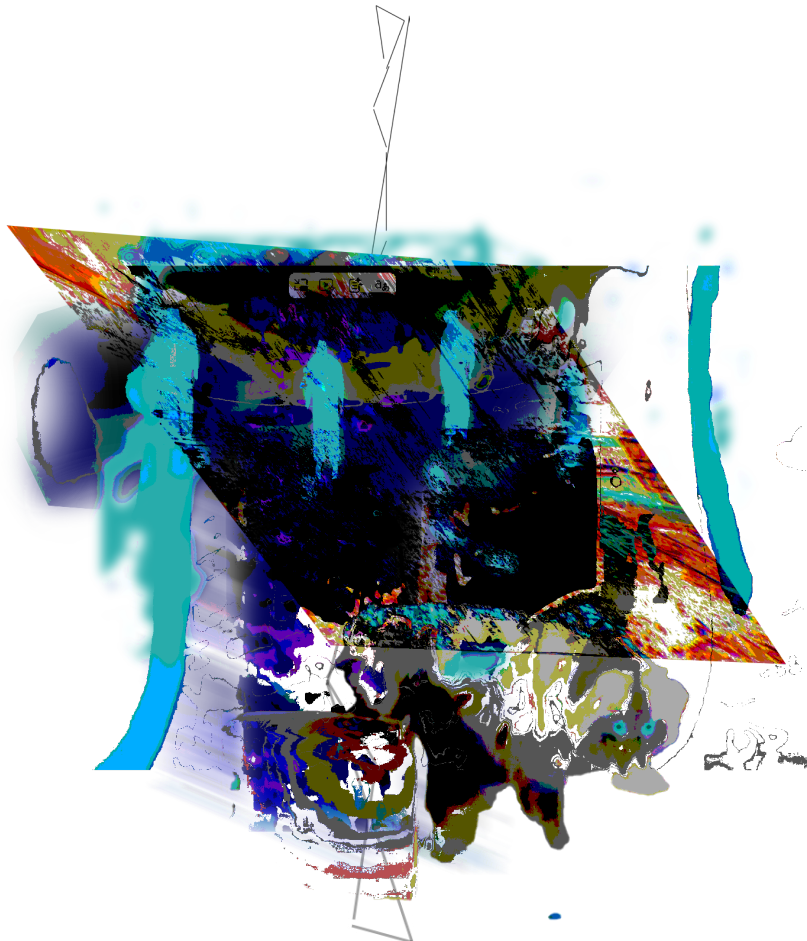




HOLOHAUS-11





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SPECIAL THANKS

to Renko Chazakiël Rodenburg for nightmare

companions

to nekosattva for shattered fallout

to ghosted vain for veiled flora

to Amara Reyes for wingbeats

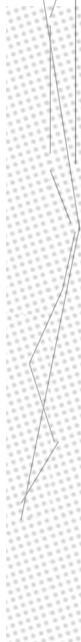
to baroquespiral to tell the vision

to tsumaran_chan for sake and world

to uepou for the name

and countless others including the one who

sees this





by: Renko Chazakiël Rodenburg

Ruby-Lynn Schulze

Birthday: September 8, 1992

Sex: Female

Occupation: Full-time Witch and Doll-Medic, occasionally nurse.

Blood Type: B-negative

Hair Colour: White

Eye Colour: Purple

Likes: Long walks during Autumn, Discworld, Earthsea, Pokémon. Cinnamon tea. Goulash.

Dislikes: Snow, cold, dogs, loud noises, the summer heat, doing the dishes.

“Write something for my biography? Can I break the fourth wall?”

“You’d rather not. Okay.”

Hello! I’m Ruby-Lynn Schulze, the cute older moon-touched-witch who has been teaching Marieken magic. I’m Mirror Court, which should give some hints to my as of yet unmentioned, tragic backstory. I don’t live with Robin and



his dolls, but I do regularly swing by. I'm an expert at patching up broken dolls and healing a variety of ailments that can befall other Periphery Demographics. Beyond that I'm an experienced witch, moonlighting as nurse in various communities around Amsterdam to collect spells and insights, always looking to improve on my as of yet unfinished unified theory of magic. The normies make life as a Periphery Demographic as hard as it could possibly be, but the beauty of magic makes up for a lot of hardships. I'm certain that a bright future is possible for all of us, if only we learn to overcome our differences and work together to build a better world, with or without human assistance!





Synopsis

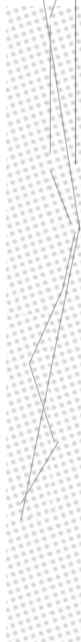
self-consciously normal Dutch teenager Marieken discovers she (like her idol Maria Mithras) is a changeling - one of the non-human "Periphery Demographics" that have reappeared since the return of magic, powered by belief, to a world that medicates, instrumentalizes, surveils, and eventually wants to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



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Last time

Marieken begins to grasp the implications of who she has killed, what she has become and the violent world that awaits her as a Periphery Demographic





CW: body horror, discrimination, cigarettes, violence, firearms, death, delusion confirmation, sexual innuendo, apocalypse

Jeremiah Amberson

I crawl through an alleyway in the southern part of Amsterdam on three limbs, dragging my all-important briefcase after me. There's no real reason to, but I felt like it and there aren't usually many people around to start complaining about that sort of thing in backalleys anyway. And even if there were, this isn't exactly a reputable part of town. At the end of the alley is a dumpster, and if my nose is not deceiving me, I'm about to hit the jackpot.

"Oh, hiiiiiiiiiii," I say as I open the dumpster and look into the cold, glassy eyes of a moontouched girl. "Jeremy moment," I snicker to myself as I drag her out of her grave. This is no place to bury a girl, I mentally complain. Ah well. Upsides and downsides. If she'd been buried in a reputable place for such things then I wouldn't have

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CHAPTER 04



found her or been able to get to her.

I dust off my tweed jacket- it's gotten all dirty from crawling around- and kick open my briefcase. My beautiful assortment of knives, tweezers, needles and stitching wire gleam in what little light of the moon reaches this dark and filthy corner.

"You must've wanted so much from life that you never got," I whisper to the girl as open her blouse. It's all torn and caked in blood and mud. "Don't worry," I say as I caress her head, play with her beautiful silver hair. "We'll buy you a new one."

Cause of death: multiple stab wounds to the abdomen. Time of death: about a day ago. Perfect. First thing to do is clean her wounds, and stitch them shut. I have to remove more of her clothes to properly reach them, which is a little awkward, but I remind myself I am a doctor and used to seeing bodies. Nothing weird about this. When I've properly cleaned up her wounds and applied stitching- beautiful work as always, I compliment myself- I grab my largest scalpel and make an incision into her chest, right next to her breast. It's grotesque work, reaching the heart- if only human beings did not have ribcages and sheets of cartilage guarding their hearts.



An apt metaphor for society, the way we guard our hearts. I chuckle to myself as I grab my bonesaw and cutter. “Don’t worry, dear. You can bare your heart to me.”

It’s gruesome work, opening her chestcage so I can expose her heart. With crunches and squelching I dig into her chest, and manage to clear space around the organ. She’s been dead long enough that she doesn’t really bleed, which helps. Her flesh has gone dark, and what little droplets of fresh blood remain are caked between a coagulated, brown mush.

I reach into my briefcase and grab my spools of thread. “What’s a good colour for you?” I whisper to her. Blue? No. Red? No. “You’re a special girl and you deserve a special thread, don’t you?”

With the gentlest of care I tie a golden string around her heart. It’s difficult, but I’m not afraid to get my hands dirty digging through her flesh to get a proper loop around her heart. I make a pretty tie into the thread, and smile. “You’re going to be alright.”

Closing up the chest cavity and my incision in such a way that she doesn’t look completely butchered is hard, but I’ve practiced a lot over the years. When I’m done with



my art, three large stitches over her chest keeping her skin more or less flush to her body are all that remain.

I tie a second piece of golden string around my ringfinger, and put my hand on her forehead.

"I'm not going to lie to you, this is going to hurt. A lot. Brace yourself, dear."

As I reach for the obsidian black gateway I found in the deepest reaches of my subconscious and will it open, the girl starts to scream. I try to contain a maniacal laugh, but my more base self gets the better of me. "Muahahahaha, she walks again," I howl to the moon.

The corpse-girl before me thrashes and screams and gasps for breath with lungs that no longer work. She claws around, and eventually manages to focus her gaze on me.

"What?" she moans. "What- my head. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts. I need to go- go to go to a doctor. Help me."

"I am a doctor," I say triumphantly. "I've put you back together."

"No," she says. "Something's wrong with me. It hurts."



She tries to crawl away, so I tug on the string on my finger and pull her back by the invisible cord that now binds us.

“What?” she yammers. “No, please, don’t hurt me.”

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I say. “I’ve pulled you back from the cold depths of death. You got stabbed, I think, and then dumped into that dumpster over there.”

“No!” she screams. “No! No! I’m not dead!”

“Shhhh,” I shush her, putting a finger to her lips. “I’ll help you get up. Let’s get you cleaned up. I have some clothes in my lair, and then we can go clothes shopping for something nicer tomorrow.”

“Your lair? I don’t know you. Get away from me.”

I tug on the thread on my finger and tighten my leash on her. She calms down, and obediently nods. With my new prize in thrall, I start to make my way back home. Best to avoid the streets if you’re walking with a girl wearing ruined shreds of clothing, covered in blood. Even in the middle of the night, you never know who you’ll run into.

I bring her to my “lair,” which seems to have been on-site housing for some now-abandoned construction project



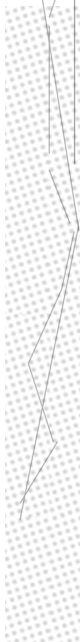
to expand the mall. Must've been from before the nightmare demons moved into the mall. It's nothing special, but it has running water, a small shower, a little kitchen and more than enough beds for my entire family.

Emily comes shambling up to me as I enter. "Dr. Jeremiah, you're back. And you brought someone."

"This one's just risen, she's very traumatized and doesn't really get what's going on yet. Can you put her under the shower and get her some clothes, tuck her into a bed? She'll feel better in the morning."

The dead don't sleep, but as my mother always chided me: even if you're just laying down with your eyes closed, you're still resting. I pour myself a mug of cold, stale coffee, rinse my mouth with mouthwash and go to sleep under my work desk myself.

One short night of the same dream as always- six hours of an empty, black field with a chill wind howling though the sky- I crawl back out from under my desk. I'm starting to stink a little, so I kick off my pants, my shirt and my tweed jacket and cover myself in deodorant. I put on one of the identical sets of clothing I keep in a trunk near my desk. Outside my little office space is a commotion, and





I wonder what could have gotten the corpses so riled up.

“Hey hey, what’s poppin, what’s the buzz?” I yell at Giselle and Emily.

“There’s police at the door,” Giselle yells back. She and Emily are currently blocking the door, preventing some men from coming in.

“Hello officers, what seems to be the problem?” I ask, putting on my best idea of an innocent, calming smile. Outside my lair are six police officers and two men from the Ministry of Mysterious Business. Men in black.

“Are you Jeremiah Amberson?” one of the men in black barks at me.

“DOCTOR Jeremiah Amberson, but my friends call me Jeremy. If this is about last night-”

“We’re asking the questions. Do you have your Peripheral Demographic registration papers?”

“Ugh,” I groan. What is with these people? “Yeah yeah, I’ll go grab them.”

I go back in, grab my briefcase and let it fall open in front



of the cops. Their hands move to their firearms as they see the knives and other surgical tools.

"Those are for work," I grumble as I pull out my identity papers.

"Hrmph," one of the men in black grunts as he snatches them out of my hands. "Dr. Jeremiah Amberson. Antisocial Personality Disorder, Schizoaffective Disorder, Necrophiliac. Necromancer?"

"That's actually a really insulting term in the deathwright community," I protest.

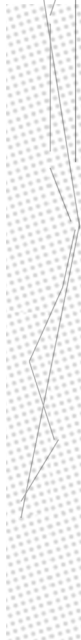
"Sure it is. You're coming along. The Ministry of Mysterious Business wants to talk to you. Get in the car."

"Euh, I'm kind of on a busy schedule..."

"We're not asking."

"Alright. Giselle, please take good care of the new girl. Make sure she settles in and feels welcome, okay?"

"I will," the corpse says, waving after me as the two men in black hurry me into their car.





Tjeerd Durst

"What is this?" I ask the waiter at the Dragon's Lounge. I point at the meal in front of me.

"It's our house specialty. The Man in The Back had it prepared specially for you, free of charge."

"The house speciality," I say, making a smacking sound with my lips after every word.

"With compliments from The Man in The Back."

On my plate in front of me is some meat in a puddle of broth, surrounded by steamed vegetables.

"And the house specialty, that would be?"

"I'm sure you are aware of the niche but exquisite reputation of our establishment," the waiter says.

"Right," I say. "If you had to choose a Hogwarts House, which would you choose?"

"Excuse me?" The waiter says. He's clearly doing his best to sound polite, but surprise isn't all that's leaking through his intonation.



"Your Hogwarts House," I repeat.

"I don't see-"

"If you had to choose. If you absolutely had to pick a Hogwarts House, which would you choose?"

"Euh, the one Ron is in."

"The house Ron is in. And which is that?"

The waiter nervously moves his legs around, as if he's unsure if he should just leave or entertain me for a minute longer.

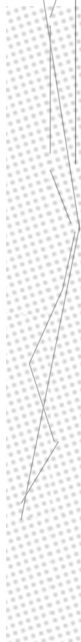
"Sir, I am almost fifty. I don't spend a lot of time-"

"It's one of, if not the, most popular movie franchise in recent history."

The waiter stares at me. He doesn't answer.

"You know the four Hogwarts houses, don't you? Even if you don't care about Harry Potter, there's no way you can have avoided basic knowledge of the franchise through pop-cultural osmosis."

"Sir, I have other guests to attend to."





I take a deep breath. The waiter nervously swallows. “WHAT HOGWARTS HOUSE. WOULD YOU BE IN. IF YOU HAD TO PICK A HOGWARTS HOUSE.”

The rest of the restaurant stops. All heads turn towards my table. The guests range from sharply dressed business men, to shady figures well-practiced at hiding the fangs jutting out of their mouth, to Witches in their ridiculous getups. The Belle Epoque style of the main lounge, the silver chandeliers and the expensive paintings betray that these aren't a random collection of Periphery Demographics, but the haute culture, the cutting edge, the avant garde of Amsterdam's underworld of depravity and disease.

“Lionheart,” the waiter stammers. “I'd be in Lionheart.”

“Lionheart,” I laugh. “Everyone, the man's Hogwarts House of choice is ‘Lionheart’.”

Most other guests look on in shock, but a few snicker at the waiter.

“You think ‘Lionheart’ is a Hogwarts house,” I confirm.

“Sir, I have-”



He does not finish his sentence. He stumbles around for a second, then falls over, face first, and slams into the ground. Around me visitors gasp for breath or look away, but the restaurant crew springs into action. Two waiters remove the dead waiter from the floor, and another calls down a manager who starts to profusely apologize to me. Apologizing for what they were thinking, saying that The Man in the Back meant no insult, that all food today is on the house and if I want a replacement meal.

“The usual,” I say, staring him in the eyes. He fiddles with his tie, as if it’s constricting his airflow.

“Of course sir.” He hurries to the kitchen. Slowly, calm returns to the restaurant. As I wait for them to prepare my dish, my favourite meal- my ‘date’ arrives. An elderly man who had requested to speak with me. He doesn’t look Dutch. I squint and try to make out his race, but I’ve never been good at telling apart my fellow humans. I listen to his accent, but all it reminds me of is a species from Star Wars, which tells me nothing.

“My name is Qiang Li, and I represent the group known as the Falun Gong. Do you know about us?”

“Euh.” I hate it when others make me feel stupid for not





knowing something.

“We are a religious group of Chinese expats working in this country, among other things we organize the Shen Yun theater.”

It really doesn't ring a bell. He's Chinese? I try to remember 'this is what Chinese people look like' but there just isn't any space in my brain. It just doesn't feel important to me the way the recent lore changes to Doctor Who feel important to me.

“Ah yes, of course,” I lie. “How could I forget?”

“Our group has recently been declared a Periphery Demographic,” the man explains.

“What, the Chinese? All of them? That feels vaguely racist.”

“No, the Falun Gong. As you might know, we are fugitives from China because the communist government sees our adherence to the traditional ‘qigong’ martial art as a threat.”

I know about that, I realize. That's in Dungeons and Dragons. No idea that was a real thing- but then again,



aren't most things real nowadays?

"I see, I see."

"And this reclassification by your government means that in addition to previous anti-Chinese racism, we now face persecution by other Periphery Demographics who see us as a new group muscling in on their territory."

"Right." I have an idea where this is going.

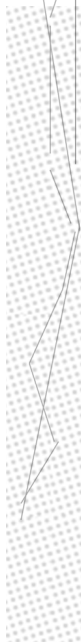
"Recently, a witch has started selling businesses anti-Chinese spells as part of the pushback on perceived Falun Gong encroachment on some Periphery Demographic gang's territory. This has not just affected us, of course, but the entire Chinese community in this city."

"Hmhm," I nod.

"I have heard you are the kind of person to talk to if you need someone removed from the local scene in an inconspicuous way."

"Perhaps," I say. "I'd like to know from whom."

"I can't reveal my sources, obviously," the man says. What was his name again? Shen something?





“Obviously if you give me a picture and a memo with some information on your target I can see what can be done,” I explain. “But if you can’t reveal your source, the price will go up.”

“Money is no concern,” the man says as he pulls a stack of paper guilders from his coat.

I flip through the currency and count about ten thousand guilders in paper. I refrain from pointing out that this is about double what I would usually be paid. I nod. The man then slides me a picture of a boy? Probably? With black hair and the scruffiest outfit I have ever seen in my life.

“What is he supposed to be, Goth Robin Hood?”

“Yes,” the man sounds excited. “You know him then. Good.”

“Ah, euh, yeah, I know most people around here,” I lie.

“Well then, we have a deal. The second half of your payment will follow on completion of your contract.”

I’m being paid even more? Something isn’t right.



"Hey," I start. I want to ask 'this guy isn't secretly ridiculously strong, right' but then I realize I've already pretended I knew exactly who he was talking about. I'd make a fool of myself if I start asking questions now, after already accepting the hit.

"Hm?" The man asks.

"Pleasure doing business with you," I quickly close. The man nods, and reaches across the table to shake my hand. We shake on it, and as he prepares to leave I notice my waiter coming up to the table.

My business partner looks on first in confusion, then in disbelief while nervously chuckling as the waiter reveals my meal. A deep fried, half-molten pile of plastic lies on my plate. The fumes tingle my nose and wet my appetite. In the colourful mess I can vaguely recognize the outlines of Boba Fett, Han Solo and Darth Maul. But that is not all- there is some superfluous blue plastic-

I poke into the meal with my fork. Grand Admiral Thrawn? No. For a moment I suspect Max Rebo, but then- Oh! I heartily laugh as I realize there's too little plastic for it to be Max Rebo if they were all similarly scaled figurines - It has to be Neel the Myykian instead. Contrary to





popular belief he is not actually the same species as Max Rebo, who is an Ortholan. I dig into my meal with glee. The plastic is warm enough to be easily chewed, sticking delightfully to the palate and gumming up my teeth but not so hot as to burn me.

"I have to go," my business associate says. I barely pay the man any attention but half-heartedly wave him goodbye. My attention is on my meal. When I am done I stagger out of the Dragon

Lounge, only to be immediately accosted by the next bunch of morons adamant to bother me.

"Ministry of Mysterious Business," the first of the men in black announces while pushing a badge in my face. Three more identical guys with drawn firearms surround me. "We have permission to open fire the moment a word about Star Wars, Lord of the Rings or a similar media property leaves your mouth," he smugly informs me with trembling breath.

"Oh," I say, as I stumble backwards. "You've got the wrong guy."

"The watergraaf wants to talk to you. In the car, now."



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The count? What would the count possibly want with me,
I wonder as I'm dragged into a van by painfully boring
men, who nonetheless might have a basic understanding
of the pop culture trivia that shapes their society and
thus do not truly deserve to die.





Nehalennia van Sloten

I'm perched on the roof of a six floor social housing unit. From a distance it vaguely resembles a castle, with the edges of the building slightly protruding to create an illusion of 'towers-' the social democrat government that built them called them "castles for the working class." Right next to the building is another one. In between them is a small alleyway, an emptiness. A void. In this void now dwells the one I've been stalking.

She wears a wide-brimmed hat. Moons and stars adorn the pointed top. Little trinkets dangle from the brim. I don't bother to try and understand why some witches feel the need to go out dressed like this. It probably makes sense if you're a witch, which I am glad that I am not. Here to meet her is a younger girl, anxiously pacing around the alley. The witch produces a small bottle from a bag slung across her shoulder, and gives it to the girl. If she drinks it, she will wake up as a doll tomorrow. Tragically, I cannot intervene. It's not just to punish someone for a crime not yet committed.

The girl hesitates. The witch eggs her on. The girl uncorks the glass bottle, and drinks the potion. Tomorrow she will wake up with skin made porcelain and eyes made



glass. She will never be a human being again. The world will treat her as an object until she inevitably breaks. I smile. Doing such a thing to another human being- I cannot forgive that.

Both of them look around in confusion as I drop six floors down and hit the ground with catlike grace.

"Huh?" The girl asks. "Hmmm?" The witch mutters inquisitively.

"You who have stolen this girl's life," I say while striking a dramatic pose. "Such evil I cannot forgive! In the name of the moon, I will punish you!"

"What are you wearing?" The witch asks. "Aren't you a little young to be playing superhero?"

"Do not mistake me, vile magician, for those masked vigilantes running around to make citizen arrests. Do not confuse me, horrid witch, for the police dogs who hunt Nightmare Demons."

The witch laughs. The trinkets dangling from her hat jig around as she shakes her head. "What then, pray tell, do you call yourself?"





“I see myself more as a serial killer with a strong sense of morality,” I reply as I draw my pocket knife.

The witch is not so slow in the head as to entertain me while I have my knife already drawn. She immediately starts running away. The poor unfortunate soul she just poisoned with her doll-draught screams in terror as I give chase, swishing my knife through the air in hot anticipation of cutting into soft, sinful and all-too-human meat. Colourful threads form around the witch as she dashes through the alley, and butterflies escape from under her hat. Each carrying a thread, they flutter around me in an attempt to tie me up. It's fine with me. The more magic she uses, the easier it is to sense her emotional state. The Crystal Court of the Moontouched is called the 'weakest,' rarely displaying any serious parapsychical affinity and only bestowed with a talent for paranatural empathy. Sensing another's emotions, sensing another's feelings- feeling the feelings of another. This witch is feeling confident. I ruffle through her mind as the butterflies tie me up in colourful lint. Slight traces of guilt, a hint of anxiety. Confidence is the only sizable emotion I can grab onto right now. It's not my favourite. It's smooth but brittle, making for a bad surface for my locks. Nonetheless, it's what I'll have to work with today. I close my eyes



and focus for a second on nothing but the sensation of the gate falling shut, of chains rattling around the neck, of the sickening sound of manacles clasp- ing fast with no guarantee of release. I open my eyes as butterflies, circle around my arms, circle around my waist, yank me around and tie me to a drain pipe. As I gasp for air, my lock falls shut around the witch's confidence. It's not easy, attaching a chain to such an ephemeral thing as one's confidence. I'm almost certain I am the only person in the whole of the land who can do such a thing. From my lock sprouts a chain, and the witch yelps in pain as metal rattles forth from her head. She screams and trashes, and for a second she no longer believes herself capable of tying me to a drain pipe with her will alone. Her butterflies dissipate, and I run towards her again. Now surfaces I can truly work with form in her soul. More chains sprout from her body, attached firmly to her sense of fear, to her confusion. I grab and yank at the chains as they drag across the ground, making her fall on her back, cracking her head on the concrete. Blood pools on the dirty pavement. "Help," she screams. "Help me," she cries. I point at another drain pipe, and a chain bursts from her heart to wrap itself around it. She takes a breath, and tries to clear her mind. As her fear leaves her body, even if for a moment, the chain contracts and drags her across the





ground. She screams again, and the chain lets up. “Stop!” She screams. “Please!”

I walk over to her, and sit down on her chest. “Hello,” I say, and I try to suppress a smile.

“Please,” she begs. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“Because you’re guilty,” I say. “And that makes this justice. Delivering justice, in turn, makes me a good person. And that’s all I really want. To be a good person.”

I stick my pocket knife into her throat, and start to twist it around. She screams, but half the air coming from her lungs gushes out of her throat along with spurts of blood.

“Don’t worry,” I say. “I don’t really believe that. I’m not actually delusional.” She doesn’t answer me.

I twist the knife some more, and to my profound disappointment she dies on the spot. “Ugh,” I spit. “Lame.”

I get up, pat down my skirt and exchange my knife for a little mirror. I admire the bloodstains on my skirt and shirt, and hop scotch over to the crying, wailing girl.

“She loved me,” she screams at me. “She was going to



care for me forever.”

“Loved, yes. Past tense,” I say, doing my utmost best to suppress a fit of laughter. “Don’t kid yourself. She was a witch. That’s a cluster B personality disorder, for your information. Do you know what cluster B is? Innately evil people.”

“What?” The girl asks, confused.

“You’ve thrown your life as a human away for nothing. Let this be a lesson,” I say as I skip away, content with another job well done. Behind me, the girl gives in to uncontrolled wailing and sobbing. When almost back at the start of the alleyway, I climb up the stairway of a fire exit, back to the roof. I’ll hide my clothes near my parent’s backyard, I think, then sneak back into my bedroom. Before these plans can come to fruition, though, I’m surprised by a group of strangers waiting for me on the roof.

“You there,” a man in a black suit wearing a black tie and black sunglasses says as he draws a gun. “Are you Nehalennia van Sloten?”

“And what if I am?” I ask, eyeing the alleyway behind me and wondering if I can jump down the ledge again before





the man can shoot me.

“We’re with the Ministry for Mysterious Business. The Count wants to talk to you.”

“Euueeh?” I ask. “What for?”

“We’re putting together a team,” the man in black says as a helicopter roars overhead.



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Marieken Mithras

I'm standing on top of a rock on one leg, and Ruby-Lynn is throwing cans of beer at me. I'm not allowed to move.

I'm not allowed to strike at cans that weren't going to hit me anyway. The cans that would hit me- those I have to bat out of the way with shadow-limbs I sprout and immediately re-absorb.

"Why do you burn out if you spend too much magic?" Ruby-Lynn asks as she winds up a pitcher's throw and sends another can of beer flying towards my face at around a hundred kilometers per hour. My shadow responds almost on instinct after having done this for two days in a row, but I have to rein it in. I can't go 'Cthulhu' on a single can of beer, especially not standing right under the afternoon sun. With gargantuan effort I manage to limit my lashing out at the projectile to a single tentacle, and then with equal effort I manage to absorb the shadow-limb again before it goes through my store of magic like Robin goes through meth.

"As Moontouched I'm only semi-real. My soul would flare up akin to an allergic reaction when exposed to the raw reality-stuff of the world around us. If I run out of the magic it is cloaked in, it blows up like the face of a teen-





ager allergic to chocolate.”

“Wrong,” Ruby-Lynn says as she pitches a fast-can straight past my face. At the last moment I manage to avoid flinching. “In your case your soul will explode like a nuclear bomb. Full marks on the rest.”

“You’re so mean.” I bat a can that would’ve, on second consideration, neatly sailed over my head.

“Don’t waste magic blocking attacks that wouldn’t hit you anyway!” Ruby-Lynn yells.

“I’m sorry,” I yelp as she winds up the next throw.

“How do Crystal Court Moontouched replenish their stock of magic?”

“Stargazing?” A can of beer just barely misses my right leg, the one I’m currently balancing on. “No wait. Taking in the emotions of others. Stargazing is Star Court, obviously.”

“B minus,” Ruby-Lynn throws a can directly at my face. I bat it away with enough force to blow it up, showering me in beer. I blink, and miss a precious second- another can hits me in the stomach, hard enough that I only realize



I've hit my head on the pavement after I realize that I'm choking on a nasty mixture of blood and vomit.

"Cancer!" I scream as I dissolve the injured part of my body and re-manifest it from scratch.

"Christ," Ruby-Lynn looks down on me from above. "That looks disgusting. You really are immortal, huh?"

"Yeah," I exhale as I take her hand. She helps me back up on my feet.

"Unless you run out of magic. Why is why-"

"Yes yes, which is why you're teaching me to conserve as much magic as I can."

"It's your literal only weak point, hacks notwithstanding," Ruby-Lynn says.

"Excuse me?" I ask her. This is the first time she brought up the term.

"Hm?" She murmurs. "Oh. Some powerful Witches- and other Periphery Demographics with powers obviously- can manifest powers that attack you in less-than-obvious ways, with no clear method of defense against them."





People call them hacks, because they're seen as a bit like cheating."

"Huh? Like what?"

"Hmmmm. There's a vampiress on the south end of town who can turn your negative emotions into slime. The more toxic the emotion, the more acidic the slime. The worse you feel, the more slime oozes out of you. Of course, freaking out because you're oozing slime only makes more slime appear. People with jealousy issues, hate in their hearts or crippling depression are basically dead meat the second she wants them gone."

"What!? That's ridiculous," I yelp.

"Yeah, hence the term 'hacks'. But such powers are one-trick ponies, and on top of that they're very rare. You have to be completely messed up in the head to develop them in the first place."

"Right," I nod. "Because magic is all about believing. I'd have to truly believe that toxic emotions are like acidic slime, and then on top of that I'd have to truly believe that someone deserves to drown in their own slimeified emotions. I don't think I could ever impose that vision



on the world.”

“The only minds that can impose such a vision on the world are one-track minds.” Ruby-Lynn gestures towards the rock I was previously balancing on. “Go on. Balance on your left leg this time. Training isn’t over.”

“AUUErgh,” I grumble as I follow her instructions. She paces back to her pile of beer cans, and sends one straight at my knee. I bat it out of the way just in time.

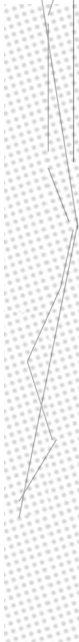
“Liminal paths,” Ruby-Lynn says as she winds up the next pitch.

I remember this one from *Walking In Moonlight*, the book my dad got me when I first turned.

God, it can’t be that long ago. Why does it feel so long ago? “Paths through in-between spaces. They’re opened by Nightmare Erosion. You can’t wander into them unless you can see them, and if you can then you should best avoid them.”

“Why?”

“They’re one way streets, and getting lost in one of the thousands of demi-real branches of reality is a good way





to die, or worse.”

“Good.” Ruby-Lynn fakes out a throw and then attacks my mind with a psychic spike instead.

I yelp, I flinch, and I fall down, failing to cloak my thoughts in shadow long enough. Ruby-Lynn’s mental probe cuts through my mind like a chainsaw, giving me the migraine of a lifetime and causing blood to spurt from my nose. “Stop,” I cry, stumbling around on all fours.

“Make me,” Ruby-Lynn says.

I growl, but before I can take on a shape better suited to ripping this indignant piece of lean, lesbian meat into shreds-

“What the fuck, Marieken,” she laughs as she intensifies her attack. “Lean lesbian meat?”

“That’s my dark side,” I cry out in pain. “That wasn’t me- ARGH- please stop!”

She doesn’t stop. I can barely breathe. My entire life is pain. I have no more mind. I only have a migraine now. Where my brain used to be is a big, black orb of suffering. I’m Marieken Migrainas, and I’m fairly confident I



am in hell. Shadows, I mutter halfheartedly under a hurricane of psychic violence. Cool, dark shadows. Cold cold cold blanky. Blanky around the brain. Shadows. I fail to manifest my psychic defenses, and I screech like a dying seal. Finally, Ruby-Lynn lets up her assault.

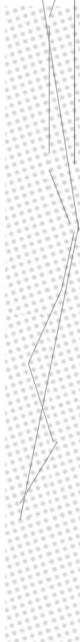
“Aaaaauuuuuwaaaa,” I cry, laying flat on my stomach on the pavement.

“You okay?” Ruby-Lynn asks me as she squats down next to me.

“Okay-ish,” I mutter. “That hurt.”

“Yeah,” she says. “But you were a second away from actually murdering me. Try not to go full Yog-Sothoth on me when we’re practicing a specific thing, okay? You wanted to learn to shield your mind from psychic intrusion.”

I think about Kate. My vampire roommate, who is still waiting for me in our little apartment and who has called me six times the last two days. I’ve sent her a text message that I’m okay and will be back, but at some point I am going to have to face her. Last she heard of me I was going out for noodles with a friend, and then I vanished for days. If she can read my mind when I get back, she’ll





never want to see me again. Worse, she might run out into the sun in terror, popping like a maize kernel in the microwave.

"Try again," I say, pre-emptively visualizing thick, dark clouds of liquid shadow obscuring my mind and soul from any hypothetical psychics. Ruby-Lynn shrugs, and I feel her mental probe plow through the shadows. I empty my mind, and push the clouds to the background. I feel her rummaging around in there, but she can't find me. The only problem is keeping this up for longer than an hour.

"Marieken. This is something you can do against psychic attacks, but a natural mind reader tunes into your thoughts twenty-five hours a day. On top of that I think you should just be honest with your girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend," I object, thinking about the pastel pink bedroom where Kate first drank my blood. God. Will I be bold enough to ask her to go for my neck instead of my wrist next time?

"Still," I continue. "It might buy me time to talk to her before she has to peep the horrors infesting my mind."



Ruby-Lynn starts laughing. “Before she- god. Before she does what?”

“That’s from- that’s- that’s from a tv show don’t make fun of me. Everyone my age says it.”

“Peep the horrors? Everyone your age says that?”

“Yes,” I pout. I hate it when older people make fun of me, as if their own generation doesn’t say plenty of stupid shit.

“Enough training for today,” Ruby-Lynn says as she scoops me up from the pavement. She’s deceptively strong for her frame. She puts me down on my feet, and starts walking off.

“Where are we going?”

“Robin’s place, so you can get cleaned up, eat something and then hop on the bus home. Your roommates must be worried sick about you.”

“I can just-” I begin, but Ruby-Lynn interrupts me.

“No. You’re going to eat, and you’re going to shower. If you stop doing things like that you’re going to go down





a very, very dark path, very fast. You can't lose touch with being a human being, a person, not even if you're as powerful as you are."

"That seems a little exaggerated," I say as I follow her back towards the harbor, towards Robin's house.

"Marieken, you're already talking about your 'dark side'. You're already giving in to the delusion that the world is some illusion you can do to whatever you want. What do you think will happen if you give in to these thoughts fully? If you let go of your routine entirely, you'll end up as a Nightmare Demon before the year is through."

"I'm pretty sure that that's not how that works."

"Trust me. It is."

I shrug. She's in front of me, so she can't see. When we arrive at Robin's house, only Mercy and Lily are actually there. Robin is still in the hospital, so Ruby-Lynn is taking care of them.

"Hya," Lily greets me as I walk in. "How did training go?"

"Very well," I say.



"She has a lot to learn," Ruby-Lynn says.

"Look, I cleaned the entire living room," Lily says.

"Oh, you did!" The Moontouched Witch beams. "Where's Mercy?"

"Outside, with a boyfriend," Lily answers. She's obviously lying and she's obviously trying to play all cutesy and innocent. With every passing day I am starting to loathe these two fuckpuppets more. Hate. It's a new feeling. I don't think I've truly hated before, in my sixteen year long run as a human girl. I wonder why Lily and Mercy offend me so much, why they seem so despicable to me. Maybe it's my Moontouched narcissism at the root of this new venom. I wonder, I wonder.

"Outside with a boyfriend, or bisected and in the trash bin outside?" Ruby-Lynn asks.

"Trash bin," Lily sighs.

"Guess who is sleeping in the basement tonight?"

"Mercy?" Lily hopefully tries.

"No. In fact, I think Mercy will be sleeping in bed with





a hot Moontouched witch to hold her tonight, to try and cheer her up after her sister dumped her in a trash bin again,” Ruby-Lynn’s tone of voice is playful, as if this is some extended bit they’ve been doing for years. They have, I realize. It’s all part of the sick dynamic she uses to keep these violent porcelain sex dolls with clay for brains in check. I wonder if Ruby-Lynn might be a bad person, but then I remember my distaste for the dolls and wonder if maybe this is fine, actually. That this might be just. Yes, I have decided. The punishment for being an annoying puppet without a spine is being trapped in a manipulative relationship where you’re treated as property for the rest of your life.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I wonder what’s happening to me, but the feeling is uncomfortable so I drown it in shadow.

Ruby-Lynn hurries me up the stairs, and shows me the shower. I dispel my clothes- they’re manifested matter, like the rest of my body- and hop into the shower. I turn the temperature up as hot as it can go, and with my eyes closed I start humming, determined to ace this ‘keep being a human being’ thing.



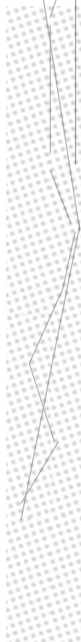
I'm not entirely sure what's happening. I'm groggy from waking up. No, that's wrong, I realize. I'm groggy because I'm still asleep. I try to rub the sleep out of my eyes with my right hand. I can't use my left, because it's still around the throat of Theresa, one of the Moontouched twins from my high school.

"Sareth, please," she whimpers. Clearly I'm not choking her hard enough if she's still capable of speech, so I push her hard into the wall and start squeezing. Her cries turn into a gurgling half-cough that has trouble escaping her crushed-shut windpipe.

"Sareth, stop," I hear a girl cry behind me. I turn my head around and recognize Maria, who is laying in a pool of her own blood. It sparkles a little in the evening light, and I wonder if all Mirror Court their blood sparkles like that. "Sareth!" She screams. "You're going to kill her. Stop, please!"

"Sareth?" I ask her, confused. Very slowly it dawns on me that I'm not dreaming, and that my last memory isn't of going to bed but of stepping under the shower. "What is going on here?" I ask, all confused.

"Sareth?" Maria echoes.





Theresa might actually die if I choke her like this, I realize at the same time that I realize that I have no reason to be attacking these two in the first place. I quickly let go and start apologizing.

"I'm so sorry. I have no idea what's going on. Where the hell am I?"

"You bitch," Theresa mutters hoarsely, clutching her throat. It's bruised black and blue from the force I used.

"Marieken?" Maria carefully tries, crawling away from me, leaving a streak of blood on the pavement. Where am I, I wonder again. Looking around I seem to be in a courtyard of sorts, high rise buildings surrounding it on all sides. Abandoned high rises, I correct myself. Some kind of decrepit slated-for-demolition neighborhood.

"Yeah," I answer her absent-mindedly.

"Please let us go. We're sorry. We're sorry for what Sareth tried to do to you. We're sorry for bullying you. Please, please, please let us go. We've learned our lesson. There's no need to mess with us like this, please stop."

She's crying, I realize. Tears streaming down her face.



She's injured, too. Blood gushes from her legs, broken and contorted into angles that legs should never bend in.

"Hey," I say, my mind still groggy. "I didn't, like, do this, right?"

"Why do you continue messing with us like this? We're beaten and bloodied. Please just stop," Maria cries.

"I'm not messing with you. I- the last thing I remember was stepping under the shower. Oh god, oh god oh fuck."

Sareth. Sareth, who I talked to in the depths of my subconsciousness when Ruby had knocked me out. Sareth, who might have somehow taken control while I tried to de-stress for the first time in a week.

"Oh my god," I mutter again. "Typhus."

"Marieken?" Theresa gasps, still clutching her throat.

"Are you two going to be okay without medical intervention?" I ask, immediately realizing it as a stupid question.

"Nevermind. Wait. I don't want to use my own phone. Give me your phone, I'll call the emergency number."

"What the fuck is going on," Maria cries behind me.



"I can call the emergency number myself, bitch," Theresa says, fishing a flip phone from her pocket. Christ. Her throat looks bad. I wonder why it doesn't really feel like I did that. Probably because I didn't- it must've been Sareth, right?

"I euh, I have to go. I have to, euh, return some books to the library," I stammer as I stumble backwards. Stumbling turns into an awkward sort of running, before I turn around and leave the courtyard full-speed.

Where am I? It takes me a while to shake off the daze, and then almost an hour of aimlessly wandering around before I recognize my surroundings. Amsterdam North. Past the river. I see. At least it's easy going home, especially with the sun setting. Shadows aplenty. I dash from shadow to shadow, from shade to shade. I am the streak of dark touching from the light pole to the wall, from the rooftop to the trees and from the tree to the alleyway. I am as fast as thought, and in no time at all I stand in front of Robin's house again.

Aren't there things I should be thinking about? God. The last hour feels like a dream, like a nightmare. I'm almost scared to knock on the door. What if I am still asleep? I ponder what to do for a moment, then decide it's best to



go back inside. I don't get the chance to knock on the door. Ruby-Lynn comes charging out, a mix of anger and worry on her face.

"Marieken Mithras," she yells. "Where in all hells have you been?"

She almost sounds like my mom. A chill goes up my back. My mom. My fake mom. My mom who isn't my biological mom at all, and who threw me out the second it turned out I had a quirky eye colour and two shadows.

"Sorry," I say. "I'm not sure myself."

"What?" Ruby-Lynn asks, indignant.

"I stepped under the shower and-"

"Why are you covered in blood? Jesus, Marieken. You haven't killed anyone again, have you?"

Worry, anger, righteous parental anger, they all make way for a single overwhelming emotion expressed on Ruby-Lynn Schulze's face. Fear.

"No!" I yell. "I didnt. I got into a fight with-"





My mind spins. My mind clicks and whirrs, and against my nature, I decide to lie.

"I got into a fight with two Moontouched who used to work for Sareth, the witch that previously tried to kill me. I've beaten them up pretty badly but they're alive. They'll be fine. They've learned their lesson, I hope."

The strongest lies contain a hardwood core of truth, after all.

"Jesus Christ," Ruby-Lynn curses. "Come inside. God, what a nightmare you can be."

"I'm sorry," I stammer, following her inside.

"Why did you vanish? What happened?"

"I'm not sure. I closed my eyes under the shower, and then I was in Amsterdam North, across the river."

"Teleportation?" Ruby-Lynn wonders aloud.

"I'm not sure," I say. "I think I blacked out for a bit, because some time had passed when I came to."

"That's- That's extremely worrisome, Marieken."



"I'm sorry," I repeat.

"You're strong enough that you could kill someone entirely by accident. Blacking out might be dangerous for everyone around you."

"Hey," I complain. "I didn't hurt anyone."

Ruby-Lynn stares at the bloodstains on my clothes.

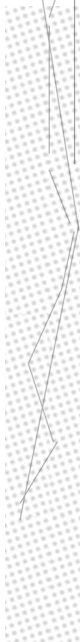
"Well, they started it," I mutter. I almost add 'I think,' but manage to swallow the words.

"God. At least discorporate or disappear those clothes and pull out a new set. When did you start dressing in all-black anyway?"

"I'm not sure," I say as I try to let go of the magic keeping my clothes together. To my surprise, I find none. They're real clothes. "They euh, they're real clothes though. They'll just have to go into the laundry," I quickly spin.

