

HOLOHAUS-9





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## *SPECIAL THANKS*

to Renko Chazakiël Rodenburg for latent  
nights

to nekosattva for crumpled secrets

to ghosted vain for the circulation

to Amara Reyes for murmurs in the air

to baroquespiral to tell the vision

to tsumaran\_chan for sake and world

to epou for the name

and countless others including the one who  
sees this



by: Renko Chazakiël Rodenburg

Hiro De Vries

Birthday: August 24, 2000

Sex: Male

Occupation: High school student, ninja

Blood Type: B-Positive

Hair Colour: Blonde, painted black

Eye Colour: Blue

Likes: Naruto, eating ramen in the rain, matcha tea, weed, Bleach, swords, Linkin Park, Fort Minor, girls, boys, Street Fighter II

Dislikes: The government, school, Street Fighter III, politics, Evanescence

“Sure thing broski.”

My legal name is Hiro de Vries. My real name is Hiro Ishikawa the Third, wielder of the muramasa blade ‘demonrend’. There’s a girl in my school also called de Vries but we’re not related, it’s just a really common surname. I actually like her a lot, but she never talks to me. This is because ninjas and samurai are discriminated against by the normie government so I guess it’s awkward to be seen with me. Recently there’s



been these supernatural murders at school, which I guess is why they're making me write this? Anyway I really hope the culprit isn't a student, because I already know on who the task of taking them down is going to fall. Hey, are they proofreading this? In case they don't and you're reading this help. Help. I'm seventeen years old and the government is making me kill people. They're trying to make me look paranoid by gaslighting me. Last week they switched out literally every object in my house with an identical copy. I'm pretty sure there's something in these meds they're giving me that's making it hard to think clearly. If you're reading this please send help I need help





## 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







## *Last time*

silver hair and a second shadow mark the awakening of Marieken as a Changeling, a non-human with mystical powers born into a human family. as her relationships with humans and other Periphery Demographics alike are turned upside down, her paraphysical tests shows she's so powerful she has to be regulated





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

In the end, I decide there isn't much I'll be taking along to the group home. I plan on moving back here anyway, so I pack only what I need most. Fresh clothes, my own bed-sheets, my toothbrush, my pillow, the books I borrowed from Ruby and Robin. A pang of guilt shoots through my heart. I still haven't messaged them, and neither have I put time into reading the books. I shake away the guilt, and continue packing. It isn't important right now. For a moment I contemplate leaving my Maria Mithras poster here, in my room, to hold the fort. But my mother might trash it while I'm gone, and it's irreplaceable to me. I carefully fold it, and take it along with me.

## CHAPTER 02



When I have everything, it's already dark out. I text my dad "I'm leaving for a group home for now. Good luck fixing things with mom and see you soon :)" and then leave.

On the bus I realize that I would've been incredibly anxious about this before the medication. The soft numbing makes the moving more of a chore than a stressful activity with uncertain prospects. It's only slightly further away than my school is, which is nice. I'll be able to walk to school instead of biking or taking the bus, which'll save me a lot of time. The group home is part of an apartment complex in Amsterdam South, and when I arrive there I realize it's rather ramshackle. I don't mind, though, and go up to the apartment complex entrance. I ring, and after a while the door buzzes and automatically opens. The apartment where my room is is quite high up, the sixth floor, and the elevator is malfunctioning so I'm out of breath when I arrive there. A girl is waiting for me at the door. She's deadly pale, and despite it already being after sunset, she's wearing sunglasses. The vampire I'll be sharing the apartment with.

"Hey," still panting from climbing the stairs.

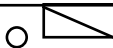


“Hello,” she says quietly. “Welcome. We’ve already cleaned your room for you. Please come in.” She’s almost whispering, but despite that her voice is audibly hoarse.

“I’m Marieken,” I introduce myself.

“I’m Kate,” the girl whispers. Despite her minimal mouth movements while speaking, I catch glimpses of the fangs behind her lips.

It still feels weird, sharing a home with a vampire after spending half my adolescence reading Anne Rice. Kate theatrically invites me in. I wonder if that’s a vampire joke or something she’s used to doing for her own kind, but am hesitant to pry. I don’t want to be insensitive or awkward in our first conversation. After I take off my shoes and drop my bag, she shows me around. The apartment is quite spacious, but a far cry from my parental home. There’s a living room that doubles as a small kitchen, a tiny bathroom doubling as a shower and three bedrooms. One’s been cleared out for me, and only has a mattress and a closet in it. I’m glad I brought my own pillow, blankets and sheets. I spend some time in a haze unpacking all of my stuff. When I’m done, I sit down on the mattress and stare into space for a bit. Moving turns out to be more ex-



exhausting than I had thought. After a while Kate knocks on my door, and I invite her in.

“Do you want some tea?” She whispers. “I’ve made some.”

“Sure,” I say, instinctively lowering my voice to match hers. I cringe a little, wondering if I already did something wrong, made a faux pas that’ll make her hate me. I join her in the living room, at the dense but pitted and worn wood-table she has there. She places a cup of tea in front of me and gestures at a bowl of sugarcubes.

“I hope moving wasn’t too stressful for you,” Kate whispers.

“It’s okay,” I say. “It’s more exhausting than I thought, but I’m fine.”

“We have another roommate, but I never quite know when he gets home,” Kate says. “He’s nice though, so you don’t have to stress about that.”

“I’m not, don’t worry,” I say.

“You are,” Kate says, and I feel incredibly weird. “You don’t have to worry. We’re both nice. I am very quiet and Walter, your other roommate, struggles with social skills



sometimes so he won't hold you to any absurd standards either."

I wonder if she's making an educated guess or somehow knows I am somewhat anxious meeting the people I have to share the next few weeks with.

"It's because I'm a telepath," she says and I get so startled I almost fall off my chair.

"First time someone has responded directly to a thought you had?" Kate whispers. "I'm sorry, it sucks, it takes forever to get used to either. And before you ask, no, I can't not do that. I can't exactly turn it off."

"Oh," I say. "That's okay."

Is it though, I wonder? I don't really want her digging around in my brain.

"I can't do that," she says, and I feel caught, guilty. "I can only read surface thoughts, things you're thinking out loud in your head."

"Ah," I say.



"I can teach you," she whispers. "To think without thinking. To hide your thoughts. So that you won't come to hate me in due time."

"Hate you?" I ask.

"Yes," she says. "Most people come to hate me."

I feel sad, but the pain is dulled by the fluffy clouds in my brain. I'm glad, really. I used to break down crying when total strangers were in pain.

"How odd," Kate says with her hoarse, hushed voice. "What odd thoughts you have."

"I'm sorry," I say.

"Yeah," Kate replies. "I know."

I nod, smiling. I might get along with Kate really well, I realize.

"I'm not staying up long," she says. "I'll go to sleep in a bit. I have medication to help me sleep at night instead of during the day, and I have to take it on time. Please do not wake me unless absolutely necessary."





“Alright,” I say. “I’ll go sleep too, I have school tomorrow and then places to be.”

Kate nods, understanding.

I take my pills, brush my teeth and lie down on the old mattress that’s to be my bed for now. The next morning, I find Kate has made breakfast for me, and is waiting for me at the table.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I say.

Kate shakes ‘no’. “I do,” she says. “I never leave the house. I will depend on you for a lot. I must do things in return. Clean, cook food for you. It’s good for bonding too. So that you won’t hate me.”

“Kate,” I say. “I’ve only just met you. You don’t have to be so nice.”

“It’s not nice,” she says. “It’s transactional. I might have to depend on you at some point and I don’t want it to feel like a burden, then.”

I shake my head, but can’t come up with a good reply. My head’s full of mist. After breakfast I take my next dose of meds, and head to school. I don’t run into Sareth or her





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10W  
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two friends, and am completely zoned out while Amy and Jan talk to me during lunch breaks.

The day, like many, goes by like a dream in a feverish haze.





At school it's like I'm a ghost. Jan and Amy's conversation subjects can't hold my attention because I'm zoning out all the time, but it's not like I was incredibly close with them before. I guess I never really noticed how much of an outsider I was until now. Sareth and her friends seem to be absent today, to my relief. I'm terrified of running into them in the hallways again. Or worse, when I'm all by myself on the schoolyard. As the last class of the day ends, I pack up my books and walk around in the school hallways for a bit. I don't really know why, but it doesn't bother me either. After a while I wander close to the exit, and decide to head out. I almost head towards my parental home before remembering I'm supposed to go to the group home before remembering I'm supposed to go to the Academy for Gifted Paraphysicals.

I'm halfway to my dad's place before I remember that again, and change my direction. While on my way, I intentionally stare at the floor. It's sunny out today, even though summer is almost over and fall comes very quickly in this country. Despite that, I cast only one shadow. The sun has nothing to do with that, I realize. The medication is suppressing my second shadow. For a minute I feel a deep sense of longing. Being magic and special had tremendously excited me the first few days, even as my life crum-



bled to bits around me. Bits of those feelings flare up, and I consider attempting to shadow-step, to teleport again. Conjuring up the mental images that made it happen the first time turns out almost impossible with the fog in my head, and it tires me out so much I quickly give up. Perhaps they'll be able to help me at the Paraphysicals center or whatever it was called.

When I reach the place, I immediately lose that hope. It's an absolutely ramshackle building next to a local police station, seemingly an abandoned then repurposed school. One of the white-and-blue letters spelling 'Academy for Gifted Paraphysicals' has fallen off, turning 'Gifted' into 'ifted'. There aren't a lot of people there, either. There's someone behind the desk at the entrance, but I can't spot anyone else, at least not from the entrance hall. The man behind the desk is frighteningly tall, but his almost spindly build and emaciated face somehow make him look small at the same time. He wears a long, black leather duster and has a depressingly large amount of shaving cuts on his face. Though he's indoors, he's smoking a cigarette.

"Hello," I say. "I'm here for Paraphysical work."

"Hm," he says. "That sucks."





“Oh. Are you closed?”

“Huh?” He asks, confused. “Why would we be closed?”

“Because you- what?”

I am at least equally confused as he just seemed to be, and now worry I misheard him or am misunderstanding something.

“Sorry, I was making a joke,” the man explains when he sees the worried look on my face. “Are you new? I haven’t seen you before.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I have documents with me.” “Great, documents.”

An awkward silence falls between us, and after a while I anxiously start ruffling through my bag looking for the documents I’m supposed to hand in.

“Thanks,” the man says as I hand him the documents, but then he pushes them back in my hands. “Down the hall to the left and up the stairs to the second floor. You’re looking for Juliet Rosencrantz. And no, I don’t know how she managed to get that job either.”



“Huh? What does that mean?”

“Don’t worry about it. I have a paranoid disorder, I’m convinced I live in a tv show,” he nonchalantly explains. “It’s part of my ability.”

“Your ability? Are you a witch?”

“No, I’m a unique case. Sometimes people with psychological disorders and a high parapsychical aptitude score develop unique abilities. It’s not magic by the scientific definition but it’s also not, like, normal, either so who cares.”

Even through the fluffy haze that envelops my mind, the man piques my interest.

“What’s your ability?” I ask.

“I don’t have a cool name for it. I think that by putting labels on things, you diminish their capacity to be anything else but what that label describes. But concisely put, as long as I keep acting like a character from a television show, I can force reality to play out along the rules of a film noir story.”

“That’s-”





I want to say ‘really weird’, but he interrupts me.

“Really cool, I know. Anyway, you gotta meet the lady on the second floor. She can explain how this whole thing works. You’ll probably be sent on a few expeditions with different partners so they can get an assessment of how strong you are, what you’re good at, and then you can take missions through the app.”

My heart sinks all the way down to my feet. This isn’t exactly what I thought this place would be.

“Hey,” the man says. “Don’t pout. It’s good work. It’s superhero stuff. Saving people from demons and nightmare corruption and dangerous cults. If you develop a taste for it you can live a good life like this. It’s better than wasting away in a homeless shelter because nobody wants to employ vampires.”

He confuses me for a second, and then I realize he’s got me confused for a vampire. “No, I’m a Moontouched,” I quickly say. “I’m not a vampire.”

“Oh. The kind with superpowers or the kind that gets moopy when other people are sad?” I look at him, con-



fused. “Crystal Court or a real court?” He asks, loud and seemingly annoyed.

“Shadow Court,” I answer, somewhat scared that’ll turn out to be an unacceptable answer.

“In that case you’ll be fine. I was scared the Municipal Government had sent another fragile girl with ‘a working sense of empathy’ as her only superpower our way again.”

I nod, pretending I understand.

“Second floor,” he says again. “Off you go.”

Confused by the man’s extremely odd behaviour and worried I’m about to meet someone just as weird or worse, I make my way down the hall and then up the stairs. The second floor is a long hallway with offices, only some of which seem to be in use. I walk along a few until I spot one with a sign that says ‘J. Rosencrantz.’ I linger in front of the door for a bit, wondering if I should knock, or just head in right away. Eventually I settle on knocking, but the moment I touch the door I realize it’s not entirely closed and accidentally push it open instead.





"Welcome," a young lady yells from behind a laptop. I think it's a MacBook at first, but then I realize it's got a pear instead of an apple as logo. "Come in, take a seat." She gestures at the office chair in front of her desk.

I hurry inside, close the door behind me and sit down. "What can I do for you?" She asks.

"I was told to report here, I have documents. I mean, I scored high on my affinity test, and I can get a job here?" I somehow manage to garble my statement into a question.

"Ah," Ms. Rosencrantz says. "Delightful. You must be Marieken. I read your test report, both of them. Very good, scoring a respectable twenty-five while on both antipsychotics and suppressors. Tell me, are you experiencing any side effects?"

"Well," I say. "They numb my feelings a lot, but I don't really mind. I think I would be under a lot of stress otherwise, and I'm actually glad I don't have to feel so much right now."

"Wonderful," she says. "Let's see those files you brought me."





I hand her my folder full of documents, and she starts flipping through them with astonishing speed. There's something odd about her eyes, I realize as I watch her read at superhuman speed. She's wearing coloured contacts.

"Are you Moontouched?" I ask.

"No, Periphery Demographics aren't allowed to hold government positions. That would cause a conflict of interests."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the end goal of global policy right now is a return to baseline reality, with no Periphery Demographics left. Don't you think some of them might object to that?"

I have thought about that, but only for a bit at a time. Thinking about it makes me sick.

"Anyway," she says, putting my files away in a drawer under her desk. "Good test results, good performance in school. Nice physical education grades, too. If you want to, I can send you out on a mission tonight, to evaluate your abilities."





"I—" I want to complain, but I lose my sentence stammering.

"What is it? You can tell me, you don't have to be anxious. Nobody is mad at you." Her voice is oddly soothing, and a warm feeling washes over me. She's right.

"I thought this was more like a school, like in the comic books," I explain.

"Yeah," she says. "That used to be the case. But the government decided that was counterproductive. So now we've been reduced to an underfunded dependance of the police. It's a tragedy. But don't worry. I'll set you up with more experienced heroes who can teach you the ropes, teach you the tricks of the trade."

"Okay," I say, not entirely reassured.

"You're classmates with Hiro de Vries, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then it's decided," she says. "Tonight you can accompany Hiro to eradicate some nightmare erosion on the edge of town. You get along with him, right?"



I don't really, but I think I'll manage, so I answer 'yes.'

"Good. Any questions?"

"Yeah. What is nightmare erosion?"





I've heard of nightmare erosion before, of course. In passing. Read about it in school textbooks, been through the hazing ritual of your classmates daring you to watch recovered footage on shady youtube-knockoff websites. But I don't have a real conception of what nightmare erosion is, except as a kind of nebulous disaster that can befall abandoned locations, or places where crimes have happened. Places people would have considered 'haunted' long before such things suddenly became much more real and much more destructive.

