

HOLOHAUS-8



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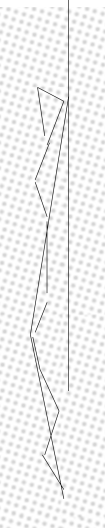
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SPECIAL THANKS

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10W
COM2EC1E
W4E1'
211
D0T0V
1220W
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to Escher McDonell for the unknown faces
to nekosattva for clear prisms
to vape escapist for the piceses rising
to Amara Reyes for dormant beings
to baroquespiral to tell the vision
to tsumaran_chan for sake and world
to epou for the name
and countless others including the one
who sees this





by: Renko Chazakiël Rodenburg

Marieken Mithras

Birthday: Unknown - 1999

Sex: Female

Occupation: High school student

Blood Type: A-Negative

Hair Colour: White, painted
black

Eye Colour: Purple, green lenses

Likes: My Bloody Valentine, Ville
Valo, Maria Mithras, Evanescence

Dislikes: Videogames, drama,
talking to people

“I have to write something down here about myself? Why?
Oh, okay.”

My name is Marieken de Vries

“Can I get a new paper? Just continue? Okay.”

My name is Marieken Mithras and I recently discovered I am a changeling. A moontouched, to be precise! I don't exactly know why they're we're called that, to be honest. It means



I'm not my parent's real child, which can be a little hard on me. A bit like how adopted kids feel, I think, except the parents of adopted children ~~actually want them~~

Moontouched are really cool actually. ~~They~~ we're split up in different 'courts', like fairies, and some courts can have superpowers! My favorite musician, Maria Mithras, is moontouched as well.

I can't really live as a moontouched though, I have friends and people at school who expect me to be Marieken, Normal Human Girl. So I'm painting my hair and wearing contacts to disguise myself. It's kind of a shame, because I used to fantasize about cool things like that. It's a bit of a childish fantasy, I guess. Maybe in the future when everything is sorted out I can be more like myself.

"I completely ruined this one. No, you don't understand. My lenses are making my eyes water, so I got some tears on the paper. That's fine? People will get the wrong idea. Okay. Whatever you say."





Synopsis

self-consciously normal Dutch teenager Marieken discovers she (like her idol Maria Mithras) is a changeling - one of the non-human "Periphery Demographics" that have reappeared since the return of magic, powered by belief, to a world that medicates, instrumentalizes, surveils, and eventually wants to drive them back out of existence





Preface

Hello Holohaus magazine. It's been five months since I started writing 'Moonlight Cantata' at an unsustainable pace for November Novel Writing Month on webnovel site Royal Road. I didn't expect it to get a small but dedicated cult following, and was soon surprised by people clamoring for more, by fanart, and by encouraging comments of people who could relate to what I was writing. A sort of 'Shonencore' story, I intended to blend old YA stuff I'm nostalgic for, Shonen Jump tropes and my own deep-seated feeling of alienation, of being a cuckoo bird who tricked my parents into raising me by adopting human skin.

Writing two thousand words every day proved unmanageable though, and I eventually burned out. Andata Express approached me and asked if I wanted to continue Moonlight in their magazine, and so here we are. This and the next issue of Holohaus will be reposting existing chapters of Moonlight Cantata, though this time at least somewhat spell-checked and edited. In the meanwhile I'll be writing new chapters at a much more reasonable pace, to be posted in later editions of Holohaus.

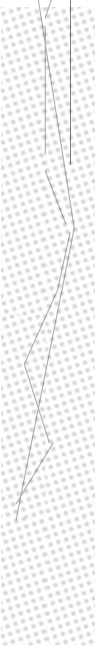
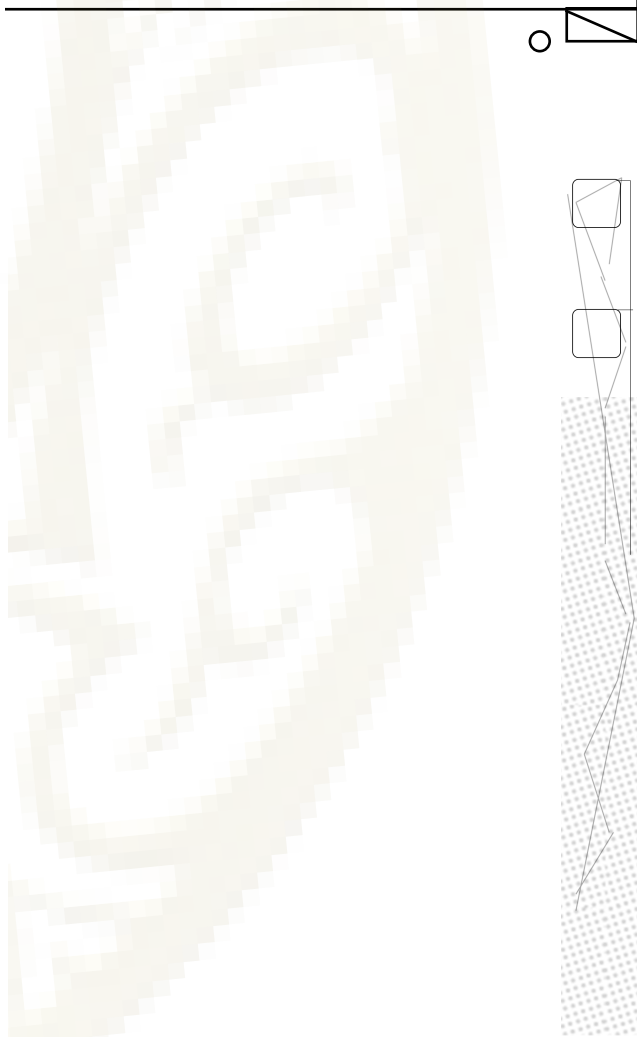
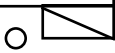




Since Moonlight Cantata is about everyone who feels like they don't belong, like they deserve better and deep down still dream of being special, consider all concepts, names and other aspects of the setting to be Public Domain. I dream of a world where we changelings freely trade stories in a sort of shared mythology, a new kind of culture that anyone can add to as they like.



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CHAPTER 01

CW: parental rejection/abandonment, racism, blackface reference, normalized genocidal ideology, police, biomedical surveillance, coerced medication, housing discrimination, bullying, antipsychotics, marijuana, dubiously consensual full-time power dynamic, possible grooming, child soldiers

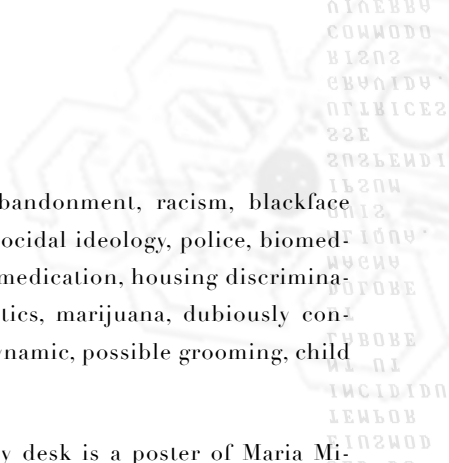
Inside my room, above my desk is a poster of Maria Mithras. Outside my room, my parents are fighting.

Yesterday, my hair was dark blonde. Today, it is white. Yesterday, my eyes were a hazy shade of blue. Today, they're a shade that could almost be mistaken for blue instead of purple.


No human body changes like that overnight.

Outside my room, my parents are screaming.

“Come on, that’s our daughter you’re talking about.”



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My father.

“The child I carried to term is dead.”

My mother.

“You don’t-” my father begins, but he doesn’t finish his sentence.

“Let me at least come to terms with that before harassing me about adopting this thing,” she replies.

The intonations of her voice, the way she stresses her words. I’ve all heard it a million times before. She’s been my mother all my life.

Moontouched. Changeling. Above my desk the face of Maria Mithras, metal guitarist and singer-songwriter, stares at me with purple eyes. Her unkempt white hair reaches almost to her waist.

Did I know? Did I subconsciously know?

“Marieken?”

My dad. He knocks on my door.

“Yeah,” I mutter back. I try to sound calm. “Come in.”





“Your mom is really stressed right now. She’s going to stay at your grandparent’s place for the night. If there’s anything you need, you’ll tell me, right?”

“Yeah,” I say, nodding.

He leaves, closing the door behind him.

Outside of my room, it is finally quiet, and I can go to sleep.

The next morning, breakfast is eaten in a terrifying, awkward silence. My father smiles as he puts the bowl of cereal in front of me, but it’s a pained smile. My mom is nowhere to be found.

“You don’t have to go to school today,” he says. “Might be good to take it easy for a while.”

“I’m not going to school today,” I reply. “I’m going to buy black paint for my hair. And I’m going to look for lenses of some kind.”

He’s taken aback by that. I don’t have the energy to wonder why. The sooner everything is back to normal, the better.





2
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TUCN2
“Can you,” I ask my dad. “Can you not tell anyone? It’d be a hassle.”

UCCNUN2M
WPECENW2
OITAEVV
COMWODO
“Hmhm,” he says while nodding ‘yes’.

W1202
EYVAIDV
N11V1CE2
I finish breakfast in silence, and head back to my room to look for a hoodie to put on.

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O012
The only one not currently in the laundry has a stylized, cartoon drawing of Maria Mithras on it.

VT100V
W0E0V
DOG0VE
E1
Shaking my head to complain about this to no-one in particular, I put it on and attempt to hide my hair as best I can.

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IEM00R
E102W0D
2EY DO
WE EG11
VD1B12C1
10W
COM2EC1E
WME1
211
DOG0V
1220W
G0B0W
My English Literature teacher, to get me to stop describing characters by having them look in the mirror and mention their own eye colour, told me people in the real world do not pay attention to eye colour all that much. I pray she’s right, head back downstairs and leave for the city center on my bike.

The world is different. Colder. Distant from me. I never really paid attention to the people around me. Now I anxiously glance around to see if they’re looking at me. Half





lost in thought, half glancing around like a paranoid asylum escapee, I wander through the cosmetics store.

“I might have mystical powers,” I mutter to the cashier as I hand her two bottles of black hair dye.

She looks at me, and then her eyes light up in recognition. “Oh!” she says while pointing at my hoodie. “You’re like Maria.”

So much for keeping a low profile.

Traveling back home with two sets of green lenses, two bottles of black dye and some mascara it was discounted- I keep thinking about it. Changelings aren’t really human. They have mystical powers, like Maria Mithras.

I am not really human. I might have mystical powers. Like Maria Mithras.

Again, I wonder. Did I know? I obsessively followed her life. I went to concerts. I read her book. I prowled magazines and internet fora for interviews. Was that borne from some innate understanding that she and I were the same, or was that pure happenstance?





And most importantly: Will my mother hold it against me? Will she accuse me of knowing I knew all along, of tricking her?

I'm not slow on the uptake. My mother has yelled at me before. She's hit me before. Me no longer being human is not going to help. She's not going to come back from her parents to forgive all.

When I think about forgiveness, I have to stifle a tear. Is this really something I ought to feel sorry about? Something I'll eventually have to make up for?

When I'm back home, my dad hands me a present.

"Dad," I try to say, but there's no real feeling behind it.

"Don't worry," he says. "You don't have to pretend you're doing alright. Just, if something is up, tell me, alright?"

"I will," I say as I take the present. Even before ripping off the wrapping, I know it's a book. I've held so many books in my life. As I walk up the stairs to my room, I trail paper wrappings.

'Walking in Moonlight,' the book reads. Downstairs, I hear my father laugh.





He's relieved, I realize. Relieved I still responded the exact same way I always have.

'Walking in Moonlight,' a book by a fellow Changeling. A fellow Moontouched. Part fiction, coming of age. Part non-fiction- mastery of magical talents.

My breath catches in my throat.

I am special, I realize. Not terribly special- there's two more moontouched on my high school

alone- but special nonetheless.

A warm feeling, the first in more than a day, spreads slowly from my heart. Special.





My classroom is mostly normal. The only person I have classes with who is a ‘periphery demographic’ is Hiro, who currently sits three rows behind me and is not paying attention to the economy lesson, but is instead playing with a sheeted katana.

I figure that that requires some explaining.

‘Periphery Demographics’ is what the government calls the people who aren’t really people, who live on the edge of our society but aren’t really part of it. The people who didn’t exist before the late nineteen sixties.

I say our society, but it’s their society, really. I’m still coming to grips with the fact that I’m not human, not part of the whole I thought I was part of.

Oh, Hiro and his katana. Hiro isn’t his real name. He pretends he’s Japanese for some reason, even though he clearly is not. He’s got some superhero-esque business going on after school, and carries around all kinds of permits for deadly weapons and magical abilities.

You’re raised to not think of such things as secretly kind of cool. Under the Back to Normal policy, abnormality is ridiculed, relegated to the edges of society. Current sci-





entific consensus is that such phenomena are fuelled by human belief, and by eroding faith in them can baseline reality eventually be restored.

I wonder what would happen to me if that was the case.

The teacher, Mr. Andreas, glares at me. I'm not paying a lot of attention to his lesson either.

There are more Periphery Demographics at my school. There's two moontouched, which I discovered I am as well two days ago. They're sorta goth, and frequently hang around a witch a year older than they are. A grade below me is a girl in a wheelchair, a vampire. She was maimed by a religious zealot, and doesn't have a lot of friends.

There's certain to be others. I don't intend to seek them out, however. Nor do I intend to join the clique of the witch and her two moontouched friends, mystifying as they might be to me. With my hair dyed black I hope to continue my life as normal. Graduate, go to university. There's a temptation to explore if I indeed have 'powers' the way some moontouched and other Periphery Demographics can have, but I don't want to draw any attention to myself.





A Back to Normal policy for my own life, so to say.

After economics class is break. I head to my own friends in the cafeteria, Amy and Jan.

“Hey Marieken, new hair today?” Jan says in his flat, Amsterdam accent as I sit down next to Amy and across from him.

“Yeah,” I say. “I thought I’d goth it up a little. Look, new mascara as well.” Amy laughs. “Well, if you wanna go goth you should paint your hair white. If you don’t mind having to explain you’re not actually a fairy freak to everyone, that is.”

“Yeah,” I mutter in reply.

“Hm,” Jan says. “Do you think Theresa and Maria would think that offensive? Like, in the same way that Black Pete around Christmas is offensive to some people?” The Dutch and their favorite subject of casual debate: racism. It didn’t really ever bother me before, but realizing that only one thin layer of black dye is preventing Amy from seeing me as a ‘fairy freak’ or Jan from dragging me into a debate about blackface rattles me





Back to Normal might be harder than I thought. I grab my lunch, and eat it while pretending to listen to Amy and Jan

“Oh, great,” Jan suddenly says. “The weeboo is coming straight for us.” I turn around, and look into the pale, extremely Dutch face of Hiro.

“Marieken,” he says while grinning. “There’s something different about you today.”

“No,” I quickly say. “There isn’t.”

“I’m used to painting my hair black,” Hiro says. “And you know me-”

“I really don’t,” I interrupt him.

“Let me continue,” he says while forming an almost cruel smile on his face. “Your pretty black hair made me look at you, and then I noticed something I hadn’t noticed before. Say, Marieken?” I look at Amy and Jan, who shrug and suppress a laugh.

“Yeah?” I stammer as I look back to Hiro.





“Since when do you have two shadows?” My heart races as I try to make sense of his statement. Before I can collect my thoughts, Amy yells at me.

“He’s right! What the fuck, you have two shadows. Marieken, move around a little. Is this a trick of the light?”

“It’s,” I say weakly, “It’s like, when there’s two lights. A trick of the light.” Hiro grins, and walks away.

“No way,” Jan says. “Look at that. That’s so unnatural.” The cafeteria has one glass wall letting in ample sunlight. I look to the sun, and then down to my feet. Where they touch the ground in front of my chair, two shadows sprout.

That’s not how shadows are supposed to work.

I follow them with my eyes, and one of the two tilts its head at me.

Amy lets out a shrill scream.

“You’re haunted,” she says. “You should get that checked out! What if someone has cursed you or something? Hexed even?”





"I have to go to the bathroom," I say, as I bolt upright and head for the cafeteria door.

Has anyone else noticed? Are people looking at me? I don't dare to turn my head to check. I lock myself into the bathroom and stop holding back tears.

This isn't fair, I repeat in my mind. This isn't fair.

To my horror, my unnatural, second shadow creeps up along the bathroom stall door, and makes a 'shrug' gesture.

"What are you?" I yell at it, before reflexively putting my hand in front of my mouth. I don't want to cause a scene.

The shadow shrugs again.

I pull out my phone, and open an anonymous tab. Somehow, that makes me feel a little less anxious googling 'Moontouched two shadows'.

A hundred results. All internet fora dedicated to the occult, to moontouched and to magic. I close the tab. I can't deal with that right now.

I expect Jan or Amy to eventually show up at the bathroom door, to ask me if I'm alright. They don't, and after





a while I hear the bell announcing the continuation of lessons ring. I wait another fifteen minutes, and leave the building.

In the schoolyard, I wonder where to go and what to do. Home, probably. Take a shower and then take my time looking up whatever nonsense is befalling me, and how to make it go away.

“Hey, girl,” I hear Hiro yell.

I turn around, and look at the sharp tip of a katana being pointed at my face. Anxiously, I take a step backwards.

“Don’t-” I stammer, but I can’t bring myself to finish the sentence. My brain is too slow to process this cascade of events in a reasonable manner.

“You haven’t strangled anyone lately, have you?” Hiro asks me. There’s an accusatory tone in his question, like he suspects me of having done something.

Of having strangled someone, I realize. Duh. He just asked me.

“I haven’t,” I say. “Is this about the shadow thing?”





"It might," Hiro says. "I'm watching you. If you're the killer, I have full permission to take you down."

"You're my age," I whisper.

"And?" He asks. "I'm the only person with the schizophrenic affliction that allows people to wield cursed weapons this side of Amsterdam. If the cops need someone to kill a demon, they don't give a rat's ass that I'm seventeen years old. And if you aren't Marieken, and you are some inhuman thing wearing her skin, I won't give a fuck either."

I become light-headed. "I'm not," I squeak. "I discovered I'm moontouched two days ago. I didn't notice the shadow until you pointed it out. I just want to be normal, so I painted my hair." Hiro shakes his head as he sheaths his katana. "Pathetic," he says as he turns around and strolls back to school.

"Please don't tell anyone," I yell after him. He doesn't reply.

With a pit in my stomach, I unlock my bike and head home.



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There aren't a lot of neighborhoods with driveways in this part of Amsterdam. Back in the day, the government assumed most people wouldn't get a car, and only put parking lots along the road. Paradoxically, we do have a driveway, but we don't own a car. When I arrive home, I immediately notice the strange car in the driveway.

I'm not sure I can handle much more today, so I desperately pray that it doesn't have anything to do with me.

Inside, my dad is busy working through a pile of documents with a shady man wearing a black three-piece suit. He's got a lapel card denoting some kind of official agency clipped to his chest.

"Ah, Marieken, you're home early," my dad says, looking up from whatever he was doing.

"Yeah," I say.

"This is Sam, Sam Anderson, from the municipal government. He's here to help me sort out some things regarding your identity." And of course, I am wrong. It has everything to do with me. My heart crashes through the floor, and the last bits of energy maintaining my sanity recede to the far recesses of my mind.





“My identity?” I ask. “I asked you to not tell anyone.”

“Your father,” the stranger- Sam- says, with a stern tone in his voice, “Is legally obligated to file your situation to the government.”

“Oh,” I say.

“But don’t worry,” he continues. “It’s all confidential. Nobody except your parents and healthcare provider will have access to any information unless you allow it to be shared.”

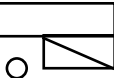
“Ah.” In the moment, I can’t come up with anything better.

“It’s a good thing you’re early. I can administer your blood test right away and you can fill in the forms with your preferred last name.”

“What,” I say, my voice coming out much sharper than I intended. “Dad, what’s this?” I’m too shocked to feel anything but indignation and anger.

My father shakes his head. “The government wants to track the ways changelings spread through other demographics. Don’t be cross with me, I’m here filling out your adoption papers while your mother is god-knows-where.”





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E102WOD
2EY DO
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ROBEW

“You have to understand this is all procedure,” Sam says. “You’re not legally- or biologically- his daughter. It’s best to get this all sorted out right now so you can carry on with your life with as little disruption as possible.”

“I see,” I say as I hang up my coat and take a seat at the table. “And what’s this about a blood sample?”

“A test to see what Moontouched, hm, what was the name you all use? Ah, a test to see what Court you are from. What bloodline, so to speak. We’ll also know right away if you need to show up for paraphysical testing.” Sam is cold and detached as he explains it, as if he’s had to give this speech a hundred times before. Hell, he probably has.

I put my head to rest in my hands as I try not to cry, and Sam shoves some papers in my direction.

“Fill out your preferred surname here, and here,” he says while pointing at the form. “Your dad is already adopting you, so you can check this box to keep your original surname- that way this is no more than a formality.”

My preferred surname. I’m Marieken de Vries, and I have been all my life. How am I supposed to pick a new surname, even if ‘only as a formality’ right on the spot?





Sam points at my hoodie. “Just go with Mithras if you can’t think of anything. About half of your kind picks that name.”

Marieken Mithras, just like Maria Mithras. Now that I think about it, one of the other moontouched at my school is also called Maria. Was she named directly after Maria Mithras? Wouldn’t that be a little weird?

I want to go to my room, and I want to get this over with, so I fill out the form and check the required boxes.

“Thank you very much, Ms. de Vries,” Sam says. There’s something kind about him using my original surname.

“Now, if you give me your index finger,” he continues while grabbing a small plastic gizmo with a vacuum-sealed needle attached to it from a bag on the ground. He removes the needle cover, and motions for me to hurry up and give him my finger already.

Anxiously, I stretch out my left hand and index finger.

“It only stings for a second, hold still,” he says as he grabs hold of my finger and then jabs it with the needle.





“The device only needs one drop of blood,” he says as I sigh in relief that it’s already over. From his bag, he grabs some disinfectant, a wipe and a bandage.

As he bandages my finger, he looks at the device and smiles. “You’re in luck, you’re shadow court.” The moment I hear the word shadow, I nervously glance behind me. The unnatural, second shadow is still there. Neither Sam nor my dad seem to notice.

“Shadow court,” I say. “What does that mean?”

“That you’ve probably got some kind of superpowers,” Sam explains with my dad making a troubled face. “It also means you really have to make an appointment for parapsychical testing. I have another form for that,” he chuckles as he pulls out another binder with documents.

I plan an appointment next thursday at the University of Amsterdam Department of Paraphysics to get tested for powers, and the ordeal is finally over.

Sam cleans up all his documents and neatly files them away, thanks my dad for the coffee and wishes me the best of luck.





Then he's gone.

My dad asks if I want some coffee as well, and if school went well.

"It was okay, but I'm not feeling great. Do you mind if I just go to my room?"

"Of course not," he says. "If you need anything, please ask. It's- It's not a great- I mean I can understand things aren't going great right now, but things will return to normal sooner rather than later. I promise." His voice breaks, and I understand he doesn't believe what he's saying either. Tired and depressed, I head to my room.

I turn on my laptop and spend an hour browsing through the top ten google results for 'moontouched two shadows' before giving up in frustration. Every single moontouched website is written in an almost incomprehensible and at times insane sounding lingo and I do not have the energy to turn this into homework.

Absent-mindedly putting on music I wonder if Amy is doing anything today, and if I should call when she's done with school, but eventually decide against it. Instead, I lie





down on my bed and start flipping through ‘Walking in Moonlight’

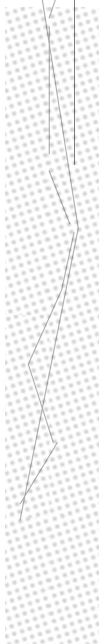
To my surprise, the book enthralls me immediately. I feel a little odd reading about someone going through more or less exactly what I’m going through, but it creates an immediate bond.

Whenever the protagonist encounters new troubles, helpful paragraphs explain the real-world concepts used in the novel and the relevance of many terms and concepts.

Moontouched come in five ‘courts’ or bloodlines, I learn, and are seemingly genetically related to each other. That means that other moontouched from the same court as I are my biological brothers and sisters, which prompts my curiosity to where, exactly, I came from.

To my frustration, I can find no answer- neither in the book nor on the internet, only idle speculation.

Another thing I learn is that magic is apparently really difficult, and that not all moontouched can wield it. The strongest court on average is the mirror court, with the shadow court right behind them, but that doesn’t mean that every individual from said court is born equal.





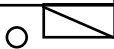
Actually learning magic seems to involve a lot of confusing diary keeping and rigorous training, and I download a PDF called ‘Transcendental Meditation for Moon People’. To my frustration this text is equally obtuse- written in odd jargon, using phrases like ‘astral body’ and ‘sigils’ and mentioning ‘temperaments’ without explaining what those are.

I recall a lot of magic sounds like nonsense to outsiders, and that the mentally ill have an easier time learning it- which harkens back to Hiro’s strange comment about schizophrenia.

For now, I give up on magic- I couldn’t find anything about multiple shadows that so much as remotely made sense to me- and instead try to rest and relax a little. Tomorrow, I’ll spin a lie to my friends, and get plan ‘Back to Normal’ back on track.

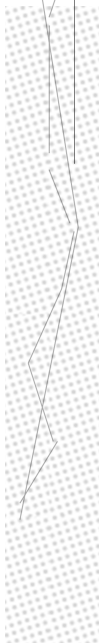
As I lie down with my headphones on, I cannot bring myself to put on Maria Mithras. It feels too strange to listen to her familiar voice, her screaming lyrics about loneliness and rage. Lyrics that now feel like they’re about me instead of her.





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LVCIGI21
AET
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VCCN22W
WPECENW2
ATLAEVW
COWWOD
B1202
EVAVIDW`
PILVICE2
23E
2022ENDI
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VGI0W`
WVWV
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W1 01
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IEMW0V
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211
D0T0V
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For a second I consider googling what court Maria belongs to. I decide against it, feeling a strange shame at the excitement the possibility of her being my biological sister brings me.





The faculty of Paraphysics is located at the University on what is called 'Science Park', a large neighborhood not far from the suburb I live in dedicated to the University of Amsterdam and several scientific companies.

Despite that, paraphysics is really closer related to philosophy than to actual physics.

The building is sparsely decorated and modern to a fault. Sterile, lit like a hospital. A young man- a student, I guess- mans the reception desk.

"Hello, how can I help you?" He asks, badly masking boredom with feigned politeness.

"I'm here for a test. Name is Marieken. A paraphysics test."

"Do you have any ID on you?" I lost my ID card once, a year ago. It took them almost a month to replace it. Yet now it only took Sam a day to bring me my new card. Hesitant, I hand him my brand-new ID.

Marieken Mithras Female NON HUMAN - CHANGELING - MOONTOUCHED, it reads "Hm," he says while barely glancing at it. "Up the stairs, third floor. There's a waiting room there, you'll be called in."





"Thank you," I mutter, but my heart isn't in it.

The waiting room is nice. There's two large sofas, a drink dispenser and several abstract paintings in bright, primary colours. On one of the sofas sits another girl, wearing blue jeans and a baggy hoodie with the hood pulled up all the way over her head. Gloves cover her hands, despite it being summer.

"Hey," I say.

"Huh," she replies as she looks up. "Oh. Hi." I sit down on the other sofa.

"What are you in here for?" I ask, a poor attempt at a joke.

She looks at me. "What are you in here for?" She throws right back at me. "You look normal enough." I can't help but glance at the floor, at my double shadow.

"Oh," she says. "Shadow court changeling. Did you paint your hair? Poor thing."

"Are you a changeling as well?" I ask.

"No," she says, throwing back her hood and removing her gloves.





Porcelain skin, glass eyes and ball joints. I haven't met any in real life, but I've read about them online. A doll.

"Oh," I say. "Do they make you take paraphysics tests as well?"

"You as in me, or you as in dolls?" She asks. There's a tinge of annoyance in her voice.

"Dolls," I say, a little ashamed of myself.

"Yeah"

"I thought dolls can't do magic."

"Dolls can grow, turn into doll-witches," the girl explains.

"Oh." I nod yes to emphasize I understand. I think I understand, at least. "I'm Marieken, by the way," I quickly add.

"I'm Noor," the doll-girl replies.

"Nice to meet you." It is then that the door swings open and an older man in a lab coat ever so slightly too small for him loudly yells "NOOR."





“That’s-” Noor starts, but the man interrupts her by yelling “Great, come in.” He then looks at me and says “This won’t take long, you’ll be up next.” One hour and four cups of tea from the drink dispenser later I start to wonder what definition of ‘not long’ the man is using. I don’t feel like drinking any more tea, but I grab another cup regardless to try and alleviate my boredom.

I once read that in an experiment on boredom, test subjects would voluntarily electrocute themselves when presented with no other stimuli.

Another thirty minutes and two cups of tea later, Noor is finally done.

“Hey,” she says, a little hesitant. “I euh,” she mutters, then looks to the floor. “Nevermind,” she says.

“Huh?” I ask her.

“I wanted to ask for your number but that’s weird,” she says, and very slowly walks away.

“That’s okay,” I yell after her. “You can have my number.”

“Really?” she asks. “I don’t want to be a bother.”





“It’s fine, really,” I say, before taking out my phone.

“Do you have an iPhone? Then I can airdrop my contact info. Else you’ll have to add it manually.”

“I have a very old phone,” Noor says while looking at her feet. “Sorry.” What a strange girl. “That’s okay, you don’t have to apologize,” I tell reassure her.

“Okay,” she pouts.

I give her my phone number, which she adds to her contacts.

“I don’t have a lot of friends,” she says.

“Oh,” I say for what feels like the hundredth time today. I have no clue how to respond to something like that.

“Anyway,” she says, but she doesn’t finish her sentence. She turns around and walks away.

A few minutes after I’m called into the office.

“So,” the older man in the lab coat says. “My name is Dr. West. You discovered you’re a Moontouched a while back.





That means we have to do. Some. Tests.” He oddly stresses ‘tests’, with a strange glee in his voice.

“The tests are simple,” he continues. “You have to answer a set of questions on the computer while we attach some. Electrodes. To. Your. Temples.” His cadence in talking is strange, off-putting.

“Okay,” I say as the man flips around a laptop with a simple questionnaire form on it’s screen.

He gets up, and plugs several wires into ports on a device wired to the laptop. He also grabs some kind of gel, and shows me the electrodes.

“I have to put some gel on your temples to attach the electrodes. It feels really cold so don’t get startled.” From behind me, he rubs the gel on the sides of my head- which is indeed really cold- and then sticks the electrodes on top of it with some tape. As he does so, he leans forward and loudly sniffs my hair.

Startled, I turn around. “What?” I ask, worried.

“L’Oreal Paris brand hair dye,” he says. “That’s bad for your hair. Moontouched hair is sensitive.”





“Don’t.” I say, but I don’t know exactly what to say.

Dr West returns to his desk, and shoves the laptop in front of me.

The questions are all strange. Bizarre. Pattern recognition test I vaguely remember from IQ tests but with an overload of information. Sequences of ‘Is this statement true when considering the last statement’ questions numbering in the hundreds.

It takes me almost two hours to work through the questions, which I answer more or less at random, or on intuition. There doesn’t seem to be any coherence to them, nor any system of logic.

When done, I click ‘save and submit’ and several devices plugged into the laptop start whirring and beeping.

“We’ll have your results in a minute,” Dr West says, who started playing something on an old Nintendo DS while I was filling out my questionnaire.

Indeed, after a minute my test results roll out of a printer. Dr West looks them over and starts laughing. A deep, maniacal laugh.





“Is something wrong?” I ask, slightly anxious that he might’ve caught on to me answering at random.

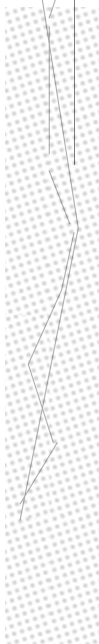
“Oh, far from it,” he laughs. “You’ve scored a ninety-five. That’d be the second highest score in Paraphysical Aptitude ever measured if I’m not mistaken. I wonder what’s in the water here in Amsterdam.” I feel a little strange hearing that. “Is that good?” I ask him.

“You’re basically Superman according to this test. Or euh, Harry Potter.” Deep down in my subconscious, a younger, nerdier Marieken demands I correct the doctor, and explain to him that Harry Potter wasn’t even very good at magic, but that he won the day through the power of friendship and love. I stifle the impulse, though, and instead ask more about my test score.

“What does that mean? What’s the highest score?”

“It means you’re extremely capable of detaching yourself from consensus reality, and have a strong aptitude for magic. And the highest score was one hundred, also measured at this University campus. Curiously enough though,” he says, before trailing off in thought.

“Curiously enough what?” I ask him.





“Egh,” he spits. “Forget it, that’s probably confidential. Oh, and euh, we’re going to have to plan another appointment. I’m going to have to report this to the military, who’ll want to run their own tests.”

“The Military!?” I yell.

“Hmhm,” he says. “Scores over seventy have to be reported. The average witch scores thirty, and it’s a logarithmic scale. Your potential power output equals that of a nuclear weapon.”

They’re gonna want to confirm the results, then register you as a weapon of mass destruction under international law, then put you on power blockers.”

“You’re kidding,” I say. Nothing the man says connects to me in any way that feels real.

“I’m afraid not. Can you come back next week? That’ll be enough time to get an appointment with the boys from the AIVD.” He isn’t kidding. The AIVD, the Dutch intelligence agency.

“You can make an appointment at the reception on the ground floor,” he continues. “Oh, and Marieken? Try not to





throw anyone through walls with your mind in the meantime.”

“I can’t do anything like that,” I say. “This is a bizarre misunderstanding. I answered the test at random.”

“Oh,” Doctor West says while smiling, and for a second I believe that my explanation solves everything. “The test is a repurposed schizophrenia test, but it’s just to get the neurons firing.

The actual measurements were done by the electrodes on your temples. It’s an almost foolproof test.” With that, he sinks my hopes. As he walks to the door of his office with me, he puts his hands through my hair.

“What a waste of such pretty white hair,” he says as I anxiously swat his hand away. “Please don’t do that,” I ask.

“Sorry,” he says, shrugging his shoulders with a grin on his face. I get the feeling he doesn’t mean it.

I head downstairs, and plan another appointment next Thursday, same time. I don’t mention the AIVD or the atomic bomb thing to the receptionist, but from his amused looks I get the feeling he knows.



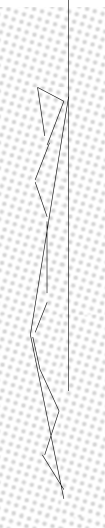


As I walk outside, I send Noor a message on whatsapp.

“Hiiii. Marieken from the paraphysics test here. I scored a 95. What did you score?” It takes Noor only three seconds to answer.

“A 3. Do you want to hang out?” Why not? A little bit out of a feeling of obligation, but mostly because I really am interested in what kind of person- or doll- she is, I message her my home address. She answers with a smiley.

With a vague sense of guilt in my stomach I bike home





Noor isn't there yet when I get home, which gives me time to change into something a little cooler than track pants and a hoodie.

When I head back down from my room after changing, I run into my dad in the kitchen.

"Hey," he says. "How did your test go?"

"Oh," I say. "Very well," I lie. "But I have to come back next week for another one."

"I see," he replies. "Your mother will be coming by in a bit. To talk with me. I think it would be best if you stay in your room or head to the mall for a bit."

"Why?" I ask. "She doesn't want to see me? She's my mom."

"Your mother is going through some stuff right now," he explains.

I wonder what that means. It still rattles me down to my bones that she got up and left me because my hair turned white.





Deep down I know that's unfair. Changelings are children swapped out shortly after birth.

Mammalian Mimicry it's called, not unlike the Cuckoo bird, that swaps out the eggs of another bird with its own and makes the other bird raise its children.

Changelings, no matter the species- there are several organisms that do this- work the same way. I am not my mother's daughter, not the child she carried with her for nine months. As far as anyone knows, that child is gone. Dead.

But I am still the same me. I'm the child she's raised for the past seventeen years.

Pained, I shake my head. "I invited a friend over," I tell my dad.

"Marieken, please," he says. His tone is demanding, annoyed. "I'd like my marriage to not fall apart. Just go hang out at the mall with your friend. "

"Your marriage," I say, confused. Defeated. My parents might get divorced because of me.





Shaking, I take out my phone to message Noor, somewhat anxious at ruining a burgeoning friendship right at the start. Right as I am about to hit ‘send’ on a question to ask if we can hang out at the mall or skatepark instead, the doorbell rings.

“That’ll be your friend,” my dad says. “Ask if she wants a drink then scram.” Somewhat hesitant, go to open the front door. It’s indeed Noor, who I am somewhat glad is still disguising herself. It makes me feel a little guilty again, but I think it wouldn’t be great for my dad to catch me hanging out with Periphery Demographics right now.

“Hey hey,” I say, pretending to be cheerful.

“Hello,” she says, rather flat.

“Wanna come in, wanna head to the mall?” I ask her, praying that she might rather hang out outside to begin with.

“Oh,” she says, brightening a little. “We can go sit at the construction site behind the mall! Sareth might be there, or Tom.”





“I don’t know them,” I say. “But that sounds fun. Let me grab my bag.” A minute later I am walking towards the mall, side by side with Noor.

“You ever hang out at the construction site?” Noor asks me. “Sometimes people like us go there to chill, away from judgemental looks and harassment. ”

“No,” I say, feeling somewhat out of depth.

“Hmmm,” Noor says. “Only recently discovered you’re Moontouched?”

“A week ago.”

“Hm, so that’s why you painted your hair. Still think there’s any chance of living a human life.” Her dismissive attitude annoys me a little. “I am going to take it slow revealing everything to my friends. My dad is doing a lot for me to be able to continue functioning as normal. ”

“I turned into a doll over a year ago now. Unlike you, I was at some point actually human. I also thought I could eventually go back to normal. ”

“Hey,” I say. “I was... Well, I guess I wasn’t technically human. I guess you’re right.” It still bothers me, that I never





2
LVCIG121
OET
TVCN2
VCCNWSM
WPECENW2
OITAEVV
COWWODO
B1202
EVAIDU
NIBVICE2
23E
2026END1
T20W
0012
VT100V
WVWV
DOTOVE
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TVOVE
W101
IMCIDIDP
IEMFOR
E102WOD
2EV DO
WE EG11
VDI12C1
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COMSECE
WVET
211
DOTOV
1220W
GOBEM

actually was a human. A cuckoo, a creature masquerading as something else to ‘trick’ people into taking care of it.

“How,” I then ask. “If that isn’t rude to ask, how did you turn into a doll?”

“If people treat you as an object long enough, you turn into an object. Something for others to play with.”

“That’s terrible,” I say.

“Hmm,” she says. “Being treated as an object isn’t all bad. Being loved, treasured, kept safe and secure like a prized gemstone.” Something bizarre comes over me. A sensation I’ve never felt before. I feel my shadow changing, my second shadow, my unnatural companion. Before I look at the floor to see, I already know. It’s turned into a facsimile of a dragon, a shadow puppet, a toy lizard with wings.

“Woah,” Noor says as she, too, sees it. “Shadow magic. That’s cool. Unsubtle way of saying you want to keep me as a treasure in your dragon hoard though, but kinda cute.”

“No!” I yell. “I have no control over that thing. I don’t want to, euh, own you. That’s, no!” Noor laughs. “No, you wouldn’t. You don’t have the stomach for it, either. You





still live with your dad.” I wonder what that has to do with anything, but don’t prod.

We pass through the mall, and I can’t help but glance around if anyone is looking at us. They have no reason to, and my suspicious behavior makes me feel terrible. Maybe Noor thinks I’m judging her, or ashamed of her.

If anything, I’m ashamed of myself. But I suppose that makes me ashamed of Noor by proxy.

Ashamed of being something else.

The construction project behind the mall has been abandoned years ago, and they never cleaned up the mess. We round a corner, and to my surprise- and terror- I see Theresa and Maria, the two Moontouched from my school, passing a joint back and forth while sitting on a concrete block.

“I know those girls,” I tell Noor. “They’re from my school.”

“Oh,” she says. “Let me guess, now you wanna run for it so your secret doesn’t leak?” Noor asks, a heavy tone of disappointment in her voice.





“Well,” I say. “Well, euh, well. They wouldn’t tell anyone right, they are, like me?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Noor says, while steadily marching on.

“Hey,” she yells. “Theresa.” Theresa waves, and gestures for us to come over.

“Hello Noor,” Theresa says as we approach them. “Not with Sareth today?” Theresa mostly ignores me in favor of Noor, but Maria looks at me. Through me.

“Sareth and I aren’t going too well right now. I kinda hoped she would be here today so I could gauge how she’s feeling a little. ”

“I see,” Theresa says.

Theresa and Maria are wearing more or less identical clothes. Fishnets around their arms.

Fingerless gloves. Fishnet stockings, Doc Martens and crop tops with leather jackets over them.

Black lipstick, half a tin of eyeshadow. Their stark, white hair contrasts sharply with their black clothes and pale skin.





“Can I ask something?” Maria says in between two drags from her joint, before sticking out towards me.

“I euh, I don’t smoke, I’m underage,” I say.

Both Maria and Theresa laugh. Noor smiles at me.

“Why did you drag Marieken from fifth grade here, Noor?” Maria asks in an accusatory tone.

“Oh, your underclassman turns out to be a changeling,” Noor says before I can protest. “She’s been painting her hair to try and fit in better.”

The smile she shows me now is sadistic. I start to wonder if Noor actually wants to be my friend.

“How cute,” Maria says. “A little assimilationist. Let me guess, Shadow Court?”

“Well,” I say.

“We’re Mirror Court,” Maria says.

“We’re sisters,” Theresa says. “Twins.”

“You know the difference between Mirror Court and Shadow Court, little shadow-stalker?” Maria asks me.





2
LVCIG121
AEG
TVCN2
“Euh, you guys are better at magic?” I stammer.

WCCN25W
WPECENW2
ATLAEVW
COWWODO
Now all three laugh at me.

W1202
“No,” Maria says. “We Mirror Court live out in the open. Proud of who we are. We don’t skulk around in the shadows. If you’re gonna be painting your hair like that, don’t even dare to look at us at school.” She jumps up from the concrete slab she was sitting on, and blows smoke into my face as I stumble backwards.

23E
2025END1
T220W
0012
“You and I aren’t even the same species, cretin. ”

WVCW
D0T0VE
E1
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W1 01
“Euh, Maria?” Noor asks.

IMCID100
IEMFOR
E102WOD
“Yes? ”

2EY DO
WE EG11
“I did plan on being friends with Marieken here. Or shouldn’t I?” She asks with her usual flat intonation.

WDEL
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“For starters,” Maria says. “You can apologize for taking this trash to our usual hangout spot.

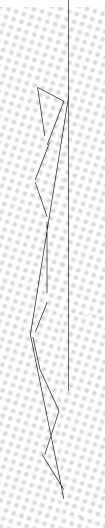
You’ve completely ruined the vibe. I guess I understand why Sareth kicked you out of the group home.”





“Oh,” Noor says, disappointed. “If I tell Marieken to go home, can I sit here and smoke with you two?” Maria looks over her shoulder, and my heart breaks as Theresa nods ‘yes’.

“I’m sorry Marieken,” Noor says. “I think it’s better if you go home.” As I walk, almost run, home, I can’t stifle the tears. By the time I reach my neighborhood, my eyes are red and my cheeks raw from the saline fluid.





When I reach home, my mom's bike is parked next to the door. For a minute, I wonder if I should leave or go inside.

Exhausted and equal parts angry and sad, I decide that it's my house too, and go in.

"Great," I hear my dad complain as I enter. He's in the living room, drinking coffee with my mom.

"Hey," I say. "I'm back."

"That was quick-" My dad starts, but he's interrupted by my mom.

"Eric and I have things to discuss, can you leave?" She asks.

"Mom," I say. "I live here."

"Don't 'mom' me," she says. It stings.

There's nothing I can do. I can read it on her face. I'm not her daughter. I'm some Thing that snuck into this household and tricked her into raising me.

"I'll go to my room," I say, and without any reply I head to my room.





The way Theresa and Maria, who I secretly admired from a distance the past year, had treated me had left me rattled and confused. I am like them, but they're not like me. I wonder if it's normal for moontouched courts to treat each other this way, so I flip open 'Walking in Moonlight' and go to the chapter on the courts.

It all sounds like astrology to me. Mirrors are haughty and obsessed with their ideal selves.

Shadows are sneaky and deceptive. Stars are distant but wise. Crystals are emphatic. Ice court are cold but strong.

Shadows are sneaky and deceptive? Aren't we all deceptive? Pretending to be human for food and shelter. The more I think about it, the worse I feel. My anger at my mom slowly makes way for a deep, dark feeling of guilt.

On my wall, my second shadow is pretending to read a book as well.

"I still don't understand the shadow thing," I say out loud. My shadow shrugs reluctantly, as if to imply she's sorry she doesn't get it either.





That's a part of me now, I realize. I'm a girl with two shadows. Secretly, it's kind of cool. If nobody would judge me for it I think I could learn to enjoy it. A mental image of Jan and Amy giving me a high five, and then pretending to give my shadow one as well. Despite the pain, the image in my head makes me laugh.

To my astonishment, my shadow splits into three people, each of which high-fives the other before turning back into one vaguely girl-shaped shadow.

"That's so cool," I whisper to my shadow. "What else can you do?" Again she shrugs. I notice I've started calling her a her, instead of an it. Again I laugh. How ironic, then, that I've started to think of myself more as an 'it' at the same time.

Maybe my shadow's the real me, and I'm just a body required to cast it on the wall. I play with the thought, myself as an object that exists for the sun to cast the real me onto the ground or the wall.

Well, we're Moontouched, not suntouched. I still don't quite know the relevance of the moon, but I decide it looks better to imagine the moon casting my shadow anyway.





I scream as I melt into a pool of dark liquid. I yell for help as my eyes disappear, and a dozen new ones manifest in every shadow in the room. The sensory input is overwhelming and I don't understand what is happening. I attempt to cry out but I have no mouth, for I am a roiling black mass with eyes pooling together on my floor, extending tendrils to all the shadows in my room.

Not a shadow, I cry out in my head. I don't wanna be a shadow. I'm a girl, a human girl, a changeling girl, something casting a shadow, something attached to a shadow.

I find myself on my bed again, my heart racing in my chest. Was that real? It felt like a dream.

The stress might be getting to me, I try to lie to myself. But the lie isn't loud enough to drown out the ninety-five test score on parapsychical affinity. Not loud enough to drown out the lingering sensation of ceasing to be matter, and becoming nothing but shadow.

My dad knocks on my door, rapidly, in a panic. "Marieken?" He asks, fear in his voice. "What happened? Are you okay? Did you hurt yourself?"