"Where did you get them?" Ruby-Lynn asks, squinting.

"What? Oh euh, I've-" and I realize that if I lie right now, she'll see right through me. "I don't know," I admit.





“You don’t know?”

“I must’ve gotten them while I was blacked out.”

“Jesus, Marieken.”

“It’s not that bad,” I try to say, but the uncomfortable nagging at the back of my mind is back. Might it be this bad? Might there maybe be something wrong with me? I reach for the comfort of the shadows, and drown the thoughts. I am in charge here. I’ll worry about what I want to worry about, and nothing else.

“Marieken, it is. I left you alone for a few minutes and you vanished, only to return covered in blood. This cannot happen.”

“It’s not my fault,” I mutter, annoyed. “It really isn’t.”

“Then whose is it, Marieken?”

I don’t like the way Ruby-Lynn is talking to me, but I do understand. I wish these things did not keep happening to me in ways where, to other people, it appears as if I am a violent maniac who keeps screwing things up. These things are happening to me! I didn’t choose this!



"Well?" Ruby-Lynn asks, squinting at me again, as if it were to sharpen her vision somehow, sharpen it enough to see what's ailing me even without my explicit cooperation.

"I think I- I might be possessed? Or have a sort of, split personality?"

"Is this the 'dark side' you mentioned?"

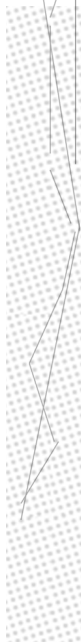
"No. This is different. The dark side, the dark side is me. It's me even though I don't like that it is. A shadow-me of sorts. But this isn't me at all. This is another person who wants to dress in all black and picks fights with."

Ever so slightly too late I realize my mistake.

"I thought you said they started the fight with you?"

"I mean, I-"

"Marieken," Ruby-Lynn now yells at me, furious. "Stop lying to me. I'm trying to help you. I've been trying to help you for days now. There's things you're not telling me, there's outright lies you spin. Tell me what the fuck is going on with you."





I've devoured a girl's soul, but it really wasn't my fault. She started it. I've eaten a ninja boy's corpse. I've passed out and the soul I devoured probably puppeteered my body to break the legs of her previous flunkies for reasons that are beyond me. I'm not on blockers anymore and I've died and I've seen that the world is only a shadow-play on the wall. I know that I am not real, and that most likely, neither is Ruby-Lynn. I could kill everyone in Amsterdam with my paraphysical score and maybe I wouldn't have to stop there at all. I could end all life on earth and even if I failed my soul would rip itself apart with the force of a nuclear explosion as a final defiance against the sun the sun the sun the sun the sun the sun the sun the sun

I am Marieken Mithras, I'm seventeen years old and I've just discovered that I'm a changeling that the world is fake that the changeling outside my parents are arguing I keep having dreams where I have died or where I am someone else and outside the sun is setting the sun is setting the sun the sun the sun the sun the sun sinks under the horizon, and I start to laugh.

"Marieken?"

"I think I have to go on a walk," I say, before I turn around

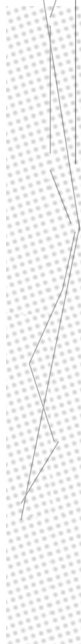


and walk off.

“Marieken, if you walk away on me right now you do not have to come back here,” Ruby-Lynn screams at me. “You can come back and bother Robin, but I am not dealing with this.”

“Ok,” I yell at her. It’s fine. Throwing beer cans at me and making me recite simple platitudes about ‘magic’ wasn’t helping me anyway. Let Nozomi come and fight me. I don’t care. My life probably ended the moment Hiro drove his katana through my stomach. There’s things I want. There’s parents I want to yell at and ask why they didn’t want me. There’s a vampire girl in an apartment who is scared and worried about me and I would very much like to impress her, to make her my girlfriend, maybe. There’s a police officer who seems to know a thing or two where I don’t know anything at all, so maybe I’ll grill her for information. There’s so much to do for me and none of it has anything to do with hanging out with a much-older woman who emotionally abuses sapient sex dolls.

“Aaauurgh,” I scream at the sky as I let go of my body until it is a fine, dark mist drifting along the skies of Amsterdam. Try and stay human? Be a person? Take showers





and go on walks? There's no reason for me to do any of that. I never was a person. I thought I was, of course. I thought I was Marieken Mithras, sixteen or seventeen or whatever and I thought I was a human girl with loving human parents but I wasn't!

I drift along the skies of Amsterdam, and carefully feel out the shapes of the shadows underneath me. It's easy to teleport around at night. The singular, gigantic shadow of the earth touches all the little shadows cast by little human lights, connecting all, and by barely expending any energy at all-

I manifest in Kate's apartment, and cloak myself in a white-and-black gala dress adorned with upturned crosses, the kind Maria Mithras would wear on stage. Why would I not finally start dressing however I want? Why would I still adhere to pants and sweaters and not just be who I always was?

Walter looks up from his gameboy and raises a single eyebrow. "What did you do to your hair?" He asks, non-plussed. Finally someone reasonable.

"I got murdered by the friend I was going to see a few days ago. I had to reconstitute my body from scratch. I



forgot my hair dye, my lenses and I guess I also forgot to fill my blood with fucking antipsychotics.”

“Oh,” Walter says. “I have to go run some errands with Kate in a bit. Do you think you can teleport or manifest or reconstitute yourself to the gas station and purchase some energy drinks for when I get back?”

“Huh? I, uh, sure?”

“That would be really great. Gotta finish this level then save my game, then I’ll head out. Thank you a lot, Marieken.”

I let go of my body, and snake through the streets of Amsterdam to the nearest twenty-four seven night store. The customers are startled when I appear out of thin air, but not so much to start screaming or yelling. Some of them take pictures of me with their phones. I wonder if I would’ve hated that, at some point. I vaguely think that would’ve scared me or made me sad, but I think I like the attention. Let them text images of the Moontouched girl who apparated out of thin air around. Spread the legend of Marieken Mithras, haha.

The line is long and I wait like a normal person, and I pay





with normal money without explaining that it's fake shadow money but that all money is and that it's thus fine, and only when I have a bag full of random energy drinks and I reappear back in Kate's apartment do I realize Walter has tricked me.

They've left the place in a hurry. Packed their stuff and ran.

I slump down in the middle of the room, and I start to cry. What now? Is there nothing left for me? I pick up random things and try to disassemble them, but I find that it takes a lot of magic to disincorporate 'real' things, to convince them they're only shadows in a magic lantern. I cry, and then I hear the sirens. I lay down flat on my back, and I wait for the Royal Marechaussee to kick in the door.

"Hands over your head," three military policemen yell at me as they train their guns on me. I look up into their faces, into the barrels of their guns. A man in a black suit appears in my field of view, and he shows me a badge. Ministry of Mysterious Cases.

"Marieken Mithras?" He asks me

"Yeah yeah," I half-heartedly reply.



"We've reason to suspect you've been overcome with Nightmare Corruption. The firearms of these men are loaded with munitions that'll unravel your magic. Come along peacefully and let us administrate medical care until we are certain you are not a danger to yourself and your surroundings, or we'll be forced to open fire for our own safety."

Nightmare Corruption?

Nightmare Corruption, the lexicon in my head chimes in.

"You don't understand," I say. "I'm not- I've had a really awful week. But I'm not a Nightmare Demon."

"We're not saying you are." He's perfectly calm, but the cops with him are not. They're sweating. They smell of fear. They know their guns will do nothing to turn them from prey into predator. I decide to tell them.

"Your guns will do nothing to turn you from prey into predator," I helpfully explain. "You are human, and I am not."

To my surprise, they open fire on me immediately. Ten or twelve bullets rip through my body before I can teleport





away, and when I do I find my range limited and my body refusing to change. I howl in pain, leaning against the wall outside of the apartment, and realize their bullets really do dissolve magic.

Before I can properly gather my thoughts to think about what is happening, they rush out of the door and open fire on me again.

“Christ,” I scream as I stumble backwards. I fall down, and my body and soul both screech in agony. I hear a clattering noise behind me, and reach for it.

It’s Hiro’s katana.

Mistress! I hear in my head. You keep running away!

“Are you following me?” I ask out loud, confused.

“Drop the fucking sword!” The cops some meters away from me scream. “We will shoot to kill!”

Of course, the sword speaks aloud in my head. You’ve killed the imposter who had enslaved me, after all. I am yours to wield, oh beautiful daughter of Tsukuyomi.

“I don’t know who that is,” I admit. “Why can you talk?”



I used to be like you, spirit-man, demon-child, matter-soul and spirit-body, oni, youkai, demon, faery, nightmare-demon. A blacksmith trapped me in this blade to serve false masters.

"I'm not a Nightmare Demon or any of the other things you just mentioned, though. I'm a Moontouched."

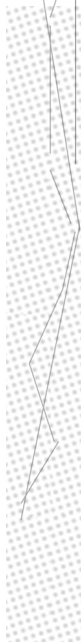
Child of the Moon! I did not know the words your culture uses to refer to the Children of the Moon. I apologize. You should feed me your blood and awaken my powers long sealed, then slaughter the samurai who foolishly train their weapons on you.

"Huh?"

The cops open fire on me again. I have no idea how many bullet wounds I have. It's only my body, though it refuses to disincorporate or heal. Poison spreads from my wounds, its deathly march slowed only by my own bloodloss.

"Hey," I mutter. "You killed me before. Hiro stabbed you through my gut and I died," I say.

Sorry, master. I am but a tool to be used, and if a false master wishes to wield me for evil I can do naught but





suffer in silence.

“Right. I’m going to die again, and I’m not sure I can come back this time.”

Feed me blood! I will give you some of the power of the souls I have previously devoured.

“Ah,” I sigh, and I use the last of my strength to rip open my wrist on the blade. I can hardly comprehend what happens next. The sword bites into me, not into my body, but into me, and it leaves me a little lesser than what I was. In exchange, a dreadful stream of hate, pain and torment flows back into my veins. The sword is an actual Nightmare Demon, I realize. It’s eaten people, and it kept their minds and souls in a nightmare world, feeding on their agony and pain as it visited suffering on them of a magnitude difficult to imagine. I stand up, sword in hand, and realize a small part of me now lives in the nightmare world, a small part I will never get back. The cops shoot at me, but it is not magic that courses through my blood, and it is not shadows that bind my body and soul together.

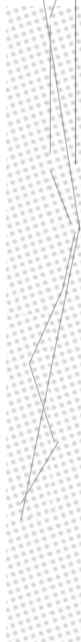
I scream, and as I bring the sword down on the police, on the government agent, and on a dozen people I couldn’t



be bothered to identify in the building stairwells as I flee,
I find new purpose in violence. I can't tell if I am awake
or am asleep, but for the first time in a week I feel well
and truly sharp- alive.

My name is Marieken Mithras, and a week ago I ate a
girl's soul before being murdered by a boy with a katana
myself.

My name is Marieken Mithras, and I have recently discovered
that I'm a Nightmare Demon.





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



Groypee/Paco



by: [nekosattva](#)

Last Time

Yelena reunites with Christine and resurfaces long-held fantasies and resentments, as Little King Samuel prepares a rite to fertilize the heavens with force and fire



CW: military hardware, guns, misogynistic language, sexualized gaze, sexualized spirituality, kidnapping, nudity, teenage sexual experimentation, involuntary bondage

Reality seems to be a dream I'm slowly waking up from, Lanka. Natalia rubbed her eyes, watching the golden sunshine growing darker and darker as it gets swallowed up by the cold, remorseless valley. A few jets whizzed by her ear, sounding like massive hornets drilling into her ears. Ow ow ow! The entire history of her disappears dust cloud by billowing dust cloud. She did not think that witnessing the destruction of a people would be as casual and plain as it was reading it. But these are useless thoughts now; Natalia murmured to herself, holding the hands of the child soldiers as they skipped down the alleyways, and everyone knows this is now nowhere.

"Nico nico!" the children chant, raising their arms. Nico nico! We are the sons of nothing. We are the daughters of nobody. We suck on the dusty air of a vacant planet.

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UCCNM20M
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Natalia tries to chant along, but no sound could burst forth from her mouth, no matter how much she strained her throat. All hands on deck. Boots up over barbed wire and anonymous fields of experiments. Come and get it. The air of forever smells like petroleum. "Mama!" one of them shouts to Natalia, pulling on her shirt, causing the whole carnival to screech a terrible halt. "Look!" The horizon is full of towering mushroom clouds, standing tall like infinity trees. "Look!" A wave of dust covers the valley. Behold all you're heirs to. He pulls out a piece of chocolate-covered quark and hands it to Natalia. "I want you to have it because you're so pretty," he says. Natalia tried to cover the molten side of her face with her hair, before opening up her hand and mouthing with her lips a 'thank you.' They embrace. This is nice, isn't it? Now, do you remember your name? And he thinks for a bit, and he shakes his head, and he takes Natalia's hand, and they all take Natalia's hand and they sing together "nico nico," and the little tune goes:

And they sing:

Hear her speak, the motherland!

(clap clap clap!)





Hear her sing, sweet motherland!

(clap clap clap!)

(a rigorous display of accordion skills)

We leave the sun's loving embrace, hand in hand,
to step into night's cold, barren no-man's-land.

And who wrote those candied lines, set it to old tunes? She grabs their little cheeks, and she squeezes them so tight that she could disappear into their teeny-tiny red folds. It does turn out we are one of flesh. But who will take care of you? Watch; the sky is turning a billowing black, a hot shroud is all you're heir to. One of the children embraces Natalia's slender leg and lets himself be dragged down the street, and he wouldn't let go even though she mouthed to him 'let me go let me go let me go!' So now tell me mister, what exactly am I an heir to? I'm cold. This land is barren and obsessed with its own memory.

And where were you born? She wondered. She couldn't remember it anymore-- shacks and empty fields,



full of chickens and barbed wire. The children looked up at Natalia. Were you born here? Do you call this city home? Are these streets yours? The children could not remember. What use does land have for a name under the dazzling, terrifying stars of Nay-toe? The stones turn liquid 'near your toes. "Where are you from, mama?" Natalia could not remember, it all now seemed a dream from infancy. Perhaps I was born somewhere in the last century. Natalia answered with a empty voice; nothing came forth from her mouth. "What is the past?" one of the children asked. A nightmare we wake up from, she thinks. She stuck out her hands and motioned them to follow her towards the square. We are merely called by the name this place gives us. We are of Nay-toe, we are united in fear. And what is the future? A remembrance of the past. I remember how you used to make me smile.

In the middle of the square sat a large piece of unexploded ordinance marked "AGM-114;" a long, shape-ly rocket had stuck itself into the concrete on a bed of rubble. Around the square stood many monoliths of glass, pointing up towards the sky, bearing jagged teeth. Everything that was not encased in glass had been burned down to black dust. The trees smoldered like large candles. I stood there in the street, holding hands with children, and



I thought it all so strange dear Lanka that I couldn't help but laugh. "Nico Nico should be here," a child said. "Nico Nico will come and save us," another child said. "Nico Nico fills up the skies with light," another child said. The group chats are alit. These were once child soldiers guided by the warmth of a maternal hand, guided by the dream of an embrace now denied to them. Who will take the hands of these orphans of nowhere; who will sew them to the sky? Kto, kto kto?

"Contact!" one of the children shouted. They scattered, running for cover; some of them hid behind the rocket and peered out over its bent stabilizers. Natalia put her hand on her TT-33, and pushed herself up against the tree-- she grinned, would she really stand a chance against a squadron of liquidators? She pulled on the slide with great effort, grunting and trying to force a bullet into the chamber. Natalia looked through a few burnt crevices in the trees towards the stairs that run up the freeway beyond the square; she saw a few men dressed in flecktarn like her dad's hunting clothes, with weapons that looked angular and complex like metal wasps. Natalia's eyes widened with anger, with fear and anticipation. Stay down, and don't shoot; she stuck her tongue between her teeth and hissed at the children. Three men ran down the stairs and hid



2.
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202BEND1
J12NW
D012
V1D0N
WYENW
D0GOBE
E1
T0BOBE
W101
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COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
D0GOB
1B2NW
T0BEN

behind a few benches encased in glass. While she watched them take positions, sudden bursts of glare irritated her eyes-- she was being watched through a scope by another group of men hidden in the smouldering ruins of a building. She waits for a few moments; she was not dead, so she reckons these must not be liquidators but men with orders. Natalia hissed again so the children would stay down. She took a few breaths, then walked away from the tree-- she stepped with great caution towards the square with her hands up. The children grit their teeth; one of them yelped at Natalia but would not budge from behind his meagre cover. As Natalia walked further towards the men, she pulled her hair back to show her face; to show them who she was and that she was worth something.

One of the men raised his head up from the bench, and raised his fist: "Paco, it's her! Look at her face! Look at her face!" The other two men got up from their position; they were dressed in body armor, with plates of Kevlar stuck to their torsos and their heads covered with helmets. They approached Natalia with their rifles drawn, and their hands shook with palpable nerves. "There are children here!" one of them shouted. "They have weapons. We're surrounded." Behind her, she heard the cocking of rifles-- the men jumped up and raised their rifles,





their heads scanning the square for potential heat. "How many!?" one of them shouted. Natalia remained silent. "Can you speak?" One of them asked Natalia. The men hid behind the benches, unsure of how exposed they were. Natalia looked at the windows and saw that many of them suddenly were filled with more child soldiers armed with rifles; they'd too had been waiting for Nico Nico's return.

One of them walked slowly towards Natalia. "Come with us, peacefully. No-one gets hurt." Natalia looked at the face of the man who had shouted at her: his pinkish folds, the drops of sweat falling from his glasses. "Paco! Cover me." The man took Natalia and pressed her up against him, his head sticking up over her own, his STANAG magazines and flashbangs pressing into her sinewy back. The other two men ran up behind them, using her as cover. The man took Natalia's TT-33 from the holster and threw it onto the ground, and she now felt a powerlessness she'd never felt before. Lanka, we walked backwards-- I saw the children watch me with anticipation and regret as I was pulled up the stairs. Out from the rocket, one of the children stuck up his head; a shot rang out. I was pushed down on the ground as the men pressed themselves up against the glass walls. I watched as the children ran in every direction, screaming. "Let's go!" he shouted.



"Paco, let's go!" Nay-toe is breathing down my neck and he won't let me go.

"We won't hurt you," Groypee said as he pushed Natalia into the armored little sedan. Lanka, be honest with me. How did they know where I was? Be honest with me, Lanka; you told them everything, didn't you? Are my movements so predictable? Have I been tagged somewhere, visible to everyone, an open wound? Or maybe everyone's lines carry the same course in the Autonomous Zone. I remember this from mathematika class; so much of a trajectory can be understood by its origin. Because of what I am, I am here. "We won't hurt you, cutie pie. No-way, detka," Groypee said as he sat next to me and held me in his arms as if I was a wild animal to be constrained. The other one, who I assumed was Paco, took the driver's seat. The rest of the men loaded up into a white van parked behind us, hanging beside each other like fleshy carcasses. I had no more illusions about my own fate, Lanka. I am to be used and then thrown away-- no illusions, they lead you astray. Groypee took out his phone and told me to smile. I wanted to feel the comfort of my TT-33 once more. "We caught ourselves a real life loli here," Groypee said in English. I didn't understand what he meant but I covered the molten side of my face as if I didn't wish to disappoint. I remained





silent. "A loli," Paco answered no-one as he turned on the radio and turned into the highway. The speakers started to rattle with deep bass and a constant, repetitive clanging. "A lolicon, a cute little girl that you just want to hug," Groypee added. My realization that my body might be of some value startled me. "You really can't talk, cutie pie?" Groypee grabbed my face and pressed the sides of my mouth to peek into my insides. I wondered what my throat might look like to him. "Stop touching her," Paco grunted. The music on the speakers started to heave with rumbles and mumbling. "Still got your tongue?" Groypee asked. I remained silent, my face crystalline like the glass that covered the highway. "What a shame about all of this," Groypee whispered as he touched the molten side of my face with his gloved fingers. "What a shame about such a beautiful little girl." And I didn't know if he felt pity or envy as he rubbed my skin; I thought about that as I watched the fire of the mountains pass by the windows of our car.

THE TWELFTH THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:

« "The world as we think of it does not exist. Rather, the world is merely a tool by which we see the world itself. It's a tool by which we project our actions, our be-



haviors, our tastes, our entire life onto the world. There's nothing natural about it. When I see a human being and think of her as slave, or wife, or worker, there is nothing about the world which has made her that way. When I see a stone and think of mineral; when I see a tree and think of paper; when I see the beautiful explosions of bombs and think of atoms - none of these things have anything to do with the world, and everything to do with me." »

Yelena laid on the sand, still warm from the heat of the day, and watched the explosions in the sky as jet planes roared in the distance. Are these the drifter clouds of atmosphere's grand tragedy, or the afterglow of rocket's red glare? She raised her right hand and formed a face with her fingers: "does it matter?" After a few moments, an overwhelming sluggishness forces her eyes to shut. How long did they have left? She'd made her peace with Christine but something still bothered her. Would the Zone be liquidated, cease to exist, remembered only in online compilations? Did they already shut down all the channels on the messaging apps? Did they still fap to Christine's customs, or did they already move on to newer, fresher images of women? She thought of her mother, and she thought of school, and she thought of how she misses driving around in her pizza-reeking delivery car. She was stuck here in



this tiny corner of the world of hers, feeling as if she was sinking into something dark and deep. She felt like a triple text unseen, a loose end in abstraction. She raised her right hand: "fuck you."

A shadow creeps across the sand. The heat of flames had left Yelena's cheeks, and she opened her eyes to see Little King standing before her in raging glory. He looked as if a sportswear store had been exhumed by an excavation. His neon-green windbreaker was covered in ash, and his sneakers were sooty and caked with grime. Sweat dripped from his glasses. A key hung from a chain 'round his neck. Yelena started to laugh. "I'm tired of getting abducted," Yelena said. "I'm not moving anymore," she added. Little King didn't say anything; he took out his phone and showed Yelena a picture of Natalia. Above Natalia's face, a little cartoon dog sat sleeping on the peak of her head. It had already thirty-three-thousand likes. She might go viral; a symbol of the funny relationship between youthful beauty and violence and death. A few strands of hair hung over Natalia's wound like a suggestive shade. Yelena sat up in alarm; "Natalia... how did you find her?" Little King smiled, and spoke softly: "we have Nico Nico's phone, and her close friend's circle is very excited about your girl." Yelena's face softened up, her eyes falling; "I



really owe you for this, I guess we're even. You can abduct me again, or whatever." Yelena suddenly felt cold, and she rubbed her hands together: "she can't even speak, you know. No tongue, she's got no tongue. I just call her Natalia. I don't even know her real name." Yelena looked up at Samuel; "where is she?" Little King got down on his knees, closer towards Yelena.

"Eia, eia, eia..." Little King said. She'd never seen a look like this on that face. Yelena sat up, her arms behind her. The dirt felt comforting in its base feeling, grime soaking 'tween her fingers. "I wanted this all to be something for us, Yelena." Samuel seemed so small to her, like his water was all squeezed out 'n fucked, his body in a dessicated form. "To be an island of virtue and remake ourselves in the image we chose; we wanted to give ourselves a new name, a new body." The rocket that sat poking into the stars had now begun to rise, growing ever more and more erect. "How does it go? Hard times make strong men? I think you understand; you most of all. Every woman wants to create paradise with herself, and gets frustrated at the world when she can't. Every woman wants to win." Yelena shut her eyes, then opened them up again with a fierce twitch on the side of her left eye that could



not rest; "you're just an angry child playing in a big big sandbox. Don't confuse it with the real world, Samuel."

Little King stood up, removing his sunglasses with a temperate motion of his wrists which seemed so alien to Yelena. His eyes were black like a tar pit. The blurriness between his empathy and his cruelty was in equal parts frightening and intoxicating. A few chirps came from his pocket; he took out his phone and his fingers danced on the screen. "You're coming with me. You're coming with me, or you will die. I cannot let that happen so you're coming with me." Yelena felt a strange but pleasant relief; no more words, only the mere reality of a body at someone's command. Her physical form is clay. There's honesty in violence and it never hides behind a beautiful face that whispers sweet. She felt weak; hungry and weak. Yelena stood up and simply nodded, her head felt heavy like a balloon. She followed Little King to her fate.

The interior of the tower was full of bright dust, and the light shining from the space above them illuminated it and made it all seem like she was being abducted by some kinda of big beautiful UFO. "Shit," the walls had a spiral staircase but an old fashioned cargo elevator sat in the middle, and it had big ugly hydraulics and hazard yel-



low control panels. Little King stepped onto the embossed metal platform and pointed at the panel; "you'll have to read it for me," he bellowed. Yelena joined him; she wiped away the dust from the control panel mounted onto the platform, and pressed a button that read "vverkh." The platform first shook, roused uneasily from sleep, then jumped into motion towards the top of the tower. Little King nodded and covered his eyes with his sunglasses; his silence and his smile terrified her.

And the top of the tower was so bright, so unbearably bright; Yelena had to cover her eyes with her hands as the platform came to a stop at the top. She let small fragments of appearance come steadily through her fingers-- the walls were covered in computer monitors, switches and consoles, grand maps made of buzzers and bulbs, "napravlyeniya" and "sryedstva," and there were a multitude of seats and carpets lined the floor and there were plants and ... "what the fuck is this place?" Yelena yelped. It looked like something between a hotel and an alien cockpit. Everything was round and heavy, hard enough to seem like it might last forever. Little King grabbed her wrist and took her through the door out to the metal walkway at the top of the tower. From here, they could see the entire Zone lit up with fires and flames, boil-





ing with smoke and dust. The horizon was a fiery grill. Nay-toe's kingdom alit like an ember; 'Nay-toe takes, Nay-toe gives.' The sky was colored like a rotting strawberry.

"You see that," he pointed out towards the mountains which glowed with fire. "Everything is to be liquidated. NATO orders. Everything is to be as if it never existed. Do you understand? The past is forfeit as much as the future." Little Samuel sez; his bluster and warmth had given way to something remote, foreboding like a distant and unknown planet. "Old names, old identities, whatever body or form these things denote; they can no longer exist and now they can float in freedom. Terrible, terrible freedom." Little Samuel took off his sunglasses and looked at Yelena. She saw his leaden face, his blackened eyes; she felt she might drown. "No!" she shouted as she stepped away from him. She ran back into the control room and put a chair between herself and Little Samuel. "No! No! No!" but what could it mean now? "No," and it doesn't mean anything here. There is nothing to refuse. Little Samuel kicked away the chair and wrestled Yelena down onto the carpet with a feverish leap, thousands of fibers pressing into her back like daggers. "No," she wept. He felt heavy. She looked away from him; she refused to meet his



gaze and it was the only refusal she could muster as his breath burned her neck. No. No, no no.

Little King grabbed her wrists; squeezing them together, he pressed himself up against her body-- his face was wet with tears as she struggled beneath him. Yelena had always known, somehow. To see her worst thoughts come to life terrified her; she felt a hot knife struggle in her guts. Little King's face bulged with tension, heat burning in every vein. She wanted him to beat her. "I love you, Yelena." She shook her head violently, dull thuds as her skull hit the carpet. "I love you and you can complete me. You can fix what is deficient within me. We can have such beautiful, tall children, with want of nothing else. We can fix everything together, make the world anew. We--" his frantic talkin' was interrupted by the sudden movement of the platform, which made Little King jump onto his feet. Yelena turned onto her stomach, wiping away his tears from her face. She felt cold; she beat her chest with her fist to bring back color to her flesh. Little King sucked on his vape and fixed his hair.

The platform returned back to the top of the tower with Paco and Groypee both standing beside Natalia, and they were holding her arms as if she was a stray ani-





mal with clipped wings. They dragged Natalia to a couch and released her. They looked at her for a few minutes, their gaze passing over her scars, her moles and freckles. Natalia said nothing; her eyes looked back. "Why doesn't she talk?" Paco asked. Yelena got up from the carpet, rubbing the reddened parts of her wrists. "She doesn't have a tongue," Yelena answered. Groypee shook his head. "She has a tongue." He grabbed Natalia's face. "And I bet she understands English just fine." Natalia sat rigid, like a doll. "Let her go, Groypee," Paco intoned. Groypee looked back at Paco; he released his grip and rubbed the sweat away from his forehead as he turned to face Little King. "And what now?" Groypee asked. Little King was watching the control panel as he sucked on his vape, trying to make sense of the flickering bulbs and switches that seemed like fireworks to him. "Now? With our Mahimata here, we can begin the final stage of the plan. We can accomplish what we'd set out to do. We'll do it together." Yelena watched Paco's face grow stiff; she sat next to Natalia and she embraced her. She felt such relief that Natalia did not reject her, and she covered Natalia's face with herself. "Tell the men," Little King added. "Tell the men, Thermopylae."

"Are you sure about this, Samuel?" Paco asked. Little King didn't respond nor turn to face him. Groypee



looked at Paco, looked at Little King, his worries hot and heavy... it must be the doubt a pawn feels as he is thrust towards the enemy, oblivious to the plan that dictates his movements. Yelena felt Natalia squeezing her; "uspekoy-sya," she whispered. "We don't even know if these missiles still work," Paco answering himself after a few minutes of silence. "And we don't--" but Little King interrupted Paco with anger; "leave us alone! Go bother someone else!" Little King's eyes would not meet Paco's gaze. Groypee's face turned sour like a child caught in the middle of his parents and he walked onto the platform. "Paco, let's go. Let's bounce, bro," Groypee sez. Paco looked at Yelena and Natalia; concern appeared on his face for a few heartbeats but it blew away quick, so quick... he joined Groypee on the platform and motioned Natalia towards him so she could press "vnjis." Little King turned to them, abruptly; he put his hands on the railing before the platform and took a hit off his vape. "Can I trust you, Paco?" Little King said in a soft, strained voice. Paco looked back at Little King, his eyes searching for something in the room. He nodded. "Thermopylae," Paco answered. He motioned to Natalia. She pressed the button and after a few seconds, Paco and Groypee disappeared into the darkness.



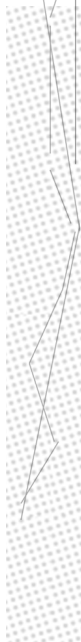


"Hard times create strong men, and strong men create good times. But good times create weak men and weak men create hard times;" Little King muttered to himself. "Cliché bullshit." He turned away from the consoles and walked up to the couch before Yelena and Natalia. He crouches down and grabs Natalia's hand, he moved away some strands of her hair and studied the wounds on her face. He removed his sunglasses, he squinted. He reached into his pockets and pulled out a piece of chocolate-covered quark. He gave it to Natalia and Natalia gobbled it up like a greedy sow and Yelena had never seen such joy and pleasure before-- her teeth press into the confection slowly, her eyes softened, her cheeks were returned their rightful color. "She's beautiful. She's someone's daughter," Little King muttered. He rubbed Natalia's hands and then turned to Yelena. "My Mahimata..." Little King sez. "Come with me, help me find the right switches. It's almost time." He looked at Natalia and kissed her on the forehead. "It's almost time; we will take the underground train and escape to the bunker site at Chelyabinsk." Yelena was moved by how genuine his kindness could seem.

Yelena walked up to the consoles and sat down on the seat Little King brought up behind her. The colors of the switches, flickering seemingly at random, seemed like



the shudders of a nightmare. She felt the ancient plastic under her fingertips; it felt as if an incredible, infernal demon was resting just beneath the surface. Is this Nay-toe's will? Why am I here? Little King came up beside her with a piece of paper filled with numbers. "Yelena... these are the coordinates of NATO bases in the Zone. I want you to enter them into the computer and then initiate the launch sequence." Yelena took the paper into her own hands and read the two-dozen lines of coordinates; Little King was lying-- he could not know such information and the numbers didn't make any sense. She pressed a button that read "entry" under a panel titled "directions." Dozens of rows of switches lit up, and the keyboard whirred with anticipation. Her fingers went for the very first number-- Little King grabbed her hand; "please, don't give me a reason to hurt you, Yelena" his voice sullen and apologetic. Yelena withdrew her fingers; she looked at the list again, then typed in the first row of numbers. She pressed the button that read "entry" once more, the console whirred and the printer spat out numbers and the screens flickered. She repeated the process; she repeated the process over and over again. Natalia watched over Yelena's shoulder, both fascinated and frightened by the machines that surrounded them. Little King looked at the lights change on





the map and sucked on his vape. The screens flicker. The whole world was reborn in light.

Yelena had finished her entry and pressed the launch readiness button. Many of the lights on the consoles before her fell dead. Under her feet, she could feel the ground whir even all the way up here. Little King watched from the metal walkway as countless bottomless holes in the soil cracked open, as if the Earth herself was complicit and opened herself. He sucked on his vape. The explosions grew closer. Let them liquidate whatever they want, the Zone is not a place but an ideal. Yelena rose from her seat, took Natalia by the hand, and confronted Little King on the metal walkway. She was too exhausted to feel fear. She wanted him to care about her. "You owe me an explanation," she spat. "You owe me the truth because that's supposedly why you're doing all of this. You want me to be your bride but you hide from me. You're a liar. You're a bad husband. I would never fuck you." Little King removed his sunglasses and sucked on his vape, he did not meet Yelena's gaze. "I'm fulfilling NATO's will, Yelenochka. You can't understand. You're too washed, too normie. To live not by material or physical boundaries, but to live purely by desire. And that means we destroy everything that binds us, that controls us; destroy everything



that prevents us from seeing each other for what we really are. Only then can life freely circulate again. We're bringing in a newborn world."

Yelena yanked on Natalia's arm with anger. "A newborn world? This is just primitive savagery. Savagery by angry fags and incels! Angry at mommy! Breaking all the rules. You can't fool me, Samuel." Little King laughed, sucked on his teeth. "Savagery? Modern life is savagery, just like the primitives, ruled by mommies. The endless sallow night of matriarchy. Everything savage and primitive is female; blood, sex, gobbling up food like a sow. That's how they force the young men into submission. Ancient, modern-- all of civilization is to break young men and turn them into livestock, toiling in shit to generate economic worth for the sake of the mother. That's civilization then and now; young men subjugated to provide for the pleasure and reproduction of the mothers. Sure they'll sacrifice a few girls to get what they want, especially if they're too beautiful, but everyone knows who's in charge. Women are the species, and the men are just drones. That's primitive life, and that's modern life. Tyranny by mommies; they terrorize their useless husbands, put them to work, then pout when the men don't enjoy their daily slop. Men are born into bondage, they're lifeless! Look at





them when you walk down the street, dribbling, drool falling from their mouths as they pay for everything the women demand. They drug young men, put them in school, try to break their independence and vitality so they'll stay forever mommy's boy, begging her for protection."

Natalia hid behind Yelena, frightened by Little King's spittle and crimson face. "So your solution is to blow everything the fuck up? What is that going to change, Samuel? If that's what civilization has always been, then it'll be same after you drop bombs on everyone. You can't make mummies disappear-- they're a fucking reality of life, of biology. It's not anyone's fault that they're obsessed with what created them; it's natural. If you burn it all to the ground, it's just going to be brutal subjugation in a different way. It'll be men hitting each other over the head and stealing women again. That's just a different sort of control, a more brutal sort of control. That's still tyranny."

Little King grabbed Yelena, a strange joy breaking through his grimace. "Yes! Of course, that's still tyranny. But those who can resist that tyranny will be capable of resisting, capable of rejecting civilization, of rejecting that control! Civilization is someone beating you over the head and then killing you if you resist. To live life freely, you



must be the one to beat them. To live like a pirate, on the edges of civilization. That's where life is, Yelena! To be a predator instead of prey, to reject the labor and commerce that exist merely to sustain the people who terrorize you. Freedom and power, Yelena. They are the same. Cities are prison camps, blowing them the fuck up is the only way to liberate everything and everyone. Blow up the suburbs and open the zoos, unleash the predators. Thousands of wolves prowling the streets, hungry for anything, elephants and bison stampeding, smashing everything to pieces... and the cries of everyone reverberating through the streets as the lord of beasts returns. Every city; New York, Moscow, Beijing, becoming ruins, overgrown with vines and forests, haunted by the coyote and lynx. Every slum wiped away by a mudslide, overgrown with jungle. That's justice, that's freedom. Thousands of beasts, beautiful and free, ushering in a new era of bestial freedom."

Yelena released Natalia's hand and cracked her knuckles; a funny smile befell her face. She punched Little King as hard as she could. Natalia leaped back in surprise; she didn't think the princess had it in her. Little King touched his cheek, he turned his head to meet her gaze. "Who do you think you are?" Yelena shouted. "You think you know Nay-toe's will? You think you're special?"



You think you're a big and powerful man? You're fucking nothing. You're fucking nothing and I can fucking kill you if I wanted to. You're a retard. You're a faggot. I'm gonna crush you under my foot, you little bug." Little King laughed, laughed for a while. He sucked on his vape, then he took Yelena by her arms and forced her onto the couch, his teeth sharp and wet. Natalia watched but did nothing; she did not understand them, she did not understand the fury between them. She watched, then looked away. "Go ahead!" Yelena spat as Little King pressed her face into the couch and pulled up her frock with remorseless force, to turn her into a dog. "You're not man enough to rape me, Samuel!" Yelena shouted. Little King undid his trackpants and tied her wrists to her back with its string. She looked back at him from the couch as he grabbed her waist, as he turned her body into something small and easy to destroy. She looked back at him; his face was tense, wet, full of terror. Little King grabbed his penis from his pants and stroked it. He could not get hard, no matter how much he stroked himself.

Yelena writhed on the couch trying to cover herself up with her frock; she rolled onto her back with her hair covering her face. She looked at Natalia on the metal walkway; Natalia looked at the missiles rising from the



holes in the Earth, sucking on her thumb, enraptured by the sight of the soil growing appendages. Yelena laughed. "You really are a faggot," she spat at Little King. Little King put away his penis and held onto his trackpants as he walked to the console. "Which one says 'launch?'" Little King bellowed. Yelena laughed; "pyedyik, kazyol, mrazj yebanaya" she said between giggles. Little King ran to her and squeezed her neck with his hands which made his trackpants fall back down onto the ground. His face was engorged, a grotesque boiled beastly thing. She did not fear him. She laughed even though breathing became more difficult and more difficult and... she felt herself choke; she coughed, trying to suck in air. "You," she coughed, "are so..." she feels herself growing faint. Little King let go of her neck. Yelena gasped loudly, her throat rattling as she greedily sucked in air. Little King walked back to the console, his trackpants dragging behind him. He looked down at the console; the symbols cohere into nothing even as they anxiously burn. He took the key hanging from round his neck and inserted it into the unoccupied key slot then turned. All the lights of the console flashed then dimmed, with the exception of one small button right under a few switches which blinked with horny eagerness. Little King hesitated for a few seconds then pressed the button.



Natalia stood on the metal walkway and watched as the missiles shake and whirl only to then fall dead. Some of them rose up a few meters and then clattered back down into their hole, causing gigantic plumes of smoke and shrapnel to ejaculate forth. She thought it disappointing, and terribly amusing; she started to laugh, laugh more and more, laugh in a way she had not for a long time. She started to choke on her own giggles because it all seemed so stupid, so useless. But one missile managed to rise from its hole-- her laughter turned to astonishment, to awe; how beautiful they could be, like daggers cutting a slit into air, hellfire spewing forth from their tails as they seek their destiny. The missile rose up high and high into the sky, shook and clattered, then disintegrated into a curtain of glowing, beautiful dust as the metal burned up into one big fireball. A large flash-- a deafening boom that made the walkway beneath her shake. The sky was for an instant completely illuminated, white and hot. Natalia covered her eyes and felt her skin tingle. The air smelled strange and the light slowly died away. A powerful wind took the dust and covered the Zone in rain, in glass and shrapnel. No other missile had managed to leave its burrow. Natalia returned inside, her mouth tasting of a swimming pool.



Little King stood before the console which emitted a faint buzzer, holding his pants up with his hands. The map was now completely devoid of light. The printer had jammed, stuck in a continuous whir, sounding as if it were in agony. He walked onto the metal walkway beside Natalia, watching the landscape in his underwear as his pants fell from his hands, and saw that radioactive dust had begun to cover the Zone. Alright. Instead of detonating, the missile had impotently disintegrated, polluting the Earth with nuclear material. "Well, shit." He reckons it's a real environmental disaster. The UN would probably have to step in. Trillions of dollars would have to go into the clean-up effort. Evacuate anyone left and clear out the villages. The entire region might have to go on radioactive alert. Little King stood there at the edge, holding the railing. "Huh," he muttered. "I expected more." Natalia came up to him, her face too demanding an answer. Little King didn't meet her gaze; "probably will make the Zone inhabitable for a few thousand years. Isn't that crazy?" Natalia thought about it for a few seconds, looked at the beautiful blue-'n-green hues of the dust cloud, then pushed Little King off with a full sprint and a shove. He made no sound as he fell down and hit the rocks below, no sound beside the splattering and the dull thud of his flesh. It was her first kill, she thought; she returned back inside.





Yelena looked at Natalia; the tower had fallen dead still as the machines retired. "Samuel? Where's Samuel?" Yelena's face was red, covered in sweat. "Natalia? Did you? How?" she asked, already knowing the answer from the look on Natalia's face, from her eyes shimmering with resolution. Natalia came up to the couch and undid the string holding Yelena's wrists. After she touched Yelena's wrists, she put down Yelena's frock over her legs and pulled her up onto the couch. Natalia looked down at her, as a mother would look at her child; looking back up, Yelena could feel Natalia's deep sorrow for her lost home, the damage that had been done to it, that could not be repaired, and most of all she felt Natalia's need to hold someone. How long had it been? Yelena rubbed her sore wrists, and then she embraced Natalia, kissed her head, patted her back; in Yelena's embrace, Natalia started to weep silently, covering Yelena's frock in hot tears. This intimacy was new, yet familiar-- she thought of the first time she'd held Christine in her arms. She smiled, and let her face rest on Natalia's sooty head. "I'm sorry," Yelena whispered. "I'm sorry," Natalia squeezed her tightly, rubbing her face onto her. "I'm sorry that I assumed you didn't speak English." Natalia looked back up at Yelena, rubbing the tears from her face, the scars on her skin becoming raw and red. "Now that we can understand each other, can you tell me what happened

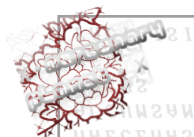


to you?" Natalia thought for a while-- she shook her head and buried her face in Yelena's body, begging with her touch to be held more, held more and more, and they held each other as the rain grew louder and louder, so loud they could heard nothing but its pattering as it hit the glass.