Ms. Rosencrantz hands me a textbook. 'Field Manual to Operating in Nightmare Infested Territory', it reads. Half the pages are torn out, and an astounding amount of text has been removed with white eraser.

"Don't worry," she says. "The most important bits are still there. Back in the day, the governments tried to harness all kinds of stuff for themselves, you see. But that didn't go so well."

"I see."

She gets up from her chair after giving me the book, and stands behind me. I look over my shoulder at her, questioning.



"I want to watch you read. I'll answer questions, I'll point things out for you."

"Okay," I say. It feels a little odd having her look over my shoulder. Like she's judging me.

"Start at chapter three, it's mostly intact and contains lots of important information," she says while bending over, almost whispering it directly into my ear. It makes me feel strange, and more than a little threatened.

Shaking a little from discomfort, I flip through the ruined book until I find chapter three. 'Nightmare Erosion and UAs,' it's called.

"Uwas?" I ask.

"Unknown Adversaries. That was before we dropped the pretentious act and just started calling them demons like normal people."

"I see," I say.

As my eyes lock onto the first sentence, Ms. Rosencrantz grabs me by my wrists. Before I can protest, she whispers something in my ear. I can't parse what she says, because I cannot tear my attention away from the book anymore.





The contents of the page make itself known to me in a split second, and Juliet puppets my hands to flip the page. And again, and again, and again.

A tremendous amount of information pours into my head, and as it does, she whispers things into my ears. No, I realize. She whispers them directly into my mind. Information on nightmare erosion. Information on demons. Some form of reverse telepathy, maybe? But she said she had no powers, as government officials aren't allowed to be Periphery Demographics. As I sit there, contemplating, I realize I've finished reading the book. I snap out of my trance, and find Ms. Rosencrantz still holding my wrists, gently rubbing her thumb over my radial artery, and pull my arms free with a frightened yelp.

"What did you just do?" I yell at her.

"Helped you see some things that were previously hidden," she says, putting on the most impressive fake-innocent smile I've seen in my life. Impressive for how purposefully fake it is, as if it's to intimidate rather than reassure.

It is, I realize.



"But I don't remember anything from reading the book just now," I complain.

"You will, it's lodged in your subconscious."

She takes the book away from me, and puts it in a drawer behind her desk before sitting down on her chair again.

"I thought you said you had no powers?"

"I don't," she says. "That wasn't magic. That was hypnosis—a well-documented scientific phenomenon that existed long before the destabilization of reality. By bringing the brain in a state of trance, a state of vulnerability, information can be added by the hypnotist at leisure."

"Really?" I ask. She took seconds to pour the contents of an entire book and then some into my subconsciousness. I doubt that was hypnosis. "It only took you seconds to do that, that doesn't seem natural to me."

"Seconds?" She asks, making a frowning, pouting face while putting one of her fingers to her lips. It's the kind of over-emoting I sometimes see girls in my school do, but from this older lady it comes across as creepy, not endearing.



"Oh!" she then says. "Yeah, it felt like seconds to you, because you were in trance. We spent well over an hour on that book, the two of us." She laughs a little, then glances at the clock.

I do the same, and realize she's lying. Barely two minutes have passed.

"I'm gonna have to ask you some questions," she says before I can accuse her of lying.

"A test?" I ask.

"No, silly," she laughs. "Not a test. Don't worry. If you need the information that's now in your subconscious, you'll have access to it. It's a flawless Technique."

I'm almost certain she stresses the word 'technique' on purpose. "What do you need to ask then?"

"I need to write down some documentation on your powers and abilities. You're Moontouched, your file says. Shadow Court. What all can you do?"

"Euh," I say. "I can teleport."





"Really now," Ms. Rosencrantz says. "Please demonstrate that."

"What?"

"Show me. Teleport."

I still haven't done it since that day. Desperate not to disappoint her, I try to conjure up the images required in my head.

Instead of endlessly captivating, I find them tiring. I feel a little stupid for creating childish images like that in my head and expecting them to have a tangible impact on reality, and give up.

"Well?" Juliet asks. "Or did you teleport so fast I missed it?"

"No, I—"

"Am on antipsychotics, I know," she finishes my sentence with words I didn't want to use at all. "There's no way you can pull off a shadow-step on antipsychotics and suppressors. Do you have any other abilities, ones that would be useful in removing nightmare erosion from an apartment building?"





Nightmare Erosion always has a core, I suddenly hear Ms. Rosencrantz her voice in my mind. A conduit from which it's leaking into our world from the world of dreams. The conduit is usually a living thing. Killing it will sever the connection, stopping the erosion, after which the area will slowly return to normal.

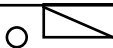
I jump up, startled.

"Hm?" Juliet asks.

"Sorry," I say, sitting back down. "No, I don't think I have those."

"That's unfortunate. Hm, without going through all the proper paperwork and training I can't exactly hand you a firearm either. Hiro is going to look out for you, of course, but I'd feel bad if I didn't give you anything to defend yourself with."

With every passing moment it becomes more and more clear to me that I'm not cut out for this. That I might not actually want to do this. Even if I could access all my powers, I wouldn't want to use them to fight nightmare monsters. When they say 'superhero stuff' I usually get a mental image of saving kittens from trees or maybe stopping



armed robberies. As I'm working up the courage to tell Juliet this, she's busy rummaging through a dingy, banged up locker behind her desk. She turns around, keeping an aluminum baseball bat in her hands, and points it at me.

"The perfect weapon for our young heroine."

"Ms. Rosencrantz," I stammer. "I don't think this is right for me."

Instead of getting mad at me, she smiles. She lowers the bat, walks over to me, and squats down next to me. "Marieken," she says. "Nobody is cut out for this. It's terrifying, it's a job where you confront literal nightmares leaking into the real world. But you're special, you've got magic, you've got talent. Nightmare erosion kills people, Marieken. Normal people, with no defenses against it whatsoever. Tag along with Hiro tonight. If you really think it's too bad, you don't have to do it. I'll sign whatever papers you need me to sign to get the government off your back. But you have to at least try."

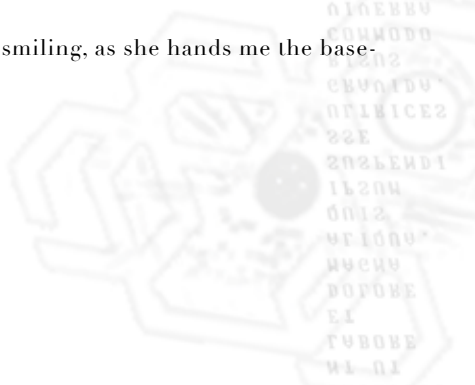
Her voice is soothing, and takes away my worries. If it was as bad as I think it is, they wouldn't let literal children do this.





“Okay,” I say. “I’ll try, okay?”

“Good girl,” Juliet says, smiling, as she hands me the baseball bat.



LUCIF121  
AET  
TUCS2  
VCCN20W  
WVECEW02  
A10ENBU  
CONMOD  
B1202  
CBV01DU  
UT1BICE2  
22E  
202LEWD1  
1B20W  
0012  
W1000  
W0EN0  
D0F0WE  
E1  
T0V0WE  
W1-01  
TWC1D1D0  
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E102W0D  
2ED D0  
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W01B12C1  
10W  
CON2EC1E  
WWE1'  
211  
D0F0R  
1B20W  
T0REW





With the baseball bat cradled in my arms I find myself taking the subway alongside Hiro. It's late at night by now and the few other passengers avoid us like the plague. Around me, the tram rumbles and the lights sweep by. Hiro doesn't talk much, and I get the feeling he's not happy having to babysit me on this mission. He keeps fidgeting with his katana, and I don't know if that's irritation, anxiety or anticipation. We ride the subway down Amsterdam South, to Crow's Nest, an impoverished and neglected suburb. Before the government had their hands full with the ever-increasing amount of Periphery Demographics, they had their hands full of plain old racism, which led to the construction of neighborhoods that were, although not officially, to segregate minority populations away from the main body of the city. They then neglected to spend any money on maintenance, and let them wither away. When the second wave of destabilization happened in the nineties, those neighborhoods suffered the brunt of the effects, which the government, although not officially, was completely fine with. Resentment is a powerful force though, and it didn't take long before that resentment was ripping holes in space-time and spewing demons out into the city. Ever since, the lowest classes of society have had the privilege of being protected from their demons by





people like Hiro- if only so that these demons don't escape to wreak havoc in more affluent neighborhoods.

The station at Crow's Nest is decrepit and stinks of piss. I shiver a little in the cold night air, and instinctively look up to see if I can see the moon. The sky is overcast, and I cannot, which makes me feel a little colder still.

"Come," Hiro says as he readjusts his trenchcoat. I hurry after him through the almost completely abandoned subway station.

We take the stairs down from the platform and find ourselves on the city streets.

"It's not far," he says. "There's an abandoned mall near here. Some unsavory things went down there, which has caused nightmare corruption."

Nightmare corruption. The literal nightmares of the tormented who have since gone to hell eating away at the fabric of the world, Juliet's voice whispers in my ear.

"I know," I say. "You say that everytime I think of 'Nightmare Corruption', I know, okay?"



"What are you on about?" Hiro asks, looking over his shoulder as if to see if I'm still there. "Sorry."

He shrugs, and we continue our path through the city, over worn cobblestone and underneath the orange glow of old lanterns. Before long, we reach the abandoned mall. Most windows are broken and there's glass scattered everywhere. Where once there must've been those revolving, glass doors, is now a gaping hole. Nothing remains but a concrete shell. Inside is dark, and all that's visible through the entrance is a dark abyss. Hiro draws his katana, sits down on his knees with it in his hands, and starts praying. I dare not interrupt him. When he's done, he gets back up and gestures to me to follow him.

"Be on your guard," he whispers as we cross into the building. "There's probably only a single demon, but it might've set up lesser nightmares as guards. Things it has stolen from the minds of people sleeping nearby, or if we're unlucky, from the minds of the dying."

"That would be worse?" I ask, trembling, shaking. Even the powerful medication I'm on can't fully suppress my fear.

"Yes," Hiro says. "The dying have worse dreams than the living, for sure."





A faint “oh” is all I can muster in reply.

As we walk further into the darkness, my eyesight adjusts and to my surprise I can see pretty well. “It’s not as dark as I thought it’d be,” I say. “That was probably an illusion created by the brighter light outside.”

“Not as dark? I can’t see a thing, I’m sharpening my other senses to be able to navigate,” Hiro says as if it’s the most ordinary thing in the world.

Maybe it’s because I’m Moontouched, I think. Or perhaps Shadow Court in particular. That’d make sense.

“There’s a lot of ground to cover, but I’ve got a trick for that. Watch this,” Hiro says as he sheathes his sword, and starts to go through a long sequence of hand gestures. “Clone Jutsu, go!” He yells when he’s done, and I have to do my best to stifle a laugh.

From his body, five new, translucent Hiro erupt. The ghostly Hiro rush away from us at incredible speed, and the original draws his sword again. “They’ll scout the area for us. They can relay information to me mentally, so it’s like I’ve got six pairs of eyes now.”





"Woah," I say, genuinely astonished. "That's amazing. How'd you do that?"

"Hm," Hiro says. "Normally, a simple trick like this would be easy, just a matter of envisioning the right images in my head. But the medication I'm on fucks with my powers, so I have to resort to rituals I have created to trick my brain into creating the images anyway. In this case, the ritual is hand gestures from a cartoon I used to watch as a kid, which incidentally, is also where I got this power from."

"I see!" I say. "Perhaps I can shadow-step again if I come up with an appropriate ritual then. I tried again today in Ms. Rosencrantz' office, and it failed."

"Shadow-step?" Hiro asks, a strange tone in his voice. "That's advanced shadow magic. Everyone needs rituals for that, no matter how talented."

"No," I say, "I did it several times in a row before I was put on suppressors and antipsychotics."

"Bullshit," Hiro spits. "If that's true, then even medicated you should be able to pull the simpler Shadow Court tricks without much effort."





“What are those?” I ask.

“Wouldn’t know,” he says. “I’m not a- Fuck!”

“What’s wrong?”

Hiro grunts. “I found the demon. Bad news: it has human victims.” “Where?” I ask. “We should-”

Nightmare demons sometimes brainwash and puppet human ‘victims’, Juliet’s sweet voice whispers in my ear. You can’t save them, only put them out of their misery before their soul has been completely replaced with nightmares.

I gulp.

“It’s coming,” Hiro whispers, and he stretches out his sword arm to prevent me from passing him by. In front of us is the back end of the central hall of the mall, where the shredded metal and broken plastic is all that remains of the elevators leading to the second floor. Above them, a tall, imposing figure looms.

As I fully process what I’m seeing, I take a step back. And another, and another, and as I prepare to turn around and run outside as fast my legs can carry me, it speaks.



"Shadow girl," it's voice booms, and I am rooted in place.

The creature- the demon- is a tall, vaguely humanoid shape of pure darkness. Two red-hot coals float in the darkness, creating the suggestion of eyes. Above its 'head' floats a crown made from barbed wire, shards of glass and other trash. In one of its extremities- I cannot call them hands or arms- it holds a chain, and that chain splits in five. To each end it keeps a human being, warped and changed and more akin to rabid dogs. I want to run, I want to run so badly but my legs do not move. The demon laughs, a stomach-curdling laugh and now I do not just want to run, I want to throw up. My heart rate is so high it interferes with my breathing, and I cannot manage to scream.

"Little human," it calls out to Hiro. "Give me the shadow girl. I long to take her down into the nightmare. I loathe her kind."

Tears well up in my eyes as my head is involuntarily filled with visions. I'm not sure if they're my imagination or from the encyclopedia that's now seemingly in my head, but they make me revulse nonetheless.

Before me, Hiro laughs. "What kind of nightmare are you supposed to be? A slaver? That makes little sense in an





abandoned mall. Oh, I know. You're a nightmare about sex traffickers, aren't you? Are those five what caused you to form? Did they keep some woman here until her fears consumed her, and she turned into you?"

"Clever," the demon says, and he lets go of the chain.

I finally manage to scream. It's a gut-wrenching scream of blind panic as the five mutated monsters, still vaguely resembling human beings, rush forward.

Everything seems to move in slow motion. Only one of the nightmare's pets seems to go directly for Hiro, the others rushing past him towards me. As I force my body to turn around and attempt to run, I hear a swishing sound, and a series of terrible cuts and squelches. I instinctively turn my head, and see too many limbs no longer attached to bodies. From four mangled corpses spray fountains of black blood. The fifth mutant, however, rushes straight for me. I can't fight that, I realize. I can't fight at all. This is insane. Why am I doing this to begin with? Money? Because someone told me?

Because I have to, I realize. They threatened me if I didn't.



I pray that I survive, and I pray that Ms. Rosencrantz will be willing to write a letter that I have absolutely zero talent for this, as I grip my baseball bat as tightly as I can, and raise it above my head. In the distance, I hear steel clash on steel, and chains rattle and whip. Hiro is fighting the demon, I realize. He's been doing this for a long time. He's not even scared anymore. I also understand his 'child soldier' sentiment now. This isn't something you force children to do, not even in the name of public safety. This is madness. The mutant is almost upon me now, and I bring down the baseball bat as hard as I can. With a sickening thud and a crunch, it impacts on its skull. For a second I think I'm screwed, as it doesn't stop moving and slams straight into me. I get pushed on the ground, and scream and scream and scream, struggling to get out from under the mutated man, instinctively closing my eyes in the process.