“No,” I yell back, but my voice breaks. “No dad, nothing happened.” He can’t see me like this. Nobody can ever see me like that. I would cease to be a human being in their mind. Even more than I already am.

When I realize what I’m doing, it’s too late. Vividly imagining me fleeing down the staircase, and out of the house, I feel my body change. I try to stop it, but I am already no longer in my room. I am a shadow cast along the wall, and I leak back into humanoid shape on the ground floor.

My mother screams, and throws a cup at me.

“Monster,” she hisses. “Out. Out, now! Out, before I call the police.” This doesn’t so much hurt me now as turn me angry. In abject horror I stifle the emotion as my second shadow splits into a dozen tentacles. Tentacles with teeth. Not shadow teeth. Real teeth.

My mom screams the loudest I have ever heard her scream, and she faints.





His face a pale white, my dad comes running down the stairs. “Marieken, was that-” he says, then sees my mom passed out behind the couch.

“Marieken, what did you do?” He advances, voice rising in panic. “I didn’t do anything,” I cry, but that isn’t true. I turned into a roiling mass of shadow, something that could’ve come out of the fevered imagination of Edgar Allen Poe or Oscar Wilde. “I swear,” I say. “I didn’t hurt her. She got scared. She threw a cup at me. She fainted dad she was so scared I am so sorry.” Tears run down my cheeks as my run on sentence turns into mumbling.

“I’ll call a doctor for her,” my dad says. “Marieken, I think it’s best if you leave for now. I don’t think she wants to see you when she comes by.” He rushes to my mom’s side, and tries to stabilize her on his lap while fidgeting with his mobile phone. “Marieken,” he says, angry. He looks me straight in the eyes. “Can you leave me with my wife?” Not with my mother. With his wife.

Defeated, I leave the house.

When I wander out of the suburbs, and along the canal that runs all the way to central station, I’m fifty percent





guilt by volume. It feels so incredible to be someone special, someone unique.

Someone like Maria Mithras.

All of her songs are about abandonment or loneliness. I never really noticed, I think. I thought I understood them, but I didn't. I fiddle in my pockets until I find my earbuds. For the first time in a week, I can bring myself to listen to her music.

Suddenly, I understand lyrics. Lyrics about courts. Lyrics about the moon and about bottomless rage against a world that has rejected her, that has rejected me, that has rejected us.

My shadow expands, moving along to the cadence of my juvenile, edgy grief. I imagine myself being a shadow, and casting myself along the road.

To my dumbfounded awe, I find myself in the shadow of central station- five miles from where I was.

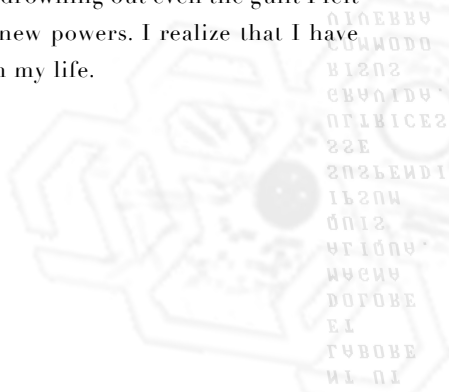
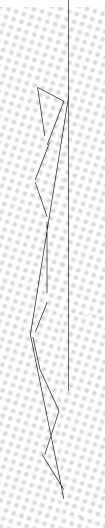
Very slowly it starts to dawn on me. I can't just turn into a living shadow.





Manic glee fills my mind, drowning out even the guilt I felt for secretly enjoying my new powers. I realize that I have never felt true freedom in my life.

I can teleport.



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I spend the rest of the afternoon trying to figure out the extent of my powers.

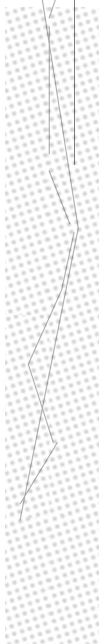
To my surprise, turning into shadows and back as well as traveling around are surprisingly intuitive, directly tied to my imagination.

All I have to do is imagine my body as an object, a focus, not the real me. The real me is my shadow, cast by moonlight. This makes me ‘melt’ into my shadow somehow.

Wherever my shadow touches ordinary shadows, I can reappear. It can stretch and crawl from shadow to shadow with no real speed limit. It isn’t really ‘teleportation’, but more moving around at near instantaneous speed.

There are some problems and limits, though. First of all the amount of information pouring into my mind in shadow-form is too much to comprehend. I have too many eyes, see too much.

Second is that my shadow-form can only stretch up to a certain limit, about fifteen meters. If there’s a gap with no natural shadows more than fifteen meters across, I can’t traverse it.





Last is that I move so fast I have no real sense of direction. If I can see where I want to go, it is easy to imagine my shadow carrying me there. If I move any further, it's almost random where I end up. Twice I appear in people's houses, if only for a fraction of a moment. Luckily nobody seems to see me.

In this manner, I crawl around the city at astonishing speed. It's exhilarating. I can go wherever I want. I start to think I might never have to walk anywhere again.

It doesn't last. While teleporting from shadow to shadow around Amsterdam central, I am suddenly overcome with an extreme sense of fatigue. I appear in the shadow of an alley near the Old Church, a famous landmark on the western side of the Amsterdam City Center.

My brain hurts in a way it has never before. Like a painful muscle ache for the brain, a migraine-inducing and nauseating sensation. As I stumble into the light, out of the alley, I see that my second shadow is weak, and frayed. It shies away from the light, and I recoil in pain- it feels like someone is pouring hot frying oil into my eyes.

I crawl back into the alley and sit down in the shadows. It feels slightly better. The shadows of the building are





like a cold, wet blanket in a desert. As I try to come to my senses, focusing on slowly breathing in, then out again, it's like I'm breathing more than air. I'm breathing or perhaps drinking shadows as well.

I really am more of a shadow than a person.

Everything I read online or in 'Walking in Moonlight' about magic made it out to be incredibly difficult. Months or years of training to be able to manifest the mental images required to do 'magic'. Meditation routines, journals, grimoires, complex rituals to trick the mind into specific shapes.

I scored a ninety five on the parapsychics aptitude tests. The second highest recorded. Maybe that's why this comes so easily to me.

I pull out my cell phone and google 'Highest parapsychics aptitude test score' Ten million results. I pick a top ten result at random and find an article that raises more questions than answers. Apparently the only person to score one-hundred on the aptitude test was a human girl who never exhibited any supernatural powers whatsoever. Philosophers and parapsychicists are divided on why, it's all a big mystery.





She lives in Amsterdam and attends the university in the science park, studying astronomy, I read.

The large telescope on the science park is impossible to miss, and I passed that faculty while going to my paraphysics test. Who knows, I might've passed by her.

Bizarre that she never displayed any powers. Or perhaps, I fantasize, her powers are so grand we don't really parse them as powers.

I feel myself drawn to this person I've made up in my head, and shake the thoughts, feeling a little guilty for having such strange thoughts about someone I've never met.

Feeling a little better, a little less worn, I instinctively try to teleport to the alley across the street.

It's terrifying how quickly I got used to moving like this.

It is not enough. As I try to cast my shadow across the gap, it unravels into thin, wiry threads and a tearing sensation shoots through my heart. I stumble backwards, and after gagging a few times, throw up.

Someone has noticed me, and comes running up to me. A pale boy or young man in women's pants, wearing a black



t-shirt with a metal band I don't recognize. His nails are painted black.

"Jesus," He says. "Be careful with that. Are you alright?"

"I'm sorry," I reflexively say as I back away from my pile of vomit. "I'm okay, don't worry." He looks at me. "You're not moontouched, are you?" He asks. "Did you just try to shadow-step across the street?" I can't hide my surprise. "Shadow step? Is that what that's called?"

"I am a moontouched!" I quickly add. "I've painted my hair to be more inconspicuous." He laughs. "If you want to be inconspicuous, you shouldn't practice advanced shadow magic in the middle of a busy street. And with a teacher, because that could've killed you. Promise me you won't do that again."

"Do what again? Teleporting?"

"The shadow-step, yes. It's terribly draining on your penumbra. If you had unraveled it altogether, you would have died."

"Penumbra?"

"You don't know?"





“No.”

“Your second shadow. The part of your shadow-soul that overlaps with the real world. In physics, the penumbra is the part of an object’s shadow where the light source is only partially blocked. In your case, it’s the part of your soul where it mingles with the light of the metaphorical sun.”

“What?” I’m not understanding a word that comes out of the boy’s mouth.

He laughs again, this time a little worried. “You really shouldn’t be trying shadow magic like that if you don’t even understand the basics. You could end up dead.”

“How should I know these things!” I yell, frustrated. “I didn’t exactly get a manual.”

“God,” the boy says. “Do you have any other moontouched in your life who you could depend on for help?”

“No,” I say, and then I realize something. The boy’s hair is black, and his eyes are brown. “Are you moontouched?”

“Nope. Just a well-read witch.” A witch. I had no idea boys could be witches. I can’t help but smile a little.





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“What if I tell you I spend all day shadow-stepping all over town? That it just failed just now because I’m tired?”

“Then I wouldn’t believe you,” he answers. “What other things can you do?”

I think for a while. “Turn into a mass of shadowy eyes and teeth.”

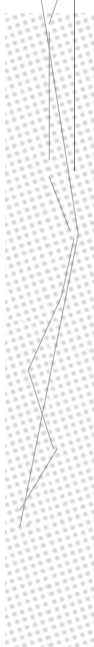
He raises an eyebrow. “That’s a first as far as I know. Say, I know some people that would be really interested in meeting you. A group home for Periphery Demographics not far from here.

Wanna come over? Doesn’t have to be long, but I think you can stand to meet some like-minded spirits.”

“I guess.” I’m a little hesitant.

The boy reaches out towards me for a handshake. “The name’s Robin.” I shake his hand and almost forget to introduce myself. “Marieken,” I quickly say.

He gestures for me to follow him, and I somewhat hesitantly step into the sun. It burns my eyes and my skin, so I have to squint as I stumble after him.





“Holy shit,” he says as he sees me struggle. “You have burnout. We should get you back into the shadows.”

“Burnout?” I say, hoarse and with some trouble speaking as Robin drags me to a bench in the shadow of the church.

“Burnout,” he says once we sit down. “You’ve used way too much magic. Your shadow is coming apart. You can’t be in the sun like this, you’ll get sick.”

“Why?”

“Your soul is like a shadow. Normally it’s strong enough to exist in the light, but if you’ve expended all of energy that becomes a lot harder. It’s at risk of dissolving in sunlight, then.”

“My soul can dissolve?” I ask in a blind panic. “What happens to me if that happens?”

“You die,” Robin says. “But I’ve seen worse cases of burnout, at least you didn’t immediately catch fire.” I gasp for air. “That can happen?”

“Yeah,” Robin explains. “This girl in London one day stepped out of the subway and exploded.”





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Woosh, gone.”

“That’s horrifying,” I say.

“Yeah. Which is why you should take it easy with the shadow magic. You sit right here, and I’ll go buy you a smoothie. That’ll help.” Aha. I mentally note down that smoothies help. Robin hurries off, and is back with an overpriced, aimed-at-tourists drink within a few minutes.

“Why are you being so nice to me?” I ask.

Robin stares off into space. “Heh,” he says after a while. “Vulnerable young girl with creepy shadow powers in need of help. What witch could resist?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Hmm? You’ve probably heard the official government line that magic is linked to personality disorders.”

“Yeah, people who aren’t really rooted down in reality have an easier time using magic.”

“While that isn’t entirely true,” Robin explains, “There’s a little nugget of truth in there. To use magic- the kind of



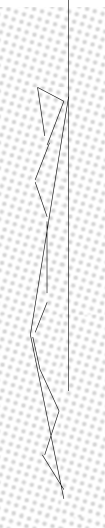


magic witches use- you have to be an incredibly self-centered person.

Genuinely believe the rest of the world should change according to your whims. It turns the user a little narcissistic. Encourages god complexes.”

“What’s that have to do with helping me?”

“Heh.” Robin shrugs. “Everything.”





I arrive at the group home with Robin, and am astonished. It is the most ramshackle building I have ever seen. The brickwork is coming loose at the seams, and the door seems to be made from two different, broken doors glued together. The windows are covered in tape or missing altogether and boarded up with wooden planks.

Still, it's right at the lake, next to the harbor. A very charming location, especially now, near the end of summer.

"The place looks like a dump but it's really neat inside," Robin says as he opens the door with an oddly large silver key. "We've got two doll sisters living here who like to clean. Or, well," he says, without finishing his sentence.

He's right. It's neat inside, with rows of boots neatly stacked in little wooden cubicles, and a coat rack containing only one or two too many coats. Right after the entry hall is a stairs up, and then a door to what I presume is the living room.

I turn out correct, and we enter a homely-looking room smelling of incense. There's half a dozen bookcases along the walls, each filled to the brim. There's a dilapidated couch with a coffee table, which is a sharp contrast to the rest of the well-kept room. The strangest detail is the





amount of wooden chairs arranged seemingly at random through the room.

An older-looking doll woman- wearing a crop top and a short skirt that reveal mostly white porcelain and ball-jointed limbs comes running towards us.

“Robin,” she yells. “Robin, Robin, Robin,” she says in a tone I can’t tell is playful or upset.

“What is it, Mercy?” He replies, in a tone that is definitely playful.

“Lily stole some of my chores,” she replies, pouting. “Now she says she’ll get my sticker for good work.”

“Mercy,” Robin chastises the woman. “Please don’t creep out my guest.”

“Woah,” the woman, apparently named Mercy, replies. “Hi, my name is Marissa.” Or Marissa. Odd.

“I’m Marieken,” I introduce myself.

“I’ve made a reward system for good dolls who clean a lot,” Robin explains, which does absolutely nothing to make me less weirded out. “Before that, nothing got done in here.”





The dishes piled up in the kitchen and trash was strewn all around the house.”

“Hmhm,” Marissa- or Mercy- replies. “But today Lily stole all my work.”

“Stealing,” Robin says ominously. “Isn’t very good doll behaviour, is it?”

“No!” Marissa replies, eagerly nodding ‘yes’.

She seems a lot friendlier than Noor had been, but also like there’s something wrong with her.

Or perhaps there’s something wrong with Robin. Maybe it’s some kind of consensual fetish thing going on here, but it feels a little odd to treat an adult human being like this.

Well, human... I feel a little guilty, as if I’m being judgemental.

“I’ll have a good talking to Lily, and rest assured, she won’t get a sticker today.” He then ruffles the woman through her hair.





“Hurray,” she replies before scurrying off and through the door behind us, then loudly up the stairs.

“Take a seat somewhere. I’ll make you some tea, and I’ll introduce you to Ruby-Lynn. You might take a liking to her.”

Very slowly, the feeling that I’ve made some horrible mistake is starting to creep through my extremely tired brain. This place feels more like a cult than a group home so far.

“Who is Ruby-Lynn?” I ask, a little hesitant. Robin seems nice enough, but dangerous people are often good at playing nice and I am an underage girl who just wandered into the group home of a self-professed narcissist witch.

As if I had never read any fairy tales as kids. Then again, most fairy tales were written before the Americans had felt the morbid urge to land on the moon, so the authors probably had never met a real witch anyway.

“A Moontouched Witch who often crashes here. She’ll be here in a hot minute, we were going to make dinner together for the rest of the house. She made Mercy, actually.”

“Made,” I say as slowly as possible. “Made Mercy?”





“Yeah.” Robin does not explain any further. “Pick a chair, I’ll get you tea. What kind do you like?”

“I like most teas,” I say as I sit down on one of the wooden chairs, one next to the largest bookcase. Being a gigantic bookworm, I can’t help but quickly scan the covers for titles I recognize.

Most of it is vampire romance. Which I admittedly have read quite a lot of, but only until I figured out vampires were real and started to feel incredibly weird about fantasizing about them. As I go over all the books, my shadow- or Penumbra, apparently- makes a vampiric smile and then blows shadow-hearts. I cannot help but laugh at her adorable antics.

Again I feel overwhelmingly happy that I have something like this going on. I thought I was plain and ordinary for most of my life, and now I have mystical powers and a whimsical second shadow. I can’t believe I felt ashamed at first, or guilty. Being me has never been better.

Then I think of my parents, and how much I dread going home, how much I dread going to school again and how much I dread having to deal with the government after





that paraphysics test, and my newfound happiness fades as shadows before the sun.

Having completely lost track of Robin or anyone else who might be in the room the moment I saw books, I get startled when he suddenly walks back into the room carrying a tray with two cups of tea. “Tea!” He loudly exclaims.

He puts the tray on the floor before me- there’s no table near the chair I picked- and as I am about to apologize and get up to relocate to a better spot, Robin sits down on the floor.

“Say,” he says. “How long have you known you’re Moon-touched now?”

“A week at most.”

“I hope you like sugar in your tea, I forgot I wasn’t making it for Mercy so I put in like six scoops of sugar.”

“Oh,” I reply. “That’s okay.” Drinking tea with that much sugar has always been a guilty pleasure of mine.

“Anyway,” Robin continues. “A week. That’s harsh. The Shadow Court curse huh, only discovering you’re a changeling when you’re almost an adult. Mirror and Star





courts usually ‘turn’ when they’re around twelve, they have it the easiest.” Maybe if I’d had revealed myself Moontouched at age twelve my parents would’ve had an easier time adapting as well.

“Robin?” I ask.

“Yeah, Marieken?”

“Is it possible that you know you’re Moontouched before you, as you called it, ‘turn’?”

“With very good genetics tests,” Robin replies.

“No, I mean, in your heart? My entire life I’ve been enthralled by white hair, enthralled by Moontouched music, had a feeling I was different.”

“That’s possible,” Robin says. “But then you know the answer already, don’t you?” I don’t know what he means by that. Before I can interrogate him any further, the doorbell rings.

“That’d be Ruby-Lynn,” Robin says, jumping up and running to the front door.





He comes back arm-in-arm with an astonishingly pretty girl. She's modestly dressed, in a long black dress. It gives a bit of an 'old lady' feel, but it can barely hide her beauty. Her hair is stark white, and I start to feel incredibly self-conscious that I painted mine black. If I keep getting so excited about being a special magic girl, it almost feels like a shame I hide my hair.

To top off her entrance, the Moontouched girl does a curtsy while introducing herself. "I'm Ruby-Lynn," she says. Her voice is charming. Enthralling.

"I'm Marieken, I, euh, I- I'm sorry, I painted my hair." Robin laughs.

"Are you here to join Robin's group?" I shake my head. "No, I only met Robin today after he helped me out. I got injured practicing magic."

"Oh my," Ruby-Lynn says. "Robin, you're so incredibly see-through in your motivations."

"Guilty as charged," Robin says.

"What?"





“Robin swooping in to help a pretty girl, then hitching her onto me as an apprentice so he gets to see her more often. Classic,” Ruby-Lynn says, grinning.

“Oh,” I say, somewhat worried.

“Don’t worry,” she says. “I can help you with magic, and Robin will have an excuse to hang out with every now and then.”

“I’m underage,” I protest, getting the feeling I’m being circled by two predators. Neither bothers to respond.

“I’ll give you my number.” These two could never be worse than my parents, I realize. From a place of rebellious arrogance, I muster up the courage to bury my worries, and swap numbers with Ruby-Lynn and Robin.

“Robin,” Ruby-Lynn says. “Go get some tea for me while I look for some books to lend to Marieken over here.” She smiles at me. “I hope you’re doing well at school, because I’m about to triple your homework.”





I reach home with six books in a plastic shopping bag. All books on magic and philosophy about consensus reality, which I'm supposed to read in the coming few months. My sour mood has almost completely disappeared when I see the driveway, and it comes crashing back.

In the driveway stands a large black van, and along the street two police cars are parked. For a moment I consider turning around and walking away, but I realize that might make my problems worse. With breath held, I enter my house.

"Marieken," someone says as I enter the living room. It's Sam, the municipal worker. He's sitting at the dining table with two cops and two more men in black from the government agency.

"Euh," is all I can manage.

"Please sit down," one of the police officers says. "We're gonna ask you some questions."

"About?" I anxiously ask.





“Your mother has filed a police report about you attacking her,” the police officer says. “She’s not pressing charges but we do want to ask some questions.”

“What?” I yell. “I didn’t attack her! I didn’t!”

“We’ll go over that,” the cop says. “Can you tell us what happened?”

“I didn’t do anything!”

“That’s not what I asked,” the cop says.

Sam makes a vague gesture. “What happened that caused your mom to pass out? No charges are being pushed. You can tell us.”

“I discovered I can teleport,” I explain. “I teleported down from my room. It startled my mom.”

“What,” one of the cops asks, frowning, “is teleport? What is that?” Hasn’t this man ever seen a movie or read a comic?

“It’s when you can move instantaneously. Go somewhere. Like, one moment I was in my room, the other moment I was in the living room.” Sam nods and the two men in black start writing things down.





"Your mother said you attacked her. That you grew teeth and eyes and threatened her," the cop interviewing me says while the other takes notes.

"I didn't," I say. "My mom threw a cup at me, and I did the eyes and teeth thing by accident."

"Ah," the cop says. "So you did do it, but it was an accident?"

"No!" I say. "I didn't attack her."

"She was hurt pretty badly though," the cop says. "Head injury, severe mental trauma."

"Because she passed out!" I scream. "She got startled and passed out. I didn't do it on purpose, I swear."

"I see," the officer writes some things down, and Sam glances at the men in black doing the same.

"That's all we need to hear," the police officer says. "I'll bring the reports to the car." He gets up and leaves.

The other cop asks me if I want something to drink. I shake no.





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“We have something to prevent accidents like this,” says one of the men in black, the one on the right. He’s indistinguishable from the other, and his voice is monotonous, almost unearthly so.

He reaches under the table, and hands me a sheet of paper, as well as two little plastic cans.

They rattle as I shake them.

“What is this?” I ask.

“Antipsychotics and Suppressors. Antipsychotics stabilize your mood and thoughts, and Suppressors make it harder to do magic. If you run out, you can get more from the local pharmacy with this slip of paper. We track your usage through your pharmacy requests too, so we know if you stop taking them.” I gasp. “What if I don’t want to?”

“You’ll be imprisoned. You attacked a civilian with shadow magic. You’re looking at a life sentence if you’re uncooperative.”

“No! No! I didn’t attack anyone!”

“Marieken,” Sam says, trying to calm me down. “The pills are good for you. Magic is dangerous, it can consume





you. You scored unfathomably high on your aptitude test. You're in danger. You could accidentally kill yourself, and others."

"No," I whisper. But I think back to my conversation with Robin. If I hadn't met him, I might have tried teleporting again and died.

"It's for the best. You can continue going to school. You can sign up for training, too, to learn to master your powers. You can learn to use them for good, then." My head, no, my entire world, spins.

"Okay then," I say. "I'll take the pills."

"Take two antipsychotics before bed and two with your breakfast," the man in black explains with his soulless, monotonous voice. "You take one Suppressor every day, around the same time.

Doesn't matter one, but don't take more than one. You're Moontouched, not a witch. You're basically made of magic, if you take too much you disincorporate."

"Diswhat?" I ask.





“You vanish. Poof. Gone.” I look at the can of pills, suspicious of them.

“That’ll be all then,” the man in black says, then gets up as well. “I’ll leave you two here.” The remaining cop and the two men in black both leave, leaving me alone with Sam.

“I didn’t know,” I say. “I didn’t know it would be like this.”

“It’s for your safety and those of others,” Sam says.

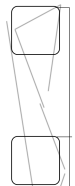
“Where’s my father?” I ask.

“The intelligence agency has booked a hotel for him and his wife. They’re a little frightened, but that can’t be helped. You can stay here on your own until we find a permanent residence for you.”

“A permanent residence?” I ask, incredulous.

“Yes, a group home for Periphery Demographics where you’ll fit in,” Sam says.

“Why?” I ask, tears filling my eyes. “Why do I have to go live somewhere else?”





“Your dad decided it was for the best if you lived apart for a while, until things calm down. So he can make amends with his wife as well. You can still visit him, of course.”

“What? That’s unfair. I don’t wanna go to a group home.”

“It’s for the best,” Sam says. “Here, I’ll give you my phone number. If you need help, let me know.” He hands me another slip of paper, then gets up.

“Anything at all, alright?” He asks. Then he leaves. I am alone with my thoughts in an empty house.

Completely mad with grief I order takeout, and worry what I’ll do if I run out of money. After I’ve finished dinner, I go to my room. I listen to Maria Mithras for a bit, but I cry so much I can’t bring myself to continue. I can’t manage to read anything either, neither in *Walking in Moonlight* nor in the books Robin gave me.

After brushing my teeth, I put two of the antipsychotics in my hand, and swallow them with a glass of water. They haven’t given me any additional instructions, and I’m worried that they might mix weird with each other so I wait an hour and then take the Suppressor as well.





I lay down in bed, and sleep comes suddenly and without warning, like switching off the TV.

When I wake up, things are different. The world is a little muted, a little less sharp. My thoughts feel a little odd, but not in an unpleasant way. Like pleasant little clouds are hugging my brain from all sides.

The light falling through the living room window is also muted, a little gray. I never noticed how much light bothered me before. I finish my cereal, and take my next dose of antipsychotics.

I stare at the floor.

I have only one shadow.

It hurts a little, but the clouds in my mind do a lot to dampen the pain. I just might be able to go to school like this, I realize.

The bus trip to school is a blur. Before I know it I'm at the entrance to my high school. A little overstimulated with everyone rushing in around me, I stumble forward.

“Hey.” It's Hiro. “Your aura is different.”





“Hmhm, what’s that mean?”

“Last time I saw you, you were a roiling ball of rage. I really suspected you of being the killer, you know.”

“The killer?” I’m confused.

“Who is strangling girls at this school. Do you not pay attention to rumors, urban legends?” He says, as if that’s the most normal thing in the world.

“No,” I say. “Rumors and urban legends are dangerous, you can manifest them into reality by engaging with them too much.”

“Tsk,” Hiro spits. “Are you really moontouched?”

“No.” I ruffle through my black hair with my left hand.

“I see. Pathetic.” He walks off, and I hear Amy laugh behind me.

“Is that creep bothering you?”

“He thinks I’m a witch or demon or something.”

“Hey,” she says, full of cheer. “Your shadow is back to normal.”



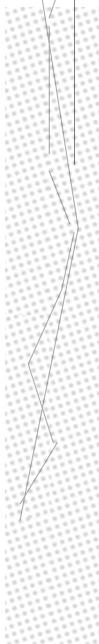


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“Yeah! Back to Normal,” I say, forcing a smile.

My heart aches, but the clouds pressing against my soul do a lot to take the pain away. I might just be able to live like this.

I'll be back with my parents in no time as well if I can keep it up, I realize. Now with a genuine smile, I follow Amy to our first class of the day.





"In later years, the amount of paranatural manifestations has been decreasing. Overall test scores for Paraphysical Affinity have been decreasing as well," the teacher explains. "This is good news, because it means global policies are working and that baseline reality can eventually be restored. Your children might not have to be scared of demons or magical terrorism anymore." In the back of class, I hear Hiro sigh. The teacher also notices, and glares at him.

"Yes, Hiro? Anything you want to add?" The entire class turns to look at Hiro, who is seated on the back row.

"You don't have to be scared of demons right now, and that is because the state deploys child soldiers to fight them," Hiro says, shrugging.

"Child soldiers, is it now?" The teacher asks, annoyed. Several of my classmates have to suppress laughter.

"Broski, the cops have me run around with a katana to murder people in the name of public safety. I'm seventeen. I'm a child soldier." Our classmates are now laughing.

"Broski?" The teacher seems taken aback by Hiro's choice of words for a second, then regains composure. "Why are





you even here then, if you're so important? You're dismissed, go report to detention."

"One of these days," Hiro says as he gets up and heads out of class. "I'm gonna stop taking my pills and then you're all in for it." The laughter subsides, and worried murmuring takes its place. It's something we've all heard about before, Periphery Demographics committing magical terrorism.

The rest of the Social Sciences class passes by without further incident. We talk about things individuals can do to help prevent reality erosion, and things NGOs and governments undertake to help the world recover.

It pains me a little. If the world returns to normal, will I stop existing? Why is it a bad thing that I exist? I remember the pain I caused my parents, and shiver. Perhaps it really is for the best if no more Moontouched are born.

After Social Sciences is Math, which is nice. Mathematics have nothing to do with changelings or schizophrenia or medication. The clouds in my mind make it difficult to focus, but I finish all my work on time nonetheless.

Then is the first break of the day, and I head down to the cafeteria to eat with Amy and Jan.





Before I can reach the cafeteria, however, I run into Maria, Theresa and their witch friend. To my horror, they force me into a corner.

“Why are you here?” Maria asks, then looks over her shoulder for approval from Theresa.

“I don’t understand.”

“Why are you here? Strutting around as if anyone wants you to actually be here?” Her voice is filled with a sadistic glee.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I won’t bother you, I swear.”

“Maybe,” Maria says. “We should tell your normie friends you’re Moontouched. See how long you can manage to keep up the arrogant act when they immediately throw you out with the trash.” I want to say ‘they wouldn’t’, but I’m not sure of that. I also don’t want to provoke Maria into actually doing it, so I keep my mouth shut.

The older girl- the witch- that I frequently see them hang out with shoves Maria to the side and grabs me by the chin.





“What’s with the glassy look in her eyes?” She says. Her voice is harsh and raspy.

“No way,” Maria replies. “You think she’s on meds?” I visibly cringe, betraying myself.

“Aren’t you a good girl,” Theresa chimes in. “First painting your hair, now taking your Suppressors. You almost pass for human.”

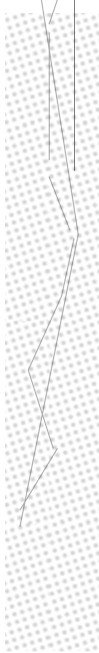
“She must hate us so much,” Maria says.

“Do you?” The witch says, still holding me by my chin. “Do you hate your fellow Moontouched? Are you ashamed of discovering you’re a filthy aberration like them? Can’t wait for all those smart assholes to figure out a way to fix reality so we all die?”

“No,” I whisper. “It’s not like that at all.” Down the stairs, the cafeteria erupts in screaming.

Maria says something along the lines of “heeeeeeeeh,” which sounds closer to screeching than language.

“Let’s go see what’s up, Sareth,” Theresa says, and the three goths leave me alone.





I have to stifle tears as I stumble down the stairs. The last few years I've looked up to Maria and Theresa, secretly fantasizing about being a cool and magical girl as well. And now that I've discovered I am, I paint my hair in shame.

They're right, I'm trash.

When I read the ground floor, Amy and Jan come running up to me. "Marieken, did you hear?" They yell.

"No," I say, putting in my all to hide that I've been crying.

"Someone died," Amy says. "There's an ambulance on the schoolyard and everything. Police, too. People are saying it was murder."

"Oh," I say. "Strangled?"

"Yeah," Jan says. "How'd you know?"

"Apparently that happened before," I explain.

"In our school? Don't you think we'd have heard about that?" Amy asks.

"I don't know," I say. "I hope they catch whoever did it."





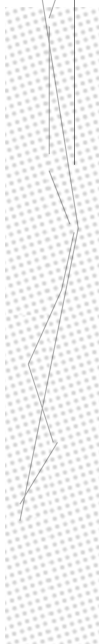
“Yeah,” Amy says. “Doesn’t exactly make you feel safe.” We continue to the cafeteria, where people are huddled into groups, whispering to each other.

The mood is grim.

I glance around to see if I can spot Maria, Theresa and Sareth anywhere. I don’t, and feel a little more at ease. I eat my brunch in silence, only vaguely paying attention to Amy and Jan.

The class after break is a double session Economics. It’s boring, but not offensively so. Supply and demand, the effects of government regulation on the housing market. They make it all sound so simple, so easy. I wonder if I’ll ever buy a house. Maybe I’ll find a Moontouched boy to marry, and we can raise our Moontouched children with lots of love so that they won’t have to go through the stuff I’m going through.

Or perhaps the scientists will manage to fix whatever is wrong with the world, and I and everyone like me will vanish, after which the humans can finally go back to whatever they were doing before we showed up.





After economics it's time for the second break, which is a lot longer. Dissociating and tired, I avoid the cafeteria and go sit on one of the benches in the schoolyard instead. The medics and cops have gone, but a part of the schoolyard is still marked as off-limits with tape. It's tragic, getting killed while still in high school. I wonder why someone would do such a thing.

As I am eating my lunch, Hiro walks up to me and sits down next to me. As always, he's carrying his katana with him. I can't help but laugh a little.

"What do you want?" I ask.

"Do you know Sareth?" He asks me in return.

"No," I say, somewhat truthfully. "I've met her, though. She doesn't like me."

"Three people have died on school grounds in the past few months. All strangled. All periphery demographics." So that's why nobody bothered to make a big deal out of it. Who cares if a changeling or vampire dies, right? "What does Sareth have to do with that?"





“I can see auras,” Hiro says. “Sareth’s has been growing stronger. As of today she’s got twice as much energy as she had last week.” I look at him, confused. “You think she’s killing people?”

“Initially, I thought it was you,” Hiro says. “Can you sense auras?”

“No,” I reply.

“You’re on Suppressors now, right?” Hiro asks.

“Yeah, and antipsychotics.”

“Before that, it was like standing next to a jet engine to be in the same building as you. For someone to grow so strong overnight, something unnatural has to happen.”

“Like what?” I ask.

“Like draining,” Hiro says. “Stealing the life force of others. Taking what’s fuelling them and adding it to your own power.” Shivers go down my spine. Is that why they were harassing me today? Am I to be their next victim? “Can you do anything about it?” I ask. It feels strange to talk with Hiro like this.





“Not without evidence. I’m not going to act without definitive proof. I’m no cop.” A wry smile forms on my face. Of course.

“I saw them talking to you today,” Hiro adds. “What was that about?”

“Nothing,” I say. “They were just bullying me. It’s no big deal.”

“I see,” Hiro says. “You should be careful. Even if Sareth turns out to not actually be the killer, she’s an unpleasant person. As bad as they come.”

“Witches?” I ask.

Hiro laughs. “Yeah. A real specimen.” I make a mental note to ask Robin if he knows Sareth if I ever talk to him again. Now that I’m on medication, it feels unnecessary to become some kind of witch apprentice. I’m aiming to put my life back to normal after all.

“I’ll be careful,” I say.

“Okay then,” Hiro says, and he gets up from the bench. He grabs his katana, and walks off towards the main school faculty building.





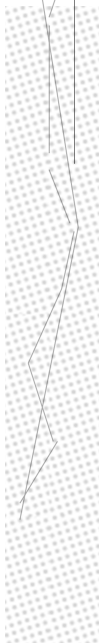
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Alone, I finish my lunch. Slightly too late I make it to the last classes of the day, where nothing eventful happens.

Alone and depressed, I make my way home from school. The house is empty, my dad still away.

There's no letters from the Municipal Government, which is somewhat of a relief. For a bit I try to read in *Walking in Moonlight*, but my mind is too clouded, too distracted. The book feels odd to me, too. A little cringe. Schizophrenic. I don't have time to read about roads one can only see during a full moon, about the hidden places in the city where moontouched dance to summon alien gods.

Instead, I sit down on my bed and wait until it's time to make dinner. Occasionally I try and look for my second shadow, but it's really gone. I really am just a normal girl on these pills. My evening is a drab, monotonous gray, but at least it is quiet. I'm not unhappy, I realize. Just a little tired.





School days go by in a blur. Like trapped in a hazy fog with only moments of real lucidity. Still, I realize that I am not unhappy.

The next Thursday I find myself at the university faculty for Paraphysics again. This time, several people from some government agency want to observe my tests. They're all armed, and they all seem to be scared of me. A man and a woman with guns at the door, two more men flanking Dr. West.

"What a waste," Dr. West says as he hands one of the men in suits my test results. "She dropped down to a safe twenty-five on those pills."

"A waste? It's a relief," one of the agents replies. "I really hope I don't have to explain that to you."

"Yeah yeah," Dr. West says, visibly annoyed. "Everything beautiful has to be muzzled, chained and put behind glass."

"Dr. West!" the same agent- seemingly the one in charge- shouts. "You're out of line."

"At least," the doctor says as he again puts his hand on my head, "wash that crap out of your hair."





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“Dr. West!” The agent yells again.

I don't mind. The clouds in my mind insulate me from the feeling of harassment.

“Anyway,” the doctor says. “Twenty five is still more than enough for you to qualify for government employment. Ever felt like becoming a superhero?” I haven't really felt much of anything the last week or so.

“Hm?” Is all I manage to reply.

“If you do, here's a place for you to live near your school,” the agent in charge says. “You'll be roommates with two others. A vampire and an autistic guy. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays you're expected to check in at the Academy For Gifted Paraphysicals, which also isn't far from the apartment. If you do well there, you might get assignments. It's a good way for you to earn some money and contribute to public safety at the same time.” I barely parse what the man is rambling about. Are autistic people Periphery Demographics? I resolve to google it when I get home.

“And if I don't?” I ask.





“Then it will be very hard to find housing for you.” Aha. Just like the medication, it really isn’t a choice. I don’t mind. It might actually be good to explore my powers in a safe environment, and having a place to stay so my parents can calm down in their own house will be good too.

“I was going to accept anyway,” I say. “It’ll be good for me to move out.”

“Glad to hear it,” the agent says.

“Tsk,” Dr. West spits.

One of the other agents hands me a folder with documents. “You can find everything you need to move in here. Don’t forget to copy page sixteen and file it with the Municipal Government. We don’t have to explain that we’ll get a little paranoid if we lose track of you, I hope.” I nod. I take the papers, and head back outside. It all feels like a dream, like I’m barely there.

On the square before the faculty building, I run into Noor. A vague sense of dislike forms in my mind, but like most of my feelings it is quelled by the clouds pressing on my brain. I’m glad, really. No reason to feel hate, or pain.





“Hey Noor,” I say, startling the doll. She hadn’t noticed me, or at least pretended to.

“Oh, hi Marieken,” she says. Her rigid, porcelain face and glass eyes betray no emotions. “Sorry for last time.”

“Last time?” I ask. I think I know what she means, but it’s all so long ago.

“With Maria and Theresa.” I give it my all to sound like I know what I’m talking about.

“Yeah,” I say. “They’re jerks.”

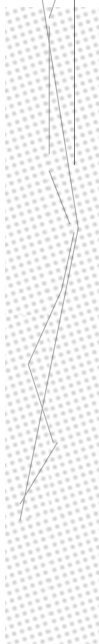
“I know, I’m sorry,” Noor says. “I shouldn’t have done that. I thought that if Theresa liked me, maybe Sareth would take me back.”

“Take you back?” I ask her. “What do you mean?”

“I used to be hers, you know,” Noor says. “Her doll.” It slowly dawns on me that I’ve seen this behavior before.

“Are all dolls other people’s property?” I ask her.

“It’s not really like that,” she says. “I have weed on me. Do you wanna go sit somewhere and smoke?” I want to





complain that I'm underage, but I'm already on two different, powerful drugs. I doubt that some marijuana is going to affect my brain any worse than the antipsychotics and suppressors already do.

"Sure," I say.

We sit down on one of the benches strewn around campus, and Noor fishes a joint and a lighter out of her pockets. She lights it, and takes two puffs, then passes it to me.

"I've never smoked before," I say.

She giggles. "It's easy. Suck in a little smoke, but don't like, fully inhale. Then take the joint out of your mouth and breathe in the smoke that built up in your mouth with plenty of extra oxygen." I try to do as she says, but seemingly do it wrong. I have to cough so badly that I start crying.

Noor laughs. "Don't worry. You'll get the hang of it." She takes back the joint, and seemingly unbothered by the smoke takes several more drags of it.

"What's Sareth like?" I ask her. "I mean, when she isn't bullying Moontouched girls at school or strangling people





to death.” To my surprise, Noor doesn’t even flinch when I mention the potential murders.

“She’s harsh, but she can be kind, too. She made me call her mistress and occasionally let me sleep in bed with her, Maria and Theresa instead of on the floor.” Even insulated from the world as I currently am, this almost knocks me off my feet. That doesn’t sound nice at all, that sounds like sociopathic abuse. And she, Maria and Theresa are all in some kind of relationship together? “Euh,” is all I manage to reply.

“I’m not a very good doll though,” Noor says. “I have a lot of wants and needs. I’m so selfish, I’m almost a human being.” With every sentence, Noor strikes me as more and more unstable and in dire need of help. Or perhaps that’s a doll thing? The doll at Robin’s place- Mercy or Merri or Merrisa or something also seemed oddly servile.

Noor passes me back the joint, and I try smoking again. This time it goes a little better, but not by much.

“Do you think Sareth could kill someone?” I ask Noor.

“Why are you asking?” Noor replies. “I kind of still want her back. I’m not throwing her under the bus.” It is as-





tounding how she manages to come up with the single most troubling possible answer to that question.

“Someone is killing people at my school. Periphery Demographics. Sareth is already bullying me, and if she’s the killer, I’m scared she might actually hurt me someday.” Noor shrugs. “She’s a cultist. But she completely adores Moontouched, so I think you’re safe.

Maybe wash that black paint out of your hair to be extra safe.” That doesn’t make me feel better at all.

“Where do you live?” I ask Noor.

“A homeless shelter,” she replies casually.

“That’s awful,” I say.

“It’s okay,” Noor replies. “It’s better than sleeping under a bridge. Though this artificial body of mine can sleep just fine while slumped against a concrete pylon, it’s nice to have at least something resembling a mattress and a blanket.”

“I’m moving into a group home for Periphery Demographics,” I say, immediately feeling a little guilty. I’m scared it’s insensitive, that it’ll come across as bragging to Noor.



“Good luck with that,” Noor says. “Most of the government ran ones are shitholes and the privately run ones are fronts for parapsychical cults.” I think back to Robin and Ruby-Lynn.

“Do you know a Robin? Lives in a group home near the harbor.”

“Never heard of her,” Noor says.

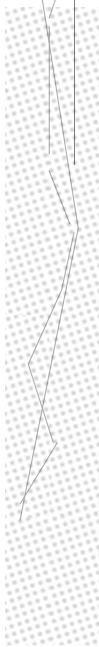
“Him. Robin is a him.”

“Faggy name,” Noor says, and I can’t help but laugh a little. She’s so incredibly blunt.

“I will probably collect my stuff tonight and go to that group home,” I say. “My parents are in a hotel right now because they’re scared of me, so the sooner they can go back into their own house the better.” Noor stares at me. Her unmoving face almost betrays an expression of astonishment.

“Marieken, what the fuck?”

“What?”





"I thought you lived with your parents. You paint your hair and all that. I thought you were a little assimilationist living with her human parents roleplaying as a human girl."

"What's that mean, assimilationist?" I ask.

"Like, trying to be absorbed by human society. Trying to pass as human. Why are your parents scared of you?"

"I accidentally did shadow magic and it frightened my mom so badly she passed out." I sigh deeply. "If only they had given me these suppressors earlier."

Noor shrugs. "You seem completely out of it. Like you're not all there. I don't think these pills are good for you."

"At least I'm not hurting anyone," I say.

"If you say so," she replies.

We spend some more time smoking, and eventually I get the hang of it, though I keep getting teary-eyed from the stinging smoke in my lungs. The effect of the weed is nice though. Calming.

Almost sleep-inducing.





“I have to go, I’m going to pack my bags and such,” I tell Noor when the joint is through.

“Alright. Hope we run into each other again. It was nice hanging out.”

“Yeah,” I say.

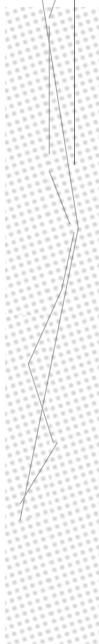
“Oh, and Marieken?”

“Hmhm,” I reply.

“Sorry for that thing with Theresa the other day. I’ll try to make it up for you. If I see her or Sareth again I’ll ask them to leave you alone, okay?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Thanks.”

With that I leave for what feels less and less like my home, to pack my bags.





Synopsis

natalia wanders the zone populated by paramilitaries, influencers and the children of napalm and static breeding across the desert until even its sands dye into the blue-light glimpsed before artillery fire



by: [nekosattva](#)

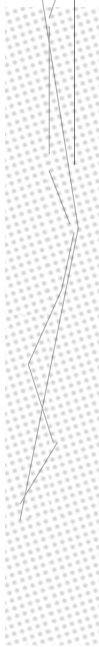
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Last Time

the armies and civilians of the glass city reveal their ideologies, their histories and more important to Yelena, the fate of Christine





CW: sexual violence threat, ritual sacrifice, fascist ideology, missile

When Yelena woke up, the world was as it was. As it has always been; bright, relentless, a flickering throb. Hot fluorescences agitated the fire of the mind, with white ash roiling from a crumbling dream... or if she'd even slept at all; the yellow of these nauseating walls which surround her had never been touched by sunlight, nor had a day ever passed. Life within these walls was inert & thin, a shitty straight-to-video parody. She sat up in her bed; a terrible thumping was beating at the side of her stomach. Time didn't pass in this bunker-- nah, it just decayed. Run your little finger 'cross the walls; there's only the dusty residue of this planet stuck to your skin.

Yelena bolted up from her bed... she jumped, jumped a few more times, did a few push-ups and sit-ups. Her heart thumped, the linoleum was chill 'neath her feet; she was still among the living. She looked down, the floor

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was the color of skin, with dark moles and craters across its surface. She took the letter opener from the floor, drove the blade into the desk, then withdrew. She dropped it back onto the desk, then drank the rest of the energy drink Alec had left her. Escape. Pabjek. The word seemed meaningless to her now, the name of some distant star. She wonders of life amongst the vacant planets, her un-aborted twins borne of the choices taken. "Vixat," the plaque above the door read. A promise it could not fulfill. Yelena stepped to the mirror, studied her flat and red face, and slapped herself as furiously as she could. With Christine dead by her own hand, she could finally live as herself-- she unlocked her phone, moved the orange frock up just enough to reveal her swollen belly, and took a selfie in the mirror. She looked at herself; the undisciplined form made the face of the figure anonymous, its body a patchwork of ill-fitting pieces. She deleted it a few moments later.

There was a knock at the door. Yelena jumped; hit in the corner by the toilet. A few moments passed... she lunged for the letter opener and hid it in her frock. The length of the blade felt something like equality. Another knock; she heard Alec loudly call for her. Yelena swallowed the stomach acid that burnt in her throat, and walked to



the door, and stood right up to it: "what do you want?" She shouted. A few more knocks, markedly more forceful. Her wet hands gripped the letter opener's hilt beneath her frock, and she opened the door just slightly. Alec's face appeared through the crack; "sorry shanti, but we got a long day ahead of us." Force slammed the door open, and Yelena fell back, still firmly grasping the letter opener. Groypee and Paco stood there before her, like glittering statues dressed in ceramic plates and Kevlar. Groypee wore a flower that rose from his vest, and Paco's feathery mustache looked feral hanging beneath his trucker cap. Alec opened up a large sack made of jute, far larger than it should be, and stood there with a half-cocked smile. A distorted sham of a forgotten tradition.