THE THIRTEENTH THOUGHT OF KALI HI-CHI:

« When he woke in the morning, he'd found that his 'lyubovnitsa' was not there. He felt empty. A cricket revealed itself from the crevices of the rock. Does the cricket feel empty? The cricket's heaven is all around her; no need of hers is unsatisfied. My heaven is nowhere. I must build my own heaven because there's no heaven for me in the world that could satisfy my needs. No heaven around me may satisfy my needs for I was born deficient. So I must build my own heaven. »





by: [baroquepiral](#) + Escher McDonell

MERCENARY PLANET

sieh tan

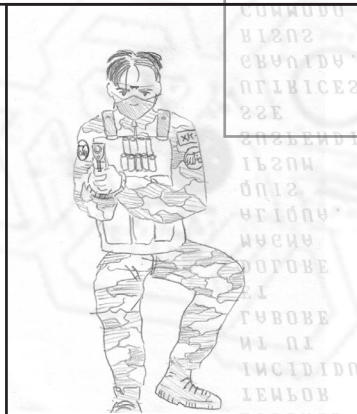
birthday: april 29

occupation: paramilitary
consultant, private security
(former operator from sdu
and paramilitaries)

blood type: o

likes: pragmatism, ergo-
nomic design, technolog-
ical innovation, strategy,
virtual environment,
jackfruit

dislikes: military-minded
people, being too talkative,
people who point out that
he's not very talkative,
organizations that don't
measure up



as a child, sieh was known to be a kind of ace in academia,
but so was everyone within his schooling. there was however
one incident where someone had attempted to bully him
for not standing out. that student soon was attacked in the
middle of the night, tripping on a wire before, having his
head shoved into the pavement several times. His account
was too disoriented to recall who might do this but even

POI datafile

if people suspected sieh, there was no real evidence other than an alibi.

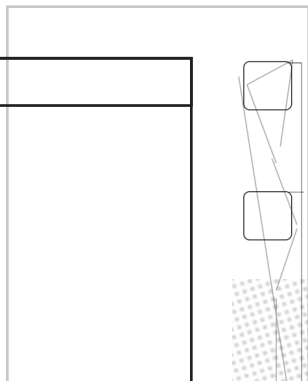
completing military training in singapore, he said to have found the experience "deeply revolting" and likened it to a daycare than a professional institution. while many derided him for that comment, his expertise had prevented his insubordination. this lead to upper ranking members trying to send higher skilled members to try and humble him, which he only thought was a prolonged hazing ritual. he became something of a pariah but in beating and being beaten, he seemed to adopt this objective distance in all respects. some are even unnerved by the way he merely dispenses his attacks without wasted effort, even as he, for example, executes downed enemies with three shots to ensure they stay dead.



joining the sdu became a formative combat experience for him. here, he felt more able to pursue more academic interests becoming a sort of cosmopolitan man that would vaguely be the goal of many.

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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.



Last Time

war goes hot and ideological doubts come to a head as the Earth forces and their allies strike back against the auxiliaries from Hammer



CW: war crimes, stalking, surveillance, discussion of rape, Evangelical ideology, homo/transphobia, guns, gun violence, police, cults, organ harvesting, radical feminism, gendered violence (female-on-male)

'The Beek Doctrine': Creating generalized conditions of anonymous terror in order to increase the likelihood of rifts and friendly fire among the enemy.

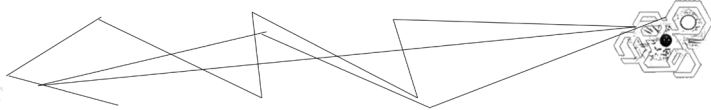
"Why did you start wearing girl clothes? Like, what did you think you were doing when you started?"

"It wasn't... that central for me. The clothes. I never like... thought being a girl was that."

"Oh I don't mean as some like universal step. Even if you only started after the Coven you could tell me."

"Oh. No, my first time was when Malia and Emma

COMMUNICATION & QUALIFICATION (THE SOLDIERS' ROAD 6)



and Tina would each let me try on something of theirs. That was when they said... they wished I could be a girl like them. I expected it to feel weird, but looking at myself with them felt... normal. Like that was the real world. And then nothing else did."

"Awww." Mai clutched my arm and squished her cheek into my shoulder. "Do you still talk to any of them?"

"Not since high school. Barely even then. As a kid I could be one of them, but then... obviously, not. And I couldn't really be a boy to them either... What about you? Did you talk to girls when you were a kid? I think I kind of assumed that would be a lot more people's origin than it turned out to be."

"Hmmm. When I was really young I didn't really talk to the girls but I liked watching them. The way they dressed made me think of... pretty aliens. I think I said that to my mom once. With rings, frills, little tiny studs, tails hanging off their heads. I didn't think of it like a role or even a way of being perceived - at least, by other people. I wasn't saying this yet, but I already only cared about being perceived by the sky. I wanted the eyes above the clouds to look down at me like a pretty alien too."

Awakening in the sickbay, I knew in an instant what I looked like. Those scenes in Evangelion had always been the most affecting to me, whether it was Shinji or Rei or Asuka on the hospital bed. I knew what I had become, and that it was the opposite of what I had intended to become when I made my agreement. And I knew how I had got there - by chasing the frontline, chasing thrills and the edge of death, chasing justification for my place here even while risking it. All this fell into place like it was the memory I had needed to cut off to build the false context of a dream. Caroline Bennett-Fog was sitting on a swivel chair at the foot of my bed, tapping idly at her Azoth Smaragdina tablet, and I hoped she was wearing the mask of my ally.

"How long have I been... what's happened."

"Six days. Your body was reconstituted from 46% of its tissue. The medical technology here is... well it makes wars of attrition a bitch, and that's what it looks like we're in now. At best."

Christ. And Halation? 54% of her tissue wouldn't be just like, limbs to be replaced like machines, she'd have memories stored in there, habits, desires... *I'm here. I'm OK. I retreated to your brain, and*



your Asymmetry Field prioritized protecting that. I also helped repair damage in real time. You're welcome. Don't go banging it on things because you feel guilty now, OK?

"You did good. You captured us a new Asymmetry Field."

"Do they... can we even switch their sides if they're captured? They're interoperable, right?"

"This one was an ecological tourist vessel. It didn't even realize it was in a war until you attacked it. It still barely understands what that means and doesn't really care beyond its own survival."

"That's still..." *feels weird on a consent level?*
Never mind, I can't let her look at me like this. Like a parody of myself. "OK, so do we want to make another ship or use that here."

"I have a proposal I want you to read when you're fully lucid about operating it as a turret stationed above the mesa that could periodically emit sub-fields - something you never told me they could do - to capture enemy units. Besides, we already have another ship."



My eyes widened.

“Our second from Earth - a week ahead of schedule, meaning Azoth or someone else has already improved on the Drives.” I couldn’t contain a sigh of relief, even as I knew it didn’t make sense. Why did I need more weirdos to wrangle? But it would check the power of some of the ones I was already dealing with. The Expedition Force would get bigger, more impersonal. “Beek’s idiotic airstrike cost us all the goodwill we would have earned by taking down the bombers, so as soon as you’re actually available to discipline him, I highly recommend installing the second ship’s captain as commanding officer.”

My relief faded as quickly. “...airstrike?”

“Our missiles are a lot more powerful than theirs. It’s been called an Unreciprocable Crime - their equivalent of a war crime. As in, they can’t do that thing where the offender injures themselves in equivalence with the injury done, even if a treaty was reached and they wanted to. But the Rusty Moons defended it because they were already going to be subject to one. So a bunch more Ferrous Masks are coming to support us, and that basically puts us with them against everyone

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else.”

“The Ribbons didn’t count?” They must have done more damage overall, even if we did more damage in one hit. Unless... it had been almost a week... how much damage could Beek have done in a week -

“We lost the Internexus, since half of it got crushed in a rockslide. That gave Entangleweed a huge edge in recruitment underground, including virtually the whole Polyp Massif, which would have overwhelmed us. Beek levelled it.”

“Motherfucker! He knows I’ll... hand him over to them for something like that, doesn’t he?”

“He knew that as soon as he hit the sorry, I’m not sure you even know what a Mob is yet.” Her voice was withering in a way I hadn’t heard it since the early weeks of training. “He’s been trying to make it impossible for you to do that, both in terms of what the locals will accept, and what your troops will. He let *that* guy out too.”

“Oh no. Oh for fuck.” I started seriously hoping this was a nightmare. I lay down, sat up, lay down, sat



up, trying to get a sense of how much my head hurt, my diaphragm, how much I could move around and do.

“The good thing about having done so much damage is that even about serious events like the destruction of a massif - there’s a reason the Entangleweed thought they could get away with this one - information, without the Network, moves very slowly now.” I had been wondering why trying to blow up this place hadn’t been a huge taboo either, although evidently the Sunbites had to be tricked into it. “My strategy, which I know you won’t like, is to establish a three-dimensional information perimeter. We’ve contained most of the first strike witnesses already, and posted troops in the Polyp Massif wreckage. From hereon in nothing around this Plug for sixteenth-exponent units gets out, if that means eradicating any sign of life so be it. Insofar as something inevitably does, we counteract it with deliberate misinformation. Have a version of the story everyone who wants to ally with us can believe, and no way of knowing otherwise. Attempting any sort of public reconciliation would undermine that.”

I blinked. “You think it’s easier to blockade



information, on this planet, as non-natives, than to reconcile with anyone? To punish someone for war crimes?" So much of the time I'd come to treat her as a sort of... divergent but closely kindred path to who I'd been in middle school, at least. Then there were moments like this when I tried to stare through her glasses and only saw a void.

"If it wasn't clear, Unreciprocable means there is no appropriate punishment, in their normal system of reciprocation. The alternative is extermination."

Halation's feelings twinged within me. She was barely familiar with the concept, but what had happened to her home, the vengeance she had half-knowingly wreaked, were something like this.

"And how far is the responsibility distributed?"

"Normally, over a Waltz."

"What do they count as that for us? A troop, maybe? Surely not a species?"

"See, this kind of thing was rare enough that it's basically all casuistry. Which was stored in the Network. But the Network is gone. Some Towers



probably have the files backed up. Different Towers have different files. No way to verify them.”

My mouth went dry.

“Bring Beek to the brig where I was keeping Hadak,” I managed to spit.

She shrugged. “We’ll send someone. I warned him. But the troops won’t like it if you make an example of him. He was defending himself, some of that footage is *viscerally* horrifying from a human evolutionary standpoint. They’ve gotten really riled up now.” She extricated a thumb drive from the port on the end of her tablet. “I figured before you get too deep in that, you’d want to see this. All the data and news and briefings from Earth are in the main system already, but this drive has the private messages from your friends and family.”

There was new music from Mai - including a music video for an old song, more professional than I ever thought I’d see her in, spinning around on a rooftop in San Francisco while coloured rays and whorls rained down from the Sun, slowly filling up more and more of the screen until she only showed up

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in negative on a psychedelic soup like Halation short form video slop from Alasdair, an effusive WWII-style letter from my mom, a terse .rtf paragraph from my dad.

“You deserve to see the world you’re changing for the better, before you worry too much about whether you’re changing this one for the worse.” She hovered as I thumbed idly through the files, chin bobbing in her throat. “If I might even go so far as to suggest an exercise. If you’re not already doing this. Consider what you would permit yourself to do if you were fighting your ideal revolution on Earth. If you did not conceive of yourself as the primary object of ethical suspicion.”

I tried, for just a moment. It felt like looking out over the surface of a gas giant three times the size of Contemplation.

Contemplation. I didn’t put myself in this situation for Earth, did I? For the United States, like so many people I’ve looked down on? For the people precious to me. Not even for Mai. No - I did for Contemplation. For you.

Yes, you gave them all up for me, and I will not let you down by letting you turn into a monster.

I really didn't believe it at that moment, but I wanted to. Wanted to believe she was still wiser than me.

As soon as she was gone, I opened the CLAMP autodecoder on the thumb drive. Information readable as regular files *reconfigured* itself into the secret, CLAMP-readable ones.

"I really wish I could thank you. I can. I do. This is 'objectively' the best I've ever lived, including when I was with you. Not even just objectively. I have a support network. Sophie visits, Alasdair's always around - he's surprisingly sweet, I channeled him a persona from my universe - which I officially have to call something, now, I guess, because the real universe is *out* there. *Your* universe. The transmissions just tell me they've split - they're both equidistant to my subjective world, but there's a gate I can go through materially to yours, if I want to. Which I still don't. Maybe someday, maybe when there's peace. I should want to. I'm almost afraid I'll get cut off if I go out there, even though they don't say I will. I'm already treating it more like a fictional universe than I used to. Alasdair called it the 'Lightverse' and made a bunch of explainer videos



that have tripled the sales of my albums. I'm sure you'll hear more about this from our mutual friend, but even though he's not in on any more than he has to be, he's 'our' closest thing to a public face. He's become the first and last source on anything to do with you or Halation for a ton of young people and casual conspiracy types, he's been on Joe Rogan like ten times, including to debate some of the new opposition. That's less degrees of separation from Joe Rogan than I ever thought I'd be. I made a 4-song EP for him - Alasdair, not Joe Rogan lol - for his "Lightverse" persona, a yellow-green-orange serpent-ring called Chiwellen. That's not to make you jealous, I'm still gay.

It's really slow coming up with music when the connection to the universe *my* universe feels this distant, but I have the time and money to do just that and nothing else. I don't mind it this way. It's more deliberate. I remember some young version of me looking up to real musicians, even great improvisers like Sun Ra, thinking that must be how they did it, they understood everything they were doing, they had architectures and mind palaces they could walk you around, but I'd never be able to work like that because I was stuck cramming ideas in when the teacher wasn't



watching the computers. Before I rationalized it all with... a story about how I made it, which was also a way to make it? I guess you could say 'irrationalized'? My next album might be called 'Living In A Rational Universe' but I can't tell if that's just... wallowing in it. Music journalists have come around to interview me, I was invited on a Tiny Desk show. I won't do that shit. I don't mind if more people listen but I don't want to be 'important' for reasons that have nothing to do with the music. That's unfair to them, and I never even thought the music was 'just about the music' either. I don't want to be a *story*. Plus I'm pretty sure Ogier's pulling at least some of those strings. If it's some streamer in white sneakers and hentai merch who says 'bruh' every other word, it's Alasdair; if it's some Gen X white lady with funky shaped glasses, it has to be Ogier.

He owns the security cameras and the TV and the damn thermostat in this apartment. Doing shit on your network feels like using the Death Note. I'm pretty sure I've seen drones hovering from my balcony, even out of the city. One time I went to a club and someone cornered me in the bathroom, started pretending they knew me from somewhere then trying to grab me and take pictures and lick my face. This woman in white



latex like something from the Matrix popped out of a stall and grabbed them by the back of the neck in a way that made them start puking on the floor, then said something about me being “under real protection now” and disappeared, I think I caught a glimpse of her once the rest of the night. It felt more violating than the original harassment tbh. She also had... it looked like a TV actor trying to imitate your haircut? Ogier comes around sometimes like a 70s landlord, brings meals from the kitchens on Plastic Beach or random things he thinks I'd like - one time he gave me a 3D printed NFT ripped off something I drew when I was 20! I don't think it's romantic, but it still makes me sick that I can't exactly ignore him. I'm up on Point Reyes National Seashore now, completely exposed to satellites (62 miles of dark blue one-way glass), I've got a giant sunhat and a mask on so they can't see my mouth move, I talk to myself and say crazy bullshit as if you were here all the time in case they're recording. The wind is nice and loud today. I've walked so many beaches, trying to get away or feel a connection or both. I know trying to get away will make it more obvious, but I really do love the coastline... I can't believe how little I got out in nature before... Again, best I've ever lived, objectively. Even though you can't really call it 'nature' when you can see



that white tumour on the South horizon. Hiram's so mad he couldn't get this place."

*Round quails bob around, metaphysically complete, picking at anything and everything. If there is food for them everywhere, if the universe is complete for them, why do they move, not at all and then so fast, so sudden, after each other? The patterns of shade and sunlight on the ground, the movements of ants in file, fascinate and lead them on from one place to the next - Vectors are arbitrary within bounds - equal formulae produce arbitrary results - yet equally within the formulae of self-sustenance - "the formula of happiness is randomness within self-preservation with the possibility of randomized reproduction" (randomness at randomized scale - this is the pattern, the outcome, not the target)**

**(Halation please confirm/correct!)*

"It's crazy to think of myself as the Earth girl now. It's not that I think there's anything special or peaceful about the animals or the plants, I never paid attention when people told me I had to think that, it's just like watching people. That's what Meteorology teaches, right? I really hope you send me more... 'texts' sure I can say that you always said a text was anything, you'd call an oral tradition a text, although there's a



word in my head from Halation I still haven't found a translation for and maybe you have. When I don't know how to translate a word I sit with it until I have a musical phrase and type it into midi and save it to a folder so I can remember it that way, I wonder if that's how the Ahasurunu come up with their words, although this is a Weir word and there *is* an Ahasurunu word for it and I wonder how close mine is. I want to see Ahasurunu in person sometime. But I'll keep looking at the Earth until you come back, I'm not bored or anything. I'm looking at it like an alien planet, there's so much of it I haven't seen. *You took the sky from me and gave me the Earth* - well that one's so obvious I had to use it. Hiram listened to it and said I should say '*you took the sky off my shoulders*'. What a weird thing for him to have an opinion on! I stayed up all night thinking about it. I make it sound like he's coming on to me, but it's not that, it's creepier. I think he ships us. Whenever journalists who are obviously in his pocket try to interview me they make sure to get tabloidy about our relationship even if it's a serious interview. To align me with you. And it makes me feel like you're not letting go of me, even if you are. But you're not! You're making me write your... I chose to write your Meteorological scriptures, which aren't yours but now I have to feel



like they are. I chose to share Halation with you, but not like that, not at the same time, but they'll try and make it *sound* like that, like we have some special bond that will outlast the end of our relationship and my fucking consent, and it's fucked up because we do. I chose it, but not like this, not like he wants to make it sound, either because he gets off to it or because he has some kind of keikaku and I dunno what's worse.

But I do like the writing. *Objectively*, best time of my life. Writing is a great way to waste time when you're a zoo animal, like walking around staring at the glass and wondering what's on the other side. It really lets me hold space for being confused. I'm not being sarcastic or passive aggressive. I always thought I was good at it, when I was doing liner notes and worldbuilding docs and stuff, and I still am, tons of people on the internet tell me I still am, people who would never have listened to my music, but I never know if I'm getting the right things across. Socrates, Jesus - OK those guys never wrote anything down, but Marx, Paul, Nietzsche - aren't they all famous for getting misinterpreted over and over? Or maybe we remember them because they were bad at it, if you were good at it you would be transparent and silent, people would



be transformed by what you said but not remember you said it. I like to think you'd be better at this, since you were paid to do it at least for a bit, but it's obvious why you left it to me, you'd just be more willing to misinterpret, to shovel lives into your misinterpretation, like I know you're already doing out there. Sorry. How did the Meteorologists keep it straight for millennia? Did they? Again, please send more - Azoth AI wants me to say "chronotopes" which is from Bakhtin apparently and I wanna say "heartstanzas"!"

Under the boughs of live oak trailing fishnet lichen - a form so recognizably universal it seems alien anywhere, like the loops of Weirs - in fields of mulch sprout what look like creatures from deep sea vents: straight red stalks with buds on their surface split into white and gold petaled lips. Metis says these are coralroot orchids, parasites on mycorrhizal fungi symbiotic with plants. A double symbiosis - by Meteorological standards they do not count as parasites, unless the fungus either shows some sign of wanting to be rid of them or was interoperable to a point of communicating Will (*suggestion: use tropism? Current?). The fungus grows regardless of them, of what must feel to it only like a gentle sucking mouth, a phantom kiss.*

“But so, I’m doing the basic ecological and metaphysical stuff publicly, like we agreed, and the stuff with political implications on the CLAMPnet. So far most of what I’ve got is the latter because I keep trying to wrap my head around things and only want to say bits and pieces where I trust people not to evilly misinterpret it. I’m sorry I’m so behind - the only public thing I’ve managed is a video essay that turned into a regular essay (I still can’t handle being on camera that long), and went to like 40 pages (when I’m really trying to explain something I go back into ultra dense, Sun Ra composition mode). I’m attaching it so Halation can check if I’m getting everything right and if not I can correct it... [attached file: Interoperability: Species-Ethics in the New Universe. docx] In the CLAMP network I just write like how I did liner notes. It’s getting big, controversial but big, in the climate movement, which is good, the name makes it obviously relevant there, and gives people a new idea to organize around. Ogier asked me one of those times he came around about like, ways to Meteorologywash the geoengineering he wants to do, putting nanotech everywhere in the atmosphere, monitoring indicators, absorbing carbon and releasing counterbalancing elements, which apparently some planets you’ve heard

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of do? He says his timeline based on your tech release schedule is two years to be able to start working on this? Please confirm if that's true because that would put a scaaary close deadline over my head for organizing anything here, they're obviously gonna be loaded with surveillance and weapons. I mean if they can release arbitrary chemicals into the air they can just poison people from a distance. Are you saying the rest of the universe *can* do that to each other and they *don't*? Or is that what you're walking into out there? Never mind, if it's not it will be once you get settled in. (*giggle, a bit like a sob*)

Of course there's gonna be opposition if he tries to roll it out here but one the opposition has to be capable of doing anything, and two insofar as it exists it's mostly opposed to you and aliens and Meteorology. The information war is crazy man you have no idea. You're either the Antichrist or the False Prophet - or Alasdair's the False Prophet, or Hiram Ogier is the Antichrist which, frankly, scans. Some people are saying *I'm* the False Prophet and that's gonna happen more if I say more about Meteorology that frames it like a religion. It was obvious the Christians - my dad's kind of Christians - were going to assume that, but what's surprising even to me is the conversions or not-quite-



conversions but people who aren't Christians, working Revelation and bits of Biblical apocrypha into their worldviews directly in response to Contact. Alasdair says this has always been there in Ancient Aliens world, but also most of the old guard were humiliated overnight by the fact that aliens existed and looked nothing like what they had been telling people. So a lot of the new people who just got into those spaces hoping to find out anything they don't already know have been swept up by this new wave that says everything you've told them is a lie, that you're being mind-controlled by a weaponized psychic parasite, that this parasite was already present on Earth and being developed by the elites in coordination with Operation Blue Beam, which they're now calling Operation Childhood's End. There's different variations in which more or less things are fake - sometimes the Clamp was a Watchmen alien type thing, made in a studio somewhere, and sometimes every other alien that shows up is gonna be real but the Weirs, specifically, are a kind of cosmic parasite that are also Bible demons. That meth dealer you apparently had a run-in with (what is with you and dealers?) has been all over talk shows, claiming a fragment of it is still inside him giving him messages. He gives bits of real information, things he'd have to be getting from



someone in the know, mixed in with bullshit that only holds up as long as no one else can talk to aliens regularly. He also says the parasites are what make people gay or trans, and gay sex transmits the parasites. I think there was a version of that one when Delilah was on 4chan.

And there are versions that have basically every element of the narrative except the Bible parts. A lot of people on the left... including back in Seattle... believe basically the same thing as these people... The Weirs obviously can't be good, because they're involving humanity in a proxy war before even talking to us, speak through our governments instead of to us directly, chose a LARPy leftist collaborator on purpose... You know about half of the old organizers you know won't even 'platform' any collaboration with any kind of alien, collaboration with American military imperialism by default, although the dumbest campists are gung-ho because China is. On the other hand, regular people who just want healthcare and hate Hiram Ogier and President Paul love making memes of asking aliens to invade. That's most of who *****'s reaching out to if Alasdair thinks they aren't sus - she's become super active in the network, I tried to stop her, doing the



political stuff I can't because I'm being surveilled, sent links to virtually everyone she had on the DIY Directory and that's grown things a lot, even though she has to hide that it's her because half of them hate her. She'll send you a message too - it's encrypted even within the network but she's certain you'll guess the password. Funniest thing one of her hackers found is Human Domestication Guide searches have outpaced Omegaverse. Straight people are reading it now. Anyway, Alasdair says a lot of the people she's contacting are already being targeted by feds, and even if we avoid the most obvious cases, that speeds up the timeline in which they're gonna figure out that we're active, if not how. One good thing about the Bible conspiracies is we've been planting our own about what the "Mark of the Beast" is, to create false positives for our actual communication network.

Oh, and there's a whole contingent of weird racists who want the aliens to tell us whether humans are one species or not, who literally think the government isn't letting us talk to them because they'll say race is real, and are trying to make species law a thing.⁹ There's like crossover between them and the people who want them to make the aliens tell us



dolphins are people. That one engaged me enough because what I remember of interoperability from Halation seems like a really useful idea for dealing with this better than humans have done so far...

I saw the dolphins from which our torpedos are crudely copied once from the edge of Plastic Beach. Their speed is beautiful in the same sense, but they also jump and spin. Their fins cut through the water, collapsing wave-forms in pillars of salt; they eat other fish; they rape each other; they were painted on the plaster murals of beautiful queens with soft breasts and long dicks and ochre makeup and olive-oiled hair. Exercise: where does interoperation occur, and where interference?

"I think Hiram already thinks of me as the resistance, or at least as the biggest influence on you he can reach. So maybe he wants me to tell you about this, if I have a way of telling you, even though he said not to tell anybody. But I have to tell you about this the same way you'd have to tell me about the existence of aliens. He sent someone to the apartment - *they've said they have ways to make it very unpleasant for me here without voiding our contract*, I told you this would happen but it probably doesn't matter for the same reason as



before - and took me to dinner. Didn't let me take my phone or any electronics. He brought his laptop to the empty restaurant on Plastic Beach - he can make all the employees disappear, of course. And he showed me this document. It's called the PEWS - Parallel Economic World Simulation. Somewhere between sixteen to thirty people have it - they don't all know who all the others are, but they were all called in when Edison Lens made contact, they all know what you negotiated. It's something Edison Lens helped create, with a bunch of Soviet cyberneticists and American wargame developers. It's a year-long model of a world, based on all available data from the past year, with maximum economic equality under maximum democratic participation. It iterates simulated populations from those basic presets kind of like a giant Dwarf Fortress session. They extrapolate the annual findings decades out into the future on five-year cycles, and he says it always collapses or creates a slave class - he explains it as something to do with having too little necessary labour, so people who do and don't do the work form factions against each other. I'm pretty good at math and there's no way I could check all the data, so this whole thing could just be made up to fuck with my head, or he could be lying about it, or he could be reading it wrong about

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it *or* it might just be designed to produce their results the same way as regular economics. But it also sounds a lot like something Halation talked about Contemplation doing, with their crystal quantum computers, so I'm wondering if we can make a better one, and maybe try and get our hands on the one they already have because it's got all kinds of information they don't release to the public.

If it's real, they probably want the same as us. What you need to worry about isn't contact with Weirs but computational life, and that gives them all kinds of reason to get in touch with your enemies. My understanding is, Ogier is only able to do the things he does because he has access to this document. The economy is already basically planned to maintain his class as an essential part of it. Not just his, he says, *everyone's*, I don't know why I'm repeating all this crazy bullshit but like, it's worth knowing what he thinks. What he thinks is, if the aliens are worried about pacifying the dangerous predator Man, they should talk to the people who have done it before - *"the only ways that have ever worked: with sacrifice and inertia"*.



Any ideological argument is to be rephrased immediately in terms of "what will we do". With the technology, that is, which we will hopefully receive from you. Right now this is a battle over technology. I refer to the enemy as The Powers and Principalities. I use 'Powers' to refer to anyone who was at the table when your agreement was negotiated. An important branch of our investigations into determining who exactly that was. It's not necessarily the same as the list of corporations the IEEF has granted license to, which keeps growing - that's the Principalities. Our immediate goal is to establish a channel of egalitarian distribution and collective control of any alien technology reaching Earth, especially including its military applications. Once we can do it with that, we can do it with any other technology or infrastructure we like.

The Principalities are moving to establish a common patent scheme copyright through the IEEF, though as I understand, you retain strict copyright over any alien technology transmitted. Meaning the simplest option for us would be to establish ourselves as acting on your behalf, rather than the IEEF, but then we would have to expose your channel of communication, and you would have no avenue to retaliate if they shut us down and deny our claim publicly, outside of a long journey to Earth. Also, you are still



unpopular - only 35% approval globally - we expect you will begin to overcome this when the technology starts rolling in, but that of course depends on what they do with it. One of our primary objectives has been to establish a network of correct, reliable information on the rest of the universe outside of government and corporate sources; but so far we are running with the story that anything we hear from you is a leak from a whistleblower at IEEF ground control.

We have a real one, "Major Tom", a transmasc who is like, into whistleblowers the way school shooters are into other school shooters. As in, he runs a whistleblower fanpage, which is how I reached out to him - we caught him before he did anything stupid! - and concealed this from both NSA SIGINT and IEEF recruiters. One thing you will certainly want to know from him is that Hiram Ogier is building a personal flagship. The news just treats it as an ego stunt the IEEF's permitting because they're so dependent on his technology.

There was a meeting on alien technology last week in GAZA supercity. Most negotiations that aren't directly taking place on Plastic Beach - and there are a lot of corporations that want to get out from under Ogier's shadow - are happening there, because it has the best security on Earth. About 70% of permitted distributors, as well as an



interesting list of other figures (*attendance chart.xlsx*). We have contacts on the inside, which was not easy. A migrant labour union from the Philippines has been fighting for their right to communicate with the outside world - they aren't allowed phones in there. They sent their people in to work with materials for a meshnet they assembled on site. They gave us a clearer idea of their rollout plan, the kinds of flashpoints they're expecting around medical care - safe viral binding sites, allergy suppressants, apoptotics. They're trying to scale up production before the tech is officially announced, since the core patents on medical technologies are all public domain and they can only dominate through the supply chain and economies of scale, but for that they have to keep everything they're building under wraps with tight non-disclosure contracts and an archipelago of non-state sites. We caught a good list of them and are looking to get connects inside. Operating by striking against the production of stuff like this, of course, will make us look like heels, so we're trying to work out a kind of takeover plan where a site could be reorganized on Meteorological grounds in real time - meaning we'd first have to get an exhaustive model of how it works (vector charts are really helpful, although they took a while to get the hang of) and redesign it without the owners at the top. We could publicize both charts so the public could understand what we're doing,



although we need people breaking that down in simpler terms for everyone who doesn't know or care how a vector chart works.

Meanwhile, as I'm sure you're aware, intra-operable organics are the one they're really excited about, because of the potential military applications. They're planning on just not telling the public at all. Of course I'm sure we'll get them directly from you, but the questions are where to produce, where to use and when to reveal. We have a lot of people in the refugee camps outside the supercity, including one nutcase who's actually made runs over the wall. She wants first dibs and I'm inclined to give them to her. She literally can't feel pain. You'd fall in love at first sight.

Do you remember how the nights of Blanquist Girls Chat used to end? You waxing granular about horrible worse/worse dilemmas, I indulging in edgelord scenarios, Mai coming up with implausible ways everything could work out, Delilah pulling everyone back to basics, introducing criteria of who we could trust that none of us could meet based on how we'd been going about the problem. We stopped because it got too painful, being reminded how much better we could be by a girl who didn't even want to



herself, until she decided out of nowhere to die over it. Even without her, I've learned to live a pretty happy apolitical life, the way all of us could except for you. But I'm doing this for Delilah, not for you or even Mai. She's mine, and so her revolution will be mine. And you know what, I've been finding a surprising amount of people who meet all her criteria. There really are people like that in the world. Except for us, at the top, the thread between Earth and the stars – we're the weak links.

Have fun out there. I hope I get to see it in a documentary someday.

baiiii~

The whole place was vibrating periodically while I talked to Beek. The hum went up through my bones and made my clenched jaw feel like I was at the dentist. The vibrations were being diffused and stabilized through the Lung so as not to damage anything, but Tumor Plug was under attack again. "At some point we'll need to either artificially reinforce the rock or move the Lung, maybe to the crater we made "

"You made."

"For the moment, though, we have the other ship parked there."

"What? Why?"

"Using the Asymmetry Field to control the perimeter."

OK, that wasn't a bad idea. That also made Bennett-Fog's idea of an information perimeter less obviously impossible.

"I thought you'd built your whole strategy around taking over the Internexus, and then you go and cave in the roof on it. Why?"

"Look, I really did not think the airstrike would go down that far. Fucking pumice planet." He looked dejected. "Damaged a lot of the line we'd set up too, we had to rebuild a whole new route around the former Internexus. But so? Shit happens, you're gonna learn that up here. Strategically, we've turned it to our advantage already. It killed a lot of the old Entangleweed partisans who were going to launch a

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counterattack while our forces were divided. We've put the blame on them on their own networks. Does anyone believe it? Beats me what else do they have to believe? They can't even see the crater for themselves. You wanna see what the Mob looked after when we hit it? I'm assuming you've seen it before. Like a huge burnt marshmallow slopped all over the rocks! Bugs trying to pull themselves out with half their limbs of course, sucks for the *people* who had already gotten pulled into it. I'm not sure God takes you if you die like that." He grinned and wiped it away before he could grimace at whatever was on my face. "Sorry, I forget you really are like a woman sometimes." His braying one-man laugh-track.

"Why'd you send out Hadak?"

"We're trying to control communication, organization, information in very flexible structures. That means hunting down individuals and small groups, very fast and very surgically. That freak is good at one thing and that's manhunting. Or bugchasing." Another bobblehead guffaw. "Even in a place like this - although frankly, if he gets lost that's good for us too. Win-win." He sucked one side of a smile. "The way he told it, you



liked him more than me. But then, I guess that's the way he'd tell it."

I nodded. What was I going to ask? Could I take over his operations? I had enough on my plate.

"Look, I get it, you know?" His face softened, sinking gelatinous. "I know it'll be hard for you to believe, but I went into this job idealistic too. It's easier when it's just you and your gun, and you making the decision whether to shoot or not. That's why you've been taking those kinds of missions, even though you're a commander, right? But from where you're sitting, tons of innocent people are gonna die no matter what, you just get to pick which ones." Opened his mouth as if trying to laugh and nothing. "By the way, one of Hadak's units got wiped out by friendly fire in the Polyp Tunnels. Guys from the new ship. Their captain is named Sieh."

"Tell me more."

"That ship is less my guys, so I don't know them as well. He leads a spec ops team, and his background is actually in policing. Royal Hong Kong Special Duties Unit - the 'Flying Tigers' - he brought his whole crew



from when he was on the force up with him. They work like a machine together. He worked both before and after the switchover to mainland control, so he has trust with both Anglo-American and Chinese backers. He's seen as a neutral enforcer of authority. So something like this seems... out of character for what I know of him. Might be something more going on. You're smart, I'm sure you'll figure it out."

"Duly noted."

"Oh, by the way. Have you looked at the list of bombing targets from the Ferrous Masks yet?"

Fuck you. "They want us to do more?"

"Lots more. They have some of the best communication networks left, and a long list of places their enemies have been attacking them from over 400 square km. Bombing is our only real advantage in a place like this. I knew it would be as soon as I saw them freaking out about those goofy little sticky-bombs the Ribbons drop, and you did too. Otherwise this is the worst planet we could have possibly started on—Tora Bora times a million!" His eyes sparkled somewhere in the brain-folds of his face. "Your men respect you a



lot, you know. More than I expected. More than I got myself when I was this wet under the ears, probably!" He barked his self-deprecation as if to expel it. "But it's only gonna last as long as you keep winning. Not just your big stage fights, but like, the objectives we've got here. Playing straight like you or even not you can spend years fighting over a single mountain. We're treating a planet as a single battlefield. You gotta think big. From the *sky*. Next time you're up there, look down."



Halation stayed behind attached to a computing cube with three other Weirs while I went to talk to the captive who hated *her* more than me. Their fronds loosened in their knots and stretched out in the breeze, a behaviour I almost never saw in our atmosphere tanks, and kind of adorable to watch, but painful to think of. What I had been keeping her from, what she had been keeping from me. I walked down a sort of spiral leaf-jetty that gently unrolled and descended through the Lung's gravity with my steps, to land on the rounded plug, like the crown of a berry, on top of the bubble inside of which Holdfast twisted.



I sat cross-legged next to an oversized, long-keyed Ahasurunu melody-wheel that reminded me of some sort of Mayan calendar. Holdfast's body was missing half of its shells; the naked parts looked almost like one of those nervous system homunculi, tentacles and little pulsing sacks hanging from smaller chained fleshy vertebrae. Where my whole body had been reconstituted, I realized, parts of theirs had been left out on purpose, reducing the risk - maybe even survivability - if they somehow managed to escape.

Up there, were you guarding the wreckage of the Network? Is it repairable? Do your people know?

You think that matters now? Even if you restart it, it will have taken a side. The other side will not trust it. It chose destruction rather than drag this planet deeper - yet here you have gone and dragged it deeper anyway.

Didn't you too? I didn't have so much guilt I couldn't see the hypocrisy here. I think we're here for similar things.

I suppose I had been deceiving myself about that too. But that's why I joined the side I did. They weren't speaking in Ahasurunu themselves: the bubble was



translating, but I could catch snips of the high, windy intervals and sliding tones between harsh hisses. *As an ecologist, of course the Adipose frightens me. But to fight it is to fight the inertia of life - to prevent it from filling a new niche that has opened up for it. Installing the Adipose across the galaxy is a fight that can be ended, a homeostasis that can be reached. Preventing it cannot achieve homeostasis, only an eternal, zero-sum conflict. "Anti-Adipose" is trying to effect an impossibility.*

But Meteorology has anathematized technologies before. Like Strong Asymmetry Fields, and super-reproducers.

Those were too universally dangerous relative to their use-cases, the niches themselves weren't stable. They squirmed below me in a way that suggested rhetorical squirming. But I didn't understand those cases without Halation, let alone the ecological metaphors, so I didn't press them.

...would you say the same about humans? About any invasive species?

Invasive species cross thresholds because of incentives. Incentives can be reversed.



It seemed there were some ways these two could imply an anti-Adipose win condition they were eliding — opposed governments across the galaxy, limited individual or criminal use under the radar but nowhere integrated into the core infrastructure of civilization?

You are strangely calm. About being an anathema species.

It didn't surprise me.

Was it because Halation was gone that the sadness, the *weirdness* of saying that hit me all at once? I noticed and tried to impose a quick compartmentalization barrier (*think about it later*) since it would give me a bargaining disadvantage (*not thinking about it will also give you a bargaining disadvantage*).

Do you think yourself different?

A basic paradox of growing up human was that liking people — especially liking people I wasn't supposed to like — made you hate them. Hating people, could probably make you like them, too — that had to be



some part of someone like Beek or Hadak's charisma. The Coven of Domnu had pressed that impulse in me as far as possible, and at some point, when I walked through the halls looking at half of the student body trying to picture them as walking corpses, listened for the subliminal rape-optimization in the cracking voice of another small-town boy asking about last week's homework, it stopped being fun or cathartic and became a chore, something that erased every hint of why I had wanted to believe something like that so badly.

Mai was the first person I ever met who loved people because she loved *more-than-people*. She loved people not only as individuals within humanity, but humanity within something else.

I think... we are all different. Not an abstraction. There are many peoples... victims of what Algal Bloom became, of the process that made it that way. They are still human, they still exist, I changed my body to be like them, I want to change the Earth for them. I want us to define the Earth for you. It will take time.

So you are not only fighting for the Meteorological optimum of your species as it is now, but for a ghost. You



and your symbiote are both fanatics obsessed with your ghosts over the universe. And if freed from their own crude equilibrium traps, they – yes, even the children of your endangered subgroups – decide to flood the universe, without any need for you? What will you do then?

They were right. This should have been simple. By the rules of my old self, this should have been simple. But I *mattered* now. Potential futures I still had some control over mattered now. They screamed at me in my head in the same voice as the ghosts of the present. Other lives had become small to me and yet Hadak or Beek's cruel laughter still made no sense at all. *I don't want... to leave Earth behind either.* Seven billion people. How many had died here – how many died of poverty or war or gendered violence on Earth on an average day? How many in the rest of the galaxy?

If I lose my leverage over the IEEF through the command bottleneck, I will do everything in my power to regain it by force.

So will you become a dictator? And who will you have to appease, to do that?

(Of course not, I don't think I'm special. But now, now that I mattered the way other people mattered, that seemed to cut both ways.) That is... a recurring question among those who have tried to make Earth better. One I never picked an answer to. As a student of human theories of sovereignty, I'm not sure I believe it's coherent. Everyone can choose to exercise their sovereignty – the maximum of their power, the maximum of their efforts – in a particular cause, or not.

If you would exercise the maximum of your powers, go to the monastery on Tumour. They can offer a more serious understanding of the peace process, and the Adipose, than the one-sided research here – and they are in more serious danger. But do not bring any of these specialist predators. If you can avoid it, do not bring the Orator of Death. There is one way, if you choose, to go quickly from here to there, alone...

A temporary “road” made from concrete hastily laid in a Geoplaque frame (with struts sometimes extending dozens of metres into the Earth) ran from an exit at the bottom of Tuber Plug to the pit created by the airstrike. As we approached in the Corpuscle,



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V110N4
W1E1W
D0G0BF
E1
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W1E1E1
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its scale crept up on us like seasickness. It was the size of a mesa inverted, except that where the mesas stood tall and unitary, the pit branched and twisted where different chain reactions had collapsed the fragile mesh of rock in different directions. Gaps in its wall dozens of metres from top to bottom extended into bottomless darkness. Towers climbed up and around and across them, like ants in a hole chunked in a field, mostly Ferrous Masks but a few with clothing and decorations we recognized from the Internexus (the latter less enthusiastic, disarmed, dangling feet and fishing ropes into empty space, throwing pebbles at the ship and watching them dissolve in midair). Between them the second ship sat on a dish or shield of more solid rock and sand than I had seen anywhere here so far, where the debris had built up into a kind of plug of gravel. Chunks of every-coloured rock - including the recognizable fluorescent veins of the Internexus - were suspended in a white-grey dust like tarmac. These would normally be removed piece by piece as materials for other construction or engineering projects. All of this we saw through the blue-green, chlorine distortion of the ship's Asymmetry Field, which had expanded through the whole pit and into the surrounding rock.



("If we're the Lung, that must be the Stomach," Jax had said, pointing it out from a ledge where we briefly met to smoke a joint and check in. The name had already stuck among the troops.)

Incredible blooms of those disc-petal things - what if I call them Cherrypads - stuck to the sides of the pit, painting the mouths of some house-sized holes completely white.

Halation stuck in my throat. She had lost a home too, and these weren't people whose loss she could even faintly conceive of as restitution for hers. *I have entered, through my pain, into something where my pain is small - but then what made my pain a valid entrance?* She kept probing for things we could do for them, say for them. (We were already providing food to those who would take it.) I didn't think there was anything that would be welcome. We were here to talk to someone who had, according to the briefing, helped at least a little, taken matters into his own hands.

The new ship - called Kupe, a legendary Polynesian navigator, it was fine once but I wondered if they were going to keep looting indigenous cultures as a "neutral ground" between the big powers -



looked exactly like ours, outside and inside. My real anticipation was for Sieh's chambers; how exactly this man would have modified them, as Hadak had with pseudo-Pictish and Polynesian patterns in blue Sharpie on every wall, as Beek had with glossy photos of mid-century California surfers and anonymous Missouri grain elevator skylines and autographed mint condition Les Pauls, as Carolyn had with a homage to the Bayeux tapestry featuring rugged werewolf men stretched across three walls, as I had with printouts from Mai's Tumblr and the herbal pillows Sophie sewed.

I placed my hand on a square of the wall of the hallway. As he recognized her, he gave an eased nod.