Then I realize he has stopped moving, and I feel a thick fluid dripping onto my face. I open my eyes, and realize it's what remains of the man's brains, leaking out from a crack I bashed into his skull.

I scream again, and pass out.





It is past midnight when I stumble up the stairs of the apartment complex I'm staying at. There are horrible dark stains on my clothes- a mixture of literal nightmare fluids and blood. My throat hurts from the amount I've thrown up, and I've got a persistent sting in my chest. I hope it's not my heart giving out. I keep thinking about hugging my mom and crying about all the horrible things they made me go through today, but those thoughts just make the pain worse. Exhausted, sick and still shaking from sudden bursts of adrenaline I ring the doorbell and wait for Kate to open up. She throws the door open quite violently, which startles me and makes me back into the railing behind me.

"What happened to you?" Kate says in her hoarse voice, the first time I've heard her speak louder than a whisper.

"I'm sorry," I say, remembering Kate can read minds. Maybe I should leave before I hurt her with my presence.

"No," Kate says, and I feel caught. Did I think that on purpose? I'm not sure. "Come in," she says.

Somewhat hesitant, I follow Kate inside. She goes straight to the living room, and flips on the electric kettle.



"I'll make tea. Have you had anything to eat?" "No."

"I'll make you noodles as well. Go shower, put all your clothes in the laundry basket, I'll clean them tomorrow."

"You don't." I start a sentence, but Kate interrupts me.

"If you're going to be like that, then go to your room and mope."

She startles me, again. I wonder what I said wrong. As if to answer that question she walks up to me, uncomfortably close to me, until I can back away from her no further and bump into the wall. Close enough that I can see the vague contours of her eyes through her sunglasses.

"If I tell you I will do a thing for you, I will do that thing for you," she whispers. "If I tell you I'm fine doing something for you, I'm fine doing something for you. You've only met me yesterday so you're probably used to pretend-niceties and having to politely tell people you don't really want their help even though you do."

I gulp.

"Get this through your shadowy skull: If I am helping you, that is because I want to. I am helping you because we're





stuck in the same shithole together, and we cannot depend on anyone else. Someday I might need your help, and then I will expect you to give it to me freely. Do you understand me?"

She sounds angry, but her words are kind. I get incredibly confused, and nod 'yes' to get her to back off. Instead of backing off, she grabs me by the chin.

"Do. You. Understand. Me?" She whispers, carefully stressing each word. "I'm sorry," I yelp. "I'm sorry, I don't understand, I'm sorry."

She lets me go, and heads to the kitchen with a deep sigh. "Go shower," she says. "I'll make noodles and tea for you and tomorrow I will wash your clothes."

Scared of antagonizing her any further, I nod and rush to my room. I haven't unpacked most of my stuff, so I just dig my towel and some fresh clothes out of my bag, and head to the shower. It's a small, cramped space, not like the luxurious bath in my parent's home, but I don't mind. I don't need a very large shower to crumple up into a ball underneath and cry, after all. I cry a lot. Nothing is going the way it's supposed to be going. I shouldn't have to deal with all this. Discovering I was Moontouched was scary





enough before they wanted me to fight against monsters. I curse and cry and wish I was a normal human girl with normal human parents who love her. This is punishment, I realize. Punishment for every time I saw a Moontouched boy or girl on the streets and secretly wondered how cool it would be to discover you have magical powers and cool hair and eyes. I asked for this. I look around for my second shadow, almost instinctively. But of course it's nowhere to be seen. The shadow-girl that was stuck to me for a few days is gone- taken away from me. I'm not allowed to have the fun parts of being Moontouched. Just the rot.

Suddenly someone bangs on the bathroom door. "You okay in there?"

Kate's muffled voice is barely audible through the door and falling water. I wonder if life is the same for Kate. It probably is. She's on pills, right? To sleep at night and be awake during the day. Not allowed to do cool vampire things, just to rot in an apartment. Worried that Kate needs me or something I turn off the shower and start drying myself off. There's some black stains on the towel after I dry my hair, and for a second I hope my hair is back to white now. The mirror dashes that hope though. Still





black. I struggle to put on my spare clothes in the cramped shower, but eventually succeed.

“Kate?” I ask, as I leave the shower.

I find her hunched over on the table, sobbing. Next to her are two bowls of noodles, two cups of tea and some chopsticks and forks.

“Kate? Can I help you with anything?”

“It’s always like this,” she sobs. “Always the same. I’m sorry. My mind will clear up in a bit. I have to experience your thoughts too, you know. No- no, stop that. Don’t feel guilty about it. This is my burden to bear, and it’s not your fault. Come, sit down.”

A little hesitant- still a little afraid of her bizarre swings in behaviour- I do as she says and sit down across from her.

“Here,” she whispers as she shoves one bowl of cheap instant noodles in my direction. “If you do groceries for me tomorrow, I’ll cook whatever you like. To make up for the bad noodles.”



I half-form a complaint born from a desire to say ‘you don’t have to’ but swallow it. I don’t want her to get mad at me again.

“Do you want chopsticks or a fork to eat with?”

“Fork,” I say, feeling a little silly that I don’t know how to eat with chopsticks.

Kate hands me the fork, and deftly uses her own chopsticks to scoop some noodles from her bowl.

“I’m sorry you’re going through all this,” she says after eating in silence for a bit. “That nightmare stuff, that’s horrible. I hope you can manage to get from under that nonsense. They used to have whole police squads trained to deal with stuff like that, you know.”

“I didn’t-” I start, but I’m interrupted.

In the seventies, after the first wave of destabilization, an international arms race was underway to militarize para-physics phenomena. To protect the populace from demonic incursions and rogue para-psychics, several countries formed special armed forces teams to combat the super-





natural threat while scientists worked on a more permanent solution in the background.

Kate looks at me. Even with her sunglasses, her face betrays surprise. "Who is that?" She asks. "There's someone else in your head!"

"That's euh. I don't know? That's an encyclopedia that a government worker hypnotized into my brain. To give me advice on dealing with nightmare erosion stuff."

"That's insane," Kate says. "Are they allowed to do that? Just put stuff in your brain?"

"I think so? They also put me on heavy medication."

"Horrible," Kate says. "We don't have it easy, have we."

"I've only been Moontouched for a week or two. I still kind of hope I can fix my life."

"Marieken," Kate whispers solemnly. "That's not going to happen. You're not human. The absolute best you can expect out of your life is managing to survive this hell until they fix the destabilization issue and then all of us die regardless. Don't cling to hopeless dreams."



I want to object. I want to tell her that she's wrong and that my parents love me and that everything will turn out fine, that the designation on our ID cards doesn't make us any less human than the rest.

I fail to. It's only been two weeks, and I'm losing faith.





My sleep is a black emptiness, a space of time devoid of anything happening. I haven't dreamt since I started the medication.

Dreaming is the number one vector for Nightmare Contamination, I hear Juliet's voice in my head as I'm waking up. Dream-killing fluoride compounds have proven highly effective at stopping the spread of demonic incursions when added to tap water. Continued research into these compounds formed the basis of modern Suppressor medication.

That's odd. I wonder if they still add those to tap water. That doesn't seem entirely safe to me. Outside my room, I hear voices. The hushed voice of Kate, almost inaudible from here, and a cheerful, energetic voice I haven't heard before. I put on my clothes, and go to the living room.

"Hey hey," a cheerful boy says. Boy? Man? I can't tell his age. He's got a little stubble on his face, but it hardly makes him look older. "I'm Walter, I was out of town last week so I completely missed you moving in. You're Marieken, right? Are you getting along with Kate?"

I nod. "Yeah. Kate's nice."



He laughs. It's energetic, full of life. I feel jealous.

"We've almost completely run out of groceries and Kate can't stand going outside so I'm going to do some grocery shopping. Want to come along?"

Before I can answer, Kate says "No. She has to stay here."

"Ah," Walter says. "Well, I'll leave you be then. I'll be back in an hour or so. Anything you want for breakfast Marieken? Orange juice? Toast?"

"I don't want to impose, don't worry about me." I say. Childhood memories of breakfast with my mom and dad flood into my mind. Slightly toasted bread with butter and chocolate sprinkles and earl gray tea with too much sugar.

"She wants toasted bread with butter and chocolate sprinkles," Kate says. "And earl gray tea."

Walter laughs again. "Can't hide anything from Kate. Well, unless you're me. Alright, I'll go get those."

He takes a while to put on his shoes, walks back and forth into the kitchen looking for something a few times before he remembers to grab a plastic bag, then heads out with another pleasant laugh.





"You cannot read his thoughts?" I ask Kate. "Did you teach him that thing? Thinking without thinking?"

Kate shakes her head. "No. He could already do that by himself. He's a very strange fellow. Knows things."

"There's a lot of special people around, aren't there?"

"Yeah," Kate answers. "Marieken, sit down, we need to talk."

I get startled. Did I do anything wrong? Worse, is she going to throw me out already?

"I'm sorry for last night," I say with a pained look on my face.

Kate shakes her head. "Sit down Marieken, if I was angry at you I would have told you."

"Okay," I reply while hesitantly taking my seat at the table.

She sits down across from me. "I'm a vampire," she says. "Government rules mean I have to figure out how to get blood myself, and of course I get in serious trouble if I take it by force."





I want to say something, but she hushes me to silence.

“Usually, we vampires find boyfriends or girlfriends. Preferably multiple, so the drain isn’t too heavy on any one of them. Though you understand, I hope, that this is effectively whoring ourselves out in exchange for blood. Regardless, I am not good at this. My current partner is ghosting me, and I am starving, going through withdrawal.”

I vaguely understand where this is going.

“I will take care of you, clean for you, cook for you. In exchange, when I am starving and have no access to other sources, will you provide me with blood?”

We’re quiet for a bit, mainly because I didn’t catch that that was a question. “You’re asking me?” I eventually ask back.

“Of course. I’m not going to force you to.”

“What if I say no?” I ask.

“Then I will starve and get weaker, until one morning you will find me in the kitchen, dead.”





Once again I am forced to confront the daily realities all the fantastical, magical beings I liked as a kid have to face. Moontouched, Vampires. We're all shit out of luck.

"I- that's awful. I'm sorry Kate. I'll let you drink my blood. It- it doesn't hurt, right?"

I try my absolute best to hide the confused emotions this is generating. The flashbacks to reading vampire novels and vividly trying to imagine how it would actually feel. This has the opposite effect, of course, and I know Kate must've seen my thoughts.

"Don't worry," she says. "It feels quite nice. There are hormones in my saliva that work like a drug. Make you happy, maybe a little slow for a bit."

"Oh," I say as I realize something. "I am on antipsychotics and suppressors. Is that okay?" "It's not great but it won't kill me either," she answers.

I nod.

"Come," she says as she gets up from her chair.

I look at her, puzzled.



"To my bedroom. It's best to lay down, and since I want to take off my glasses I need it completely dark."

To her bedroom. Laying down on Kate's bed who I have only met two days ago to have her bite down on my neck. My heart rate accelerates almost to the level it had when I met the demon.

"Y- yeah," I stammer. "That makes sense."

Almost stalling, I slowly follow Kate to her room. Her room is different than I would've imagined. She comes across as harsh, almost cruel, despite her kind words. I also imagined her more goth or emo-like mentally. Probably because she's a vampire, I realize. Instead, her room is mostly plushies, posters of idol bands, a collection of young adult romance books, and a pink macbook with Hello Kitty stickers on it.

Kate turns around, and looks at me. "How can you tell that well? It's pitch black in here."

"Huh? Oh! I discovered I can see perfectly in the dark yesterday. Probably part of my shadow powers."





"I see," Kate says, as she reaches under her desk and gets a small box. "A first aid kit," she says. "Disinfectant and bandages."

I get a little anxious and really hope that it won't hurt.

"If you're scared then the first time I can drink from your wrist instead of your throat. It's harder for me, but it's not like I need a lot of blood. Just enough to get by without starving to death."

The mental image of Kate pushing me down on her bed and sinking her teeth into my throat is overwhelming. Far too overwhelming. "Yeah," I say. "That would be better, I think."

She gestures for me to sit down on her bed, and sits down next to me. A little bit close next to me, and I instinctively inch away from her.

"Roll up your sleeve or take off your shirt," she commands me as she taps me on my arm.

I'm not wearing a bra- I slapped on the first pair of pants and shirt I saw this morning- so I am not taking off my shirt. That'd make things awkward beyond belief. Luckily,



the long-sleeved shirt isn't very tight-fitting so I can easily roll up the sleeves.

Kate smiles, and takes off her glasses. Her eyes are beautiful, a sort of darkly luminescent red. Like faintly glowing steel, a rosy, distant red.

"Breathe in," Kate commands me, "and breathe out."

As I stare into her eyes and follow her instructions, I fall into a trance. Unlike what Juliet did to me, this feels nice. Not confusing or violating, gentle. It's like I'm barely there, like I left Kate alone with my body on her bed. She lifts up my arm, and brings it to her mouth. I want to flinch, but I find my mind too distant from my body to really react. Her exposed fangs create an almost primal terror in my heart, but one glance from her eyes makes me calm down again. It hurts as she bites down into my wrist, but only for a second. Then, a warm, pleasant feeling slowly washes over my arm, and from there ever so slowly over the rest of my body. I giggle as Kate pulls her teeth out of the wound she has created, and puts her lips to my wrist to suck out blood.

"Are you doing okay?" She whispers after a minute or so. "That's quite enough, I think."





Enraptured by her eyes and high from the ecstatic feeling of having my blood drunk, I can only weakly nod and giggle. Smiling, she takes her first aid kit and wipes down the two puncture holes with disinfectant. The wounds are bleeding quite profusely, I realize. I would be in serious trouble if she didn't bandage them.

She then starts wrapping bandages around my wrist. "They're also disinfectant, so the chance of you getting an infected wound or getting sick is very small. I'll look after your wounds in the coming days, and if something doesn't look good, I'll have Walter take you to the doctor, okay?"

I nod. Kate is going to look after my wounds. I wonder if she'll let me look into her eyes again.

"God," Kate says, laughing. It sounds shrill, and I wonder why she's always so hoarse. Shouldn't a pretty girl like Kate have a pretty voice? "You are so goddamn out of it," she says. "Weirdo."

I giggle and I nod yes. I am a weirdo. I let myself fall backwards onto her bed, and let the delightful combination of feelings rummaging through my head carry me back into sleep.



When I come to, more than an hour has passed. I feel better rested than I have in a very long time, since way before I found out I was moontouched. The bandages on my arm have been replaced, and only small two rust-brown dots have formed. Maybe it's something to do with the hormones in vampire saliva, making my wounds heal faster. In the living room, Walter and Kate are busy making an extensive albeit somewhat belated breakfast.

"Hey," Kate whispers. She's got her sunglasses back on, which is a shame. "You're awake. How are you feeling?"

"Really well actually," I say. "Like some burden has fallen from my shoulders."

"Nice," Walter says. "Maybe now I won't be as anemic during work anymore."

That stings. I feel somewhat jealous, but also realize it's not my place to be jealous- Kate needs blood, or she dies. I join them making lunch, making sure my bread is exactly as toasted as I like it. Walter has bought a lot more than I anticipated, so there's croissants to eat as well and different kinds of fruit spreads.





“Stuff was discounted, don’t feel bad about eating it all,” he says while gesturing at the now well-set table. “Helps with the lightheadedness as well.”

Kate taps me on my arm, and I show her the bandages. “Those are healing incredibly fast,” she whispers.

“I thought that might have something to do with you?” She shakes her head. “No, not me.”

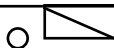
I shrug and sit down at the table. It’s comfy, the three of us. If I didn’t plan on going back to my parents as soon as possible I might even be able to imagine living here.