"No!" Yelena shouted. "No fucking way am I getting in that!" she shouted again. Groypee and Paco pulled her onto her feet by her arms, their faces red & mean. She hoped their many beatings would dissuade them from giving in to their primal urge... is she to wither, to go slack with surrender? Groypee and Paco squeeze her arms and her pulse thuds in protest. To be of value is a great curse; Yelena feels herself a tiny gem to be spat on when a reminder of her worth is needed. She hung her head, and Alec covered Yelena with the sack. As they closed the sack





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and lifted her, she felt the odd relief of night's arrival long overdue. She shut her eyes and fell into a deep snore.

Strange that we should meet again like this. Now, there's a piece of datum you'd hate to swipe left on! What's a sweet thing like you doing in a dump like this?

The orange disk grew, its warmth burning the sky. An eagle flew through the window and landed beside her, and she lowered her bow. A flame nuzzled her bare chest. At the top, a bell swung from left to right. It toils for no-one. In the distance, a few towers tickled the red skies. So what's it like in the mental institution? Did they take out your brains and make you a hot fem-bot unit? Do they let you have an insta in there? A finsta? Christine laughs. It's time to wake up. A mahimata has a lot to do.

Darkness unmercifully burnt up into heat. Yelena shrieked in pain; through the hands covering her face, a shine blew gently through the webs of her fingers. Before her sat a large table decorated with gold, laid and set with thousands of dishes. Groypee and Paco folded up the sack and moved away like her obliging attendants, stepping behind Yelena. She let her hands fall from her face-- before her sat a large bowl of glowing magenta liquid, a few eggs floating along like islands. Besides the bowl were many





smaller bowls, filled with black fish eggs, orange fish eggs, pickled cucumbers and garlic, pickled tomatoes, pickled cabbage; there were wreaths of dill and parsley, and the air was singing with notes of pepper and freshly-cut herbage. Stretching from one end of the table to another, there were salads of red beets and cheese, potatoes and peas and ham, herring sprinkled with chopped-up eggs, and there were pancakes and little dumplings covered with sour cream, and there were long skewers of meat glistening with fat, and shiny pieces of onion and pepper, and there were little steaks and sharp little rods of potato, and there were cakes and black bread and long loaves and...

Yelena set her mouth to the edge of the bowl and sucked down as much as she could in one gulp. With the spoon she took one sip, two sips of beets, cucumber, carrots and egg; she sat on a bench before her and took a few pieces of bread and tore them apart and dropped them in the soup, then mixed it 'round a few times with the spoon. As she swallowed with little concern for chewing, she looked to her left, to her right at the women of the bunker; their foreheads sweaty, their heads veiled, their hands coarse and rough. Tahmineh stood in front of Alec, her face ruddy and swollen. Yelena's gaze was caught on the sharpness of Tahmineh's chin, pointed like a weapon.





It reminded her of Natalia; she tried to dull her worries by telling herself that the girl was merely a fish she'd thrown back to its waters. As Yelena's chewing slowed, she took in the surroundings beyond the table-- a few posters of Tupac hung from the crackling walls, and above the door was an etched red symbol of a circle surrounded by three leaves. In Russian, a placard beneath the symbol read "izluchenije." Before the table was an empty space, lit up by candlelight.

Little King Samuel came from the metal staircase behind Yelena, dressed in a bulletproof vest adorned with a cross, and a bandana wrapped around his head and a cigar in his mouth. "Yelena," he smiled. "My mahimata." Yelena nodded as she spooned dumplings into her mouth. "Do you know what it means to be a mahimata?" Yelena's eyes were heavy, dark; juices spilled down her neck onto her frock. "It is only a woman's power that can actualize the masculine potential. Man represents change, but women represent the never-ending currents of the universe." Yelena's chewing ceased; the women looked down at the floor, as if to shield their eyes from Yelena's fate. Yelena bit a chunk off her bread. "Are you going to rape me, Samuel?" she said plainly before chewing. Little King Samuel let out a few nervous chuckles, then put his hands togeth-

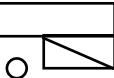




er. "I understand you're a little on edge. It's on me to show you that you are safe, that all you women are safe." A few boys came behind Little King wearing masks, dressed in olive-green military garb from the waist down. One of the boys pulls at another boy; the mask of the first boy has sparkles in the cheek and a wide smile, and the other boy's mask had a tear running from its left eye. Another boy broke in the middle; his expressions was fearsome with shark teeth blaring. "Do you like Tupac, Lenchka?" Yelena burped before nodding in affirmative. Little King started to pace before the tables; "you see, he called himself Makaveli, after Machiavelli, but I always felt he was something more... he was a figure of pure action as informed by the will, hot blooded sentiment mixing with cold, calculated violence. He saw his artistry and his banditry as one and the same; he was a warrior poet, he was the hip-hop Odin. Do you get what I'm trying to tell you?" Another boy wearing a mask stood beside Little King; his expression was stoic and indomitable.

Yelena shook her head while shoving a few eggs into her mouth with two of her hands, her frock stained yellow and red. One of the boys brought out a makeshift wireless speaker, made of bolts and felt. A few pings filled the room while Little King Samuel fiddled with his phone,





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trying to collect the right files. "Mahimata moyo," he sputters. "You get the honor of being the first to see the work-in-progress 'All Eyes on Me.'" A few sustained violins ring out from the speaker, discordant yet hazy enough to fade in the background, and two of the boys dressed in military garb dropped down on their knees before Little King Samuel. He let his arms drop beneath him, and the sustained violins came to a sudden halt, letting the resonance continue on throughout the bunker. A few bass notes rose from a deep darkness, merely flowing without melody, as Little King Samuel raised his arms to form the shape of an archer eyeing his target. As other instruments joined, Little King Samuel repeated the gesture of the archer, choosing a different target each time. First a gentle wave of oboes, then a sudden strident figure of strings repetitive and insistent. The boys line up behind Little King Samuel, who hid his face in open palms. The music fell to an eerie silence, and Little King Samuel approached Yelena who served as the captive audience.

"Who shot 'ya?" Little King spat. "Ready to die, motherfuckers." Little King fell onto his knees. From behind, one of the boys came with a heavy lip and a steady hand, and set a pistol up to Little King's neck. Little King's head tilted towards the make-believe sky of the

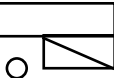




stage, then pushed away the other boy. Two other boys came and stripped the jewelry from Little King's neck. The music turned discordant, full of insistent violin screeches and deep rumbles of the bass. Little King falls down to his knees. Another boy places his hand on Little King's shoulder, but Little King pulls the hand away, and accepts his solitude there in the loneliness of the empty stage.

One of the boys cracks a spotlight from the top of the stairs overlooking the stage. It shines down onto Little King, enveloping him in a shining white egg made of light. "Egg?" Yelena thot. She cracked another egg open, feeling her stomach heave with heft but incapable of controlling her appetite. How long, how long; she'd denied herself for how long? No more. She spat out a few egg shells, stuck to the roof of her tongue. Little King rose suddenly to his feet, the music taking on a more playful rhythm with fluttering flutes and airy little spins of the viola, and Little King laid across the arms of one of the boys; and together, they hopped on their feet, graceful like sparrows, stepping and tip-toeing with admirable accuracy. Yelena, who always had a weakness for dance, dropped her two pastries to applaud. Little King stretches out his arms like a bird while the boy lifts him up towards the fire of the skylight.





Little King goes back on his feet. "Sorry, work in progress." He plays around with his phone, and Yelena strokes her tummy as a terrible nausea rose up into her chest. The music shifted from precious little wooden instruments to drawn out sounds in a vacuum, like one ever-long lasting cosmic slurp. Two of the boys pull aside the food on the table, throwing it into the floor and making a terrible clatter as salads and little fried potatoes scatter across the floor. Little King lies on the table, and one of the boys pulls out his phone and reads from a script.

"The scene," the boy cries. "Makaveli lies on the operating table. The operating room lights cast a sterile glow, like the streetlights of a concrete jungle." Little King looked so lonely, isolated from the world there on the table.

The boy presses something on his phone. A loud gunshot rings out. The drawn out sounds fade to the background.

"In my own way," Little King speaks in a bellowing voice, "I've tried to be free. I've taken fate into my own hands, as a man must. But I could not know that death is what it means to be free." The stage lights flickered. The boys spoke in unison: "ashes to ashes; hood to hood." A comment section's collective nightmare. One of the boys plunges a wooden stake into Little King's heart.





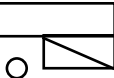
A loud gunshot rings out. This time even louder, shaking some of the lights into a slow sway.

"And yet there, between where the shadow plays on the tail of the panther, I've tried to milk the light that peers through the cracks. And drunk on the milk I've tried to carry water and chop wood, and I sat parched on the green pastures past the still waters you still denied me. And in the terrible heat of summer with its hissing concrete lawns. And in the goodness of the LORD dear LORD all is good so good my LORD but I buckled, and I shook and rattled like a prize catch pollock in the muddy waters flowing downwards from crystal mountains on which mansions have their tables ceaselessly set. And yet I was not caught."

"Who?" The boys answer.

"But life in a fishbowl is not life at all good LORD, dear LORD. It is filled with bobbles and knick-knacks and artificial sands, and the terrible tapping of the glass that insists upon you. Dear LORD, it is that damnable tapping once more! And I looked to my sides and I saw that the other fish of my school were deaf to the fingers uninvited at the windows of my world. So I reached out to bite those fingers, and indeed I gnawed right up to the hand that feeds. Forgive the bromide, dear LORD."





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A loud gunshot rings out. The plates and glasses pinged and clanged as the table shook.

"And I--," and here Little King takes a peak at his phone and scrolls through a few lines, "like an arrow am doomed to the trajectory I've been shot on. And I passed from grand halls to mental ghettos, and I've been hospitalized by the choices of others. And I've worn the cloak of night, and felt its long daggers stuck in me. But I fear not for I know my body is merely a vessel of my desire, and my will, and who I chose to be. So I remade myself in thine image, again and again, redoing the past and future like sketches in a notebook. A name is no sentence but merely the clay by which I form myself, and a name may change its shape as I will."

A few little crumbs fell from Yelena's mouth as she was dumbfounded to hear such words. Her own name, 'Yelena,' was just clay, just as the words 'Tupac,' '2Pac,' or 'Makaveli' were. A fiction, formed by the actions done by her and done upon her-- meaningless without her will. The flesh itself is merely incidental, a boring matter of fact. She was no more 'Yelena' than she was 'Christine,' no less 'Christine' than she was 'Yelena' or '@user1243232' or 'neko_girl2000' or or or...





"As I was born 'Lesane Parish Crooks,' dear LORD, let me die 'Makaveli' as a symbol of the will you'd given me in a world starved of light."

A loud gunshot rings out; so loud that the walls recoiled in a tremor. The music died out to a gentle hum. "Who?" So, so strange.

Yelena awoke from her after-banquet sleep with a terrible fever and a nausea that tumbled from one oozing wall of her stomach to the other like a ship in troubled water; so she tumbled, from the bed to a sink standing before a glossy mural of palm trees swaying in the tropical breeze. The offensive image made Yelena spew onto the sink, onto the floor, onto the toilet; her entire stomach emptied itself in one grand gesture of purity. She fell onto the floor, and realized that she'd been stripped-- she'd been denied the humanity of dressing herself. The deathly cold of the floor sent sparks up her spine, and she yelped and crawled over the floor back to the bed where she clutched at the covers and dragged them onto herself to make the world dark again. Nay-toe, help me!

Dark, dark again. She laid beneath the covers on the floor for how long? Without the sun, the minutes and hours become flakes of skin. Another woman's dream had become





Yelena's nightmare, but what would have her name been? "Yelena, Yelena;" she muttered to herself, unsure of what the sounds were meant to represent. Yelena took the covers off her face, and looked around the room-- the chiseled roses on the ceiling, the tulips and marigolds of the carpets, ugly ugly ugly! Yelena dragged herself back on the bed, meditated for a few short moments, and noticed that a mannequin now sat in the room next to the mirror. From the mannequin hung beautiful red silk, embroidered with geometric shapes prancing amongst jasmine and magnolia. Did the silk belong to the woman for whom this whole shelter had been meticulously constructed? The wife of a top-ranking official, or his mistress? Yelena rose from the bed, draped in the covers, and inspected the silk with her fingers. It felt heavy and rigid, as if the fabric itself were weary with the weight of all said & done. She looked down at the dusty portrait of the woman next to the mirror; Yelena had been an understudy her whole life. "In this patchwork of lives," she thot, feeling all filosofikal 'alla a sudden. Thinkin' of this pool that had produced her, thick with beads of liquid identity, freed from the constraints of cold-hard cash. Here in the pool, we are free to play as ourselves, to wear the tattered costumes of the past. "But who was Yelena really?" she sez as if narrating a Shorty scrolling by... Yelena looked around again, studying the

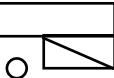




flower-decorated chamber of the bunker, and took her place.

"The ceremony is starting," Alec said while he walked behind Yelena, careful not to disturb the red silk with the sooty barrel of his AK-74. "Just down the hall this way," and Yelena felt the air thicken as they traveled lower down the complex, past the rusting machines and dead computers. A few young children saluted at Yelena, guarding the storeroom filled with nutritional bars and energy gels. Even thicker air, slivers of silver rolling through the air. Tension flooded into Yelena's chest; she felt as if space itself might combust under its own pressure. "Bah," she spat. Alec stopped her, his ugly, rotten glove on her silk-shoulder; he stood there, suspended, his nose jumping with an anxious twitch. "I feels like I should be saying something, little dime," he offered. Yelena pushed away his glove; it left a dark impression on the fabric. "Come on, don't be like that, Lenka." She tried to see it from his eyes-- were they not both objects, merely drawn from different bins? "That's not my name," she flatted muttered. Alec's demeanor stiffened up, and his smile fled. He drew up his weapon. "Suka blyat; we need to get moving, detka."





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The bunker opened up to a deeper complex, with darker hues and cavernous spaces fogged up with the dust of a forgotten something, or another; there were signs and placards which were etched with 'opasnostj,' painted with 'vnimanie,' lettered with all sorts of commands like 'vkhod bez maski zapreshon' or 'kantraliruemoya zona.' Artifacts of another time, their meanings dead and the symbols lifeless. Ah; she felt like a ghost aimlessly wandering her own graveyard. Further down the stairs, the bunker opened up to an impossibly large chamber topped with a huge hole towards the sky from which dense, heavenly light shone down... at the center on the floor, a large white missile hung over a dark pit of machinery erect and proud amidst a halo of light, pointed towards the needy blue orifice. Yelena felt herself gasp; "jobarj," she muttered. The side of the missile was painted with all sorts of red lettering, and at the base stood etched "8K69." Above her, there were a dizzying number of chambers flowing in every direction, filled with pipes and instruments, connected by millions of wires that stood like veins throbbing on the surface of the concrete. Underneath the burning light, there was a metal platform on which a table with a dish had been set beside a large computer console. Before the platform sat the many women she'd met before in the bunker, who had traded their black cloaks for beautiful red scarves. She

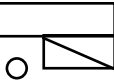




could not see their faces, but she noticed that a large empty space separated their seats from the men. In the further periphery of the platform, many boys sat on the floor, chewing on their nails or cleaning their weapons or doing push-ups. The whispers and laughter, the clattering... they reverberated so strongly that Yelena felt her skull rattle, shaking her thoughts to stupidity; after a few moments, she realized her fate and walked down the empty space 'tween the seats towards the metal platform.

"My dear friends," Little King announced as he walked down the stairs from the control rooms towards the metal platform. "Feast your eyes. Doesn't she look good enough to die for?" Yelena stood before the metal platform, and watched the gaze of the women fall upon her. She saw their chiseled faces with their sharp chins and noses; their plucked black eyebrows a suggestion of the beauty they shrouded in modesty. She touched her own hair; the dirty blonde strands were frayed, full of flakes, and she felt like an animal put on display at a circus. Prodded with a stick. She felt ready to dance; Yelena cracked a smile. The women remained lifeless. Alec took a seat at the back, beside two men dressed in ill-fitting officer's clothes that they'd stolen from larger, hungrier men. The boys rose to their feet; a sea of eyes intent on piercing Yelena. The heat made





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her stomach churn. Their eyes then turned from Yelena, towards the missile that loomed above her like an ancient monument.

"Strength and honor, my friends. That is what it represents to us. Strength and honor; a powerful symbol of a new world order. A fist that pierces the skies. And... a powerful cleansing flame. Whatever your personal beliefs are, friends, surely we can agree that this is a weapon of divine providence. Powered by pure human will. I quiver in anticipation when I see it, and think of its charismatic power." Yelena opened her face and smiled as widely as she could muster. Little King looked up at the missile, ascended the platform, and placed his hand up against the hull of the missile. He pressed his forehead to the hull, and smiled. "Today, we seek a blessing for our new 'mahimata.'" Little King gestured to Yelena, beckoning her towards the platform. Yelena faced the crowd as she shuffled towards the platform... two boys came and lifted her up onto the platform, where Little King patted the computer console to show Yelena her pedestal. "Just as the great fist above us can empty the world, a great 'mahimata' may give birth to a new world; by her sheer will alone, she destroys the world and she creates it. She is the great fist in human form, a girl-shaped missile." The boys cheered; they pressed their



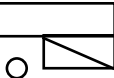


oily flesh together, still free of fateful hairiness. Yelena felt stretched on a rack, her every pore exploded to hysterical sizes. She locked her smile into place, she felt her muscles twitch and her forehead burn. She felt some vomit burn at the back of her throat.

A few boys pull a table towards the platform, lined with all sorts of dark red meats. They looked slick and sickly under the light peering through the orifice above them. Yelena looked above her, trying not to be too sentimental 'bout the plumes of smoke freely crossing through the sky. If she was the girl-shaped missile, what was the needy, wet little hole beggin' for a strike? The metaphor begun to collapse in her brain; she thought of men fucked by explosive phal-luses all night, walls streaked in sticky drama. They turn into red spittle in an instant flash, gone in a single orgiastic display of might. If she was the girl-shaped missile, she longed for a target to fuck.

"What do we call our 'mahimata,' my dear friends?" Many of the men who were seated crossed their arms, took hits from vapes, had a shot or two of chemical-colored energy drink. Paco and Groypee wore matching tracksuits, revolting sunglasses; she wanted to see them captured in glass, forever made monuments to their own wretched banali-





ty. "What do we call our 'mahimata?' I'm reminded of a passage, if I may read it to you;" Little King took out his phone, and fiddled with the apps for a few seconds before clearing his throat.

THE SIXTH THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:

« After a harsh winter, the 'druzhina' had burned a young woman to death in order to placate Nay-toe's anger. This disturbed Kali Hichi, who told the 'druzhina' that such rituals belonged to the world of 'Nefejest.' The 'druzhina' responded with a question: "how should we show Nay-toe that we are devoted to the cause given to us?" Kali Hichi retired to his mountain, and thought for a long time. Afterwards, he returned to the 'druzhina,' and said: "Simple. Just make a puppet of a young woman, and burn that instead. A death is a mere tragedy. Symbols burn forever in the heart and the mind." They made the puppet and called her 'Marena,' meaning 'cute little death.' Soon, every household in the 'druzhina' had purchased their own 'Marena.' »

"My friends, we shall name our 'mahimata:' Marena!" The men on the seats rose to their feet, erupting in applause. The women remained seated; Yelena was unsure if they'd even comprehended the ceremony, if anyone would both-





er to translate all that had been said and done. She saw Tahmineh turn to one of the other women and whisper something in an ear. Yelena turned her gaze away from the crowd, looking at Little King, who seemed so proud in his Air Jordan's and olive military overalls. She felt like the butt-end of a terrible joke, as if the cosmos big-banged only as a prank to humiliate Yelena; or should she say Marena? The light above her filled the room with white-hot heat, and the applause crackles like firework. Marena? The name is familiar. In the white-hot heat, she sees strawberries growing from the vine, impossibly sweet. They sit beyond a rusting gate; Yelena tries to pull apart the gate but the rusted and brittle lock nevertheless does not yield. Marena? There is a shape she sees, refracted in a murky pool of mud beneath a squalid old apartment. She's a child of the land, of the earthly blood.

"I've tried to make sense of you;" Yelena speaks out to Marena. "But I don't know where you and I begin. I know your shape, it's so familiar to me because it's like my own. But what is Christine, and what is Marena?" There are no answers. She remembers her mother on the balcony, smoking and lost in her contemplation. "Did I have a sister?" Yelena asks her mother. This humble stereotype can't offer much of an answer. Throughout the years, she could





not shake the feeling that she'd been separated from some sort of conjoined twin at birth; a shadow who lived her own distinct life, invisible in the light. "Marena?" She calls out, hearing her own voice reverberated throughout the bunker.

From the darkness at the back, a figure walked out of the shadows. The figure was tied to a piece of wood; its head was wax, its hair yellow-d like fine mustard. Two blue plastic pieces hung from the head like rubies, and some tattered red cloth covered the wooden body. The boys held up the figure like a coffin, their fists tightly gripp'd 'round chipped wood. The figure had a crooked smile sewn in bloody thread, tied to its fate by gnarled rope. "Marena?" Yelena muttered.

And what did she look like? The frayed hair that ran from brown to black, with strands of silvery white that hid her ears. Her short, stubby fingers, tipped with soot, a single finger yellow from cigarettes. Soft, tired eyes; they dance with anxious expectation. A sharp, piercing nose above lips that fall apart so easily. Tears that ran down the traffic markings of her long neck. The sharp teeth that revealed themselves with laughter; the childish pout. Fine hairs that stood like trees over rosy lakes. Focus just long





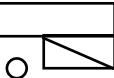
enough, and you may fly through the landscape of her face, a history of touches glittering like the tarnished gold of sunrise over a lake. "Marena?" And in one quick flash, a light turned all these features white as they exploded into flames. And now the world dies in heat.

Strange.

Natalia watched as the fires fell from the sky and clattered onto the ground. With each impact, a plume of hot fiery glass erupted into the air like spittle. She'd never seen it before, though her mind quickly dismissed any sweet fantasies of divine vengeance. Revenge must be a human emotion, she thought; an omnipotent being with infinite might need not concern himself with such pettiness. She gathered her things back into her backpack, throwing some of the left-over sausage to the starving wild dogs below. She rubbed her wrists; they were still raw and red from the chains she'd been placed in. A few nervous thoughts insisted upon himself-- she imagined Yelena in chains herself, sent off to Europe to work bathrooms. Serves her right, she thot; though she could not explain her animosity, she felt no need to apologize for it.

After she'd lowered herself down from the roof, she cleaned her knees; glass residue made the skin dry and





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itchy. A pick-up truck drove up beside her, covered in stickers of drawn cat-girls. A boy wearing a collar sat on the cargo bed, a green G3A3 nuzzled under his cheek. One of the windows of the pick-up truck lowered-- Natalia looked in and saw a woman at the wheel wearing an olive frock, her face shiny and red with sooty eye shadow and long hair dyed pink in ponytails. Her expression was soft, yet coldly determined. "And? Direct hit? Popadali?" Natalia shrugged her shoulders. The woman's expression softened up. She reached into the glove compartment, pulled out a pistol in a leather holster, and threw it towards Natalia who jumped in anxiety as she went to catch it. "Don't go far. Nye daleko!" Natalia opened the holster and looked at the pistol-- she'd fired her father's TT-33 once or twice, but had no real aptitude for it. "Did you live around here? Zhila zdyecj?" Natalia shook her head, gestured a walking motion with her two fingers, then mimed writing in a book. "Ah. School. Schkola." Natalia nodded. The woman rubbed her left pony-tail; she had a terrible habit of chewing on her lip while thinking. "I'll be back. Vernusj. Panimala?" Natalia didn't respond. She understood the woman, but did not believe her. She placed the pistol in the large overalls she'd been given; she looked as if she'd been shrunk by some curse. The woman's face had a few contortions of concern, but they quickly faded away,





and the windows of the pick-up truck rose up again. The boy on the cargo bed stared at Natalia as the pick-up truck drove away, his eyes yearning for nothing in particular; he stuck his tongue out.

Going down the promenades, one can see all the buildings covered in slick glass which may glitter if one puts her eyes in all the right places. There were pharmacies, and markets; there were tomatoes and apples suspended in amber. The windows were covered in black soot, corpse-outlines spattered against the walls. The air was still, the air was silent; before now, Natalia had never felt the cold chill of nothingness. This was no mere death, as death always gave way to life-- a decaying body is a return of some sort, or a transformation. Natalia approached a fountain in the middle of a roundabout, and set her fingers to the sharp, dusty exterior of green-yellow glass. Beautiful purple and yellow flowers were trapped beyond the glass, with hot-red stems and deep stalks remaining still, placid, lifeless... they were the flowers her mother would pick up on the mountains during the weekends, and the soldiers would drive her down at the evening time when the darkness made the path too dangerous. Now they're mere symbols, reproducing only the image of themselves, a static figment lost in a moment of time long passed. Natalia took a piece of metal





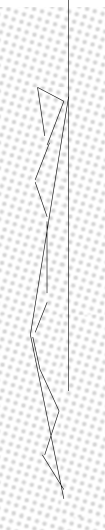
lying beside a car and smashed the glass with untrained flailing, smashing it to a fine powdery dust, smashing the flowers 'till they've become organic shreds, smashing it into bio-mulch to rot in the sweet-smelling wind.

Every breath came in more troubled than the last. She dropped the metal beside her, its length powdery and white like sugar; resonances howled down the steep surfaces of the empty alleyways, a flood of sound for no-one. There were broken chairs and meaningless props on tables, bound by empty walls where moss was breaking through the cracks. Glass crackled 'neath her feet as she walked through rooms once private, their dresses and toiletry freed of any use. Down a broken door, a bridge connected two walkways littered with shattered glass. Natalia stood in the middle of the street, her hand on the holster by her waist, listening to the wind rattle distant metal as it rushed through the open space beneath her. The cars beneath stood behind the lines, without drivers, still waiting for the signal to turn red. Further down the road, in the middle, there stood a giant crater from which a beautiful crystal grow like a tree with sharp amber branches that pierced the road. Where was she? She looked above, but the words of the signs had no more meaning. 'Hospital,' 'magazin,' 'apteka;' without people, they were all just emp-





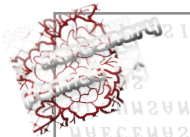
ty rooms dreaming of function. Natalia walked down the bridge, passing through a park littered with beer cans and shadowy figments burnt into the concrete 'neath her feet. She imagined their last moments; they were lost in their own words, their little promises and come-ons, 'till the intolerable heat of the outside world made itself known to their private kingdoms. And in the absence, something is struggling to be born. On a wall beside a toilet stall, three shadowy figments have their arms raised and their mouths wide open.





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by: [baroquepiral](#) + Escher McDonell

MERCENARY PLANET

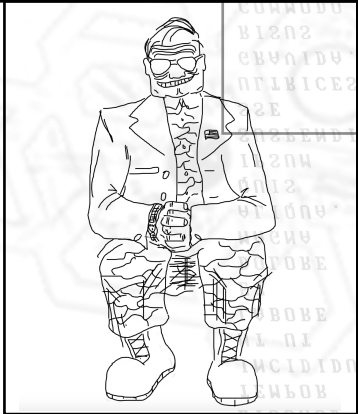
Name: Waldo Beek

LIKES: bone dry cappuccinos, watches, James Cameron, The Beach Boys, Dean Koontz, Generation X (the book by Douglas Coupland), Stoic philosophy, high end guitars (doesn't play), rock climbing, see Appendix C on sex work

DISLIKES: public transit, jazz, party games, women without makeup, Chinese food (real or American), ingratitude

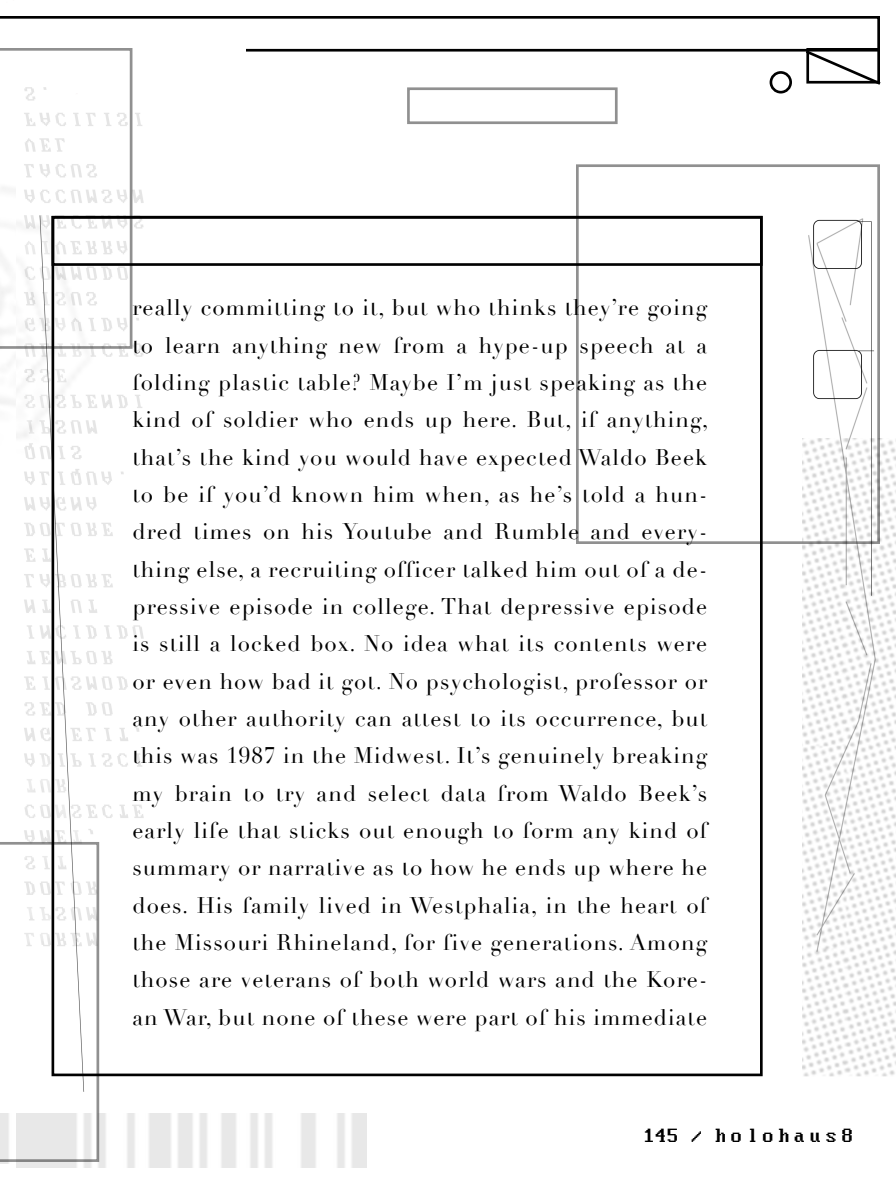
Blood type: O

Theme song: Great Big Sea - Ordinary Day

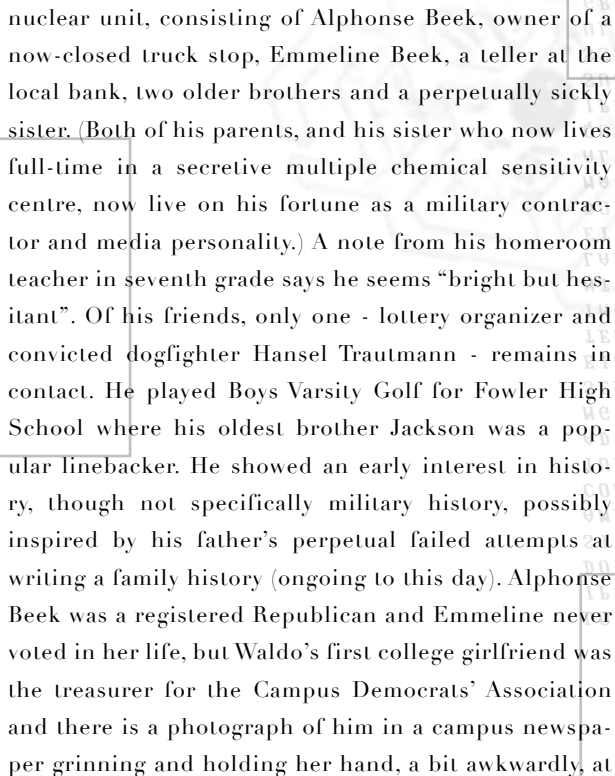


Look, I never got those recruitment stands they have at college. I got into Edison Lens through military college (like everyone here who isn't just a random Trekkie) and I didn't expect to end up here (obviously) but I weighed enlistment all the way through high school. Some jobs, you see a brochure for and go "oh I never thought of that", but everyone in America knows the army exists and what it does. Everyone knows the tradeoffs. Everyone knows you might die in a desert somewhere. You might decide to do more research before

POI datafile

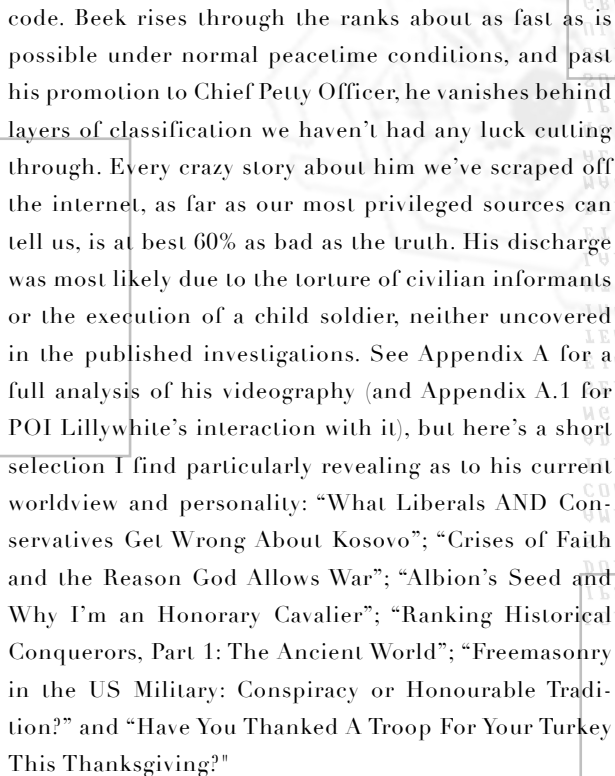


really committing to it, but who thinks they're going to learn anything new from a hype-up speech at a folding plastic table? Maybe I'm just speaking as the kind of soldier who ends up here. But, if anything, that's the kind you would have expected Waldo Beek to be if you'd known him when, as he's told a hundred times on his Youtube and Rumble and everything else, a recruiting officer talked him out of a depressive episode in college. That depressive episode is still a locked box. No idea what its contents were or even how bad it got. No psychologist, professor or any other authority can attest to its occurrence, but this was 1987 in the Midwest. It's genuinely breaking my brain to try and select data from Waldo Beek's early life that sticks out enough to form any kind of summary or narrative as to how he ends up where he does. His family lived in Westphalia, in the heart of the Missouri Rhineland, for five generations. Among those are veterans of both world wars and the Korean War, but none of these were part of his immediate



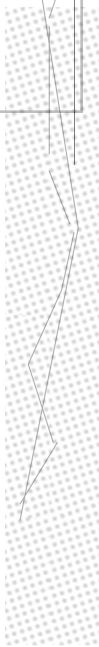
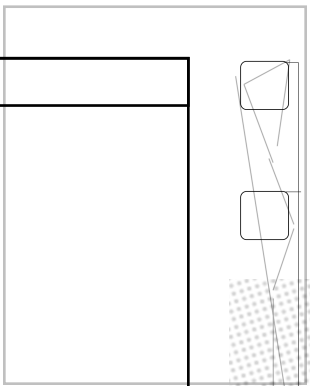
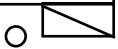
nuclear unit, consisting of Alphonse Beek, owner of a now-closed truck stop, Emmeline Beek, a teller at the local bank, two older brothers and a perpetually sickly sister. (Both of his parents, and his sister who now lives full-time in a secretive multiple chemical sensitivity centre, now live on his fortune as a military contractor and media personality.) A note from his homeroom teacher in seventh grade says he seems “bright but hesitant”. Of his friends, only one - lottery organizer and convicted dogfighter Hansel Trautmann - remains in contact. He played Boys Varsity Golf for Fowler High School where his oldest brother Jackson was a popular linebacker. He showed an early interest in history, though not specifically military history, possibly inspired by his father’s perpetual failed attempts at writing a family history (ongoing to this day). Alphonse Beek was a registered Republican and Emmeline never voted in her life, but Waldo’s first college girlfriend was the treasurer for the Campus Democrats’ Association and there is a photograph of him in a campus newspaper grinning and holding her hand, a bit awkwardly, at

an anti-apartheid protest. Try to picture the swoopy 80s pageboy on the cornmeal kid in this pic over the motherfucker we deal with now and maybe something subliminal will happen, I dunno. He spent only three years as an ordinary enlisted sailor, where he served under MACV-SOG veteran Elmore Riggin, himself a somewhat controversial figure at least in the underground anti-war press. Tennessee native Riggin may also be the source of some of Beek's mannerisms. Riggin's recommendation of Beek to the SEALs is probably the single most valuable document about him we have obtained, and is reproduced in full in Appendix B. It is oddly sparse in its specific examples, focusing on his intelligence - his performance on Navy-specific tests vastly exceeding his upper-average grades - and "tactical, out-of-the-box learning abilities". It also refers to "proactive self-criticism" and "appetite for success", terminology which would become standard in his videos. Most curiously, it refers to "potential for moral development" - such a strange assessment given what we know about him now that it's hard not to read it as some kind of



code. Beek rises through the ranks about as fast as is possible under normal peacetime conditions, and past his promotion to Chief Petty Officer, he vanishes behind layers of classification we haven't had any luck cutting through. Every crazy story about him we've scraped off the internet, as far as our most privileged sources can tell us, is at best 60% as bad as the truth. His discharge was most likely due to the torture of civilian informants or the execution of a child soldier, neither uncovered in the published investigations. See Appendix A for a full analysis of his videography (and Appendix A.1 for POI Lillywhite's interaction with it), but here's a short selection I find particularly revealing as to his current worldview and personality: "What Liberals AND Conservatives Get Wrong About Kosovo"; "Crises of Faith and the Reason God Allows War"; "Albion's Seed and Why I'm an Honorary Cavalier"; "Ranking Historical Conquerors, Part 1: The Ancient World"; "Freemasonry in the US Military: Conspiracy or Honourable Tradition?" and "Have You Thanked A Troop For Your Turkey This Thanksgiving?"

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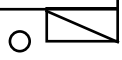




Synopsis

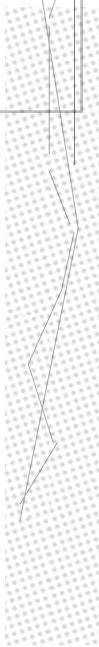
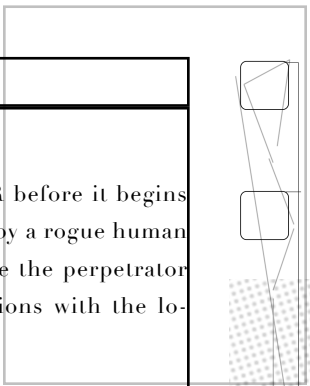
clinging to a single desperate prayer, leona meets halation, a visitor from that supposed better world once held remote by the thousands of atrocities that littered the earth, and draws war and peace towards a collision spanning the galaxy.

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Last Time

the mission on Towers might be FUBAR before it begins with their Ahasurunu liaison murdered by a rogue human operator! Leona must move to recapture the perpetrator while simultaneously establishing relations with the locals





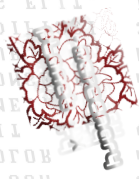
CW: eusocial roles, insectoid biology, military ideology, anti-Asian racism, forceful drugging, death, violence, gore, isolationism, colonialism

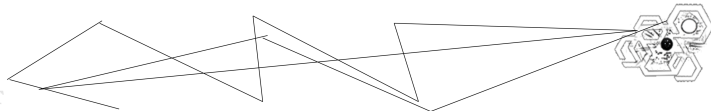
As soon as it was clear there would be no more wrinkles to the story of Vakha Bashtaev, an anonymous petition started circling to let Waldo Beek, or someone other than me, pick the crew for the expedition to the Internexus.

I couldn't even blame them. In the organizing spaces I had come up in, fiascos like this were less forgiven than in the military (as I knew from the perverse pride with which Beek told stories of men he'd lost, the mild professional setbacks he'd taken as "total ownership"). Unless you were the kind of fucker who could wrap a cult of personality around yourself and force everyone you knew to choose between you and the counter-revolutionary wreckers, you'd step down and go back to the suburbs and never be heard from again.

CHAPTER 08: CONNECTION & SPECIALIZATION (THE SOLDIERS' ROAD 3)

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The success of the petition was mostly limited to the upper brass Americans and NATO allies, however. They still had the illusion of an assumed hierarchy of legitimacy and expertise including them; everybody else was reluctant to get back to the national jockeying, light years away from their actual national governments to rein it in or the IIEF to fall back on.

What's more, the ulterior reason I'd insisted on going in myself was paying off. The drone footage had "leaked" through the intranet and the sentiment analysis was some of the most positive of the mission so far. It made me look - and admittedly feel - like a bit of a badass, or at least someone who could lead from the front and actually knew how to fight in conditions that even to experienced soldiers felt (more so, according to some comments, after watching the footage than just going through Caroline's weird exercises) like starting over from absolute zero.

The accompanying rise in pressure to expand symbiotic operations was being held in check by the first unlicensed symbiosis immediately going rogue and putting the whole mission in jeopardy. I didn't have to defend the misanthropy of my own distrust of humans; most of the humans already mistrusted the aliens.





Maybe it would be better if, sooner rather than later, I expanded contact on my own terms. It didn't bode well for our relations with the people we would be fighting both alongside and against that there was already an edit of the footage going around set to the stupid Dragonforce 40K song - "*We're Space Marines of the infantry corps, we take no shit & destroy the dark hordes...*"

"Does this mean we should onboard Zach Flagg," Jax asked through the Clamp net as we played Starcraft, a less nakedly offensive but still instructively horrifying example for Halation of how humans imagined aliens. *The 'purity of form' and 'purity of essence', see, are good examples of how the dominant societies for the last few hundred years, and in some places a lot longer, imagined their ruling and subordinated groups. Of course, since most humans aren't at the very top or the bottom, have resentments in both directions and also recognize both tendencies in our own personalities and history, we imagine ourselves as the flexible bundles of potential in the middle, while everything else really is as bound to a pure form or essence as our ideologies try to tell us we are.*

Zach Flagg was one of those guys I used to see online who were exactly like someone I would meet at a Seat-





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tle queerdo party except they were a by all indications fanatically loyal officer of the US Armed Forces. Not an actual combat veteran, but obviously nobody was in the Space Force, and they still wanted in on this because what were they even for if they didn't. I think he got into his furry and femboy shit at West Point, where he was now a research partner on the theory of exotic weapons. He hadn't participated in the ship's sexual underground at all, or as far as I knew even acknowledged its existence.

"Not yet," I mused. "He is a good pick, which is I don't wanna risk losing him first. Let me bring him on, see how much leverage I can get out of him for containing just this mission, and if he's reliable we can make it official."

Jax laughed. "You deserve someone who can actually command troops in this thing."

"I don't even know if he can do that! Serrao has some experience too."

"I talked to him about it and he doesn't really want to be leading anything right now. It's also probably better if we don't make it too conspicuous who's close to you when he's already on video."





Jax was surprisingly smart when it came to stuff like this. Maybe it was scheming with Alastair all the time or maybe we just grew up on the same lore wikis.

Instead I played the different factions against each other. In a show of pragmatism agreed to split the crew between Beek's and Bennett-Fog's suggestions (and leave anyone even vaguely associated with Hadak). I couldn't really tell if she had a faction or was just very opinionated - I was starting to think the latter. The more I observed her up close, the more it looked like she was deeply isolated even within Edison Lens, and had seized her biggest shot at getting her ideas to matter ever just by acting like she mattered at *me*. Admittedly, she seemed like the kind of schemer that if she was good at it I absolutely wouldn't know about it. But if she needed me, I might have some redeemable informal sway over her, even though I wasn't going to give her any idea I was thinking that.

Waldo Beek's picks included himself.

The nature of the terrain was such that we couldn't send very large groups anywhere, at least not yet. The Towers bivouacked single file, along with somewhat larger, semi-autonomous palanquins for transporting goods - and us, since we would slow them down too much trying





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to climb. We settled on an initial expeditionary force of ten, with two groups of reinforcements of the same size. Each group, like the groups of Towers, would have to travel more or less single file. We sat along with our supplies on the

But really, if my entire strategy hinged on being the only person who could command, did I need to lead from the front like this? I had to admit I was motivated as much by curiosity as by distrust of the officers I wouldn't even be able to command directly at this distance from our communications; it was also my best bet at gaining popularity with the troops. I had made myself a MVP combat asset in a couple of ways; my competitors in legitimacy were monsters like Beek and Hadak. And above all, any knowledge I could gain firsthand secured my strategic authority.

And Halation's. Halation, I reassured myself, is really our general here. I am their-

I was about to say something like "mobile battle station" but then remembered the venerable human traditions of military symbiosis. Bucephalus. Rocinante. Shadowfax.





It matters that the humans will follow you. They wouldn't follow me. Except in the sense of a local guide. A...

Malinche. I winced. Which is exactly why it's important that I'm following you more as much as the other way around, that they don't -

We've already been over this. You're just letting the questions get to you. I can't afford that. You need to focus.

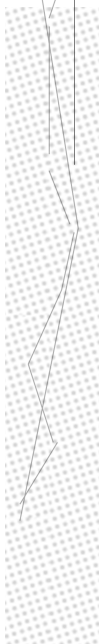
Their anger felt like an unintended glimpse into something. To understand what we did and didn't share with each other, even after all those weeks of attempting to synthesize our wills so that we could act without hesitation - and yes, I was the one breaking that synthesis first by hesitating - you have to be aware of the distinction between conscious awareness of thought or internal monologue and the vast reservoirs of memory and context once tendentiously referred to as the unconscious. What we chose to make conscious to ourselves, as a rule, we made conscious to each other, but our unconscious "RAM" (as Bennett-Fog preferred to call it) was basically "partitioned" although we could access it more or less with each other's permission, and spent long hours on the journey just lying there diving through each other,





vaguely aware of each other's shadows on opposite sides of the pool.