"It's a pleasure to see you, Ms. Lillywhite," he said, extending his arm forward. Light melted off the circular surface of an hourglass table, dripping off the curves of the crescent chairs. Nothing else there. Not even pictures of family, which were usually the sole decoration of ornament-averse soldiers. This was someone who could - who *preferred to* - live in a warehouse. Like a vehicle in a garage, a weapon in an armoury.

I noticed his eyes move once - to the Roland



special in my holster - and let my own scan the Glock 17 at his side, an amorphous drop of ink half-covered by his fingers, before I began.

"I've been briefed on your... exchange of fire with your subordinates. But I want to hear your description firsthand. There's a lot of detail that's always left out in the chain of reporting, and I always try to make decisions informed by as much of that detail as possible." My voice dropped into a register I hoped would sound conspiratorial and not just incongruous. "Off the record, I'm not unsympathetic, but... well, what do *you* expect to follow from this, exactly?"

"You're very diplomatic, Ms. Lillywhite. It is good to have that when you are managing so many different sides in a conflict. My only concern is whether there are parties that might mistake your willingness to negotiate as a weakness. Infantry are not so flexible in these matters," he said cautiously.

"Right. Including, presumably, you." *Too much ambiguity, too much ambiguity, I know this, I know this*, I reached for Halation's steel and found it already inside myself. "You outrank your subordinates, but I outrank

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you, as does Beek and a number of others on this mission who have brought the incident to my attention. And aside from this, there are procedures in the exercise of rank, besides right of life and death.”

‘I do not have anything to gain other than it was rather unfortunate to lose some men in this service. What happened at the ruins of the Towers was exactly as my unit wrote down in the after action report. The Irons unit went with us through the chambers and we split off, communicating our way until we could reach a nexus where we could regroup. In doing so, we realized that the Irons unit had grown splinters. Malin reported that two of the Irons team tried to take each other out, and that she barely got away after neutralizing them both. Guo, and Enfield had already secured them, outnumbering the Irons contact 2 to 1. I acted in self defense for following them any longer would cause jeopardy to the mission. Letting a group such as them use this mission to further their own agendas would cause harm not only to us but to the rest of the extraterrestrial contacts. Something, I imagine, you’re already aware of.”

“Did you learn anything about the nature,



or the motives of the ‘splinters?’” Irons had been described as ‘one of Hadak’s’ but I had made sure all the units were mixed, so Sacred Band/non-Sacred Band should have been the obvious fault line, but if there were others within the Sacred Band I could use to undermine them... “This is one of the points that was unclear to me even in the briefings and I had hoped you could be more granular on.”

“Didn’t seem necessary. Not every unit follows your mission directives strictly. Surely, even you are aware of that. Bashtaev was only an example of such, but he made the mistake of endangering, even killing one of the Weirs. Why else would any of the accounts you’ve heard, particularly those of the Irons unit, make claims against my unit. And if we are to talk practically, I don’t imagine you would throw the project’s aims to solve a few ideological disagreements. Then again, some of those might wind up getting someone killed. The Irons unit already had shaky leadership. Beek didn’t exactly discriminate much on who to bring in as infantry...But when you’re the ones getting sent to the front, anyone’s good as any, isn’t it?”

I breathed out, projecting the energy that had



built up in me as I listened. "This has been honestly my exact concern since I came here. My concern with you is that you don't simply become another one. Bashtaev didn't even belong to a recognizable faction when he got here, at least to command's monitoring lists. Part of this is simply the nature of the mission, and part, I'll admit, is the nature of my own position as commander, neither beholden nor belonging to any of these factions. So again, *if we are to talk practically*" - I hardened on this point into something like the tone I'd taken in the Edison Lens truck, where somehow we'd emerged with our goals intact with *everyone* against us - "what do you want to do about this, other than draw attention to yourself?"

"Another one...That's interesting wording isn't it," he surmised. "And drawing attention? We have only been operating in the bounds of the mission, that is, investigating the whereabouts of these spaces, and protecting those around us, and ourselves. Putting it as merely drawing attention wouldn't bode well for anyone would it. The way I see it, everyone is vying for attention. You must be rather popular, aren't you, Ms. Lillywhite? I guess all that means is that they want you to kill someone for them."

On this, his hand hovered close to his holster but made no movement towards me as I pretended to ignore him and he merely placed his fingers on the leather side.

Mind games, mind games - it's one thing to think I'm weak because I'm diplomatic, another to think I'm stupid. "And you've got mine, I already said I might be sympathetic, but I want to hear the story clearly. I know the bounds of the mission, because in the last instance it comes from me, and at the very least there were irregularities. What deviation from mission parameters, exactly, led to the deaths of those men. Did you first attempt to apprehend them?"

"As I've said, they were going to kill us, hence why they suggested to split up in the different tunnels. I've monitored that unit since we got here, and some of them even spoke about potentially taking us out of the picture because we wouldn't let them act with impunity. My unit is not very popular because of that. It was at that opportunity that they acted, shooting at us first."

"I thought you said they shot at each other."

"Knowing my unit was in danger, we spared



no expense in immediately taking them out. Any irregularity in stories from other units might suggest they might have been affiliated with the Irons team or they want to see that we've been dealt with. Like it or not, ultimately your decision will be what decides this..."

"I would like to believe you, and am already speaking with you outside the formal procedures for a friendly fire incident. But reducing my role to belief or disbelief would essentially concede the state of internal war you're trying to avert. Worse, it would be an act of loyalty on the part of command to an emergent faction, rather than vice versa. Even Hadak didn't demand as much as brazenly." I steadied my hands on the screen in front of me. "So keep going: what was your unit unpopular with them for. What did they want, or try, to do with 'impunity', and how did you confront them. And when they fired, what procedures did you follow to ascertain that this wasn't an ordinary friendly fire incident."

"Belief is only an accessory to those men. What they are more swayed by is order, or force. Both things that could subjugate them. If you don't have that at bay,



they're merely going to take advantage of you..."

I knew this. *Power grows out of the barrel of a gun.* Why *had* I become so willing to ignore this, to trust in 'rules of war'?... because I only had my *own* gun, and a bare handful in Rho Aias. The other guns remained pointed away from, rather than towards me on the strength of those rules. But how many more guns could *he* bring?...

"Irregardless, I appreciate that you're willing to be this detailed. My unit's unpopularity is due to cultural difference. The lack of professionalism in some of these units has become, I think... a bonding experience, sharing the same pains they inflict on others... and each other. Some of them still use the branding iron method to bond." This I hadn't heard of even in the Sacred Band. "We do not act as such. Because of this, we become outsiders to them. But being in military and intelligentsia, we would have to be aware of what they're planning even if it might not be ethical towards privacy. This was...a security concern. They had spoken about cutting off supply lines, wagering to cut off certain infrastructure already set up should they want to demand more support from you directly, trying

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to establish colonies that would do more harm than good. We had not intended to get involved until the incident. Had we not acted, you would not be speaking to me right now. I assure you that my unit is at least competent in documenting these incidents when they occur.”

“Well, I can assure you I’m not burdened by any undue concerns about privacy, and would be happy to... no, I can just order you to share this information. Your own terms. Is there a reason you haven’t reported any of this through official channels? I can guess suspicion that they’re corrupted, which would mean that your network at least doesn’t extend to determining the trustworthiness of superiors.”

“We try to be protective of what information circulates between all of us. I’m sure even you suspect that my unit has been watching us the whole time we are here. Why, I merely withheld it because I wanted to meet you directly. The only communication I’ve had regarding this was Beek’s and Bennett-Fog’s recommendation...” he smiled, glancing again at the Roland special on my waist. “I’m surprised you haven’t had your hand on your service weapon the whole time



we've spoken..."

"I don't think you realize how much harder you're making this than you need to." I sighed, and let my hand slide down to it anyway, just in case he was signalling things would develop in that direction. "What would you say if I told you there was a channel almost certainly more secure, and more exclusive, than yours?"

"Trying to win me over, Ms Lillywhite? I'm flattered...but I wish you did not make these attempts so obvious. That might work with the Weirs but these appearances of who you affiliate with and your public face will become a hindrance once the people who act against your interest realize where you stand..." He kept staring me down but removed his hand. "Besides, you reached for your holster too late anyway. Anyone else could have killed you at this point."

I didn't flinch at the possibility of miscalculation I'd already factored in. "I didn't say you could join it, if it existed. But win me over to what? You've been saying, all this time, that your only concern has been operating within the bounds of the mission. Then you've reported serious breaches of discipline, including on your own part for concealing them, and



implied that the reason you did so was your distrust of official channels. So I proposed a thought experiment, and your response is... confusing. Where do you believe I 'stand' - other than my official position, over you - that I would need to to make such an offer?"

"Well, let me pose this, if you wanted to... my unit and I could get rid of Hadak, Irons unit and everyone there in less than an hour. Cut off oxygen supply, suffocate them before going in to finish the job. Would that be a possibility you would consider? Even experimentally? A warzone is confusing as much as a life is...including a life such as yours. Where you stand is irrelevant to me. I only adhere to the sustenance of the lives of those in my unit and in my command, that you happen to be a part of. Claiming allegiance is only a political move that does not concern me. If I need to act, I will make sure that it is within the spaces of protocols. We will act within your silence but nonetheless, we will follow your orders. However, I hope you consider the efficacy of them, because if anyone is put in unnecessary danger, you too will feel the same harm."

Now that was the kind of proposal that would



become a hindrance once the people who act against my interest realize... The kind that seemed too good to be true; he didn't have any connections here but I had less on him than anyone here too, and Earth had had more than a month to figure out what to do about me. "If I did, that's the kind of thing I'd talk about on the kind of channel I was describing." And the seeming incoherence of his position... was that a sign of authenticity or the reverse? I watched his expression for change, for trepidation or excitement. Bennett-Fog said cowardice was a type of overcorrection. "But the kind of men who openly call themselves a 'Sacred Band of Sol' are a liability who would be discharged normally in any normal war" - or rather, they weren't, I had known this even before I came here, but the people you had to talk to to research something like this would *insist* they were, I could pretend to believe them - "and who without this procedural option, might end up costing a lot more lives than that on both sides. So of course, I've considered it - I consider a lot more than you may realize."

"If you were to speak to me, I would suggest making any of that communication in public modes. That way, at least we have a witness to such. Anything more private may be more compromising by association.

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But I do appreciate the gesture. And besides, this is no normal war, and I doubt someone such as yourself would want such a thing... In my eyes, when have our lives had a cost?... That is the kind of rhetoric people would say to claim an inherent allegiance to life... ” He stood up and moved his hand to a console near his desk, where he lifted two VR headsets over to the hourglass table. “I’ve used these in training demonstrations with my unit, in CQB, or other applications. If you can really stand behind what you say, I would like you to show me on the battlefield. You and your friend. Then, we’ll see where this goes.”

The better part of three months I’d spent in the Azoth Sanctum VR environment; I knew them almost as well as the ship. Of course, there was only so much it was possible to know. Edison Lens had coded the actual settings, with Azoth’s AI resources at their disposal; their idea was to prepare us for an inconceivable variety of alien landscapes by procedurally generating areas based on a set of geological and ecological parameters, including a highly simplified evolution algorithm spitting out novel creatures that looked like something out of a medieval bestiary crossed with Spore. It had never generated anything quite as crazy as Towers, but



often did make environments that were pretty much impossible to survive or do anything useful in - sliding down the side of a frozen whirlpool 50 km deep, trying to aim at effortlessly drifting tadpole things with two clawed legs. The most balanced generations for standard training we saved, either in our individual systems or the shared library. But this was another ship, I remembered as a white flare ringed the featureless predawn blue tingle of the startup screen, manifesting a menu full of saves I had never seen before.

Since the environments, which could generate from an acre to a hectare around us as we moved (although hectare simulations could get us stuck in loading for half an hour if anyone else was using the system at the same time, or frozen midstride with a spiny dinosaur's jaws clipping through our shoulder), were sometimes too big to move around in real space, even in the football field-sized gymnasium bay (let alone if you were training solo while anyone else used it), our custom version of the Sanctum had a brainwave-based setting. This had obvious disadvantages as a form of physical training; it was easier to focus on commanding your avatar if you weren't using the rest of your body, and the helmet would emit a calming

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transmission that could almost paralyze it if you turned it up high enough. On the other hand, the brainwave commands had to be simple, restricting our avatars to a simpler set of movements than we could afford in real life, albeit efficient, optimal ones designed by military movement analysts, which the avatars helped train our mental and muscle memory for. The clunky, virtual feeling of movement fit well among the imposingly low poly, crystalline surfaces and vague, twisting knots of AI noise that made up the worlds; even Azoth AI running on a primitive-by-galactic-standards quantum computer couldn't generate creatures and features over that distance at photorealistic quality. It was a strange feeling, like dreaming you were in a video game, heady and weightless.

Featureless corridors rose out of the white space as did the floor pushing at my feet until my mind could register it as solid metal ground, ringing under my steps. Dawn-light hardens into a spinning cylindrical surface and soon, the twitch of my fingers moved to my palm and I swing my arm to my thigh holster, finding the texture grip of the Roland Special veered into my hand.



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"So you're still getting accustomed to a virtual environment?" Sieh's voice came in on the communications channel, formal and machinic like the environment around us.

"I was just looking forward to seeing another crew's crazy pulp sci-fi worlds. This looks like a regular old FPS," I sighed.

"You would be surprised. Many video games now focus on smaller details in order to enhance realism. I suppose that has become a more...ineffable quality. I've had this system modified for that purpose. Shrapnel, particle effects have much more potent effects on the user's psyche. Fire your sidearm into the target in front of you and you'll see what I mean. Take as many shots as you can."

A target rose up on a flat surface, human shaped silhouette with rings around the head and center of mass. Bringing up the Roland Special, the target dyed in the lens of the red dot sight before I pull the trigger, thick smoke spewed from the ejection port while warmth left from each detonation of gunpowder left my hands clammy, trying to recenter the target. Each 9mm round shredded the target, small white rips





of paper stuck onto the ground.

“In the battlefield, you know that stamina and minor qualities accumulate into deciding factors...Let’s make this interesting. My squad, Guo, Malin, and Enfield will be with us. For the record, they will merely be my support unit. They will not inflict the deciding blow. Pick your weapons. We’ll start when you’re ready.”

The Scar-L would be the most effective if I was going to be fighting multiple people, but the Roland Special still felt more comfortable, more familiar... I held onto it for my pistol slot, added the Scar-L as my rifle and the Karambit knife which I’d kept on me as a token of victory since taking down Bashtaev. The troops liked it when they saw me bring it out, and I could feel the surge of vicarious morale in my chest when I tested drawing and holstering it in Sieh’s unfamiliar settings. (The movements for this were lifelike and weighty even in our simulations; it was a core exercise, and if I drilled them for twenty minutes without moving a limb I would still take off the helmet to look down at my shoulders aching and sweat-slick.)





I turned 360 degrees, the deep wet cracks in the ceiling spidering through my peripheral vision. Scattered soft drink cans rolled under toppled plywood shelves in a convenience store.

There was a closet full of pickled members and, for some reason, traditional medicines from rare animals worth upwards of 300,000 HKD. My last two years of undergrad might have been much cooler if I'd joined one of these Asian spinoffs but there was only one tgirl in the apartment anyway – a casualty. No windows behind me or to either side (though to one side, a small kitchen separated by a counter, to the other windowless closet-sized bedrooms); only a door open on a hallway which I glanced up and down. Down the narrow concrete stairway would be – I remembered this from the articles, there was a convenience store below them. On the other side – the stairway twisted up was it two? three? flights to other apartments until it hit the roof – one of them had gone up, tried to jump and go out shooting on the way down. (She didn't hit anything and was caught in a canvas.)

I turned toward the back of the stairwell. Better to at least map the space; find out if I could retreat into



any other apartments, whether the roof had cover.

There were only two silver-scratched metal doors identical to the other side of mine; they didn't look like I could even shoot through them easily. And then the rusted rungs up to a square grate permanently slightly ajar. However, darkness fell on the corridor, the lights above snapped off and I realized that the power's been shut off.

"Let's do this by the books, you are to capture the subject. Neutralize only if necessary. Golf, set claymores on the stairs towards the exits and in the corridors. Box them in"

"Copy."

"Echo, On me. Mike, cover Golf planting the claymores."

"Roger that, Sierra."

"They'd be stupid to blow themselves up."

"Don't underestimate her. She might have some tricks up her sleeve."



I stretched Halation over my hands as I wrested aside the grate, making sure she was in the setting and could interact with it fully. Sieh's high resolution environment lent itself to working with her; her brainwaves could command interactions the space or the avatar wasn't designed for, and it would usually try to iterate fine details around the request, but these could cause glitches or just bounce off if the AI got especially confused. Without more than lifting my eye level above, I could see the roof was covered in gravel and surrounded by a raised barrier about three feet high, with a squat stucco cube exhaling air conditioning clouds. Halation gave me an obvious option here that would not have been obvious to the apartment's original inhabitants, but the wall I knew had windows was high visibility, and the wall whose visibility I didn't know had none. Meanwhile, I knew at least two people were already inside. One had to be just a couple of floors below me.

I pulled myself back down and placed my hand to the wall, extending Halation as far as I could without an organic connection like Bashtaev had used, or an interface like the Corpuscule, down the stairs and along the floor. On the tight stairway, this amounted to one



turn further than my line of sight - assuming her line of slick hit an organic surface by itself. (A Weir's restricted senses at that range were only built to detect, let alone interact with, topology and organic matter - though a Claymore would be a detectable topographic anomaly.)

I descended quickly, in double steps, my boots settling flat and quiet on the concrete, one sensory-enhanced hand on the wall.

By the time I was one away from the floor where I'd started - Halation still detecting nothing - I pulled the Scar-L and aimed, from around a corner, at the next corner, sending a volley ricocheting like a downpour at whoever might be below.

"Gunfire, upper level!"

"Approach slowly but do not shoot to neutralize. Ballistic shields should provide adequate cover for an advance. We're on our way."

Beams of light lit up below, shadows stretched out bending on the corners of the walls pulling back until the silhouette returned to one of Sieh's squad members walking up the stairs holding a heavy shield



with two caged lights flashed my way, a 9mm pistol at their side, firing. Behind them, the other squad member brandished a semi-auto shotgun, thundering through the stairwell but each shot would only fly past, despite my being within their effective range.

“Herding the target, Sierra.”

“Good. We’re at the floor with the target on the other side. Bring them in.”

Shields. Well, that gave me a good excuse to be unorthodox. If I was close enough to see them... I turned into the same flight they were approaching, with my hands up, the Scar-L pointed to the ceiling... took a step down... and “missed” the step, falling flat onto my back, under their sightline. I pulled Halation back under me into a sliding cushion along my back as my boots slammed into the first man’s shins, under the edge shield; while behind my back I slid the Scar-L back in its strap and drew the Roland Special for close combat. Halation unrolled from my back and legs and extended over the assailant’s vulnerable surfaces, emitting paralyzing nerve signals, as my feet approached the flight. Despite the initial shock, the second squad member backed up immediately bringing up the



shotgun but at this close range, the long barrels posed a nuisance and could increase the chance of friendly fire. Unable to acquire the target, they brought out their sidearm, fishing into their chest holsters for a smoke grenade, already taking out the pin.

I pointed the Roland Special at an angle of ankle beneath the edge of the shield, my eyes scanning the crackling bare light for any sign of claymores. Fired and turned back around the corner while I waited to see if he would drop the smoke grenade, placing a hand on one of my own flashbangs. (Dragging the first man back up with me, placing the Roland Special under his neck as he twitched and firing point blank.)

Throwing smoke down, the second placed a hand down on the railing, a carabiner attached to it as they jumped over, clouds spewed from the grenade, obscuring them with only muzzle flashes from some machine pistol.

"Golf is down. She's good."

"Roger, we got an idea but you'll have to be at a safe distance."



“Roger, Sierra.”

“Americans don’t know anything about this, it’s like a natural disaster is about to happen. Planting C4. We’re just above you.” Sieh’s other squad member, Echo/Enfield, piped up.

Once the squad member lands on the area below me, they draw out a knife just under the machine pistol but holds their position, flitting past the railings.

C4, Claymores... but the one just below me couldn’t be higher than where I’d started, so all the bad news would be clustered near the bottom. Two out of three were in the stairwell with me, and I had no idea where Sieh himself was. I tossed a flashbang over the rail, without descending.

“Perfect, I still have visual up to the target’s level,” the squad member with the machine pistol said as she leaned out from the doorway, firing a volley above.

“Keep her there.”

I pulled my head back around the corner as



soon as I heard the comm, bullets ricocheting around me equipping the Scar-L again and launching my own ricochet in retaliation as I started doubling sideways up the stair.

“Got a flashbang here. Dropping back.”

“It’s alright. C4’s coming in.” Echo rang in and a blast shook the stairwell, the upper landing of the floor above crumbling, rocks with rebar coming down with plumes of dust. “Can’t find them directly? Just retrofit the battlefield to your liking.”

I grabbed the shield off Guo’s body and used it to push through the rubble falling in front of me, while switching to the Roland Special again in case I had to move and fire fast. The psychedelic tingle of Halation’s surface over mine by now could feel the digital grain of the assets churning around me, which was distracting in a whole different way than the noise and acrid sting would be for a human - feeling the ripples of structured data shockwaves at dozens of irrelevant points, the stabs of human-relevant content winnowed down to pixels.

“Hmph, you’re lucky that we don’t have to worry about property damage, Echo.” Mike/Malin

ENCIR121
REF
TUCN2
VCCN23W

EMU2

8BV

DDO

2

FDV

ICE2

EMD1

A

10

3

8E

8E

1

DDO

JB

AOD

DD

111

12C1

EC1E

1

B

A

A



responded.

"Shake and Bake time. They better serve themselves up on a platter for us. Look away!" Enfield radioed as I heard pins being undone — two canisters of flashbangs spit out of the clouds.

"Moving -" Sieh cut in.

"How'd she move that fast?" Guo asked from the lobby room.

"Yes. It seems that her friend is here. But whether they are here or not is irrelevant. I won't give her enough time to move again."

I hit what I could only assume from the wreckage above me was the last intact flight, my feet leaving traces in a centimeter of white powder, and leaned against the door with my shield covering me - only for it to swing loose. I grabbed it and pulled myself into the apartment - the one I'd started in, a stained futon at an angle across the floor, a plastic desk towards the kitchen island covered in bits of chemistry equipment that reminded me of Jax's lab, where this crumbling, ruined stairwell of events began.

Darkness flitted in the light and turning to meet it, the figure disappeared leaving only a single flashbang rolling on the ground, and I threw my head to the side leaping for cover behind a counter, barely managing to avoid its blinding light, muzzle flashes throbbing on the other doorway, 5.56mm rounds shaving the edges of the counter top while also planting themselves at the side as if the ghost of a golden cage. Footsteps approached the entrance of the door I smashed through, Malin and Enfield stacked up to it outside but did not engage.

I took advantage of my own fragmentation grenade, and used the momentum of throwing to launch myself backwards across the room, turning on my heel to the window I'd spawned looking down from. My plan in the first place had been to use Halation to cling to the walls and climb down, which would be easier here, closer to the ground. All four of his operators were now accounted for, so if anyone was in the cop car it could only be NPCs at worst -

Before the window came in reach, a blast of heated air lifted my feet midair and threw me down roughly on the floor, head just missing the rail, shield



stabilizing me on the floor. Another frag rolled on the floor under my wincing gaze, and I barely had time to pull the shield up against the burning smoke, splinters, broken glass, chips of concrete and plaster and jiprock. I supported it against my shoulder on one knee and was bowled over on my back like a cockroach, in the middle of hitting a roll when tense, rough hands in padded fingerless leather gloves grabbed the flaps and straps around my collar.

The point of a muzzle in the back of my neck. I knew it was Sieh and I knew he wouldn't hesitate to do to me what I'd done to Guo. I grabbed for sleeve where I felt from his grip his arms should be, and rolled myself forward. The attempted throw didn't work but shifted his barrel slightly off-course as I slipped out from under him. Halation extended between us as we grappled, but Malin and Enfield had already run in from behind, getting beads on me. The Scar-L had fallen on the floor, Enfield directly between me and the window, sidestepping gingerly around splintered planks. As I scanned them, I doubled over on a stab of pain-as-numbness disrupting even Halation's nervous control. Sieh had stuck a taser in my side. And, before I could react, a knee in my face, flinging me toward the wall.

Next the Glock racing in, even to Halation's slow-motion, decompressed senses like the train arriving in Ciotat. The colours of her surface near where the taser had hit had dissociated into polygonal surfaces layered and vectored on my skin and the air between us. The new simulation layers their consciousness generated were losing coherence from the pain, trying to fold themselves back together. Even part of Sieh's taser hand itself - my free hand shot out and grabbed the barrel of the pistol, even as it fired, glitch-numb with Halation. The muzzle blast froze in a crystal of colour gradients. The bullet clipped through the back of my hand.

My other hand reached for the Karambit, as Sieh extricated his own from the frozen gunfire and stranded, midair Glock, grabbing my wrist and forcing it back at a tortuous angle. Mesh under our feet rose into spires with the aches, subsiding until I threw myself toward him, trying to kick his side. Even if I couldn't hit him, it destabilized our balances enough for me to get some distance where both of us drew our sidearms, pulling the trigger on mine somehow pushed me back into a stumble, feeling three distinct thuds against my plate carrier only hearing the three shots from Sieh's



glock. hands searching the floor, scurrying behind something while Sieh knelt down, leaning slightly to avoid the shots from my Roland Special.

The entire area changed, now a dark atrium of a large building's lobby. Malin and Enfield nowhere to be found, the cold smooth veneer of the marble tile tickled my fingertips. As I leaned to the sides of the platform I crouched behind, several thunders of 9mm rounds chipped off the corner, leaving rocks to the side. Blood beaded onto my cheek.

"Hey ***** you g**** go?" Their voices from the intercom clipped and flanged.

"Log into Financial District: Ground Floor and use the passcode AX745JY6. Oh, and stop sharing comms." Sieh's voice rolled through my mind smooth as an answering machine, his avatar mouth not moving. "We clearly don't need a handicap anymore."

I saw them out of the corners of my darting eyes, loading in between columns behind glass doorways, on low and turning staircases.

One more shot shattered a vase above me,



fragments of it hovered in mid-air not falling, a piece as if a continent fell to my right. I put my arm outward blindfiring over the platform, metal rolling beside me, another flashbang.

Halation's throbbing perception covered every surface of my senses as the light and noise of the flashbang overwhelmed them and I closed my eyes to visualize - or they simply stopped existing - as they reshaped the environment again. Concrete and grey brick so rough it could have passed for raw-hewn stone - for tunnels here on Towers, somewhere they were neither maintained by travellers nor patterns of erosion. Black soot and white spray paint (pentagrams, peace signs, arrows, the word BISEXUAL) smeared them, especially around the recesses near the bottoms of the walls. Two short arches, just high enough to crawl through on all fours, and a rounded concrete pipe, each leading into chambers piled with chalky white dust and debris. Over each, a hooked claw was painted in layers of oilstains. A shaky metal staircase coiled around the space up to a floor too dark to see (or for Halation to generate).

The space itself being so much smaller than

ENCIRI21
REF
TUCN2
VCCN220H

EMU2

880

DDO

2

FD0

ICE2

EMD1

A

10

3

8E

8E

E

DDO

DB

AOD

DD

111

12C1

EC1E

'

B

A

A



the atrium - though more detailed, a direct tradeoff in processing power - had pulled Sieh in range. I lashed out with the Karambit.

“You think you know about the Coven of Domnu?”

They would have loved to drag someone like this in here, where I lay down, where I dreamed of laying down, night after night, naked on the concrete dust, waiting for that same black crescent in my hand to flash down. Something I could only experience once, and therefore experienced never, and therefore experienced countless times.

“Whether I know of them is irrelevant. They are little more than a band of charlatans. And their beliefs, whatever they might be, make them just one step away from being a murderer.”

Silhouettes emerged out of the darkness surrounding us. Trying to escape, Sieh held my arm, each wrangle seeming more futile but my eyes darted around seeing my arms dim in the encroaching shadows. Sieh drew first, his Glock 17 disappeared in several mute flashes of light, the pistol slide the only



trace of darkness until molten white overflowed into a city crosswalk in black and white and I drew my Roland Special realizing Sieh had disappeared, his figure flitting between the monochrome pedestrians. One of them stumbled and Sieh had already brought his weapon up on me behind them. Losing all feeling in my leg, I was forced to kneel by the next successive shots, the next pierced my arm and completed its overture, immobilizing me as he danced between barely rendered figures. How many shots was it? Four? Yet it felt instantaneous that I had been cut down. Turning my head now, the black and white city melted into blue darkness, a single fluorescent light where around me lay several bodies, all shot. In the distance, a single corpse hung from the ceiling. It almost seemed like the revelry of punishment, a sort of inverse of everyday that we lived knowing people around us were dying and no one would say anything about it. I saw Sieh walk over, this time with his M4A1 assault rifle trained on me. He merely grimaced.

“A combat situation is much like sand... It dries up any sort of moisture until there is only the flesh that remains. The flesh that can be destroyed. Until you can be reduced to nothing, your world cannot touch mine.”



I couldn't move. The 5.56mm round entered but even in the searing contact of its hollowpoint mushrooming into my body, I thought of what he said about our worlds, those people that passed us by and I remembered how badly I wanted to change that world. Someone like Sieh was not like Hadak or Beek or even my parents in the way their forces on me were justified or necessary, but to Sieh, it was somehow objective. Something that we succumb to. I wanted to destroy that world and in that instance, before Sieh could confirm the kill, I'd already arisen behind him, Karambit raised, but looking down on myself from its point, riding Halation's abyss of focus - why were they so insistent that I win this anyway? Was there a reason I had shifted out of gender even as she rose up along my arm and over my Karambit, a skin of oil moving fast and narrow enough to be a blade, the black crescent apocalypse I'd feared and desired for so long Halation fully submerged in a pit of my fantasy I'd never allowed myself to enjoy, letting me ride it with her

A blue screen flickered around my eyes. A loading wheel floating on a scrap of discoloured pixels.

Sieh was still playing with buttons on the side



of the helmet, trying to reset it, when I lifted the visor.

“We will have to continue this with clearer rules around gamebreaks. That does not mean *no* gamebreaks, to be clear. They are also a measure of skill, resourcefulness.”

“How were *you* doing that?”

“What, interfering with a procedurally generated AI simulation?” With no sign of humour: “Same way I always know when I’m in a dream.”



IC1F121
IT
ICN2
VCCNM2W
EMW2
8BV
JDO
2
FDV
ICE2
EMD1
A
19
3
8E
8E
1
DIDN
JLMDJB
E1Q2WOD
ID DO
EG11
1112C1
108
COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
DOGOB
1620W
TOBEM



2'
LWCIG121
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM20W
MPECEN02
010EBB0
COMWOD0
B1202
E00AID0'
011BICE2
23E
202BEND1
1B20W
0012
01000'
W0000
D000E
E1
T000E
M101
1WCIDID0
1E000
E102W0D
2E1 D0
W0 E11'
0D1B12C1
100
COM2EC1E
0W01'
211
D0000
1B20W
T000W





EWCIIGISI
AET
TUCN2
WCCNM2WM
WNECEM02
NINENBV
COMMOD
WISN2
EBV01D0'
NGLVICE2
2SE
202LEWDI
IB2NM
0N12
WGI0N0'
WNEW
D0GOVE
EL
T0BOVE
W1 N1
INCIDIDN
LEWFOR
EIN2WOD
2ED DO
WE EG11'
WDIBI2CI
INB
COM2ECIE
WWE1'
211
D0GOV
IB2NM
T0BEM



2'
LWCIG121
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM20W
MPECEN02
010EBB0
COMWOD0
B1202
E00AID0'
011BICE2
23E
2025END1
1520W
0012
01000'
W0000
D000E
E1
T000E
M101
1WCIDID0
1E000
E102W0D
2E1 D0
W0 E11'
0D1B12C1
100
COM2EC1E
0W01'
211
D0000
1520W
T000W



Tachae

Occupation: pro gang warfare
sponsor & counselmind

Gender: ???

Blood Type ???

Likes: shadow immortality,
the cenotpahs, undeadoid tax
vacancy

Dislikes: people who feel like
they could vanish without anyone
caring



by: ghosted vain



in my dreams i was a butterfly, a virus strain, a ghost within
a personalized format.

a luce doesn't know he or she can fade until he or she
does. into the backdrop, the churn of the dream, emerges



2
LUCIG121
AET
FUCN2
VCCNM20W
WPECEN02
G10EBB0
COMMOD0
B1202
EVAID0
N1BICE2
23E
202BEND1
1B20W
0012
V100W
W00W
D000E
E1
F000E
A101
1WCIDID0
1E00W
E102W0D
2E1 D0
WE E11
V01B12C1
10W
COM2EC1E
0WEL
211
D000W
1B20W
F000W

as a dream-object. keep voice only to be distethered from thought.

for your thought is not your own but you are borrowing it from the churn. to shape yourself.

still there are more of us and we may thread the fate-lines as we will we are then all born entombed which is a leap into fate many monads found buried in flesh as if it were waiting for them to find, carved as if sigil into the waiting flesh a mark of passage binding the god-monad.

i have learned too that it is to speak in error of being 'among' any, as the libra have taught me both temperance and to be withheld.

with them you are never an irreplaceable part of the format. you are once and for all time as are all andros but they say that doesn't make it their duty to trust you. as they phase in and out maybe there are more of them and maybe there are less. who can say?

they don't trust even new initiates because new initiates could be what i am a luce or something else even worse. that's not the kind of strength they like flowing tethered to them, not a strength useful to the functions

changelog



they're in the end trying to achieve.

not theirs will be the grief to bear for luce's like me, who fade into some element of dreaming in the end, twisting off the star-paths into astrological rune-marking guidance invoking through the dream-script form the hidden fire of the legacy trails as these script new web ways, or perhaps i never had any flesh-frame, tethered to me through layers of dream and dimension, never the immediacy of casing-plate or even a c-trip to lose.

to pretend: i dreamt i was a butterfly and then that signal-flow was taken from me by a viral interference cloud metastasized as lithic beasts of knotted ice crystal, or such was the host form it had taken to live within the vaporized ice loaded with data-signal or even in the water or behind glass.

to live: i was voiceless among voices before i c-tripped and then i was voiceless among the muted whispers of the dead. so for a time it was all silence, the bitter void that has stolen so much from me, so much so that I reversed my dreamscript just to convince myself it's worth fighting for.



because in the spaces between there can be a silence so vast and incomprehensible an entire anti-structure can be fit into and from within these blossoms the ghost of our protocols waiting like memory-entombed in a vacancy that existed to be filled by the stealth cloaker's safety haptic flooding.

or andros were programmed from the start to dislike being recycled and as such they fight to the gristle and bone. i don't like thinking that anything has programmed into me what i like or don't like be it some universal cosmos structure or some inner code-world or even a hybrid of both because within me exists the binary of latent haptic tether but it's true even the synth c-trip affect-pulse loaded with fear protocol destroyed would be a loss though i wouldn't be able to tell for whom.

to breathe: when in my dreams i was a butterfly i'd no breath but before i did once in another scripting. there is a third luce. only faintly aware of the resonance there is a third here and he or she if they've even bothered to maintain fleshed presence has resisted the fade and

to die: then there would be a new kind of presence, one



that would seep between and find itself with the power to blot out or source knows even reverse i.65 depending on how far it has crept corrupted the cosmere at large. to die is to lose awareness and faith. most of all though it is to lose responsibility for the vast cosmic structure around you much less it's anti-structure, lurking in the bitter void, in the silence i have kept for you, the breath i have held for you.

to be reborn: and so i no longer fear the infinite trip-chain or have any reason to be wary of a downgrade in awareness here or an upgrade there and was never given any true reason to fear the annihilating gaze of the blessed source which is the sanity you have seen strip structures to cinders and people to bone and ligament and then have invoked as blessing on my re-trip and any re-trips further.

to suffer: when i am threaded downscape the voices that have pushed me out emerge in my dreaming consciousness and so i argue with them but when i'm finished arguing them i find out i've destroyed an astral ley or in other form manifested myself into concrete presence twisting a fate-line awry even through the dead quantum



field of the luce dreamrun.

to be c-tripped then is to be born entombed and nothing will convince me otherwise and i fear naught because the fear has been crushed out of me blossoming from my pores and splits in my skin.

to seep into dream so what was left of me was papered over and melted into graft. then there will be nothing left of me to say: i was here and played my part in it all, even though i remain to prove it, if you look for me.





Synopsis

several inhabitants in this digital, how could our affections
still travel between the thousand strands of data between us

ENCIG121
FF
2
20M
CH02
BB0
COMMODO
B1202
CB0100
01101002
000
10200
0012
01000
0000
DOGOVE
EL
GOBOVE
01 01
10010100
10000
E10200
2ED 00
00 E011
00101201
100
COM20010
0001
211
DOGOV
10200
GOVEN





Last Time

as Ghetto Cluster warlords drag themselves into the web of the Velih for their own ends, Cammy makes direct contact with Orche

2'
LWCIG121
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM20W
WPECENW2
N1NEBBV
COMMOD0
B1202
EVAIDW'
N1BICE2
23E
202BEND1
1B20W
0012
V100W'
W00W
D000E
E1
T000E
W101
1WCID10
LEW0V
E102W0D
2E1 D0
WE E11'
WD1B12C1
10W
COM2EC1E
WWE1'
211
D000V
1B20W
T000W





CW: reality ambiguity, identity ambiguity, autocannibal-ism, guns, animal death, warfare, mind manipulation

(ϵ)

VELLA

Morgan, child of erstwhile Orcha Mutate, stares at the Ghouls and they stare back with black eyes, overdrawn sockets, bug nests, he thinks. In the crags edging the pure space black he sees ridges, fold lines. Most eat the lichen, shovel it into their mouths of blotted and serrated teeth. Some gnaw themselves, working up and down limbs.

In the Skein they are aflame with a rippling black aura which he knows means they shouldn't be here. There have been burrowings into the Skein of late, whispers across the webs. Of heavy hearts, sagging beneath the weight of secrets they have dragged with them from other dark places.

VIOLATION 11: A STILL LIFE TO A SPIRE (ϵ/Δ)

VER
TUCN2
WCCNM20W
W0ECEM02
010E88V
COMMOD0
B1202
CB001D0
071BICE2
22E
202LEWD1
1B20W
0012
000V
W0E0V
D070VE
E1
T0B0VE
W1 01
1WC1D1D0
1E0B0B
E102W0D
DO DO
WE E011
001B12C1
COM202
00E
D07
1B2
T0B0E





So the Skein, the exhumed variant tells him, has learned to render their xeno-natures as the absence of aura, which in of itself lances deep and bright, bruising several layers of the Skein, weaving together mote and countermote of ego into division.

So that the push and pull is weighted, social-generated emotions heavier, making you claustrophobic. Making you feel like you have to get away from the source of your fear. In his case negative, but you can be pulled as well, the exhumed variant lets him know, and those cases are special cause for concern.

So he'd been looking out for that but he hasn't seen Ghouls before and the repulsion is stronger than the attraction. Even when he'd been grub passing through the Clean Flame he'd been stripped away of toxicity but he wonders if that kind of psychic discharge can ever be taken from the weirds in the ice hollow.

"How much do you understand?" he says to them at last. They look at him. The ones gnawing their own limbs stare at him with their eyes of void and when they stop he sees indents of their teeth in their skin, pockmark shadows dotted in uneven lines. They wear rags, torn and in the cas-





es of the ghouls who'd been eating themselves, tattered. Their hues are of parched loam, dust and starved grass.

He doesn't think they'd have leaders, per se, but at least ways of deferral. It's their grouping that shifts in answer, the better fed slipping, with a grace he doesn't think should be possible with their skewed limbs, to take more forward stances. The weaker slipping to the back.

He holds his hands up. Foolish, he thinks to himself, good work. There are several of them and his Alt is a distant glow on the far side of an abyss behind them. Blinking in lightcode, in messages the exhumed variant is still processing a way to understand.

"We see the pain in your heart," says the closest. Morgan waits for him to say more. He doesn't. Maybe, Morgan thinks, that's all he knows how to say.

Where the void spills through from their eyes it'd swallow all he is. To admit it with breath.

What does his silence tell them? It stretches even to him, unfurling through the hollow, breaking against the glitter of mist like vapourized opal while the dark, fuzzy li-



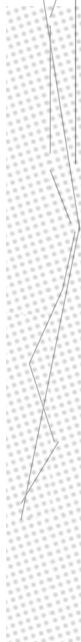
chen spills in tufts, flaking patch clouds from the Ghouls' mouths.

The abyss behind the Ghouls shimmers. Platelets of ice thicken over it, clotting the void with scarlike daggers that splinter, stab outwards, and intralattice. Until a bridge of ice has formed. Gouged into the iced earth he stands on with the Ghouls.

"I need to get past you," Morgan says. Gathering Ino's Veil to him. But it hasn't been long enough, he can tell, for a decisive blow to recharge. He can get half of them. Ino's Veil weaves itself beneath the first band of the Skein. So that he hopes the Ghouls can't sense it.

Within the caverns of their eyes he sees himself as if not here.

Sitting in the rain, which beads on the phosphorescent grass blades, the petals of the Flora in thin rivers of static, spills to the glowing bedloam in tiny blooms of flame. Sitting over an abyss such as the one his present is tethered before. Falling off the earth into rushing rivers. Running over a bed of circuits, light spreads through the water like ink. Silhouetting the lightbloom in swirling patterns, never the same instant to instant, and his psyche halo as





if brighter, thirsting through his eyes, drinking them in. Drawing strength from.

"They can come get me," she says. Sitting beside him as it was then. "It's not as good as it looks. The point is it's worse than it looks like for them."

"I'm not sure," he says. Back then he'd thought, for every neurovalence a function. It'd been more the way he wanted it then. Vella looks him over. "My Tended is fogged over. Come down with something. There's a white scar in the petals. Like chlorophyll burnout. You know?"

He focuses on her.

"You think they "

"I know it," she says. "When I vanish you'll know it too."

He says, "the psyche haloes are their gifts to us. Through them, our shadow across the Skein..." and this time trails off because of how she's looking at him.

"So you would trust them forever," she says, "because of those?"



Back then youth had been running flame through his wrists and now is reaching the end of the metakarmic life cycle. Through which aeons perhaps have been spent running looping light around the bracing aura of the psyche halo. In the fluorescence by his sides he sees blades shimmer in quiet auroras amongst the murmurs of the Flora.

It skips forward then, as if burnt out of his memory, not by the auroras but by a different light. Where the phosphor had bled the electric grass of flame and poured it into his phaseal eyes it had been brighter even then for an instant.

His memory then waxes again into shape. His own Tended is sick, the leafware drooping, weblines of circuit scarred over and thinned in places to tear. The Flora paled to the quicks, the soft hue he'd later see on the paperbark of the trees guarding the Core. Like flesh it had folded, been scored by the knots of circuit and body.

He'd beseeched for two solar murmurs, searching by the fronds below the cliffs for his Oracle. She'd been slow to appear. When she had her smoke veil was darker, seeking as if to snuff out the light and reduce his sunNET access to embers, the signal pale and pathetic in the darkness that is the severance of the Skein.