“Are you doing anything this Saturday?” Walter asks. “I’m going to watch sitcoms so if you have nothing to do feel free to join.”

“I don’t know,” I answer. “I’ll check my phone, some friends might want to talk to me.”

Breakfast feels at once nostalgic and new. I’ve only just met these people, and eating my childhood comfort food while sort of living out my childhood daydreams with them makes it all a little overwhelming. When I’ve eaten my fill, drank my tea and my orange juice, I check my phone. Six





missed calls from Robin. I think about returning a call for a moment, but decide against it. I can't really bring myself to talk to Robin right now, and besides, I barely know him.

I've gotten several whatsapp messages from Hiro.

'U ok? Did u get home safe?', 'If u died on the way home let me know', and 'I know a good noodle stand near our school. If ur still alive want 2 hang out?'

I message him to let him know I'm fine, and that I might come back on those noodles later. Last, there's a message from Noor.

'Sareth says sorry', then a smiley followed by 'Want to hang out? We're smoking weed in your schoolyard.'

That feels a little scary. My last interaction with Sareth and her friends was excessively bad, and my last interaction with Noor with other people present was also not great. But then again, if Noor has intervened on my behalf, it might be good to make things right with Sareth. If I could just explain I'm not what they all think they are, that I'm like them, then I might just be able to go to school without being scared of them. Hell, I might be able to finally integrate with other Moontouched. By now, if I could sit and





eat with Maria and Theresa, I'd gladly wash the paint out of my hair. Jan and Amy haven't exactly been good friends to me. I decide to message Noor that I'm on my way.

"I'm going to hang out with some friends from school," I tell Kate and Walter. "I might go get noodles with another friend in the evening, but I'll be home before that and let you all know, alright?"

"Alright," Walter says and Kate whispers.

I rush to my room to put on something to hide my injury, and settle on my Maria Mithras sweater. Somewhat hastily, I brush my hair and check if my face looks presentable in the bathroom mirror. Then, I'm off. School is within walking distance from here, but it's still a good fifteen minutes away. The entire way there, I'm plagued with anxiety and an elevated heartbeat. Still, it's nothing compared to meeting the nightmare demon. Additionally, I'm probably still somewhat high from the things Kate did to me, and that helps. When I reach the inner schoolyard, I immediately spot Sareth, Theresa and Maria sitting on the concrete ping pong table. They wave at me, and I wave back as I approach them.



I wonder where Noor is as Maria and Theresa get up and approach me.

“Hey” - Before I can say anything else, Maria punches me in the stomach at full force.

Reeling from the sudden pain, I fall to my knees. The two Mirror Court sisters then each twist one of my arms behind my back, and drag me back up to my feet.

“Help,” I cry. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I thought you wanted to see me. Noor told me.”

Neither of them answer. I try to wriggle out of their hold, but they just twist my arms further up my back until my shoulders feel like they’re on fire, and I’m forced to stop resisting.

“Well well well,” Sareth says, as she hops off the ping pong table and walks up to me. “If it isn’t everyone’s favourite little undercover shadow girl.”

“I didn’t do anything to you,” I yelp in pain. “Why are you doing this to me?”





I suddenly remember the murders. Right. The murders. The murders that Sareth probably did. I feel unfathomably stupid for not thinking about that fifteen minutes ago.

Sareth spits, and I flinch. Her phlegm hits the ground before me.

“Sareth,” I cry. “Please. I’m Moontouched. My life is in shambles too. I’ve looked up to you, Maria and Theresa for the past two years at school. Noor said things would be okay.”

“Noor,” Sareth laughs. “Noor says whatever I want her to say.”

“Please,” I whisper. “Don’t kill me.”

“Let me explain a few things,” Sareth says. “Both to get me into the proper mental state, and so that you understand why, exactly, I hate you so much.”

“Please,” I repeat.

“First I will explain to you about the world, and then about my place in it,” Sareth begins. “This world is fucked beyond recognition. One night, magic became real again. The new Aeon, that Crowley had predicted, dawned. But



instead of elevating humankind to a new level, instead of allowing for evolution to run its course, the governments of this world banded together to kill this magic. Magic. The thing little girls dream of. And us, of course. We have to die. This is their world, the humans their world and there is no place for us in it. Doesn't that bring you to rage? Doesn't that make you want to burn it all down?"

"Yes," I say. "Yes," I say again. Before I can say anything else, Sareth kicks me in the stomach.

"Bullshit," she says. "Here you sit, with your painted hair and your expensive pants and hoodie. You don't want to burn down shit. You, you want to be a human." She spits when she says 'human'.

"Aren't," I manage to say while coughing up vomit from her kick. "You human too? You're not Moontouched right?"

"That brings me to my second point," Sareth says with a sadistic smile on her face. "My place in this world. See, since I was a little kid I've known I was different. Special. I waited for my hair to turn white for months after Maria and Theresa turned. Months turned to years. Eventually I realized it wasn't happening. This world with magic in it, and I was one of the villains. This feeling eventually turned





into resentment, and resentment turned into entitlement. Do you know what fuels Witches' magic, Marieken?"

"Narcissism," I say. "The honest belief that the entire world should change to suit your needs."

"Very good," Sareth says, clapping as she does. "My belief is that I'm owed magic. That I deserve to get all the magic in the world, and that I will get to trample this filthy human world underfoot. Ten years from now, me and my two beautiful wives are living in a palace, attended to by human servants."

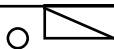
She's delusional, I realize. Then again, aren't I as well?

"You're insane," I say. "You're going to kill me over that?"

"I am going to take away your magic," Sareth says. "Dying is a side effect of that."

She puts her left hand around my throat. It feels more like a steel clamp closing around my throat. As she does so, Maria and Theresa let go of me. I grab ahold of Sareth's arm to try and pull it from my throat, but it doesn't budge.

"Mine," Sareth says. "You didn't deserve this to begin with."



A horrific pain shoots through my body. I can feel my shadow, my inner shadow, my shadow-soul, tearing free from my body. I try to scream, but she's got my windpipe crushed.

I am going to die, it shoots through my head as I feel her tugging at my soul. Stripping away little strands of shadowy power as she slowly ups the pressure. My entire being is going to be sucked away. And for what. She's delusional. Then again, aren't I as well? My ID card says 'Mithras'. My dad never filled out my adoption forms. My parents were never going to take me back home. Tears fill my eyes. It's unfair that I have to confront this right now. I wish I could've died happy, thinking of Kate's beautiful eyes, looking forward to sleeping in my own bed again and introducing Robin and Ruby-Lynn to my father.

It's about delusions, I realize. About belief. I try to believe that I can escape, that I can shadow-step away from her grip, but I can't. The antipsychotics cloud my brain too much for the required mental images, and even if I could push through that, her grip on my throat is stronger than steel. It isn't fair, I want to scream. These powers are mine. Mine. Mine and mine alone. After all the misery I've been through, I should've been allowed to play with my second





shadow more, to teleport around and to scare Robin by turning into a shadowy mass of tentacles and eyes.

As I mentally cry out in anguish, a sound- or rather a sensation- akin to a jet engine starting builds up in my soul. Mine. These powers are mine. They're not Sareth's. I'm the one who scored ninety five on the Paraphysics Aptitude test, the second highest ever. If she wants to make this a competition of entitlement, I'll show her.

Deep inside me, the jet engine flares to life. I understand what Hiro said now. I couldn't sense my own power before, how deep a well of energy it was. Now that I can, I almost drown into it.

But no matter how much I struggle against Sareth, I cannot stop the flow. Darkness steadily gets drained away. I close my eyes and try to focus on Sareth her power, Sareth her soul. It's a tiny pinprick compared to my own, I tell myself. If she wants my power, she can have it. She can drown in it.

That's it, I realize. The mental image required to beat her.

I give her all of it. I extend my entire mind, shadow and soul into Sareth's body. More power than she could ever





hope for. I pour it all into her, and it washes her soul along into a torrent of shadow. I close my eyes just in time for her eyes to go wide. She cancels her spell, but it is too late. My power recedes back into me, dragging her along with it. Sareth's empty body lets go of my neck, and stumbles for a bit before falling over backwards. Inside the endless well of shadow deep inside me, I can feel her cry. Feel her struggle not to dissolve, not to be digested by my soul. The roar of the jet engine overpowers her cries as they get softer, and eventually fade. Maria and Theresa both scream. I turn around, and see them. See two frightened, pathetic Moontouched who thought Sareth was their god, their savior.

They turn and run.

Completely out of it, I look at my hands. They're still the same hands I've always had. Behind me, I hear a voice.

"So it was you."

I turn around to face Hiro. "No," I say. "She started it."

Hiro is paler than ever. He grips his katana in both hands, in a pose ready to strike.





“It’s overwhelming. You’re even stronger now. I don’t know how you managed to hide your power in between your murders, but I cannot let this continue. You’ll become unstoppable,” Hiro says.

Murders? I didn’t do that. That was Sareth.

“Marieken Mithras,” Hiro solemnly says. “On my honour as a ninja, for the murder of three high school students, I hereby sentence you to death.”





Hiro looks at me, frightened, while I can't stop looking at my hands. I've killed Sareth. What's more, I can feel an excess of power in my mind. In my blood. It's drowning out the dampening effects of the medication in a terrifying roar.

"I didn't do it," I mumble while staring at my hands. "It was self defense."

As I turn to face Hiro, he charges me with his katana. He's incredibly fast, and my first reflex is to flinch backwards. I find myself about ten meters back, in the shadow of the school building. A shadow-step.

"Hiro!" I yell. "I'm not the murderer."

"I saw you kill Sareth with my own eyes, demon!"

For a second I think he believes me anyway, because he sheathes his katana. Then he crouches down, and I realize what he's about to do. I narrowly manage to dodge to the side as he rushes forward with supernatural speed, unsheathing his katana mid-flight and cutting a massive gash into the wall where I was standing a moment ago.

"Hiro!" I scream.





"I can see auras, Marieken." He's sad. Solemn. Like he's grieving. "I saw what you did to Sareth. You ate her. Three murders do not explain your overwhelming amount of power, Marieken. I know you must've done this more often."

"I didn't!"

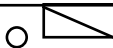
He comes at me, again, or so it seems for a second. Instead of drawing his katana, he dodges to the side at the last second and hurries through a series of gestures with his hands. He splits into six, and he and his clones surround me.

"I thought we were friends," I yelp.

"I thought so too," I hear from six voices at once.

"Hiro, stop!" I scream. He doesn't give any indication he's hearing any more.

I've got my back to the wall, literally and metaphorically. If I don't know which Hiro is the real Hiro, I can't dodge his attacks. And if he won't stop, he's going to kill me. I can't kill Hiro the way I've killed Sareth. Hiro is a good person. I'll run instead, I decide and try to imagine being



a shadow. I am a shadow fleeing along the shadows on the wall, I am a shadow fleeing along the shadows on the wall I repeat to myself as I close my eyes. I'm successful but only for a short distance before the wall spits me out again. Behind me, Hiro runs along it, katana outstretched.

"Hiro!" I don't know what to do but scream again. I can't focus on the mental images required for long enough. The clouds in my brain won't let me think of things that aren't real.

He catches up to me and swings for my neck. I reflexively close my eyes and throw up my arms in a futile effort to not be beheaded, and to my surprise it works. When I open my eyes, I see an oddly flat, fluid black shape has sprouted from the ground and caught Hiro's sword in mid air. A tentacle of solid darkness. I try to think back to the incident with my mom, when I no longer was Marieken but instead was fully consumed by what I later learned was my 'penumbra', the part of my shadow-soul that mixes with the light of this world. I fail, and Hiro manages to cut the shadowy tentacle in half and immediately swings at me again. I stumble backwards, and a sharp pain shoots through my arm, followed by an immediate icy numbness





spreading from my wrist, upward. The only warmth I can still feel on that arm that of a warm fluid-

My brain isn't working properly. I keep spiraling into these distracting trains of thoughts. Blood pours down my arm and I see my right hand lie on the pavement. For the second time today, I fall to my knees in pain, grasping at the stump of my wrist, desperately trying to keep the blood inside my body to not die.

"I don't wanna die," I cry, as Hiro switches his katana to a reverse grip, and turns around. "Perish," he says as he drives his sword backwards with both hands, straight through my chest.

I've never felt pain before in my life, I realize as the katana shatters the cartilage between my ribs, cuts through the fatty tissue above my spine and pierces my spine, erupting from my back. True pain, a pain that slows down time enough for me to feel every single splinter of cartilage from my ribcage penetrate my lungs like a shot of hail.

"It wasn't like that," I try to say, but all my lungs produce is blood. I cough and convulse as Hiro pulls his katana out of my body again. Everytime I instinctively try to breathe in, all I feel is blood and blood and blood and I start coughing



again. I won't ever manage to cough up enough to be able to breathe again, I realize. This is how I'm going to die.

I've thought that before, earlier today. When Sareth had me in a chokehold and was sucking out my very soul, I thought I was going to die. I wonder how this is different from that, as I lose the ability to cough and an icy chill crawls through my body. Probably because I lost a hand and several internal organs this time, instead of something so ephemeral as 'pieces of my soul'. As the puddle of blood around me stops growing, I feel oddly at peace, and sharp. Like I can clearly see for the first time in weeks. It's strange, I realize, to treat my soul as some ephemeral abstraction, something unimportant, as opposed to my body. Isn't my soul much more important? I was warned that taking enough magic suppressors would cause me to vanish, because I'm 'made of magic'.

Then, isn't my soul much more concrete, and my body an afterthought?

My body is only here to cast my shadow on the wall, after all. Most of it is still here, too. Melting into a living shadow was a mental image, and coming back was letting go of that image. What if I do that in reverse? What if I let go of the mental image of having a body and melt into shadow?





Then, wouldn't I just have to imagine having a body to reconstitute it from its component parts?

Smiling, I let go, and I die.

Or rather, what is 'I' stops, and another 'I' takes its place almost immediately. This 'I' is a mass of shadow, omnipresent wherever the light is not. Having let go of the illusion of a body, I no longer need a brain to process the visual input of the eyes that sprout along the shadows on the school's enclosed inner yard.

"You've got to be kidding me," Hiro says as he turns around and sees shadows with teeth and eyes shrinking into humanoid form as I am reconstituted.

I've done it. I've reassembled my entire body down to the last atom by forming a picture of 'me' in my mind. I laugh, a roaring, maniacal laugh. From the corner of my eyes, I spot my hair. I ruffle through it with my hands, and smile. A beautiful silver-white.

"Forbidden demon technique - soulless sword!" I hear Hiro yell a couple meters away from me as he cuts his left hand open with his own katana. A frightful aura envelops the sword.





"Hiro," I say, laughing. "You can stop now."

"You are no longer human," he says, spitting on the ground. "I've never seen anyone casually come back to life. Not ever. Did you burn one of the souls of the kids you killed as some perverted form of a one-up?"

"Hiro," I say, now angry. "I didn't do it. I didn't kill the others. Sareth tried to kill me and I reversed her spell, turned it on herself. I almost died."

"I have a hard time believing that from someone indistinguishable from a Nightmare Demon, Marieken. Did you see yourself just now? A mass of eyes and smiling teeth. I don't believe you."

"If you want to fight," I say, as my anger grows and slowly envelops me, "I can't promise I won't kill you."