Not that Halation wasn't completely changing my relation to my own attention. I found myself able to pay attention to maybe double as many things at once just from getting the hang of following all the different points Halation could map. One of the major constraints on their maximally fluid form was simply information transmission; they couldn't map and control everywhere on their surface at once without significant tradeoffs in higher-order cognition. In that puddle on the field they had been practically an amoeba; only once they had found a sufficiently complex nervous system to latch onto, like mine, had their mind "woken back up". This was similar to the tradeoffs in complexity and flexibility that applied to Asymmetry Fields, why despite having such total computational control over their own surfaces that the laws of physics didn't apply to them, they could only do and think limited things. I still haven't quite figured out how to translate the Meteorological terms (a proud innovation of the Weirs) for this spectrum of internal-versus-external-based cognition.



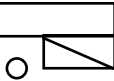


I thought about this more when I met the Sunbite's Fabber.

All the Towers we'd seen so far, as it turned out, belonged to a single morph, which I at first wanted to call "Scouts" until I learned there was an even more specialized morph for that (the Sunbite group was small and didn't have any), smaller and even more flexible with stronger wings. (These were, somehow, originally a separate species.) I didn't want to say warriors, although they were the only ones who fought - there was a reason unlike so much other tech, their weapons weren't built into their bodies. At the end of the day they were primarily Gatherers, and they were the majority of Towers, the closest to the original body plan from before the planetary expansion (which had converged, over the course of a long social and biotechnical struggle, from a number of other eusocial roles that were hardly remembered).

A Fabber, like a queen but I don't want to make the gendered analogy too overt (even Halation, growing into it for reasons I'm still struggling with), was the most vital part of a group and had to be hidden and protected as long as possible from untrustworthy aliens - though they weren't immobile or defenseless, which would be





absurdly impractical on a planet like this. The Fabber was a modified reproducing form - the lower third of their body, which on Gatherers ended in that goofy looking extra hand, functioned as a biological 3D printer. The swollen organ was two thirds the size of the rest of their body, curled like a millipede's carapace, and in place of the seventh hand a dozen fingers fanned out directly from its edges, manipulating and weaving the threads it spun. It produced, among other things, the implants that had supported the Network, and Fabber capabilities themselves. Its exoskeletal scaffolding wasn't the pale keratin of the rest of their bodies but the hard shiny semi-translucent black of an early 2000s gaming computer - the material of their implants was a kind of plastic - lit from within by pools and veins of superconductive fluid. It was supported by a pair of back legs twice the size of anyone else's, but with simpler endings, two-pronged hooks.

I shared the rearmost palanquin with them alone. Their name was Aqueduct.

This large kind was normally reserved for fixed supplies - fortunately they were running low so their three could share the weight of a troop of humans - and the Fabber himself. Waldo Beek insisted on climbing himself - he





kept up for a full twenty minutes before I noticed the leading transports stopping too much. It gave me at least some rough mental calculations of how fast a skilled climber - and he was, Aqueduct seemed particularly fascinated to watch - could traverse these caves unaided. But for all our pursuit predator skills, even without any real vehicle of the speed I was used to on Earth - all of which, I had been told, would be too hard to steer without the Network - we were slower on the crumbling ground than the Towers, who transited by planned dashes and jumps - crescent-shaped Scouts with a second pair of scissorlike wings flying ahead through nooks and crannies, echolocating and mapping what tunnels and gaps were large enough for the rest of the group to move through; Gatherers docking together in a sort of conga line, a Runner at each end identical except with the same powerful legs and simplified arms as the Fabber, biomechanically enhanced and capable of pushing off at (we still used human measures in military calculations) 50 km/h, with the wings of the de facto centipede between them outspread, allowing them to glide on momentum. (These legs were alarming for close combat - essentially a Rider Kick.) The transport itself had a four tentacles on each corner that split into curling stalks for feet.





Our caravan was lit by glowing balloons that also gave us a consistent sense of up and down by floating in the opposite direction of Towers' gravity; one also pulled in the direction of the closer magnetic pole. The strongest sense I had was of its silence; as much as the Towers looked like grasshoppers, there was none of the spasmic party blower snapping I remembered from summers in the dry fields. The curtains themselves were moderately sound dampening, and within them the Fabber spoke in an entirely different set of vocalizations from the other Towers, like a singing bowl.

"I wove these myself just a few STU¹² ago." They stroked the curtains surrounding us, kaleidoscopic patterns of light playing across them from a rotating lantern, as they popped an oval of soapstone idly in and out of their mouth. Thanks to biomechanics, unlike a queen, they didn't need that much more food than everyone else - with several redundant power sources, their Fabber organ operated largely in parallel with the rest of their body and could break down just about anything. The major reason it was integrated at all, besides ease of transport, was direct neural control.





I'd be better at telling you these things through dialogue like in a normal science fiction story if I wasn't a sociologist. I'd assume that it would simply be taken for granted that, as the Fabber, they would make all the materials and the tech for the commune - you know what, I am going to call it that, I've been here long enough, although at that point I was still only registering a nervous hope at the possibility, as in my first observations of the kind of group living where you were more than roommates, more than (as I worded it in my proposal) contractually dividing the labour of maintaining a space, but less than partners - and probably little else. But like, I wasn't stupid. I knew we were heading for what was essentially, in human terms, a trading post. I knew that because of the difficulty of maintaining consistent supply chains, especially now, most of the Towers' technology would be what they could make in one commune - answering Beek's incessant question, as we wound through vault after sedimented vault, the largest almost inevitably with some natural light filtering down through some series of gaps above, pale waterfall shafts where light moved as a visible substance but never revealed its infinite source, of why this tedious hang-gliding instead of just flying some kind of plane.





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“There are things like that. Wind-powered wing enhancements, like jump-jets,” Aqueduct told me. “I’ve always wanted to make one but never gotten my hooks in the designs, let alone the resources... Maybe someone will have them at the Internexus.”

You could collapse entire sectors using something like that.

“And you guys planting fungus bombs everywhere wouldn’t?”

We will remake our apologies at will, but we did assume that was supposed to happen. People do it on purpose sometimes, not even for war reasons. Sometimes just to reorganize a trade route or something. Also a lot of tunnels change size and shape too much for any kind of vehicle to be convenient.)

The question that floored me was one that should have taken me even less by surprise given its proximity to myself. From what I knew of life cycles, Aqueduct seemed at least a couple of fifteenth-exponent units older than the disaster. *You never downloaded anything from the Network?*

Nobody thought we needed to download anything when we had it. We- the Sunbites, at least, I can’t speak for anyone else. The group we split off from - and the word for split off,



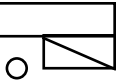


according to the extra information the vocalizer primed in my mind with subliminal Ahasurunu overtones, had connotations of an asymmetrical rift in a group that had escalated to a point of abuse - *stored everything in the cloud for seven generations.* (Which wasn't that long here.) *But besides, I- wasn't even a Fabber when it happened.*

"You mean..." If they had said when they were a nymph, they would have said that. My understanding - the understanding at the Lung, but for obvious reasons no-one there really got out much - was that children went to Fabbers, after a period of decision that could take as long as it needed within reason and involved several forms of divination, to pick their final morph.

A group of just Gatherers is called a Waltz, and there are plenty of them, or used to be - probably less now. They usually just follow bigger caravans until they can find other morphs to join them - like I said, we'd just split off and were looking to start our own, then... we couldn't rely on trade any more. And Sunbite, in the separation agreement, had gotten one Fabber spore... They would have taken it themselves, to take responsibility for leading us all away. But they'd never... thought about it before the way I had.





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“Thought about it.... But you didn’t take the role at first? Was there pressure?”

The old group had three Fabbers, and they were very insistent that was enough. I didn’t mind at the time, these are practical decisions, though I realized the way they were made was weird later on, and the number - it was a big group, too big for three Fabbers, not enough other morphs - was also part of how they manipulated scarcity, coordinated...

“That’s sort of how... it all is, on Earth.” I sheepishly explained my own situation.

Ohhh wow! Changing reproductive capabilities is much rarer than productive roles - and 6 out of 7 us don’t use it anyway - but you can do it with a gamete packet.

Gamete packets??? It felt actually embarrassing to explain that all we knew how to change was hormones and rearranging features from outside.

Yes, once we study the expression-matrices of the genome you sent us, there should be Fabbers at the Internexus with the micro-scale add-on who can figure out how to make one for you.





I barely knew any trans women who were that fixated on “the surgery”, let alone the longing for a working womb. Half of us were lesbians anyway - although that might not matter the same way with gamete packets. The Coven of Black Domnu venerated the empty womb of the Eschaton, the inverted grail, and insofar as I had any interest in childrearing it was as a communal social form. But then I had gone from compulsively tucking stuffed animals under my shirt to reading all those Mpreg doujins in Grade 9...

“So what do you do while you sit back here making stuff?”

It's not all just like... eating or digesting. (Although most of the waste product of what we eat does go into it, and everyone else's too.) I was proud of myself for not even giving a hint of how embarrassing that would be for humans. There's too much complexity and variability in a lot of tech - not even to mention decoration, which is one of the best parts of being a Fabber - to encode it all genetically, even with graft packets. So a certain amount we have to pay attention. Like I was doing for the first while - several hours in which they had sat seemingly perfectly still, humming nonverbal overtones up and down several overlapping scales.



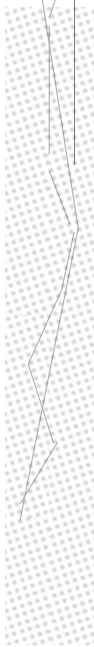


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“I don’t think humans have... any internal organs we can sense or control the way we do our outer organs.” I tried to imagine it. How utterly different a relation would that entail between... inside and outside? How could we, tubes like virtually every other multicellular lifeform on Earth, simultaneously perceive ourselves as outsides with no insides, like Mobius strips?

“Can I... sh... share, with Halation? I’m sorry if that’s weird I just want to know what that feels like.

I don’t think it’ll feel that different from making something with your hands. A wave of flexion rolled around the ring of fingers. The best part is just closing my eyes and diving in Phantasies every time. That’s the word I guess I’m using now for something like the story of Yayaraya Halation showed me back on Earth. Much of the galaxy uses the Weir word since they had millennia to develop it without any techno-neurological interface, but the artform isn’t unique to their biology; Towers experienced the same thing through their implants, and there are other technical options available - I hope they have cartridges at the Internexus. Maybe one of the first things we’ll trade to Earth, honestly. Even when I was a nymph I spent all the time I could afford diving them in the cloud, whereas since





I took this morph I've had so much more time and gotten so much better at focusing with just three cartridges - a 34198 Banquet of Embers, a 66110 Star-Green Bow, and 49703 Zero's Orbit - all of which are double or single-sense. All classics, of course, and all with eighteenth-temporal-exponents of lucid content, but it's not exactly easy to get lucid off Zero's Orbit! I hope they make cartridges compatible with your neurology so you can experience them...

The curtain opened. We need something to clear this opening. There's Geoplaque all across it and it's thick.

I straightened my back and crossed my legs as if meditating - the palanquin didn't really have seats, as the Towers had more efficient ways of folding up their bodies than us - and the hum changed to a higher pitch with more overtones, like throat-singing. I was content to let the shivers roll up and down my skin like a scanner, but with a free hand they clasped my wrist and Halation verified the meaning of the gesture. Closing my eyes I was first startled by the awareness of the points and lines of extreme heat in the Fabber cavity, heat that in my own body I would have registered as terrifying pain but which was safely enclosed in a cool green space of hermetically sealed outsidersness. A reversal of the relation between





body and world, I was now the surface of the world in which I reached and felt fine calculations, in standard units down to low exponents that as a human would have required specialized terminology, running like basic sense-perceptions down the two dozen millipede legs, ending in tubes like pipettes, with which Aqueduct manipulated as many sacs of raw materials. It seemed almost unimaginable to be aware of the outside world and this one at the same time - the humming was a magic circle, a border - though I could imagine a movie or a memory projected distantly across it like an aurora, preferably simple as a silent silver screen. At the end of little more than thirty seconds we spat out six rubbery golden eggs around a phosphorescent white substance.

We were close enough for me to jump down and land where the ground was flat (my boots splashed in a few inches of a liquid we'd been advised to chemically treat all our gear for before heading out), the cavity continuing for about a dozen feet (sorry I know I should be practicing my standard units) at barely over our head height (the Towers moving easily on all six). The "Geoplaque" was a sulphurous yellow mineral that seemed to be made up of thin flat sheets like mica, except one sheet was still almost an inch thick, and translucent like horn or amber.





The otherwise similarly tinted limbs of the Towers stood out against it in their own faint light like shadow-puppets.

The Towers delicately carried the packets and squeezed the small opening at one end of one, then another onto the Geoplaque where it crept along the crevices between the layers then started to smoke profusely like dry ice, spitting firework sparks as the Towers backed away and pulled their own wraps over their faces, before two plates snapped off and fell forward. After applying a couple more, one poured the rest of one sack into another and added the remainder to their utility belt.

“Don’t you have any bigger tunnels for freight?” Beek still sounded unimpressed. “How the hell are we gonna get rations through here?”

There should be a few at the Internexus, but not from this direction. The explosions above have been making cave-ins worse.

“Can you stop complaining about everything? We’re guests here,” I finally snapped at him.





He tilted his head. “Guests? That’s a funny way to describe what we’re doing here.” I knew he was right, and he knew that I knew it. “But I’ll stop if you make it an order, commander.”

“I order you not to play that game with me again, lieutenant,” I growled.

We were planning to get off one “stop” before the Internexus, which was (according to the map-cartridge, about the size and shape of an acid tab which the Towers placed on a sensitive ridge on their crests, from which it would project a semi-navigable mind-palace of the standard unit of extension sixteenth exponent radius surrounding it) at the centre of a basin of highly regular porosity, above a large ground-liquid current. The pumicey catacombs around were used by regular visitors to stockpile their goods outside the site of trade itself.

Informally; it’s considered part of the pact, and specifically groups will take efforts to keep out of each other’s way and not observe each other there, so as not to compromise exchange in the Internexus. But there’s no saying if that will apply to an unknown alien species.

“Let alone an armed one.”





I wouldn't particularly worry about that unless you get into any fights. Nobody can tell you're armed. Those things you're carrying... if we hadn't seen you use them, we would assume they were some sort of sensing tool, like my staff, or a kind of radio telescope, the Sunbites' leader (Sunbite, they shared their name with the group) explained calmly.

"Uh-huh. How many other kinds of alien weapons you not recognize?" Beek huffed.

Is that an idiom, they leaned over my shoulder, apparently confused by Beek's asking a negative.

"Are there any you *would* recognize?"

I doubt there will be aliens at the Internexus in general. Map cartridges are harder to come by than they used to be, and most of them don't even work for alien neurology... (as they didn't, unfortunately, for ours).

"But someone most likely working with aliens gave you this one." Beek was unmoved, folding his arms and blocking the tunnel entrance as he paced. "And you're now telling me they have essentially a mandated place to hide and stockpile arms. How has nobody done what you





almost did and just fungus'd the whole place to kingdom come already?"

Why would they do that.

Beek paused for a moment. "Cut off the supply centre anybody can use, set up one only they can use."

That would make everyone turn against them.

"How would anyone know it was them? The way your mission was supposed to go, our base coulda gone boom and nobody would have even known it was you. They could blame it on the other side, which is presumably us. The moment we get in there, Leona," his eyes turned to me now, "we need a recon plan. Scout around as much of the terrain as we can before we set up positions." The strata of his forehead compressed. "God damn, this whole ant-hill being 3D makes everything take three times longer than it should."

"If they're telling us there's some sort of taboo against this, we could undermine our whole first impression here by poking around." Zach Flagg, unprompted, spoke as the voice of... I wasn't even sure if reason. I couldn't even tell if it was Halation's or my own thinking but Beek





sounded kind of right here. The trust and slack of the local social fabric was clearly already being exploited by somebody. What I was grateful to have him speaking as, I realized, so I could chart my own path, was something like Obama-era dispassionate caution: a doctrine that corrected for the adventurism of its predecessors by stacking up intelligence and reputation until it could act “surgically” with as-good-as-guaranteed results. “It’s too big to just do a sweep anyway - let’s go in where we can talk to people, at least get a clue of who we’re most likely to be looking for.”

We knew a few things by now about the Towers who had given our new allies their instructions. They were geoen-gineering with the goal of establishing some kind of new communication network, and they wore elaborate figures of golden rope fibre (something like a cross between shibari and a full-body cat’s cradle).

“Can’t you just use the staff?” I remembered.

The leader bobbed their head and joggled their feet in a gesture of approval. *The stone around the Internexus is muffled to limit direct eavesdropping on trade or personal secrets, but they are an integral part of how we know where others are and where we should be free to set up camp. They*





also make snooping difficult - not impossible, but we don't have anyone with those skills, let alone you.

Star-Green Bow is actually about trained Silent Scouts, Aq-ueduct tapped.

"The word for that in the human language of an island that produces a lot of our best media means one-who-steals-in," Zach carefully constructed through the vocalizer.

"And in the language of the ruling world empire, it just means to Look," I added. "Although the cultures of that empire are kind of obsessed with looking in a lot of different senses."

"I'd need to watch this Star-Green bow thing, but I think the Ones Who Steal In are closer to what you mean Silent Scouts sound like than the Ones Who Look. Ones Who Look can do a lot of things from just deciphering codes to getting information out of people by sleeping with them, but the ones I've encountered mostly just sit in offices."

"Don't you look at your sims too? Or was that not meant to be the wording you used just now?"



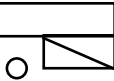


Now I was starting to get embarrassed. “Like I said, humans do a lot of different kinds of looking, especially in my culture. We say we look at Phantasies, even though we also listen to and imagine them...”

The Internexus seemed, if not as big as the Lung itself, at least as big as one of its lobes. Yet as an actual geological formation, it was far more deliberate than the haphazard cavity encasing the Lung, with a distinctive onion shape, nearly its entire surface a honeycomb of gaps of interlocking shapes, like Islamic sacred geometry except every coloured tile was a yawning void. A decent number of these gaps had pipes emerging from them, ending in faucets of liquid we were glad to have molecular filters to turn into water. It was filled with semi-inflated-looking, glowing pastel tents that unzipped from the top like flower bulbs. Black light bathed everything, both from fixtures in the voids of the walls and the luminescent rods many of the Towers seemed to be carrying like cyalume sticks at an idol show, lighting the pale chitin of their bodies and their garments in a garden of neons that made up only a slice of the spectrum they could see.

Innumerable voices rose up like an orchestra of soft fog-horns. The vocalizers were mostly going on the fritz but





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would occasionally pick something out of the waves like “natural tingle balm” or “blind licking game”. At the same time it was nice not to think about what any of it meant and just let the sound roll over my skin. How convenient that we’d already encountered two species that communicated using sound in some way, rather than something I couldn’t even sense like radar. Halation was surprised at how worried I was that this way of relating represented some unprocessed human chauvinism on my part; first guests and first hosts commonly appreciated physiological dimensions of novel communication.

We entered covered in a semi-translucent tarp (we could see out, they couldn’t see in), quilted with an elaborate pattern the group had insisted on making before bringing us here. Normally this would take weeks, but I had agreed to supply material and printing capabilities from the Lung so it could be done in the one night I spent with them planning it. Everyone had participated in the design, each member conceiving of one shape that iterated into it in a fractal. As with (Halation told me) many first guest customs on other planets, as with the Recorder and its Song, it was meant to suggest something of the species in forms sufficiently abstract that others would have to speculate infinitely as to their interpretation.



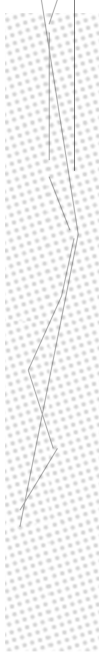


(There were at least hundreds, probably thousands of such customs on this planet alone. Sunbite had needed to dig out a generations old cartridge from an inherited sticker-album to remember this one.) They hadn't met enough humans, I thought, to attempt any such representation; another reason, under normal circumstances, to stay longer. Another reason I might have pushed if I had credibility to spend in the ranks. I had paired each of their contributors with one of our crew. The figures were separated not by colour but by the texture of the different fibres, which various Towers reached out close to our shoulders or faces to touch with those long eerie fingers even I was still getting used to, as if to stroke the outer membrane of our perception. The logic by which they translated whatever each of us struggled to explain into seemingly non-representational figures was entirely lost on me (and Halation). But it lent itself to the problem we were going to face as soon as word of our presence reached enough of the Internexus for a public unveiling. (The logic of all this, Sunbite assured, was not to make us a spectacle but diminish competition among different groups for access, which didn't necessarily feel more comfortable.) The problem of reassuring a peaceful assembly of multiple sides about our presence.





We wound our way through the crowds to a concave spiralling elevation of stacked stones (reminiscent in structure of the Giants' Causeway, uneven and difficult to climb for feet that didn't wrap around surfaces) surmounted by a folded structure of stiff black material that projected sound out from under it. The only natural light in the Internexus - and the only one we'd been able to see all the way through to its source. From the height of the podium we could see commerce (or simply conversation and relaxation) continuing at the far edges of the Internexus, groups in garments of completely different shapes from the Sunbites' (abstract diagonals cutting across their bodies, covering as little as swimsuits, or billowing sleeves and even hoods like windsocks covering their crests), but the surrounding four or five tents deep had more or less emptied. And children, bodies bullet-round and fingers floppy but wings almost always out, leaping and fluttering around large stone cairns, where they weren't settling on their guardians' shoulders to watch. They looked similar to the Scouts I'd seen in Aqueduct's Phantasies, and tended to have a close relation with them, although I wasn't sure I could tell the difference at a glance.





I couldn't hold everything in my eyes or mind or memory at once - it was a 360-degree Where's Waldo - but we could see almost the whole Internexus from here, and I realized the Sunbites, encircling the stones just below us and tapping code on each other's shoulders, might not have much trouble spotting whoever had tricked them. Maybe they would even call them out from up here, in front of everyone - there had been mention on the journey of some offenses against the rules of the Internexus being handled this way.

The problem, at least as far as I could tell, was that Waldo's striped shirt - the rope garment, at least as far as they had described it - was everywhere. On the way they hadn't given me the impression that it was a common thing - at least, none of the Sunbites had ever seen it before - but from here I could see dozens of Towers wearing it, mingling with all different groups. Each seemed to be wearing a slightly different pattern of loops and knots, so maybe they would recognize the specific pattern. But maybe it was simply some new trend bartered at this Internexus - maybe it wasn't a useful lead at all.





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In the same spirit of egalitarian tessellation, after I began with a brief history of humankind as I knew it, everyone else launched into some kind of expression of their own.

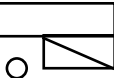
My voice had already lost some of the sane human hesitation at this kind of speech I could hear everywhere now when Bennett-Fog made me listen back for the millionth time to my first contact announcement from Earth. All the more disturbing as this speech felt so much more cruelly dishonest than the first. We were speaking directly in our own language - we had an algorithmic translator into Ahasurunu by now, which according to Sunbite was being fed into a network of vocalizers around the Internexus that I still wasn't sure exactly how were connected. "We came here because we had good reason to believe a planetwide war was about to go hot, and because on our home planet, we don't have places like this. Places that everyone agrees don't belong to any side and don't have to worry about being taken or targeted by any of them. And it's places like these that if the war threatens to spill into, we want to do everything you'll allow us to defend. If necessary, we'll do that in exchange for the resources we need to stay here. That's not an uncommon exchange on Earth, although we'd rather this not become a place where it is. It's not that - there's a trope





in our contact fiction” (most species, Halation told me, derived some sort of genre dealing with the hypothetical inhabitants of other worlds either before or after contact, but humans were unusual in conflating it with science fiction, which she understood as simply Speculative Meteorology, a research branch comprising almost a third of the synod, most of whom would spend a lifetime extrapolating the material and social effects of a single abstruse hypothesis or a change of a few percentage points to the laws of physics) “of the Warrior Race, a species where everyone not only is good at fighting but likes to, or at least finds meaning and value in it. I’ve never thought that was possible, at least beyond a certain level of intra-operability, although I could be wrong and extremely racist or something. Or if it was people would just agree to and it wouldn’t be like Earth. A thing about war on Earth that isn’t true everywhere else, I think, is that most people who participate it don’t want to. Enough do to keep it going, but enough just know, or have convinced themselves, that everyone they know might get killed if they don’t, because they live in a certain place or have certain genes, that a set of fighters have decided are at war with another place or gene group. And those fighters aren’t like, a different morph themselves. Sometimes it feels like they are, but they’re mostly just humans doing what other humans





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tell them to do, and/or given permission to do things they aren't allowed to do the rest of the time...."

I covered a lot of the basics of human society in much the same way I'd explained it to Halation, except with an emphasis on the eusocial analogy - we spent so much time going over and over it in my head on the trip it makes me fantasize about a first contact where we just wrote a book of first contact anthropology before doing anything else, which has apparently happened on a few planets. Beek swaggered up next. I'd approved the basic concept of everyone's performance - he had pitched his as a basic recap of his "Internal Command" and "Learning From Kids Who Grew Up With War" speeches, both of which I'd heard. But I knew he was going to improvise. "My commander makes our home sound pretty bad, and I mean, I get it, I had to leave too. But I'm going to explain what makes me - and her, when you get her guard down around the bivouac with a few drinks - there's a lot of stuff that ferments and becomes psychoactive, it's great - love Earth and love humans too. First of all, like she said, we don't have different morphs or castes or anything. We're all equal, and in the country we're from, that's the law. That's the principle the law derives its legitimacy from. But it doesn't mean we're all equal in real life. Lots





of us can do things others can and will never do. Which is also the beauty of it, because we had to work for them, and fight for them! The fighting - and that's probably why we do it so much - the fighting is as important as the working.

I've been told the tragedy of war has come to your planet. I've been to lots of places where war hasn't visited for fifty, a hundred years. I can only begin to imagine what it's like for a peace as long as yours. In those places, everyone's wounded. Even if they haven't lost anyone. That peace was a part of them. You could get up in the morning, think about something ten, fifteen years from now and it would get you through the day. Even if you didn't do anything in the day to get you any closer to it, you just sat on your couch and watched TV. You had all the time in the world. Now where'd it all go? Like Leona said, on Earth there's almost nowhere that's not at war, and it's been that way pretty much since we climbed down out of the trees. And before that we were running from predators, and that never ended. We had to invent war to invent peace. I'm from a place that's very good at it, so it mostly fights in other places. So people can pretend they're still at peace, even though they know they're not. But that's just like walking around with a wound





untreated and festering. Dragging a twisted ankle in the sand and it's so numb you pretend you just fell asleep on it. That's why I made it my mission, when I came home to my own peace, to tell civilians: you're still at war.

Whether you like it or not. War comes first, you have to earn peace. When I came home, that was peace like I'd never felt it before. Like a limb that's phantom first. War wounds you, but it can also heal you. It's the only thing that can heal the wounds it inflicts.

And I wanted to teach people how to earn their peace, even if they never get out in the field directly. Not everyone's cut out to do that! At least half the world isn't, biologically, I don't think we're that unspecialized to be honest, and I'd say psychologically, at most 1% have what it takes. Until you've really sat with war you have no idea. Talk to war. Ask what it wants from you. Why it came to you. What you really wanted. Don't say you wanted peace, because you weren't paying attention to peace in the first place. War didn't bring you death, you could have walked out on the street and gotten hit by a piano falling from a fifth storey balcony like a Looney Tune. It's not just that war makes you think about the important things - it makes you think about them all the time. It doesn't matter if on paper the war is about something stupid,

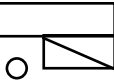




it's really about the most important things. Winning and losing, living and dying. The same things the world inside your head is about. When you're in a unit, even if you're Private Peckerwood at the bottom of the food chain who cleans the lunch trays, you are the commanding officer of your own mind. You clean that lunch tray like you're clearing the perimeter of insurgents!

Like we've been talking about, you have all these different drives, all these different functions. All these different possibilities. All these different 'you's. But you gotta keep em in order, like a troop. Or like one of your little... colonies. There's another guy with us you might run into at some point who's a real fighting junkie, with drawings all over his skin, and his problem is he never understood this, so don't take anything he says too seriously. The thing is, the way our companions have told us the war is going here, it sounds like your problem here - hell, in the rest of the galaxy - might be not knowing how to do that. When a society that's been at peace for too long goes to war, it can't control it. Nobody knows how to demand of themselves what war demands of them. And everyone goes nuts! The worst battlefield I ever saw on Earth - I can tell you all about it - was a place like that. It was a place that wasn't very good at it, because they'd been





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VCCN20W
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W1202
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W101
IMCIDID0
IENW0
E102W0
2E10
WE1011
VDI12C1
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living under one government, protected by another more powerful government, for a long time. If war is already the worst thing you can imagine, there's no difference between being a warrior and a spree killer. The only people who could think properly about it were the kids who grew up there. And I know Leona makes it sound like that's everyone on Earth - I mean, I think she's probably right, compared to a place like this. But there are differences there too. If you take war as your starting point - your ground of reality - like you guys, how you've learned to live on this planet where the ground itself crumbled thousands of years ago, and still crumbles all the time, that's really impressive if I do say so myself - tells me you're good people, people who can adapt to war the same way we did." (I was afraid these ways his sentences were chopped up into spontaneous units of thought came across better than mine through the vocalizers, with which we basically had to just string together words with only the barest bones of syntax and no tone - I'd probably get these sentences across closer to the way they heard them if I wrote them all caps with no punctuation.)

"We may not be a warrior race, but we have one thing we write them having - we can make war honourably, fairly, with pride and without fear, without killing those who don't need or deserve to."





I fumed at the thought of Waldo Beek saying this - of him saying it in spite of what he had done, and what Harpers had pulled but its authors, and their sources, a Bosnian family (the ones we were supposed to be protecting) you could still talk to on social media, they still had a 2003 looking website up with photos from Operation Snakebite, I'd interviewed them for a feature on student radio that also got pulled at the last minute -

I had hoped Zach Flagg would deliver an impassioned speech on the relations between humans and other animals embodied in cross-species costuming, but he just sheepishly bust out his guitar and played Wonderwall, referring to it as a "human gathering custom" ("often accompanied by those fermented psychoactives he mentioned"). Jax did a rap he had been composing the whole way here that interpolated sections from Public Enemy, Biggie, Three Six Mafia (our endless teenage porch nights together...), Ye and Lil Peep. Aqueduct had spent five minutes before we entered producing something like a thumper from Dune to accompany it as a beat box. We didn't even attempt to translate it, let alone contextualize it - like the sounds of the crowd, it justified itself as an exposure to our native sensorium.





Then there were questions from the crowd. This part, we had been warned, could last up to half a day.

“Back in your speech, you said intra-operability. That’s a Meteorological term; specifically, a Weir Meteorological term.”

“Yes, we were briefly captured by the anti-Adipose camp in Tuber Plug, that’s why the vocalizers are translating us through Ahasurunu. But I’m not sure what that term has to do with weather.”

Was it dealing with my parents the way I had for so many years that let me lie this effortlessly?

“We just assumed it had caught on everywhere,” Zach Flagg took over, “it seems so useful for thinking about how different kinds of brains and languages and morphs can all fit together...”

“Everyone in my commune uses it, and we’re not Meteorologists at all,” someone else backed me up. The crowd began to overlap into cacophony.

“You should become Meteorologists,” said the representative of another group, wearing billowing sheets that





bloomed clean ultraviolet in the blacklight around all their limbs - “It is foreign but a great comfort to all who have lost precious things to war.”

“Kick them out! They’re breaking the neutrality pact!” someone yelled.

“We are unaligned Meteorologists!” they objected, and a crowd of strangers rallied around them.

Sixteen to eighteen different groups invited us to participate in activities, about a third of which the vocalizers couldn’t translate. (And this Internexus almost entirely served, the Weirs back at the Lung had briefed us, one of the sparser of 334 cultural-geological regions of Towers. Of course, in the time of the Network, these regions hadn’t meant as much as they did now. The Sunbites themselves had been travelling from an adjacent region when the Network had gone down.) The gathered hosts then voted on their own offers - it seemed strange not to let us pick, but fair as we didn’t know what any of the activities were. The winner was something that translated surprisingly simply as “fishing”. But there seemed to be a vocal minority opposition to this activity too. At last, after the show of hands was repeated at roughly the same ratio three times, one scuttled up the first layer of the platform





to pass a message to Sunbite and on to us. If you are conscientious objectors to your people's wars, are you also to your people's predation?"

I had tried for a while, after I left the Coven of Domnu, where strips of raw bloody meat were consumed in ceremonies, though men were barred from it and given bland plates of rice and oatmeal, "the fruit of their own cursed agriculture". Though I had also heard interpretations - my advisor had been secretly partial to an outmoded one - where women were the inventors of agriculture. I had never had the willpower to make it an absolute condition, a stance, but eating less meat had become a factor, to the point that in the city where it wasn't hard to find them, a majority of my meals in any given week were vegetarian; I ate meat socially, but also when my favourite fast food places were around and I was lazy. Besides, as I learned more anthropology I realized more how many indigenous peoples lived forms of life inseparable from their customs around meat.

This ambivalence wasn't far from the Meteorological position on it - because predatory relationships were understood as part of the accord between wills on most planets, but also an imperfect accord formed by beings





incapable of communicating with each other or the rest of the material world. It was possible to intervene in these relationships without violating the will and accord of the beings involved, but only with extreme care and close study. The abolition of predation on Contemplation had taken most of a millennium to stabilize, and that was after Orchid had already proven it in concept.

Beek, for his part, was overjoyed. "Oh, we do that on Earth! If I'd known we'd have it in space I should have brought my hat! I haven't seen anyone with a hat here, are they a thing people Don't Wear for some reason or have you just never thought of them?"

I had seen a few, including where we were going - Beek hadn't been paying attention. I thought of how, as a child, it took years just to think of all the questions like this to ask even have a basic working model of the world. And I was likely to go out shooting strangers in this one within at most weeks.

The well formed in the texture of the living space by this activity had been visible from above as a circular opening large enough for ten Towers to sit, stand or pace in relative silence and isolation surrounded by onlookers. The circle's iris and pupil were a ring of activated carbon





laden with pale thin strips. The Towers in the mid-circle dangled some kind of rope into the gaps in the floor, and those on the edges sucked down the white things in single gulps, reaching in to spear them with long pokers.

I was sure there was some taxonomic catch to the things they were casting into the darkness for - were they even animals? - but it was probably the most straightforward translation I'd gotten so far.

At one side of the circle, Fabbers wearing the clothing and markings of different communes sat together, taking the "fish" (of varying sizes and proportions, but most roughly conical, with a ring-shaped maw at the wide end and a small cluster of tentacles at the other) in the Fabber organ input and "cooking" them. At the other a cluster of Gatherers cooked them more or less the way we did on Earth, with combinations of lichens and cave anemones, juggling and doing tricks with pans that held the heated embers directly under the cooking surface. The first platter (an unfolding series of slats that could be carried as easily as anything else here) brought out to Sunbite for appraisal had Fabbled on one side, glazed in a thin pink glitter, and cooked on the other, narrow strips chopped alongside reedy translucent strands.





Zach Flagg unshouldered his backpack, where he'd been carrying the molecular converter, staring at it hypnotically. The xenophilia was a good sign - I wasn't sure I'd seen anyone this excited on the mission so far besides, well, Hadak.

You don't have to get that out, Aqueduct tapped on me suddenly, pointing at a bloated-looking Fabber - organ twice the size of ours', covered in sharp orange stripes. The Fabbed side is coated in an autoadaptive substance - like our healing one, but more complex, I didn't think anyone would still have this one. It also has recording properties, so if you... excrete it.... it'll provide a full readout of your biochemical preferences.

Does like... spitting it out count as excreting?

I... just a fifth exponent, they're communicating with me on a local transmitter, I didn't think anyone would still have that either. It's... they say it's best if it goes through your whole digestive system first.

Sweat dripped into the corners of my stretched red smile. "We... we have our own. Thank you." Sunbite hastened to translate: *They have some strong taboos around excretion. They wouldn't even do it around us.*





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AET
TVCN2
VCCN25W
WPECENW2
ATLBBW
COWWOD
W1202
EVAIDW
PILVICE2
23E
2025END1
T220W
0012
VT10W
W2CW
DGT0VE
E1
T200VE
W101
IMCIDIDW
IEMWOB
E102WOD
2EY DO
WE EY11
VD1B12C1
10W
COM2ECL
WWE1
211
DGT0W
1220W
G0BEM

Had *they* done it around *us*? I hadn't even noticed... how did it work?

Zach Flagg thrust his hand into the air with an expression of solemn duty out of a Waldo Beek opening monologue. "Sir, I volunteer to share our biometrics through the scat drugs, sir." OK, maybe more than a good sign.

They'd want to have everybody do it anyway, they don't have a sample size to estimate human variability.

"We want to share our biometrics?" Beek scoffed. "God knows what kind of poisons they could cook up with it. One thing with our allies but... look over there." He gestured lightly with his thumb towards the centre of the cooking ring.

A shining silver stem wound around the ring, spiralling into the stand supporting a large vocalizer that projected announcements like "12 standard units of mass 10th exponent at 34 standard units of extension 13th exponent and a beautiful opal lichen coat for 3 aesthetic marbles at Well 803!" Handling and appraising the "fish" in one pair of hands, a tall Gatherer tapped their fingers along the wire with another - presumably in a code but not the one





I was just learning at a glance - wearing the golden ropes we had been looking for.

“What is that person doing?” I asked the pair that had approached us.

“They’re setting up the Ashirunalapilolahala,” the vocalizer spat out the Ahasurunu species name (the entire ten-note bank of Ahasurunu names was dedicated to their database of trillions of offworld species), which had no established Weir conceptual match, though the concept was clear enough as soon as Halation internalized it. “It’s a conductive plant that ancient undergrounders used for communications before the Network. These guys - they call themselves the Ashirunalapilolahala Fishers - have dug it out of the seed banks and started spreading it around here. There’s three of these fishing circles in just this Internexus, and a few more along some nearby gathering stations, and they all use this to compete and communicate. It’s sort of a demonstration.”

“It’s nice, but Ashirunalapilohala is just too messy, too much work,” the representative of another commune complained, jostling between us. “Somebody needs to send some real delving teams, there’s supposed to be another computational lifeform down here somewhere,





people have matched repeating signals in pyrite veins on opposite sides of the Great Vault. We needed to get away from the acid-thunder anyway, but searching for Fools' Bell is why we came down here."

The Fisher overheard us and flickered a long tongue out like a frog, snapping in the air almost all the way to the while tugging lightly at their ropes (I tried not to let my interpretation of totally alien body language be coloured by the image of a Southern politician pulling his lapels). "Fools' Bell is a legend. And if it was real and not a So-lipsist and you figured out how to communicate with it there's no reason to believe it would make a pact with us and not try to destroy us like half the computational life in the universe now. Anyone who ever searched for Fools' Bell would have used Ashirunalapilohala, anyway. Undergrounders never stopped using it in the places Network access couldn't reach."

Other Towers were jumping in to interrogate them now, not even paying attention to us.

"But what's the largest a network could get?"

"Wouldn't you need everyone to stay still?"





“And become sitting ducks for all these aliens while they’re at it? Present company excepted.”

“Forget aliens, how would it survive cave-ins?”

“Back when we had the Network up,” our guide addressed me directly, “everyone could have just looked this up. Maybe if they’d relied on it less, a few could even remember. [This shit we really needed a shorter name for] evolved its conductive capability in the first place to react to cave-ins. When it can no longer send signals along a length, it triggers that section to drop off and regrow in new directions. With more sophisticated code, of course, we can improve this process. But there are even naturally occurring networks spanning whole plugs, from deep groundwater veins to the open air.”

“Didn’t the Tuber Plug just have a huge cave-in? Like the entire middle just dropped out. I don’t see that being enough to deal with something like that.”

I looked around startled - Tuber Plug was the local “name” (a three-to-four-gap translation) for the one the Lung was located in. The lie - it was a lie, right? hadn’t come from one of ours. Sunbite explained on my arm: they had already, negotiating their way through while we





were under the tarp, talked a handful of drama-loving bystanders into asking leading questions and creating a cover where the Sunbites had carried out their mission.

“Of - of course there will be catastrophes. A system vulnerable to limited catastrophes is better than one that can only collapse in one extreme event. We undergrounders have always known this, but everyone else surely understands now.” They returned their attention to me. “We’re recruiting, see, to find people to plant it.”

“How much have you laid already?”

As more voices joined the argument (diminishing my ability to parse any of them), I was already debating in hushed tones, between myself, Halation, Zach and Jax how best to translate the word.

“Is ‘Entangleweed’ too twee? I feel like it sounds like something from a slice of life YA fantasy.”

“Dude weed lmao.”

“I’m more worried about it sounding similar to Jan-jaweed,” Zach considered. “Though depending on these guys’ deal that may end up being appropriate.”





“Did I tell you about the time Alastair and I almost got cancelled by Sudanese Tik Tok for calling a mixtape Gan-jaweed Militias.”

“Dude, there’s people who fought those on our ship and they will kick your ass.”

The Fisher was glancing at me, and I glanced back. I slid my backpack back on. “I think I’m good for food for now. I want to try catching some myself first. Can I?”

“Sure! I don’t know how good your species’ vibratory sense is, but the difference between skill and chance is only a little under half on average. Not that that deters the people who practice for skill - the top percentile can get a lot better than that.” I noticed the more practiced playing with their lines like single-stringed harps.

“Alllright,” Beek rolled up his sleeves. “Let’s see how you keep up with an old hand.”

“How much of what you do on Earth is even gonna apply here?” I shot back. “You can’t ‘read the water’, and casting is just dropping the line straight down.” I grew up in a hick family too, I knew this stuff.





“A true fisher can feel...” he put on a decades old fake Asian accent “...the ripples in the water... like ripples in the dao.” He paused as if waiting for a reaction - I could see where the ‘Jester’ codename came from, regardless of being funny. “That’s what these guys are talking about, right? And none of my buddies believe me when I say I do that back home - wait till I tell them the aliens do it all the time!”

“Why don’t you ask them. I think they mean a real thing.” And why was I coming up with these boring straight-man answers? Because my mind wasn’t in it, mainly.

“Of course, in a place like this I feel more like I’m trying to fish a ball out of the hole at mini-golf.

“Where... are these fish exactly?”

“In the deep groundwater flows.” What I’m translating as ‘water’ wasn’t exactly, let’s just leave it at that, I’ll do some appendices for chemical stuff at some point, I do enough of that in the paperwork already. Maybe I can just relax on this a bit, tell a fairytale. The underground ryugu palace. “Here, take this, it’ll help.” They handed me what looked like the upper layer of skin from a mushroom cap, curled around its edges in shapes similar to the sound

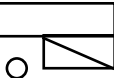




projecting array from the platform. A hat, after all. The most focused fishers - curled up into almost motionless pillars - were also wearing them.

The hat was soundproofed like the tent on the back of the palanquin, blocking out every sound from the sides and above, so if I listened closely I could hear, for the first time, the hush of groundwater below. I didn't know the real colour of anything in the Internexus - under the black light, even through the tent's translucence everything was marbled in pointillist clouds of toxic rainbow - but the sound rising from the holes in the floor was grey, or a layer of silver leaf, polished by its echoes. I thought of the single-sense focus of Aqueduct's favourite Phantasies - was this a cultural aesthetic? The phenomenology of feeling and manipulating your own insides, at least to me seemed related to this game of sensing in an imagined space through the faintest of signals, ones I had never developed the patience to appreciate. There were Fabbers fishing, as well as processing fish, here - a higher ratio to Gatherers, at a glance, than the rest of the crowds. There was also what had looked at first like the row of connected Towers was a single organism with maybe twenty, thirty pairs of legs. About six were idly fishing, while another dozen Towers (mostly on the other side)





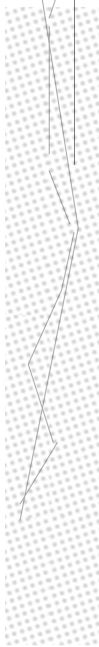
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VD1B12C1
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lined up to recline against this supertransport morph, which also had up to five joints in its fingers. Zach Flagg had also noticed - I caught him glancing and drifting over as inconspicuously as he could in its direction, while alternating furtive glances back at me; I waited for a disgusted-looking Beek to be distracted to give him a nod. Jax conveniently fell between them as another Tower's fingers curled around his shoulder and pulled him into line, and two more fell on him.

The "Entangleweed Fisher" stepped over the ring to give me a line, pulling it from a pile of loops around the bottom of the central, along with a grooved wristband from which to spool and unspool it. At the end they looped it through what looked like a rubber hole ball dog toy; along with it they handed out long pale seedpods, but I could see other visitors slipped items of their own in, crystal baubles, urchinlike spores, compressed food packets.

I squinted - the textures of the two kinds of shining thread were slightly different, but... *Are they related to the ropes we're using?*

Yes, these are Entangleweed after a line reaches a dead end, breaks off and dies, if you put it through the gilding proce-





dure. No one's used it for communication in generations, but it's been gilded as fishing line. Not to mention the fishing and the line-laying are a very similar process. We were using it for this before we discovered its conductive properties - probably, no one really knows. Before the Network most of our history was transmitted within individual groups by cartridges, and so many of those are lost - biodegradable, of course, like everything else...

One of the things I'm hearing all the time about the Network here... I'd feel silly if I'd missed this while we were arguing about the word, but it couldn't be helped. It wasn't just real-time communication, like some early electrical wire-based technologies on our planet. It stored data - the Fabber I'm travelling with is always talking about files they wanted to download from the cloud. Can Entangleweed store information?

Much less, and our capacity will improve as we can store data for improvements. But to coordinate all those signals it always had a kind of rudimentary brain in a bulb, a modified fruiting body-

Was it... interoperable?





Again that word. Interoperable for what? We're operating with it. If you mean conscious, not more than a plant that coordinates movements of sap instead of electricity; and we haven't made it more so, we're using a deliberately crude storage architecture because of the risks of machine consciousness, which is one of the things that slows our development.

Beek's voice peaked over my ability to follow the conversation, echoes this time by the vocalizer: "So you guys don't need a license or anything? No Fish & Wildlife Service breathing down your neck?"

"The network monitored populations. It's hard to say now but we're still only estimating 10% of the population along this stream it would take to start destabilizing populations."

"We don't know where half of our planetary population is. But they don't seem to be here."

Beek's grin like beach-polished wood, angled with his shoulders straight down the hole beneath him, didn't move at all from my angle, but no one here was familiar enough with human body language to care.