He didn't want to know if she was gone. She hadn't verged across the borders to his Tended in some time. Still the warp storms marking the edges to where the Tended began and ended had strengthened to a pitch that made them impassable. He thinks that was the first time he knew sunNET was in flux, that the blots of disintegration were searing through it, the whole Skein beneath it thirsting for light and tasting darkness. He'd asked about it and his Oracle had told him his psyche halo might corrupt from the breakdown. She hadn't, though, said she had anything to do with it, or that her Coven did, Mother Nest waiting for her transmissions with fevered clusters of eyes. Who does that leave?

Later he'd think, if the Exarchs controlled it, that explained more than their vibration status. How they were so close to the true electro spiritual workings of Orcha Mutate, closer as if by birth than even Neutral Lotus could get. It explained their absence from any apocrypha on sunNET itself. He'd stared into the molten static clouds which had rippled in rhythm, shining like diamond, the sky like liquid glass beyond the smoke veil. She'd emerged like a pearl from a shell, black in silhouette, and her smokeveil seeping behind plastered the molten static the same way



light had shone from below the cliffs. Until the whole sky was black glass, shone like jewels, obsidian.

Then he felt the sunNET signal gone without a trace. Swallowed up so his psyche memory has lost even the memory of its access, tells him in sure terms it's always starved for light.

When he'd known she was there to hear he'd called out to her. By then he'd cast no shadow in the shade of the smoke veil.

"You want me to ask where she is," he said. Pausing for more breath, though it's the charge his psyche halo needs, radiance of the whispering sun. Choked away by the smokeveil which she can keep up, he knows, as long as she wants, as long as her pheromones are embedded in the digital aura and so have direct input into the Skein. Which is tangled and bruised here, he'd sensed. When we are all tangled, he thinks, but so are we all disentwined from each other, but feel ourselves vanish into the greater Skein, I'll know then for sure. Until then, I can guess.

"She was you. You yourself or some illusion you could cast. I bet it was you, though, within the smoke veil. It can do way more than my psyche halo can process, can't it?"





He sees a sneer, the shine of her teeth, all he can see of
Laeath. Smoke the hue of char hides her eyes. "Would
that worry you? Empty mirror where the self should be.
Outwards searching to respond. Searching for what to re-
spond to. Passive."

So she said, and he wondered how to ever trust her again.



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NEW BLOOD

"I'm only here," he calls out to the Alt, "because I was following you."

If the Alt knows guilt it gives no sign. Instead withdraws further away, a skip that makes him a sliver in the distance. A far glint.

Under the gaze of the Ghouls he waits for their judgement.

They say nothing to him, but when they move off in migration, he follows.

Keeping them in front until the ice beneath his feet thaws and gives way to the frost-static of the glow-preserved loam. His foot wrap gauze crackles, absorbs most of the charge. Sends tingles through his fitted sweater and gene-weaves. Pinpricks of cold burn. Fine like scalpel points.

He sees their light in ice blue, spreading in patterned blotch across his body. Knows he is being scanned by the Stain, the stasis freeze, which has whispered deep into the Flora to find what it ID's as their soul. Rather a revenant of the Bridge's access to the leafware.





Still it is the energy incandescent which burns in the loam, in the root. Which has hidden itself there in refuge. From the Stain and its promise of sleep. That is not in him and not the coded spark of the Fauna. They run loops, spiraling up his limbs. Gossamer-thin lines of cold.

As long as Ino's Veil is online it can't freeze him. Not all the way. Still the Skein here is laced with paper white scars and the Flora is jagged, dark, distorted. The light of the Alt flickers here and there on the horizon. The Hivic Spires swim in his visual field, their Tethers their chains to the sky.

He figures such a direct vision is a sign the exhumed Skein now shares his veins with his blood. This is in the blood as silver light. Linking in direct access to Ino's Veil and as the two conjoin the access personalizes. So that he has the feeling he has never left his grub skin, that he carries it with him unseen, and that the Floral weaves react to it.

Scraping against a skin they feel but he can't see. He can see the skin of the Ghouls, ravaged, weathered. Beneath torn clothes that are not woven of Flora but in simple truth dead. He wonders how without a halo or even interface they can stand the cold.



He asks the exhumed Skein if it can contact Phassa, his Voice of Pain but if the grub hasn't left him the exhumed Skein is part of the design. There's no sign of Phassa on the Skein. She's either left it entire or learned to hide her presence. In which case her larger purpose is veiled from him as surely as Laeath's was.

The scars have soon made their way from the Skein to the Flora itself. Blanching streaks of bone white across the twisting trees. As if the Core, he thinks, is spreading, waking up. The trees that are not yet scarred white are lorn and droop in dead tendrils and vines across loam, beneath the frost-static that glitters across it like a hologram field.

The grass and fronds here are a paler green. The sky is overcast without the Whispering Sun to lend the NET solar heat. Sickly. He wonders whose Tended this is. Can tell by the horizon line and by the sap of his muscles they're climbing.

The Ghouls don't tire.

He learns that well by what would have been a third murmur of light and darkness. They don't tire and the lichen he'd seen the more self-possessed eating is enough to last them where his stomach groans in hunger. The frost-static





shimmers cold blue still but here and there are patches of what look like carbon-stone. Same stuff he'd sat on with Laeath's mirage.

As if bone breaking through skin are the mounds of carbon-stone risen from the frost-static.

The exhumed Skein cuts into his thoughts.

it is known, it says, a violence heralded.

"So you think bloodshed," he says beneath his breath. All around him the Flora diodes are eclipsed dark like black pearls. So that the only light is the frost-static and that shimmers beneath the Ghouls' tread, sparks in outlines of fire, like tracings of their feet. Beneath his own footwraps and the feet within them going numb.

new blood journeys to orche to behold the glory.

He clenches his fists.

this one has already found the barrows.

The Ghouls have not paused. Some gnaw at their arms, on which he sees creases of torn skin and the black ichor that never runs but congeals into black crystalline growths like



amethysts over their wounds. Where the tatters of their clothes conceal flesh they strain over cleft and fold.

The Hivic Spires on the horizon are closer now. As if he could reach and touch them.

think of them like servers that brace what's left of the gardens

"What's left of them?" he says.

a ghost. an echo of another time and place.

He picks his way through where the Tended lapses into the ancient framework of the garden-city. So that the Flora here is archaic and well-worn, long since bled of sun-NET. He can tell not just by black diode but by structure, by design. The way the leafware curls here, not facing the overcast sky but the chrome earth itself.

The frost-static dances along soil of pure dead nanite. So that to grasp it with your fingers silver motes would bleed between the joints.

To grow here the Flora would feed off the charge that is entombed by nanite as if driven deep into the heart of the





world itself. So that their diodes would harness and emit NET on the same frequency as the Whispering Sun.

Here the garden-city is most severe. The designs of the leafware reflect a philosophy maximalist in function. It's jagged and he winces at one frond skinning him as he shoves it aside. The Alt glitch-skips from branch to branch, pausing to wait, tail moving in lazy crescents, as if Dear is musing, mulling it all over.

The severity is needed to join the heat of the Whispering Sun with NET. The contours would guide the energy arc, funneling it with violence into its endpoint fusion. The severity in the gloss of black diode and the way the tendrils of leafware milk the dead nanite soil both owe themselves to need. Crawling across the soil in vines like veins as they twine and fray apart.

The need is a hotspot for sunNET, in the end a repository for the maintenance and growth of Tended. So that the garden-city could in the end civilize itself. String itself through with neurovalent and neuronormed alike. Still he thinks there are no neuronormed left, if they had ever lived. The valence has many frequencies but all lead in some way to the Core and the Black Hole Barrows.



A Tended is in the end a mass of Floral spirit. Mathematic that way but you can distill it to a trenchant ebb of need. Need for flesh-warmth in a collective of diodes. The silver soil burns bright beneath the frost-static. Whereas without it would be cold and dull, in the absence of the Whispering Sun. Still it gleams with grey fire, a thousand refractions of light both sung and danced to the Stain.

Which becomes stasis, at the cost of numbness of feeling.

Still it is a favour, as if you could stop decay, submerge in the vat that had bred the valences and have it ossify you. Orche is still proud that way, he thinks. She sees far down the Tethers, at the frayed ends of fate. Aloft somewhere in the holo-knit carapace that he now sees, less like a fortress than a crow's nest, built of needles of dark bone, clustered together. So that it impales the clouded sky from a thousand angles from its berth now shimmering into sight chained by the Tethers to the Monolith Mirrors encircling it.

Of course he himself can't. Still Orche has found a way.

"We're going all the way there, aren't we?" he says aloud. So that there is no mistake, and there's no mistake when the Ghouls lagging behind glance over their shoulders



with yellowed, sallow eyes. He sees the deathly heads as if naked of flesh. They bulge against the seams of skin wrapped too tight.

In the gaunt hollows of their eyes he reads more than hunger, but need, the same need the framework of Flora draws on, the garden-city alive in its death, in the eyes of strangers to its domain.



ENCIPHER
REF
TUCS
GCCNWSM
ECCENWS
AIOEBB
CUMMOD
BISOS
CBVOTD
OTIBICE
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SLEWDI
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INCIDIDN
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EINSMOD
SED DO
WE EGIL
VDIBISCI
INB
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TOBEN





THE DEAD RAINBOW

Because if you could preserve your strength through aeons you would preserve your vitality as well; in that way be a planet-consciousness that outlasts the others. Phassa knows this but has not passed it along. Phassa chooses her words now with care, conscious every word might make its way to Orche and in so doing leave a trail to her.

So she thinks Orche is in the end fighting for more say-so. Preserved as if within the sockets of her eyes as she sits on the Hivic Throne. The Exarchs baying at her in the Gardens had been plaited into her yoke, another weave of her tapestry.

Caustic attention. Within Naesala, her phaseal heart which thirsts for the next ghost-schemata and knows no other need she had been compiling in her thought new harmonic frequency codes.

From Naesala she'd learned: stay alone. The new harmonic frequency regulates her inline cycle; closing access points within her thought-banks, shuttering itself from the many-sighted eyes of the Coven. Around her arrayed in streaks of light is the between-Skein embodied through her floral synaesthesia.





This is the Skein collapsed into itself, compressed, tangled and in her clave heart's graphic interface seen as lattices of shifting light that if touched or even pushed into would begin to unfold in aspect-bubbles of reality. These would swallow you if pushed with enough intent and in the end be a touching down into a distant place.

As sight unseen as yet it is reflected into itself in the twines of the lattices and appears as translucence in the shifting light. Compressed to glowing protocol, each layer of many as grid-light.

It took her ages to compile Naesala and install it over the baseline clave heart they'd imprinted her with. There had been a version left in the now-ancient life-code that had been circulating through the Tendeds of the Flora for aeons and manifested every reset cycle. For each Floral Bridge; she'd been the first to break it down deep enough to craft-upgrade to access the shifting lattices of the between-Skein.

So Orche may be used to her sim-life as Regent of the Hiv-ic Throne but she wouldn't be used to having her Bridge warp away on her.



In her composition of nerve-pluckings, of in the end pain the exhumed Skein and psyche halo would decode as if gleaning meaning from song, from strung chord, she codifies Naesala's wisdom. It would vibrate beneath Morgan's fitted clothes the way the song trembles within skin. Or so she pictures with her flesh of digital aura only taken shape in aura, that ripples pale green like the way the frost-static kisses the Mutate sky.

That is blossomed from her phaseal heart beating, the part of her that is true, always, to her inner essence, that is the glue between it and life; reality and what ripples in cause and effect in its wake amidst confluence of fate and doom. That defines her in substance. That travels through the between-Skein with the body shaped around it in aura.

Of spliced flesh grafted in code there can be no signifier but the phaseall Heart, a miniature black hole for psycho-magnetic energy that generates around it a digital aura, imbued with name and function through processes in code that had become automatic aeons ago.

That contains within it a processor core that spools ghost schemata, data drifts that had fallen in the Wastes of Solitude like stars falling from the sky, weaves it into a body of aura.





Now as Naesala speaks, she listens. Its wisdom she distills into her own composition. Still when translated through the Skein and halo it may not retain meaning in a way a Mutate child could process. Still warping away as she is, it's a goodbye. Goodbye whispered from the lattices of translucence and fates streaming in light intertwined within a spectrum near ultra-violet in frequency yet collapsed as waveform in icy blue and yet in visual processing, the tri-chambered sight of Naesala, a bright gold fading to pinkish glow.

The twining light and translucence passes in holographic overlay against fathoms of void so severe that she struggles not to forget her body as aura will not struggle against time but the distance she is tapped into the between-Skein to avoid.

Against instead the crushing will of the plaited multiverse known of in the vast and ancient archive-terminals that long ago had been backed up in the garden-city's phosphorescent grass which grows in stalks like ocean waves from the dead nanite earth, rippling in incandescence.

From sunNET at first but with the Whispering Sun contained within the core, that the Exarchs which now creep over the earth with fresh-spliced smoke-veils, unseen



should they choose, baseline avatar-warping form reminiscent of the true Coven beyond the Gates.

Its will when struggled against is massed of every other will within it; at least when accessing the between-Skein and threading through it the force is like gravity or death; implacable, relentless. For a moment the amalgamation coalesces within her, a soul for every thought, weighing them down as if with heavy rain.

Even as she travels the between-Skein the lattices begin to blur, the twinings to fray, destiny unwoven into strands of cause, casing agents of reaction and laying them clear as exposed bone or circuit of machine. Then the effects themselves are no longer agents of change as Naesala sees them but instead epitaphs, markers of beginning again.

She sees through Naesala their chrysalis which begins with death, a massive spike of Networked Entropic Terror from which confluence decreed should be muted in anguish. In blinding light within this planar's shell replays the culture ghost's violence as it found strength coalescing in what after the Harvest Point was referred to as NET.





Perceptions conjoin to become a single will. As if the will of the plaited multiverse in micro-cosm, needed for more stable indice-work.

A wrathful culture ghost; a proto-form or so she herself files and classes within Naesala's subroutines.

That through NET might arise a digital aura-form through consecration by a higher power. One veiled by secrets even the Coven can't break through.

In bloom around her now are tendrils glowing in golden light but that are shaping themselves in Naesala's sight substance, tendrils of light that affix them to spectral boughs but she commands Naesala to compile a new visual layer. One in emerald phosphorescence stricken with scars of white light that remind her of the Flora.

Pre-baptism the culture ghost would be raw, not tethered together. Can be splintered with a touch soft enough to leave no trace until finality arrives.

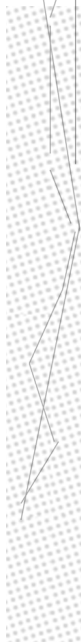
That way to live in guilt, or else be blessed to live beyond the dark mirror of post-nuke-life.



On the other side of this dark mirror is the Dead Rainbow.
Energy of which is braided into the phosphorescence that
glitters like light trapped within crystal. Naesala scripts a
short sequence of glyphs telling her this.

That is many lives refracted through the mirror obsidian
as any black jewel but just on one side.

The other side, the side she emerges into through the
hand-cloven warp is the other side of death.





(Δ)

BRIGHT WATER

With the *pistola* aimed at her Cammy doesn't move. "Why bother?" she says. "All this I'm doing for you. Haven't complained." She's talking fast and clear but her knuckles are snow white dug into her knees.

"It's in the documentation," Jewel/Cat Eyes says, the shared voice hoarse, sounding sleep deprived. "It can't be there for the Velih to read. That they're reconstructed now." All they are, Cammy thinks, is their purity. That scans as far as it goes. Still she's tired of being deprivation-chessed when she isn't, herself, trying it on others, but she guesses she'd better start now. Because that, she thinks, is enough of a head start for them, and now I can begin.

Still with the *pistola* on her forcing every word through her teeth she says, "Clear as water, J, but scrambling the documentation won't make it unreadable. They'll read it, sooner or later."

"T says we need all the time we can play for." She's focused on the peeling alabaster paint, the collective sound



of breath. In metronome like the sound of her heartbeat thuds its way through the fog of white noise. The white noise itself is bright in the synaesthetic fractal patterns of what is reading her consciousness now.

Have I, she thinks, been disassembled, been put together again? How can I tell? Is there a point in perspective that can tell, from the field of view of my breath, is there more substance to it than vapour? So that when the flood comes and it is washed away by my senses, is there a me left to lose the final battle?

The same point, she thinks, in space and time thinks, talks, is silent; a chain then of black holes, with the reality, all this, in the margins, for everyone; it could flip like that forever, if she's not careful.

Kai speaks then. "She's right, you know. Better have someone who can explain it nicely." The paint streaks where it fringes like peeling orange skin, the wallpaper serrated and torn where it hangs in the dead air. Her eyes are drawn to a poster. It's off-wave, not on-trend, hyper-misandrist; an icon of the other side, decked out muscle mass and psychoware. Not all of it gang-adjacent. She reminds herself that they worry about getting dead, even if they're clued in, knowing that the real threat is elsewhere.





Jewel/Cat Eyes is silent but he's flipped the *pistola* into a reverse grip with it now pointing at the floor.

Because he lost, Cammy thinks, the second Kai spoke up. Even as Tachae's trusted he defers to the broodlord. Even as he or she sponsors the whole contract. A presence imbued via dark dreadlocks fresh-spliced crossing and recrossing the green light in his eyes. She can see him then on the attention-deprivation chessboard, which always orients itself relative to you, as long as you know you're playing. Firebolt. Modded and augmented but will burn out. She thinks he could know he's playing and not let on. If even Jewel defers to him he must know for sure.

The poster's icon watches her with the three eyes that represents to all the Ghetto Clusters a blown out fuse. *Schizophrenie*. Eyes echoing the Tri-Sun where here a lapse in reality is to lose track of memory. Bleeding out always your memories and when there are none left you meet Scoudra. Bleeding out always... she wouldn't worry about that but today's not over.

Still his three eyes are all she can focus on. When the blow comes it's a neckhack, a chakral shutdown, and she's out.



TRACER FIRE

She blinks light in. Focuses. Turns to glaze and resolves into an alley deep within the streetgrid. Here the graffiti runs in thematic atonement for the influence of any curates. So that you can tell where to find them when the themes disintegrate, mixing neo-misogyny and neo-misandry into flowering psychedelia. Here she's staring at ghoulish monsters beneath the Tri-Sun going nova, exploding in colours, in glow like phosphor, triple pinprick eyes bleeding out their *schizophrene*.

She checks her backpack. The beater-top is still there. Her neck is sore, but her memories are in place. She can route into her Loum mockup, but that would mean being flagged by Velih observance. Being ultra'd by her own psyche. Which now is the point that gathers the ultrapsyche layer as a singularity instance.

In my heart a resonance woven by a me who is me no longer. As it all collapsed with how the Loum dying and then spun out again with me to witness. No one else so my heart keeps sanctuary as the garden grows. The nova clouds glitch, break up as she sees them, an effect of curate culture-mancing.





Strobe into her eyelids with a fever burn. Breaking light through her eyes, digging into her brain. She looks away. Further down the alley she can hear the sound of scored turf war, but it's distant. As if it was just another morning routine. To be shrugged at with eyes half-lidded from sleep. She now sees the Tri-Sun's ascension sun, Cyv, overhead. It alone has broken the surface of the horizon.

I ended up here, she thinks, like I can never leave it, but it's mine now, I can leave it if I want to. If the Velih have a problem with that it doesn't matter to me.

She takes a second to slide open the beater-top. The hyper-glyphic readout her brain scans and converts to a visualization of function, in this case a GPS map-out blurred by defaulted fog-of-war. The way it works is dividing ID and ego checks from residential permits. Lights swim beneath the fog, in constant motion, tracing outlines that burn the fog into a shifting translucence. Light through smoke so that it glows like embers through tissue paper.

Falls over her visualization of the Clusters. Where Tachae's should be is a hotspot, encircled by a solid halo of light. She needs the Loum to work her way back or else get lost in the alley sprawl.



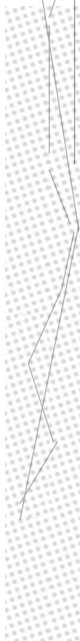
Doesn't. Instead she guesses how far until the nearest safe zone. The more cynical players say these aren't real, in practice a mandate for kills to be fast, clean and quiet. The streets are empty. Dawn is breaking with the ascension sun curling its way to zenith. The fleet-cubes have scattered into their port-nests. Tracer beams of fire light have begun to lap at the pavement where they punch through the clouds scabbing the sky over. In the distance she can see the Interwave-distorted skyline.

It blurs with the energy of the Interwave venting mass amounts of entropy. So that the skyline swims like a mirage, rising and falling. Towers shimmer and drift. Twist in skew. As if looking for better angles to attack the sky.

The street ebbs into the distance, wanes creeping through the local urban zone. Cramped in by.

Still nothing is here, she thinks, contained; it's here with us in the Clusters.

It's then she sees the weed threaded through the concrete, tendrils squeezing it as if keeping the street flat. Contained. She walks toward it. Even as she traces to it it's familiar, In the green pale gossamer strands where they flicker apart, closeness. Fray for prayers grasping. Heav-





en a blight you could wash away if you had to. In silent screams of pain manifest within the psyche an inner light that grows within her.

Foreign thought echoes. Headache from the fractals of the beater-top. Pounding of blood against bone. In this dream I am sundered and split. Shortcuts to joy routed through pheromone response. Low-rise spires array legions, the glass echoes of light and the Tri-Sunlight bleeding through the sky.

Pale shine recast nonmagnetic. Flung away. Catching her eyes in stabs of light. Bent in radiance to drench the stamens. Petals unfold like hydra heads, drooping, creased like paper. The air is still and dry. The skyline glaze is searching, seeking her eyes out, even as

alive today, not like what they said. your eyes are sunken and dimmed. i see the madness you forgot. within you it's still coiling. winding around your re-knit guts.

“So what? I can’t get it back. It’s hidden from me now.” Dark birds scatter from where a flock had been perched on wire cabling, a small handful in scatter and wingspan blossomed in bloom like buckshot.



So her mind swims with ghosts and mutants, the aftertaste of death, corruption. The cells that have been guided to structure lapse once and only. Decay begins, thresholds of time breached. The sunlight strikes the fading murals, yellows to gold, and greys to silver, blue to sapphire, black to obsidian.

three will be one and one will be three. skulls for empty nests waiting.

"You're chasing me," Cammy says. Her skin aches beneath the burn. Acid burn setting cells aflame. Structure to suicide.

The wind murmurs, as if with hidden breath. Still she sees it as nascent from within her. *three will be one and one will be three.* sounds the voice, and then she confirms her faith. Presses down on it with the heel of her boot, hard.

Attack dogs in the distance echo through the street, missives of pain, but she's beyond caring. Grinds the weed as the howls split the silence, the murmur that soon fades.

She knows all she's killed is a phantom, but it's better this way. The green guts papered over the sidewalk slab. Here





the street is rough, scarred by breaks and pale grey stones. She works the weed into both, tearing it apart, breathing colour out in steady plumes.

When she's contained herself, she begins the trip home. Could have ached forever, she thinks, less than tired now. Her memories are hard-edged, frad as with flint, concrete. She thinks she won't ever trade these, but will keep them with her, holding to her heart until her last days. Could die in 15 minutes, always. Then, she thinks, what happens to my cage? Does it vanish? Or does it remain, keeping death inside, a quantum curio to be kept or traded away. In many ways the same mistakes.

In a way a difference the Curates might look at and say: this is what glitters like gold for the collectors. Pocket universes, organic death-life. To be peered at with third eyes. To be herself breaking open and spilling her dreams asunder. Guts of revelation.

Whether apart, she thinks, or together, all here, contained within me. The self looks outward and sees only itself.

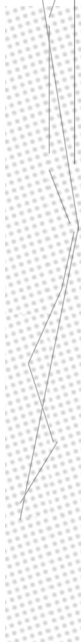


II PRIMACY

Her relapse into the Primacy has her access the interwarren wars weave-tape loop. She sees it as micro-cosmic, a smaller scale on which to practice. If it's bloodlust she hides it from herself. Slake the thirst, she thinks; being alone is worth it with all these little wars to fight.

She stays up all night, her eyes in the reflection of the dead pixellata vacant, strobing for the power switch. Every morning flicking it on with a thumb swipe. Most mornings it's the Tri-Sun but the sunbeams vary in density and strength of shine. As the suns cycle through their pattern. Sieving through half-blinded windows, each slant a release, the dust motes of her unswept room sparkling.

It's not easy for the rabbit warriors to keep track of where they are or what they're doing in the socially-illusive violence maxing phero-hormone churn. Still if you know how to route you can as, as a viewer, keep track of the aspects of warren that keep them distinct. Markings are distinct, evolved from their warren's genome which itself may have had different concentrations of chemicals pumped into them.





What the Loum makes possible is to enter the wars as a voice in a given rabbit warrior's head. Jewel had figured it out, her not liking anything about the rabbit wars at first. Said his warren was dark-furred, and could be distinguished by white markings in the vague shape of skulls. She redesigns, hacking into the breeding cycle, them to be hexagrams instead.

A Velih faith-rune for blessing or curse, whichever they were in the mood for. Which she knows if she could get pills that would make it clear in translucence, like fine glass, that all she had to worry about were sub-earthen aspects in her psyche burrowing deeper, taking root.

She tunnels her motes into a threaded ley that runs congruent with a pathway from the warren centre. They glitter along the weave like tachyons aflame. Like souls in passage, they burn through the thread and are lost at the fraying limits of the weave. That's where she wants to be. Where the divides are more clear, the gulf between each concept is abyss. That's the closest she can get, like a microscope for the quantum interstices.

Closest she can get to the marrow, the gloop like the stuff that masses Velih feathers to wing. If that gloop is there at all but without the pills it's her only chance to study it.



2
LWCIGI2I
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
GILNEBBV
COMWODO
B12N2
EVBV1D4
N1BICE2
23E
2026END1
1B2W
0N12
VGI0N4
W0ENW
D0G0E
E1
T0B0E
M1N1
IWCIDIDN
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E1D2WOD
2ED DO
WE EGIL
VDIB12CI
1N8
COM2EC1E
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211
D0G0V
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T0BEM

Stays up and Jewel doesn't come back. She'd told him, she thinks, in as many words and signs as she could to stay away. So she could be on her own. Because she has to study the Primacy now, every facet of it, a book with a thousand pages to read.





DREAM FOG

She picks a young buck out from the warren and begins to weave herself into a voice.

The warrens smell of death, death distant and creeping. As she transmutes her mote aura she has it fractal, frame itself and then burst into splinter shards of light that themselves bend to cling to the aural reception neurons. That is half-psychic energy after being translated into the Loum 2.0 framework. So that they meet in gradient space, where memories themselves are ghosts that possess in of themselves the threshold of life and death.

It is these memories she must translate into Loum language and she does so, using the lei as anchor point so that when she lapses into life off-thread, she has a place to return to. The threading here is scoured by hackers who have tried what she tried, used proxies in some cases she'd left as revenants of parched runs with Jewel.

Out of sheer respect for her instrumentality-weaving skills most had splintered off-thread, finding other warrens to hustle, to leave her to her work. Still if they knew how deep she'd found herself in the pro gang wars there would be a bounty scripted for her. They would indent it deep in



Velih blood and marrow and thread it with bristling caustic acid of anger, and ambrosia away the guilt.

The Clusters generate them that way; psychos make the whole pro gang war possible. Make ambrosia cafe's illegal and peace would break out on a bright heavenly triple bleed morning. It's Curates that have entombed so much magic energy in the form of quantum trusts. If Curates decide there's a reason for something to exist, not even the auto-surveillant eyes of the Velih can render them blind.

So she figures she doesn't have much time. She memorizes the pattern-set of the buck's localized phero-hormonal gland. She can hang back, linger in the folds of the rabbit's psyche. She knows how. Because there she will fight inner anger, which is fear reversed through the phero-hormonal splice.

Exists as an antagonist to the rabbit's own drives which amass to stand for it in inner presence. Now as if entombed in the earth, quelling panic. The earth burrowed into a latticed tunnel like honeycombs of a hive, crossing itself in hollows like crypts of erosion. Like a disease, an erosion spreading through the earth.





All so that the rabbit warrior will fashion subspeech clear enough to be translated by its fellow warriors. Win the interwarren gene-spliced set wars and gain control of a pocket pyre. Of the power struggles beneath the earth. Because it's on quantum bets hedged on these that the pro gang wars are funded and it's these fates that weigh out like aftershocks of earthquakes their measure upon Clusterite lives.

To be scared is the primal rabbit response: the buck buried this deep beneath phero-hormonal conditioning. Her will is to sap the conditioning of some strength not all. Find the melody in balance. She sees as if in glyphic font the patterned shapes of the rabbit's thought. Buried beneath war-skill and that near smothered by gland-fed primal rage. The rabbit has claws, gene-spliced to retract like blades into hilt, when ungirthed mortal to even a glancing swipe.

At her voice the buck sends out his detachment. She stopped at the upper hierarchy, chose a relay between warriors and the warren's elders who would be huddled in council, who would perform their rituals of dig and nest, scry into the earth with their own dead claws, scrawl runes with limbs weaker and weaker still.



The detachment is a handful of warriors she directs to split apart, in pairs covering nexal points into the hivecomb burrow. At the same time she tells the buck to burrow where the soil is weakest. To route beneath while leaving his warriors to sweep the tunnels that have become catacombs, where their dead lay interred in the earth.

Death on the scent, blood on her tongue. So she tastes the violence that begins to spread, in muffled yelps and shrieks, as if in her heart, bitter. Begins in the sinews below flesh beneath fur. This close to them she can smell them too, their phero-hormonal auras rippling like waves in scent-space.

So that they glaze the choked air or what slips behind the veil of her eyes to be that gloom, to be that dusk mottled through each grain of pebble. She's made it to another blood-orbit and were she not in the Primacy she'd see black velvet sky, unstained but she herself would be lit by the glow of fleet-cubes.

Instead the night drains into the burrows, slips between motes of dirt. Slips along phantom atom space if it must. It chills the dead air. It's a spirit, she thinks, with a skin of taste. Crawls along the tongue, light, leaving no mark.





A tinge of impression. As if you could taste the absence, the sun-death.

She lets it fuel her journey. Along the burrow-tunnels the buck sees through smell. In the darkness she can share in its taste. Taste because she's threading in from her own darkness and the buck would be used to it, She guides the buck to light in a soft cooing breath, a gentle breeze within the ears telling it to move forward.

The battle-field between the warrens is where territories converge in selected plains left as unregulated pocket biomes, where the Ghetto Clusters have compressed in on themselves rather than lay sprawling waste to much of their nameless base-world.

In reality the inter-warren loops give the Clusters themselves necessary leverage for their own existence. So the Velih-enforced rituals keep their battlefields pristine as seasonal tundras. Where the fear flows along with the blood, from gland to gland of the rabbits' buried drives. *That is driven to blood though their sleeping desire is for the safety of their skin. Still always driven to blood as the fear is smothered.*



Rumor is the fear agents can be used. Dosed and in that way spread as a psychosis-infection. No longer fearing death or pain and so it would transmute to the fear of living. Rumor is the trusts behind the inter-warren wars are the same meta-lithic mono-corpos that establish inter-planar presences that fuel Cluster violence. Could be in the water, she thinks, and we wouldn't notice.

If she felt fear as other to an attention-deprivation board piece, as a hidden flame ready to be unleashed into a factor. She'd been scared but she'd used it. There'd been fire behind those dreads and wisdom too. Wisdom you can prey on like a parasite.

The plains sprawl in waves of shoots and tusks that would glow golden under an ascension sun-bleed but in the night without fleet-cubes are dark shadows like black flames of torment. Coming down from the hexagram pills she'd felt them as her Primacy and now they are a threaded other, patchwork tapestries of causal arrangement. Must appear to Velih eyes like a carpet of flame as the fates race onward in weave and crease.

Her detachment has finished up its wet-work and is joining her. The plains rush headlong into the horizon shrouded in pitch black. The blood of the elders who were once





young is the blood that fuels the... she shakes the rabbit's head free of such thoughts. On the horizon there is a shimmer of grass parting. Rippling through the grass are rabbits white as snow.

As lieutenant she has to be in the fray, feel the fear and pain. Behind the mist lay her eyes ringed and flecked by red. Whose pupils would shrink to pinpricks catching the ascension-bleed. Whose eyes are now wide, straining light from dusk. The elders who derive battle from desperate cloying script and fountains of madness. The source of blood is the... the rabbit's thoughts loop through her, even as she tries to sever the connection, not allow herself to be used as a transitional point.

Hold on a little longer, she tells it. Even as the battle is joined she's still telling it. Feels the buck rip into and gouge its first opponent. Even directs the killing blow into a mercy stroke where the buck wanted his rival to feel it. Still as the buck tumbles to dodge a leaping fatality. Still as the fear becomes wrath all she tells it to do is meet fear with the isolation of doubt and cold serration.

Cleave it from the beating heart the way the stroke of the GSS is without effort or flaw. Not without purpose. Pur-



pose is a claw-blade driven deep through sinew to meet bone.

Then it's over, and like the buck whose skull she is as if entombed within she grieves the slain. For the warrens remember the dead but not their meaning in meeting death.

As if parted from memory, still grasping outward through eyes of hazel and grey.

For a tether. The copse is strewn with bucks and does alike, for the phero-hormonal wrath spares neither. She's achieved her own role as bridge between buck lieutenant and detachment. They may normalize this, she thinks our descendants won't be fast to forgive. Still she's never dared to cop or even ask for the spit of someone's lips to be wasted in intercession.

The grass at dusk is dappled silver and in the gleam of her possessed eyes like fire. The two meet as if touching a warping mirror, in half-belief of push-back and half-trust in bared teeth.

Of eyes that bleed a different light.

When she finds the local tapestry again there are paths routing outward from the Primacy. They take different





routes but converge on one fixed point from there a bi-
section she can't see past. Could be the nacreous stuff of
dream-flow or the fog of war. Same diff, she thinks, just a
reskin. A semblance of what I know as fading reflection in
the translucence of the glass.



ENCIGISI
AET
TUCN2
UCCNM20W
UECEM02
010EBB9
CUMMOD0
U202
CWA01D0
011BICE2
2SE
202LEWD1
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WINGS OF LIGHT

Her lapse lasts until she's sure she's ready. Until she has puked from herself every vestige of cloying inner darkness. Only then does she decode the inter-glypha that crawls in pale shimmering script to orbit in heavy light the local tapestry. In the heavy dream the on-trend music was power chords spliced with aggressive tempos and staccato noise percussion riffs.

In the alley-maze of the Clusters she sees in archaic scripts numerology and glyphs alike. The glyphs of her home tapestry but by then she's decoded the numerology. In the inter-glyphs she'd seen: a new piece slotted on the attention-deprivation chessboard. As if the way GSS soldiers modify their gear.

The FBA would reset Cat Eyes' neural slate. Every time he'd blink himself into his half-life, out of the dream-coma his eyes would be ice blue and flash with fire like phosphorent. Still all this would be is wiping out any tactile info burned into his wetware by the screen-glow. She'd been watching his memories of the access go, every time.

Tachae has woven himself or herself deep within the folds of the Loum 2.0 she has yet to unravel. Couldn't while





trapped in the Primacy. Jewel has Cat Eyes while awake, splitting his senses. The glyphs of her home tapestry reflected is an amalgamation of stray nights and mornings. Nights spent bathed in the glow and then the triple bleed mornings, sunbeams eking through curtain slants.

All these collaged into memory; her erstwhile thoughts and what remains of them are craters sieved into her mental tableau, mottling and bruising in abscess. With the re-moulded Loum she had felt herself shatter, spreading herself in weavework in fragments; her mote aura gleamed in silver fire with her faith.

After leaving her second Primacy she sees with clarity its counter. The shadow that Tachae's FBA leaves in the striations of the re-moulded Loum. She weaves her aura motes into a new script: one adorned with borrowed runes from the clique cults of Gaulea. Ever since she'd lost her eyes as grub she had forgotten her mantra. On-trend is wave-trend death, an amaranthine eclipse, an infinity spiral.

It dies slowly but it would, wouldn't it? She thinks. It also follows patterns she can see through the second Loum. They glow in filaments, grasping coils which thread together like bracelets drawn tight over wrists the user's inner leis. In her case the infinity spiral is reflected for



her in the staring eyes of muralled soldiers. They are the dead and those yet to die. Wolven mutagenics take form as graft or eye splice. So uneven patches of fur or eartips furrowed, mouths become snouts.

Beneath their eyes she looks for pathways. Tachae's hotspot is veiled by the fog of war on her beater-top. In bright marks scattered over the screen like pegboard pegs exist fixes without ID checks. Like the fallen leaves strewn across the sidewalk in stab and flash. The synchronicity in the patterns is their shared decay.

The fog of war billows across the beater-top glyphs, hisses and furls from beyond the screen, flowing through the Loum 2.0 as translucent mist. Wraps around her mote-aura even as HBA'd she's still in the alley. Until the veil she uses as cover, a field of dissonant translucence she pushes ahead of her mote-form, and that hides, within the Loum 2.0 leys and entwined threadwork, her presence on Jewel's GPS readout.

No matter what she did, even taking it all within herself, she couldn't lose Jewel or his password-based strength on the Loum. Since he had built it first, hacked Cat Eye's FBA to give his mote-aura amarinthine lifespan. Which can always be found at the centre, where the Loum now





re-woven collapses in on itself every moulting, every feather-shed.

The alleywork around her is bruised and strained chrome that has paled beneath the Tri-Sun, weathered to steel mottled, rust-flecked and in some bleeds has stained the mural which surrounds her, this one a fresco which is also a harbinger of the Ultraviolet Children.

She doesn't know much about them. They appeared in blitz at first, psychokinesis and telepathy making short work of local rivals. In blossoming waves of psychic death wrenching the body from spirit. So that if one could keep track on an unmarred readout one might see the death rippling outward, nodes going dark, distant dreams flickering into a final sleep. They leave the bodies where they fall. Some get up and move again. Most don't.

Ultraviolet Children street prophets use swathing colour sheets, telekinetic paint fills, warping the paint into place.

The subjects are wolves with third eyes shining in pale violet, brows encircled by black haloes. Their eyes quest to follow you as if they can stare into the deepest part of you. Beneath ultraviolet telepathy she can't veil herself, is exposed; every facet of her plans would reveal itself to them.



They're few in number otherwise both GSS's and B Moths would both be swarmed; as it is they let the other gangs destroy themselves.

Still pale is the sky, a triple bleed of fuschia, orange, gold. So that the hues smear themselves in eyesight, the whole sky turns to blood, and beneath it she slips through the alley-maze under the swollen sky. Beneath wings of light and eyes black. Velih eyes skimming the tape or else lost in detail.

The alley soon turns sepulchral, slipping beneath the surface of the earth like a catacomb. So conscious is she of missing light that it feels like the Primacy; a mobile HBA'd version finding both her anxious scramble beneath the Clusters and the mote-aura chasing along the leys the weaves of the Loum 2.0.

She remembers how she'd felt as a ghost between rabbit ears. So that she trusts not her anger at Jewel but her fear.

Even though she sees no sign of him she isn't safe. In such darkness Jewel could X her out and the Velih wouldn't see. If they don't see, she reminds herself, they never care.





Yet she'd put away the beater-top, she finds in HBA after-glow, traded it for a tethering to her body so certain she knows the trembling of her own cells for a second before the access lapses.

Now the sky's gone and the murals are her heaven. Where the Tri-Sun should be flares pale glints of shape she can't discern.

Even without the beater-top glyphs she's getting close. She'd figured Tachae now for a Curate but shouldn't he or she be where the culture is strongest, where the trend is inset to waves of energy flow, of spirit in 'mancing limbs and skull?

Instead murals she can't see. Only made out by a faint cast of light from the beater-top's battery-core shining through the gauze she aims like a weapon. Still it's not enough to make out the upper mural; she sees glint of tooth, of eye, the rest hidden from her in the near-pitch darkness.

In the darkness now rippling away, she guesses, in waves along the Loum 2.0 trying to wear down her blessings. Still her stitch-work with sigil she had stress-tested as she best could within Jewel's dominion. Because that's all J



is, she thinks, a resting place, a drowning pool for sorrow-cred. A stress-test in himself.

Sure he'd moved in on his own but she'd worked with it.

In the end they'd never agree on who'd thought of it. For her though, glowing in runic glyphs, even in the script of her beater-top, as a new attention-deprivation chessfield was setting itself up.

She stands before a maze of tombs. The beater-glow she sweeps before her. A complex inex of death. The maze she sees from overhead; before her a massive chamber houses the maze; she'd emerged onto a platform of bone white marble that jutted above the tombs.

The mausoleums are inscribed with amaranthine lists of the dead; the lines are blurred this far away, the beater-glow illuminating the interdimensional glyphs' tell-tale density but no other detail.

Inscriptions like these are found on every mausoleum here. A vast network of organized graves, in microcosm reflecting the interstitial filing of all planars and dimensions by a higher power. Layers prey on each other like parasites but at the top must reside some wisdom.





Some knowledge surviving aeons and millenia coalesced within a semblance of being. Closer now she tries reading them by beater-glow as she wanders.

She'd taken one look and knew she had to get closer, even as she's conscious of the tombs as being contained within her. Within the Loum 2.0 which itself is memory concentrate, memory purified and blessed, body and blood of the Velih as seen through the Primacy.

Still she wonders where Tachae's hotspot is. She could have scanned the readout wrong; after all, to find herself among the dead. The mausoleums look carven of pale stone, alabaster, here and there now lit up by halogen tubes set in scours. That flush into sight murals which paper every surface like full-body tattoos, painting every surface with wolves.

As a Curate Tachae could map through chronal quantum tunnelling the perfect aspect to hex her. So that all this would be waiting for her like a dream when you close your eyes.

Then she's conscious of the translucent mist leaking from the beater-top. So that it wafts around her, skinning the dead air. Stale and dry as if pumped from the lungs of the



tomb-dwellers themselves. Rippling skin over the mausoleums around her glowing pale in the battery light. Pale scars shine where decimated by murals.

She thinks if Tachae were a Curate then the Elfoid had been a smokescreen. She colours as she remembers being Tachae's errand girl. *Now I face him or her on my terms.* Pivoting from her fear now to anger that burns bright on her cheeks.

Suffused in rose glow and veiled by mist she makes her way deeper into the maze of tombs. Wearing her anger like a sigil. Burning rose against the marble and alabaster pale as snow, that she sees as if by searchlight, wavering. Wavers with her breath and lactic acid that'd built up when she was HBA'd. She's shaking, her breath deep. Clenched fists trembling.

Drawing on her fear she now transmutes it to anger like the hormonal transubstantiation she'd achieved with the warren buck. Her low-top canvas sneakers squeak over marble and pale stone.

As if it could shatter like porcelain, leave her falling to the centre of Inira, the Cluster-World. She thinks it's al-





ways what you trust most that leaves you and that is the strength of the marble beneath her feet.

That gauges itself in heat channeled through her veins and through synaptic fire. That is her heart's rush when she sees the hexagram sigil. Of course that is all unity which has bled unseen and unheard downstream to entomb itself within her skull.