I am me. I am myself. Right now, I am the single most important person in my life. I'm probably the most powerful girl in the Shadow Court ever. If Hiro wants to fight so badly, he can get a fight. He rushes towards me for a rematch, sword enveloped in dark flames and blood running down the blade. He doesn't understand what I am right now. That he isn't running towards me, just towards





my body. Every shadow my shadow touches is me. In this enclosed schoolyard, I am gigantic. I am a god. I emerge fully from the shadows, a mass of tentacles and eyes. Hiro's eyes go wide as I skewer him with seven tentacles, as I sprout more mouths than he can count and rip him limb from limb, throwing every shred of flesh I shave off of him into a different mouth. Before I fully realize what I am doing I realize I have devoured a second person in less than thirty minutes after the first. First Sareth's soul, now Hiro's flesh.

As I become incarnate into a singular body with beautiful white hair again, I stare at my hands. It feels fitting. Soul and flesh, friend and foe. Light and dark.

These are insane thoughts, something whispers from my subconscious. On the ground, a second shadow sprouts from my feet.

Did I forget my medication when I reformatted my body?



## □ Moonlight Cantata: Hiro's World □

Throughout the world, there must have been an uncountable amount of children reenacting their favourite cartoon on the playground. Most of them grew out of this, of course. And few actually believe themselves to be a Transformer or Jedi knight or hobbit, even if the boundaries between one's self and one's character during 'play' get blurry at a young age.

I was twelve when I accidentally threw a ki blast at another first grader in my high school. It wasn't strong, and he got away with third degree burns. I got lucky too. I got away with a lifelong prescription of antipsychotics and a triple dose of suppressor meds after scoring fifty-five on Paraphysical Aptitude. Not everyone is that lucky. I've heard that over in the United States they lock you up for life. Denmark dissects high-scoring students and sells their blood to the highest bidder. When I was fourteen, I encountered my first Nightmare Demon. Unable to shake the juvenile feeling I was a superhero, destined for greatness, or special I went looking for it myself. I found it, and punched and kicked its skull in. That got me therapy. I was allowed to use my powers, but I wasn't allowed to believe I was an anime ninja. That was paradoxical, of course, but





there's nobody with powers in the entire government hierarchy. They just don't understand it.

"Doesn't me being able to do anime ninja things mean that I am an anime ninja?" I frequently asked.

"Don't let the schizophrenic thoughts win," was the answer, and having my medication dose raised.

Nightmare Corruption. Destabilization. The supernatural encroaching on the natural. All symptoms of the same thing.

"The demon king is reawakening!" my subconsciousness yells at me, but I know that's wrong. There's no demon king. There's no ninja clans. Those are stories my mind made up to cope with a world I do not understand, to safely channel powers I was not evolved to properly deal with. Collective belief in magic is the real problem. Too many people believe in the impossible nowadays, and making them not believe it is difficult with witches flying around on brooms and demons eating your coworkers. Ridicule is the answer. Make it lower class. Make it filthy. Make it something the mentally unwell get up to, something morally heinous you cannot steep to.



And it works wonders. Test scores are dropping, less children are being switched out by whatever mechanism replaces them with Moontouched, and less and less people get eaten by demons.

Part of that is on me, though.

Every week I get a list of haunted locales from Ms. Rosenkrantz, and I head there with the katana she found for me. It's a beautiful gift- a real cursed katana from ancient Japan. The perfect tool to amplify my specific schizophrenic ninja fantasies. And when I'm dashing straight through someone's nightmares made manifest, I do feel like a ninja. It's almost real. For a second I forget about the real nightmare.

For some reason they make me go to school. So that I can have a future after all of this, they say. It makes no sense to me. One of these days I either get ripped to shreds by a demon who turns out to be a little above my paygrade, or they manage to fix the destabilization of reality. And if they do, my powers will vanish along with the demons. My sword will become a normal historic artifact, no longer the legendary demonic blade. I will impale myself on top of it, and die together with the rest of the magic. This world rejected me, and I think I'd rather leave than stay behind,





forever medicated. Powerless. Genuinely insane. Attached to delusions of the past.

Today I'm not fighting a nightmare demon. Today I'm fighting real evil. In front of me is Marieken Mithras, who is a veritable hurricane of Paraphysical power. Enough to break the world three times over. This should entice me. This should charm me. Perhaps, ages ago, I would've been charmed. I would've pledged to her my blade- if only she would overthrow this rotten world.

Marieken has killed several of her schoolmates. Marieken, from a selfish desire for power, has drained the very soul out of one of her classmates and most likely several more. Juliet had me take her to fight a nightmare demon, and it terrified her. Broke her. I wonder if this world scares her, that she thinks she needs more power. She's worse off than I am, I realize. When the magic disappears, so will she. She's not human, more like a spirit.

"Marieken Mithras," I solemnly tell her. "On my honour as a ninja, for the murder of three high school students- I sentence you to death!"

My honour as a ninja. Despite hating this world, I cling to childish delusions of cartoon heroes who stand up for



the common folk. Real world ninja were assassins for hire. Contract killers. I know all that- but I'm delusional, not a historian.

A girl is dead on the pavement in front of me, and Marieken did that. Marieken, who I thought was pretty cute. Who talked to me despite everything. She doesn't even listen to my judgment. She's staring at her hands, a maniacal smile on her face, mumbling something I can't make out. I have to take her out before she grows worse. I dash for her, and swing at her with my beloved sword. She dodges- no- she teleports out of my way. One moment she's there, another moment she's standing in the shadow of the school walls.

Teleporting from shadow to shadow. Cute trick. She would've made one hell of a ninja.

"Hiro!" She yells at me. "I'm not the murderer!"

"I saw you kill Sareth with my own eyes, demon," I spit back at her. I have to dehumanize her. I can't cut down a pretty girl I go to math class with. I can cut down demons. I've done so before.





If she teleports, I just have to hit her fast and hard enough that she can't react. I sheathe my katana, and crouch down. Quick-draw rushdown technique, activate.

Still, she manages to dodge. I cut a massive gash into the school building and can already hear Ms. Rosencrantz yell at me for causing property damage in my mind.

"Hiro!" She screams at me. Her voice is full of fear. Is fear what drove her to do this?

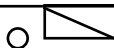
"I can see auras, Marieken," I explain to her. "I saw what you did to Sareth. You ate her. Three murders do not explain your overwhelming amount of power, Marieken. I know you must've done this more often."

"I didn't," she says, still with that maniacal grin on her face. Still staring at her hands. It makes it difficult to believe her, as much as I would want to.

She's too fast to land a straightforward attack on. Instead, I rush towards her while activating my clone jutsu. Several copies of me help me surround her, back her into a corner.

"I thought we were friends," she begs. "I thought so too," I answer her.





Duty comes before friendship. Otherwise I would have abandoned this path long ago, would have given my loyalty to a cult instead of Ms. Rosencrantz. Again, she teleports, but too soon this time. I can predict where she's going, and dash after her. I'm faster than a car, and with a little luck she has some kind of cooldown on her teleport ability.

She has. She can't dodge, and throws up her arms while reflexively staggering backwards. I didn't expect her to do that, so instead of her head, I take one of her hands off. There's no recovering from this injury, though. She's out of the fight. Still, I can sense her aura. Dark, deep and full of rage. A power that can easily devour the world when unchecked.

I have to stop her. "I don't want to die," she begs and cries, falling to her knees.

I know Marieken, I say to myself. I don't wanna die either. I wish we'd both lived in a different world, one better suited for the kinds of people we are.

I can't look her in the face while I do it, so I turn around. I try to sound strong as I drive my sword backwards, and through her chest. She falls over, dead, and I feel the hur-





ricane of psychic power subsiding. Finally peace and quiet.

"I'm sorry Marieken," I tell her corpse. I watch the puddle of blood around her body slowly grow until I can no longer bring myself to bear witness to this grisly sight. Still, I do not want to forget it. I want it etched on my soul.

I turn around, and walk away. As I do so, Marieken's aura flares back to life, a hundred-fold stronger than it was before.

"You've got to be kidding me," as I turn around to face Marieken's second form. Her body has molten into a dark puddle, a shadowy mass quickly expanding to fill the entire schoolyard. A thousand eyes and mouths look at me from the darkness. So this is what Marieken really is. A hungry mass of shadow.

The shadows condense and merge, turning back into a girl. She's got stark white hair now, and purple eyes.

If she can just come back to life, I'll have to cut down her soul along with her body.



"Forbidden demon technique - soulless sword!" I yell as I feed my blade my own blood, awakening the Nightmare Demon trapped inside the sword.

"Hiro," Marieken laughs. "You can stop now." Her voice is inhuman, projected directly into my head. She sounds just like a Nightmare Demon.

"You are no longer human," I tell her. "I've never seen anyone casually come back to life. Not ever. Did you burn one of the souls of the kids you killed as some perverted form of a one-up?"

I want to be wrong. I want her to tell me I'm wrong. I want her to tell me she didn't just expend Sareth's life for another shot at life herself.

"Hiro," she says, angry enough to almost blow me off my feet. "I didn't do it. I didn't kill the others. Sareth tried to kill me and I reversed her spell, turned it on herself. I almost died."

"I have a hard time believing that from someone indistinguishable from a Nightmare Demon, Marieken. Did you see yourself just now? A mass of eyes and smiling teeth. I don't believe you, Marieken."





“If you want to fight,” she says, her anger making way for a playfully sadistic growl, “I can’t promise I won’t kill you.”

She seems to take pleasure in taunting me like this.

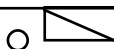
With my sword awakened, I am much, much faster than a car. Closer to a jet. I can feel it hunger, feel it draw itself towards Marieken’s overwhelming amount of lifeforce like a magnet. I dash towards her for the umpteenth time today.

In less than a thousandth of a second, she falls apart into a mass of shadow again. Tentacles shoot at me from all directions faster than I could ever hope to be, impaling me.

My eyes go wide as hungry mouths open up in the shadows around me. What a fucking shitshow, I think as my limbs are torn from my body and Marieken devours me.



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## Synopsis


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



by: [nekosattva](#)

## *Last Time*

Yelena is about to learn what her duty as a ‘mahima-ta’ really is in Little King Samuel’s kingdom - it may not be what she expects, but that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s any better...



CW: rats, mass destruction, blood, injury, nudity, body horror (fantasy), kidnapping, child abuse (physical), guns, child sexualization (parental)

And if I could reach you somehow, what would I say? My thoughts are disordered, disjointed. I try to write it down on whatever I find; the hood of a car, bright wood, sheets of metal. I try to make the words come out. I'm walking down an empty street. A few insects crawl beside me. Rat gnaw fruitlessly on the shards of glass that poke out of the windows & doors. I'm not sure what words to use; how do I feel about my home becoming a location? I see a bus map beside a pile of shards: a relic of some yesterday before ruins, when the words had a use. I point at where I am, to make where I am a place. I try to think of the words.

I'm beginning to forget my name. Though I remember yours, dear Lanka. People here are chalk, soft and powdery; they crumble and spread into the wind when I





squeeze them. I walk down empty streets, and I watch for dogs in the little tunnels between the buildings. I wish I could call out for you in the courtyards between the tall concrete buildings, under the thousands of clotheslines hanging above me like nerves. I wish I could call out your name, to hear it echo and bounce in the empty canals underneath rusting, bronze bridges; to hear it bring life. I am learning to put it all into words somehow.

And what I find here in this winding, circular walkway of shuttered stores? I hear my own footsteps, I hear my own heartbeat. A woman's face, red-cheeked, blonde; her face explodes with light. I am in the presence of civilization. And what is crunching 'neath my feet? Plastic, cardboard, Styrofoam; a can of Coca-Cola sticks to my ragged shoes. I am in the presence of civilization. The woman is smiling, but I can tell it's not honest. I wish I could call out your name. I walk down the corridors beneath the empty overpasses; dozens of cars lay still, rusting with wheels strewn on the asphalt. I remember that we walked beside each other, our hands joining together. Do you remember the pink flamingoes in the sandpit? They looked like beacons in a still pool of grey. You took the flamingoes in your hands; you raised your leg, you presented them to the sky. Then we watched the sun set over



a great big lake that glowed with mysterious green vitality. It was the greatest day of my life; I do not share that memory with anyone, fearing that they might crush it in their greedy little hands. I grasp the handle of the Tokarev; cold, functional steel steadies my nerves.

I'm beginning to forget my name. I am the only one left. If someone called it out, I could not respond. I might recognize the shapes, the way the pitch goes from one to another-- I could not respond. She called me 'Natalia,' or 'Nay-toe's child.' And am I supposed to believe that you're really there? Through the doors made of crumbling steel, on stairs down into deep tunnels flooded with rain? Am I supposed to believe that you're there; rushing through my veins, dancing in the light that peers through a window? Are you there when I feel the heaviness in my chest, when I smell the ben-zin as it burns my nose, in the claws and jaws of stray dogs? And are you there beside me on this ship, rudderless, drifting in free space, awaiting eagerly for the sun to break through the clouds just one last time? Are you really there? I find it hard to believe.

I walk through the park. I'm trying to find you somehow, though I know you won't be there or here. I walk past the park, down the train tracks. Beside me, there's a



creek in which a train has collapsed. Green vines rise up from the cracks. I spit down into the creek. Further down the train tracks, I step into an abandoned train. It's filled with curse words, curses; a makeshift table and a few bottles of beer. The windows have all been shattered. I walk down towards the station. The walls are covered in black soot, they form shadows of the past as it might have been once. Men at the booth, selling phones. Women in their Sunday dress. It's the dust that sticks to the walls. A few pieces of metal hang from the ceiling of the station. The heat of the sun makes the wires bleed and melt. The walls howl as the wind rushes through the cracks. It makes me feel calm, in a bittersweet way.

And I remember your face. How it changes; you were brash, then shy. Your lips pursed; they folded into themselves. You smiled, without judgement. The edges of your hair were colored like the sun. It made me feel like something powerful was growing inside me. I lean down besides the plants which have all withered, calcified and turning gray and white. I grasp one of the flowers; it crumbles in my hands. The dust spills and attaches itself to the braids of my hair. A plume of ash is taken by the wind. Is that really you?



How did I end up here? An abandoned gas station by the side of the water. I find a few cans of tarragon soda in a house blown up by fire; I chew on dry, fibrous meat and try to wash it all down. I feel blood seeping down my leg. I take off my clothes: the large overalls, my blackened socks, my tattered sneakers; I place them in a neat bundle beside the cans and the pistol, and I jump into the water. The water tastes metallic. I imagine spikes growing out of my head; I imagine metal instruments itching and twitching, with thick wires, breaking through the skin. I hum something to myself; the melody is plain, monotonous, useful like leather. The stillness terrifies me. I remember butterflies circling the bushes. I remember birds floating down to peck at the surface of the water. I leave the water; I cover myself in a few shiny survival blankets. I study my skin, which is full of craters and bulges beside dull hills. A powerful shiver makes my body shake and rattle. A strong sadness pours into my stomach and I feel it whine. I try to think of the words. I etch something into the survival blanket with a broken pen. I try to carve out my name, but I'm not sure of what it should look like. I imagine the surface of the water coming to life with ripples dancing freely among the stars. I forget how many days it's been. I hear the words, I can hear them. I lie on the cold concrete for a while.



I write you a letter, dear Lanka. I write you to confess. The memories of my life hit me in the head every vulnerable moment at 100km/h like they're riding Papa's KAMAZ. Life is the great forgetfulness; I forgot the moments of my life so easily that I spend most of my time tracing my steps backwards. I don't understand the boundaries between authentic memories and fantasies, for I'm a powerless spectator in either. I'm a gigantic drifting eye that roams the landscape; I'm an alien observer, watching from her spaceship somewhere remote and distant. I shut my eyes and sink within myself; what do I see?