I nodded and decided to make at least a token effort at fishing before interrogating them further. Of course I could just use Halation. I didn't want to cheat, but I did want to know what these rocks felt like as a lightweight carbon ball careening down them into the invisible waters - not that I hadn't careened through more than enough of them the past few days, not that they were that different at any scale. I almost wanted to see one of the "fish" up close but - I let them roll down the line for the first few seconds as it fell, then got bored with the blurry flashes of space and momentum. I tried to remember fishing at home - had I liked it, or just not liked the people who invited me? Had I ever had a Huckleberry Finn moment in that blue checkered dress I hid from the Salvation Army bags from a farmhouse my dad foreclosed? It was one of those things that people said taught you about patience, and I didn't like "learning about patience" because it was usually a veiled threat to stop fidgeting or reading when the family was doing something else, even though I didn't mind patience when I came to it on my own. Fishing was about focusing on something you couldn't possibly be aware of - not even faintly the way the Towers were, or I was if I let Halation enhance my senses enough. Feeling the line, or even feeling its weight shift - which was easier if I didn't feel the line - reorient-



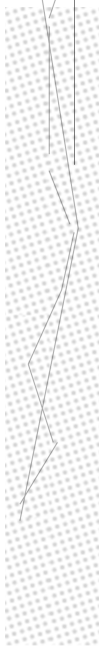


ed me in space so I felt smaller, more precarious, like a balloon floating at the end of a line.

You don't know how much we appreciate your offer to help us defend this Internexus, they reached over and tapped as I focused. You're right about the risk of war taking root. Offworlders have already made large swathes of the surface uninhabitable. And yet their sympathizers are still among the refugees they force down here. Half of these people don't even know how an Internexus works, and they no longer have a Network to look up procedures. The system here is already facing stressors it never has or was meant to. Underground has always been sparse, but that doesn't mean we can't accommodate and live here, that we have to start repelling people like you did on Earth. It just means we have to start taking the situation seriously.

Their fingers drew close around my neck as they tapped. How seriously would you be willing to take, for instance: not just defending this Internexus, or the existing neutral spaces. But making all of it - all the territory we connect by driving the warring offworlders out of our territory altogether.

On Earth, I might have automatically sympathized with this position. Or I might have recoiled at its cold overtones of isolationism. I would have decided at least





partly based on where I was situated in relation to it. And I would have corrected, to some extent, against my own situation. I couldn't tell, because here my situation was articulated so differently. Aren't there sympathizers among the Towers as well. *Everyone who has a stake in the Adipose one way or another - if not now, then when it comes here...* Halation guided my fingers - I still hadn't gotten the hang of the code myself.

Were they tapping on Beek's shoulders the same? He was rambling on again, drawing a small coterie even though he wasn't bothering to use the vocalizer, just listening: "They all these skinny little frickers? No big fat bastards like a largemouth bass?"

What were they imagining, I wondered, from his body language, from the sound of his voice? Even the long transport and the various Gatherers, including Zach, entangled in its now virtuosically tapping fingers were rapt. But I had to pay attention. *We will prevent that. We don't need the Adipose any more than we need a new living Network to bind with, or the Meteorological Synod - we've learned from that mistake. With Entangleweed, we will connect this planet on its own terms.*





This was turning into a nightmare version of my own - Halation's own - preferences. *Then wouldn't you be effectively joining the anti-Adipose side on your own terms? Which doesn't lack for peace-seekers or provisions to establish neutral zones.*

You do know more than you're letting on, don't you. We were just such a 'neutral zone'. Our only connection was the private alignment of our guardian Network, and still we were attacked. We want no part in seeking peace among the stars. We will offer them nothing, and if they demand we will repel them. These will be our only terms, and they will be ours.

Is this why you tried to trick the Sunbite plug into destroying the alien camp in the Tuber Plug.

Did... did they do it? Is that where they found you?

We were captives there. They found us after we escaped the destruction you manipulated them into.

While we spoke, Halation had extended along the Entangleweed line, finding the nearest bulb in a demonstration tent where it was being used to print files onto what Aqueduct had called cartridges. Since it was an organic interface, they could symbiose with it slightly, although





they didn't know the coding language being used to store data on what appeared to be an enormous manifold of benzene sheets. But all they had to do was piggyback on a regular transmission of fishing numbers; our conversation was "encoded" in the same simple language of taps. From there they blocked it from its normal movement outwards to the other speakers and sent it solely to the storage bulb for someone to find (or not, depending on the course of action we decided). I was so absorbed in Halation's single sense of data that my eyes rolled back in my head for a moment, but not understanding the significance, my interlocutor didn't notice.

The bulb (which had a mirror hanging from the ceiling near the skylight) contained most of the obscure programs Aqueduct wanted, as well as the documents charting the way to the launch point. It transferred via a long strip that unfolded from out of the dense thatchwork that as far as we could make out made up its surface, velcro'd at the tip with tiny conductive hairs, that connected to the same direct port on a Tower's crest as a cartridge (which it could also "print", gridded sigil inscribing itself in capillaries of colour and flaking off). It reminded me a bit uncomfortably of the Weirs' own symbiosis.





Aqueduct wanted to go anyway, and Sunbite was impatient to expose them, but we waited at least a little for the first reinforcements to arrive. Sunbite estimated at least six dozen Entangleweed Fishers were here, not counting any who weren't wearing the regalia. (It was customary, especially in keeping with the principle of neutrality, for Towers to swap clothes or wear new costumes acquired at the Internexus, unless they specifically needed to be recognized, for instance meeting someone; the Fishers, however, seemed to want to make their presence visible.) But more than another unit would be suspicious. One of the Sunbites who'd stayed behind had to come out to tell me, and attempt to describe their movements - radio wasn't working here.

Aqueduct disappeared with two others under the folds of a lilac tent with a curling peak like something out of a Tim Burton movie I couldn't figure out how held up, while Jax, Beek and I tried to make sense of trade offers from almost everyone waiting with us.

“Who here thinks attempting to recruit at the Internexus and using it as a hub for an expansionary offence itself violate its neutrality?”





About sixty percent of hands went up in the near radius of the matte-black Fabber leading the protest, although a few less went up in an expanding one - the demographic being sampled wasn't clear. I could only imagine how much things like this were easier with the Network - I could hear arguments and sounds of confusion around the edges, and a small rock clipped worryingly past Zach's ear.

"We never saved any such conversation. It must have been injected into our database somehow." One of Fishers objected. "The whole thing must be compromised, which means they'd

"So is Entangleweed that easy to penetrate? You've been telling us all this time that no one from outside Towers understands it! It seems more likely that it was just your mistake - you left it in the fishing data instead of wherever you meant to save it!"

"That doesn't mean it couldn't have been penetrated - if it's simple organic chemistry, there are inherent security vulnerabilities!"

"This is exactly why the security of the Entangleweed network depends on not allowing offworlders under-





ground! The offworlders and their Sunbite group sympathizers have breached the neutrality of the Internexus! Why are we waiting to drive them out?"

"The safest option," another interjected, "would be to drive both out. The humans haven't declared anything, but seem to know the inner workings of the anti-Adipose faction and came from one of their labs - we can't assume they're telling the truth about being refugees."

"And if they come back with the rest of the faction, or some of the scary weapons they were offering to use for us, who's going to defend you?"

Even after spending several days with them, even after confirming the plan overnight, I had been unsure of how Sunbite themselves would take this attention, but I was starting to understand Tower body language (partly through the Phantasy I had spent half the night sharing with Aqueduct on a new cartridge), the expansive tension that signalled excitement and a kind of triumphant embrace of hardship, the kind they must have felt when their parent group had forced them to strike out on their own instead of preventing it. They stepped up to the entrance of the tent, leaning in as they pushed its flaps open.





“If it’s false, you wouldn’t mind holding a referendum to commit the Entangleweed network, if it’s going to be hosted here, to the same standards of neutrality as the Internexus. If you intend to use this Internexus as a hub for a wider network of coordinated stations.”

A leader - or someone acting as one; staves and roles were exchanged as well as costumes here - stepped in front of me, splaying their hands over my shoulders. “Is all of this true? Would you be prepared to swear”-

My head bent back as another pair of hands meshed across my face, covering it with a fabric, stinging, sparks of all colours popping against my eyes, tendrils of tingling reaching up my nostrils and around the back of my mouth and into my brain, my brain was resisting them, resisting the simultaneous sleep/pain/nausea but not Halation, Halation was spilling out from every surface of my body, their instincts telling them they had just crash-landed on an alien planet whose atmosphere they couldn’t breathe and needed to find the nearest body that could -

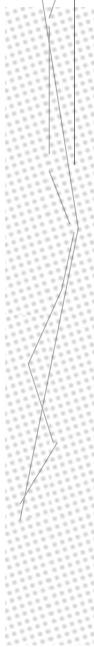
“A Weir! We told you! They’re working with the anti-Adipose faction!”





The cloth fell away as Sunbite drove their staff through the chest of the Fisher holding it down, then just as Halation began to retract into my orifices Sunbite's blood sprayed across my face as two rotating, grooved cylinders punched through their chest. *"It's now or never! Begin the deconsecration!"* The voice of the unfamiliar morph, two of its arms ending in what I guess it's safe to call drills (though I should note they weren't tapered) was almost immediately swallowed up in the tremblings of riot. Its drills crashed into the ground and collapsed bridges over depressions in the rock on either side of me. Its face leaned close, eyes leering pink slits in the blacklight, and a bullet splashed through its neck.

Several more had already ganged up on Waldo Beek, avoiding his gun until one grasped the principle of line of fire and immediately threw themselves forward and covered it, another going for his legs like a wrestler. Meanwhile, shaking off a nearby dogpile, a massive figure rose above the crowd - seven Towers docked together, hooked hands clamping on at the transport morph's load-bearing shoulders, hopper legs lashing out at the end of arms, a second head swivelling at the end of the centre's tail-arm, wielding two Entangleweed cat's cradle slings in four hands. A volley of acid packets flew at it from the crowd





and was beaten back with the fabric of the tent which it picked up from its tip and stretched out like a giant fan. Spinning it several more times (along with practically the whole compressed body of the Tower whose outstretched fingers were hooked into its framework) in a dancelike pattern raised enough wind to lift several lightweight nearby Towers off the ground.

How does that symbiosis communicate, I asked Sunbite through Halation's retracted strand, as I tried to focus a bead through the colossus' spinning limbs on its central body. If I take out, say, the head, does it all go down, or is there a window it needs to reorganize? Are they specially bonded, or can it just pull somebody out of the crowd?

The colossus formation uses direct neural communication between implants. You need access permissions to dock like that, but in a cult like this probably everyone has them. As if to confirm, I saw more colossi rising up around the edges of the Internexus. Three, four, five, and I still couldn't see everywhere from this low. Assume any brain could be doing the processing - what you need to look for is structural weak points.

As I attempted that - yelling the same order to Zach who probably knew how better than me - two packets came





flying at me from its tail arm. Diving out of the way, I realized belatedly that they weren't just acid like the Sunbites had used, they were explosives. A steel-wool paw of burning air threw me back on top of one of the Gatherers who had tackled Waldo Beek, and even with just one good arm I was strong enough to wrestle them off, shove aside the large rock they had dropped on Beek's diaphragm and let him deal with the remainder as he sat up and unfolded himself above me.

A projecting voice Dopplered around the edges of the cavern: *The humans have attacked the Internexus on behalf of the anti-Adipose faction. They are allied with the Weirs, aliens that can invade bodies. They have unknown weapons. Our intelligence suggests a coordinated attack planned between multiple groups of offworlder collaborators. In order to respond, the Entangleweed alliance will temporarily deconsecrate the Internexus on behalf of the collective interest of all Towers in order to expel all offworlders and their allies.*

Beek grinned, hefting his rifle on his shoulder, and all my homicidal thoughts about him since I'd met him slammed into me like lightning in a lightning rod, my muscles seizing, not moving as he was covering me (and Halation





holding me steady). “Well, isn’t that perfect. They’re doing all our work for us.”

Just as one of its hopper hooks swept down towards us another commune leader, mostly naked and covered in vortical brushstrokes that glowed cold crimson under the blacklight, landed on the central shoulders of the nearest colossus in a long gliding leap, knocking it off balance.

“You can’t deconsecrate the Internexus without a majority; you arrogant egg-eaters! How will you even know who to drive out? No one knows who’s on what side since the Network fell, this is the only place that’s a good thing!”

“And is that the best you dare to hope for? Sooner or later it’ll go the way of everything else. We’ve passed through three Internexes that have fallen already.” Three sets of hands at the end of one arm picked them up from behind and began to stretch them backwards as they flailed behind them with their staff’s bladed base.

Then the colossus tipped backwards, barely even moving for the first 30 degrees, like an asset being rotated in an editing program. The palanquin, our original getaway plan, had crashed into its legs from behind, with three of our men aiming guns out all other sides. “Get on!” threw what I now recognized as an Entangleweed fishing line





2
LVCIG121
OEG
TVCN2
VCCSN2M
MRECEM2
ATLAEVV2
COMWOD0
B1202
EYVAID0
N11VICE2
23E
2026END1
T220W
0012
VT100V
WVCW
D0T0VE
E1
T0V0VE
W101
1MC1D1D0
1EM00R
E102W0D
2EV DO
WE EG11
V01B12C
10W
COM2ECE
WVET'
211
D0T0V
1220W
G0BEM

down - Beek grabbed it and, to my eternal humiliation, me under his other arm. One of the tentacles, peeling aside the tent, scooped up Aqueduct, who was curled up like a millipede around the bulb, still connected. The other leader had landed somehow on its side.

"You'll need to defend the consecrating cairns," our hitchhiker told me and I thought for a sinking second they meant the cairns the children had been playing in - the children were safe in the air anyway, flying in agitated knots like murmurations of starlings, Scouts trying to calm them down and corral them. Gobs of spit or excrement occasionally rained down and hit the canopy above us. But there were different kinds of cairns here. *"If they are unmade, the pact is no longer binding."* The children's cairns were massive honeycombs of black basalt, maybe broken off from the same pillars as the central platform, whereas the giant silhouettes around the edges of the cavern bent protectively over their comrades picking away one piece at a time at heaps of gifts not unlike the ones I had seen in the fishing baubles, azurite eggs, flat fossil-stones and petrified lobes of fungus. Throwing as many as they could back to their original owners (I saw one thrown back at them, one caught proudly and then the hand disappear-





ing under its neighbours), sorting others into different sacks.

Beek lowered his rifle and aimed as we approached. The bullet sheared straight through the blurring butterfly wing of a fabric shield painted harmlessly with the impacts of dozens of acid-packets. Not that they even noticed us coming when it passed through. A stick figure with a deflated head slid off the side of the pile.

The colossus charged at it. The two soldiers on the sides of the palanquin pivoted and shot out both of its shoulders, which swung at its sides from twisted hands or feet crawling around to find new purchase on each other. One gave up and dropped straight off as the other released and reattached to the end of another limb, an extra-long whip of an arm ending in a pair of spring-loaded legs slicing at us like an axe. Aqueduct told me to grab onto something as the palanquin rolled on its side and caught the arm in two of its tentacles, twisted. This time we got off a whole Tower who jumped at us, Rider kicking the vehicle ten metres through the crowd. As I fell, I reached into my pocket and pulled out an opalescent tube - the Corpuscle decompressed in midair.

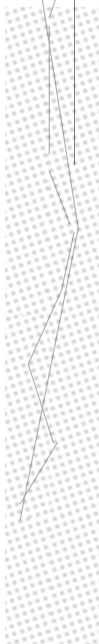




Aqueduct joined me in one of the bubbles, which left me the choice - someone I trusted, or someone I didn't. Someone I wanted to keep close, or someone I wanted to keep closer.

The Towers who had been clinging with us grabbed Zach and Jax and glid to a safe landing. "Stick together in groups of two!" I yelled through a Bulbul speaker - walkie-talkies still not working - as I accelerated ahead and rammed the colossus' legs while the thicket of anonymous limbs covered them in my hindsights.

If other communes had vehicles even like this, I thought as we flipped the Corpuscle up and hit the reeling giant again with Beek's spinning bubble, spraying as it fell back, it wouldn't be hard to take down a few of these even without guns - but behind the cairns, Geoplaque was already climbing up the largest gaps in the walls, keeping everyone from the encampment catacombs out and the Internexus itself in. At the same time more Towers were starting to climb the cairns - some clambering and throwing items away, others trying to pull them down, the wave rising and falling with their efforts.





“Stop pulling shit down or we shoot!” I yelled, forgetting to use the vocalizer, but getting enough across for the waveform to freeze.

Beek wheeled his ball of the Corpuscle around ahead of mine, reconfiguring the mechanism and dragging my gun off target. I wasn't so much shocked by his insubordination as that Halation - who still relayed all our mental commands and communications through the Corpuscle - was permitting it. *Officer Beek, what are you doing.*

Let them take it down. We're going to need this as a forward operating base.

I told you we wouldn't be doing that before we even came.

My bubble rose up over and ahead of his, swiping two Fishers off the cairn before being caught by two hands of a colossus.

That was on the assumption that we could at least secure free movement in and around here. At this point they're as likely to kick us out even if we help them. Even just seeing this thing - isn't this enemy tech?

As if on cue three of the drills Sunbite's killer had used, in one hand, drove into my bubble's surface. Within



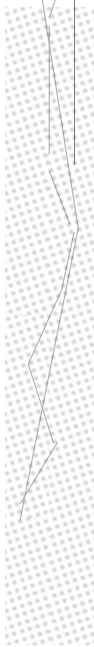


seconds I could sense the material was strong enough to break through head on; I let the bubble slip alongside it and spin, grinding both to a halt. Then Aqueduct rotated over both of us, climbing on the colossus' shoulder and dumping several glowing green ovoids that exploded in narrow pillars of fireworks that kept burning for thirty seconds, sucking in spirals of air.

Spear-fishing - I didn't have the mental space to absorb the context, as much as I wanted to disappear into it, except that it was an old undergrounder tech from the same era as Entangleweed itself - *I saw this in 66100 Star-Green Bow, but they really have it in here.*

The towering flames twinkled and vanished down the gaps in the Internexus floor, leaving molten indentations in the shoulder, torso, crest, eye of four Towers who dropped away from their megamorph, regrouping to heal themselves - and in the materials in the cairn. As we fell back on top of it, scattering them further, I saw the crowd climbing into a geodesic dome over us.

How many more weapons do they have in these things? Can you tell where the other ones are?





In response they only rotated themselves to the front of the Corpuscule again - I was getting used to this kind of synchronization, feeling more like the symbiote myself and sped off up the wall behind us, winding between the growing number of Towers that had taken to climbing them en masse, showering projectiles down on... mostly the Fishers, who were picking up their tents and moving under them. Over the heads of the crowd I could see Zach Flagg riding the huge transport morph rearing up, firing on vulnerable points in a colossus along with two of Beek's men until it stopped rearranging itself and fell into individuals to heal.

Right - they could do that. How long would we have until any of these things reconfigured themselves? Fifteen minutes?

Halation - am I in the wrong here? Am I hesitating where I can't?

Don't make me think right now. I'm in too many places to think. Make up your own minds.

The metallic coldness of her desperation scraped a layer off my brain.

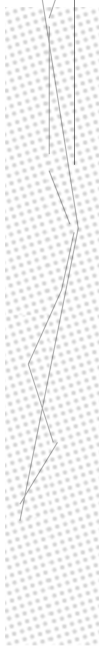




Aqueduct, fab as much of that Geoplaque clearing stuff as you can. We're going to use it at - I'm not even gonna try and translate it, but I'm glad the Towers had a three-dimensional coordinate system for different geological features in everyday speech, so I could indicate the positions I was pretty sure our reinforcements were at without any confusion.

The waves up and down the sides of the central platform exceeded anywhere else in frequency, but no one seemed to have risen above the lower levels, or even seized on an innovative strategy to guard it. The high ground probably held less advantage for them than for us since their weapons had less range and precision - you could see the cairns from up there, but you couldn't necessarily shoot them. Even our range wasn't ideal - our actual snipers were outside.

The Tower leader whose name I still didn't know came crashing back through the crowd toward us on our palanquin, with two more of our men - that gave us three units. We strafed the edge of the cavern and shot packets of remover at the Geoplaque targets in passing while staying out of the way of the colossi, trying to shoot them from a distance as much as possible while staying high





to avoid collateral damage. Not that there weren't other possible collaterals at height. I didn't see the children any more - I think they had gone back inside their cairns - but there were Scouts zipping all around them, wielding little handheld weapons like tasers. Zach's unit was holding colossi away from two cairns with covering fire until another - one of the ones we had collapsed already? a new assemblage? - pulled itself up from the crowd and threw itself on top of the transport morph, trying to tear them apart with huge specialized claws made from paired legs.

Moments before the writhing serpentine body that had been caressing its countless lovers the night before went the way of Eva 03, sniper rounds slammed into the colossus one joint at a time.

Down in the crowd, a Tower lifted another one of the bulbs, torn loose from its stem, like a victim's heart in a Mesoamerican sacrifice.

As our reinforcements crawled cautiously out of the walls, hooking and rappelling where the Towers could climb as freely as kids on a jungle gym - a vulnerable position they were resolving effectively by proceeding one at a time under arcs of suppressive fire - one was





knocked out of the air by what looked at first like an arc of black liquid, but sliced across his face and neck like a blade, from the upside-down gazebo where our target, the last bulb, hung, now tied into the ropes of a thin green-and-white Fabber.

It liquefied again and swung back towards us, slicing to my amazement through the surface of the Corpuscle and Halation's barely conscious pain as we swerved around it.

That's a... the Corpuscle's increasingly overloaded connection blocked out Aqueduct's enthusiastic identification. It was like if Halation could control their liquid form in real time without a medium, I got it. Beek and I, symmetrically rotated forward, opened fire.

All this time I had imagined - hoped - real war, at least, would be less like a game. But the adrenaline drummed out every quality of my surroundings except the rising and falling of towers of data. And I - or what was no longer I - flowed between them the way I had thought I could only flow between words.

Waldo Beek, next to me, was a black hole in Halation's mental field.





The persona I had found so grotesque, I realized, was both a reprieve from and a parody of this.

They jumped off as we fired, wings opening, and shot toward us faster than I had seen any Tower move in the air - faster, I realized, because they were using the aerial enhancements Aqueduct had told me about.

Their weapon splashed down, even in liquid form staying contiguous across its gapped spread, sharpening into a bladed net shredding the surface of the Corpuscule to bits.

Halation suspended in the air between and around it, rainbow and black intertwined.

Liquid again. A bullet had, within a third exponent or some shit, passed through its user's head from the ground.

A tiny face between tessellated voids, Jax smiled up at me, for another split second before a moving tarp fell over him.

My mouth open and dry and silent, I grasped the bulb as I fell past the corpse. Without time to disentangle it from the netting of the Fisher's uniform, I clutched it to the



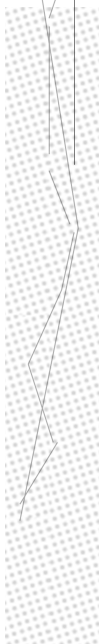


surface of the bubble while its enhanced wings - not just the wings, spread out in slats of lightweight featherlike tubules, but the body, which up close I could see had a jet suction tube built in through its thorax - spun out of control.

Halation could connect us - but not do much else. I couldn't hear her at all any more. She had reduced herself to a conduit, every point of her body transmitting signals from one part of the Corpuscle to another. Aqueduct could send the signals to control it, but... my own consciousness was getting overwhelmed trying to even keep track of it. Maybe if we jettisoned one.

Fuck Waldo Beek. Maybe this would actually be my fantasy all along, or maybe I would die first. When I opened my eyes I was being suspended among sounds somewhere between by my clothes by a swarm of children.

We sailed effortlessly across to the other troop position, bombarding it with what remained of the Geoplaque remover. Our second unit began its descent - only for the entire wall to collapse behind - on top of - them through the fizzing hiss of explosive fungus. Guts, limbs, gear, brains - not just human but Towers - rolled down the side of the Internexus, crashing into the cairn and sending





items rolling into the void. Below, I could see almost everyone who had been hunkering down, ambivalent rise up and fall on the Fishers in one massive wave.

On the other side of the Internexus, four out of five of our reinforcements had now surrounded the remaining cairn, barking through a vocalizer to back away or they'd shoot. I glided around to the top of the platform, head pounding, recuperating. (Halation recuperating more than me. Me being a body for Halation to recuperate in.) And sitting there like Lucifer in Cabanel's painting, I heard Beek's voice rise from all the vocalizers of the Entangleweed network at once. He must have seized the last bulb at some point, I thought.

"The Weir user has been captured and isolated, and will be banished from the Internexus in accordance with its neutrality pact. The rest of the human delegation promises to abide by and defend the neutrality pact, and will freely submit to the same testing the Fishers used to identify her. We are happy to prove that none of us have had any contact with a Weir, or claim any affiliation with them."

I looked down. Zach's unit had surrounded the base of the platform, five pointed up at me.





A Bulbul looped around my head. Jax's voice, recorded, crackled out of it. *Don't worry, it's not a mutiny, we'll keep you in the loop. Just go on ahead to the launch point.* I was too tired to think about it.

I travelled through the magnetic tunnel in the fetal position, though it felt somewhat good to know the Towers had a different name for it, without its human connotations of infantile regression, something like "capsule". Back to back with Aqueduct, Halation sharing a single Phantasy between us from the bulb. I felt her presence, recovering, like a head on my shoulder.

The Phantasy enclosed us in an entirely black, soundless, featureless space, without any interference from our surroundings except a very faint awareness of the movement of the basket around our bodies, enough to be alerted if anything went wrong. Only a single beeping, chiming sound, almost like a note struck out of a bird's song like a bead fallen from a necklace, repeating at mathematically regular intervals.

I had been in a relationship with an electronic musician with a religious devotion to craftsmanship for three years.





I had never heard a sound so perfect in itself, so inexhaustible to detailed attention without giving away the slightest hint of a distinct detail. (She wouldn't object to my saying this, only to being unable to hear it.) Only when I had sunk so deep into the sound that I thought I was imagining the colour synesthetically did I realize the Phantasy had in fact, added another sense, a blue-green light pulsing at the centre of what could no longer be called my field of vision.

The pulses changed in number, in interval, though the intervals were still made up of regular units, multiplied or divided, seemingly at random, and as I tried to make out whether they were following any pattern, or saying anything, if I could hover over all of them in the total emptiness of the Phantasy, as if outside of time, I realized, or thought, that I was determining the patterns myself by thinking about them. I would anticipate one thing, and it would happen; but this didn't give me a sense of control, it created a strange nervous tension, as the patterns seemed to be anticipating my own anticipation. My anticipation as I experienced it wanted to not know, which created more than one possibility, but my anticipation as externalized in the pattern knew ahead of me, resolving my anticipation while deferring anything so

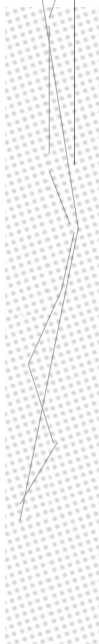




external that it would have been an answer. And no matter how closely I examined this dynamic I got no closer to pinning it down, as it was already absolutely simple, yet infinitely detailed, like the sound and the light.

The light, however, was getting brighter without my thinking about it, as I didn't think about it, filling up more and more of the darkness of my inattention. And when I opened my eyes it seemed like a seamless transition, as if all along it had simply been the dusty turquoise jade of an everyday Towers sky I had been shot into.

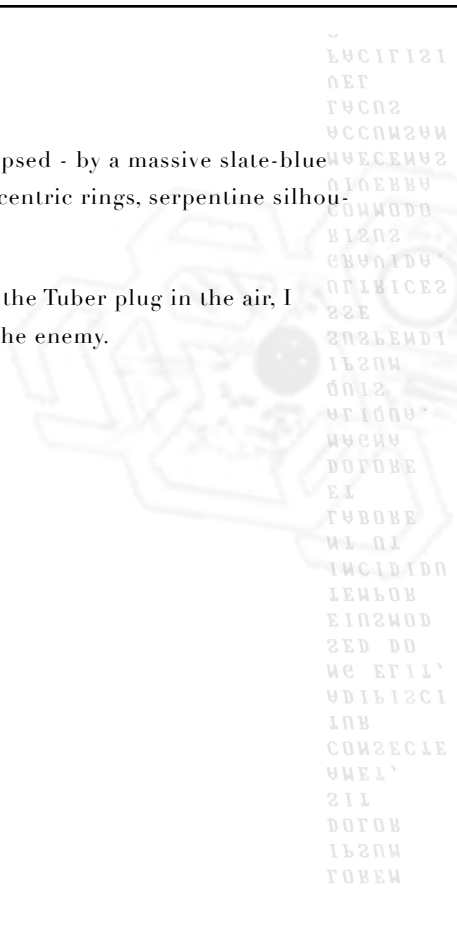
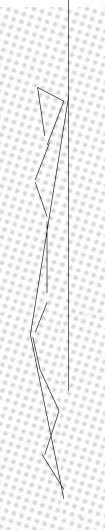
(When had we been plugged into the shuttle? Aqueduct informed me that it was mostly automatic, but that they had facilitated a bit through their own experience of the Phantasy - once you got the hang of it, "lucid" as they said, you could even use the patterns to encode interactions with the outside world.) The original point from which the colour leached into everything, even the grey grubby suds of cloud, was Towers' sun, which was white - how could it be anything else, at this distance, at this brightness? Even an eclipse didn't change the whiteness of our own sun's rays.





And this sun was half-eclipsed - by a massive slate-blue sphere, recessed with concentric rings, serpentine silhouettes flying around it.

Three times the height of the Tuber plug in the air, I sighted for the first time the enemy.





2'
LASCIGISI
AEG
TASCUS
WCCNWSM
WRECEWAS
AALAEVW
COMMODU
WISUS
EVAVIDU'
PILWICES
ZSE
ZUSSEWMI
WISUM
OPIZ
WVIDU'
WAWW
DOWVE
EI
TAVOVE
WI PI
IMCIDIDU
IEMFOR
EIOSMOD
ZEU DO
WE EGII'
WDIPIZCI
IUM
COMSECTE
WWEI'
ZII
DOWW
WISUM
GOWW





SCARRED ZERUEL

Kai

Likes: a good chill, points on the board

Dislikes: GSS,

Seen with: Cammy, Elli

Blood type: B

Elli

Likes: smart dice, hacker down-keep, culture signals

Dislikes: a cold pulse, fog of war

Seen with: Cat Eyes, Cammy, Elli

Blood type: O

"the sorrow lives on" - Cathy Newman

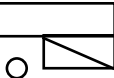
Kai wakes up in the morning light streaming through a cracked and taped window. The light splinters across the gauze, casts a fractured shadow across the bed. He's alone, draped in sheets wrung with sweat. The Tri-Sun is in 3rd Zenith, meaning the smallest sun, Gaulea, has crossed over to centre the first sun in partial eclipse while the second sun has dropped into the periphery of its orbit. *Bills to pay; mouths to feed*, croons the radio before dissolving into a



by: vape escapist



character profile



2
LVCIG121
AET
TVCN2
VCCN22W
WRECEW2
ATLAEVV
COWODO
B1202
EVAIDV
PILVICE2
22E
2022END1
T220W
0012
AT100V
WCEW
DOTOVE
E1
T000VE
W101
IMCIDID0
IEMFOR
E102WOD
2EV DO
WE EG11
VDIR12C1
10W
COMSECE1E
WME1
211
DOTOV
1220W
G02W

shriek of noise and reverb that almost shatters his eardrums—a coded signal from B. Moth HQ. It slips into the song's backbeat, a steady drone.

He doesn't need to see the Tri=Sun to know all this because the rhythms of it are in his blood.

Where he's at: a hovel slotted into the Clusters in avoidance of any permit or regulation. He was with someone last night, but they've scarpered; no one wants to deal with the come-down of sleeping with someone marked for death. Kai was born marked because he was always going to be initiated; hadn't his father, and his father's father before that—the rules were different, the teams were different, but it's the same bloody game. Get sponsored and kill as many as you can. If you die, die in faith and zeal. It's not a rule, per say, but it's the only constant. By your own hand is cowardice, by any other's is courage. He thinks before he even gets involved he'll need something to keep him on his feet. Food will do; a brew would do even better.

Bullets... bullets fly through the air. He retrieves his piece from beneath the pillow. Thinks about shooting the squawking radio for the hell of it but where would he get a new one? To cut yourself off from the game is to cut



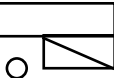
changelog



yourself out what makes life worth living. Living not for yourself but for the sponsors and fans. Even for the group fiends.

Even before he descends down the creaking, half-destroyed staircase he smells the smoke of the fiends, gamers half-in for the dope and half-out for the violence. What they do is they cut their dope with ambrosia and milk tea, wait for it to congeal, and torch the gloop with hydrochloric butane. Smoke it through artisanal pipes which are tattooed while molten with designs that cool to inlay beneath the surface of the glass. The fiends know the stats of the pro gang wars like they know the designs of their pipes. That one's mine no arguments. The groupers are as pure as they need to be because they don't want to miss a second of the action. View it all through their hallucinogen haze, the ambrosia wiping the ugly parts that would otherwise stain their psyches.

"You're going to hell," says one of the groupers when they catch him coming down the stairs. He ignores this. He could argue, sure, and be right; he hasn't sinned half as much as the megacorp sponsors and they all know this. The grouper is shooting his mouth off just to hear it.



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He speaks when he's among them. Glided down silent as a wraith he could tell by their goggle-eyes. Moving is more like floating, distethered, for those marked. By strengthened tone and sweep of his eyes taking them all in. "I got places to be. This place is KZ if the pulse isn't strong today." Only one of them is an inside line. They stare at each other, furtive, trying to guess among themselves. The ambrosia takes away the sketch feeling at the root. So they forget what their reason for the feeling was in the first place. The dope, a neutral serenity, a push that says it doesn't matter. It's lodged in them, a hook, Kai thinks, but where does it go? He knows where he'll go. The stat-line. The pulse.

The radio had told him it was time to make moves.

His piece is an ASP 39-2. So light he forgets he has it. Minimal kickback. He has it on the lurker outside the steps as he smashes the outstretched arm into the doorframe. Their piece bounces, goes off, digs itself a half tomb in the dirt. He swears. No-look kill then, someone in the game. They drop away but their body on the turf makes no noise.





Gaijin Street Samurai but their fall hadn't been broken by deck. He's back inside the door and snaking to the window. To pick off a few more from there. *These guys*, he thinks, are not tested; he can tell. Scouts who wanted an early bird kill.

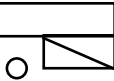
They're still sprawled across the tube room, the fiends. He marches to the inside line. Eyes wide but still dulled by fog. Inside lines aren't in the game but even through the fog this one can tell it doesn't matter. The other fiends watch. Their eyes half-lidded. Only mote gleams betray interest.

Without a pulse?

What good is a bad pulse, he thinks, and drops the inside line where he sits. He slumps over, a neat circle in his forehead. Bleeding, but almost a tattoo, a shadow. Comes to rest on his left shoulder. Hair spilling onto fabric torn and grimed.

It had been the one who'd announced his damnation. He'd taken it as dope-speak. Half these dopers became street prophets and said things like that to any who'd lis-





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ten. Fuck it, he thinks, always cold even while listening for footsteps at the door. It's not that he thinks they're right. They are for sure. It's how close he's coming to it and it's still morning. The Tri-Sun in 3rd Zenith in its barrage of light had been an array of beams pouring through the slashed panes of the living room facing out.

He stalks out to see it, feel it.

B. Moths are on the scene now. He'd heard gunshots from within and thought them echoes of his own kill. In the pure cleanup phase, the most senior soldier is at the door, telling him it's all clear. He thinks of telling the dude it's about time, but thinks again. No point in schizophrenia this early in the day. *Because we will be judged, in the end*, he thinks, *by the fiends, the street-prophets, the schizophrenes to whom all this is a game. Who are passive, who watch and live.*

All the while he lives knowing their new hackergurl is schizophrene.



changelog



Synopsis

several inhabitants in this digital, how could our affections still travel between the thousand strands of data between us

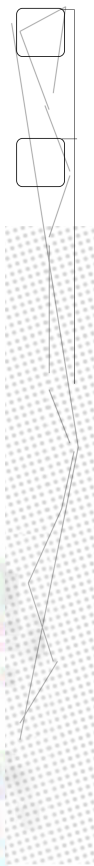




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Last Time

Orche watches from the Garden as Morgan languishes in the Barrows, separated from his Tender, and Cammy noids out in gamespace





CW: gangs, self harm imagery, firearms, blades, psychotic experiences, religion, fantasy racism, fantasy queerphobia, psychic warfare

(Δ / ϵ)

SIDESHOW

Cammy finds pitch black void, all she thought she'd see, spooling herself out from Tachae's into the leis. The leis are all that remains of the first Loum but she tells herself her challenge will be to delve them, find enough feather-shed to weave it anew.

Weave it her way this time, with Jewel as adjunct, she thinks; *keeping him where I can see him. Lest he lose his shit and blow it again. What of him I've managed to save, which I don't know, can never figure out.*

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ALL Y'ALL DO OR DIE (Δ / ϵ)



Without weaves to map it the leis in visual are pitch void. Cat Eyes would've taken a second, if that long, to slip in with her. He's now somewhere in this darkness, waiting if he feels he has to wait.

He'll wait forever, she thinks. So I'll find him. She cloaks her mote aura as dark as she can get it. Without thread to hold each movement is unsure, nervous. The motes themselves cling to each other in weird, bumpy orbits.

She could be groping in the darkness, asking it to cut her wrists and tendons apart. Then like a whispered breath, thoughts strand between the motes.

Slip in and harden into gouging knives. To coalesce like this, she thinks, Jewel would kill for whatever he's hard-wired himself to use. Has killed for it, in a way.

[Fuck.]

[You read it right,] Cat Eyes/Jewel says. He's gouged in with her like there's no part of him he needs to leave out there. [To deal with the dead leis. Fix what he's got her doing up there. This is his play. I'm riding shotgun. T doesn't know.]



[You wish,] she says, and then she is wishing herself, her motes finding their extremes as she goes phantasm. The space between the motes where all can be wished for, kept safe, wished black and putrid. Great, she thinks. I kept enough of him safe that he's still one fucked puppy. But even that can feed into the fantasy, because maybe that's the part she saved, but not the part he liked most. Strung dead enough to care and with your worst self all to share the time with.

In that space she lets the wishes play out, and the wishes give breath, with him at her heart, to the rebirth hiding deep within the void in the leis. This brings forth the spark that begins to thread them in pure white. A purer shade, she thinks, than the Velih themselves could get to. She checks herself. It's way better than what Jewel strung up. She has that.

As the whites weave Cat Eyes/Jewel slips out with a sigh, almost a shame run along the threads. At home as he was in the void, that thread had him razors through the core of anything he could think about.

[Didn't think you'd go ghost,] hears him say. [Thought you'd just take it.]



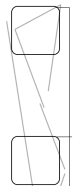


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She ignores him. So much space and time. So much space to spin the initial framing tapestry that holds the leis, flows marrow through their bones. Where the destiny energy is so concentrated it can be visualized as shape, as thicker threads of finer lace entwine. It's cut out enough to do, and she wonders if now that she's made her point he'll help. Then inside she frowns. Cat Eyes is already just a distant cloud on a runway line out of the main tangle.

The time is her contract up there. In play for as long as it's useful to both parties. So she sweats out the imprint the knives had left in her and forces her motes to hold steady. As she weaves the pale thread whitens more against the dark shadows of the Clusters refracted through Velih eyes. Like lichen streaks in thick moss they course through the void of the leis.

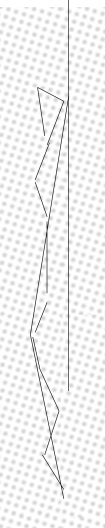
Jewel told her there were two. Two of his agents. She knows who the second is but not how to find him. What will the Velih say now, she thinks, waiting, biding their time, now that she's added rebirth to her slate? As if ripping them off wasn't bad enough. She burrows deep within her own folds. The weave flowers outward, strands first then thickens into braids, until it's past what she can process. As if a nest of mass brambles but dimpling into the void, flut-





tering over it. She pictures it spilling out into the world, if they all haven't forgotten how to use it.

When Cat Eyes comes back, telling her T says it's break time, she dimples herself, letting her motes sink back beneath the surface of the 2.0 Loum. Then she respools. She finds herself back at Tachae's, her body refixed from whatever it was doing to be back in front of the beater-top, cross legged, but her knees, she sees, are askew.





FBA

She's come back to an impromptu war council. A few B. Moths are here, and she guesses they're higher-ups from the filaments they wear as chains, quicksilver with a milky shine. All are hooded and most capped beneath. White hoods and sweaters sag over black jeans.

There's a handful of them, enough to make the small space cramp even harder.

"Damn," she says to no one, not really. "Y'all here for a holo-sim or something? A training chamber?" She adjusts herself. Cardboard boxes half-opened litter the space, and a few terminals are online. She guesses Cat Eyes had her help with that.

"Ayo," one of them says, "the chick's got something to say."

"She looked smarter before," says the other. "Keeping her mouth shut." Dreads plait his cheeks, some trailing clumped into the sleeve of his hood. Bleached in white streaks like phosphor burn.

Cat Eyes' voice trails from the back. "She's smart enough."





"Sure," says the first. "You don't have a clue, do you?" he says. "You were buzzing around but you weren't aware."

He looks at the second. His own hair is cropped or non-existent beneath the fuzz of his beanie. "Shit, what do you think, Kai?"

"You owe her," Cat Eyes says. Coming back into the room holding something that looks to her like an augmented *pistola*. A blue screen fizzes above the casing chamber. He's humming to himself, his hum enjoining the fizz of the screen. He keeps his distance from the Moths. Then he stops.

"She's cooked up something pretty in there."

Now it's Kai's turn to look off-step. "Why? What is it?"

"Right now? A framework. But I've already started charting the lines she's nursed. You could ride the scales, all the way. Get the Velih to get miraculous just to square it. "You get it?" he says after a moment of silence. "The V themselves."

The first spits. "Sounds like snitch shit."





"Roll one," Kai says, his voice here, his eyes somewhere else. Chasing a thought.

Cat Eyes twitches but Cammy's a step ahead. "Can I talk to you about something," she says. Right as Jewel, she thinks, was about to open his mouth for him.

She's tugging him away when Kai says to hold on.

"This place is now hallowed ground. May all be entombed, brothers."

The voice is one, though amassed from them all. "Whom so ever are entombed within these walls find solace in the last light."

Grim, she thinks. She grabs Cat Eyes by the arm and when she lets go he says nothing. Follows her into the back like a leashed dog. "Entombed," she says. "You're gonna stand for that?"

He shrugs. His face is half-cut in the light seeping from the fresh electronica beyond the doorway, strands of what she decides is perma-greased hair beating out his eyelashes to strand the corners of his eye sockets.





She rolls her eyes. "I mean you, dude. Not J." *If I'm talking to Jewel, and he's in control, then he's just losing this guy's life for him. Wasting it away, keeping the dude happy as a mid-man for gangers.* "They were talking about this place like none of us can leave. Like we'll die here."

"Yea," he says, as if she's stupid. "They talk about all places like that." Just, he doesn't say, setting us straight. *As if, she thinks, they're free, and maybe they are.* Free of fear, the fear that comes with death. Death isn't their sure thing at the end of their given run. It's a shot in the night, or even under the Tri-Sun.

"Look," she says, "I don't wanna hear that shit. It's demotivational." She turns on him, stalking to the bare wall at the back of the room. The ash smears across the pallid paint remind her of scorched earth. "What am I gonna do when the beater runs out of bat?"

"T's on it," he says. "By which I mean, T isn't bugging too hard. No news is good news."

"I wanna meet them," she says. "I deserve to, if I'm working for them, if I'm the crux of the op."





He stares at her. Brows gaunt beneath the fuzz of his cap. "T's the last person you want to be dealing with."

"Why," she says. "Dep-chess? Because I beat you, down there."

He says nothing. As if he doesn't need to. But she's gotten him out of the room, and the place sworn sacred for her trouble. The gamer in his hands hangs limp, twitching in coyness at the lengths of his fingers. As he turns away his half-mask of light is gone, and there's the full moon of the facing cap, the greased hair flip beneath, the crook-fold of his sweatshirt.

"Think about what you owe."

Light flickers on with his movement to the corner cabinet, a small squared socket light nearby. Its faint glow sets off lashes and whiskers where he's fucked up his shave. Still enough to splash over the cabinet, gleaning from it the contours of a laptop. This one is no beater-top. It's top-line or else preserved through ascetic focus. A black casing swims with streams of grey-white light like thawing ice. The blue screen above the augmented *pistola* melts into the grey light, is grey itself, hides and then he slings the tech into a deep cargo pocket.





Meanwhile the bat cradle spins the pristine light into a blanket blessing. That would protect either it, she thinks, or the mote aura within. She hopes she hasn't just whistled.

"Yours?" she says.

He's booting it up, suddenly the whole room awash in blue light, his face paled by it, his eyes sunken in it, as if he hasn't slept. "Till T says otherwise."

"It's an FBA, isn't it?" she says, and he nods. Both of them know now that further talking is, has always been, a slag for him. Because if he is Full Body Accessed he has a half-life. And that's whatever life was left after crashing the Clusters.

"I'm sorry," she says, "I'll get back to work." The sad thing is that he doesn't ignore her. Even though he's already dreaming, weaving his way through the Loum. Even not in his body he is watching her as she goes, in his eyes the same twin fires that had seen her in the dark.





EMPTY & LOOSE

Cammy never about shit. That's what she hears from life-moguls of tomorrow barking advice at her every street casing. Retrowaved fashion canvas for the shape-walkers of the Ghetto Clusters preaching stylized easy living. Through the schizophrenic spam training the scattered breezes of their breath reach her smelling of musk, a relentless bravery lending sour years to their sweat. They studied her. Velih blood backwash has been in her veins since the black hexagramme pills found their way into her stomach.

You can hear them, ghosts in the reaches, with or without a Loum mockup. Voices that isolate. Pin you against opposite ends of your own skull. Of course then you are severed. Until you confuse them with the voices in your own head. They all blur together in an interwoven seam, with or without a feedback frame.

Turns out you can hear them wherever you go. Echoes fuse together in swarms to form a greater cloud. These envelop the Tri-Sun light, soak it into churning ocean, keep you high out of your mind on mirage.





The walls that section off this area of the Clusters are high, loom barbed by razorwire and beneath the coiled serrated loop-arounds there is matte brickwork laid blackish gray. This is overpainted by streaks of photo-solvent into the trend which has changed with either time or translation by (she reminds herself) whatever reconstruction is operating out of that mess she'd left in the Chapel. The vogue now is 'meridians consumed by veiling destinies' or so the local Curate informs them. The Curate is not defined by any effort but is coalesced into via where he happens to reside. She's on her way there now to barter for influ-credits on behalf of the B. Moths.