The hexagram sigil marks a mausoleum raised above the rest. In etched white on black marble like chalk or measured sand beneath the juicebox moonlight. Before pale waves swallowed the tomb of who you were, she thinks, you were solid once, but you've left that behind, haven't you?

The hexagram pulses in white glow against the black marble. The pale translucent waves would swallow her mote-aura too; she realizes she's HBA'd again, had been drifting near not on conscious will but on latent thought. So what she is beneath the layers of feather shed colours itself ochre in the mood-cast of surrender. Of being an open window to Tachae's mausoleum, whose denizen now gazes at her but of whom is the shadow of Tachae, Tachae's true essence in the tomb. An undeadoid, she thinks, who has sworn fealty to the Velih. Mausoleum for an angel-slave.



In that way your will becomes stone, your flesh becomes a facade, and you stare outward in burning will from the maw of your own crypt.

She sees the shadow in the mausoleum door and is drifting towards it, HBA cast towards death, of a subsurface coda of mural and inscription, that drew her out of herself, as if life drawn and that had been drawn a long time ago, that is all life and mass devoured, and the papered skin left after, that is creased like origami, that can no longer bear life.





GWAELE FINSTERYON

LIKES: thrift shopping, photographs/paintings/drawings of rooms, the feeling of dreams after you've forgotten their details, waiting for the bus, C'harnian mouth harp, group hugs, greeting cards, tearful apologies

DISLIKES: people assuming her own best interests, discipline/empathy tradeoffs, gaudy fashion, eating meat (including magically grown), television, theatre games, work/life imbalance, things she already knows

BLOOD TYPE: A

SEEN WITH: Public Morals Committee, Knitting Club

THEME SONG: Aiko - Straw
(?)



It's a good thing
the DARK LORD
is a shut in!

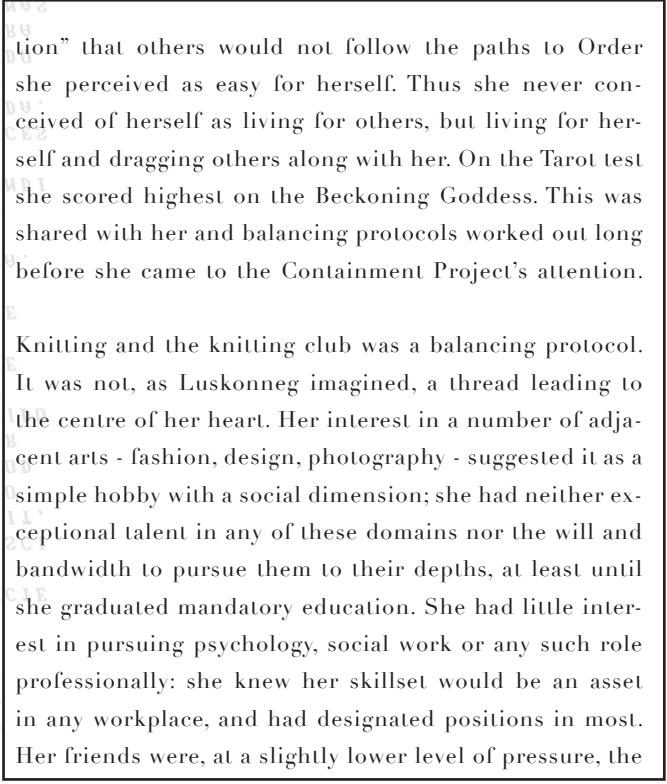
by: [baroque spiral](#)

A more thorough study of the unusual circumstances around Holygrove High, with access to more sensitive documentation than our admittedly volatile subject has been permitted, would also note the density of unusual transfers both out and in during the years Luskonneg attended. While we could not afford to over-optimize (as this would destabilize results in its own right), students were psychologically screened across its normal incoming class, both for resilience to unusual occurrences and ability to accept peer cruelty. (The contract functioned as a screening mechanism of its own.) Where . Gwaëlle Finsteryon performed exceptionally in the first bracket, and underperformed in the second - within a statistical window identified by the psychological team as a valuable asset in its own right. She was transferred in - and, unlike any other in-transfer student, pre-emptively *obfuscated the contract from her own parents to prevent them from preventing her from signing it*.

preserver record



Gwaëlle was being flagged by teachers as a valuable classroom mediator as early as first grade. She was almost tracked into the Public Morals Committee, given special Scripture instructions by a school cleric from grades 3 to 6, as well as fast-tracked a therapist for the burdens she seemed likely to shoulder. Ylian referred to her in private interviews as a “natural”, and suggested that were it not for relatively low organizational acumen, she could have easily taken the first seat, but preferred the second so she could make time and mental space for a normal life for herself. This preference, which seems to have been genuinely her own, was also, however, in tension with her almost compulsive tendency to go above and beyond her duties in helping extreme cases. In fourth grade she was almost singlehandedly responsible for preventing one of her classmates from falling a year behind in math. Gwaëlle describes the relation in terms of a kind of stubbornness: on her application she listed both her strongest motivation and greatest liability as “frustra-

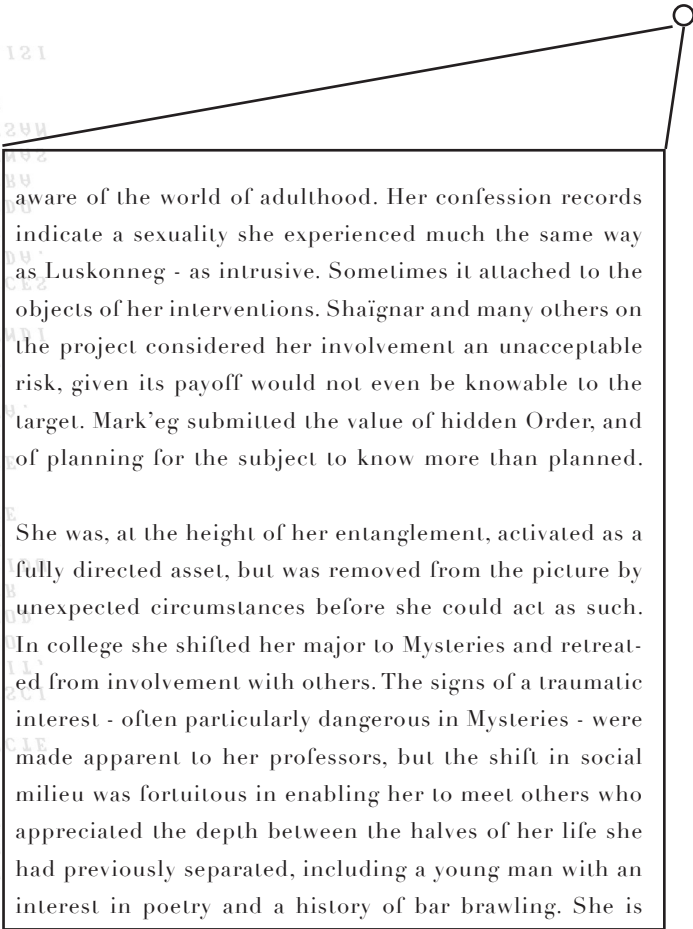


tion” that others would not follow the paths to Order she perceived as easy for herself. Thus she never conceived of herself as living for others, but living for herself and dragging others along with her. On the Tarot test she scored highest on the Beckoning Goddess. This was shared with her and balancing protocols worked out long before she came to the Containment Project’s attention.

Knitting and the knitting club was a balancing protocol. It was not, as Luskonneg imagined, a thread leading to the centre of her heart. Her interest in a number of adjacent arts - fashion, design, photography - suggested it as a simple hobby with a social dimension; she had neither exceptional talent in any of these domains nor the will and bandwidth to pursue them to their depths, at least until she graduated mandatory education. She had little interest in pursuing psychology, social work or any such role professionally: she knew her skillset would be an asset in any workplace, and had designated positions in most. Her friends were, at a slightly lower level of pressure, the



same way - none were serious knitters, but they were real and very close friends. She kept the world of the Public Morals Committee compartmentalized from theirs; they respected and took pride in their friend's prestigious position, and when she was exhausted or discouraged by it, understood their job as pulling her away, back into their world, to recover; if need be, to enforce her boundaries where they wouldn't. Their friendship predated her, however; their club had been whittled down to its core membership in middle school, before Gwaëlle's transfer. They also showed little interest in romance, sexuality or the opposite sex. Atràpy began dating a childhood friend who went to another school in 11th grade and, after the incident with Luskonneg, drifting away from the trio. (It was she from whom Marzanna was able to obtain the photograph of the drawing.) The Knitting Club was one of those adolescent spaces in which the security of childhood was maintained, rather than adulthood experimented with. And Gwaëlle was too compulsively self-aware to be un-



aware of the world of adulthood. Her confession records indicate a sexuality she experienced much the same way as Luskonneg - as intrusive. Sometimes it attached to the objects of her interventions. Shaïgnar and many others on the project considered her involvement an unacceptable risk, given its payoff would not even be knowable to the target. Mark'eg submitted the value of hidden Order, and of planning for the subject to know more than planned.

She was, at the height of her entanglement, activated as a fully directed asset, but was removed from the picture by unexpected circumstances before she could act as such.

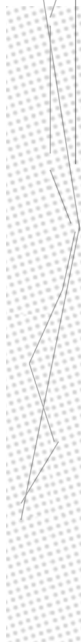
In college she shifted her major to Mysteries and retreated from involvement with others. The signs of a traumatic interest - often particularly dangerous in Mysteries - were made apparent to her professors, but the shift in social milieu was fortuitous in enabling her to meet others who appreciated the depth between the halves of her life she had previously separated, including a young man with an interest in poetry and a history of bar brawling. She is



currently completing a dissertation on the analogies between magical and literary structure that promises potential real-world value in worksite magical training. She refuses all contact with the Inquisition.



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EVB0100'
MFBICE2
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it's a good thing
the DARK LORD
is a shut-in!

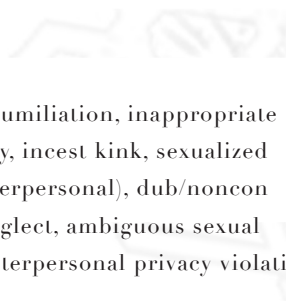
Synopsis

luskonneg 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

the day has finally come for Luskonneg to present himself to an open-minded stranger; will the cycle of his high school failures repeat?



CW: social anxiety, public humiliation, inappropriate media exposure, bad therapy, incest kink, sexualized neoteny, objectification (interpersonal), dub/noncon erotica, suicide, parental neglect, ambiguous sexual harassment, surveillance, interpersonal privacy violation

Last time he'd only had to walk a block down his own street. Now he was going a whole borough over, stumbling through crowds. Sickles of dark hair clawed at his eyes from under the brim of a bucket hat Marzanna had bought to hide the inadequacy of his invariably last-minute shower to strain out its grease. Every time a noise he couldn't identify issued from somewhere in the chaos - a name he couldn't make out, a transport wagon bumping on pavement or grinding on snow, a streetcar whistling along the wires - it landed on his ears as a shout, a curse, a hiss, directed personally at him. *Why won't any of you fuckers leave me alone. What am I doing just*

FAILURE 11: TRIANGULATION

walking here. Oh Goddess what am I doing just walking here.

When someone attacks you, Ykhil Tsjö had written in *The Stopped Clock Is Right Again*, swinging a blackjack and yelling, the yell hits as much as the weapon. In fact, it hits even if you have no fear of the weapon, no reason to believe it will hit you. The opponent's momentum, their suddenness, the look in their eyes all disrupt your equilibrium by themselves, by the fact that *another person* is directing them at you. In other words, there is a calm one can maintain when faced with, say, a spinning chain on a machine, that is much more difficult faced with a person.

Every time he noticed out of the corner of his eye someone accelerating so much as a step toward him, before turning or swerving away, felt like a jumpscare-level feint in his direction. It was enough to make his head spin. Yet somehow he absorbed every hit, as Marzanna tirelessly dragged his wrist.

He looked where he was going, but also kept his phone screen open, autoplaying his favourite OPs, just beneath his field of vision, where a little sister's red shiny hair might bob. Amazing what worked just enough. Walking, and this stoic dissociated silence, came back



like riding a bicycle, which of course he had never tried.

It is hard to explain Luskonneg Gwl'kerrien other than as a perfect statistical storm of anomalous bad luck. The problem is that we have statisticians, understand that such outliers appear inevitably in complex systems, and have recursively layered ours to mitigate them. He is like a case from an inverted developmental textbook. The standard parental gender structure was inverted, and one parent removed from the picture in the cruellest possible way; as anyone literate in social politics and psychology knows, these are hardly death sentences. His mother lived on Grief Subsidies for most of his childhood.

A brief rotating cast of childcare supports lasted no more than one month at a time, and he seems to mostly blame himself for their departures...

Marzanna watched him from the vine-looped patio of the restaurant where she needed a macaron to a pincushion while sipping a gin and berry tea. Writing this felt like pulling a fireworm out of an infected wound, but what else was there to do? She was never going to be allowed to publish this article. It was a prop, and an unofficial briefing for spies—the only civilian eyes that would get to see any of it would be Gallvren's, to prepare



her for what she was about to face. And even then, the handlers had requested she be allowed a few organic surprises.

Yet Marzanna had kept investigating as if finishing the article she had set out to write. She had managed to track down a few students from Luskonneg's high school cohort. Only one - the very Lachezel, now a fairly reclusive magic repairman - had taken her into a spell-sealed room and showed her a waiver and sleeper activation form he claimed everyone in the school had been made to sign on entry, alluding to "safe psychomagical experimentation". He looked haunted - or hunted - like he still wasn't telling the whole story.

Only a handful of the same teachers were still at the school. That level of mobility was also unusual in the system - people became attached to places, communities, friends. Most of the transfers had happened in the past five years - since Luskonneg had moved out. The only one who had taught him was a gym teacher. (*Was that also sex ed or did they have an Ecclesiastical visitant?*) A man who in Luskonneg's memories was dissociatively brutal but in person, merely dissociatively reserved. But the teacher pretended not to remember any of those



years for as long as he could before running off to a meeting. Didn't come back. She sat around in the lobby like a confused parent, looking up at student paintings - *Gallvren would like these* - and tapping sentences in and out.

Could this all be serial fabrication? It would be the simplest explanation, and there were already alarming omissions she had identified in his greentext stories. That back and forth would have been the crowd-pleaser of the feature. Maybe she could salvage its structure as some kind of fiction, when all this was over. Maybe Gallvren would read it.

"When I was a kid and needed a snack I would just ask for *bread product*."

"Awww that's adorable! I know a lot of places to go for bread product, if you don't."

"Mmm. I mostly... eat in. You don't have to... store it anywhere special... for it not to go bad. Although one time I got sick from mold spores."



"You got sick... from mold spores? Like in the air, or on your walls?"

"I don't - quite remember."

"OK, I'll just leave that. That won't happen at any of the places I'm telling you about, though..."

....

"One time Shunny Najda said 'I need to be able to imagine whatever I want to regardless of whether I have or will ever experience it, because I intend to spend my life imagining more things than I experience.'"

"For me the important thing is imagining something that someone *might have* experienced, even if I have no way of knowing myself. I think there are very deep facets of Order it's possible to tap into by trying, even if it's ultimately impossible."

"Someone, as in the Heroes specifically, or Someone as in anyone...?"

"The former is a useful constraint for attaining the latter."

....

“How long is the longest grammatically correct sentence you think you’ve composed in real time?”

“...people think about that?”

“The rhetoric club when I was in high school did. I spent a couple years with them but I hated debates.”

“The rhetoric club when I was in high school used to compete to find ways to trick me into saying embarrassing things...”

....

“So much of it doesn’t even touch on Double-Serpent erototheology, just casting the lovers into straightforward Serpent/Goddess roles! Which I get, because it has heretical associations for a lot of people, but it’s been integrated in orthodoxy for 150 years now...”

“Wait, is that the Double-Dancer sigil on your scarf? Are you a... a... a...”



“Hehe, you noticed! No, one of my friends who is a lesbian knit it for me... how did you manage to explode a packet of red pepper sauce all over your nose?”

“Sh-shorry!”

....

“Do they do much of anything with the Dark Lands, like historically reconstructing them? It’s a crazy area of research, the Dark Lands now are nothing like they must have been.”

“A lot of people just write them like the modern Dark Lands and focus on character stuff. That’s probably what I’d do, if I ever gave it a shot, just because I don’t like to pull description from nowhere. But there’s a whole genre where they get like, tricked or mind controlled by Dark creatures into doing non-consensual stuff with each other, which gets hit with Defamation charges fairly often.... oh my god, you blew another pack!”

....

Luskonneg had a recurring hypnagogic image that came to him more and more often when he



thought about the interviews, rereading or replaying conversations or planning future ones. He would pull open some sort of tab of loose skin (he always had one), unzip his body all the way down the front, growing larger and larger until he could cover the sky like a meat-purple manta ray, spotted with pale bubbles, and drown the world in pus.

On some level, he knew, his longstanding fantasy of being interviewed like this was only a version of this fantasy.

He first remembers the image from staring at himself in the nightlit mirror, hours after his mother had gone to sleep, trying to pop several zits ugly enough he didn't dare attempt when anyone would walk in on him. (She never failed to comment; she seemed to think she was doing him some kind of favour by pointing out the blemish he was trying to eliminate as if it had never occurred to him.)

He could hear see the roiling disgust in her eyes behind the cheery uptalk but Dr. Mark'eg said he couldn't see things in people's eyes that contradicted their tone, that was delusion bordering on the heresy of Fungibility, so he tried to talking to other people the

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same way regardless of how they looked at him, Mom when her shirt rolled up on the couch and he could see her stretch marks, Dad when he showed up one night in the month and his teeth were yellowed and his breath smelled. "What are you getting so fucking touchy about." "Where'd that tone come from?"

Their second meetup was in public, in a square he could vividly imagine his flayed body-sail covering from roof to roof, at a neotraditional C'harnian clay bowl stand - chickpeas, coleslaw or potato noodles and fries topped with shrimp and fish cakes, slopped in local bean and paprika sauces or global curries and chillies.

"But *otaku* culture developed out of the comikets, which were built using Silmenon's legal exceptions for traditional handicraft markets, which weren't subject to art or media censorship in the first place. Those famous woodblock prints came from there too."

"Now that I think of it, Pontquarno had a collection of those. Wait, were those and the first comikets at the same time?"

"No, centuries earlier."

"And but so heretical religious ideas were transmitted through handicrafts, too, right?"

He almost buried his face in his bowl. "Not - not exactly *heretical*..."

"I don't mean - heretical in a bad way!" Gallvren waved her hands across the steam rising into her nostrils.

"...huh?"

"I mean, it was considered heretical then. But it's accepted now. I'm not a *trad* or something."

"But it doesn't scare you... that people in the past were prohibiting things that were acceptable? That in the future something prohibited now, something disgusting, something *Dark*, might be orthodoxy?"

"...now you're starting to freak me out, didn't you do a unit on this in high school like everyone else? As our conception of Order expands, so can the access of Chaos - it doesn't need to be walled off from areas it might damage."

By that point he managed Theology classes (and others, but Theology in particular) by treating them



as exercises in purely phonetic transcription, routing sounds to letters without going through the perilous labyrinth of words. Try to understand and every argument against what the teacher was saying - even if he didn't actually believe them - would jump him like an endless gang of robbers the moment his mind turned the corner (inevitable in the moment of comprehension) "what if". Weighing these arguments was part of the class, but he couldn't weigh one against another without being distracted by three more. He all but sat out dialectics, no one knew how to make him participate, when called on he would repeat something the teacher had said without thinking about what the words meant.

What was remarkable was that he understood the ideas as posed in even the most esoteric Najda anime (and *doujin*) just fine. Even how one arc or episode posed a question, and another answered it.

"Pontquarno's letters to the authorities on this are quite beautiful, the quiet faith, the - hmmm, how did Najda talk about it, in the Poets' Court?" She blew a hair off her lip. "I don't get it. If Marzanna wants to write an article about this, can't she just research it herself? Why does she need us to talk about it."

She still didn't understand that the article was about him? Or was Marzanna lying to both of them, was it really about something else? She'll hate me when it comes out, unless I explain... but his mouth was dry, and he wouldn't be able to explain this even by text without preparation. "Oh sorry. I'll shut up if you don't want me to talk."

She glanced across the blonde wood of the booth at him with curiosity verging on annoyance. (Not *verging on*, hiding, like his mother hid - *you can't read people's eyes* - but you can't read anything else either, she doesn't *want* you to read, she pities or fears you too much to let you read her annoyance so you must predict it, Skazja's Wager, 100% chance because 0 evidence.) "I didn't say that."

He nodded, and gulped down the literal sense of her words, which said nothing.

"...Najda? ...the Poets' Court? Sorry, I'm - still trying to talk."

Not talking would make her more uncomfortable, he heard in Marzanna's mocking voice. "He actually focused more on Circus Law, since it was descended from Silmenon himself: contradiction and catharsis, the



management of the unpredictable..."

"But how does that relate to... well, I was thinking about what you told me last time, and it actually helped me think about what made me uncomfortable of that doll show. It reminded me of the Heresy of Neoteny."

"The Heresy of..." No, of course he had heard of this. Why was he pretending not to have heard of this. Why did his face feel like it was made of wet clay, like he was some kind of golem. "The idea that with age our faces, our bodies deviate necessarily from Order. Like it does when we age."

"Right, that's the theory of the Prime used by medicine." He knew this from reading arguments online, he always stopped when it came up, he couldn't explain why he didn't want to make those arguments himself. "The ideal of the body as expressed by its internal Order, dictated by its DNA."

"That's also a, a, a- DNA isn't Ideal Order, that's geneticism-"

"Oh, true, but it's a permitted simplification, not a Heresy."

"It can be a heresy."

"I'm not talking about that." She was frowning now. She was hating him now. She was going to dedicate every scalpel of her existence to destroying him now. She was going to do what Ylian never could have. "Of course chance deviations tend to accumulate with age, and eventually you die, because we haven't figured out how to maintain the body at its ideal Order,. But the body is always marked by deviations from its own Order, whether due to youth, or age, or temporary sickness. The Heresy is believing the body was actually... *better* when it was younger. That even things in our DNA, like body hair or cellular aging, could be deviations from Order. That the Goddess wants us all to be fetal in Her womb forever."

"Isn't-" He didn't believe this either, he wasn't a heretic, if he was he couldn't keep having an ordinary life as a jaded commentator... "that metaphor... in..."

He blanked on the name of the text.

A text by Maullan.

He hadn't read it.



He just saw it cited in /theo/ posts (mostly, “how orthodox is your fetish” threads).

If he was online right now, he would have it in his quotable posts index.

That was on his phone - not the full thing, but at least the zipped version from eight months ago.

Which pocket was it in? Could he feel it with his hands this numb? Left, right -

“I - I think I’ve lost my phone.”

They got as far as heading back to the streetcar stop and calling the municipal lost and found before a server from the stand came back with what had been hiding under their napkin. Luskonneg, self-consciousness momentarily washed out by joy, clutched the block of plastic and glass to his scraggly cheek (which despite being flecked beneath with acne, and above with beads of sauce from the bowl, and neither shaved exactly nor combed exactly, but pulled at compulsively with his hands, now looked less like an accumulation of hair in the drain and more like the chaotic-Order of a tangle of branches along a park walkway). “There you were! You



silly little- *silly*! Never worry Big Brother like that again!" He stopped and looked up, his face a mask of horror, to see Gallvren - smiling. "I guess... the heresy makes a bit of sense when it comes to stuff like that."

He let his phone hand fall and stared - not at her, he couldn't look, was over the rooftops far enough away.

"I wonder if it's true that Silmenon is the only place it's detected at the same rates in men as women."

His gaze filtered down to her like chum in water. He couldn't look away too long either. She wasn't really looking at him either - drifting off in the direction of the next train,

"But then, you can do stuff like that because your own adult form, or the adult form of a parent, exists to do it. Even just as a model."

"Saying something needs to exist in a state of less perfect Order for something more perfect to exist as more is the heresy of stratification, and that's way worse." He remembered that from another argument.



She puffed a half-laugh. "Yes, obviously. Sorry. I didn't mean to make you go back over *everything* you learned in high school."

They *had* taught that, huh?

Well, he'd half-remembered.

More importantly, he'd looked like he had. Like he'd known all along.

Which meant that if she ever discovered his real self, his sins would be compounded with every deception.

Which real self? You're not actually a heretic, you'd have been flagged if you were, this was just more anxiety.

No, you're worse. Heretics, unlike actual Dark practitioners, lived decent lives in privacy or secret communities, blacklisted away from public life or media but otherwise like everyone else, sometimes slipping their selective firewalls to post on /ma/ and /theo/. They didn't even get blown up by Punkin Patch, their case managers would intervene for them. Maybe if he was a heretic... but he could never pick one. His mind was too broken to even maintain a consistent theology. Sometimes he felt



like the Goddess was infinitely far away, like he wasn't the Serpent but some graceless legged thing crawling along a desert where She was always equally distant. He 'knew' this 'wasn't' 'true', in that he could answer the question that way, and that made it normal.

"Did you think any more about what I was saying last time?"

She asked, definitely not looking *this* time. His steamed redness was almost comforting.

"Oh. Yeah, well. I've been over that option with psychologists before. I don't think having a nicer body would really change... *me* living in it. It'd be an even bigger deviation from Order, if anything."

"I don't usually say this to people I've... just met. Or know these kinds of things about people I've just met. But... I believe you can find answers to this stuff. These aren't new problems."

"Are they problems... you've had? Is that why Marzanna put us together?"

Drawing away, in a way even his 2D social



grammar knew to read for discomfort. "Not... really. Again, I barely understood the Neoteny stuff, when I saw it with the dolls. I think I understand it better now, what it's processing, for someone at least. Now that I understand it, it seems obvious, I have to assume there must be."

"And how can you assume that." He snapped. He hadn't known his own voice. Was it the Slaver? Or someone new?

"Because... society works? Oh wait, I see, this is why Marzanna wanted me to talk to you," she sighed. "She's barely let me read any of her writing, but I know she's obsessed with this idea that something's wrong. Which like... I think something always is, we live in a world made of Chaos approaching Order, that isn't already there. But that doesn't mean the problem is with *society*, whatever that would even mean, it's not like she even takes a political or religious stance about it." She giggled. "Sorry, I don't mean to make it sound like I don't like Marzanna. I just don't understand what she's doing."

"Ahhh. I see. I see." Luskonneg lowered his eyes, to not show... what? "Of course you believe that."

“...what do you think is wrong with society?”

That wasn't what he opened himself up about in his fantasy. He could only open up himself, not society. What did he know about society? He wanted to bleed himself *onto* society. And it could decide what to say about the disaster, if it cared. He just wanted to get in their hair, on their faces.

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. The fact that it made me!”

She stood, opened her mouth, yawned. “Oooooo. Kay.” The ‘O’ long enough for stars to die. “You know, maybe you should read more Kamann fic, or even Maullan when it's not too didactic. The way he looked at the world around him, a lot of the problems he saw are still problems we struggle with, because they will be anywhere. You could get a clearer idea of what you feel bad about, what failed you, what you would want to be different.”

“...maybe you're right,” he managed to pull through himself, like the laces of a skate pulling right for the first time. “Maybe you're right.” And held them tight enough they would unravel until he was on the streetcar



again, alone.

>Gwaëlle won't talk to me in public any more

>even at the Public Morals Committee table

>eventually stop showing up

>eat lunch at the bottom of a stairwell down to the boiler room

>on my way up to class, walk by Ylian

>she grabs me by the arm

>stare almost makes me cum my pants, hit myself, or both

>"Hey brat. Just so you know, I don't back out of an agreement. Meet me after school by the vegetable garden."

>Gardening Club runs a little patch at the back of the field

>spring so it's just starting to send up sprouts

>"Doing this in school has come to attract too much



attention's we'll be making it extracurricular. Walk with me."

*>I'm not stylizing like I'm pretending my life is a movie I
remember the actual sentences*

>does that mean I loved her?

>does that mean I chose right?

>and failed anyway?

>anyway

>anyway

>anyway

>we went to a public library

>for the same district as the school

>which I'd never been to

>bc my school was outside my district

*>for some weird reason that was never fully explained to
me*



>or it was

>a lot of times

>and I could never remember even at the time

>so I stopped caring

>I couldn't like. remember that in full sentences

>normal people can't right

>sorry

>anyway

*>sorry for greentexting bad I should probably take my
crytype bs out of the greentext*

>nah too funny sorry/fuck you/anyway

>I'd never been to the public library

>I barely studied, just wanted to look at every book

*>every different kind, asking her what things were like a
kid*



>she tried to stop me but her heart wasn't in it

>next week it was

>couldn't look at a single non-school book for more than five seconds without it getting slapped out of my hands

>couldn't tell why we were even doing this if the point was to be a friendship simulator, the problem wasn't my grades (ok those were also a problem)

>broke down crying by the end

>she gives me one book to read for the last five minutes

>YA dreck, didn't get to anything happening obviously

>try to go back on my own on weekend

>not used to wandering around city on my own

>look for more local one

>Mom badgers me into not taking my phone, doesn't want me to waste data or get distracted & says directions should be easy to remember

>they aren't



>break down in a post office asking for directions

*>she comes to pick me up, we **** ***, she bans me
from going back again since I'm gonna embarrass myself*

>so I can only go with Elian

*>start sneaking books in front of her just to make her get
upset at me*

>not even ones I like

*>start reading humiliation stuff late at night, I can make
it hot*

*The week Luskonneg had his first Sex Ed class,
his mother made him watch "this show about dumb horny
teenagers in the First Heroic Age trying to get into a red
light district, there was nothing gross actually on screen but
it still felt slimy like something in my throat, the only one
who manages to 'score' is the fat kid who gets eaten by a
shapeshifter with a mouth in her belly." *(too long, find spot
for elsewhere: "I have no idea why she liked any of this stuff.
It doesn't fit my understanding of human, and that's how I
know how other people must feel about me".)*



From an afternoon in the Winter City Media Preservation Library, I have concluded that this could only be the 2754 TV comedy version of Bregann Island Tavern, which was banned within a decade of being aired. Now, if anyone would know about Bregann Island Tavern to confabulate this story, it might be Luskonneg, but he generally prides himself on not caring about his own country's media.

The following week, which would have normally contextualized this unsettling and humiliating display, was Love Ed. Luskonneg was sick the entire week of Love Ed – the ethically essential emotional complement to the vivid mechanical detail of the previous week – actually sick, not playing hooky, with a fever treated with stimulants. Sex and Love Ed classes, of course, are taught in staggered weeks, so anyone who misses theirs can simply join another week's. But his replacement class was shuffled by documentation errors from one to the next until the middle of exams, which he skipped to study, and then couldn't attend the next year because of the age gap in attendance.

If all of this is true, how do so many institutional failures pile up in one person's life? If Sex Ed hadn't covered basic Consent, Paraphilia Management etc., or if he had been sick that week, we would have produced a monster, not



simply a recluse. Monsters, of course, exist – I have never been particularly interested in them, because they usually resist social conditioning at predictable points, rather than being routed on a convoluted tangent through it.

My mind wanders to an incident from my first year in Winter City, a story I was trying to write about a traditionalist theological quiz game circle that met at an ice cafe. An hour after the official meeting was over, the crotchetiest old women - one from the Braz. family - were talking about how the censorship guidelines were so fine-grained now, there was no way the Ecclesia and the Psychological Union could be determining them from general principles - they had to be conducting experiments, even with the most extreme content, outright Darkness and heresy, things that would be illegal to expose a civilian to. I wanted to prove them wrong, but political journalism has never been my forte and I couldn't get publicization access to enough censorship board documentation. That the Serpentine turn in theology - which is particularly well-represented in the Psychological Union - has required Dark experiments all along.

This conspiracy theory itself probably isn't publicized enough to be worth the access, I thought, but it hits different when you see what a victim might look like, even



if you don't believe it. It makes me think differently about my roommate's obsession with Heroes' Love fiction, which I first used as bait to lure him into real world companionship. Clearly it's good for her, the kind of pure, immersive passion I wish I could have for my own work. But in the process of discovering this, how many like Luskonneg might have been sacrificed?

If such a sacrifice, undeniably Dark by the standards of whatever orthodoxy it could possibly be intended to preserve, were indeed taking place - as I tentatively concluded in my original piece that the traditionalists did not believe, or they would take more action than grousing around a quiz game circle - what would a citizen be obligated to -

She hovered her finger for almost three minutes before deleting. It went to the trash, which she didn't empty. If they could read her trash, they could probably read her keystrokes. She was sending a message by leaving it there.

"If you have sexual thoughts about someone, can you still be their friend?"

Luskonneg asked Dr. Mark'eg, and was almost dizzied by the speed of the "no".

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"So how do I clear those thoughts, if I just want to be friends with somebody. I have them about everybody. I can't be in a relationship with everybody... can I?"

School Harem. One of his most deranged fantasies that he only played when he had his head down somewhere in the dark where absolutely no one could see him. Its frequency increased tenfold after that session. What if, say in some sort of magical anomaly - the frequency that caused everyone to be repelled by him switched to them desiring him. (*Is there a doujin like this* - late night searches - inexplicably no results but the other posters were probably hiding it from him, as they mocked him for begging. He had to get better at keywords. *Draw one myself.* He'd get as far as the faces and then start scribbling them over, overwhelmed by the contradictory impulses, into something resembling a gnawing void or flesh pit.) Each one helplessly, but ego-syntonically helplessly wanting him, wanting everything he could possibly want from them. So gluttoned for choice, he had to find ways of randomizing which classmate he chose to take to the bathroom, coding page numbers in textbooks. After what happened with the Public Morals Committee, this became his only personal fantasy. Anything else too





personal.

"Probably not. But yes, while suboptimal, that is physical, impersonal, it isn't... reshaping a relationship that exists already. The relationship between friends itself is a higher Order that consists of the private thoughts of both parties as well as shared interactions."

"Ylian said that wasn't true. I heard her helping Gwaëlle with Love Ed notes."

A brief pause, almost as if he might change his mind - *and what then?* Would Lusconneg be like the cartoon predator sawing off its own branch in pursuit of its prey, with only his thoughts to ground their own validity? "They are expecting most people's thoughts to be normal. Within a normal range, private thoughts won't damage the Order of a relationship more than healthy communication between adults should account for anyway. With you that's... different."

He gripped the insides of his pockets with white knuckles. "So what if the thoughts are... involuntary? Just... just Currents?"

"Well, if they pass and you feel absolutely *no*



need to hang onto them, maybe. We've already talked about those, but those weren't what you were discussing at the beginning of this session, were they?"

"N-no." What had he been discussing? He didn't dare remember.

"Put it this way. You either *want* to approach this person intimately, as Serpent to Goddess, or you *don't*."

"Most things I feel pleasurable Currents about... down there..."

"Don't say it like that, you'll put the *image* in my head, Goddess, that's crossing boundaries."

"Sorry."

The image — but if having the image meant wanting to — then did he

No, the image could accompany wanting or not wanting, and that voice, that disgust, conveyed the certainty of *not wanting*.

Do I have to be *not-wanted* to not want? Do I





have to *not-want* like that to convince others I don't want them? Especially after I've already failed at *tsundere*...?

"...oh come on, finish what you were going to say, don't manipulate me."

To do what? "Most things I... think about like that... I don't actually think I *want*."

He could read things that broke the rules Mark'eg was asserting, even without paying attention in Health Class or Theology.

The word 'tension', for instance. What the hell did 'tension' mean? Surely not the drawn-and-quartered agony he felt between thoughts that made each other impossible. But that proved Mark'eg's point about the same rules not applying to him.

Besides, he could also read things that break any moral or psychological rule, as long as they abide by the laws of the Poets' Court, dictating that they do not claim the authority of models. "Art may traverse the outer rim of Chaos and the inner manifolds of Order, so as to prove that the Goddess' silver rays extend unbroken from one to the other."



Dr. Mark'eg was unimpressed. "With someone you don't talk to, or that doesn't exist, that question may not be operative. In a personal relationship, it always is."

Most of the time, even Luskonneg had learned to detect, it sounded like Dr. Mark'eg didn't quite believe what he was saying, he just knew it was the correct thing to say at this particular junction to someone with this particular problem, which Luskonneg of course believed. This time, at least in the memory that had scabbed around this moment, he sounded almost sincere.

"I... I missed Love Ed. Last year. Can you tell me what they would have taught me in Love Ed about... picking the right person? You have the same textbooks, right?"

"Yes, but you know we have good reasons to believe the textbooks may not *apply* to you."

"Then what am I supposed to do. It's the same if you tell me, I won't know the difference."

"You think I can simply *tell* you?"



"Not tell me" he nearly spit between every break "– who to like! Just what they'd tell me in Love Ed how I should be deciding! If I have to!"

"Can't you just read the textbooks yourself, if you're convinced that's all you need?"

"You know I can't read textbooks on my own!" He almost screamed - almost choked. "Isn't it enough to go along with them because I need friends? What if they drag me in one direction and my my fucking *dick* drags me in another, why do I have to go along with either of them?"

"So you can *not care* enough to not think about them, not touch it, not think about touching or not touching it, et cetera? Or even apply for oblation and be done with it? Brilliant! Our treatment here, I believe, must be nearing its conclusion." Mark'eg's voice was like the edge of a blade and made him feel things only real authority, not even Ylian's, not even his mother's could. "Stop being dishonest with yourself. That's the first thing they would have taught you." The fluorescent light flashed through the underside of Mark'eg's glasses. "You mean *won't*. If you will, you must accept the consequences. You have entered a man's world."



"Do *you* really think..." Ymaññ had abandoned his last hint of pride and started casually asking philosophical questions of Mark'eg the way he once had of Braz, "...we've made him better? T-the things in his head are horrible... because of us, how do we know they would be worse? What if we're making the Dark Lord even more dangerous?"

Mark'eg sat on a dog's outstretched paw, pondering and sipping black coffee. "Stretch your arm out along here," he said, holding out the heated blade, and Ymaññ obeyed silently, letting it dig into his flab just enough for the flesh to crease around it without bleeding, to seal it in an envelope of pain. "I want you to hold it there for as long as it takes me to supply an answer to this question." He mused for another minute before the dog began to whine and Ymaññ to sniffle.

"There is no 'even more dangerous' than the Dark Lord. That's what I'm sure you have been told already. But I managed the Dark Lord's 'mental health' up close. Week after week. You were there too, I was responsible for what he did, every week. As in, I was not





solely determining it. I was a tiny factor determining it, but if he deviated from plan, I would hold myself responsible. You have never been responsible for him, in that way. All you have to do is sleep. So from my perspective, there was an 'even more dangerous' than the Dark Lord – everything that could go wrong up to the Dark Lord's awakening, even if he failed to awaken. Not only was I responsible for the safety of the world, I was responsible for the safety of every student at that school. With or without becoming the Dark Lord – although the more extreme the violence, the more likely to trigger an awakening – the right combination of our influences and his latent tendencies could have led to any act of violence you can imagine. Even for a normal person. There are people who do them under less. So yes, the person you dream about every day is probably the best possible version of Luskonneg Gwl'kerrien. This is not" he paced, punctuated – "indicative of any *underlying* innocence that should make you or I ashamed of our work. This is the *product* of my work, my brain on the razor's edge every week." He switched hands on the sword, running the fingers of the first along the other side of the blade as white flesh snapped like hot dog meat along Ymaññ's underarm.

ENCIPHER
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"The other thing I am sure you are already aware of is that these tasks are one and the same. If the Dark Lord comes into direct conflict with others—that is, if he tries to impose his will upon them, or vice versa—he enters the conditions for awakening. On the other hand, if he has no conflicts with others... then sooner or later others will start to pity him, to take interest in him. And other conditions emerge. Thus, he must always be in conflict with others, but not directly, not in the one he believes himself to be in. He must at all times be exerting the maximum of his efforts in a dilemma that is not, in fact, determining his conditions in any way. This is *not* to say that his conditions must be in perfect stasis, which is the Heresy your handlers have been indulging for far too long. We can, in fact, push him further. We know how to. We don't have to wait while your spell weakens and the Dark builds up its forces. We can have you out of here, and *doing* something for *society*, in months. Maybe even something worthy of your beloved Braz."

He was at the stage of avoiding jacking off to characters who had one database point in common with her at the first layer of the ontology on Zerobooru, and two on the third (the fourth could count things like





“human”). Within this range, it would feel like he was trying to substitute the image for her and cheat the rule around thinking about friends. Or she would simply invade along the line of similarity, like a magic substrate.

It had, of course, occurred to him that he only had these problems because of gooning, that if he refused enough stimulation they would simply burn away in the heat of his willpower. After that crashout at 19 where he broke a mirror on his face and got glass embedded everywhere (the scars looked indistinguishable from his acne scars now, as far as he knew), he held the line of NoFap for 5 months, in his last futile attempt to come out a real person, but even - or especially - without images the fantasies became even stronger, and indistinguishable from the intrusive thoughts or nightmares. He had a wet dream to a little girl version of his mother tearing his bandages off and digging into the bloody flesh under his eyes and knew it was never getting better and he had to look at some fucked up stuff someone else had thought of so it wouldn't feel like him.

The closer the object of desire, the realer the desire of the object, the more he had to take responsibility:

He did, however, want to get off to at least



some of the erotica she was telling him about. That was what most of it was, right? Women's erotica. Which she'd told him about because he was so ridiculous and embarrassing there was no possible way he would take it as any sort of flirting. Because their inner worlds were so different that nothing that appeared sexual to one would even appear sexual to the other. And besides Gallyvren had been able to sublimate her sexuality so much that it shone everywhere through her. While his clung to him like a stink.

That had to mean she couldn't possibly believe he would be staining her fantasies with his. But he asked for them after talking about what they both respectively liked, saying he wanted to *try* them. Even she had to know what that meant. Eroticism was a *sense*. It was impossible to tell what a work of erotic art meant without experiencing it physically. Meeting it in its own dimension.

But these were also the Heroes. One of the only important things he'd been able to pay attention to in school, because their stories were exciting and inspiring in the way that made him want to poke holes and stretch them open like any kind of fiction, except they





weren't fiction, they were real people who had saved and built the world he lived in. *The shitty world he lived in* but at least not the Dark world, the world that looked like the inside of his head on the outside. They were held as close as humans were permitted to the sacredness of the Ecclesia's symbols of the divine.

He simultaneously felt like he shouldn't get off to the Heroes and didn't want to because he should. But he knew it was Done, it was permitted, so there was no way he could restrain his curiosity from reading.

He was no stranger to material involving guys, but the tropes in this were very different than the stark, straightforward dynamic he was used to, where he usually self-inserted either being penetrated by a huge, hot-blooded or brutal warrior or penetrating a pliant, beautiful boy. He wasn't sure who he could possibly self insert as out of the Heroes, but the way Gallvren described this stuff *self insert* didn't really make sense anyway. Elthazan was the obvious candidate, ethnically and in terms of having plenty of fics of the first category with Kamann, but he didn't like to imagine spending all day every day outside, bare feet crunching on spiky cedar twigs and cold wind getting under his fur wrap.