I was taken from the closet by a few vultures, encircling the remains after the violence. I waited for the noises to stop before leaving the closet, but they never did-- the deep thumps were constant, followed by engines and whirring. The camp as I knew it had ceased to exist. I wonder what had happened to the wares of the bazaar: trampled, looted, or the sanctity of commerce upheld? I giggled; sarcasm always reminds me of my father. It's a hollow joy. I open my eyes and look down at my hands; their youthful plump is gone, I see functional veins. I look down at my body, I count the scars and bruises. I welcome the chill of the wind, I shake the habitual. I appear to myself as a pale vessel; the sun falls on my skin which eats



up the heat with glee. The camp as I knew it became a flat crater. I remember the love songs on the radio. I am free; I have no home, I have no state. I am merely a vessel, a little coin that carries her value on her face. I am a symbol of pure intercourse between man, I am currency. I am Natalia, I am 'Nay-toe's child.' Take me, sell me. Make me useful again. There's nothing tying me down; I carry no burden of history with me.

When they took me I was so scared I fainted I fainted twice. I remember columns of white light collapsing before me. A lot of masked men. They put me in a truck; I was on a pile of cloth, beside other children. I did not know our fate. A woman opened her veil and shouted at me: "kuda nas perevezut?" I shrugged; I did not know where we were going. I would have said that I'd never known where I was going. A small boy jumped into my lap and held me. I thought it was precious, I embraced him tightly. He looked up at my damaged face with probing eyes. I am the shape of things to come. A few rays of sun break through 'tween the cracks of the truck's cloth exterior. I pointed towards the light, he followed my gaze. It never goes out. You are so free, it's terrifying. You are like mist, flowing through the breeze. I suppose I should be old enough to know. Without a name to put on our



thoughts, they disappear; they don't even become memories. Without a name to put to ourselves, we're flesh and bone with no purpose beyond our function. I thought of a family adopting the boy, the mother cooing in his ear, comforting him by telling him it was all just a bad dream and that he was home now with papa and mama. I thought of Nay-toe's crest above him, protecting him from the ills of the world. Under the heat of that symbol, this other world is kept from you; you will know an endless stream of aisles, full of shining products. You'll sit in a car, licking ice cream. You won't ever hear the screaming under the asphalt. It's not in a language you care to understand. A girl beside me placed her wet face on my shoulder; they mistake my emptiness for strength.

After we'd been chased out of the truck by about two masked men, I looked at the cliffs below us: the rocks were full of dancing lights. They wore green overalls; they looked like they'd been assembled from a box. I saw a valley of amber glass beneath us, and the lights poured into the crystal and scattered with beams and flashes. The small boy took a grenade from one of the masked men's belt, pulled on the pin like it was a toy, pulled it back like canned fish, and there was a big commotion. A few women ran, screeching. A few of the masked men started to





wrestle with the boy, who kept the grenade tightly in the middle of his chest. Another man without a mask jumped out of the truck with a piece of wood; he started beating the boy, hitting some of the masked men by mistake. The girl took me by the hand. She started shouting, "byegi!" Her face was red and swollen with tears, ripe with fear. "Byegi!" We ran between large pillars of glass, down the cliffs. I heard something explode behind us; I pulled on the girl's hand to force her to stop, and we tugged as I watched the smoke rise up from behind us. "Byegi! Suka, byegi!" I was disgusted by her, and I pulled on her arm and I pushed her down, and I forced her underneath me. I wasn't sure why I did it. As soon as I felt her body grow slack with surrender, I let go of her and she ran off with her sobs growing louder and louder. I watched her tumble and roll over rocks down the cliffs, down towards the glass, and I thought about helping her.

That's my confession, Lanka. I'm walking beside an abandoned swimming pool. The glass of the gigantic windows have all shattered. The old glass was swept away, to make room for the new glass; a few large spikes hung over the empty pool. I walked through the locker rooms. The glass crunched beneath me. A few rats had nested in a hole beside some shrapnel. After I'd left the cliffs, I





followed a trail of cars. I recognize the buildings; I recognize the shape of the shadows they'd left, and the name of the roads. They've all died here, Lanka. There are shards of glass sticking out of the windows of the cars. I recognize this little 'magazin;' I used to buy comics and read in the shade of this beautiful old tree. They'd taken away the beautiful old tree eventually, which made me understand immediately that the relationship I thought we'd had with nature was my own stupid little fairytale. And I understood that when I let the little ladybug walk up and down my fingers, I was just killing time. And that when I let you take the little ladybug up on your face before it flew away, we were just kidding each other. The shade is still there, somehow; one of the buildings had collapsed into the other building, and they formed a strange, twisted braid with a few loops. I took two big handfuls of my own hair, fizzy, dusty, and I formed my own braid as a reminder. The streets glittered with dust. It was difficult to breath, and I coughed a lot.

This is where I was born, Lanka. A graveyard for all possibilities is wet 'neath my feet. Across the parking lot, there's a small clinic; there used to be a small clinic but it is now just a display pedestal for a large, unexploded rocket. I admire the shape; tall, masculine. It pierces the





virgin air, brave and unafraid. I extend my arms above my head and I form a little wedge with my hand-- I imagine myself as a rocket, crashing into a building. I imagine everything falling to my powerful flame. I birth the world into white hot heat. I am a life-giver. I was an angel, held up to the light; everyone wanted to touch my little feathers. I jumped out the window, and took flight. And behind me, a trail of figurines followed.

If you were here with me, Lanka, I'd watch you hop down the stairs, onto the playground. I'd point out the bars, I'd tell you about all the times I'd fallen flat on my ass; I'd demonstrate it for you by doing a few cartwheels, then jumping up on the bars and doing a few pull-ups. Could you take a picture of me, Lanka, while I'm hanging with a careless grin in my face? Or do you stand and watch me quietly, moved by my little childish displays? I hear you calling after me. The slides are encrusted with a strange green muck. An accordion comes screeching in my ears like a seagull, but I'm sure it's a memory. I am lost here in this space filled with everything except any real passage of time. Everything lies suspended, inert and permanent; it neither rots nor grows. I walk up a long flight of stairs, up into a courtyard. The horizon seems like one continuous roof, interrupted by pulses of sharp, jagged glass. Some-



where beneath that horizon, I would have been home. But the buildings no longer distinguish themselves; they now all form a clump of something.

This is my school, Lanka. Or what it used to be. Let me measure out the size of the front gates for you using my feet. I find about fifteen steps to be sufficient to reach the left column from the right column. The gate is covered in green muck. Beyond the gate, you'll find several little gardens about twenty steps wide. Above one of the gardens, there looms a chicken coop. Silvery dust covers the soil of the gardens. The wall behind the chicken coop is tattooed with a few shadows; one of them is covering their eyes. I follow a path made of little stones; a project I'd helped finish. I measure about fifty steps on this path. Besides me, I see small pools of glass. Alongside the path, you see the metal stairs up into the classrooms, where the windows have all shattered. The western side of the building is scarred by thousands of little holes. Painted beside one of the large metal doors is a mural of a folk hero-- she holds a small dagger, and her chin is turned up towards the sun, and her face is glowing. I copy her pose; I imagine myself riding on watercolor plains, tasting gouache dawns on my perfect tongue. I walk up the metal stairs, I try the first door on the left; it is perpendicular to the wall with





the mural. The door does not move. I walk down the stairs, I walk about another forty steps to try the second door. I pull on the handle, and a few shards of glass tumble down and fall onto the ground. Sunlight fills up the hallway. I peek into the structure and find that every surface has become encrusted with glass, such that the school's interior now appears to me like some sort of massive crystalline burrow. I step into the glass, I feel it crack and crumble under my feet. I crawl through the burrow, room by room; I peek into the classrooms, in which desks & chairs & tables & books & pencils have all been suspended in unyielding amber brine. There's a howl through the burrow, I feel a chill and I shudder. I crawl.

The second story. I leave the burrow behind me. The glass here is much more brittle. I push it away; it lies defeated like stale cake. This floor is full of silhouettes. I study them and I give them names. This one is an archer. This one is a horse-rider. This one sells vegetables on Sundays. And this one smiles when she gets herself a caramel candy after school with the pocket change she gets from her auntie. And this little boy is too shy to speak to her so he peeks at her from the window when she's playing hopscotch. I think of fantasies as flying machines, soaring over the landscapes of our memories; and I think



of crashing into that landscape, I think of it all too often. A silhouette. It comes to me. I walk down the hallway: eighty steps. The windows have all shattered, and shards of glass are embedded into the floor and ceiling. I find a few pianos covered in dust, loitering in the corridors. I press into a key. This is "A." This is "C." The walls shake along. The sound made by the strings remind me of a wolf's howl; it stutters, it warbles. A, C, Eb, Ab. I mash on the keys to make the wolf howl even louder. The crystal whines along. I release the keys and it all ends. I try to imagine your laughter; I choke a bit and it resonates with the strings.

It's still here, all of it. I see drawings stuck to the walls, and the notes hastily scribbled, and the books and the shoes. I find a clock on the ground, fallen from where it used to perch. I try to think of the time I'd like it to be. I set the clock, but the clock does not move forward. I play with the frayed wires hanging from the back; I give up on the clock after about some time has passed and I set it back down on the ground. Let me draw you a schematic of the second story. There are about sixteen rooms, each about fifty steps across. Each of the rooms are identical in their furnishings except for two which are devoted to music and performance. The rooms are all arranged around a large atrium. Atrium; a large open air space within a build-



ing. The name stems from Roman times, Lanka. The Iranians and the Romans killed each other here. I wonder how the land must have looked to them; surely, a mountain is a mountain and a stream is a stream regardless of its name. Who is to say that when I call a 'rabbit' a "rabbit," I give it its true name and hang around its neck its destined meaning? Or is each name just a shadow of something else? I see the mountain; but when I point to the mountain and shout "gora," I'm merely giving a name to my impression of the mountain. Do these thoughts come to you as well, Lanka? I walk into one of the rooms and find something curious. On the western side of the wall, and I know this because I've been tracking the sun; on the western side of the wall, I see a plastic wallpaper illustrating 'Paris.' I know it's 'Paris' because the word "Paris" is in large print in the bottom corner. And what do I see, Lanka? I open the teacher's desk. Some of the paper has been burnt up. I take a few pieces and I take a pencil. And I write to you:

"[a]nd I sit at this little caf-- cafe, sipping my espres-- coffee, the Eiffel Tower rises before me like an iron giantess, reaching up to kiss the Parisian sky with bronze lips. She stands there, bathed in the soft, golden glow of the afternoon sun-- she is elegant, timeless; she is impossibly romantic; as if it were crafted not of steel but of



pure dreams. Her latticework sparkles, like lace woven by the hands of the city itself, and she's delicate yet indomitable, unknowable. Every curve and beam might whisper gossip in your ear: of lovers, artists, and wanderers 'neath its supple legs... [a]nd I sit, entranced; I am merely in its shadow, and I feel every heart beating as one."

I approach the window. The glass crackles beneath my feet; it's familiar and something like home. I fold up my letter to you, I pattern it as a paper airplane; I cut a few flaps and I send it flying out the window and I'm satisfied knowing it'll come to you because you are carried by the wind somehow. And there in that empty space between the ground and the sky is my homeland. I await my spaceship with eager eyes. The landscape is like a massive carpet rolling 'neath me. It all bursts so easy. I blow and a massive wave of dust wipes away everything clean. And are you there? Really?

Call me what you wish, Lenka. I'll be anything you want me to be. I read the names on the lockers. Aza. Ayna. Karina. Katya. Lalita. Liza. Zara. Zula. I use the handle of my TT-33 to break open one of the lockers. I am looking for something to be. I find clothes, shoes; I take off my worn sandals and exchange them for soft, beautiful



little white flats. I shed this tattered skin, made of fraying cotton, and I wear a thick black frock embroidered with hearts. There are no mirrors here, only glass which distorts my broken face, so I myself am still an abstraction, a concept; I've not yet been given flesh by the eye. I am a fact; I am a construct, a deduction from a series of premises. I touch my face, I stroke my flesh and feel my scars; all the signs which demonstrate that I'm here. I feel every ridge, every disfigurement. Nay-toe lives here; my skin is the Zone she haunts.

And so I write you another letter, Lanka. What do I feel under my fingers? I feel supple and fresh skin growing over ruins. From the foot of the mountains in the north, you may take my hand and travel down the long boulevards, down the heart-ways cool and blue, bumping & beating, concrete and asphalt forming hard scabs over bloody soil. Every solid erection on the land is a monument to a stubborn refusal to die; 'ha ha.' Watch as I trace my fingers over the squares, full of statues dedicated to the millions of dead skin cells who gave their all to hold the perimeter. Lanka, touch it with your own fingers too; a showcase of His divine architecture, my nose and my eyes and my ears and my lips are formidable, austere, functional. They are the sites of parade, of feasts. They are symbols





of this solitary State of myself. Above my eyebrows lies the palace, smooth and dotted, with ridges of wisdom. Move your fingers down and you'll find the heart-ways expand into thousands of residence rows in perfect order, ringing together in unison. Now move your fingers closer and you'll find parks, avenues and courtyards, there where the flesh is soft and yielding and red with anticipation. Press deeper. Beneath the skin, you'll find machinery belching, thick black smoke, hot heat with each twitch of the muscle; an industrial line connects the north and the south, taut with electricity. Watch as I move my limbs, and the factory comes alive-- my breathing accelerates, sweat pours from me, and every muscle stands at attention. Deeper still are millions of tracks, tunnels, rails; no part of me lies neglected, remote, and I'm heavy with burdensome blood. Press deeper still; my skeleton is propaganda of the deed, my rigid bones are inflexible and they must never surrender. Release-- a lake of blood where your fingers were, next to gardens and trees, and it is fat and boiling with life. And it should be paradise, but it is not. This letter I will keep to myself.

Here is the room where it started. The day had been uneventful, Lanka. I'd woken up early because one of my sisters had a nightmare. My mother had taken it as a



poor omen. I'd always resented their petty little superstitions, but now I've come even to miss the things that bothered me about my old life. Sasha woke up crying, shouting at how she'd seen birds fall from the sky. Rina woke up, resentful, and pulled on Sasha's hair. Mama pulled them apart and told me to fix breakfast. I screamed at them; something about how I wished I didn't have to share a room with the two brats. I brushed my hair, I splashed cold water into my face. I went to the kitchen and poured milk and grains together into a pot. Since we'd moved into the city, butter became plentiful as to be dull. I refused the butter, to 'watch my figure;' I recognize now that such concerns weren't really my own. Papa told me that back in less enlightened times, I'd already be prepared for marriage. I found the epithet a bit annoying; 'less enlightened times,' I've yet to find any enlightenment at all. I asked Mama about the term 'enlightenment;' she told me something about how people used to live like animals before they lived like us. I thought the explanation strange, as I'd only known the animals to be peaceful even as we rage war on their homelands. I finished my grains, and I put three bows in my hair and I wore a dark green dress. I'd often protested the dresses, as I preferred the costume of the heroes I'd seen on the television: their green khaki pants, their long beards, and their modernized Avtomat Kalash-



nikova. I found their power intoxicating; I was terrified of their still and merciless eyes. I did not know what they fought for, or who they'd fought against. I didn't care; what mattered to me is the stench of that fight that churned my stomach.