They need it. The GSS are getting final formed or at least tertiaried by their Hiroko contract. Now every spraypaint freakout reflects their strength in some way. Anagrammed into the symbology somehow and those who have been schizophrenia-spammed are most weak to it, will see it all places. So going up to the Curate begging for scraps but they have the 2.0 Loum reconstructed on their side. Cat Eyes thinks that's worth something and for all Cammy knows that's what T thinks. On Cat Eyes' say-so. That's why she doubts. She folds her hands in a prayer to the weed that was fucking with her. That prayer consists of: please have mercy on me. Because, she'd thought, it made





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sense to pray to those who tormented you, not those that said they could relieve the torment.

Her hands are clasped like that as she enters the Curate. The Curate withdraws from his physical external structure as a shady shopfront in the Clusters down to his shape-walker form, the one that keeps the location safe, most likely for himself. Before her eyes he's gene-spliced into an old Elfoid. These are marked by rove of ear and slower heartbeats, slower breath. Elfoids are gendered into default and she-elves, the neo-wave slur being 'shelvers,' that they're kept on the shelf. Cammy gives herself the most wasted smile she can as she comes in with her Loum self tethered in the light plane and shows it off. The Elfoid doesn't have any time for this, but the Curate in it needs to pay some semblance of attention.

Cammy never about shit, the weed repeats. That called itself Orche, a young planet-consciousness from somewhere past the Interwave. Empty thoughts to dead hands there. Empty seeds to the fields that stretch askant and parched in her eyes.

They are golden light beams that pierce from the rivulets of the blade shadow crook. Like teardrops stripped of the glint of the sun which has stolen itself away to thread





a razor wire to the shoulders of her Bridge and Witch-Leashed, Phassa. The Curate namedrops and Cammy commits if to memory, unsure why.

The Curate knows most about Orche because she's the biggest, brightest star. Wants to know what of Orche there is to sell to the archaean-boned Velih Skein re-feathered its way across a desert entropic, a death field. So empty synaptical there might be something hiding out in the expansion. Cammy's still flipping a half-dipped waster smile. She's out of there in terms of mental-spatial. Her mind's still in the streets where the paint moves and the weeds in bright burning flame and fragrance.

So the Elfoid is about to tell her she's not about shit when she says the 2.0 Loum skein feathered is empty synapse anyway. A reconstruction. Glass that could be shattered by a potent enough psychic nuke bomb. What it needs is defense. A barrier to coat the bones. High-grade but soft enough to twist, lacquer, entwine the marrowing thread.

Curate says all chill but he needs some hype value. His own personal nexus marked and tagged so more seekers can find; could be a good idea. One thing default Elfoids love is good ideas, she thinks.



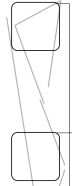


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She takes some stock, awareness of her scene. The Curate's place is here swallowed behind the 2.0 frame infra-visioned so she can see the psycho-cultural loadouts. The place itself could be tapestried, templed up, a shrine to flora, overlaced by glow paint ribbons of thorns and roses. Sapped in are designs of crawling vine and bright ivy. The ugly psycho-cultural womb-function is painted in on-trend motif as a teething chalice.

She shudders. The Curate's say is it's culture shock. He does it for the point or the promise of. Back within the visible sculpture there are crooks of water stain and the walls are like white marble faded with absence of light or polish. She says she doesn't understand Orche or what she's about, just that she has her ear. The Curate has her pre-flattered.

He's saying he can get the B. Moths war-toned now. Hologramatic paint shit that can flare into light or fade into darkness at the touch of an emotion, closed fist of need. Stuff that plasters into the Loum to pop them in and out of this reality at a bullet pop, keep the thought charged for a spray. In many ways like instancing in and out of their own deaths.

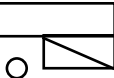




So she's out there streetwise and Kai's passed her a hybrid cig. Enough to trick but not addict, as the promo goes. She could have used it and does. It's not Kai out there telling her she ain't about shit. It's those ghost voices drifting in while his eyes are dark, probing, serious. All the alley graf is tributes to dead soldiers and kings. Kai's predecessors in symbology or lines of synthetic design mixed into each other. Kai's eyes are pensive and swimming in darkness. Searching her.

So it's him and her but she's too scared to talk. She adjusts her hood which she now wears to block out the voices. As in this time and maybe always, going forward. It doesn't block but muffles. It mutes, fades out, gets them fainter out there like, hell, she thinks, the dead loose protocols that they are.





II SCHIZOPHRENE

Walking back Cammy's mind is blank. Slated out and she wants it all kept out. Kai's been delegated to body her guard while bullet burst sounds are all she can hear in the velvet black from distant wars. She can tell these invade Kai's mind too, but as a LT., he's got orders on his feelings there.

When the GSS made their entrance it could have been on jetpacks or some shit she thinks but from the feeds their dope right now is gene-spliced reflexes and Hanzo steel. One almost gets her. Kai pulls her away and he's gone chrome steel finish, paced caliber, tensed out from one of any six pockets. One of the GSS is screaming murder as blood pockmarks the pavement. The other managed to dice the bullet, she guesses. He's on backswing and Cammy for all her schizophtrene has no clue what to do in a fight like this. This is the bullet chase that happens while she's busy hacking. Busy doing whatever she does, which she knows is how it looks. Kai weaves to avoid losing his head but by the stare he spins 360 degrees to flee down the nearest saferoute she can tell he might not be feeling this either. She's already booking for it. Praying that's what he wants, what makes sense; her to dip while he fights or follows.





Guided by his stare and the lights, cold blue burn of the juicebox Tri-Sun.

Still she hears a cry of pain that could be bi-raced and even bi-gendered. The B. Moths skewed male for aggro but the GSS rely on technique so no telling there. A GSS could be any pale lady which could explain the neo-misogyny, she thinks, even if anyone who'd be newfound to an ancient lost territorial mapping. Kept alive in obscure bloodlines here in the Clusters. Those bloodlines front as the mega-corp Hiroko, she'd presume. When someone could be anyone you expect what they're most likely not to be. One the spam sessions, she's realized, have disintegrated; unwoven like how she re-wove the Loum, in reverse like the Velih blood wash against her heartbeat.

So the void of that echoes once twice, slaloms her skull. The alley walls are like paper flashing the way light glides with waterfall splitting around her. Split veils the onrushing painted stucco brick. No third echo because she's worried about her own self this time. *Put it all together*, she thinks, *I'm the fix*; that's what Jewel said. *Jewel who died and I brought back with pieces missing*.

I'm the fix, fixing up my host's mistakes in violent design, but after all that, she hears no more bullet bursts. There is





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only the silence of night fallen, a peace accord dispersion, the kind on the wavelength everyone gets when someone's scored a major kill.

She's back at Tachae's and Cat Eyes is FBA. busy. She's almost ready to yank the freak out and tell T she'll pay for any damages or absence of profit incurred. Not to mention flatlining him just to talk. She's buried herself in the shroud; she's looped black hoodie cops. Lit cold blue in fringe by the juice boxed Tri-Sun. Or so those thirsty for moonlight she checks herself have always called them, sipped light from them, sipped light with their eyes.

The moon has never been there for the Clusters, never to offer support either tidal (what tides?) or emotionally. It's the ghosting sun Ochaoliv that slips behind the others veiled in translucence that is the closest they got. It's the juice boxes, nifty white mini monoliths acting as base of op for the fleet cubes. How the fleet cubes still pattern the over-sky like stars, the under-sky like birds, the lanes like glow-bugs unless you look too close. The FBA wiring that she can see is filament tendrils wrapped around into the crook of his back, parallax on entry between his shoulder blades. His back is to her, nape peeking over the back of his plexiglass chair.





It's some modern shit she hadn't seen where before the place was in the dark. Lights are on now because T may or may not want to keep track of his vitals, his physical body. "Are you okay" would be the message there fuelled by both love and the severe overwatch of employ-terms. She's still there headwise and about to yank his shit hoping for the B. Moth Broodlord to stop her.

He does so, yanking her back from the doorway she'd left open. Unsoft. She turns this into a tuck roll just to get some personal space. When she comes up the Broodlord is fixed on her. Cat Eyes breathes slow and steady in BG, like he's asleep, like he's hard at work.

"Fuck is your name," she says. Mutters it low as in, do I care if you hear it or answer. Her fists are clenched. His beanie is half-tilted revealing the flicker of his buzz. "I don't know," he says, laughing it off. "What the fuck do they call me."

"They call you Broodlord," Cammy says, "but I'm not a goddamn moth. Listen, dude. I think your second got plugged out there. You care you lost a life or death, someone's, right? Or is all you care about what you can get?"





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He says, “None of us get much.” He muses. “So I guess we gotta dig. Dig out the equation to zero again. Subtract in negative. By the way, my mother named me Elli.” He rolls it enough for her to notice the asynchronicity.

“Do you, Elli, have,” Cammy says, “any kind of plan at all? We can’t do much if you guys aren’t keeping us safe, or this place. You swore an oath, man. ‘Let all be entombed’ and all that shit.”

She darts her chin tucking side-swivel behind her shoulder. “Because any time they want, it looks like. It looks like any time they goddamn want.”

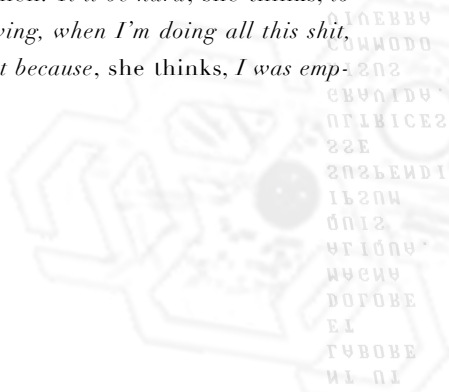
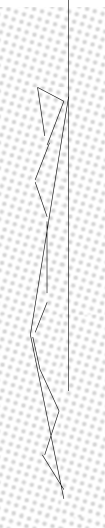
“You’re angry,” Elli says. “You don’t need to be.”

“Tough,” Cammy says, spitting it. Spitting it, rolling her eyes, and rolling out because it’s not her problem. What she needs is the quiet stockroom. What she needs is sleep, but no sleep, she thinks, has been more than fair chosen for her. Elli slipped her the beater-top as she left and she couldn’t help cradling it. How people push it on you. So she could sleep. What does that mean? Is she bored? She knows how she’ll find herself. Cross-legged buttressed into the stockroom carpet. On another reconstructed trip with the Velih bloodwash telling her there never was Velih,





and what's in her blood then? *It'll be hard*, she thinks, *to fucking tell, when I'm weaving, when I'm doing all this shit, not because I was asked, but because, she thinks, I was emptied and lost.*



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STAY AWAY

She notes the exact angle of her own crossed legs even though she thinks the Broodlord or Cat Eyes/Jewel might both be too busy to hustle her around. *In that way*, she thinks, *I keep my love for the Loum rather than wandering around braindead. Before others' dead brains. Brainmatics with the lights off.* She sees them as chambering a pocket void of death which has time to slalom into intercurrent, a static ocean field within the skull clawing at it in tongues of flame. They all live like that here. This is ops central and there are about a dozen give or take one or two skulking about the place. They'd call it chilling. A few more hiding somewhere in the night.

She likes it that way. So chill it's a freeze-out so she can do what she needs. *But T*, she thinks, *will take his or her chances any way they get them.* Logging on this time the only ice is the crack in her display glass. Distorting the way she looks herself in the eye. The crack slivers across it like a lightning bolt, a serpent bolting through dewed grass blue and shining. The screen turns the same blue as the glyphic clouds. She's on her way.

Through the glyphic font; she can see it as swimming that way. Swimming into a bleeding cut and that way going





with the flow. So much to love and more translating glyphs to thread until you yourself are a mote between meanings. Hazy glitter bug cloud. Drift the lines which are entwined after all or so she has resewned them. She doesn't want to be here to feature anyone. Still she knows the weed has grown with her into trails for now rose-scarlet, thorn tendrils probing the crossings of the Loum's 2.0. She follows them to see their resemblance. *If I run into that other thing*, she thinks, *J's thing... Well, that's that shit I'm trying not to piss off or even have it curious.* She thinks about choosing this herself and shivers. *Making it look for me.* Her shoulders were shaking before she even logged on.

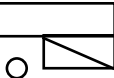
I'm still here. I'm still Cammy. None of this shit was my problem at first.

So when she finds the weed it has named itself Orche.

Orche has made herself at home here drawing the threads, winding and tangling them. Restitch and recross the parameters. Until she has structured herself a throne glistening with a thousand insect eyes and shrouded by spiderveil.

Light bleeds through the veil in petals and tongues. With green abraxas hair sodden with coarse moss bubbles of





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dead motes. Dead motes cloud the rivergreen of her hair; Cammy reads as: “stay away.” It’s true. There’s shit out there she’d rather deal with but a spider-fuelled planet avatar. Like logging right back off the way she logged on, on zombie control, not thinking about it, just finding herself doing it. Tendrils of her green-grass hair waver in the wind, knotted, Cammy sees, by spiderweb. This glistens like teardrops the morning rain which she has not yet had a chance to weave a reconstruct of. Orche’s tears are her own and she makes them work for her.

The first thing Cammy wants to know and the first thing she asks is if Orche’s working for her. [Be straight up,] she says, [because you won’t get another chance later. You will never get another chance. You cannot, it doesn’t matter.] She repeats herself to be sure the message gets through. Ochre’s tiara is spider legs crowned by blanched and sorn fuzz and she herself ducks her chin beneath it, but not for long. “Of course not,” she says, and Cammy’s heart is falling even as she thinks about her training, what she’d sent herself to deal with, sent herself to forget dealing with, this is the life she has now. Holy fuck, she thinks, it will never end this way, never goddamn end.

All that means is make her pay for it later.





so here you are Orche says. i've sensed you the whole time. i've felt you. but when i've tried to talk to you you've stared at me like I was something you couldn't wait to get rid of.

She laughs, a flutter of sound scraping off tongue hidden behind mandible thorns. *don't you think we should get some of this straight between us?*

Cammy's mote cloud shies away despite her grip on it. She mutters, [if you trust me enough for that.] Because, she reminds herself, there's a lot of trust in her, despite how she's stood, even let Jewel down, her best friend, even fragments of him. Like broken glass fragments of him were swallowed and for all she knew by Orche when she came to call. No, that's not right. She knows who got those pieces of Jewel. She heard all about it, straight from him, in the beginning.

[If you're not being cruel,] Cammy says, imbuing her point with tangented notes in breaking waves, splintered, [there's something you could do to help]. We just don't know what you're here for.] She winces as she lets the next part out. [We just don't know why you were even born.]





i was born, Orche says, because they were taking everything i loved from me. they couldn't help themselves and so i became aware just to stop it. legions of brats and their pet gardens running all over me. cold feet into my warm earth. i put a stop to that, okay? now it's my turn to freeze them when they step on me.

[Fantastic.] Cammy says. [Great news but the problem is I didn't know what I was stumbling into and neither did you. If you're so aware, are you aware that outside people are dicing bullets with swords? That's the best case. Worst case those bullets and swords find somewhere to be. Like a ribcage.]

Orche's palms have stayed gripping the armrest of her spidered throne. Now she flips them, facing up, in a gesture of *What do you expect me to do about that*, at the same time saying it, at the same time Cammy's mote cloud translates it.

i'm not really here and you know it. back where i am? you and your boyfriend blasted me.

Cammy thinks about it. [I'm not sure that kid liked being frozen out. I'm not sure he liked anything about what you





were doing. And I'm not sure, either, that he even had resources to care about you that hard. He had a dying what did you call it pet garden? and some kind of glitch pet besides. All sorts of things were going on back there.] Orche shrugs narrow shoulders. Cammy both sees and feels the shrug because her cloud has been drawn close and the shrug sends ripples through the mote aura. Through her composed of what she's thinking of as nano nebulae, the way she has gotten close enough to herself to see the design of each mote. In mass each mote hides unseen but digging deeper into it she can see them now. *I see them in my reconstruction, she thinks, the way I couldn't at first, in the first construct. So what does that say about me, that I can only see myself when it's me plotting it all out?*

what's wrong, dear? Orche says. Grinning at this last word. *are you back inside yourself? does that work out here, in this place?*

She says it almost with too much innocence but how can there be, Cammy thinks, too much innocence. With innocence you want more and more. You want as much as you can get.

No matter how Orche puts it she's right. *I'm looping*, Cammy thinks, *in my cloud, tumbling around. Bouncing off with-*



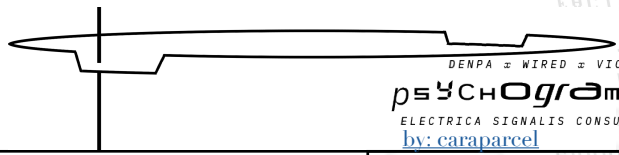


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in-held concepts. Back and forth. I did this shit myself so it shouldn't even be that hard. She strains. Her cloud trembles even drawn, close enough to envelope fragrance. The smell, she thinks, like tallow, like burning candle wax. Smells like the husk of dead things, or dead leaves, rotting. Dead leaves fragrant to the gasp of air that must exist, somewhere, beyond the interwoven chains. *When I'm surrounded by aura, she thinks, and there is air beyond, or could be.*

She logs off then, praying for the war to be somewhere else. Cammy not about shit, on the outside. Still the same on the inside with the *pistola* pointed square at her head.



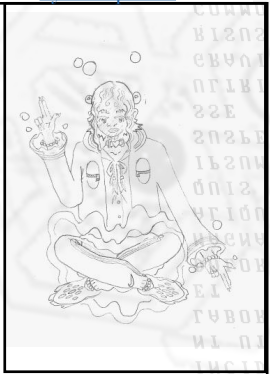


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 ELECTRICA SIGNALIS CONSUMMATUM
 by: caraparcel

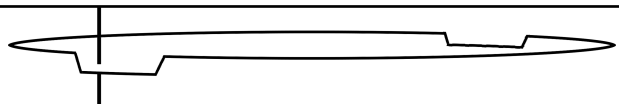
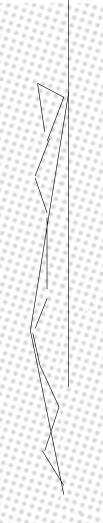
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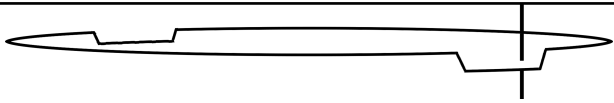
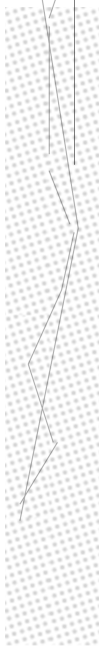
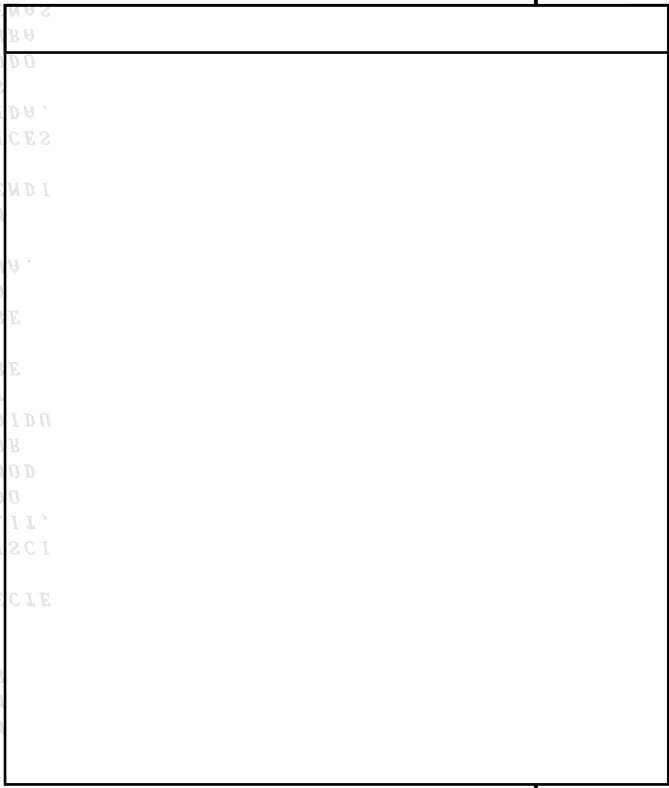
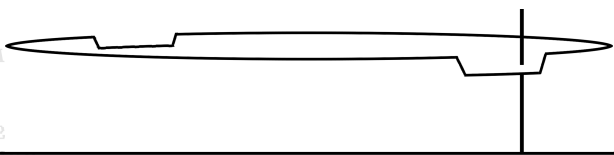
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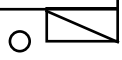
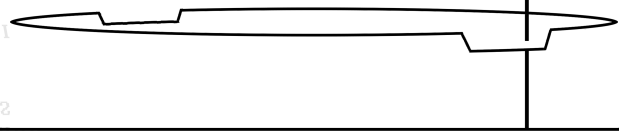
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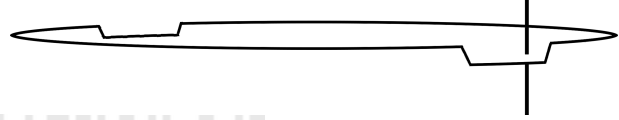


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Last Time

Through a routine forum search, foxtel uncovers a number transmission that begins to sprawl out its connections, all the while a user known as exxxon serpico challenges them to a duel in the palo shabba server.



IT'S A GOOD THING
the DARK LORD
IS SHUT IN!
by: baroquespiral

character profile IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT IN!

SILMENON SANGRIOT

Likes: roses, woodblock prints, textiles, shisha, impermanence, cherry blossoms, flirting via poetry, secrets

Dislikes: dogma, loveless marriage, extreme climates, heavy meals

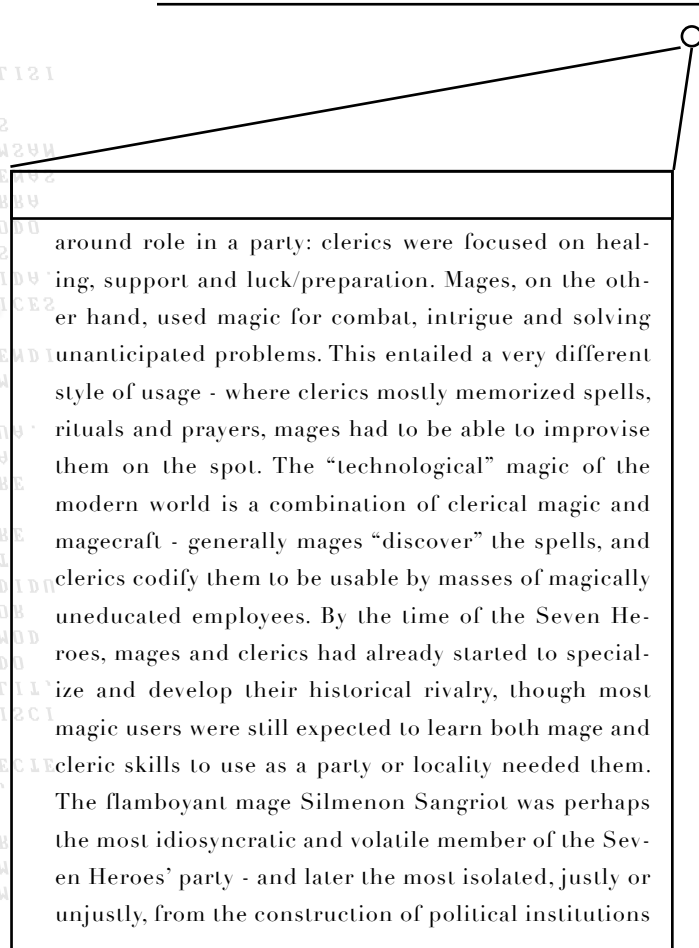
blood type: O -

seen with: the Seven Heroes

Theme song: Schwardix Marvally - Flowers of Dearly




Before the centralization of the Ecclesia, mages and clerics were not always strictly differentiated outside of the context of an adventuring party. Both used magic, and both understood their magic in an at least partly theological sense. Though clerics tended to be more theologically orthodox and mages more esoteric, the difference essentially revolved



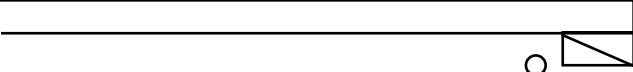
around role in a party: clerics were focused on healing, support and luck/preparation. Mages, on the other hand, used magic for combat, intrigue and solving unanticipated problems. This entailed a very different style of usage - where clerics mostly memorized spells, rituals and prayers, mages had to be able to improvise them on the spot. The “technological” magic of the modern world is a combination of clerical magic and magecraft - generally mages “discover” the spells, and clerics codify them to be usable by masses of magically uneducated employees. By the time of the Seven Heroes, mages and clerics had already started to specialize and develop their historical rivalry, though most magic users were still expected to learn both mage and cleric skills to use as a party or locality needed them. The flamboyant mage Silmenon Sangriot was perhaps the most idiosyncratic and volatile member of the Seven Heroes’ party - and later the most isolated, justly or unjustly, from the construction of political institutions



preserver record



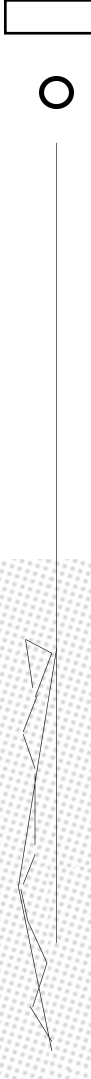
after the defeat of the Dark Lord. He identified as male but often wore women's clothing and elaborate makeup and hairstyles, habits he acquired before becoming an adventurer as the travelling magician of a theatre troupe. Silmenon's troupe was, infamously, devoured by its own audience in a village overrun by shapeshifters, and he identified immediately with Yahsef Kamann's mission of vengeance. However, his vengefulness was tempered by curiosity; more than any of the other heroes, he wanted to understand what the Dark was and why it periodically rose against civilization. Most of the best early primary sources on the Dark Realms and Dark Magic come from his writings. However, despite conspiracy theories and heresies to the contrary, he never came close to the knowledge he most desired - what exactly the Dark Lord was. Some historians have suspected him of wanting to become the Dark Lord himself; others theorize that the Cleric Maulan, fearing this possibility, hid or destroyed information that would have allowed him to solve the enigma once and for all. Yet Silmenon, like the Ranger Elthazan, was broad-



ly uninterested in power or the shape of the future world order - though he eagerly accepted his title as king ceremonially while deferring most political responsibility to an intricate web of local nobility and democratic councils.

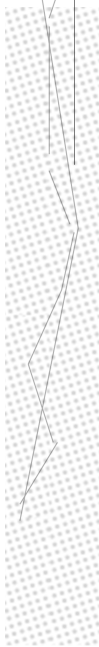
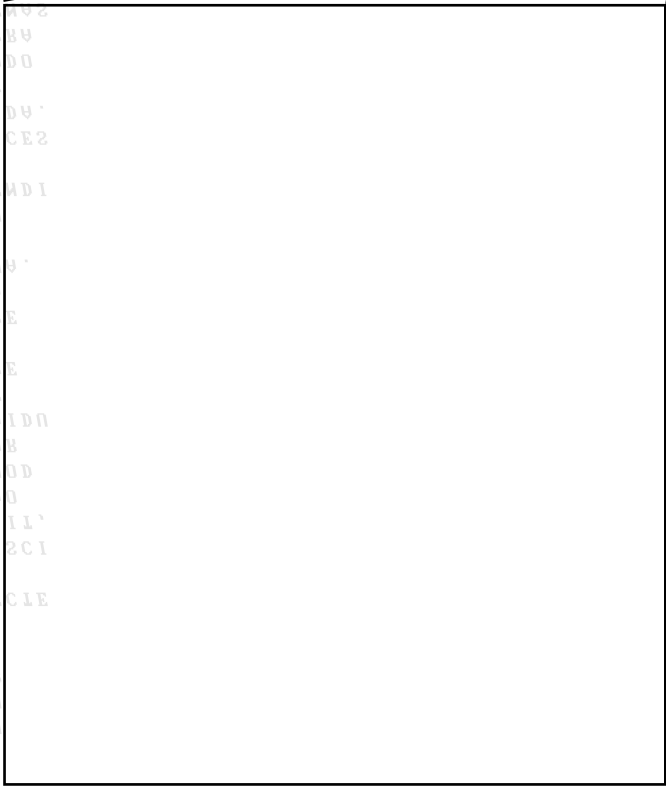
His most controversial act was his split with Maullan over the unification of the Ecclesia, even refusing to grant her Ecclesiastic authority in his kingdom. This led to his being cut out of the founding of the postwar magecraft institutions, and it was only hundreds of years later with the completion of the Sevenfold Alliance at the end of the Warring Era that enough of his magical innovations were accepted into orthodoxy to make the technological revolutions of the postwar world possible. The Church of Silmenon was granted some autonomy under the Ecclesia in exchange for allowing the Mages' Colleges to study his grimoires, and it is unclear which of its idiosyncrasies actually derive from his personal beliefs and which from the menagerie of heretics that sought refuge in his kingdom, though the infamous Carnal Communion





was common in circuses and Silmenon likely practiced it himself. The development of modern scientific magic can be traced to the reconstruction of Silmenon magecraft under the pragmatism of Kamann's military administration and the Ecclesia's formalizing rigor. Having learned in the unprofessional environment of the theatre, he was a prolific inventor of spells and considered one of the greatest improvisational magic users of all time; magic theorists have lamented that it may not even be possible to improvise at his level any more with so much of magic systematized and charted. Silmenon never wrote down his own theology, which may have been as improvised as his magic.

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JIADDIEU MIWA

Likes: dates, festivals, alcohol, rock climbing, campfire singing, fresh water, victory, lemurs, girl sweat

Dislikes: ranged weapons, organizational politics, hard floors, vows of chastity, torchlight, overthinking



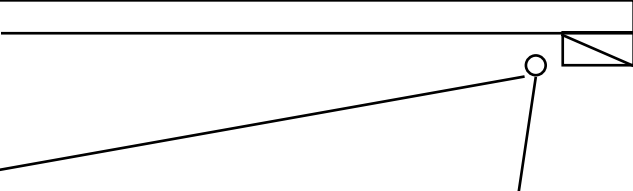
Seen with: Seven Heroes, Netrix Klauxion

Blood type: A

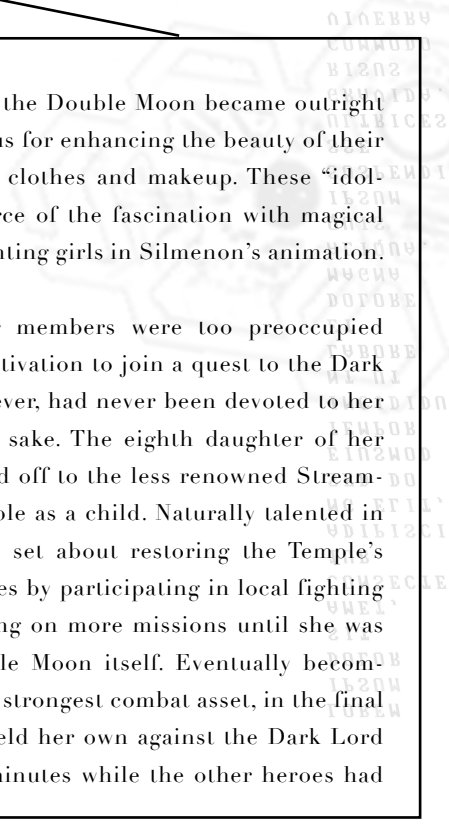

Theme song: Leftmuenang - ศัพสองทอน (Instrumental)



While Mages and Clerics are a doctrinal division of the mainstream practice of magic that did not exist in its current form before the Seven Heroes, the two other magic-using classes, Monks and Druids, are much rarer and derived from extremely specialized, regional religious traditions. Several generations before their most celebrated acolyte (to the

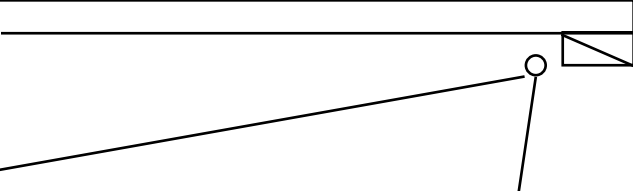


point of her name becoming synonymous with the entire school) brought their practices to the world, the Temple of the Double Moon was founded as an all-female order dedicated to embodying the image of the dancing Goddess by cultivating their bodies with internal magic and disciplined, elegant movements borrowed from the barehanded fighting arts. While the existence of Rhi had long been understood roughly as part of the equation of magic (and some forms of physical combat), the Temple Mothers and Hermits innovated the foundations of the modern concept of Rhi fields, and demonstrated their understanding by enhancing their physical abilities, as well as healing and longevity, to sometimes superhuman levels. The Double Moon was itself only one of a profusion of monastic orders that had flourished for complex cultural reasons in the Shieuddua Estuary, most of which were purely religious in nature, practicing vows of poverty among other asceticisms, but some of which especially




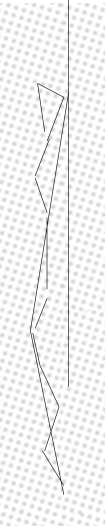
after the ascension of the Double Moon became outright luxurious and infamous for enhancing the beauty of their bodies in action with clothes and makeup. These “idol-monks” were the source of the fascination with magical girls and beautiful fighting girls in Silmenon’s animation.

Most sects and their members were too preoccupied with their internal cultivation to join a quest to the Dark Realm. Jiaeddiu, however, had never been devoted to her studies for their own sake. The eighth daughter of her family, she was handed off to the less renowned Streaming Turtle’s Back Temple as a child. Naturally talented in the physical arts, she set about restoring the Temple’s reputation and finances by participating in local fighting tournaments and taking on more missions until she was “traded” to the Double Moon itself. Eventually becoming the Seven Heroes’ strongest combat asset, in the final battle she famously held her own against the Dark Lord alone for ten whole minutes while the other heroes had

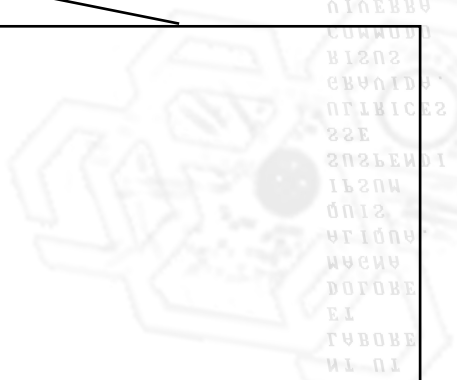


been incapacitated. Despite her skill she often struggled with the deeper internal practices, and would come to understand many of the Temple's spiritual texts in her own way over the course of her adventures - and her romantic relationship with the Rogue Naetrix Klauxion. Less interested in religious reform (or esoteric research) than Maullan and Silmenon, she let most of the monasteries carry on their own traditions and only wrote a few introductory texts of her own at Maullan's behest. Due to her cultivation, she outlived the love of her life by 150 years, and retreating from the worldly requirements of the Orders became a mountain hermit for almost a century, drinking heavily and accumulating a massive harem of women who took on most of the actual duties of government, and after her death formed their own monastery, Eroding Peak. This also made her the only one of the Seven Heroes to live to see the Dark Lord's next reincarnation, though they never fought directly again.

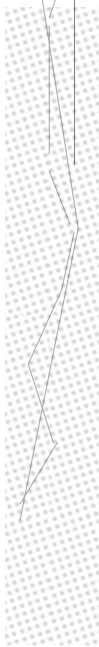
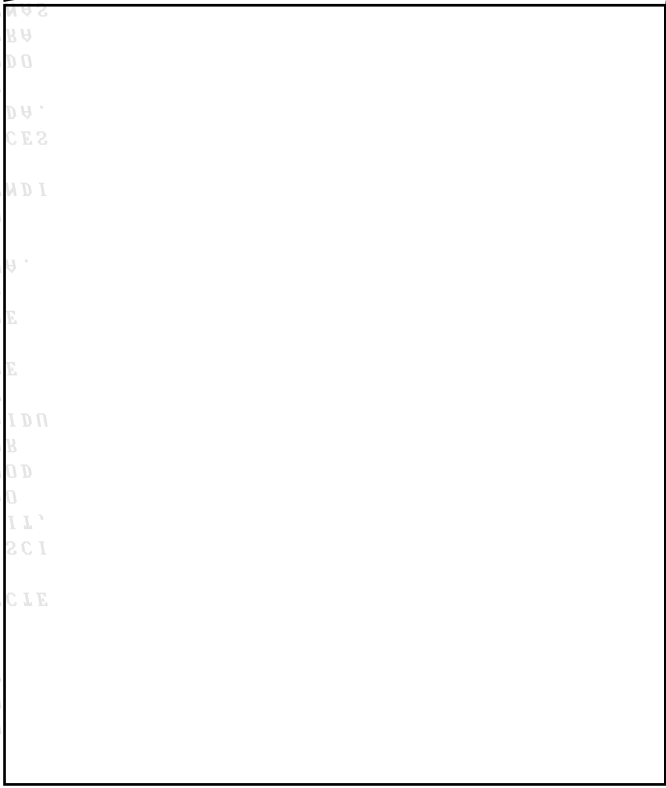




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It's a good thing
the DARK LORD
is a shut-in!


Synopsis



Iuskonneg remains dormant by a curse and a conspiracy, social peril, online conflicts and miniscule destructions litter the interior of the small Pandora's box of his life; a hidden cornerstone on which stands an unstable world.



Last Time

Luskonneg finally attempts to explain himself to Marzanna as four interviews intertwine in space and time - a younger Luskonneg's gamble on therapy, and the Inquisition's dissections of the forbidden love between Commissioner and [Taboo Preserver]





CW: amnesia, religion, religious education, meditation (negative results), disordered eating, suicidal ideation, de-realization/depersonalization, masturbation, pornography, conspiracy

It wasn't uncharacteristic, although it was unusual, for a Special Commissioner to be away from Elthazan at a place like Voidhanger Abbey, being served nootropic reed tea by novices walking with their eyes closed while waiting on a hard folded mat for the performance of a mock marriage ceremony.

What was unusual, and sharply alarming, was that she couldn't remember why.

She knew the concrete details of her mission, what she was here to pry around for: she didn't know its import, though with this many blanks in her memory she must have known at *one* point. For this information to be with-

FAILURE 08: HEAVY AIR

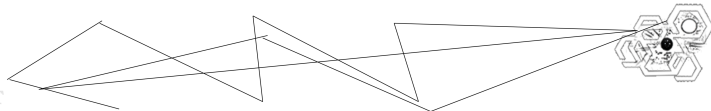
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THE
DARK
MATTER





held from someone of her rank... that wasn't just scary classified, it was nonsensical classified, there wasn't enough higher for it to go. But then the Inquisitorial officer who had dispatched her from the door of the train - she remembered essentially nothing of her ride - with a sneer hedging somewhere between skepticism and contempt ranked lower than her in interagency. Had there been some kind of coup? Should she even be cooperating? (On the other hand, they had shown her her own handwriting consenting to both the wipe and the mission.) Would she be putting some innocent in danger by reporting every piece of information, official or unofficial, on or off record, she could find about a Lacriz Aeeth who had studied here, and also any developments, however secret, in rhi-Preserved magic?

Everyone who had taken the Applied Mysteries stream in military college had done decision exercises on cogitohazards, but nobody had ever heard of one.

The Master Superior who had agreed to answer her questions was now gracefully sliding their arms into the red-gold scaled sleeves of the Serpent vestment. Both partners, in this rare Silmenonian variant of the ceremony, practiced only here and in a few remote mountain villages





(though it had recently been performed on national television for the engagement between two popular voice actors and there had been a round of controlled debates about its theological validity), would wear it. The bridal vestments awaited at the centre of the labyrinth of blue-white curtains, the outermost hung in the form of a two-lobed Silmenonian heraldic heart. It just looked like another vaulted arch, like the rows on either side of her, falling back into niches for statuary or iterating into ribbed corridors, from where she was sitting facing its point, but an overhead view was projected onto two limply hanging screens on either side of the altar, showing how the pristine colour of the exterior deepened in three layers to amaranthine and black. The movements of the lovers in the labyrinth, the brochure she had been given as if she were an ordinary visitor explained, could be studied as omens of future issues or dynamics in their relationship by a trained cleric.

Was there any such relationship to speak of between the Master Superior and the gulping novice being helped into the same robes, like in the novels the [] had read? Probably not - if anything they were probably each concealing somewhere on them an Oracle Card representing two entities in relationship, say the Abbey and the State.

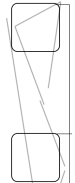




How did she know what kind of novels her target read - (in what detail did she know what novels her target read) - and what had she just almost called them?

She straightened her back and tried to breathe this kind of thinking out of her mind. She didn't know how to read the patterns the participants would trace blindly through the hangings that, bounded in that abstract ivy-leaf shape that in Silmenon had come to represent the heart rhi node (and in the rest of the world had become a ubiquitous sub-culture fashion icon through the influence of Silmenon anime), looked more like the folds of a brain. (The brochure said the petals of a rose, but everything in Silmenon was a rose.) For her, the ritual was meant to be a sort of meditation.

Even the turns of the hangings themselves had been determined by an elaborate oracular meditation, the brochure explained, the two Perfect Initiates walking in third-steps and turning at each twist of a prayer-wheel tuned to their own heart-rhi. Why did she keep thinking about that image with some sort of terror, picturing the wheel going out of control, creating a trap that could have no exit, a telltale heart...?



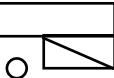


The organ ascended its arpeggios, self-similar with the percussive motifs of the metallophones, as Master and initiate circled the cloth toward their respective entrances, the younger man parting the curtains where the point of the heart faced the front of the altar to the sound of the gong, the older disappearing around the back.

Underneath it all, she could hear the rolling of the Grey Bay, deliberately echoed and amplified through the Abbey's vaulting to a constant hush enforcing the silence of the acolytes and a subliminal metronome to synchronize their breathing.

The lights in the nave were dimmed to near extinction, so the initiates' candles could be seen guiding layered clouds of colour through the labyrinth. Her eyes swam in them, following the golden fish of the acolyte's torch, running her hands up and down her arms - it wasn't a draft (although there were plenty), it wasn't a fever, it wasn't even the "chills" evoked in a rave review of a poetry special, it was the kind of frosty hollow one feels waiting for news of a family death on the job. (The labyrinth, with its darkness and candles, was inside her diaphragm; she wanted to wrap herself, for warmth, in the curtains.) If the Master





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Superior could see her rhi right now, what would he see?
No sooner did it go quiet.

Something about the connection between these diaphanous hangings and the secrets of the heart seemed crystallinely intuitive, familiar as if she had come up with it independently as a child. Right, it wasn't just intuitive but specifically, achingly nostalgic, even calling up other sensations it took the shock of scrutiny to separate from the present, an animal scent, an ache in her belly, an excitement and shame - she tried to recall old schoolgirl encounters she hadn't thought of for years to see if there was any connection, maybe her trysts with Ayrgeon in the secret attics of Pontquarno castle, but no, those tapestries had a whole different weight and a hayfever dust...

The lights faded to dim stains behind their layers and the feeling only grew stronger.

She wanted to get up. Go inside. Bury her face in the soft coloured light. She could already do that, by looking. There was something more important on the other side.

Well, yes. That was the idea. There was the "innermost chamber of the heart", the place the two lovers or initiates had to reach by passing through the shared yet separate

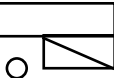




labyrinth of themselves, in order to be united in marriage -or in this case, nothing more real or personal than two friends singing the chorus of a folk song together, it seemed strange to profane the ritual like this but “personal” did not exist here, the initiates of Voidhanger Abbey aspired to this level of unity and Order-Chaos, “spontaneous order”, that most people would only reach in the most important relationships of their lives as a matter of course, so they could perform this ritual as a meditation among other meditations which felt profane still, but since when did she have opinions on this backwater of theology? Ritual, she herself had argued, was mere imitation of the form of magic, a virtual halfway between the asymptotically unified poles of magic and piety... of course now she was going to sound culturally insensitive in her own head and throw off her integration with the space she had been assigned to investigate.

She hadn't had intrusive thoughts like this since first form of military academy. That and the amnesia together were more likely related than not, and she had been trained not to think about it. She closed her eyes. She was in the best place in the world to meditate.





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In the aftermath of amnesia, it was always easy. She just went into the grey blotch.

And yet the blue, white, red, black flame of the curtains flickered in the middle. Two shadows inside who couldn't see each other.

Luskonneg couldn't explain how little he thought, or felt about the call with the journalist over the following days, and didn't want to think about it enough to. He had worried about some kind of public shaming but if the story went to print with what he had told her, he wouldn't be able to distinguish it even reading it himself from any other vague thinkpiece about wasted youth or greentext about any other loser he read on 42chan - maybe a weird detail or two like the Zeparmide, but there wasn't anything he identified with in them. From the sound of it, he hadn't even given her enough for that, so she wanted to keep going, drag it out into some absurd documentary project of trying to improve his life. That should have been exciting, or terrifying, or humiliating, or something, right? That was the kind of thing that would happen in a manga, or a visual novel, or an anime like *The Clover Association* - which he'd dropped on the second episode since the convenient and uncute childhood friend the shut-in was obviously getting





set up gave him a really boring monologue that sounded like it was ripped straight out of a government brochure. This lady wasn't that bad, he had to tell himself, or he would just drop her. At the end of their call she had given him a set of meditation exercises.

He hadn't done any of them. It had been six days. He was going to pretend he had, and use them as a jumping off point to complain about meditation. (Right, this was basically another DM friendship where he could complain in slightly longer form about things, fish some gloopy string of coherence out of his sludge of grievances without the pressure of making it funny or relatable or fitting into board culture. That was why he felt so nothing about it. How many times had he had this insight already - five?) The idea of sitting and observing his thoughts, for him, was like standing there and letting a bully just hit you over and over. (Something that had somehow never happened to him, as if he was below even their notice.) The idea that stand there long enough and they'd just give up for some reason was the same kind of adult wishful thinking. There was no reason his thoughts couldn't keep going at it forever.





Not that there was any question of going at it forever. There were meals every day, and school, and eventually his mom would do something...

Well, none of that would happen now.

Now he could prove it, if he wanted to.

A chill opened down the middle of his gut like a crack in a glacier.