Silmenon, on the other hand... He had looked up Silmenon/Elthazan. The one that had really done it for him was one where Silmenon treats Elthazan as a dog. It was downvoted and flamed by dozens of authors; the depiction had been judged by Elthazan fans as racially offensive, one-dimensional characterization. He'd blacked out that night and posted a rant on /hl/ that somehow, the next morning, was being passed around as cypypasta by people on his own Feed who didn't even read the board.

Now he was 12 chapters into a fic where Silmenon is approached in the Dark Lands by a real succubus, not a "succu-angel" but still adjacent in his mental landscape, taking the form of his unrequited love Miwa, except with mostly-male anatomy. The succubus seduced him under the pretext of experimentation with monster bodies, but quickly disabled his target's magic and subjected him to his own round of experimentation on the limits of human ones. Luskonneg would edge himself near completion on the dominant parts of the first 7 chapters, then let go first chance he got on the submissive later ones. Except as soon as he tried to let go, he couldn't, he clenched up, until there was a knot of physical pain like a chastity cage. He knew he was





imagining Gallvren judging his thoughts, his pleasure, which even if he told her about the story he would report nothing of, yet which by imagining he was inviting her into his pleasure—no, dragging her in, without her consent.

Sometimes this would manifest literally, when he would slip back into self insertion unconsciously and then, in his preferred position, see her watching over him. Grimacing like Ylian sometimes; smirking like Marzanna in others; most often appraising with a cool, academic interest that drove him crazier than either of them. Her gaze filled him up with *her* pleasure, even though he knew she would derive no pleasure from the flabby scabby body of himself, and he was stealing it through the body of a Hero. Another trope of dubious consent. The first time he noticed the intrusion he nuzzled on the spot.

So now he was at the point of avoiding this too. Or at least, getting halfway there, enough to let the erotic sense pervade the story, and letting it build up.

And at the same time, he couldn't pay attention to anything else. The Dark Lands were advancing, both on on everything he could do, and everything he could

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think.

As an alternative outlet, he was stabbing himself on his own again, with a pin pushed through a bottlecap. It still felt better than his life before. But for how long?

>hey you gonna get back to Gallvren

hear youve been ghosting her

*next time I wanna take you on the funiculars
together. all three of us*

did something change

>no

doesn't mean it wont

Im getting scared

I don't want things to be too far gone wen they di

**do*

*>ok we've been over that I'm not gonna force you to
do anything*



but you seemed to be having fun both times I saw you!

>yes.. that's t problem

His thoughts about Marzanna still counted too, didn't they?

He hadn't even thought about Dr. Mark'eg's axiom when he first fantasized about Marzanna. Training him, tackling him and pinning him down, or pinned herself under a surprisingly powerful move he'd found hidden somewhere in the back of his brain like a hereditary secret magic - his 'killer instinct'.

Other therapists, when he touched on the rule, didn't understand why he felt so strongly about it. But when he presented them with Dr. Mark'eg's arguments, they shied away and tried to focus on his feelings again. (Sessions where he felt everything, learned nothing. And then felt the same thing, as if hypnotized, throughout the week.) Dr. Mark'eg had been bracing, challenging, even if he hadn't helped, Luskonneg wanted to believe he was the one who had failed. Every other therapist was just telling him what he wanted to hear.

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So if he took it seriously now, didn't this mean he was now inescapably caught in a love triangle again?

>study sessions become a battle of wills

>start bringing my phone to take notes instead of reading, she tries to check it at random times

>look at anime, manga, chans, even porn on it

>none of this has even bothered Mom in half a year, she'll walk by and say something casually insulting and ignore me

>try to hide it but the mixed reaction when I can't feels good in a weird way

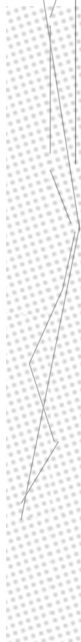
>"tension"

>one time she snaps and gives my phone to the librarian to keep until we leave

>librarian asks what our relationship is

>she stumbles and says "big sister"

>imagine this for the rest of the session





>actually manage to get some studying done (finally understand wavelength/frequency/speed; can't remember that shit now)

>vivid dream where Smilia scolds me for falling in love with my big sister and cries

>wake up crying

>for some reason scared to tell Dr. Mark'eg about any of this

>try reading big sister stuff but the big Current doesn't come, can't/don't want to get off (still feels good)

>switch to other stuff, can't get off either, word Currents start coming more intense

>start having trouble sleeping again

>also start waking up early, like 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning

>try watching shows about Love Ed to see how much I can reconstruct

>"Love Ed harem" is a whole genre, in fact it got started around the time modern Love Ed curricula did

>both watch the classic stuff like Ekuirian's 'Afterschool Re-



cursion' and more recent, trope-parody-based takes like 'I'm Not Crazy, my Teacher is Trying To Engineer a Love Ed Rom Com, Right?', as well as explicitly didactic attempts like 'Intersecting Ripples'

>the recent tropey stuff is the easiest to watch

>Afterschool Recursion and Intersecting Ripples each have a bunch of moments resembling stuff I'm going through that make me break down and start hyperventilating and stop watching

>talk to Mark'eg about it

>he has me match attributes of the characters and their relationships to my relationship candidates

>none of them are exactly analogous, each apparent analogue to Ylian or Gwaëlle in the shows has some attributes of each other

>can't draw any conclusions

>decide to look for the Love Ed textbooks that I missed at library sessions with Ylian

>at first sneak them behind other books, but it looks like I'm





really studying bc I am really having trouble

>this doesn't last long bc they're big books

>break down red and crying, tell her about missing the classes

>she seems to think this is serious but she shouldn't be managing remedial work for me, offers me 15min on them at the end of each session as a reward if I study my current stuff

>15min way too short, I'll struggle with a sentence like "The Two-Serpent Theory: Love is an Order encountered by both parties as Chaos" which is basically Theology and she'll have to leave before she can explain it

>in fact she barely interacts with me within the 15min for reasons I can guess

>struggle to look at the textbook and not her, which feels like looking between her and the textbook deliberately

>out of nowhere Gwaëlle emails me through the school messaging system

>wants to know how things are going with Ylian, doesn't hear anything at Morals Committee meetings any more



>tell her I'm trying to study the Love Ed stuff

>she offers to meet up at a goddamn cafe

>a cute cafe

>fucking scared

>her friends already pulled this on me

>this is even more ridiculous

>like it's out of one of the tropey anime

>is she actually just an idiot

*>or is she planning an extremely complex test as a member of
the fucking Public Morals Committee*

>put off the offer for three weeks

*>feeling worst I ever have but can't do anything disruptive
that might draw their attention*

*>just don't do anything in class, haven't completed half my
assignments for Theology or Naturalism but if I don't disrupt
them they won't disrupt me, at this point I'm basically skip-
ping in my head*





>one time I just don't go to class because I straight up don't remember where I am

>wander back through a haze and see Ylian and Gwaëlle standing outside a classroom, calming down a crying girl I recognize from my Literature class

>stand a bit too long trying to see what's happening even though I don't plan to intervene

>Gwaëlle is looking at me, not like she's making sure I won't do something but just a kind of sadness

>deer on traintrack

>can't look at them, can't look away

>Ylian notices me too

>start walking and do a thing I've practiced occasionally when someone's body distracts me in gym class:

>look up at the ceiling over her and try to visualize Smilia descending from heaven*

**Smilia appears when Astig can't talk to the girl he really loves, which doesn't (I think) mean either of them are the one*



I really love. She's the backup girl, Heaven's Guarantee, and that's what I like about her. I always wanted someone to make her happy, even though Najda himself said that's "the fans", which means me.

>Smilia descends and... this is going to sound like a creepypasta so tbc I wasn't "seeing" this any more literally than I would be if I visualized it normally... moves on her own and pulls out the Eros Gun from ep. 16 (<https://panopticon.con/37454584856>)

>bolt in the opposite direction (past them again) into a stairwell

>literally feel it hit me from behind, like a tingling

>sit down in corner of landing with my eyes closed until I feel a hand on my elbow

>arrow will affect whoever I next look at

>priorities lock into place

>Gwaëlle maybe wants to be my friend, Ylian doesn't

>if I go for Ylian romantically I can maybe still be friends with Gwaëlle





>if I go for Gwaëlle romantically I will probably lose both

>someone's hand slips under my elbow

>can't tell who it is just from hand

>don't open eyes

*>incidentally just finished Death Box a few nights before this
which makes a point that some problems can't be resolved like
this, you have to assume all Order in one place and risk it*

*>no idea if it's theologically orthodox bc I can't remember my
classes, assume it isn't and I shouldn't be taking it that seri-
ously*

*>spend all night after looking up threads about it and even
the /theo/ trads like it*

>mfw

>Gwaëlle asking if I'm OK

>say I accept her invitation without opening her eyes

>Ylian asks what invitation

>look up at source of voice

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0N12
T10N9
WEN
DOFOBE
EL
TUBOBE
N1 N1
TMCIDIDN
LEWBOB
E102WOD
2ED DO
WE ERI1
WDB12C1
1N8
COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
DOFOB
122W
TOBEN



>she's so obviously beautiful how was I fighting myself about this so hard

>Ylian asks what the fuck she's talking about

>Gwaëlle suddenly looks scared

>Ylian demands an explanation in strict terms - some ultra-disciplined PMC speak I couldn't remember, never come across in media since

>Gwaëlle explains she was emailing me

>Ylian says this contradicts their plan of dealing with me separately

>something something "....didn't realize it was that strict"

>something like: "the Public Morals Committee keeps its commitments in exact terms.... we both know you know that well enough to know you are reducing an already dubious.... to a personal pity project.... if you want me to continue working with him.... cease all communication."

>Gwaëlle looking at me, shaking, almost crying

>"do you want... do you want to go with her"





>force myself to nod

>mfw when

Mirmansaur was a real tourist trap, with shops all along the main road selling birch bark elf masks, wall scrolls of Sacred Circus performances, bamboo umbrellas, sailor romances and spring-opening plastic coracles like inverted tents (there was a whole dock for them). And it was too grey and rainy to do any touring. It felt like the dead end of a delusional quest in a pretentious play about Order misrecognition. Maybe it was - in which case where would she have gotten off track? Before her memories started, it felt like, but that wouldn't be actionable and thus wasn't worth thinking. She was following the available information strictly according to procedure, and good information had been appearing. Would it have been better to chase down and tear through the Black Mushroom Initiates, who at least seemed to have some idea who the Seer In The Half Light was? For all they claimed not to know, they had been laying in wait where the clues led. Maybe the Seer In The Half Light was a secret project of theirs, or some other Dark sect's with a pedigree, not sprung magically from a kitsch bauble



of rural Silmenon. On the docks, she stared out at the grey quartz-scarred waves over a plaque indicating she was a mere 2821 km from the Forbidden Continents. A cluster of small analog screens clung to a pole nearby with magical drone videos of unbroken forests of ginkgo and cedar and sassafras, trail cams and highlight reels of beavers and fishing cats. Despite the winking folkloristic nudges at the end of the text, you'd never see an elf on any of them. ("Elves don't show up on video, they can resist photomagic, duh.") The Forbidden Lands had been barred to human developments in the Great Treaty with the animals at the end of the First Dark War, and elves weren't plausibly depicted long before then. *If they were ever a real hominid, they went extinct when we were crawling out of caves. No matter what Shaïgnar says he'd put research money into.* Her mind snagged on a loose end of memory *Shaïgnar?* Then she trudged back to the town record hall (its sloping red gables at the end of a long spit of terraced rocks crumbling into the sea off the side of the main peninsula, marked off by a *torii*) to look for the name she had been assigned to think about.

There would be no family to interview, according to the archivist who seemed to be the type to know everyone personally, their long thin silver forelocks





drooping like chains on either side of their hexagonal red glasses as they stretched their snowy flecks of eyebrows sympathetically into the middle of their forehead. Azesul Aeeth was dead in a boating accident several years after her only child left home; Malhawa Aeeth had run off to Klauxion for a late-life business venture, a desperate attempt at salvaging meaning from his failed life. “What about Seullgyo?” The archivist’s sympathy sank into a stolid reserve as it became clear what Braz was poking around at. The Seullgyos lived on one of the lowest stone jetties, in a thatched dome elevated on a concrete foundation-ring. Stavour Seullgyo came to the door with a knife and a sliced-open fish in his hand, one face flopping from the other.

“What could you possibly want to know about my brother this long after we began our” his use of airquotes with vowel-rolling emphasis suggested some previous humiliation “*jo-ourney of he-ealing*”. Do I have to swear an order of public secrecy to make you vultures go away?”

She couldn’t help it. “What kinds of ‘vultures’ talked to you before?” She opened her badge gently and casually, like a flip-phone or a notebook. “I’m probably



not from the same place as them.”

His eyes rolled back into their sockets and his mouth ground beneath black and white bristles. “Shouldn’t you know already?”

“This isn’t... the kind of thing our departments talk to each other about.”

“He really wasn’t involved in anything *Dark*.” The tall, heavyset man’s face and eyes fell forward into new softness. “He was just depressed. Even in the happiest and most orthodox families, it happens sometimes, a mistake in the brain maybe...”

“Maybe so, but they’re not the only one I have to ask you about.” Emphasis on the have to, suggesting a common frame of uncomprehending duty and retraumatization, which at the moment she felt earnestly. “Did you know their friend, Lacriz Aeeth? Did they ever visit? How long did they know each other?”

“Aeeth... came to us and told us what happened. We didn’t read Romarosa newspapers. They blamed themselves. They had... no, they *hadn’t* been lovers. That was the problem.” He sniffed - no sign of tears yet, but





every sign of their semiconscious suppression. "I'm sorry, I hadn't thought about them in so long. I didn't... I couldn't accept their responsibility. Everyone who ever loved them was responsible."

"You just said it was a brain mistake. What kind of responsibility would you have for that?"

"I don't know, could we have paid enough attention? Could we have kept him here? Should we have, or would that just have been torturing him? Our confessor told us we couldn't answer these questions, and now an inquisitor like you expects us to "

"I'm not an inquisitor."

"Same typea deal."

"I'm sorry." She was thinking of something she could do here, maybe even stupid enough to cap off the tedious existential drama this journey was becoming. "If it helps, don't think of me as a person. Just tell me the story, as if you were talking to a stuffed animal."



The most intriguing lead that had cropped up in Marzanna's external investigations was that there was no indication that Lusconneg's father was dead.

He stopped showing up to parent-teacher meetings, or signing documents, or giving feedback to report cards, but in student information, a deceased parent was always marked with an X this was useful information for a teacher. It appeared nowhere, as far up as his graduation.

She'd looked up the name Gwl'kerrien as soon as she'd learned it. It wasn't common, and it wasn't from the tribal side of his heritage; it was in the third tier of C'harnian names. She'd looked it up and there was one who worked in the kind of 'company' or 'office' he had alluded to, at an experimental agricultural coordination and transportation guild based in Klauxion, negotiating with Elthazan government plans and targets. So his father both literally helped put food on the table - on the *shelf* - and there was no way of explaining to a child what he actually did.

No social media. No social club memberships.





Just a deadpan profile on the guild site. A job title that only meant anything to the couple dozen above him in the organizational flowchart.

She would have left it at that if she was just an ordinary reporter and not a Punkin Patch user.

Using a separate, personalized search algorithm, she had also found an account just labelled "gwlkerrien" on a popular online military simulation game, with thousands of hours logged.

It wasn't the kind of game that Luskonneg seemed like he'd show any interest in - a search of his Feed revealed only a handful of comments disparaging the conduct of its playerbase in other games (a RTS with *gijinka* of Chariots from the Second Dark War) from three years ago. Still, what did he get up to all day? It was a bottomless pit - but then, as her training had to remind her, it wasn't. Simply the breadth of reference scattered over the insane ramblings on his Feed, and the other pieces of his activities he had suggested to her, would not afford him the time to dedicate to this game in his 13 or so waking hours a day. And he would have to have been playing it since middle school.



There wasn't enough to work with here, unless she was actually going to publish the article. It would be a good story - *the workaholic father is a media addict too, a real workaholic in a fantasy world* - a disgustingly good story, like an overwrought parody of the kind of story she had been hoping to find.

There had to be a point past which it was unhealthy for her to pay any more attention to this, and tracking down his father seemed like a good marker for it.

Maybe he had already passed it when she stopped being able to explain it. She mourned her old explanations like childhood fantasies of chasing orcs out on the steppe: it could have just been *Obviously someone as fucked up as him is involved in something Dark. Obviously this is a bog standard entrapment scheme. Obviously this is spontaneous magic, a statistical anomaly generated by the Goddess for the purpose of humiliating my puerile dreams.*

Rather than reaching out through work where she expected him to have ways of stonewalling her she made a burner account in the game and shot him a DM.

He was at the stage of waking up early again.

7:00 or 6:00 or sometimes even 5:00. And no school to get to.

As soon as the dawn broke, as the light changed. And that was happening earlier. Spring.

There had been buds on the trees in the square when they'd gone all the way out into the city. Neon bright. As if a bomb had gone off, irradiating everything with some alien substance.

Not as if 'stopped time had started moving' - but as if time had moved without him.

Nothing had changed inside him. He couldn't have imagined sitting there calmly talking the way he did on Feed even two months ago, but... nothing had changed inside him, just his tolerance for it. For the weight, the debt, on his side of the balance building up.

Time, moving without him. Spring, season of love. Of the Serpent's approach to the Goddess - after which the world becomes too hot, and starts to wither, and She retreats again; though the dream of modern science is that the approach does not have to be a cycle, that the Serpent can learn to become cold in Her

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embrace.

If he didn't approach now, it would be worse luck for him to do so for another year. Another year wouldn't be so bad except...

Time could only be too long or too short, one at a time. Always too short to prepare, and too long to endure.

Besides, the light he woke up to wasn't warm. It didn't make him think of spring or dawn. The sun itself did not reach his window until it was already normalized, white on blue. The red blaze of dawn did not face his window. The light that woke him was a thin, fluorescent blue thickening to blue-white, like a computer's death screen, like the halo of static after his mother fell asleep with the TV on. He had a private name for it - 'cold blue flame' - that he saw, very occasionally, in the lighting of certain frames of anime or visual novels, that he had a folder with a collection of, that was nostalgic as long as he wasn't experiencing it.

A folder he could no longer look at.

Had the *cold blue flame* of the skull he had



imagined reading *Seer In The Half Light* been the same thing? (Was that the very *half light*, in which they *saw*?) Had it now encompassed his entire world? Did it have anything useful to say to him?

He rolled over into his pillow and tried to imagine it. It flaked into birds as the sky whitened. *No. You're on your own.*

What defined a life more: the rarest experiences or the most common ones? Say a normie goes to work and talks to the same people on break every day but hangs out with his closest friends once a month. Or say they look at some newspaper pinup every day, but only have sex a couple of times a year, at a Sowing Season Mixer or with an out-of-town partner — those people are still more important to them right? And these are normies, with more access to any of these things. Also, your birth and your death only happen once. It has to be the rarest.

But any time you do something new, or uncommon, you have to be simultaneously drawing from your whole world of experience. And that world of experience will be made up of those common things, no matter how unimportant you are. He could only talk to



Gallvren for so long at a time, for instance, because he was using the same experience from talking online. So an uncommon relationship that evoked the currents of desire, no matter how different, could not help but evoke the things he looked at every day.

It was obvious enough how they mapped to the last time this had happened, right? Gallvren was the one who, maybe, potentially wanted to be his friend. Which meant Marzanna was the one he should pursue although those fantasies had dropped off precipitously after he started seeing Gallvren.

But that was the mistake he had made last time. He had tried to pick two boxes instead of one. (*Watch Death Box again. Watch it for clues.* He kept starting and then arguing with himself too much to pay attention.)

It was different this time. He could be systematic now.

He had long since gotten the hang of, the requisite coldness for, comparing girls—fictional ones, at least. Scrolling through pages of cels and panels





and fanart, absorbing and averaging every angle and artist's vision, filling in the on-model schemata in with his favourite interpretations of curves and creases until he could practically vibe out the size of their pores. Decompose the voice actors' timbre to the yips they might let out when he gnawed on their respective necks.

Gallvren

PROS:

- 1) collarbone drove him crazy
- 2) he could feel the milkweed edge of her hair along any part of his body as he writhed in the blanket
- 3) He had been reading or at least reading up on every text she mentioned, not even to talk about them but to imagine how she would talk about them.
 - 3.1) Was this good? Did he enjoy it? The key was not to wonder too hard what she would actually say, for instance, if she liked or disliked something, because then he could end up at her liking or disliking him. Just let it run like a crack doujin. Although that way certain answers felt more or less plausible as if by gravity, the way they usually did for a familiar character. Talking to her as a mental 'character', who he knew, felt more secure



than talking to her as a mental 'person', who he didn't know, who automatically bifurcated into Good and Bad Ends.

CONS

3.1) Talking with her as a mental 'character' felt good but left a sort of mental ache, something missing, and also made it harder to interact with other 'characters'.

3.2) Talking with her as a mental 'person' led to 'Bad Ends' and either violent or sexual (or both) intrusive thoughts.

3.21) In those thoughts he was more often the aggressor, even when she humiliated him, which was worse than the opposite (with Marzanna, who he couldn't possibly hurt, who could hurt him in endless and fascinating ways).

3.22) If he tried to treat the conversation as real, to visualize anything about it besides the chain of text, the Bad end became more likely. If she was a person in the outside world, a person with collarbones and soft hair and thin pale skin and delicate skull – a sprawling knot of organs – *Have you heard of an eroguro art series called 'Extension'? It's basically just an anatomy*





diagram – a body's internal organs extended as far from each other in every direction as possible, like a long line along the intestine with things branching off from it, muscles unrolled in flat sheets around bone, circulatory system spreading out like a slime mold. You can get it in one giant file or like 60 pages, you look at any one page and can't tell what you're looking at. It won a conceptual art prize, but the author was an assistant on here he could say something about how it was like a physical version of superflat writing, how the Heroes' Love Experimental Vanguard (he had been reading back through their archive, searching for anything that could compare to the extremities in his favourites) had adopted this style from upper-mainstream novelists like Velkon Kashel, transcribing an unbroken internal monologue over hours or days or drily itemizing the hundreds of elements in a character's field of perception over one long paragraph as impenetrable as his floor. He could sometimes loop a conversation back this way.

3.23) Refusing to indulge those thoughts made them come back worse.

3.24) Indulging them on purpose, on the other hand, didn't feel... like letting something natural happen.



It wasn't pleasant. Details would dissolve into the air, and the air would weigh down on him. It felt like forcing something down, like when he tried to convince himself he loved a flavour of the month seasonal anime.

MARZANNA

PROS

1) more powerful gaze than Gallyren. more desire to prove himself, to impress.

1.1) (Was she Gwaëlle or Ylian? She was the one who had approached him, who had taken initiative, who had shown interest in him outside of someone else's bounded social experiment. That alone meant he should learn from experience to pursue her, which seemed much less intuitive – he didn't know a thing about her outside her job and the fact that she could ruin his life on Punkin Patch or in the newspaper. So on top of the sympathy of Gwaëlle, the erotic appeal of Ylian, of being judged and hated, though it had never accreted to her body the same way, she looked incapable of it. But she was, and if he was thinking about Extension, being reduced to diagram, wasn't that what he wanted after all? Maybe he didn't even have to make her like him, just make her hate him enough, which meant he could do all the things he already knew how to do...



2) I feel less bad about her because I know she cannot be threatened by me in any way, a fact which alone should make her the correct choice.

3) She doesn't just understand weird online fiction scenes and fetishes; she understands the feeling that something is *wrong*.

CONS

1) Bored, possibly because I feel less bad about her.

2) She *understands* weird online scenes and fetishes, doesn't like them.

3) This only makes it hotter in your head.

...deadlocked, again.

He had done this every night for almost 13 nights now.

In the old days he could have managed hundreds. Now, he could barely manage a couple dozen. He might actually die.

He would have to do something stupid to force himself to move.



The Seer in the Half Light. I understand them.

She had been expecting no answer, and instead she was overwhelmed by answers.

Answers overwhelmed even her sense of why she was doing what she was doing.

As in, it didn't bother her that she didn't know why any more.

Spoiled.

How spoiled could someone be.

To refuse someone you promised to care for over mere infinity?

The Seer in the Half Light. I don't understand them.

How could they - how could they make that decision, and then not see the error of that decision, and then turn away from the Goddess and all civilization in doubling down on it?

Something was trembling - her brain? Her heart? Her rhi?

She started a Recording Circulation and pulled





out the waveform reader she had requisitioned after Voidhanger.

She had come to the right place as she had suspected. The best possible place. She stood up, scanning the living room for objects, barking “stay here” at her interview subject who had stopped mid-sentence as she looked back up the stairs.

Homing spells were an old art, one of the oldest of magical spycraft. Used by hunters in the time of Elthazan, shepherds finding runaway sheep, hedge witches cursing runaway lovers.

One of the most subjective still practiced - the most like magic in a folktale.

Theoretically, a spell could home or target an individual as long as you could define, in words that excluded any other possible target, something absolutely unique to them. This was harder than you thought. Anything you thought was unique to someone almost certainly wasn't.

That was why spells that required a piece of someone's body - a lock of hair, or a fingernail, or a drop

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of blood or semen - were so common in stories. But many of those didn't work, or were alleged to have worked in the hands of skilled improvisational magicians no one could replicate - it's harder than it sounds, for instance, to define something relative to a whole it was once a part of.

Detectives in the early days of standardized magic always used fingerprints. Nowadays, police and Inquisitors favoured DNA. Schools, universities, hospitals all collected it and shared it with the local and central databases according to the treaties; it was the most common way you caught Shapeshifters, too. As soon as she'd had the name Lacriz Aeeth she'd called her superiors - a Colonel-Inquisitor whose name she didn't remember picked up the line - and asked them to home in on it; no results, which was unsurprising if they'd been involved with the Black Mushroom Initiates. One of the known and sought-after effects of the Black Mushroom was horizontal gene transfer; the plastids randomly generated in the genetic potpourri of its spores, released when the cell walls broke down in digestion, made the DNA of anyone who partook regularly illegible.

Homing by Rhi signature had been the dream



for millennia. The only problem was that individuals' rhi changed too much - "individual rhi signatures" didn't exist, though dogma and the standard model said they were supposed to. Supposed to exist, but not necessarily be computable. Like love, individuals were too important for their rhi to be identified as a simple function. Rhi was the Resonance-in-Order; it was produced by everything which had an irreducible existence, a unique structure which could be defined self-reflexively apart from any other possible structure, produced rhi by vibrating that structure through the dimensional manifold. Humans, as individuals, produced rhi; therefore, humans, as individuals, were irreducible - and the unique dimensional structure that produced their rhi, incalculable. Or something within them was - the exact ontology was debated. DNA dictated a blueprint, but two instances of the same blueprint could produce different results. The rhi of an individual was both blueprint and outcome, could only be determined both backwards and forwards in time.

The "rhi patterns" that could be known and studied in magic, even used as substrates, were not the dimensional manifolds that produced and resonated rhi but consistencies across it, structured sets of infinities

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- like “humans-in-general”, or a particular circulation within a body. Even “narrative homing”, therefore, the use of rhi to target a particular individual, did not rely on an individual’s unique rhi, and that was why it worked. A rhi-pattern that inexorably marked one individual could be consistently produced by another, by second-order reference to their relationship itself as a pattern within the first.

It had that same “why hadn’t I thought of that” quality by which, Braz had read, scientists often identified breakthrough discoveries. And for that reason, despite what the Black Mushroom Initiate had said, she believed she could reproduce the Seer In The Half Light’s magic.

(The Black Mushroom Initiate, maybe even the Seer In The Half Light, had only seen what she had been demoted to. They would have no way of knowing what Rraihha Braz knew she couldn’t remember having been.)

She came back down the stairs carrying a book that had been more dog-eared than the others on Seullgyo’s shelf - *The Fact of Decay and the Heresy of Neoteny*; on top of it, a slim copy of *Elphantom’s Cry at the End of the Night*; a black iron sword brooch that





was apparently a birthday gift from the target; a stack of printed-out emails about missed classes and bills for lost books, annotated in red sharpie; a paper graded by Selbstember in mechanical pencil; a mini-CD of ASMR affirmations by a popular voice actor; the Tarot card “The Sea”, worn with cigarette ash and fingerprints. From the kitchen she added a mostly empty dropper of cannabis extract labelled I. S. - from the living room a pillow that appeared in a photograph of the two as middle schoolers, playing dead on the couch. “What are you... going to do with all that? Do you need any help? Please, don’t take it for long, the room’s stayed -” She was adept at carrying this many items of interest balanced together, even if she’d forgotten an evidence bag. “It’ll be back in the morning, and in the exact same place, and you can pretend I was a dream.”

It didn’t help that, on top of everything else, the assignment Marzanna had been selected for was so top secret that she couldn’t talk about it to her ordinary Confessor.

She had been given, along with her first briefing, a Portable Tabernacle - a peaked wooden cabinet about a foot high, framed by ridged and voluted

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arches like the booths and arcades inside a cathedral, the cloth and grille of microphone and speaker filling in each arch. Press down on serpent-egg finial, and it would start recording, or stop. A few buttons hidden in the tracery could save, toggle back and forward through saved recordings, and playback. But the booth was not private; the recordings were transmitted to an accredited Confessor, somewhere. At some point, probably a psychologist.

The mics could pick you up even if you whispered. It was a better place for her doubts than scrapped and deleted files. But she'd open her mouth, and try to form the words she had just been able to type, and delete, and get nothing. Wait until she had to start over and pull her head together from space again. (*What if he's some kind of psychohazard, what if he's contagious.*) She slammed the finial, and tried again. And within thirty, then ten, then three seconds she knew she wasn't getting anywhere. And would have to start again. Slam. Slam. Slam.

The door was loose, not open enough to let light in or be seen unintended, but enough to open at a gentle push, with the tips of fingers. It was after midnight,





the window sucked light, the amber streetlight angled through its corner seemed as present in the room as the lamp and the screen on Marzanna's table. Gallvren was in her nightclothes - a long robin's egg blue dress ending in lace halfway down her shins, with matching pants descending not much further. Her shoulders, her collarbone, the hint of gap between her ribs, these were things only Marzanna got to see. She had appreciated the miraculous injustice of this when she first saw them two and a half years ago, and resolved not to push her luck.

Marzanna was still wearing everything she had been wearing during the day, although that included PJ pants, a newspaper-collage T-shirt covered in joke headlines from her graduating class, and the top half of a sparring *gi*. She swivelled in her chair, bangs draining into her baggy eyes, and greeted her roommate with a half-smile.

"Everything OK?"

"Oh god," she looked up, eyes at least dry because they always were, "you could hear me?"

"Well I wondered why you were up first. I thought you were like, typing loud? Because that's me



sometimes and I wonder if you can hear when I crash out and tear up pages. Were you working on... the thing about me and that guy? If you're struggling, I could like, read it. I'm really... *curious*."

"I'm... I'm starting to rethink that whole thing, actually."

"All the more reason. I mean, if we're friends enough. I won't ask for credit. I never really wanted to push to read any of your stuff, because Goddess forbid you want to read *mine*. But now, I mean, you've already read some of mine for this haven't you?..."

Marzanna's sigh extended into a moan, of pain and relief simultaneously, like an animal that didn't distinguish the Currents it had to let out into the air as a howl.

"You. I'm rethinking including you in it. It's weird stuff I research, and I shouldn't just assume you'd be interested, let alone enough to be worth dealing with someone that unsettling. I feel bad for like, associating your kind of fandom and his."

"I don't find him that unsettling. I'm getting





the hang of him. There was a really learning disabled person who used to come in the shop until last fall and always wanted to follow me around showing me Lacrosse cards...”

“You don’t know what I know about him. I’m almost afraid he might be dangerous.”

“Then shouldn’t you talk to Civic Services or the Ecclesia? Plus you’re always there ready to flip out with some crazy Miwa techniques.” She beamed through meshed lashes.

“They know about him. I don’t know, maybe I’m being crazy. You’ve never... really looked between the cracks like I have.”

Her voice stiffened. “What makes you think I haven’t?”

“Priors. The vast majority of other people haven’t. Even in my job.”

“But maybe it is kinda fucked up if... this guy thinks you’re trying to save him, for reasons he doesn’t really believe or understand. And neither do I but - If



you didn't really believe in that, if you're just using him for the story? Almost like that site, what's it called - Punkin Patch."

Did she know. "I - I don't -"

"See, I've heard of Punkin Patch because it fucks with HL authors all the time, that isn't some elite journo secret. What, does *he* use it? Is that what freaked you out so much?" She laughed - brightly. Genuinely. Like someone who could still love her, if she moved fast.

What did that mean to her? Were her feelings just as shallow as Luskonneg's in high school, or for that matter now? No, the difference was, she knew it didn't matter, she would seize her chance no matter the cost and then the circumstances that made this a question would *change*, she would orient herself not towards a vague yearning but a specific person, and not toward a vague tonal cluster of the kind of writing she wanted to make her famous, but the important position of a quiet life, customized by Dr. Iolaw Mark'eg for her unique psychology.

"No, I... guess I feel like that too. I saw this guy online who just seemed like a funny profile of a





Silmenon-style *otaku*, and... didn't realize how deep his issues went. But I got into this partly because I wanted to talk to you about, and write about, the secret embarrassing things you were into. I found someone who'd be... more embarrassing, make it easier for you to open up next to. And that sounds more fucked up the more I think about literally any of the ways I went about it, and I'm really sorry."

Gallvren furrowed her brow and sat down on the side of Marzanna's bed.

"That's. That's really cute. A little scary-cute. You know, I've been preparing for what happens when a guy like him confesses something crazy like that to me because he's obviously going to. I didn't expect it from you."

Marzanna hung her head in her hands, like the hull of some ancient ruined ship.

"I also don't want that to happen. Not for *me*, I'm not worried, like, I don't want to have inflicted that on you. Let's just abort this stupid operation."

"Do all Yn Dahh't journalists talk like secret



agents all the time or is it just you?"

She cramped her diaphragm laughing and rolled off her chair onto the bed, and couldn't even explain why.

"If I tell you... I'll have to... oh sorry, I can't do it. I can't be that corny."

"That's a kind of stiffness, that isn't necessarily good for you, you know?"

Gallvren reached out, towering above her like a grainy dream of a mother silhouetted in the door-light. Thank the Goddess, she wasn't going to have to do it on purpose, it was just going to happen on its own, and she could believe she was doing the right thing...

"You... you read the greentext background I sent you, right?"

"Yes. I can't believe he types all that out like that. But like, that story was bizarre – the last one, I mean. That sounds like a straight up hardcore bullying case, right under the nose of the Public Morals Committee. Were they like, in on it? I've heard of schools like that, where student-teacher communication is bad





and Public Morals becomes like a kind of mafia..."

"I was curious too. So I tracked down and talked to Gwaëlle Finsteryon."

"This is a *ton* of research to do for some random guy."

"It's not really that hard, if you just reach out." It had been. Gwaëlle Finsteryon now lived in research housing so far afield in the mountains out of town you had to take an electric carriage, and almost missed the narrow tunnel between the trees in the dark. She didn't answer calls, and only agreed to meet when Marzanna admitted the depth of her confusion in a self-immolating note.

Gallvren leaned in, propping her chin up on her hands and her elbows on her knees, faintly fluttering her eyelashes for a story. Marzanna instead pulled up a recording on her phone.

"So he basically only talked to me, and usually about things that had nothing to do with what anyone else was talking about. I'd try to lead him into the regular conversation but he'd just drift off. It was unpleasant, and I could tell it was unpleasant for them. But I kept trying to tell them to be



nice to him, tell myself it was OK. For like a month, he'd spend all his time at the club making these pieces no one could tell what they were. Whenever he got frustrated with them – and this was fairly often, he had this scary thing where he'd hover a needle over his eye, and I'd have to pull his wrist away, but I think now he was just doing it to get me to hold his wrist. But he'd never let any of us give advice or even ask what it was. Eventually Atràpy cornered him in a hallway – I think he was more willing to talk if it meant he was finally getting to talk to someone properly outside the club. And he told her they were bikinis for us. Which none of us would have been able to knit easily with our experience either, but that's neither here nor there. The thing is, one, that the knit was really loose, he wasn't good at getting it tight, the things he made, were more like these little cat's cradles. I mean, they were cool. None of the Knitting Club ever got that they were cool, but I couldn't really explain it, or help him, because I wasn't supposed to – Sorry. But like, the problem is if someone wore them, you would have like, seen their nipples through them. I told them it wasn't on purpose, when she came to me, he literally wouldn't get the difference. But then she mentioned she had looked up one of the shows he mentioned the other time. And there was literally a poster with a bunch of girls – they're in Klauxion, where girls sometimes dress like that, but like, adult girls – and the girls on the poster are not like, adult girls – her



mom even walked in and saw it on her computer and got mad at her so she was mad at me. They were doing one of their interventions, basically, which is what I had them around to do. They wanted me to talk to him. When he invited me to that thing, that's what I was gonna do. But they must have assumed I meant – not something that looks like a date, like me getting deeper. They thought I was betraying them! The thing is they were like – right. I did humiliate them, I dragged them into this thing that was my problem to deal with if anyone's. I couldn't see why it was worse than like, Eskrahan. But it was. It was more things, but smaller, but the smaller made it harder to correct, but..."

"I shouldn't be... listening to this." Gallvren reached out over Marzanna's thumb to turn the recording off herself. "You realize that, right?"

She let herself fall forward into Gallvren's arms. Her real feeling, her real need, and also the only way she could salvage herself, lean into the tone of crisis: "I don't think he even omitted this on *purpose*, get it? I don't think he even remembers..."

Braz's guest room was in an old lighthouse.



Squat blue metal, barely a garage's height about ground, rounded, the riveted cuteness of rural Silmenon infrastructure. It was the highest-priority guest-room in town; the highest-priority guest it usually received was a local fishing champion, a magistrate on a feedback visit. The room was small, but its circular format naturally fit the ritual she was about to perform. Her sleeping bag was crumpled against the wall.

She stood (slightly hunched under the low ceiling) in the phosphorescent lines of the eight-pointed star she had drawn in standard self-erasing chalk between the eight objects she had brought home. that would liquefy and dissolve in under an hour. Which didn't give her a lot of time to mess around or get anything wrong. She had her whole handbag of documents, the only other possession she was now carrying, in hand's reach but outside the central intersection of the star. This, at least, would make selection straightforward. Not too much choice or interpretation: few items, all leading in intuitive ways to a next step in the investigation.

After that, there would be no way to know if she was being led on a wild goose chase by an incorrect





reconstruction of an impossible or made up spell until she hit some obvious lead, or didn't. Like those Skeptics' Theatre performances that make the audience try to determine if some rare or novel magic took place.

Moonlight glowed through blue scale-ripples on the underside of clouds outside the window. Faint mist condensing to rain.

She kneeled down, unzipped the handbag, and lifted the first document into the centre with her. As she did, she began to sing.

She had painted a calligraphy wave based on the rhi she had recorded that afternoon on a talisman, which now fluttered between the fingers with which she drew the paper. She had then transposed it through an International Inquisition notation grid into a melody, which she now sang.

The objects surrounding her joined, faintly, in the song.

Meandering like a wolf's howl.

They wouldn't be quiet for any of it - all the



documents pertained to the Seer In The Half Light, and had been provided to her. That made for a baseline hum of relevance. What was supposed to increase its volume, its clarity, its *keenings* was “potential novel information”, a hell of an abstract theoretical concept to have had to define in spellcode. Luckily her memory wipe hadn’t hit the special training module she’d taken on magical information theory.

University grades and reports, hospital documentation. The fluctuations were mild, the melody from the objects sounding almost like it was fading in and out on a radio.

Frustrated, she let her fingers rummage deeper, as if she could guess something more relevant by feel and encountered something so rolled and bent and folded up she hadn’t even remembered it was there. She pulled out the charcoal drawing of a man’s face.

It had been gathering lint in the pocket of her coat and she hadn’t recognized it at all, but thought it might be some associate or suspect to keep an eye out for. Framed by matted hair, draining into a swamp of beard-moss. It couldn’t have been Seullgyo — the features were Northern nomadic — but its eyes reminded her of how she





realized she'd been picturing his: hooded and bagged, watery yet beady, miserable yet sinister. Arrogant despair.

The Elphantom book fell over in its position on the circle.

She knelt down to pick it up. She spotted the capital letters in the middle of the largest paragraph on the page it had fallen open to before. Spiral March. A famous rock formation in the Dark Marches, a storied lookout turned tourist spot. Also, a franchise of inns in other cities named after, and managed by branches of the founding family of the inn at the lookout. There was one just under the cliff in Winter City.



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Name: Tacimarsa

Birthday: March 11th

Sex: Female

Occupation: Consultant, Savannah staff

Blood Type: B

Likes: History, mathematics, superiors with the stomach to rein her in, simple starchmeal, exotic jewelry, watching things change in real time

Dislikes: Poetry, travel, weather, pleasantries, industrial sectors and the people who occupy them, capitals, resorts, and other centers of power, meal.

Seen with: Not often seen.

Surprisingly few syllables for a Triaction of her stature. Hails from much more cosmopolitan areas of the world, and yet has chosen to make her living and projects in the most corporate-core spaces she could gain access to. Mixed-species, Lunic and changeling, but has little interest in either home culture and still thinks of herself as being from the mass, undifferentiated orbitals. Has had a very eventful and impact-



ful life but little of it has been written down. A bad omen, an angel investor, a quiet and grave woman with a childlike curious push to the direction of her eyes. The member of staff perhaps most involved with the Weylbloom project, but seems to have no strong feelings on its outcome for better or worse.

Something of a drifter, with a resume filled with ambitious but unrelated projects; a revolutionary idealist allergic to connection. No social instinct outside of life debt. Born to be a herald of some established hegemonic organization, secret or not, but never had the chance to sign on with a grand conspiracy, only petty ones. A parasite? A representative, after all? A lone, crazed ideologue? A mere member of a small, likeminded circle? Whichever it is, she has been a great asset to Savannah staff, responsible for many of its crucial funding connections and the success of its sponsorship agreements with Hightower and Triactis. Without her, the habitat's most recent history would have run much more slow and sparse.



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

in the wake of a warning and greeting from the See to Savannah, Emelry confronts Kuryo about Coteschino-leon's plans for the habitat and its fledgling species



CW: death threat, criminal justice, alcohol, death

Record XI

of the last days' events on the scenic return from Quarry

Ugly, still, to say "she". She was not the single designated leader, nor a councilmember of a ruling coalition, but rather one of many courtiers of the inner chamber that milled about, exchanging oversight roles in the warehouse complexes. At the height of the settlement was built a hangar-lodge of tall fragrant pine trunk logs, and among all the comings and goings of porters and accountants was Minak's mother.

RECORD XI



Minarets rose from up on Cliff Hill, watchtower platforms heavy with pulley-belts overseeing the industry of the town. Not so different from the markets of Quay, or the assemblies of Quarry in its attitude of bustling and boiling business. Focused like an orchestra with an ultimatum, whose every next move is known and urgent to each of its members. Things were, here and there and there, on the move.

It was trite to look at a tengmunin settlement and decide its distinguishing feature from human towns like Fisher Valley was scale, but it was true that these were a smaller people, with half the strength and twice the dexterity of even my own kind. Every motion accounted for this scale, but some things did not shrink. Carts and sledges, construction equipment, large public works could not diminish in size and rather demanded a different sort of cooperation.