Once I'd gotten to school, and I took the blue line of course, I felt the tension in the air as a loud silence. The fields did not buzz with the sound of insects crying, and there were no butterflies spied by the birds perched on the trees. When I was a child, I imagined the animals were so loud because they imparted knowledge on each other. When I discovered that they were incapable of any knowledge whatsoever, my disappointment soon gave way to wonder: and how does the dog know it must dance and whine so sweetly for its meal? I exchanged a few words with Tima, with Lena; they chided me for hiding my secret enthusiasm for boys. My response bored them; I told them that I had no interest in boys whatsoever. How could I tell them that I was obsessed with the men I saw on my television, and no schoolboy could possibly compare? Their concerns were with family, with romance, with kisses traded in dark places secret-secret; I wanted to be a tank shell, I wanted to explode, I wanted to burst through walls. How could I tell them? I told them that they should forget about boys,



and study harder instead. Lena stuck out her tongue at me, and called me a bitch. Tima told me that Lena was just jealous of my beauty. We went up to the second floor, and started our first class of the day. I removed my Russian journal from my bag, and I drew a disgusting cartoon on the empty page next to my diary. The teacher had placed me in the furthest corner, away from the windows, as I'd been prone to day-dreaming when the lessons bored me. I bit on my pen. Suddenly, the sun broke through the clouds.

To call it a 'surprise' would mischaracterize the experience, Lanka. The great surprise was in fact that it was no experience at all. It was a vacuum of experience, a black hole which sucked into its bowels any comprehension or sense I might have had. I woke up, stiff, the ceiling was full of black holes; I felt cold and my heart thumped. I felt as I'd woken up from a long night. Everything was bright and melting onto a flat image, as if it were a dream. I went to rub my eyes but a horrible stinging sensation made me yelp in pain. The strange dream would not go away, and I found it hard to open my eyes without falling stuck in a twitch. The flatness of everything bothered me; I rubbed my eyes again, and I felt a wetness on the hand I could not see. I looked down and saw the pooling of



blood-- I realized that I'd lost an eye. The floor was covered in glass, blood, other things. I rose up from my seat; I held my head in my hands, trying to stop the blood by holding it captive somehow. I looked back at the classroom, I looked at the window; the brightness was unbearable. Everyone in the classroom had disappeared. Things went blacker and blacker; I crawled on the ground, and I felt a weight drag me back into the deep waters of sleep.

When I woke up, I was in some kind of strange vehicle, surrounded by strange letters and numbers and machines. A myriad of tubes came down onto my face. Everything was still flat, robbed of definition, as if I were staring deep into a painting. They spoke in a strange language I'd heard on the television. One of them turned to me and said 'prosnulasj' in a strange accent. I turned my head and a woman looked at me with concern. 'Kharasho,' she said. Her white clothes were splattered in blood. A man with a strange looking rifle sat beside her. The vehicle bucked and kicked like a wild horse. I looked at the patches on his shoulder, and admired the blue, the red, the white. The woman took a syringe and injected something into one of the tubes. "Shto tij vidjela?" She asked. I didn't know how to answer. She repeated it again in her strange, choppy accent; "shto tij vidjela, devotchka?" I couldn't think

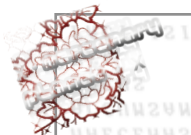


of any words that might answer the question. Any word that came to my mind felt inarticulate, savage, stupid... stupid, stupid, stupid. I felt irritated; I felt like I'd missed my train. I turned my head away, towards the cold steel of the vehicle's interior. I promised myself that I would not speak; not until the next words from my mouth answered her question. And that's how it happened, Lanka.



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by: [baroquepiral](#) + Escher McDonell

MERCENARY PLANET




## CORE PLANETARY BRIEFING: TOWERS (EXCERPTS)

Towers. So named on most galactic maps for its space-scraping spires. They resemble more volcanic plugs than mountains, though people familiar with pharaoh's serpent style reactions may find something uncanny in them. Geological formations taller than Olympus Mons are the norm on Towers though unlike Olympus Mons they are typically temporary.

Life on Towers the whole world is defined by sinkholes.

POI datafile





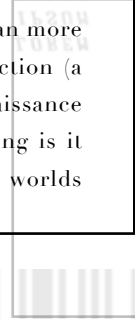



Glaciation is bad not because it makes parts of the world cold and uninhabitable, it is bad because it makes the crust collapse.

Cities are not bad because they are less livable or use more resources or whatever, they are bad because they're heavy. They make the crust collapse. And even if somehow you made a not-heavy city, if the crust collapses and everyone is together in one place, then everyone is dead.

Large factories and industrial chemical centers are bad because they cause hideous industrial accidents if the crust collapses under them. Factory animal agriculture is bad because if the crust collapses all the animals are dead and you have a putrefying disease pit you need to deal with.

They've been doing this for two billion years.

While a tight symbiosis with a network bloc has meant the cultures on Towers suffer from primordial eidetic fugue (a term for a cultural syndrome when so much is remembered



that important details from the past are lost) the general outline of what caused the world's geological woes has been preserved. In essence, the goal was part of a wash of renaissance of geo- and astro-engineering projects that took off at those early stages of the galactic community. Few vestiges of this movement remain, but many features (gas giants stripped of their atmospheres, mercury worlds inhabited by incomprehensible machine ecosystems, the Living Nebula etc.) Some of the most infamous heretical movements within Meteorology, like the Servants of Possibility in their current form, are also thought to date be survivals. But most traces of the period outside the substantial data and records of the network blocs are ruins, like Towers.

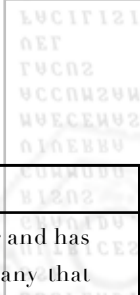
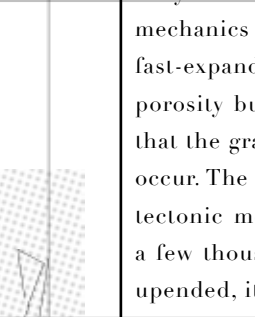

Essentially the goal of that primal engineering corps was to increase their planet's surface area. This would mean more room for habitation, agriculture, and energy collection (a major concern for civilizations during that renaissance was mass energy management). And the funny thing is it worked. Towers' star is orbited by six other rocky worlds



and all were used for testing and all tested successfully, without any major seismic disturbances.




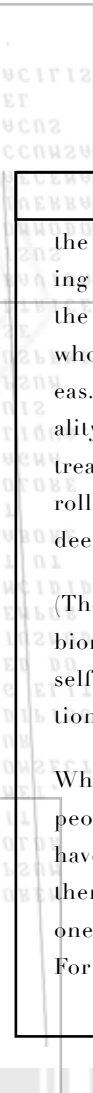
A picomechanical reagent was used to increase crust porosity through converting common minerals to complex, sturdy polymers that formed dense, stable structures. This, furthermore, had the upside of facilitating resource extraction the resulting crust was cavernous and easily entered for mining. Blasting was safe because the polymers strengthened the crust and gave it a very predictable structure. Towers' secured significant technical and industrial prosperity from these experimental trials. The resources flowed to Towers and established it as a crucial ganglia for its network region. The geo-engineering techniques pioneered by their picomechanics were exported and are albeit in highly modified forms ubiquitous in several parts of the galaxy still for planet-breaking. However, nobody uses it on their home planets. Nobody uses the method because of what happened when Towers applied it to their own world.





Blame and speculation has surrounded the disaster and has had two billion years of elaboration — really so many that it's hard to say that anything like blame exists in their society for the event any more. Some corruption in the picomechanics or interaction with biological life resulted in a fast-expanding runaway reaction that produced the desired porosity but with incredible brittleness. The end result is that the gradual, expected polymer tectonics have failed to occur. The sponge is always shattering in response to deep tectonic movements or its own accumulation of mass. In a few thousand years the planet's ecology and order were upended, its oceans were guzzled by its crust, all its population centers became mobile, and its population itself was decimated.



And this is where the network blocks really step in. While symbiosis between computational and non-computational life is truly the galactic norm, the people on Towers relied on a deep integration so natural and common to them it was essentially a sense. Biological sensor organs that could read and respond to bloc's satellite web were integrated into the Towers phenotype. The satellite systems monitor



the world, and through sophisticated sensors detect coming changes to the crust. These changes were broadcast to the people and other lifeforms integrated into the network, who were alerted in time to migrate away from unstable areas. It wasn't a perfect solution — sudden cave-ins are a reality of life on Towers. But it was a way for life to survive the treacherous terrain it had made. Sentient life on the planet, rolling far back into deep time, has evolved in intricate and deeply enmeshed symbiosis with the network bloc.

(The satellite network is itself self-sustaining — a eusocial biomechanical colony that is capable of reproduction and self-repair, though it depends on the block for normalization and to avoid runaway evolutionary branches.)

What is life like on Towers? Well, it moves all the time. The people of Towers steward the ecosystem to make sure they have enough food and carry their factories around with them. Their main relationship to computational life was one we'd be familiar with — memory and interconnectivity. For a long time the only way they sustained the overwhelm-



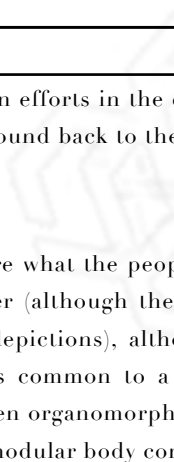
ing weight of a two billion year history was through their computational connections, and the only way the planet's communication network operated was through a computationally-administered orbital satellite network. They've become integrated to the point of symbiosis and until quite recently the computational relationship was so integrated into the flow of nature on Towers that very few people on the world actually understood as anything different from the clouds or the sun.

So, the war has been bad. Their network block was destroyed — badly destroyed. The way to picture it would be like if in the course of a week everyone lost their sight or sense of hearing. Yeah some people would adapt but they live in a world designed around those senses and many would be fucked if they were forced to smell or feel their way everywhere.

### General Ecology

Life has had two billion years to adjust and it has, by and large, been successful. Aside from the planet's sentients,

the massive selection pressure of avoiding cave-ins has pushed a lot of creatures to be able to climb quickly, scale vertical surfaces, run fast, fly (a major part of the world's ecology is entirely airborne), or capable of hovering or gliding long distances. Many animals are either phototrophic or have symbiotic relationships with phototrophic colonies. What plantlike life exists either germinates quickly or actively exploits cave-in conditions to spread and at a plant's pace there is usually a significant struggle for space after a cave-in and rich plant-filled pits stretch down as far as the sun can reach. Underground, too, has developed a complex ecology — mostly distinct from surface life, and descended from those organisms that were sucked down with the oceans. Life underground is somewhat more accelerated than on Earth — evolution still moves at a gradual pace compared to light-drenched regions but is somewhat more accelerated in these lightless areas than it is on Earth due to the frequent need for life, even underground, to migrate. Steady infusions of biomass from the collapsing surface result in complex food webs. Likewise, the picome-














mechanical reconstruction efforts in the crust will often foist biomass from underground back to the surface.

### The people of Towers

We don't know for sure what the people of Towers looked like before the disaster (although there are a wide range of historical artistic depictions), although the basic seven-limbed structure is common to a sizeable phylum of other lifeforms. Between organomorphic compounds, ordinary cybernetics and modular body combinations, the Towers are a species used to self-modification - in fact to the extent that we're surprised at the relative consistency of body plans across often extremely isolated cultures, which may be due to some combination of reflexive technological conservatism, homogenization through the former Network, and resource efficiency. That said in any large gathering you are likely to find some weird bespoke morphs, but most of them will be combinations of the same basic pieces - think of them as letters in an alphabet.



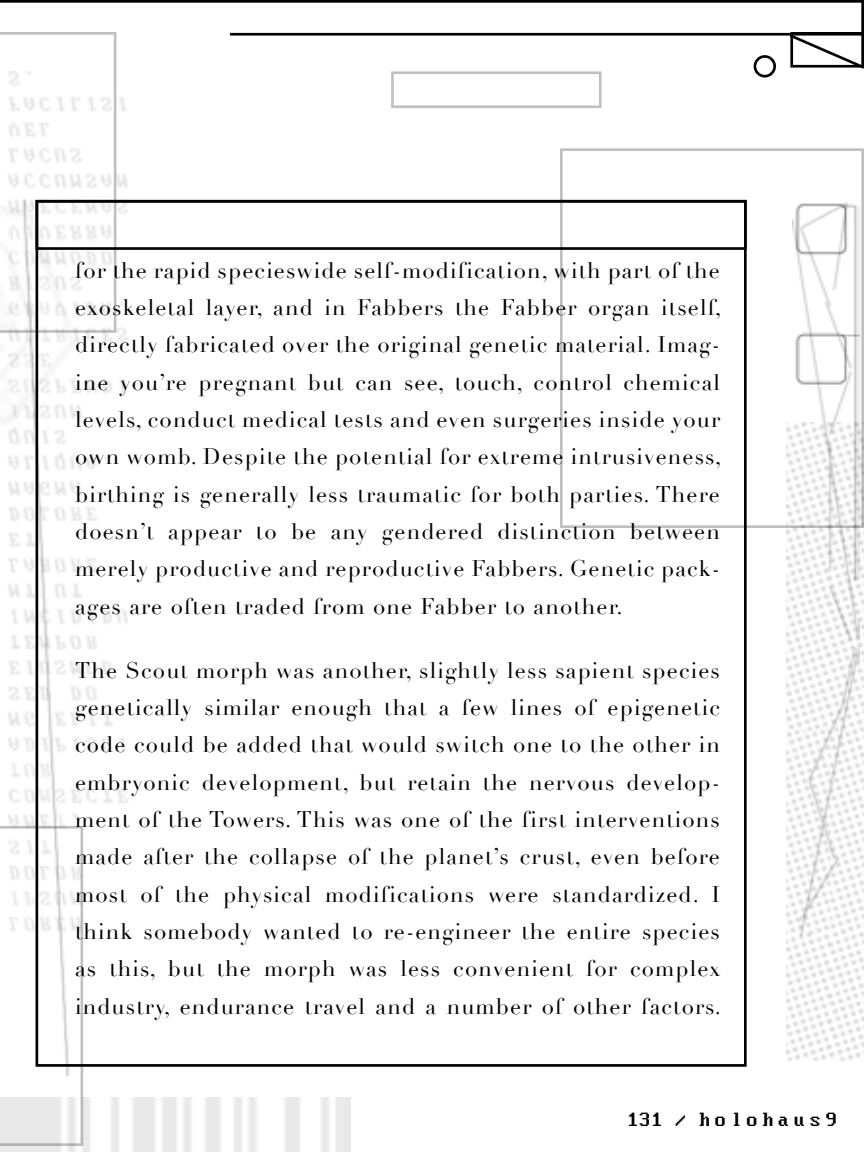


For the default “Gatherer” morph, which is probably closest to the pre-disaster phenotype, the major modifications were making everything longer and skinnier, especially the fingers, which look too unwieldy to have evolved that way but allow them to grip through multiple turns of a hole in a rock face (all their joints can rotate 360 degrees). As fits their name they’re tall by human standards - three to four metres on average not counting the full extension of their fingers - and very skinny, almost like stick insects. They have lightweight exo- and endo-skeletons made of hollow chitin, whose hardness can vary based on mineral intake and augmentation - the Sunbites, a newly formed Waltz with few resources, were soft enough to be injured barehanded by Specialist Hadak, but according to the Rusty Moons more specialized fighting morphs from larger groups may be impervious to blades and even small rounds. The modularity of their bodies is partly determined by the semi-detachable connecting structures between both at their joints. The Gatherers, however, tend to keep a standard frame and arm length in order not to have to regrow their folding, hemicircular gliding wings.