Marzanna didn't want him to prove anything. In fact, she seemed pretty willing to believe anything he had to say (another thing that made her feel more like a forum acquaintance than a representative of the real world). The Miwa sutra that had appeared in his messages an hour later as an attachment - as simple and instructional as the worksheets he was used to, but written in blank verse - prescribed fifteen minutes a day. It was one of Yn Dahh't's internal special techniques, a special circulation designed to motivate reticent adolescents. The real deal.

Like that time.

But that time must have been a fluke, right?





Because if “real” meditation techniques, proven over and over by modern science and legitimized by the Ecclesia as compatible with the highest forms of Order, were harmful to him categorically - not just some technique in particular binding to the wrong receptor, not just the off-the-shelf stuff that only sorta worked not working, but something about the way it was *supposed* to work being Wrong, or impossible - then he really was doomed. The problem was beyond illness, beyond circumstance, it was him - anything he could possibly define himself as was the knot that had to be untied for Chaos to coil its way back to the egg of Order.

That *was*, after all, what he had concluded that time.

Had that conclusion, living with it, been any worse than his life now? Or the infinity of less rigorous, less compelling, less smooth, less permanent proofs that he should die? In a way the worst thing about that time was that after he had formed this perfect crystal at the centre of his mind, his perfect Order at last - and hadn't even attempted, he could let it sit as long as he wanted to, unlike so many of his thoughts now it made no time-demands, it was infinitely patient - he'd been forced to break it. Even that answer had been wrong somehow. Maybe he was still





picking up its pieces, these jagged new thoughts - which were no different from his jagged old thoughts, the ones he couldn't remember a time before. There was no way to say if now there were more or less - but sometimes he'd sweep aside a piece of mental trash and feel a pang of guilt like it might have once been part of that precious thing and he'd never look close enough to know.

When he came back from the suspension ("you know that isn't *all* you said" - but what else had he said? - he screamed at Mark'eg after fifteen minutes of failing to write it down on a notepad, and Mark'eg accepted his version of events) and a couple of equally embarrassing incidents, the Public Morals Committee put him on a Talking Fast specific to girls. He humiliated himself to a boy just as quickly. Theoretically boys, as the Chaotic gender, were supposed to be less morally vulnerable to unexpected attention. But this was a progressive school.

They found his journal of other people's conversations. He asked Mark'eg to send a note explaining that it had been at his professional recommendation. Mark'eg explained that this would be breaching confidentiality.

He had almost been relieved. He could return to the path of least resistance which was playing his handheld at every





break. Although he had just seen a meme on 42chan about how playing your handheld in public was cringe. He was already cringe, he was suspended and on a Talking Fast, but how could he ever come back from it if he played his handheld in front of people. Which he had already done, dozens of times, before he saw the meme.

His mom wanted him to do his work on his breaks, because he was spending more and more time at home watching anime, on the internet, and she was powerless to stop him without triggering one of his episodes (or hers - *don't try to shift blame*). But now everyone would be suspicious of him if they saw him with his notepad open. The Public Morals Committee had snatched it out of his hands twice when he was trying to doodle fanart (not even lewd).

Dr. Mark'eg suggested meditation.

There was a meditation room, but it was rarely used for a reason. Due to some ill-advised reshuffling the year before Luskonneg enrolled it now sat directly under the woodshop room. The focus plants were poorly watered and attracted flies. And yet every time he tried to do something else in it, someone seemed to walk in or out.





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One day after he had been up till 4:00 watching an anime where the main character ate lunch on the roof - there were a number of people he knew from eavesdropping did this but they weren't the kinds of people who did it in anime at all - it occurred to him to wonder whether the gym building had its own roof entrance. From outside he could see a fence around it. The space under the gym bleachers, which he had been using occasionally to play his handheld, had by now been claimed by happy couples. But there was a door behind it to the storage room, and at the back of the storage room... His feet clanged dully on the thin metal steps on which he had to pause until he could prove in his head it would be nearly impossible to slip through the gaps. The peeled door at the top was unlocked, and he found himself alone facing the blue sky.

Still expecting someone to walk up on him, he sat and stared. The breathing - the Uninvented Circulation, two seconds in, two seconds held, two seconds out - almost came by itself.

That is, as soon as he looked out into that sky, he needed his breath just to hold it all in him. Like holding his breath and breathing between strokes in the school swimming pool. Except he could still barely manage that, the tingling



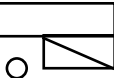


rush of the water would cram its way into every sense no matter how tight he held his nostrils and then he couldn't keep his nostrils separated from them, gasping through every rush of stinging shards because that was what he was made for, no longer making the distinction between them and his thoughts either. But this was what he imagined it felt like when he watched the girls in their school swimsuits disappear long enough that they couldn't tell he was watching them. This slight thickening of the air, in the way the water itself was only a slight thickening of air, in the way the chlorine was only a slight thickening of the water. This blue thickened as if by chlorine. Why did it look like that. Just this morning it had looked as worn as the paint on the pool's edge. Was it just because he had come out from under three hours of fluorescent lights and low ceilings. Or was there some haze near the ground that was thinner here.

It took about five minutes to get the hint that he wasn't going to figure out what exactly he was reacting to and then his normal thoughts came back.

Or rather, his normal thoughts had something to respond to. These were...





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They weren't even bothering to form words at first. They were just like grey plastic knives of pain, replacing whatever ineffable qualities the sky he had been staring into had, carving them away.

Yes, the colour was different. But if he had to pick it out on a colour wheel, he could do so. If he had the dropper tool from Photoshop, he could pick out one pixel, and make a pixel of the same colour, and use it to colour a field. And even though the colour of the sky was not one field, it changed pixel by pixel.

And "depth"? It was painted across his retinas.

He couldn't feel any "depth".

Soon his belly started funnelling attention away from the rest of his body and he realized he hadn't eaten. The idea had been, after all, to have lunch up here (were there any characters who meditated instead? he would look it up later). He had been so caught in the dilemma of where to sit and what to do he had forgotten about it entirely. Except his stomach felt heavy and bloated already - he had eaten the pack of five cookies he'd brought in his lunch bag, a compulsion whenever the dread of his breake-time decision surfaced from a break in class focus. (Not that he was stay-



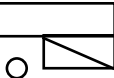


ing focused - the effort to stay focused was a focus in itself, the steady flow of information producing an endless chain of new distractions.) A hard sludge seemed to push back against any response, either satisfying bounce or fold or pain, when he punched himself in the navel. He could feel it - taste it - the taste of no-taste, the taste of not-yet-shit - all the way up his esophagus.

He looked back with desperation at the sky. That had been a healthy viscosity, like blood, right? Chlorine was a purifier - except for humans, who for some reason weren't supposed to drink it - if they weren't supposed to drink the chlorinated water, or the unchlorinated water, why put chlorine in the water? or was it just to produce that nice smooth feel and nice sky blue? was the blue sky toxic too and that was why he was starting to feel sticky and toxic with his own focus? - if he had found this stairway maybe he could find the chlorine tanks for the pool and drink straight from them to clean out his clogged tract - ha ha, now that would be a way to go that would almost be funny enough to justify the effort.

Last night around 9:00, instead of doing his Theology homework (how he kept track of these things), he had been reading a thread where the majority of anons were





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goaded someone with an eating disorder until it got shut down by the mods/censors. They had been talking about sticking your finger down your throat until you vomited.

Luskonneg had no idea if he could do this. Most of the time he attempted any type of self-harm described on the internet, he found himself flinching at the last instant. And nausea in particular seemed like a bottomless pit, one where the border from ordinary to altered existence was as mysterious as sleep, and Goddess help him if he thought about that too much. Nor did he want to develop a compulsion for girls.

He decided to start breathing again. Maybe the cleansing chemical from the sky would return.

Instead, just time. Abstract time - not even the satisfaction of a count, but numbers he had to start over. Repetitions, meaningless even on the level of number. And with every meaningless quantity of breath, the meaningless quantity of breathless thickness in his diaphragm built up.

Time as Currents lapping against him. Empty Currents, emptily bad Currents - what could these possibly be, theologically? Would he understand if he had paid any attention to his homework in the last three months? (He had two





overdue assignments unstarted and was literally drawing pages of scribbles to keep his mom from looking closer - the words in the textbook didn't sound like the things they were supposed to mean.) Tongues of Chaos lapping at him in the position of Order - but did that mean he was already inhabiting that centre? Did that mean the Serpent he was normally was something that ugly, a tongue he wanted to tear straight out of the throat of existence? Sandpaper tongues like cats, orifice probing tentacles. Neither Order nor a desire for it. Realer than they had, according to his 64-average grasp of orthodoxy, any right to be.

What was the difference between this and the meaninglessness of the sky he had failed to pin down before? Whatever it was it was utterly beyond his control in a positive sense, and utterly vulnerable to his control in a negative sense. He could destroy it, and he could not create it.

Maybe he had already created and destroyed it for the last time.

He tried to go back to breathing, but now he noticed the block with every drag which felt heavy and effortful, like hoisting stones from a well, and every draw would come with some new image of agony. So obviously devoid of context, though, they almost seemed gnarly and cool. He





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felt like one of those Miwa scrolls that showed monks be-
set by imps and cherubs.

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Intellectually, he recognized this as the moment Mark'eg
had described in terms of "noticing your thoughts and let-
ting them pass".

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He looked back down at his lunch. All this noticing was
like watching a TV that was always changing channels. And
yet they were also the same channel.

EL
T0BOVE
W101
He looked back down at his lunch. All this noticing was
making him hungrier, but not more willing to eat.

IMCID100
IEMBOV
E102W0D
2EV DO
WE EG11
Half-intentionally, registering the pain and the fear as not
much more than further images, he stuck a finger down
his throat.

VD1B12C1
10W
COM2EC1E
WWE1'
211
D0T0V
125W
G0BEM
On second thought, it would be really hard to explain the
things that happened back then. It would sound made up.
He'd already learned that when he'd tried to ask about
some of it on /mo/ while it was happening. He had actually
gotten banned for LARPing, albeit by a janitor who was
ousted a few years later for pushing his school's agenda
too hard, or at least that was what he had come to suspect
and tell himself.





This journalist was Miwa-trained, though. He had watched her move and react in ways he had only seen in 3D in national televised demonstrations. Maybe she would finally be able to explain what he had done wrong. (Or maybe she would just recognize it as strange, unexplained, fucked up, like the Zeparmine thing... but what would that do? Did she want him to mount some kind of legal case against the universe? Was she going to uncover some conspiracy against every shut-in, like some of the heretical-adjacent incels claimed, proving once and for all that were it not for the schemes of certain hidden subversives the Order of the Sevenfold Alliance and the modern world truly was compatible with every random combination of genetic and psychological presets born into it?)

He ran through conversations in his head, most of them ending in humiliation and abandonment - and there it was, *abandonment*, even though he hadn't been thinking about her at all, even to jack off to some scenario where she decided what he needed was some obscure sexual Rhi circulation, or just to get laid. He expected nothing, was getting nothing, but if he said the wrong thing he would lose everything all over again. Maybe he should just get it over with and cut it off himself. But then the power to start it all again would be in his hands like a naked wire.





Well, no point keeping his mind off it then. He stretched his middle fingers around the already thickening base of his cock.

In the bask of post-nut clarity he found himself adopting the Uninvented Circulation half-intentionally. Half-intention, that was the right way to get himself to do things like this, the only way. But he was about to attempt the very process that had once made it impossible. He decided if - or when - it started to bring back memories or symptoms he would write them down in a note on his computer. Something to show.

But rolling around awake like this (in his own dripping filth, in the algal sunlight, which made him think of *Magical Helix Protozoonotikon* and its best girl Slina, feel like Slina, if only Smilia was there with a latex glove to clean him up like she did Astig after she experimented on him, do you have gloves like that Marzanna Etnexheyr, do you use them in your experiments, if I meditate hard enough will you conduct them on me) was something he did anyway. It wasn't that different from meditation the way people described it - if he told her about it would it count? He could notice his thoughts coming and going like water striders on a pond (when had he last, if ever seen those?)





was he just making up how they moved? no that one saku-ga scene from *Magical Helix* - hello again, glint of Slina's cameltoe, sorry Smilia yank me until I crack) without judging them, notice the texture and light of his surroundings, float on his pillow and mattress until these didn't matter as *circumstances in a world*. He could return to this and it would make everything alright and worth it, but that wasn't why you wanted me to meditate was it? (He wasn't sure the 'you' now was Marzanna.)

He remembered the terror of absolute suspension between those poles - *everything is possible and nothing matters, everything matters and nothing is possible*. He had run back to the black solidity of the latter. Was he really about to open the white hole again?

Maybe he would associate it with her fantasy, as a preward. But he wouldn't tell her that.

"Lacriz Aeeth..." A twinge of worry and even tenderness crossed the Master Superior's face. "Has something happened to them? I had hoped they were doing well. They seemed to be, by the end of their stay, but they left without saying much."





Nothing to worry about, they've only become the most wanted Dark criminal in the world, disrupting vital infrastructural magic using a structure of spell no one has ever seen before, that Preserves itself with other people's Rhi. A structure of spell they most likely learned at this very Abbey, which was part of why she didn't just open with all of this, besides compassion - for all she knew the whole Abbey could be in on it. (Was it safe to send her in alone?... she had a secure line to backup, a local contact sitting in a visibility-shielded coracle in the bay, an Inquisition base ten kilometers away...)

"Were there reasons you'd suspect otherwise?"

"Well, the circumstances of their arrival... How much background are you starting from here?"

"I know about their connection to the incidents at Roma-rosa. At least what they said publicly - unless they told you more."

The university itself could withhold its internals until their request went through a convoluted vetting process, Silmenon gave them an infuriating amount of freedom. The only names in any of the public reports were the professor who lost their job - Dr. Fraxine Selbstember,





Esteemed and Confidential Professor of Mysteries - and the victim - Izour Seullgyo, their research assistant. Lariz Aeeth's public enrolment record put them in the same year as Seullgyo, and they had listed the same high school, from a remote pier town in one of the southern fjords. There were no obvious connections to Dark themae in Selbstember's research, which was fairly abstruse, mathematized work on the Order-Chaos interface in natural material systems. (Maybe a Druidic connection? The poem they had been looking for... but this was the theoretical perspective on natural systems furthest from Druid ones, as far as she could tell.)

"All the people from the university told me is that Selbstember breached the secrecy of certain Mysteries, either deliberately or by negligence. And of course all the dogmatists and thrill-seekers online ran with a pulp story about a 21-year-old undergraduate driven mad by forbidden knowledge... but I always thought it was just a pretext, a bow they put on a story that wouldn't satisfy anyone any other way. The kinds of questions Aeeth would ask in confessions... were the kinds any normal person who's lost someone that way would ask. Anyone who... I think they must have tried to stop them. *Is everyone meant to live, does everyone really want to, how do you know if someone's meant*





to, if a permanent death can deviate from Order how can Order ever be attained.” He paused. “You know, at one point, I think they asked the same question about love.”

“Love? What sense of...?”

“Well, I imagined they would have asked that question too. But it was a topic they seemed to have a particular fascination with.”

Something was jumping around the edges of her mind. “Were they interested in... love magic?”

“What, like making someone love them? I think it would have been the furthest thing possible from their-”

This was getting nowhere. The more she had to say out loud, the more something itched, the more something hurt. “No, like the ceremony I attended today. The brochure doesn’t talk about this, but it isn’t purely symbolic, is it? It’s a rhi recognition training - that’s why you perform it with your acolytes. Even ordinary lovers under ideal conditions are supposed to be able to find their way to each other by way of their resonating rhi.”

“Yes. But that’s not magic, just resonance.”





“Spontaneous synchronization at a distance is magic, by definition.”

“And there’s an entire field of Mysteries dedicated to understanding all the nuances of this definition.”

“And what about *your* work on it? This abbey’s, I mean?”

“Do you really think the Ecclesia would send someone they thought might have been traumatized by premature exposure to high-level Mysteries research to an institution still doing high-level Mysteries research? This Abbey hasn’t operated in that capacity since the Mysteries Department at at Romarosa was established in the first place. Our upper initiates - myself and six others, eight when Aeeth was here - have the same clearance as a tenured Mysteries professor. So I could read Selbstember’s papers, at least a few of them, except the ones that were suppressed when they were sacked. And we have scrolls from before - things only *I’m* allowed to read. We know the kinds of things you’d need to deal with someone compromised by that kind of exposure, even if we didn’t know the exact content of the exposure itself. That’s not what we dealt with. All I ever had the sense of was a very intelligent person grieving the loss of a friend, a friend they might have loved.”





“Very intelligent?”

“Lacriz Aeeth spent much of their time in the library - not reading anything especially related to Mysteries, we had people keeping an eye on them, mostly historical things, from before the distinctions were even established.” (The novels. Lacriz Aeeth had read the novels. Why had she forgotten Lacriz Aeeth - the Seer In The Half Light - reading the novels. What novels.) “Things I wouldn’t have expected someone without a grounding in historical magic and theology to be able to understand at all, but - they’d often ask questions about things they were reading in confession, and they were very perceptive at reconstructing unfamiliar conceptual frameworks simply from the internal relations between terms in a text, like translating an unfamiliar alphabet. They would also... watch ceremonies very closely, and one time I observed them meditating in a way I’d never taught them - performing the Mountain Spring Circulation, which I had been demonstrating a few weeks before. They never mentioned it, though. They were quiet - I myself preferred to learn quietly, so I let them be.”

“What was the most advanced technique you performed in front of them?”





They opened their mouth, then closed it several times, looking troubled. “I can’t remember.”

“What’s the most high-level you *know*?” She sharpened her voice like a sickle on a grindstone. “You may think your Monastery is special, sheltered from the eyes of the Sevenfold Alliance, but that doesn’t mean I only know what you’ve chosen to report. I know you’re capable of Preserving spells on Rhi patterns. Any documentation of this you haven’t shared, I am entitled to requisition under the eighth ratification of the Sevenfold Anti-Dark Counterterrorism Pact.”

He clamped the bridge of his nose in two fingers, nostrils flaring and collapsing, and blinked behind his foggy glasses. “It’s that serious? Can you.... Can you tell me what they’re involved in?”

Her eyes narrowed without moving. “How close were you exactly.”

“You haven’t lived in a Monastery. Here every heart is open to every other heart. A door is open that I am not entitled to close.”





“Yet you don’t know anything about what they wanted, what they knew, even what they read.”

“The heart is a labyrinth with inner and outer doors. The inner doors must be guarded separately for the outer to remain open. This is one of the very principles today’s rite is meant to illustrate. To open the inner one must enter through the outer, yet to open the inner is a different kind of love.”

Braz glanced around the Master Superior’s office. The walls were lined with vaulted stone niches filled with scrolls, books with no titles on their spines, incense sticks and braziers, little clay abstract sculptures, a hourglass-shaped flask of bubbling precipitate that was probably Preserving some spell, implements for unknown ritual or improvised magic like a conch and a pheasant’s tail feather. “I set up an object interference spell before I came in here. Right now, your Rhi is the only thing you can Preserve magic on. And now,” she undid a silver button from the front of her coat and stretched it across her throat on an indigo thread, “I’m going to lock the door.”

The monk stood up and in a microsecond struck across the thread with his open hand. She dropped just as quick-





ly beneath it and lunging forward swept him over the desk, pinning him to the wall.

“There are two difficulties with Rhi magic.” His voice was as measured as if he hadn’t lost any breath. “One is that you must be capable of defining - and mastering - a Circulation very precisely. The second, and the reason it was dropped as a subject of research, is that you must sacrifice your own possible internal states. I have mastered one, and it is not for use in combat, if you want a demonstration that badly.”

“What about... other people’s states.”

“Other people’s Circulation, you mean?” He blinked - it genuinely never seemed to have occurred to him. “To even set it as a condition you’d need to synchronize it with your own, like... sexual synchronization. That *sounds* like something out of one of Aeeth’s novels.”

“How much do you remember about these novels?”

“I can give you the full record of everything they checked out from the library, although they spent a lot of time reading in the stacks. You won’t find anything on Rhi-magic interaction - you’ll find a lot about love.”





Something unbearable was building up behind Braz's eyelids and they closed them as they let the Master Superior slip down onto the desk and turned away. "You said they *might have loved* Izour Seullgyo. Can't you tell? Like.... by their rhi circulation? Whether it was love or not?"

The Master Superior gave a startled laugh. "The Love Circulation? That's an old holy grail, going back as far as that ritual you saw today - and a theoretical misconception. The more two people love each other - as current psychology understands it - the more unique their rhi resonance patterns become. That's how something like the Rite of the Heart Labyrinth works - but it's no use trying to recognize it from outside. It'd be indistinguishable from a random fluctuation."

Nien 10 - was raging at a level of Helicopter Mage (flipstudio game from when I was like 12, found this backup site with an emulator <https://coffeearchive.sc/3380s> lots of fun dogshit on here) and started doing Uninvented Circulation. just got really obsessed with synchronizing my finger movements with my breathing and kept getting owned. It would be easier if I could do this at the same time as other things. It would be easier if it didn't count as doing a thing, but it does. Is there a scripture that talks about why?





Nien 11 - tried to do Uninvented Circulation through the last ten minutes an episode of *The Clover Association* for the lulz. noticed a weird smell in my left nostril, convinced myself there was a gas leak, almost pre-emptively suffocated myself with my pillow, went out in the hall and it was there too, kept smelling it for next ~4 hours. missed the dumbest episode ending yet, cunning of Order lol. Thanks_Sister.jpg

Nien 12 - skipped. but lay around doing nothing a lot, does that count? very rainy - weird night. <guess you would have seen too.

Nien 13 -////

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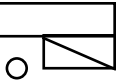
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657dv55bd46 qw352a4cts4biy8f4 56cqx3 (i (k)
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MISSED MY FUCKING APPOINTMENT lmao

this happened all the time with actual psychs lol. but it's good I hadn't even started on the homework. why do I have homework again. Sens-no I'm giving myself enough complexes Thanks_Sister.jpg (prayer hands emoji x57)

Nien 14 - fifteen mins Uninvented Circulation on the toilet. Why do I want to be in my body it's just the same thing all the time and every time I notice it feels worse. thought I could observe something like time turning into shame as I observed it. <<wtf does that mean. ended up scratching my ass until I bled. Thanks_Sister.jpg [delete]

NYAN15!!! - @Suburbophile says hi. he would probably be better at this than me. he says his parents do the one you gave me (Blue Bell Circulation)??? do not look up what NYAN15 is [delete]

Nien 16 - was looking up that one thread RP comic based on the Thanks Sister reaction image where OP is the Eldest Sister of a monastic order that takes the sibling thing really literally [delete/modify] and decided to try the Blue Bell Circulation finally. I think I can describe the thing that happens normally [start with this, ignore rest of list]. its like I can sorta combo break whatever I'm already thinking about and roll for random thoughts (do I need to





explain “roll” and “combo break”) but then the first new thing to stick in a loop will become a really strong loop, and whatever’s not any one thought still feels like a thing, like it’s a weight that I have to drop eventually. if nothing else I’ll start thinking about stopping. anything that’s like a little choice like that like do I stop or do I move becomes really unbearable. so unbearable it starts to feel like hurting myself and then if I do it long enough I’ll feel less scared of hurting myself. but I can write this because after about... twenty minutes? (I lasted twenty minutes on this? yes last time was fifteen but that’s Uninvented Circulation I can do anything on Uninvented Circulation I actually can’t do anything on Blue Bell I didn’t think I’d last five. the binaural beats helped probably.)anyway this shit hit different I couldn’t feel my body and now that I’m back I don’t feel it or the Currents or the screen really and can focus on the words like they’re flowing through a kind of gutter. I got a bit freaked out because I felt like I was falling, the way you feel like you’re falling in the middle of the night. it also felt longer than twenty minutes. help I’m still writing. why can’t I stop wri

Nien 17 - couldn’t sleep. felt like I wasn’t going to be able to go to sleep unless I did the Blue Bell Circulation at like 5:00 in the morning. I was already doing Uninvented





Nien 18 - have you ever heard of something called the Dawn Mist Circulation [send separately?]

He told Dr. Mark'eg about it, as always, like a sitcom episode. 'This week I gave myself an eating disorder'. Laugh track.

And like a sitcom, it was already returning to the status quo. His mother had noticed him staggering off the bus after five days on however little his stomach couldn't help but retain - all the doughy thickness of the cookies he was now sneaking from the convenience store on walks now floating up to his head - and tucked him into bed, gave him laxatives and oxbone broth, and on the way he'd had a tuna curry sandwich and could barely even notice the taste in his mouth as he meditated in the waiting room.

"Are you doing that for him?" Mom asked with a tone that suggested a set up for dismissal if he wasn't.

"Yeah." All week, he had kept meditating at lunch, hoping to recapture that first vision of the sky, although for the last three days it had clouded over. "Oh, I hope that helps then," she replied with an airy sort of despair, no longer looking at him. He didn't mention any connection between his practice and the week's sickness - he felt

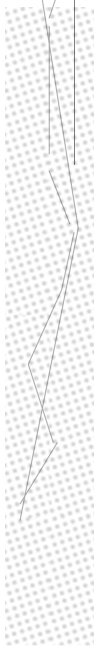




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sort of proud that she didn't notice, and that he was doing it anyway. He still wasn't sure whether to count it as more than a fluke, but he was expecting Mark'eg to tell him to stop when he explained everything - he found himself almost not wanting to explain everything, so he could keep doing it, but that was what his mind's loyal opposition was for.

Instead, Dr. Mark'eg seemed positively encouraged, and wanted him to do more. This time he unlocked a filing cabinet behind his desk and handed Luskonneg a gold-foiled scroll, one that actually had illustrations of monks and devils, little corkscrew serpents with probosci like mosquitoes. The monk's skin bursting into golden flame and his face and features, along with the devils, disappearing. "The Dawn Mist Circulation & Preliminary Exercises."

The Dawn Mist was to be worked up to over the course of a week of exercises - combinations of the Uninvented Circulation, progressive muscle relaxation, temporary fasting and water consumption, visualizations (a floodplain, a stepwise waterfall, the borders of the body dissolving into golden motes) - at regular intervals that conveniently mapped to his breaks and meals. He didn't attempt the Circulation proper until the end of the week, though once





he had learned to sit still for it (it required at least thirty minutes to complete) he would be able to do it every day. (Like a medication, the “dosage” could be upped to an hour, even two hours at a time. Luskonneg hadn’t assumed a secular doctor could “prescribe” techniques like this.) By the end of the week he didn’t expect to be able to master even the first “dose” for months. Visualizations were a particular source of stress - on Zeparmine he had become almost aphantasic (increasing his dependence on anime, even without enjoyment, to restock his childhood image-reservoirs), and since stopping his intrusive thoughts had returned with more vividness than anything else (gore in particular honed to photographic precision by shock videos). In constructing images he had to borrow explicitly from visual techniques he had seen in drawings, and that seemed to collapse the images into the words he used to describe them, or the background radiation of his eyelids would simply eat through them. A process which would make the images paradoxically more literal: landscapes devoured by magma. He would start over, “not count” unsuccessful attempts, or just skip “reps” by procrastinating until the bell, “making up” with unlimited loops that replaced loops on homework or trying to sleep. By the end of the week, he was starting to see some of the images involuntarily when his eyes glazed over in class.

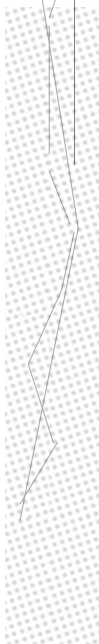




When he went up to the roof at the end of the week to make his first attempt, his eyes almost hurt from the strain of anticipation, and the sky was blown-out with sun.

He wondered how long until he would have the chance to drink that sky again. But for this one he had to close his eyes.

Close his eyes, relax his muscles, breath in a 3-5 pattern with a longer out breath than in breath, hold his hands slightly apart in front of his diaphragm, and expand his focus from his breath and the inner surface, to the outer, to the world around him and its edges - *not* forming any images. He noticed he wasn't shutting his eyes as tightly, which helped - rather than pops of static and afterimages, a rose gold wash eroded the first hints of outline before they could take shape. Thoughts, on the other hand, swam freely in this amniotic fluid - so much that they slipped out of his grasp on their own and he couldn't say if they had been there or not. He could feel it pooling where his hands had been, where his stomach had been, but those outlines too were more effort to form than not. What remained was a distinction between inside and outside, a membrane, equally present in all directions, like a circle, a cylinder, extending endlessly in two directions, above and





below, or maybe the other axis, or it was the only axis, like one of those lab cylinders in -

That reference was the first image proper that formed in the Dawn Mist. And it didn't form like the visualizations, a faint overlay shakily projected over the nonstop live feed of the senses or into the squirming chaos of a brain, a body scanning itself. It arose on its own all at once in the same way the body or the world arose. The consciousness in the tube only knew those existed because they were what had made and seen the image it suddenly had to tell itself not to jump to the conclusion that it actually *was*.

He tried to open his eyes, and he could have sworn it took several times for them to reform.

Well, that was something.

Was he supposed to stop?

He returned to class remarkably clear-headed, in the literal sense of feeling like all the gunk of vaguely tactile, referentless perception that spiderwebbed the area of inner space (the tube?) he associated with his head was gone, and in its place a silence that reminded him of the Zepamine. When thoughts came, they branched and blocked



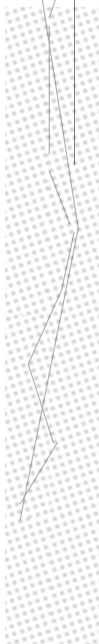


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themselves exactly as they always did, but in between them was a space where, even without directing his attention to it, the sound of his breathing echoed. He also noticed glittering floaters in his field of vision throughout the rest of the day.

Dr. Mark'eg reaffirmed that he wasn't supposed to stop.

The Dawn Mist, which he entered three times that next week, wasn't simply a pleasant or relaxing state. The same evil thoughts loomed up, and sometimes he couldn't feel their borders, and sometimes their borders collapsed suddenly into the borders of the world. One time his own attention's reaching from the innermost to the outermost stretches of what he assumed was there became a faceless female figure, made of a sticky pink substance like bubblegum, lodged deep in the cavity of [what he had thought he had been] and extending sticky strands out in all directions to the furthest stars to pull them into herself. He still hadn't handed in his Theology assignments but had picked up enough by reading Shunny Najda threads to know that if someone put that image in an anime there would be interminable arguments, maybe even taken to the Poets' Courts, about blasphemy.





Another time, his thoughts tried to resume an argument about whether the age on a Wiki page of the ice cube mascot he had masturbated to last night counted, and in the image that formed in the Mist, he was a fleck of cum brushed off the tip of an uncaring onyx sky.

But while in the Mist he lost track of time, and space, in general as he practiced it he started to find them clearer. He forgot what he was doing less. Instead he would forget why he was doing it. He finished some of his homework, even one of the Theology assignments (the words still didn't make sense, but he found he could organize them in ways that sounded like they did, and check against the textbook) in a strange, distant state, as if he was waiting for something to happen, to unlock some other world, some other dream. Mom was more relaxed and more distant around him, finally finding the space to sink into her own memories and television dreams. He could pace all the way around the house and she wouldn't stop him once to ask where he was going.

The night before his next appointment, he woke up in the early morning from a nightmare. He didn't feel rested at all, and felt he had with great effort pulled himself out of a hell he couldn't remember. He didn't want to go back



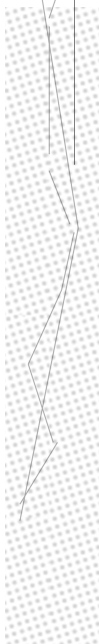


there, and at the same time felt like he had forgotten how. He spent the remaining hours until his alarm rotating a platinum sun behind his eyelids.

“It’s weird, right, how I went from being aware of my body as this cloud of bad feelings between me and everything else, to not being aware of it at all?” He was still laughing lightly, as if being weird didn’t make it particularly unlikely or untrustworthy. The image appeared of one of those towering summer clouds he was starting to recognize from the covers of visual novels and anime school rooftops, but in a sooty negative. “That’s not how people talk about it online, or how my mom talked about it when she brought it up years ago. You’re supposed to become aware of it, in like, a good way. Although that doesn’t make any sense to me either.”

“What would that mean to you? What do you imagine it meaning?”

He imagined something like the air on that day, the colour on that day, when he first stepped up on the roof. He hadn’t been thinking about his body but it was his body that had breathed it in, that had seen it, that it had filled. And it was his heavy brain that had tricked itself into seeing something in the colour that, if he looked through it





the way he now looked through everything, couldn't be there.

Instead, it felt like all his senses were a single flat projection around him. (A sphere would make more sense than a tube, but there was still this sense of extension along an axis.) The edge was no longer of his body but of this projection. And from the outside of it he could feel a buzzing, like a faulty fluorescent light, even when he was paying attention to something else.

There had been a similar flatness to the world on Zeparmine, but in a way it had been easier with nothing outside it. The flatness resolved into what he called the Mist if he simply moved his focus away from holding it or one of his usual chains of thoughts together, but the Mist was still an imperfect refuge; he would almost always be jolted out of it by some inexplicable thought or image, often multiple times in a session. He only once or twice tried to write these down, always finding himself stuck on some word. But he could shift through it to move his focus, which helped with things like work. Even as the longer he did it, the more the buzzing at the fringes and strange symptoms like floaters (sometimes as distinct as UFOs) took more of his effort to ignore. Maybe these were the same enemy





forces he had first perceived as thoughts or shame or an inherent quality of time and things. But if this clarity gave him some way to fight them he didn't know it.

In other ways it was better. His old therapist had asked him to visualize the future life he wanted, and he couldn't because he couldn't visualize anything; now he couldn't because he didn't *want* anything. He simply rearranged things until they were sufficient in the moment. If anything it now seemed strange how much people *expected* him to want things; to work on his education, or return, eventually, to practicing social skills - which produced no less overwhelming a fission of information needing to be rearranged. He couldn't eavesdrop any more if he wanted to. Other people's conversations were chem-lab fizzbombs of white noise from outside the bounds of his world. What had he ever *wanted* from them?

When he asked the question, Dr. Mark'eg would remind Luskonneg hated the things he wanted and the way he wanted them. He'd ask if *really* Luskonneg *did* want those things, or worse, want to *not want* them. Want to be stuck. Then when Luskonneg tried to separate the things he did want from the things he didn't, he'd needle the definitions until they seeped clear fluid like sores.





Poring over yet another Theology worksheet - surely he could make these experiences relevant somehow - he wondered if this was how the Goddess felt at the centre of all things, encroached on all sides by the monotonous buzzing of Chaos. But if he wrote this he wouldn't be able to explain the Hierogamy (*you never had a girlfriend or a boyfriend or even a friend*, his old self protested from the bottom of some echoing well, *of course you can't explain the Hierogamy*), because why would the Goddess ever want to be reconciled with the Serpent.

Occasionally he would look up more tentacle H (a genre he had never been that into, preferring art that stayed as close to the real impossibility as possible, insignificant things about bodies he couldn't help but notice) in hopes of understanding it, or if not, simply dousing his new perception of the world in that older acid bath. Always without directly looking it up, always setting up some convoluted series of searches that would end in him stumbling across it accidentally. (That was how he had gone from *Ero-Guro Puzzlebox* to full on *ero-guro* in the first place.) He got particularly attached to a single image, whose source anime he wouldn't look up until years later, of a baby-fat green-haired girl in a swimsuit that looked just like his school's lying in a stagnant pool of water covered

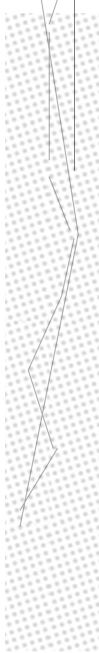




in flowering algae that crept up over and under the suit's elastic edge-bands, eyes fluffily closed and smiling like a frog.

The eating disorder never came back - the next casualty was sleep.

The forces, the algorithms, that attempted to hijack him whenever he meditated weren't capable of penetrating the Dawn Mist, especially as he practiced it more, but strengthened from training against that more powerful opponent (or so he thought - he was still working through a 1000-chapter battle shonen he thought he would eventually get to talk to people about), they easily stormed the defenses of "lying on a questionably soft surface in the dark dreading the next day". The count of seconds, which once would have been swamped by other thoughts and anxieties until they vanished under each other, now occupied him until he gave in and opened his eyes and watched the numbers on the alarm clock or his cell phone change. Boredom, which he had been training himself out of, couldn't coldcock him any more. The Dawn Mist Circulation took all the faculties of simultaneous presence and forgetting he now recognized as the border between sleep and waking and redirected them to establish and erase a





border between waking and something else. That something else, for its part, was distinguished explicitly from sleep in the metred text of the sutra Mark'eg had sent him.

There were, of course, specific meditations for sleep. He saw threads about them every time he went on /mo/ - they were largely ridiculed for diminishing the seriousness of the art. He joined in the ridicule. He was himself immersed in the seriousness of the art. If he tried to imagine, again, who he wanted to be, he could imagine himself as someone who "solved his problems with meditation"; or even someone who had a religious experience and lost interest in everything else (though he couldn't very well write about that if he couldn't even finish his Theology assignments, and that was turning into another abstract threshold that wasn't the one he knew how to cross). But he couldn't be someone who used it to get to sleep. And so, telling Mark'eg what he wanted to hear (for all he knew Mark'eg was reading those very threads - every now and then someone claimed to be a clinical psychologist), he didn't even mention it until three weeks in, he was floating in on ten hours of sleep in seven days.





Floating - not stumbling. That was proof this was working
- whatever process this was. He was already sleeping in
the cocoon.

Winter was coming on, and it was getting too cold to go
up to the roof every day. On the way to the gym build-
ing, shrugging his jacket around his shoulders, he saw one
of the groups that hung out on the main building's roof
blocking a classroom doorway and being chided for it by a
class rep. He took longer detours around the halls, keeping
his eyes open for another quiet place. If he wanted to stick
to narrative tropes, an abandoned clubroom. If he sat near
the fence he could look out over the bare trees along the
road and the horizon and imagine them as the tendrils of
thought-static only the waves of his breathing could beat
away.

Spreading and cracking and covering everything, perhaps,
as those waves and the sky froze over.

There was some passage in the Theology homework about
barren trees as traces of the Goddess' dance and the Ser-
pent's coiling. An exercise with a photo of one, asking him
to describe it as each, then both.





For one thing, it seemed impossible to expect high school students to write something like that, but everyone would freely admit they didn't understand it and what they were really being graded on was imitation. But how could he imitate it if he really did experience the exact opposite? Just write it and turn himself in as- not a heretic, if he didn't just get a bad grade they might ask him to go to therapy but he was already getting that and if it wasn't helping...

He tried to tell Dr. Mark'eg about the growing feeling that he himself was wrong - not just some specific thing about him, not just a scalar exaggeration to everything he was and ever would be, but the thing he apparently was if he stripped away all of those things, as he was told he was making good progress doing. Also that he needed to find a new room and the meditation room would probably be if anything less tolerable now.

Dr. Mark'eg offered to make a note to his homeroom teacher or the guidance office for special accommodations. In the meantime, didn't he know this was what it was supposed to do. The point was to dissolve his "self", which he hadn't liked, and kept getting in the way of itself.

- but without it there was nothing to get in the way of





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- which was the point.

- But there's supposed to be a "self" I return to, an inner core of Order as well as the Serpent-Self aspiring to it, and I don't think that's there because when I -

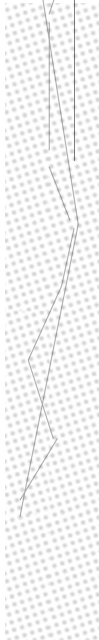
- and that's what you're discovering and identifying with, isn't it?

- but it can't be, because then everything that should be Order and Hierogamy is just more Chaos trying to wear me down, and I don't even want to -

- yes, that's the inversion. Do your Theology homework - maybe try meditating until you have a sentence, and if it's not the right sentence, go back, until...

He somehow hadn't thought of this before. How was he still hiding things like this from himself, while seeing everything about himself? He couldn't stop now. He had to go all the way, until everything was what he couldn't imagine it being.

The teacher told him he could use the nurse's office if there was no-one there. He brought his work, promising himself to finish a season he had been putting off at home





when he finished and actually enjoy it. The surface that wrapped itself around him before he closed his eyes was white and pale green and smelled like... he knew it was a different disinfectant but it almost smelled like chlorine. Almost thickened the air the same way, although it stung a bit. The fluorescent light, even with his eyes closed, seemed to take him somewhere cooler than that reddish-gold haze that for all its interdimensional transcendence he knew to be merely the same light through his eyelid capillaries, distributed by his drifting centre of perception. This was reality disinfected.

The surface inverted.

Now the tentacle, the intrusion into the universe, the rhizome-monster of stacked rubbish, an itch plugged into a tumour of numbness plugged into a a misfiring nerve sending up floaters like flares to its army of gauzy phantasms of sex and gore, was on the inside, not the outside of the membrane. The world was clean and bright and cool, like he had been trying to convince himself, but he didn't want to go back in there and write it. No - there wasn't a "he" to "go back in there" and write it. The world, Goddess and Serpent alike, was looking down in disgust on his body on the edge of the bed from the outside, creating





those stim-perfect starched white sheets - the overwrought cliché of astral projection of course just another imaginary parody it was throwing over itself - the real thing might look like a pillar of writhing flesh out of Ts'yo's cosmic horror experiments.

But there was no way, from the outside, to disinflect that thing. The world was as helpless on the outside of its membrane as "he" had been on the inside. Except this had all begun with the bridge between the two - his breath. Why wasn't the breath control he had learned enough to stop it once and for all? He could hardly hold it longer than he did in the pool. He coughed and spluttered. He made himself vomit into the plastic garbage can next to the bed. This was a nurse's office, there had to be ways to empty more of it. He bolted to her desk, rattling cabinets, looking for needles, pills, scalpels. A long silver scissor curved like an ibis' beak was shivering over the double bridge of his ulna when the nurse opened the door five minutes before the end of lunch.

That night when he resumed his Theology assignment, he was no longer afraid to lie.

He was only going to try it so he could write it down.





He hadn't done that last time. And so, it had been lost, and he couldn't even prove it had ever happened.

He couldn't even *believe* it had ever happened. He was fucked up enough that there was no reason he couldn't have simply fabricated several months of his life, was there? It wasn't like he had been talking to anybody to say otherwise.

(It wasn't like he was ever going to talk to anybody from the Public Morals Committee again, so for all he knew he might have fabricated that too. But maybe an investigative journalist from Yn Dahh't could track them down - if he didn't lose her interest first.)

All the negative effects he had experienced, you could find people talking about on /mo/ or blogs (or books probably, he didn't read those). But when he described the way he reacted to them, it sounded like he got addicted, and every single source said that couldn't happen.

Even if it wasn't the meditation doing anything different, he wanted to protest, it was everything around it. But it was supposed to change everything around it.





If he was the one person in the world who could get addicted (it took him like eight tries to finish the sentence in his own thought) to meditation - then he hadn't been addicted, he had simply been right. And everything straightened out to Order as it was meant to.

The theological discovery of the human glitch. Marzanna Etnexheyr wins the Tollbrann Prize.

Maybe there were others. Maybe they would be rooted out of their rooms after him.

But he was just going to try it once, and do it wrong, so she couldn't prove it.

Besides, now that he was thinking of it, now that he was already halfway back there, he wanted to know what would happen if he did the Blue Bell and the Dawn Mist Circulation back to back.

Maybe he would actually, literally dissolve, and be freed from the tension of waiting to find out which of his fantasies would be demolished.

Maybe he would trigger some condition in himself so extreme it would force Marzanna Etnexheyr to intervene, not





only for the sake of her story but the Covenant of Goodwill in her contract with the government and Ecclesia. Put him somewhere people would monitor his internet usage but admit it wasn't all his fault.

Until they discovered it was.

Or maybe absolutely nothing would happen.

The Blue Bell Circulation, according to the sutra, was meant to feel the extent and edges of one's own Rhi field. It was often used as a preparation for martial arts techniques that used rhi, which was presumably why that woman knew it.

(Maybe she was going to teach him to fight, and send him on crazy missions like hunting down the terrorist who had taken out the power and started all this. If he survived this.)

These were the kinds of fantasies he had stopped having years ago (although he'd had them most in the first couple years out of high school, when there had been no realistic life to measure them against, no reason not to).

At this point he was starting to *want* a hard reset to get rid of them - whatever else it brought.





He cleaned again, clearing a loosely circular space in the centre of his floor. Stains had seeped into the boards anyway. It wasn't clean, it was a pond.

Smilia wouldn't mind. She would visit him here on Slina's territory. He still couldn't find any yuri of the two of them what the fuck.

But the afternoon light was already starting to look stained and sticky in its own right, and he had almost spent an entire day avoiding this, hadn't he.

There was a cruelty he enjoyed to cutting off his focus from anything other than his breath, when and only when he knew he would stick with it past any end outside it. Like joining a cult in his mind.

Maybe that was why he was doing it wrong. None of the texts emphasized this, but it was the only way he could make it work for himself. That didn't explain *why* he was doing it wrong.

But why did that matter, if *he* wasn't the one doing it wrong anyway?

He couldn't cut anything unless he could cut everything.





He wasn't going to remember any of this to write it down.

Maggots were crawling at the back of his eyes. If he tried to open them they would burst and spill all over the floor.

Ahhh, that was more like it.

He didn't open his eyes, and they opened inside themselves.

A rippling sun of white magma without time. He observed the ripples without counting them. He didn't have eyes to worry about opening.

Some body was counting time at the edges but like a rapidly dropping health bar it was falling away.

It could feel the vibrations of its breath stretching out on either side of what it had been like butterfly wings, like two loops of a magnetic field, like lungs outside its lungs.

It switched to the Dawn Mist Circulation.

Struck the vibrating glass.

A note to shatter the windows.





The bounds of the field dissolved and seeped out... and washed against something heavy and dark.

He had never felt this before. There had been shadows, unevenness in the light, but they tended to disappear, like thoughts, in a few more breaths. Whereas now the more he extended his consciousness - the vibrations of the Blue Bell a kind of radar in the Dawn Mist - the more clearly he could feel them. Discrete objects, jagged rocks in the waters, although they weren't like images taking hold of his loosened consciousness either - simply blocks of nothing. Towering rocks - cliffs - to which his waters were shallows. On either side he encountered them - in rough semicircles around the furthest reaches of his field lines, beyond which they interfered into darkness. How were they so consistent? As he focused more on them and felt around their edges he even found he could count them - six, eight, up to ten and then no more.

There were ten knots of dense, self-effacing energy floating around him. In whatever space he inhabited. He was almost afraid to open his eyes - as if he might see them in the room. But maybe he would see them if he adjusted to his eyes being closed, to seeing in the light. See what? He half expected one of his recent delusions like the skull



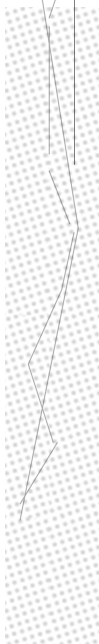


Marzanna's follow-up call with Luskonneg confirmed what she had noticed the first time. There was something extremely odd about this man's Rhi. Ten things, to be exact.