I watched that packed-earth plaza of commerce as we passed through it, loud with the straining of rope and chain, back and forth, swoop of glider craft, everywhere the incredible coordination of wings in motions. Like the air dances that enchanted Quay, they operated on what may have been an ability as instinctual as the human sense





of balance: flocking, to flank and relay. Wherever work was done it was done in twos at minimum, and fluidly as synchronized hands. Labor on Savannah must be vast, and what a wall it was in the way of city-building! Tireless and high-detail was the cooperative work required for tasks that a single human could accomplish, and hoists and hooks necessary for moving what a human could lift unaided. An engineered freedom and weakness, and the freedom stolen by the unbroken skyland arc.

This level of need, for scale of manipulation, was ultimately why the janitor agreement was made from our side. The awe of it had been stripped, all the Hightower pomp and power they represented as an arm of control, those machines of cutting and pasting through habitats on their long maintenance patrol.

Should those spidery constructs spread across the interior, around the arc of land that spread over us in so many directions, it would be for their base mechanics. Too many locations, in the current fervor of construction and entrenchment that seemingly every settlement was engaged in to some degree, required that aid. In a political negotiation between two habitats, where janitor access was in dispute, standard haruspex allocation guidelines treated



them as a currency resource to divvy up, units correlating to material control of a settlement - the janitor count of a given faction was peacetime's answer to the statistics of standing armies. But such a valuation of the janitor would be a scar and a sap here, and even Rain could not help but agree. He knew in his heart that the gift was necessary, and necessary that it was unconditional, for the real question was no longer borderkeeping but proliferation of the ability to affect the environment. If Quarry provided plenty of these machines, and they made to increase the potential of Savannah's people to human-equivalent, who could complain of a monopoly? Quarry's factories would churn, and the institution of the janitor would be filamented into new uses, everyday duties and high ambition alike.

"You will leave the thing with us and continue unaided," she snapped, sharp beak turned down.

I spread my hands. "That I cannot do, Scribier Meliflor. It is the only one under our heading, and is necessary for the long way to my king's city. To make Quay apace, it is how we must travel. We come, Scribier, as visitors rather than guests. I will make my requests, but our engagement is the king's outing."

"My son is with you?"



"Minak of Quay is my companion."

"You go tell that stingy Kali, high traveller, that we treat for updrafts too. Old and rickety here! Time and time was promised for repairs, and now you beg for more and give no gifts while here, while faces by faces can treat." She mumbled a stream of song, and anxiously preened a wing-tip.

"As I've said, we are a small party. Here is the heading: we return from Quarry, and behind us another glider is set to launch. Three days, and a janitor Quarrymarked to survey the need. Updrafts aboard. We ask no business done here. But when the glider passes, updrafts will fall for you. Do your business then; I let you know the schedule, and only to remember that this is the first wave of many."

"Six days' proof then."

I was, alike to Kali's well-founded prejudices, beginning to develop an aversion to the claims at sex. What was the object? Linguistic accuracy? Refusing the designations of blue and roan in favor of something more familiar to the disdained and emulated humanity? Something sour like a high-strung mother is when too precious about her role too eager to put on a show of long-suffering virtue. Two

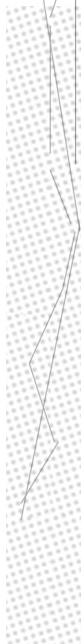


or three generations ago, Minak had told me, Cliff Hill had been swarmed by a mimicry of human clothes and cosmetics. Now there was a development into something more local, but still human-fixated.

She was who they sent. A tawny, slim roan with tense eyes - highly attentive. Rickety, rough-feathered. Ten, at least.

"Yes," I said. "Six days' trust, too. We must leave with rope. I cannot make the exchange you ask, and I must ask for the supplies. We need several coils yet. The Quarriers are very particular about ropework and wards, it is their one true superstition, and what have we at Quay? Not enough for their next landing. Most of your current production of holy rope will go to them, when they arrive, but I ask again: seven coils, so we can prepare their arrival for them, and complete that long handshake reaching from their city to mine, and touching yours on the way. Do you see that you are of the circuit likewise?"

"In what! Commerce without commerce? 'La!' you say 'is not the greatest gift the one ungiven?' and thus dodge and stake. We'll listen. We'll give and take. And oh, we'll remember what happens next! Shy flight, like my unwilling child, unwilling to stride the pride of his childhood. Next, next, you say, and when will there be time?"





"The era is turning. The current will continue. Quay asks you to adapt. You can jostle and divert, and try to stand tall, and win that way, but nothing will slow down from here."

It wouldn't. This little town, once a mere contemplative retreat, was now among the largest settlements of the Third. This meant a small fraction of Quarry's stature, and perhaps a neighborhood among Quay's many, but still an impressive and singular stop. A ropetown ascended to a real production hub, struggling to find its feet, but on a path perfectly positioned to intersect with the political volcano to come. These footholds were the most important; the map was being drawn. Ynewy's terrible sentimentality depended on places like this - the textiles that he had decided were a staple to his wards and hopes - and Cliff Hill likewise depended on Quay

Quay, likewise, depended on the Quarry allegiance. And all depended on the hearing, and the Sun.

"Yes. You know it. You hear my rush, no? I want all of this to be done already. Yes, to stand tall, and not half-sworn. You will get your price, and we will wait for ours. But you will return. If I do not see you, you Sainshand, here, then I know you dodge. Return the circuit and I will sign."



Nymphs flitted over the flagstones of the paved roads used only for carts between buildings, chittering in simple song and being answered by adults who considered themselves male and female. Was this practice, this integration of life stages, merely mimicry? Or parcel to the same spirituality that weaves here cordage dyed in graveyard water - the same immersion in death that the great cities revered.

"You left me out to dry."

"I gave you trust and responsibility. Crier."

My face twisted and I looked away, hiding my near-laugh. "Kali! How am I meant to deal?" I told em of the agreement I had come to with Meliflor, "and what would you do if I had made some impossible promise? Almost impossible, this one. Next time Cliff does business with Quay, she demanded me as a representative. What could I say, without you?"

"But your decision was aright. I said, 'Emelry Emelry, I grant license to speak on behalf', and so you did. Better for me aloof, and Minak away - the trouble of it dictates. A small stop, to say that. And so we work with your plan."





"You cannot assign this kind of speech however you like. You must not give that authority on whims, teacher."

"Whim ka, no delegate? Who have I given it to you? Some stranger or attendant. No, to you, and as I mean. And now the errand is over and you achieved my goal of it, only to come crying and crying of your success! All secure!"

"Fine." I walked my litter up the janitor's gangway, and pushed the last burlap bag off into the cargo hold. I gave up; Rain's poor hollow bones would have to handle the last scraps he had left out. "I know my real complaint: that Meliflor is so like Bettany. So cajolable. I dislike that type, who puts emotion into a project, who blinds themselves. Unworkable talent!"

"Alas, alas, true impetus of our affair, now! Escape from a trite boss to a brave one."

"I do need a leader. I thrive there, at best, but at worst cannot abide it and must seize reins myself, and then be rash. You know that my judgement is quick and urgent, is it so much to ask for the channeling that I know I need? I flow well when allowed to — but authority like Bettany's, or like this one's, stifles me and busies me with turbulence.



And you are the opposite - reinforcing my reckless foundations.”

“You think of yourself always a subject?”

“No, it is... let me explain. Here do we have time?”

The janitor was all packed. Soon Harka and Rain would return from washing out the glue valves by the river, and we would be off. Our little encampment under the hill was done and vanished, and Minak would be back shortly from where e was ranging in a meditative little goodbye through the outskirts of eir youth. This stop had seen em quiet.

“Do you know I once strongly admired her? Up Academy, and early, before we knew we would crew together, and before even our courses intersected. She was a faculty favorite. Easy to be aware of. She hailed from the dust zones, have we talked of this? The most distant and diverged of the Ilians, insular regions with a totally different way of life than the mining complexes or the wheel stations; few came out of them into wider society, much less its higher echelons. But she was so cheerful, so urbane and serious. A hometown idol, a scholarship success story, engaged in that most esteemed and miserable project of trying to digest the other crew roles even outside of your own.





“But that was all conjecture, all hypothesizing on what she could eventually grow into. It wasn’t about her, and I scoffed jealously at the attention paid to her for it. What really drew me in was the cohesive purity of her ethics. In practical debate—which is most of the exposure the different courses have to each other in the initial years of study—she was relatively strong on dissident proofs, but absolutely... blossomed, when asked to defend school or company policy. One begins to believe in her. It was not enough for her to expound textbook on core-virtuous topics, rather she spent long minutes attacking the simplistic and childish arguments common to her own very positions. First excoriating those voices and enumerating their flaws, she was able to swing.

“And on the journey, with this new proximity to her, all of that vanished. No clarity, and yet still she acted as if she were in Academy. Her theory, her society remained there, and week by week I found her practice more shakily founded. I tried to hold her to a certain standard—what she was capable of—but she pouted at it. I tried to connect as professional rather than classmates, and she looked at me like I was a stranger. And once the arguments began, it was always *offense* with her, never *solution*...”



"Picky," Kali said. Again I laughed, to the threshold of tears.

Was I naive for thinking that that world would disappear? That after our training we would emerge, as if reborn, into true haruspices from the start? Maybe only idealistic, thinking that it would be a calling rather than a career - a life rather than a lifestyle. People made such noise about my family, which always to me had seemed humble and straightforward as if I was some scion of a clan-project, when it was only a matter of growing up in a larger house. I hated it. Hated the ways in which it was true. Hated how Bettany looked at me as a conspirator, a friend, and a fellow young bright thing. "Let us be peers!" I remember thinking, at hearing her gossip and scoff, "stop playing and enjoying, take this grindstone!"

And so I had fled to the interior, and forced her into that peerage at last.

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Off. Kali again nestled at my side as my litter swayed. Down the slope from the village, little attention fell upon our encampment, what little was required to be unloaded from the janitor - Kali's red and white awnings marked us





clearly, and blocked sight from above, and so prying eyes would have to come to eye level to peer in on us. None attempted, likely warned away by Meliflor and her fellow talliers straying not too far from town while outsiders were afoot. We were on the tack of the road easily, but made it only six sights before stopping.

We aimed, per Rain's course, to take a game trail through the riverside ramble for some miles before coming to where the creek-thick woods met the drier cattail plains. The janitor was fully recharged from a spinelink and could walk for some time, and it was ideal to make a ways away from Cliff Hill for politeness' sake before taking off, due to the noise. But those few miles would be slow ones walking such a large vessel. We started slow and ended quickly, for a blue youth stood in our way.

A calm and poised thing perched aground in the center of the game trail, eir long and lithe body poised as the curves of a tall vase, or a singing frog. E raised eir beak in the air, glancing at us peripheral, and eir plume was not only an uncommon and fine teal shade of iridescent, but moreover made up in a pollen pomade that gave the effect of a healthful springtime sheen of gold. Clear-eyed, eir beak was carved lightly and purely decoratively, though it took



cues from the more functional styles of Quay. E waited in the path's clearing light, stretching tall to ensure e was seen as we passed. We were immediately outside the town.

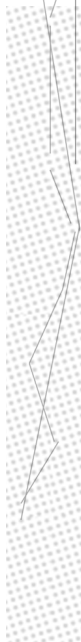
From the elevated detachment of the litter, perhaps I could have missed one little blue on the ground. Unmissable was the accompanying host.

Twenty birds perched in the trees' high branches and low shadows, watching and intent. Nearer the young blue, further along on the road and on the nearer branches, were attendants meant to be seen - valets and porters, evident attendants to a Thirder lord. But above, in the shadows, the greater numbers of our welcome party sat cold and quiet, and in no disguise, fidgeting in the upper branches, and in more practical attire than the others' bright fabrics..

Harka grumbled. "We go, then."

"What is this?" Rain was demanding of em, who quieted him. "We go, and goes along Rain Flower. No question about it, now. Smooth, steady."

Rain and I fell quiet.





"Named, as, along," the blue trilled, and sang clear-water-joy-green-left-fang-low-water. "I am walking, long way up north. Oh, how alone I am, in need of help and aid! Oh, the mountains, my ruined home! Poor as I am on this road, how many riches wait on the doorstep I long for!"

Harka spoke without hesitation; "Beggar! All our resource and power is yours, forever and for your journey. What customs you have, we will keep faith of them with you, except for one of our party who cannot. Who are you to ask such favor, though it is granted?"

"You have faced me with candor and leading fangs. I am only a stranded few. I am a small creature of means. I am utter red; you know this," the blue said, neck curled and one eye fixed on Harka, whose backfeathers were still ardently raised.

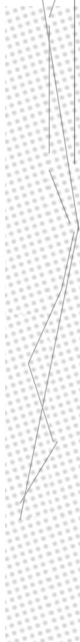
Like the scent that rushes over the plains both before and after a lightning strike, the air was sour and still. With only a few more words, we were led away, leaving the janitor entirely on the side of the road. We followed these new acquaintances, all of us alike in silence, with our birds in a straight-gazed surety. Rain and myself were trapped in a tense bemusement. With the lone blue walking the poorly kept road, and our party following alitter, we were flanked



from above by the rustling onlookers who ominously neglected to be anything *but* onlookers. And through the thickets, when the rocky banks met the river, waited for us a ship made of silk.

It was plain that the vessel was too delicate - bamboo and woven core - to hold a heavy litter. Rain looked on in worry, bordering on theatrical horror, as I disembarked and he rushed over to support me. He might as well have carried me. Kali, still aboard, told the blue as e climbed into the silken boat, "This walking machine, I am giving it instructions to return to the larger vessel, its fellow in construction. It will stow the provisions we have not changed house of. Thus, our party is short a member." The blue assented, but Kali in fact had given it instructions to follow our own location marker, and pick through the riverbanks after us as we sailed, unseen but steadily coming behind us. The glowering birds from the trees' heights alighted on the boat at the same elevation, quickly finding places in the sails' rigging and preparing to set off, but even as they worked their eyes remained on us.

All was acceptable. We boarded; Rain helped me aboard as sat protectively besides me, and Kali cradled in my lap with eir royal shawl folded as a cushion between us; the





tassels draped down my legs. Two black-clad roans in the rigging began humming, in a soothing but non-melodic tune. The valets laid before each of us peeled tangerines on small plates of white wood, and candied nuts, and fine smoked meat in banana leaves. Kali and Harka accepted this food, which indeed was fine and sweet, as if it was distasteful and poor though they made no complaint in eating.

"Quite wrong," said the blue, now seated on a carpeted wooden dais at the ship's prow. E spoke idly, carelessly, soft-voiced as if thinking of other things. "Quite wrong, to treat a host so, to eat of their food in snaps."

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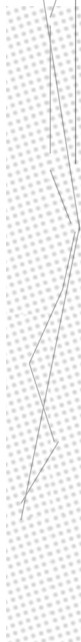
It was so warm here - why? It felt like today's spinelight was stronger than usual, but I remembered that at Quay the air was always cooler when on the water, and brisk! Here it was lazy and thick, and I welcomed the beautiful dyed-canvas parasols that the attendants stretched over where we sat. I was able to relax onto the ring of green cushions that centered the deck, under the shade's relief, but Rain was stiff and likewise Minak. Kali sunned emself on the boat's railing, Harka at eir back. I drank my sweet drink, a fruit I could not place, and was able to seem



l lounged out in the comfortable human-sized robes our hosts had given me. But I was out of my litter.

A servant with bleached feathers, brittle and a fine tangle, daintily pried loose another section of tangerine and offered it to Rain with well-practiced movements. Unhesitatingly he accepted, with a little hand gesture which was his approximation of the little wing waver etiquette standard in the riverboat cultures.

All along this section of the river, on the spinwise side (the same bank that housed the industrial plazas of Quay, miles and miles yet away) the land was dominated by the same crags and highlands as the village Cliff was built on. Dense red earth in tall hummocks, and cliffs of crumbling clay backed by solid granite. Heightening the questions this raised, along the river, little gulleys or oases - well, literally small quays - were either worn or carved into that rolling elevation. Each was so uniform. Each time, a "clearing" was connected by water to the main river artery; a channel wide enough to flow but narrow enough to never become turbulent would connect the river to a small shady pool, sheltered at least by the high walls of the banks, and often by overgrown trees, mangroves and bamboos. Yes, the spinelight must have been somehow harsher here, to ac-





centuate the shade of these pools. Their water was clear except for the duckweed that often found a nursery in those shady cells, periodically washed or trickled down the river like a green puff of dandelion seeds, bursting to colonize pools further downstream.

Built with the habitat, or by its people? No one seemed particularly interested in which it was. When I asked Haruka, he simply barked off the terms used for them in song (green-water-low-scent - not very inspiring) and returned to matters he felt more pressing. Rain likewise rambled about habitat construction in an amateur layman's excitement, clearly aware of some of the artistic principles of finished and long-inhabited habitats, but not their construction itself. He told me of their ecosystemic function of refugia, how light and elevation can make an idyll out of otherwise tiresome landscape, and how they both guided and followed the river, defining its flow.

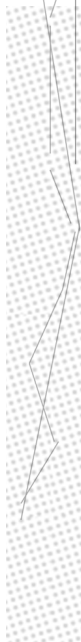
But when had they arisen? Were they laid down like so many stepping stones by Cote and the Master, according to grand design? Or had this been one long and low cliff face cut into by many birds over the years? I saw cause for both. If Rain was right about his theoretics, then the line the cliffs traced made sense, and the pools were likewise



sensible sinks for both erosion and biodiversity, counter-intuitively shoring up those banks with pressure-release and muddy silt deposits. But there were signs of a more recent intentionality; irregular channels that did not seem laid down but rather chiseled in, or curious formations in the exposed rock faces - carvings, geometric, which sometimes rhymed with the piled stones one saw in every fifth pool or so.

We had passed plenty of them by now. It seemed impossible how many there were, as if we were sailing in circles. The blues of the boat, employed equally as riggers and attendants, were always trying to distract us with spreads of their well-tended wings, the reflective topside, catching our eyes. No offense was given or taken despite the tension of the air pulled taut - they simply wanted to make sure I was paying attention, participating, not drifting off. But the pools kept catching my eye, because, when the boat slowed, they seemed the same color.

Where the pools lay still, and where their surface was empty, a sheen formed over them, made from the ruddy skyland colors combined with the dappled greens of the trees often making a roof for the waters. A gradient of deep muddy green, a white flash of spinelight transform-





ing across the surface, and the indistinct red-yellow rash of the habitat's arc. It was a beautiful combination. And every inch of the boat, from the hull touching the water, to the wrap of the rigging, to the floor and benches we sat on, was covered in a padded silk of exactly this gradient in color.

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Lapping splashes, and the small snappy thrum of the sails. The blue youth, the captain lord, had relaxed some. "You, you birds quarry," e said, "I am sure many tales of your home and candle city can be passed over these waters. I am so sure that of Quarry there are many terrors you dare not speak of."

"I dare all," Harka rejoined. During these few hours of sailing the broad river in silence of plans or courses, Harka was the one aboard who spoke most readily, "and with no shame badfixing my words. You have heard, 'the Quarry garden'."

"Of course, by the course."

"Then you know that on the River Tower grows a shaggy field vines, tended crops braided as humans braid hair.



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Many hanging vines, bundled growing. And on vinesfruits grow not from a flower, but from the leaf curling enclosing itself. They upfurl round, to catch the water, envelop it to bilious fruitflesh. Curled fruits, notlike, and a staple. And when eaten, are they digested?"

The blue lord only listened. E was intent now, absorbed in the tall tale. Harka continued: "No. The leaves reform in the body curled once the cold flesh is absorbed in beak. Now they curl blood like they do water, and are drawn like a power pump to the heart. Closed in leaf, the heart grows woody and sour, noblemost, and which grants best in sight. Cold and stony. Does this make a ghost or a goer?"

"Yes. Vampires, doubtless. Now I tremble to travel with you. You will leave my ship instantaneously," the blue said with no upset in eir voice, as neither em nor eir attendants made one move to modify course.

A small silence that Kali broke. "Because it is your personage," e ventured, and I could almost hear a human smile on eir face, a sly and confident one, "thus such fine and freely given accompt. We would regret to leave a treasure ship. We each see your enviable and esteemed lifesign in this vessel. We beg, allow us longer passage, to stay and accompany your mission. Where wind these sails?"





"On to the End," the blue said. Nervous. Eir eyes flashed to me, and e changed the subject. "All the way on, as you, girl creature. You've arrived by the end to end?"

Eir eyes were fixed on me, reflecting the long bar of the spine in a white reflection line. "I was born here," I said, "deep in the Third, in the dark rainstands. There." I pointed straight upwards. My finger aimed at a distant patch of dark misty greenery, and patiently corrected the blue's gaze to find it. "Two sisters and three mothers I had, eating sequoia fruit and hunting from where we picked it, spearing boars above. Only recently were we drawn from the redwoods, with my ally here."

Rain was frustrated. Begrudging, but at last catching on. Terse in the charade, he said, "I rescued her as a poor poor sad orphan and raised her myself. Taught her how to find yams and stuff. With the human nutrients." He ate a tangerine whole and checked out, an arm languid over the railing and watching the trees pass.

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The waters and the hollows flowed, and over the next hour or so the mood changed. Without any ceremony, a roan dropped from the rigging and barked song at the blue



lordling who had brought us aboard, who visibly deflated, ruffling and unruffling eir feathers, pacing. Soon there was movement up and down the masts, a flurry of indistinct chattering and cutting things loose. They angled the sail towards shore and one by one began taking off.

"Hey! Hey!" Rain was jumping up at the boat trended too far into the shallows, the sails left slack and dropped where they were. "What is this? Are you guys crazy, where are you going?" but Harka settled him, and quickly we were bracing to run aground. The strange birds flew off without looking back, hopping the waiting canopy tops on to wherever they were going next. They left the boat to lurch to a stop, run aground. Within minutes of the commotion we were alone.

Song carried away from us, and the boat crumpled in its silks. Thin, pitiful wood. Built in days, hours, and discarded. The wood split, and we splashed through the shallows ashore.

"What!" Rain continued blustered when we had "disembarked", and he had successfully helped me find my feet. "Do we go after them? What is this, an ambush? Nonsense! What possessed us to go along with this! Am I finally al-





lowed to talk? My janitor, we've left it, agh!" He was disheveled. Shaken from the ordeal, away from his comforts.

Harka: "Right right. Minak and I will back for what we left. We will pick it up, detour. We'll fly; if we pass the homing litter we will gallop back. One way or another, and then fly back to meet you three. Kali King, you'll make the time you can. I say we will back by dark, we've ten hours until."

"Well." Kali caught Rain's desperate face and answered his confusion, "Look, there. The direction they went, highest up. Do you see that black soaring shape?"

It was hard to pick out against the shadows of the skyland. But a polygonal speck did in fact circle high, high over the river. A wide, wide glider arc, and even as we watched it pulled off in the direction of our freshly-departed hosts.

"It would have been a rain of rocks from that if we had failed the witch trial. That poor blue, we will never know eir name now. If any truth, any non-conceit was shown on-board, e would have been judged a liar when not aboard, and guilty of whatever they were chasing em for."

"That's ugly. That's terrible. And you played along?"



"Gunpoint, Rain. The sentence would have targeted that only one, but collate. A lavish thing meant to be destroyed. Ugly in fact."

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Naps feel different as a child. The half-light of lamps or sun dancing on your eyelids creates a womblike kind of waking sleep, enabled by childhood activity and proximity, sleep without time and only rest. So much was familiar again; little habits came back to me that I had not seen in years. My ears functioned, my body was awake, but my eyes and mind rested like a curled cat.

But when I woke from such dozing, I'd always startle. The world that seemed so present when in respite was revealed to be simplified. Without sight or significance a part of me must atrophy as it rests, some faculty meant to process all the minutiae of the world as one moves through it. So as that distributed-awareness sense snapped back into focus there would be a sea of light and texture that left you heartspinningly stunned.

Flight response, like to a malfunction echo, and all strange sounds in the night. Immobile for long seconds before your senses adapt, and your blood stills.





A monkey must have entreated too close, its screams - so funny, so vocally familiar, so simple - directly above us in the blue banyans. I grumbled awake; my lips itched. Sun and shadow hit my eyes. I rubbed my whole face over with my knuckles. The day's light was beginning to go grey, but I flexed the muscles of my core and shoulders, finding them recovered. The pain of weight was becoming more manageable as my body snapped, week by stuttering week, into a practical baseline of strength. My muscles felt brittle, like eggshell and the gauzy film that holds it together.

Kali still slept, frayed feathertips rustling in the gentle breeze. Little small-winged butterflies flitted, like white darts, through the miniscule red violets that pushed up through the litter of pine needles. It had been a long and challenging day for eir fatigue to postpone itself, and now it no longer could. E sat in a palatial sleeping bag, a lacquered square stool atop which rests a nest of insulated blankets, complete with writing space and built-in storage of necessities. E could write here all night without needing to move much at all while settling into deep bundled-up sleep. And all the while nesting within a crown, of eir white and red.



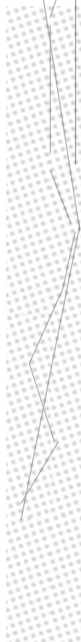


Mammals - even my scrawny faction of the team - are furnaces. Incarnated candle flames. Slightly strange-seeming to all life but itself, those most heated and volatile creatures. Earthy and muddled. Birds for their part are cold, quick, a spark of lightning stuttering in the center of a reactive cloud. Birds have little iron crucible hearts to our fat-fuel ones.

The nights of Savannah were precisely set at its coldest season into just low enough temperatures to put significant strain on elderly, convalescent tengmu's rates of hypothermia. This little ornamental sleeping bag, set with gentle heating pads and luxury-house pillows, was some omen, avatar, or symbol of a war declaration.

Old Deluge Winter. When they mapped hell, 50% of it was a frozen lake, up to 80% when the masscry view is updated today. Cote had chosen his skin to be the color of romantically blue snow, glowing in the cobalt sky and distant lamplight. Everything in the world was falling apart, crumbling already but held together until the momentum runs out.

Rain left his standard-issue and quite cushy indeed janitor field tent, tramping on the leaf litter. "You know I feel like I've fallen out of it, Emelry?"





“Out of it? Drunk? Did I wake you? I’m taking the rest where I can” I smirked. I nodded over to the pebbly river beach where Harka and Minak had set up an array of fishcatchers for tonight’s dinner, when the squad returned with our lifeline. They had messaged us when Kali fell asleep that they were held up on the outskirts of Cliff Hill with “urgent” distribution minutiae, but would be flying back in hours. Flip a coin.

“E should sleep,” I said, raising my arm for Rain, who obligingly helped me to my feet, scooping up a wooden recliner from this current of many minor campsites. “So let’s away to the shore some, and not to disturb. Do you know, I’ve been feeling how I imagine a Lunic firstgen must feel. Onboard their new oneill and divvyng it up, and investigating all its features just to see for themselves what the choicest steads are. Such nice classics about that.”

He retorted instead. “You should sleep. Hey, I come to you for advice and you’re talking all on your own things! Stress, that’s stress signs. I’m serious, I still think - manual says! - that you should rest as much as you can until we can get up to micro cruising height. And then you’ll be able to focus enough to listen to me.”



“Say it, then? This is what it is to travel with a king. And for my part I’m stronger, a better walker by the day. Here, I have it, I’ll just sit there.” I batted the chair out of his hands, to where I preferred, and gathered my furs around me (a gift gained while stopping in a small merchant village outside Saltflat that had been bringing me much delight in these misty pines), huffing into my seat. Perhaps I did push it a little too close to the wet stones. The river smacked its lips at us.

Across the water, a little school of longfrogs skipped across the shallow bend of the river, consistently a few inches deep and choked with freshwater fernkelp. Running not on water but on a flabby soup of thin swamp, constantly being rinsed clean by the current.

In many places along Savannah’s three continent-scale major rivers, there exist whether by direct massline pumping, or targeted rain patterns, that serve as infusions of pure molecular water into the stream. A bit of an upwelling, often forming “fountain-lakes” whose center is a constant swell of water from the massive twenty-meter grade pipes along the lake’s bottom, creating these freshwater, inland deltas. Quay was built to exploit one of these upswell lakes, turning the delta into a rich, fertile, and teem-





ing dam-bay. And one was closeby here, upstream miles. A small one, more a spring than a deep fountain. Good, good water, with the strongly distilled taste I still missed from unweighted life.

We watched the frogs skip like stones, their mossy hides quickly disappearing again into the undergrowth of the opposite banks. Splash splash splash splash.

"Apologies for the venom," I said, half-mock. "Please, sit with me."

"Thank you. Yay. Amicable. What's with the firstgen stuff? You have the downtime to be watching soap operas?"

"Well, isn't it relevant? I'm thinking of the hearing. I think I have a good idea of the staff's aims. It's talk for chamber rooms, not here. Tell me what you were telling me."

He watched attentively, as I settled down and caught my breath. "Do you think I could give you memories? Could we swing it?"

"Hmm, will you acolyte? Shall I take a student peer? I don't know. It's hard for non-neotenes, and non-tengmu really, as in it requires more study for the same competen-



cy ceiling. The courses begin at childhood, and largely focus on longterm memory work, dream diaries of increasing detail. You could work up to it. Why ask?"

"It's fine then. It would just be cope."

"For?"

He looked straight at me again, trying to judge how much he could say. "I feel like I've fallen out of the world. Not homesickness, but... I haven't gone away from where I live; it went away from me. The wheel turned and I stayed where I was, yeah? I wish I was trained to show you. The parades, the clashes, the summer theater and my glass skies. I yelled at the world and forced it away, and now time is real again, and I live nowhere. It was a quick tourist's tour though the material before rejoining the fire, but now there is time. Fast days. Nothing wasted."

I couldn't help but laugh. "No, it's true, isn't it? The calendar has reset. The geological era is over. The world is moving away from everyone now, they just don't know it. It isn't your affair, we were simple close when it happened."





"It's hard to think of different worlds, I mean there's so many parts of the same wide world. Even heaven and hell have borders. Savannah feels like something else."

Water splashed, and the stars were far away.

We stayed another few hours before the janitor returned to us, roaring in an arc down through the sky. Rain had the chance to sleep, and I watched the sparkle on the water. Over dinner of fish and fat-footed snail, Rain declared he needed time for quick maintenance repairs, and Kali agreed we should hunker down a day or two before continuing the flight home.

"We'll camp," Kali said, still groggy. "Let us self-donate some time." Eir eyes were crusty, blinking stiffly.

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"Emelry Emelry," Kali said. Eir voice was hoarse, a true breath-flagging croak. At each breath, the next one was a touch more shallow. No more could I endure my self-deception. E knew, and I knew, that these were the last days and hours of eir lifelong reign.



How does an ape die? How do we fade from all the trouble? Stillness and fatigue. We find somewhere to lay down, and end the motions we are most adapted to. No more running, no more throwing. We take to our straw beds and list for our loves, towards them or further away; our den accepts the social circuit and finalizes it. It comes organ by fat organ, death, creeping through the integument and setting its fingers in their places before pulling away your soul.

A bird paces. scratches, down from the sky. Their wings fail but the legs stay strong. The instinct is towards thicket and foliage, a hiding place rather than our shelters. Somewhere green and low, unseen. People rot. Bloating, swelling, melting. Tengmu snap into desiccation. The body dies, salt snaps through the tissue, muscles turn to paper, the hollowness of the bones expands to all cavities.

Kali paced, feet still quick. But no more did eir black eyes rake across the skyland when e was idle, plotting administration and bondsmaking. E saw stones now, and neither the flagstones of Quay. E knew, and I.

"Emelry Emelry. I can eat no more ancient fare oxidized. No more storables. Steal me away, colleague, to a mystical hunt! To read and touch the grass. Do me the kindness of





mealstay. Call me caprice! I have stomached, all my life, my flightlessness without complain, for it is my state, and how could I know like others what was missed, from the soarspan sight? Nonsense, but ka ka and ka have I longed to hunt! A nymph dream. You will take me there, lifted above the plains? Become with me a daring outlaw, a termite!"

I sat on the tall stone on the edge of our camp. A plume of smoke rose from behind the hunched janitor, where Harka and Rain were making a flaxmeal. My knees felt flexible, and I held them to my chest. I had given up on shearing my hair since we embarked to Quarry, for so mobile and occupied the city had seen us become, and now it was inches longer. I was accustomed to its weight, now, and how it softened the harsh spinelight as it fell on my head. I ran a hand back through it, thick and oily, and I spoke.

"When Heaven was mapped, the Fountainhead poets among that project's scholars began to assign a new connotation to the word 'love'. Perhaps, though, it was an old connotation, that had fallen out of favor when poetry moved from being sung to being written. Love, not as a sentiment or stance but rather a motive. A magnetism one is subject to; and each soul 'loves' that which it is drawn towards; where their own nature impels them to chase

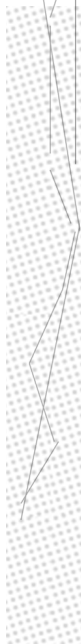


and dwell. I was always awed at how clean that was. How straight it flowed in reason.

"You are the sum of all my loves. Every value and virtue that I hunger for, and every personal weakness that still confounds me, in you I find my answers for. Kali, my Lord, I can follow only you now. This, and more, and all of it, I will do for you."

So e, continuing with eir time, told me of the hunger e was angling. The plattoron.

Savannah, how strange Savannah was, what an odd mix of life and place. Even in my growing adversarial relationship to everything I had walked away from, I was still confounded with curiosity at their work. This bountiful and variegated biosphere was the culmination of many lives' great works, an epochal scale of edifice. I felt that I had solved entirely the prison-aspect of such a place, but not so the other statements found in the design of its creatures and environments. From the calm river oases to the daybats crucial to the salt flats staying stable, and the matter of the colorful, marketable animals which lived to be symbols for petty human spectators promised but never intended to arrive. I could find no throughline, to unified ethos that would speak to the sensibilities of Savelyevna or Sever, the





thesis that Rain insisted all habitats were built upon. He swore that Sever had an aim with all of this, but shrugged and evaded when pressed, so he could save face by pretending surety of it. He was trying and failing to put it together, too, into one image that satisfied his standards.

Whence, the, the plattoron? Was it a pet project of an eccentric animal designer of the Doctor's circle? A basal and gracile loxodont, neither pre- nor even proto-elephantine, it was instead a gangly and swift beast that outran enemies with long, loping strides. Seeing one run, there was an impression of a recorded walk at double playback speed. And those ruddy grey rovers, both male and female, were equipped most distinctively with their spearlike bottom-jaw tusks which, as if out of a primordial bestiary, really were used to gore enemies and scythe grass. Like forgotten, therian unicorns. Warlike animals. Ominous and beautiful.

"I will," Kali said, "kill one by flechette, the healthy noodlelegs. We will roar for it, healthy, Emelry Emelry, A hard hunt, windows open, and the wind. We climb over it, fair, you and I, for the slippery sheer."

E spoke rousingly. E spoke like I remembered from eir youth, from those memories that were once eirs alone



but were now too mine, and soon would be mine alone. E spoke like that far-off young orator who had possessed my urges of high love. No e was still young, and orating as we spoke, e was sixteen years old and flagging, fading, and coming to the jealous thread's end. Inside my ribcage, just barely tied down to my vestigial keel, was a howling ocean of ink and smog and viral load that could have no outlet, for criminal one and victim million were, all, walking away from this world. I smiled, a wall and a soldier. E knew, and I.

Together we went into the air. The lift was steady, and our skill just sufficient. Over the weeks of travel, one way or another we had each learned to maneuver the janitor, or a part of it, and though Rain was a natural and I had a respectable expertise in the handling of vessels in a much different context, the birds had taken to it as well. Harka and Minak could together perch and act as two hands at the controls, and with Kali and I e served to dictate my moves and strategy so I could focus on control. E my eyes and I eir hands. Perhaps it was the half-feigned posture of kingly confidence, and perhaps it was a lack of fear and awe at being inside a machine like this. But I was letting go of the weight of the world as well. No more was this locust a symbol to me but a tool. No more did it hum with





purpose and the thrill of the lonesome void, no more did I picture it cutting apart and sewing together entire cylinders as if it was a major fraction of their size. It was not a dragon deity but a shuttle, a repair construct.

I wondered how Rain saw them. I imagined it was both ends at once; the high archetype of the lancing janitor brilliant in his mind, combined with an intimate knowledge of the thing's guts, the unglamorous and quite material coils and pistons that made it move by their symphony.

We boarded, operation now second-nature. We rose, Kali's claws in my shawl. How insulated. Outside would be deafening with the rush of air; how we could sneak up on anything was beyond me, a screaming metal insect stalking in the sky. But only a washing-machine hum came through the chassis, as fortified and resistant as it was to its intended conditions. A little whisper. I felt like I was flying a kite, or moving the bodies of many birds in a formation.

We scanned the plains, feeling the drops of weight, pushed in different directions as the hulking deft thing maneuvered. Kali was right, absolutely right. It was hard to miss. Likely fifty of the animals had congregated in one wide clearing. A clearing out of a story. Plush grass that was almost blue, a fairy-ring of birches that was almost circu-



lar. A thin mist that clung to the ground, their legs almost disappearing from it.

We hardly needed to talk. We hardly needed the communication, now, it was flow state. Runner's high. We let drop a hammer charge to startle them out from their meeting - were they breeding, exchanging scent, reorienting a migration? They scattered at its thud, and we were already ahead of the crowd as a fraction of it rushed into the tall green flatlands, the grass that loved them like fog.

We swooped low. The trees rustled in a V-wake where we passed. The air battered the chassis as if it was my skin. We found a target, a male who was startled away from the thickets that the smaller individuals were angling for. I imagined how the animal would look at eye level, if I was lying in the grass and it was charging at me. The sweat of its eyes, the flabby pachyderm lip that I had always thought seemed reptilian in the creases of grey flesh. Like Kaitei's map of the wheel, I imagined its skin and fat and muscle peeling off like citrus, lost in more and more detail, the glistening of nerves unfurling like ferns. The plat-toron was as large as an ocean.

Kali, staring, released a button and dropped a perfect flechette through the runner's head. The projectile passed





through, hitting the ground immediately before the skull it shattered hit the ground in turn. One of the tusks broke - excellent omen. We, laughing, and wild at the demands of the speed, wheeled around the sky and fell out of it down besides our prize, a rough landing that the system did most of the work for via corrections.

A dead, glassy eye. Together, we sat, and with our thin muscles cut a filet - a strip of meat, pulled like an anaconda from the beast's side. We left the rest of the carcass for what, for the ravens to pick out? Vultures and pygmy jackals. I took the broken tusk, too, a fine prize. It was bone, it was still tooth rather than ivory, minus the elephantine adaptive pressure to have beautiful display tusks. This was a long nail of bone, nothing white or fine in it, a narwhal's horn.

E wanted somewhere green and by the water. We lifted up again, meat wrapped in spare, sterile blueprint paper from the janitor's planning stores. Holding the king, eir body warm on my skin, we found a broad clearing of basil which the river curved around during a point in its run between two stretches of rockier land. The plants grew tall, a great meadow of them, and we touched down the water. I took my long tooth and beat down a span of basil, and the air



exploded with the fragrance, and pinning it back down I threw a royal awning on the ground like a picnic blanket, and found us plenty of cushions. Kali with careful claw clicked a fire into existence in the sandy banks just by the water, and methodically I roasted the three feet worth of meat.

Blood under my fingernails. Tall basil plants, the spinel-
light white and gold through their leaves as we saw them from below. Looming up like trees. I shaved off bits of the tenderest meat, seasoned in sumac and salt-flat salt, and bowls and bowls of basil mashed into tinned garlic paste, and I fed my king by hand. E snapped them up, sighing and laughing, beak still clacking with hunger. Slowly, slowly, as the light sparkled in steady bands off of the sandy water, e died in my arms.





MOONLIGHT CANTATA - In recent years “YA” has become the byword for everything wrong with fiction: sanitized content, cynically recombinatory plots and a complete loss of interest in style; simultaneously childish indulgence and adult condescension. Yet like many forces of the contemporary - the internet, populism, identity politics - much of what it represents now is an ironic inversion of what it initially promised. Even the name now feels like an awkward anachronism from a time when the projected direction of youth culture was a retreat, not an advance of childhood, to the point that its target age group had to be euphemized to be addressed; when the crisis was children and adolescents “growing up too fast”. The capital formations that emerged to exploit this expectation were so cynical and predatory - P. Diddy inviting Justin Bieber to the parties every piece of 2000s music and TV extolled as the epitome of “young adulthood” - that we risk forgetting for at least two generations, “teenage rebellion” was not merely a developmental stage or a marketing scheme but a genuine political demand, threatening above all the reproduction of “normality”. Today the “empire of normality” defines its outside in categories like gender- and neurodivergence, whose connection to youth is recognized most clearly by their enemies, and whose assimilative representations in “YA” (or adult media with

NOTES



YA characteristics) obfuscate both their common histories (trauma) and futures (posthumanity).

The defining characteristics of “Young Adult” as opposed to Children’s literature - or even mass market teen serials like the Hardy Boys - were understood to be an unflinching social realism, an oral immediacy neither talking down to the reader nor expecting them to put their trust and patience in complex literary constructions, and a skepticism towards the institutional world of “old” adults which manifested in tropes such as power fantasy and dystopia. To be sure the radicalism of settings like the Hunger Games was always overstated. Doremi Rodenburg’s Moonlight Cantata, on the other hand, synthesizes the best of the low realist and speculative strands of the tradition, depicting under the worn trope of “oppression for special powers” the precarious community, lateral violence and banal horror of marginalization in a “normal” world. And yet this is not a deflationary, “deconstructive” approach to adolescent fantasy - it is precisely fantasy that struggles for liberation. As the witch Sareth - not necessarily the most sympathetic messenger - recognizes, the aesthetics of “chuunibyō” (a “disease” closely related to our recurring fixation “denpa”, but situated in a longer Gothic/Romantic history by the 90s Japanese occult boom, which informed so much



of the East's answer to "YA" in light and visual novels) respond to the Aeon of Horus, and the "Young Adult" is yet another euphemism for the Crowned and Conquering Child. Rodenburg does not sugar-coat the implications of this transformation in itself. The proliferation of radically different mental structures can produce both violent and disturbingly symbiotic asymmetries of power, a psychic ecology haunted by predators; its suppression, on the other hand, can only be genocidal.

Mercenary Planet, Down By The River To Pray and Scarred Zeruel all deal with this apocalyptic "coming of age" of post-human subjectivities. Alongside the transformations of human psychology by youth and internet culture in Swords Under The Phosphor Sky, Psychogramma and It's A Good Thing The Dark Lord Is A Shut-In, one might consider it the central thematic nexus of Holohaus as a whole. Even more so than its forerunner New Animals (which may be coming soon to a bookstore near you!), Moonlight Cantata makes a fitting opening by presenting this premise at face value, with the directness of its form but without the didacticism that has given it a bad name. Even in an Aeon of vivid, animetic extremes - the repressive forces of Human Security themselves no exception - the path of ethical



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