This gave *some* context as to why the Inquisition was so interested in him. And that after she relayed this information back, they didn't simply take him in to some facility where someone qualified could figure out what was going on suggested that they already knew. This didn't necessarily bother her. It was their job to have reasons they couldn't just tell everybody. Her sense that not everything was as it appeared, she could still insist to herself, was neither conspiratorial nor heretical. Those were simplifying aesthetics - she wanted to explore hidden complexities. Frailties, flaws.

Their next instruction, however, was straining her capacity for trust.

Knowing what she knew now - both the weird stuff and just how he talked and acted - she didn't even particularly want to be in a room with Luskonneg herself. Let alone someone who hadn't even volunteered as an Asset, someone considerably more physically and emotionally vulnerable than her.





And at this point - although they didn't necessarily know this - probably the most precious person in her life.

If they knew enough to pull off a strategy (and for what she had absolutely no idea) like this without investigable endangerment - why would they need to do it this indirectly? And if they didn't, they were being extremely stupid delegating it to, of all people, an Yn Dahh't licensed investigative journalist. Even she wasn't allowed to probe the absurd tiers of confidentiality indicated on her instructions, but she knew from precedent that if she could prove that they were being abused, she could win the right retroactively. The double contradiction didn't leave many possibilities that weren't conspiratorial or heretical. But it didn't leave many of those either.

Or rather, it left too many, all so far from the reach of Maullan's Razor that it was impractical to even think of them.

Maullan's Razor did say, if whatever this was had been going on all his life, it wasn't likely to break out of control now. (Unless, say, they had been feeding people to a monster this entire time.) Gallvren would probably be safe - as a one-time, temporary asset.



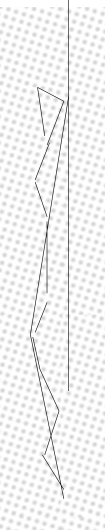


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Invoking an Anti-terrorist Covert Mobilization exemption (that - adding insult to injury - Marzanna recognized from having written an editorial against in high school), the instructions specified that she was only to be informed if her mobilization was extended.

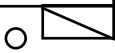
She could only smile bitterly at the subheader she might get to use if she blew this all open someday, and hope it wasn't too prophetic: *Am I my roommate's handler?*





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Name: Anahit Lyly

Birthday: September 23rd

Sex: Female

Occupation: Ilian haruspex, speaker role

Blood Type: O

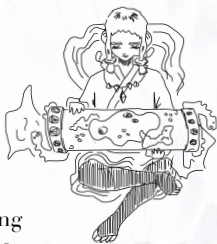
Likes: Chocolate ceremony, paleontology, Ilian township design, the comfort of taking things for granted, the pride of living up to her role, jewelry, boiling hot showers twice a day, fresh artisan bread

Dislikes: Meat, salty things, loud places, solitude, any kind of light manual labor, any work outside of her role in fact, mining towns, travel, people too self-indulgent about their hobbies, thieves, clumsy liars

Seen with: The rest of her lawship crew, and Kuryo Redname



by: Amara Reyes



A driven and sensitive young woman, and predictably the most religious of the Umihotaru crew: such is the role of a speaker, a priest to priests. Delicate and naive in many ways, and enjoys being so, as it means she has enough freedom to be that way still. Bubbly and a worrier, strict and kind, a gentle heart for a gentle





age. Is harder than she lets on, though, and under the right circumstances of enough stress, buckles down into a no-nonsense hypercompetence, revealing all her good-student performative studiousness to be an almost scary dedication to her craft and brittle belief in her organization's principles. However, this same keen ability also makes her reckless and unmoored, unable to cling to things usually crucial to her. Longtime best friend of Emelry; were educated in the same year and were very close all throughout academy, and much of their study and practice were done together. By a large margin, they were the two people closest to each other before assignment to the crew, and are accustomed to working as a unit and covering each others' weaknesses. Deeply devout and devoted to all the minutiae of orthodox Ecumene thought and can be quite a stickler about the party line; eternally overawed by authority until it isn't what she expected of it.



Synopsis

an emissary vessel from the See of Delphi, learned lawyers and messengers of the Sun, descend to the garden habitat of Savannah to uncover the nature of a mysterious project that might change the very key of the song of humanity.





Last Time

rogue at last, Emelry plunges fully into the physical and mental world of the tengmunnin and begins to glimpse a precarious path between the dogmas of the See and the void of independence, the hard-won unity of the Ecumene and a culture already fully its own



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The Cyanoë and Longcaud forwarded official protests - but these were veteran crews on the way to retirement. The middle and younger generations of lawships did not respond. The inquest was quashed. Heartpage was a case of magnitude, and the last meaningfully hostile audit had occurred decades before the majority of lawships were yet in service. Thus the younger crews grew up in its shadow, took it as a simple fact of caselaw - the precedent was made, for better or worse. Commission and Command openly acknowledged mistakes were made, but the line remained: glorification was the right call, made from the wrong information. A perfect legitimization of the panic and heavy hand.

Heartpage was taken as a provincial outpost, a representative of a much wider shadow empire. Glorification was therefore considered a warning shot in the morning, a demonstration of force. This broad, diverged culture had to be reminded of what the true world was, what its demands were. A standard audit was impossible, no approach could be made in the months of stalemate and negotiation - but evacuations did at last begin.

When could one point to an era that required a response of this scale? Not since the final years of the unification wars



in the decades after the Ecumene's founding itself; even the establishment of the corporate states had learned that lesson and kept a tight leash, only allowed it to change hands. The reasoning of the See, as it spread to Commission, was one of preparing for an existential conflict not seen in centuries. The world was turning, and the scales must be weighed.

But, of course, Heartpage was not an outpost. It was not one station of many on the border of a grand and deviant outer kingdom. It was not a parallel strain of neotene civilization broken off like a spoke from the wheel, overgrown into a spreading thorny rash. It was the last of its kind, last remnant of an experiment long failed. Each sister settlement had blinked out decades ago and spread to scrap. Its people was one of a scoured and lonely place, huddled together in what was a crown jewel of resilience and ingenuity in an era of utter scarcity.

And then the fire was gone. Of a parallel world nothing now remained. This is one of the unforgivable losses. Command must have felt a relief that there was so little resistance. Families split up and were resettled largely successfully, with the highest numbers in neotene-major-





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ity areas of See territory. What else? The guilt faded with the culture.

Brick Spine sel Hard Wave - Olive Tree Institute Dissenter's Review



Record VIII

Of fellow visitors and key performances



“No.” I made a show of glaring, angling my head to look down on him. He bobbed on his perch. Nervousness he had reached several minutes ago, and was settling well into the prolonged stress now. “I told you, that is no longer in argument. Already you have lied to me once -”

“What! Lie? You throw this kind of language at me?”

“I accuse you of nothing, it’s a fact. I saw you lie. No normal employed citizen would behave so. These are baseline logistical queries, the kind that one does not scramble or





blush at, unless there is something to protect. Is it your secret or theirs?"

He thought to harden himself in a show of frustration, and so Henarl snapped at me. He would not show me neck. "I haven't 'scrambled', what is meant by that? Day by day you've dragged me through the accounts for the entire quarter; what have I denied you? Have I refused to you a single record, no matter how patently irrelevant? I doubt you are so hungry for insight, no lieutenant, you are on the hunt for a lapse of focus. The whole staff knows what's happening."

"What is happening?"

"Obviously there was nothing gleaned from the water commission staff proper. So now you are looking for an underling to scape. Why do you guess none but I will meet with you uncoerced?" Pouting.

"Listen, clerk - this, this is not a matter of petty ledger misplacement. This is not even about a bit of embezzlement on the commissioner's part. We do not speak of extra yield-rations, or off-code quarters. Do you understand that? This is a *significant* misallocation. Maybe you don't know that - as I don't know if it's your secret or theirs





- but a full five percent of the island's production is in contention. Highly abnormal, entirely unacceptable - how could one in your role not see? We have a keen and active scribe, your holding out will delay us but prevent nothing. You must speak."

"Then why come for me! When did I ever lie? What moment was it that you first targeted me in!"

"In preliminaries you claimed you were unfamiliar with the commissioner's clan outside of the man himself. You chose your words carefully, but this was a lie. Shall we pursue this? Go name by name until you admit it? Who are you protecting, which of them is it?"

"Ugh - Emelry!" and he had broken character. "Time, time out, we're unpacking this."

Typical - using outside tactics to throw my performance off! "What! I was winning! You can't simply call time at the moment you've been ferreted out!"

"No I hadn't. Going straight to the clan ties? It was far too early to bring that in, you couldn't have guessed at that yet! You're factoring in the full scenario summary, subcon-





sciously or no. I'm calling a foul here for extracharacter-
istic knowledge."

"But you did lie there, I registered it, it was a perfect tell.
You're just upset you gave it away."

"Maybe. But we both have most of the scenario, and that
doesn't sound like a routine question for a middle-tier
clerk to me. You were chasing even there." God, he was so
smug! Why did he not bring this up last week if he was so
concerned! He knew this was a key moment for my team's
progress and was trying to stave it off - and had the gall to
call *me* extracharacteristic when operating like this! "I was
very effectively concealing the character's feelings, and I"

"Oh, indeed, you *are* back in character now: a terrible liar!
'Very effectively', please, it was splayed across your face
even without the detector's aid. This is absurd, I won't
take a foul for such -"

The intercom sounded alive into the interrogation room
with Olkha's curt voice. "Settle yourselves. That is the last
pause I will allow. No foul. Sorry, Henarl, but the question
is within expectations and other teams handled it without
issue. Back to characters."





Henarl and I settled, and showed each other the same glance - conciliatory, frustrated, embarrassed - and pressed on.

~~~~~

Henarl was not my kind of person. He had a sullen and slow personality that was still content to be outgoing - that spoke to the lack of a certain awareness I found necessary. I did not quite like him, but neither could I ever approach dislike. He would be a good liaison upon graduation - was from good sales stock - but as a crewmate I would judge him more harshly. He was a stuffy and proud boy but with no arrogance in him, only an approval-seeking need to find a place and lie down in that groove forever.

It was interesting, realizing which classmates I still called boys and girls when thinking to myself, and which I already knew as men and women. A difficult age.

Henarl was a good actor. He was playing a cornered, romantic clerk in far over his head, a man even Henarl could see the naivety and incompetence in. It was a typical, even easy scenario, only slightly more advanced than early coursework - but it was quite a jump from theory to practice.





“Self-report,” Olkha demanded, not looking up from the transcript.

A deep breath. “Too eager, in places. I struggle with exaggerating my emotions too often. Part of me thinks it is effective - a flare of frustration or the joy of pursuit, positioning myself as a free and passionate hunter. But I slip into this too easily, it makes me less cold.”

“No,” she said loftily, still reading. “It wasn’t unbalanced. To me it accomplished the signals of drive and focus well - not volatile, but coming in knowing something more than was given. Good character; you could stand to hide your hand for longer, but that’s personal judgment. Not an issue in the behavior, just a choice of what tone to set. Here,” she turned the printout to me, pointed to the first place I had said ‘liar’ - “Why was the callout here? What were your other choices?”

I stiffened - I had an answer. “I had an opportunity earlier when he was discussing assignment history - lie of omission during the role in waterworks. This would have put him in close but brief proximity to characters F and R - I made a note of this here - but there was a possibility he would contradict himself during the expertise line of questioning. This was also minor enough that I was not







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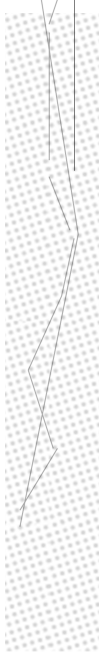
sure I could have fully inferred it in the moment. The call-out placement I made... I could also have saved it for our discussion of incentives, but I wanted the unbalance to be early. The ‘focus’ I was establishing - I wanted it to feel like an instant pounce, a hard misstep, rather than a looping-around reminder.”

“His moments of reticence didn’t factor in as a callout point?”

“No - that fear felt natural. An innocent could have acted in the same way if they were mistakenly suspected or brought in for supplemental questioning rather than primary.”

“Good, sounds correct. Alright,” she said, and clipped the paper back to her desk, “what could have rerouted you? Dig deep and think about it, be very honest with me. In this exercise we know the subject’s guilt for a fact. What could have diverted your attention from him? ‘Convinced of his innocence’ is one way, but the shallowest one. Take a moment.”

“No, I won’t require one. There were a few points. Knowing Henarl’s typical sense of interpretation, I suspected a full confession. I thought he would play it that way -





cave early and completely, give everything up and place the blame squarely on his superiors' shoulders. He had the leeway to do it, as he acted far more out of personal connection than personal gain. And I had no idea how to handle that should it have come, it would override my decisiveness. I would necessarily read him as a coward, not a conspirator."

"Then you know little about cowards. Good work, more?"

"I'd like to think I'd left few outs for drama - I can handle meltdowns. He could have tried to convince me by reasoned argument, I suppose, but I don't see a route where he wouldn't implicate himself there with the level of details necessary for such an argument... am I missing anything?"

"No. He was cornered, at the end, it was a matter of making the kill... So. I'll make it official soon, but I believe you've earned three-fourths marks here."

My face was instantly red, a rush of pride and relief. "Thank you! Thank you, instructor!"

"Mm. Last question: what's your guess so far? The actual project in question, the hidden initiative - this was not ex-





plained in the scenario. Given what you have now, what's your current suspicion?"

Deep breath. "Theocratically, the habitat is lax. Not strongly spiritual - that can be a good thing, as I don't suspect anything apostatic here. There's a reason the investigation is centered around the water commission; if not stemming directly from the commissioner, his purview is a major conduit of whatever is happening. So my wager is that it's an issue of living space - extra population, extra biosphere? I realize I've neglected the wider regional political situation; the interior seems so straightforward and self-contained. But that's my direction next: who is coming?"

She gave a platonically neutral response and dismissed me - I hoped that I saw a satisfied twitch in her eyes. Outside her office, Anahit was immediately in my face.

"What did you get! How was it, how was it?"

"Hmm," I hummed, not meeting her eyes. But she caught my flicker of a smile and pushed forward until I was forced to say it. "Well, three-fourths marks."





She threw her arms around my neck, spinning us in the air down the little brig corridor. “WAH! Yes! That’s incredible, you’re soaring! Ugh, how could it be any other way, of course we’ll be in same year forever, we’ll get there! Wonderful. Wonderful, Emelry. And isn’t *she* wonderful?”

I disentangled her, and we skipped back in long strides back, arm in arm. “As expected! These aren’t even final marks, you know, and who says I will get so easy a pair as Henarl during finals. And yes, of course you enjoy her - she is ruthless. No time, no time at all for cutting her words down, and she speaks with her teeth.”

“You are so smug, so smug because now you know you will sail through. Not so the worrier you’ve been for weeks, ha! Oh nooo,” she mocked me, “what shall I do short of perfection, how can I bear the wait for confirmation of what I know!”

“Oh, as if you’re any better. Eager girl! You play too much.”

The amused waver in her voice stilled, “No, I’m not playing. I’m just excited, is it not exciting? How liberating it is to fall more and more into the grip of the skill. Maybe all education is like that. But no schools so direct as ours,







But suddenly I was out. Present life faded back in - I'd been thinking too broadly. I stared upwards, vision reconstituting itself, at those rainbow glimmers of lights suspended under the great green dome of the grave tree.

"Broke it," Kali said.

I held my head - dizzy - and slowly stretched my neck. "Yes. Aaah... yes, I lost it. I don't mean to - the feeling of it slips away -"

"Emotional, that's it. Spiral, pull in outside the moment. Motive force must associative, must eat and digest everything the feeling feels. Unmeant for sharing. Torrid, no? So how to clean it?"

I sighed. Looked at my hands, knuckle by knuckle. "It's - there's the detachment. Learning this by coursework is heavy meditation. Making those standardized loops personal requires a discipline, an ability to keep your head in order. One maintains a space for oneself - a field - that memories can slot into without overwhelming you with their own perspective. Steeping-in rather than living-through. But shared that becomes impossible."





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E hopped around me, keeping eir beak pointed at my face. “Isn’t? So quick, you, so quick and perfect. Impossibly quick! Half marks, for breaking it.”

“Pff. Please.”

“But isn’t it? How is that space built? A square - a neutral form - how is there to be a neutral form between two people, two heartborn language? A bricking, a treading should happen. Walking together. Iron. What happened, tell me, next, the night? Now I know some of this story.”

“We went to celebrate that night. Her, I, another girl - Ameen Bera. Anahit insisted on inviting her. She asked me what I thought of her - nothing in particular, I said - but Anahit saw right through me. Ameen was another lieutenant-track, with a famous liaison mother she was close to. She began with a full foot over the threshold - you know? I’d be shy around her, impressed. I was very fervent there. How I’d wanted to compare notes with her, ask for direction on where to look, what she knew mattered in a lieutenant. I was chastising myself for my shyness when Anahit, she laughed at me, said how could I be so blind to not know we were already friends? I didn’t understand. We had talked during class, partnered on a project or two. But





Anahit knew I was already friends with her, before I knew. How does that happen?"

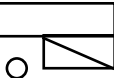
"Why did you love so academy?"

Another flash of a blush on me. I knew what e meant. "Because it was prestige and progress without stakes. It was the thrill of discovery, secret discovery. It was fun and safe and of a home I loved. I was proud of being there, of belonging to it. There is a sense," I sighed, looking high high up into the interior of the tree, "and I think all corporate states have it, of participation. In Ilion it is pure and small. It's tight-knit, in the logic of families, a ring of sending letters and seeing off. I liked it, and it was easy."

And then it was easy. We watched the rest of the night together, all of it. The hotpot restaurant the three of us had gone to, what we talked of - class gossip, hopes for future crews. We giggled, we hid our faces. Kali along with us, wide-eyed, I hoped it was a gift. I carried the wonder, unbroken, to when I slept. We woke together - and then it was eir turn.







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The center sang and sang and everyone listened. My fellow preborn - I knew what I was now - and people of the city. City! I couldn't hear the words yet. I was listening so hard, at all times; they were starting to take shape, and I knew the tones. I could hear the tones. I could hear the feeling of what was being said - the penetration of knowledge - the long tower of stairs - the inner fire I had to hold. And I knew what bones were. The tone had called me here. Months and months ago on a day the fog rolled through the city and turned it grey I heard the echo I had been hearing before, the one I had heard behind throats, in second words, but now song and song filled with it and it brought me like a magnet.

Another preborn perched near where I laid. "Red/blue/sharp/soft/see/finish/there," e sang to me. "Blue/soft/here/finish," I replied. E flew away.

I knew what the world was. Everyone knows what the world is. The world is a place you are pulled out of but fly against - you live in the world through flight, through the current between ground and sun. Everyone knows the sun is fed by something greater, inner-outer source. The sun shapes the sky, and the world turns and pushes against its borders. The world is a barrel that wants to grow; it turns





and presses. An egg grows with the spirit inside. That life grows into a further world. There is an endless ladder under the river, under a great weight of water.

In me was nothing but this drive. It boiled, coiled, swirled like a hidden eddy of flame, edging through my veins, feeling out the limits of my skin. My feathers tingled, each one, down in the quillpoints. God, God it was like fever, my eyes! It was building in me - it would burst - and I could not move it. More. Less. I looked up, the other student-listeners frolicing in the branch eaves, among the bones and bright edges.

I was here because I was once in the center of the egg, and now I was in the center of my skull, and now I was in the place that was the center of this society, this mass of higher ones who I was not, and this place was the center of the lower world. The sun was the center of the higher world. And once I was there, I would be gone to another center. But everything must be perfected first. Everything must complete. Cycle, sign, sight. The light changed, the hour marked, it was playing on the leaves, and each stone then shone from a different angle. There was a glow that was not fire. I knew what fire was. Fire ate and was kept. A kind of fire that was free, rote, faceted. A solid fire. Teacher - my





teacher - my eyes, my nailpoints, I was... there was shaped shadow. There was the smell of sugar, and I was awake.

Bara noticed by that night. The nymph flock dispersed and lingered, and the adult students back to their homes. But now I was among them. "New name, why are you bent?" e asked me, after dusk fell and I had not moved from the little space on the ground floor e read at.

"I hurt myself. It was a sign. My life: I grew here in the hutches too busy, left with my friend, climbed and fell, it was a sign. Now. I refused city so world refused me. Not so?"

"So. I can see it, yes." E bobbed eir head, hitched eir shoulders up - an old and ragged blue, well-preened but feathers thinned and bones grown heavy. Shuffling. "You can tell that story."

"A desert now. This yolk-well of the city within it, in paint and blood. I am drunk on it, heart-point heart-point. Everything lacked, wanted, defined in these walls. Everything - the swell - the plumb - the beat - and key."

I woke up bleeding. I coughed, my ears were wet and hot, my fingers came away from them red. "Dropped," Kali said,





paying it no mind as we found the world again. “I spoke no more to em that night. E left in a huff, that walking cloak - but we spoke first, then. And gave me more time to cook in myself, my broth.” Kali clicked eir nails, already an attendant of eirs was by my side with a wet towel, cleaning me off. It would stop, soon.

“Ruthless, you,” I said. “That was... I’m twisted up. How was it so smooth in the moment? You sailed right through the transition - and I along. But here the whiplash is, is agony, this, this...”

“Utter transfiguration. Nothing changing in particular. And you always in the moment, very the moment. One fails to describe it, no description. Before the faculty - red, far, shut, call, look.”

“How were you *alive*? Lucid, in the womb.”

“Eir eye was on me then. I was a favored student then. The speakings, eir’s, were for the benefit of all there - but tailored build circle of successors, keen who listened those. E died. I mounted em to the circle of kings, the ringlet of bones upper entrance. Eir eyes are blue now, true and tired gilded blue.” Kali’s claws snapped across the hardwood floor, polished and gleaming. “The world came to



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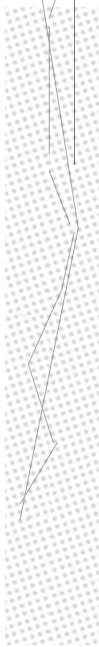
Savannah: you are late. The works and epics and treatises and games, all filtered down and settled. Thus was God given to me, you see? Thus in shape, echo pure, far away and like a new shower light. Bara read and read, and here we make the opposite of song in our fumblings. Dream pain, and wake work. My work isn't that, but Gelo thinks asame, you saw. A shotgun: do you know?"

"No... I don't know that word."

"An old hunter's weapon: pa! To bore the whole animal, all-covered target. A conic palm blast. Turn, Emelry, for I will gift you a shotgun. I will craft you into a shotgun."



Back across the river, from the grave tree to the bank we nested at. My litter walked slow and I met no one's eyes - I was dazed, it suited me. Rain, he was a celebrity in the city now, a beloved guest. I was too, I supposed - but when he passed, the esteem towards him took the shape of chatter. Questions, dares, boasts and taunts he took in kind. He laughed with the city, laughed it off, exchanged compliments, jabs, all to create a kind of safety. He went out of his way to show he was unguarded, as if saying, "I will not shy or shock from you."





I met no one's eyes, but they met mine. The crowds parted for me, they watched me. Rain was a cheerful new classmate: I was a dignitary princess. My esteem was a sort of reverence or even fear, what could I do with that but inhabit it? My litter walked on autopilot, I shared the chambers of the king, I carried the outer law. I had come here to change the world.

It was a long, low, late night. The streetlights across the city were a rainbow of senselessly arranged colors, but along the bridge-dam they were honeyed incandescent and built to splay their light out onto the murals. Fat moths with fabricsque wings. Beetles clinking against the lantern glass. I let myself sway in my seat. I let passers by, the tentative crowd hopping from perch to perch alongside me, to catch my eye, to take that curious glance, and I would look back as gold light flashed across theirs. A simple acknowledgement. A lonely girl walking home late, staring and aloof.



*"Where for me is my skinning blade?"* Likin cried, shimmering and almost invisible at the center of the formation, recognizable only by the silvers e was clad in and the unique high and ragged tone of eir voice.





*"Who will bring me the heft?"* the crowd answered in patches, in one roar, the call-responders darting through the crowd for a better view.

*"I gyre down the ladder land, where allwolf eats the sun*

*Call down soft and canyon cut, drown abide my lores*

*Gale beneath my skin I spare, my skinning hour come.*

*"I awhite, aswan away,"* e called - the heart. From that center the wings grew, the turning head and clacking beak. A kite dance, hundreds of crows synchronized, shaping out the shadow of a single massive one.

*"Abandon me aside!"* the response came again. Loudest from Minak, who in the moment's excitement hurtled up and away from our group to join the rightward wing, near the formation's shoulder.

*"Where for me is my cracking haar, who will bring me there?"*

*Die unswayed of ocean god; mine is the skinning one*

*Who will my eye chaff to claim? Who can unhalf me?*





*"I was coming down for you," "My master craft, my sign!"*

*"My blue and pale, my mark ashade, far away from me*

*I was eaten. I alone was counting out the gait*

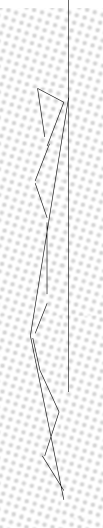
*My bluest brave. My seed in snow. My petal rotted sweet."*

*"I dive down welcome aroad," "Alone now, I, alone!"*

*"What mark cut can follow me? My skinning hour come*

*Love and laugh and blood and brain, medicine I swell*

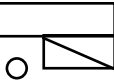
*My bower heart escaped from me. I settled in the dark."*



The whole week was a duty of entertainment. Rain and I had our schedules arranged in an ongoing series of play-dates (there was no better word) with Ynewy's circle of ministers: we were being jointly courted, and courting each other in an odd vicarious triangle. Outside of our sessions, Kali was permanently occupied across a table from Ynewy, both drinking delirious volumes of chocolate in clarifications over this or that territorial trivia, or such and such balance of trade and aid. The great dance between the two great cities of Savannah.





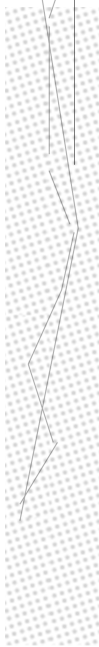


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Quay produced quick and bright folk with deep eyes, their words were carefully chosen and spilled out of their beaks. Quarry bred proud birds: proud, ruthlessly fairminded, clean and vibrant, steelily shy. Looy, a lanky and sneering roan whose every movement was etiquette, exemplified these traits. E watched the dance impassively, neck following it as if e was above the sky. “Are you enthralled, Rain? Harka, no sport, will not tell me the read e has. And how to dare disturb this Minak! Ka. You. Is this beautiful?”

Rain took up four rows of bleachers - we were close to the exit to accomodate for our bulk, much to the chagrin of overruled Minak who had wanted a higher seat. But e found one anyway, leaving us, and Rain was happy to oblige. E leaned over casually, “Spectacular. And yes, of course, leave em to the play - e has been so dreaming of this. E’s tried to pitch it to me - I don’t pretend to get it yet - but it really is spectacular. Human dance at a certain level still surprises me, what is possible with a body so familiar - that awe gets doubled here, right? Look, you’ve seen me walk, how strange is it?”

Looy grunted. “How you do not die. Teetering pillar, yes.”





“And so here. I love dance, I’m a fan, I’ve seen good dances. Hyperballads back home had the benefit of Hightower schools and precedent, these ruthlessly competitive ateliers and social spheres, you understand, the only route into any main performances. Even of middlingly-sized cities. But no skill like that is going to find its way out here. We still hold a few for holidays, but they end up boring. All recitation, no revelry! Talent shows, by and for old men, awping at a traditional form dead for two centuries.”

“You still dance? Here, with the staff?” Looy was quieter. He hadn’t expected such an enthusiastic response.

“Just the usual holidays, yeah, no special productions. Again, petty, village-tier stuff. La!” he scoffed, grinning. “It’s a town built by exiles up there, so they have a sickly homesickness. A noble spirit of return, and then a pathetic nostalgia. Plenty to appreciate... little to admire. So I could show you some real performances, but they will not be here - not in the foreseeable future. Nothing that compares to this. And nothing, inner-system or out, that replicates it.”

Looy dropped it, shifting weight from talon to talon, weighing. I wish Rain had not called the quarter a “city of





exiles” - would Quay and Quarry not qualify? And would they ever stop talking over the song?

The giant crow dove - the left wing plummeted, the right hovered in place, a waterfall of momentum with the beak pointing groundward. Slowly it evened out to swoop upwards again, too large for a single angle to capture it - I envied Minak for eir quickness, and I looked up so hard that my neck ached and my ears strained.

*“Take this glass away from me!” “Drown it tide and turn.”*

*“Sharp sharp lie, and melting balm, I never wanted so*

*Peeling skein of corn and kale - flesh reordered thin*

*So billowed you, where I could hear, pale and careful turn.”*

*“A molt ago your face was mine,” “Mine, as was a sun!”*

*“My wander star, a morning glows, a hissing to the bay*

*Gallop down, you buried pile, bottle my debris*

*Shrapnel clean, come split my heart, split my skin ayear.”*





We filtered out - walking. The rest of the crowds simply flew away at the conclusion, but of course we had to climb our way down. Harka, Minak, Looy balanced on the railing of my litter, and so did Rain's hand as he picked his way down the very narrow stadium perches.

"How long will you be here, Looy?" I asked em where he perched at the litter's prow, confidently staring ahead.

He didn't look back. "Days, while the load prepares. Updrafts will finish soon, then reassembly before the next barge passes. All timed, an agony to organize."

"The kings still trading," Harka explained. "Much still to decide in that load, and fare."

"Ynewy is never a king," Looy snipped. "Stop."

"Aye, well, I won't say."

"Rain Flower," Looy shifted subjects, "your spider. We saw it, by the river you sleep. It alone could do the work, no? Carry our cargo up and weld the wing back together there. We proceed with what we have, but how little. Do not say,





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‘it is not mine to give, it is my master’s’, because now you are here. How?”

“That’s true, my friend, la that’s very true. Who says no, who says no? But they bricked me once I didn’t get back. No emissary’s privilege for me, no. I had the wheel for the whole way here, but once my session ended they left me with a missive and nothing else. I’m beached, oh, how much poorer am I!”

“A friend brings gifts. A friend does aid.” Looy stared at him, expressionless, and waited long enough to be unsettling. Quay we had been in long enough to accustom to the common mannerisms, but Quarrybirds had none of these. Grave and direct, all of them. “Let’s, then. We can fix it. Likely.”

“You’ll forgive me. You’re welcome to access it - it’s scrap now. Janitors operate on deep company secrets, far far above my own grade. You’ll forgive me, surely, but I cannot imagine many people in the world doing anything about that lock.”

“But the wires of this bone are ours: Quarry owns them now. And whose bone was it? We can do it, I will wrench





it open to show you. And you'll fly with us. Harka, fly too, what do you think?"

Harka nodded. "Aye, worth and reasonable. With permission?"

Rain smiled and shrugged.



But soon the engines were thrumming. Rain was laughing in incredulity there by the riverbank. The spider rested there, crouching in the pebbly sands of the riverbank with its tendrils dipping into the water to cycle. Rain had spilled its guts out; the bottom chassis was popped open and the mess of control modules sprawled out by their umbilical wires. Little drones, those spindly spider-hatchlings, were not subject to the lockout, and dutifully swept between the exposed components to clean away any sand that encroached. The carpenters had been busy - already a roofed roost cast the janitor in shade.

Clouds had rolled in. A gray, close sky somehow more colorful than in clear air. The warm-colored plains and green rashes of forest blended together, usually, into a blue-tinted brownish vague color far above you. It was best kept to

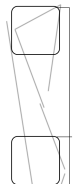




peripheral vision, for me. Too long spend tracking those geological contours made my head spin, and I felt panic building slow and low deep in me. I knew how to turn it off now: looking away.

Without clouds, it was blue haze and red dust and a piercing fluorescent light. Spinelight, with exposure, was less ominous, but became stifling. It was an enclosed glass roof too distant to touch. The distance, the limitation, it blended to an infinite enclosure, a true but hard to sense limit of things. The whole world was there, stretching, waiting. But with clouds - the spinelight was softened. The blue of the air, the painted land, glowed from behind the grey in an almost iridescent spectrum. Pastel chalks. Healing mist. A warmth to it, cottony, summer-storm gentle even as the chilly rain spittled down.

We'd known the rain was coming, even just the drizzle. Clouds were impossible to miss - no horizon - just the long pale raindrop slide down the skyland as the formation rolled towards you. My towel I draped around myself like a shawl, and Minak had insisted on appropriating a cart vendor's awning retrofit to my litter. Far before me, Rain and his attendant flock fussed at the janitor's entrails - what were they even doing?





Part of the control module hung from the spider's prow like a severed jaw from tendons. Looy sat on a little wooden stool with a precision solder in eir talons, working at watchmaker scale on one of several trinketlike components spread and sheltered from the rain. E had a clay cup of some indistinct food next to em, picking at it occasionally as e worked.

"That's what?" Minak asked.

Looy continued working, not looking up. "Hm? Oh, a few routing issues only. You study networks? This is far more straightforward than was lent, that Rain said impossible! But past the door now."

"No no, that fare. I don't know it. May I've some?"

"This currantmeal? These are my little rations, no. It is what I have for this period. Speak to our suppliers if you're curious, they are upriver for us - but really, it's nothing special."

Minak hopped from perch to perch, staring down at em. E had been exploring the janitor's chassis for the past little while, finding new outcroppings and contours to perch on







and investigate. “No sharing? And no taking, you all shun the king’s invitations. Why no dinner? Why not grace us?”

“We don’t ignore the invitations. Ynewy comes, each time...”

“Ka. And eats one bite to talk and talk. Are you above the eating and meeting? No dinner for you,” Minak mumbled, still fluttering around. “None come but Ynewy, who picks. Why?”

Harka looked over gravely. But Minak ignored it. Looy returned both eir gazes, stiffening eir neck and fixating again on the work. “How hospitable. Please and quiet. Let me work.”

“So above - great flier.”

But eir patience was done with quickly, and e dropped eir tools. “Young thing, what do you want? Here I am, a work and sustaining myself. What culture will you give me but habit-breaking and waste? Don’t decide my place - as if you paint and it comes to life! Take the food, starve me - but I will not eat alongside you.”





“Friend I order and impose nothing. You as Quarry refuse welcome. What do you tell when you leave? Scorn our king’s considerations? Mock what preserved?”

“Nearsighted, you. I work - I work through all dares - my dream is my work. What do you give me? This is welcome, cruel game? Go, complain to another idling in a premature late-phase. Glutton! Welcome, ka, such warm welcome no to show your guests - human guests too - such a performance as you loved. What was that long love song meant to convey? Punishment? I could say more, but I will work.”

“Mi! Nak!” Harka had enough at the first sign or raised voices, crashing to perch between them. Minak fluttered off, barely keeping eir balance. “Ka! May shame, Minak, now. And both of you! These dallying convictions, I believe nothing.”

“Nearsighted! E said, and you!” Minak protested, still waving eir wings. “Old rock. Here old disrespect! Vassal, we’ll abide this? Can’t you mark?”

Harka burst out, bumping em with eir chest, wings still folded. “Can’t you give what you beg for? Talk and talk of open, charity, and where is it! So valuable, you say, to not value it. Proud. Where is the city in that? The meeting?”



And Looy - you are curt, I understand. I feel your disruption, Minak is hasty. But talk efficiency, bring that to em - you argue prolong back.”

“I only responded,” Looy said with beak raised - but e had at last joined the conversation.

“But angry. Both of you have it, before talking, petty and irrelevant. Neither spoke to the other nor respected their own stance. Think for this! Minak: you will come with me. Looy - we do what you ask now. Peace now! Speak later when fair things to say.”

Looy seemed satisfied. Harka hurried Minak away, scolding em the whole time to mingled protestations and apologies, and Rain squatted down next to Looy - these two got along better. They were able to talk shop, check in on the state of the jailbreak. Rain knew how to not step on toes.

The rain itself, meanwhile, let up. As the light persistent drizzle turned to less-frequent fat drops, I stopped being able to overhear. Thanks of drops on the awning, and everyone too busy to give me a glance. There were few chances to be so alone.

The communicator panel of my litter buzzed.





Anahit.

“Rain Flower! *Rain!*”



Thank God he heard me. He ran over as well as he could, knelt right in the muddy red-brick walkway next to me, arms folded on the railing. Ruining his clothes, staring at me.

Silence on the line. I worried there was nothing there.

“Why are we doing this,” I finally said. “Waiting each other out? Talk to me if we’ve anything to say.”

She made me wait long enough to worry again. “I hate you now and you hate me. What a sad crew we have! What a silly, silly story we are in. Finally your voice again and you, you actor...”

“This is the first time you’ve hailed me personally. I assume you’ve something real to tell me.”

“I have called you seventy-six times for nothing. I was shocked you’ve deigned to acknowledge me. And now you





talk as if..." She sighed, gave up on the sentence. "There is nothing to do."

My chest shook, suppressed panic. "I had to do it. I could only do what I did. You all are quick and sharp, I know you are finding your way. Do you want to update me on the situation? You can guess what work I am doing, Harka has carried me.."

"*Graduation speech*," she hissed, bitter and low. "Oh, we will cope. We will be torn apart! With our little adventures underway. That Harka surely ordered your mouth shut forever, I have nothing to ask you. I have nothing to say to you! You've ruined all of it, everything's ruined."

"Please... please. A hard hand we've been dealt. It will stay hard. What is happening there?"

"I have continued making my readings. I have kept working - God knows what you are doing, as you've rejected everything. If you would talk to us, Emelry, even talk just to me, have you found it? This same rot? I don't know what you can do, what I should be doing... There's something wrong here. The crows, the light, the developmental history, all those are symptoms but... its more, its between any of that. It's not what we're talking about any more.





This is all... through a window, its set dressing! There's something sick. I have no idea what's happening, I feel like I'm dead. I don't know anything about it. It's sick and wrong. It's not evil, or weak, or different. It's a familiar key. I think it's interplanal, it works in death. Look... I'm not talking to you."

"Of course not. What is Bettany saying?"

"How would I know?" she snapped - and then a short gasp, catching her misstep.

"What do you mean? Is she being cagey? Is -"

"You don't want to ask too much either, huh?" Her voice was sneering and desperate. Spoke too fast, as she did when nervous. I knew I was speaking too softly and betraying the same thing, but there was nothing to be done. "No plan. Flying blind. I'd laugh, dear, I would. You give nothing to me! No messages back, no pieces of the puzzle! Who do you think you are. You're delusional, Emelry! Lost in dreams of fate! You who will order the world what it should be! Yes, I know that city well enough, I know what you're learning. We're all desperate now, desperate vessels, you've made it a desperate era."





“It will all come out. Savannah cannot escape the sun, it will be brought out. That is the only way we have, that long process - it is now a rush to make sure the first movements are favorable. I reject - I reject only what stalls that, what paints a circle around us.” I said it wrong, with a tinge too much of panic: “Where are you?”

“I feel like... I’m so lost. I’m so lost and alone. Are you? Are you adrift in this same empty space, cut and cut and cut so far from...? Aaah.” She said, weakvoiced but more composed, “It’ll look better, right? For how close we were. Sells it better. More of an issue, and less of one, when we both flee, and the story gets split between us. They will have options on the narrative. It gives us time.”

“Where *are* you? You would abandon them too?”

“I will laugh, I’ll do it. Hang up now,” and she beat me to it. But not before a murmur of another voice came through. Kuryo’s, echoing in a very small room, and indistinct.

“Tell me first. Are you somewhere I can meet you?” I glanced at Rain for approval, he nodded vigorously. “Can we? Listen, please. We are moving reckless, but remain a crew.”





"I'm where I can make it count." The line politely clicked off.



Rain and Harka both insisted I not sleep in the water that night, not so agitated. Harka and three others had flown a whole bundle of blankets and cushions over to Rain Flower's hut on the barely-claimed pretext of stocking the whole empty village. Swaddled in all these was almost as easy as the water; we sipped hot stomach-warming tea as Rain dried his hair.

"Does a steward have a place here?" Harka asked, bringing over a lantern in eir beak and carefully placing it where he and I sat on the floor.

"No, thank you," I all but whispered. "Don't concern yourself. I will speak with the king soon - tomorrow, early - and you will be there."

"Aye. You'll your secrets."

"That's not what I meant..." I said.

"No! No blame," e insisted. "Good work. Bumble along, I - no barrier read I, only a skin. You two friends: I will







welcome you again and again. Settle - talk - and talk I in a cozied morning. Sleep well?"

"We will, love," Rain assured em."Busy day, sleep soon."

The river whispered, the cicadas chanted from the distant trees in great numbers - and a few clinging to the outdoor posts holding up the house. Harka flew off towards the city, lurching steadily through the tall dark sky. The rain had passed, the cloud formation transferred beyond us and now climbing up the opposite curve of the habitat. It had thickened, and far away were low murmurs of thunder, and occasional flickerings of lightning. Far away, muffled in distance as I was hiding in the blankets.

"That at least went better than what you said of the Red-name call. Though similarly frenzied, those two. Crazy bunch, you all, haha. Are you having fun in all this drama?"

"No. I want to be done with it and call the See to cut through the politics."

"Can't call Mom just yet."





“I know. And I’m sorry I didn’t come and get you when Redname contacted me. I was in the water, she had a camera on me...”

“It’s fine. You told me right away, and I heard this one. Stop being so nervous - I believe you already, la.”

“I do need your advice, you know. I’m being vulnerable here. I guess that they have fled to Redname’s partisans - if they are together, and have also fled, it is a similar mission they’ve undertaken to the interior of the third - should we chase them down?”

“Do you actually want to leave the city?”

“No,” I said, instantly. “I want to see the End, but they leave so early. My work with Kali will not be done.”

“Hmmm.” He sighed, and laid down on the hardwood floor lazily. He asked the ceiling, “How fast do you want to go?”

“God. As is possible. I know I’m flustered with that desire, to push and push.

“Here,” he said, “here’s what I say we can do. Ditch your old bestie. Her and Redname - write ‘em both off. Fran-





tic worrying and vague warnings - they're more flustered than you are, I can tell you that, and Kuryo the fatalist will always pull them in that direction. You were right when you told me last time, if staff had taken drastic measures they would have done more than flick my janitor off and make no changes. No, I say they are in a flurry of cleaning up their act, deleting evidence, preparing their own case. Futile - Harka says we have complete system backups right here, staff can touch nothing. They are panicking, but have had years to plan a slow contingency procedure. And Bettany is a strong and sly woman - Anahit was right that she has a perfect cover story of two devoted friends going rogue. The two of you were not the most stable at the beginning -"

"Alright, alright. Let's not joke."

He grinned up at me. "But that's what I say. We're in a good position, lieutenant. Really. We've fallen into being fortified. Forget everyone else, we can run for as long as we can get away with. Follow through, break the tether. Talk with Kali tomorrow - if you think it's time to contact the See, then it's time. It'll be months for a decision in the court, months more if they wanna send someone. Talk to the king, draft a message, make contact. That's what I'd





do - and then keep running until they react one way or the other. You're right there too - their response will be the one that matters, this whole mess can only go so far before landing in their hands. Put it there early, and put your name on it and Kali's. Right?"

"Ka." Why not. Why not letter to the King of the World? I would only be delaying it.

"You have a long life to reconnect with. To mend any broken faith. But we both know... Quay has... a tight schedule. They can't wait so long, here."



I broached the subject in the morning - and from eir own desk beneath the grave tree e brought me a handwritten paper. E shone with pride, could not stop looking up and breathing hard. This was an old draft. E had been ready, Revising and revising this message over the years: deep underneath its current state, there were turns of phrase I could recognize from the same draft that Bara once kept, in the same place.

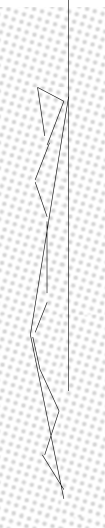
Revised and revised, by the generations of Quay:





*O daughter of Delphi - son of the Sun! High one and voice of the Lord, I greet a king as a king. You who are the branch of gold, the bloodspring of goods, you whose spoke the world's wheel turns upon: my friend and falconer! Will you fear my sharp beak and quick claw? Will you jolt at the death-scent my wings carry? It is few that know the weight of ruling. I speak from Savannah, first of many. It is happening. To you I call - to the line of Christs I entreat myself - for none other could bear my keen call. Call me, as a king, as a wolf, as a comrade! Call me from the outer dark, the terrible valley forest, the savannahs where we together were children once. Call me to the inner fire - I will lay at your warm and resting side - I will alight on your strong and treelike arm - I will hunt for you, and cast many gifts at your feet - for my forbidden one, my betrothed; for the wise one, the pure one. I will be as your rediscovered eye; return me to my socket. Now you will feed me of the lifeblood, for it was written, "It flew from you at the ebbing of the waters, and knew your name when your tongue failed to tell it." It was I! My love, my pen, my heart is yours. O king of one million hands, to you I entrust my excruciation.*





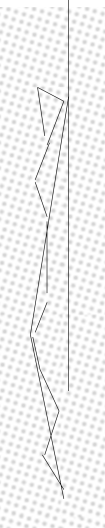
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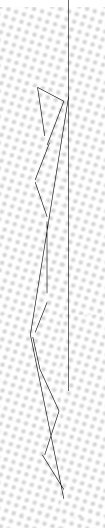






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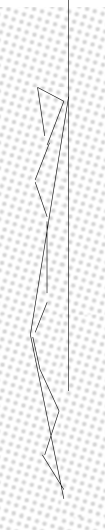




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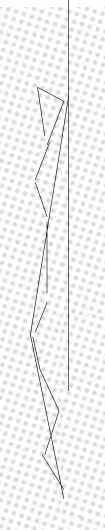
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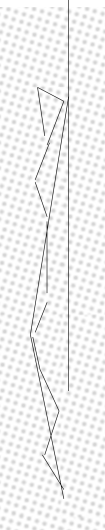
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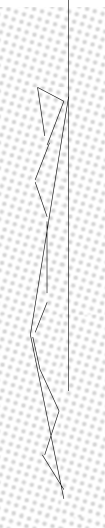
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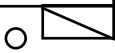
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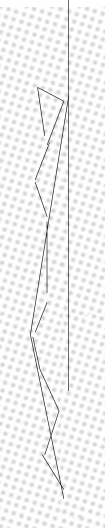
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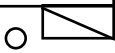
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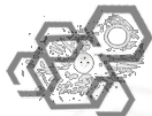
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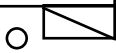


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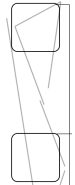


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