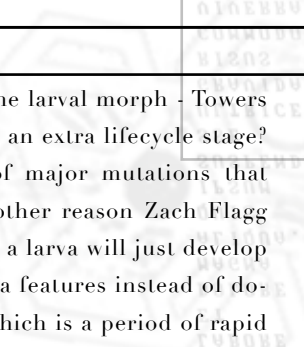


LUCIF121  
AET  
TUCN2  
VCCN42W  
WVECEW2  
A10ENW  
EUNW00  
W1202

The Fabbers trade in much of this mobility for a bulky thorax whose size varies from roughly equivalent to up to three times their ordinary torso in length, and five to ten times around. Unlike some species in human fiction, Towers do not depend on biology for all their technological production, and have a number of other manufacturing systems that can be transported in pieces by a Waltz of Gatherers alone. Different groups and cultures rely on Fabbers to different degrees; with the varying ability of space and resources, however, it is considered a good idea to have at least one as a last resort. This tends to entail having at least one transport - again, the tradeoffs are between resource and population investment; it is cheaper to have a few Gatherers combine in a temporary bivouacking form, if you have them to spare. (The size of the planet alone, and the tradeoff between fabrication and reproduction, has usually been enough to prevent runaway population/scarcity dynamics, but with the collapse of Networked coordination these may inflame conflicts.) The integration of fabrication into reproductive structures - which were probably already morphologically specialized - was necessary



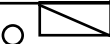

for the rapid specieswide self-modification, with part of the exoskeletal layer, and in Fabbers the Fabber organ itself, directly fabricated over the original genetic material. Imagine you're pregnant but can see, touch, control chemical levels, conduct medical tests and even surgeries inside your own womb. Despite the potential for extreme intrusiveness, birthing is generally less traumatic for both parties. There doesn't appear to be any gendered distinction between merely productive and reproductive Fabbers. Genetic packages are often traded from one Fabber to another.

The Scout morph was another, slightly less sapient species genetically similar enough that a few lines of epigenetic code could be added that would switch one to the other in embryonic development, but retain the nervous development of the Towers. This was one of the first interventions made after the collapse of the planet's crust, even before most of the physical modifications were standardized. I think somebody wanted to re-engineer the entire species as this, but the morph was less convenient for complex industry, endurance travel and a number of other factors.



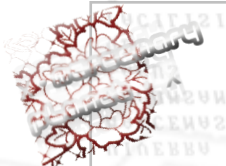
They're already pretty similar to the larval morph - Towers as such might have just evolved as an extra lifecycle stage? there are a surprising number of major mutations that happen sequentially like that, another reason Zach Flagg won't shut up about Pokemon - so a larva will just develop normally and then grow a few extra features instead of doing the standard "reverse molt", which is a period of rapid skeletal and exoskeletal growth that determines development into Gatherers or Fabbers (more specialized morphs are modified after the fact). You won't see any... "awkward teen" Towers probably, it's a painful and sacred process for which they usually seclude themselves and require a large stockpile of nutrient minerals, they can delay it as long as they need. There are even epigenetic packets larvae can use to develop into Scouts temporarily if they don't have enough resources. (Note: they're pretty extravagant in using their healing tech on an early encounter where they assume good relations almost axiomatically, but they'll run out fast in a real war of attrition.)

Like humans, their primary long-range senses include light and sound - light has particularly powerful directional as-



sociations for undergrounders, while sound is essential to navigation through both rock and air. Towers' sound-based languages encompass a wider range of frequencies than ours, which permit more and less private languages and conversation in the same range. Most of their complex neural architecture is clustered in the two lobes of their head where it's integrated with the Network connection. That's the place to shoot; their circulatory and respiratory systems are also a lot more modular than ours, and related to their hydraulic mechanism of movement, explained in Appendix B.

Culture is absurdly varied and best discovered in person.





## *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*

Leona's first expedition travels to the neutral "Internexus" to learn about the complex culture, biology and technology of Towers - and establish a military presence before someone else does first



CW: insectoid biology, gun violence, bombardment, discussion of ethnic cleansing, close combat, gore, antihuman rhetoric

Even through my metabolic symbiote, which would probably wear off within a few days if we didn't find a few specific nutrients it needed, the air up here stung in a way that felt a bit like breathing rust. It had been easier underground than up here where these huge green-grey clouds rolled across the pinnacle where I lay basking like a lizard, except I only let myself rest when the clouds rolled over and the bombers couldn't see us. Sometimes it rained really hard. Aqueduct had fabbed a gizmo shaped like a harmonica that could roll over any surface by hand and dry it out with a blade of wind, itself powered by chemical reactions with the air. But I didn't really mind being wet out here.

The bombers. If I was less self-critical, which unfortunately isn't the same as more imaginative, I would just call

**CHAPTER 09: RESPONSIBILITY & RETRIBUTION (THE SOLDIERS' ROAD 4)**



2'  
LUCIF  
AET  
FUCN2  
VCCNM2W  
HPECENW2  
AUCENW  
COWODO  
A.202  
EVAIDV  
PPIVICE2  
22E  
2026END1  
1120W  
0012  
VRI00V  
WUCW  
D0FOKE  
E1  
FVBOKE  
W101  
IWCIDID0  
1E4608  
E102W0D  
2E1 DO  
WE ERI1  
VDB12C1  
LOW  
COM2EC1E  
WHE1  
211  
D0FO8  
1120W  
F08W



them dragons. Their bodies were made up of ten to twenty flattened, opaline shelled segments that rippled and rolled in the air, from only one of which, near the middle, dropped a set of symmetrical talons or mandibles, three on each side, like a UFO grabber. Every third segment a blur of translucent wings like a dragonfly's flickered and hummed out of the narrow gaps in the sides of the shell. Although their most evocatively draconic feature - in the Chinese sense - to me was probably the mustache of two trailing feelers that twirled and twitched lazily in the air from the segment I interpreted, partly by association, as the front (the back stabilized itself with a sort of propeller).

Every few minutes, I would watch a ball of golden slime roll from some hidden cloaca into the basket of claws, hang there for a minute while the body circled and spiralled around some coordinate, and then let go.

As we began to fall again to Earth, I peered through the bottom of the Corpuscle to follow the orb as it disappeared - and a plume of pulverized white mineral dust rose where it had last been.

Halation just called them the Ribbons.





They were a well-known species, but she hadn't known they had joined the war, or how many, on one or both sides. They used their aerial bombardment to hunt, though normally the thing they dropped was a kind of sticky bolus of toxic mucus that paralyzed their prey. They had long been able to synthesize different chemicals in it, however, and had used explosive ones in carving out canals, accessing rare minerals and otherwise terraforming their planet before developing their own circular production systems and offworld supply chains for necessities and returned, like a number of other species, to a kind of idyllic managed reproduction of their natural state, which had been something of a tourist attraction for body-surfing Weirs in particular. (Their typical prey were usually replaced in the interest of scrupulous (but not-too-scrupulous) Meteorologists with low-interoperability automata.)

Halation had never been to Waterfall. It wasn't her kind of vacation.

Head swivelling loosely at the end of its body as it relaxed after its bombing run, the closest to us paused when it swung slightly in our direction, the two feelers rising, pointing and twitching as we began to fall faster - and it coiled in the same direction, accelerating after us. At least



two more, further back towards the distant orb, noticed and pivoted toward us.

I sent a thought frantically through the Halation-veins to Aqueduct - *Wait why are we falling. We didn't reach the Network's altitude did we.*

*The Corpuscle isn't the size and weight of the units that were supposed to go through these. But it's not just that. I think we hit a Weak Asymmetry Field.*

I stared at the spherical hive - the innermost circle of one of its indentations dilated and one of the Ribbons fluttered in - in horror. *They probably have these at all the launch points then... does that map to the bombing range we know?*

*How would I know the bombing range?*

The Sunbites hadn't even known where they were. I had almost forgotten that just because I was at war didn't mean I was dealing with soldiers - a fact I normally found somewhat comforting, as it made me less the outlier. But I had also gotten used to having soldiers around who could answer a non-soldier's questions - and here I was stuck in a giant bullet with another civilian, the only soldiers in sight (if that was even what they were) the enemy.

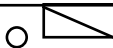


At least I knew how to control the bullet.

As three ball joints, three atoms in a molecule. This was such a weird halfway point between a regular vehicle and a mech, it made sense for aesthetic reasons and none for military reasons, it was a *generalist* which was a different way than how I was used to thinking about technology. Heidegger shit everyone in my department had pretended they believed but had never figured out a way to make anyone who runs a lore wiki take seriously.

The Corpuscle had one empty sphere, since there were two of us in it - Aqueduct had moved down to their own after we finished the cartridge - and so that would have to be our hitter. I swung it over coming down onto their head as they caught up on us, and they rolled over in the air and launched another ball of something at us. It was fast and sharp, but still at the end of the day trying to hit something in free fall by throwing a ball. We, on the other hand, were trying to hit a flashing, swirling Ribbon with a clunky abstract shape. Neither of us had an obvious way to hurt each other so it just backed off.

Until it got more of them in to hover above us, in a tightening circle like the Eva prototypes over Asuka in the lake, and just start dropping them.



Most of them didn't hit us directly. That wasn't entirely the point. They were bombing a hole beneath us - a pit for us to climb out of.

Fortunately the pit wasn't *right* on top of the Internexus. Maybe the network at least had been thinking of this kind of exigency.

As the pillars of dust unfolded themselves up towards us, I pointed both guns through the membrane, firing the opposite direction of the nearest outcropping I had seen standing before it was swallowed. I didn't want to fire until shortly before the clouds covered us so they couldn't just track us. If they were dense enough, we might also be able to use some of the Corpuscle's own aerial movement capabilities, designed for the denser atmosphere of Contemplation, although we would get less momentum from the guns.

I had emptied 80% of a magazine and fallen six standard units thirteenth-exponent when we crashed into something and rotated ourselves slowly around it. A huge flat slab had settled across the top of the twisting pillar giving us an overhang we could hide under as the dust cleared and we could place ourselves in the middle of a vast canyon.





Most of the vastness, from the looks of it, had already been there. They had bombed all the way down to some kind of wide open channel, a thin black rivulet draining along its lowest trough, tryphobic clusters of tunnels may- be even leading back to the Internexus - another pillar three or four units whose artificial shape made me think it was probably the launch tube we had shuttled through. But the flower-shaped window of sky through crumbling layers of stone above us was small by human standards, for that many bombs, if I tried to map the shells of stone above us to the OSINT I'd seen of MK-82 craters.

Ragged strips of cloud covered where the alien sphere had been, but it was probably too high up to see anyway. The bombers had evidently returned to it, but we had to as- sume they could be back.

We used the navigation programs within the Corpuscle to try and calculate where we had landed relative to the launch tube, and its most likely location range had been entirely covered by rubble - the second-most-likely was out of sight and we couldn't see around to it.

Jax had said his group would get a message to us somehow, but we had no idea where we were, and they had less. *The*



*smartest thing might be to try to get back to Tuber Plug? At least that might be recognizable on a skyline.*

*I... I need to go back to my default form for a little bit, Halation's voice seared our minds with urgency. I've never strained myself like this, not in training, not in space. I feel like I'm going to fray into nothing.*

So we rested, Halation sealing off their bubble and filling it with an emergency supply of their atmospheric compounds from Aqueduct's Fabber supply. Faint fish-scale clouds drifted overhead, layering the turquoise sky sulfur-green and tile-grey. The rock this close to the surface, or maybe just here, was chalky enough to look as much like pumice as it did at scale, or like I was in an endless version of those giant sandstone beach caves. With things with wings similar in structure to the Tower Scouts darting in and out of tunnels overhead.

I couldn't shake the feeling - especially without Halation in me to regulate it, their willpower honed by decades alone in space and dozens more impossible situations - that I was already too resigned to dying absurdly somewhere out here. My plan for the future of the Earth, the future of the war, relied on staying alive at all costs - but did I really believe that, or had I just arranged things so



that I could die without being responsible for anything I couldn't have on my conscience?

A pale thing with three tough semi-tentacles like a starfish crawled out of a hole in the rock onto me and Aqueduct skewered it with a needle-like implement, informing me it was edible. That distracted me for a bit. I thought of watching another Phantasy with them, but I felt like I needed to absorb the atmosphere planet more if I was going to interfere with it, or die here. I checked a terrestrial bias of that metaphor, and the perversely literal fact that I was feeling it more strongly aboveground.

*Aboveground is... a place of nostalgia for us too, Aqueduct said. Look at those.* They pointed to what I could only make out as a haze of small white circles that had blown in from the edge of the sky-window and already settled all along one side of a ledge above us facing the sun. As it shone on them they started to take on a flush of different colours, pink and green and blue and purple pastels. *You'll see them in 6 out of 7 historical Phantasies about the time before the Cataclysm - some people are calling it the First Cataclysm now, since the network collapsed - even though they're only native to one continent. Even the abstract ones, there's a whole genre*





*of pointillism inspired by how they bloom like that... it was a labour of thousands of lives to ensure they survived at all.*

At some point a scent or a sound I couldn't perceive alerted Aqueduct - *we should get moving soon. It's going to rain.*

Halation was sluggish and unresponsive in the Corpuscle. She didn't participate much in our discussion of where to go, beyond telling us which ways up the froth of shattered stacking archways rising in a crater around us would take too much energy. Aqueduct made some packets of rock-melting and -solidifying stuff that got us around and over rough patches, carving a roundabout trail where we didn't have to use the Corpuscle's speed and surface tension directly against gravity.

The things that had landed on the ledge lifted off again, before the rain which I could now following us could reach us. They flew close overhead and a few landed on and slipped off us, but I couldn't get a close look at what exactly they were, besides about the size of a potato chip and petal thin. Now, once again, all silky white.

When we finally reached the highest lip of the blast radius, we kept going until we could look down.





It was the most sublime, most disorienting landscape I had ever seen. It was completely different from within than through the Hiawatha's display from overhead. Deep pits like ours followed overlapping, semicircular patterns, probably from bombing runs. Blue and yellow grasses and lichens of some sort capped the highest crest, and occasionally things that looked like stacks of succulent lilypads. Elsewhere, still higher towers rose; branching pinnacles like a witch's in a fantasy book, mesas woven together out of a grove of other mesas. I could see one tooth on the crenellated horizon that by its rough shape might have been the Tuber Plug. I could see milkweed-fine strands of rain brushing it from flat clouds that moved lazily over it like robotic vacuum cleaners.

We waited again, to let Halation rest, and it was a good choice because in time Aqueduct heard a faint, low frequency overtone they told me was a signal to round up stragglers of a caravan that had left the area.

*That particular overtone is only used by Ferrous Masks, Aqueduct informed me. Or people who have a Ferrous Mask vocalizer, or reverse engineered the vocal recognition from something that had access to the Network database. There are*



*codes embedded in it so it's probably real. But they're probably ready for a fight.*

*Which side are they on? Are Ferrous Masks just like, a group?*

*Not just a Waltz like the Sunbites - they're a large meta-group, with a lot of historical baggage, and the leaders of the anti-Adipose faction, at least from stuff I heard from my old leaders. Who didn't like them very much. They're... a lot of people blame them for the First Cataclysm, although we had a full planetary government then and everyone agreed to it. I think. Nobody knows which sets of records going around by the time the Network started cataloguing and authenticating are legitimate any more. But they believe it enough themselves to be pretty obviously committed to technological caution, at the same time as having a lot more of it in their own transmission networks than everyone else. Which makes it look like they're hoarding from everyone else under the guise of ideological scruples.*

*Oh that's not good. I mean I might be thinking from a human experience and perspective here, but that's not a good set of starting conditions.*

*They do share just about everything they make that's useful - under the conditions of good diplomatic relations with them and playing by some of their technological rules - so they have*



*a wide alliance. I'd say of people who have an opinion on the war at all, about a third are with them. But the other two thirds have... well I think anyone who's actually destroying ground here must be a pretty extreme interventionist. Or maybe that's for psychological effect against them specifically.*

*The other two thirds? I reminded them.*

*Basically just think it's insane to refuse a technology like the Adipose when we just lost the Network. Think the Adipose could be a better replacement for the Network. I think some people think it could even fix the planet? But I haven't heard any of this firsthand.*

I knew a bunch of this in outline already from my briefings, but I'd asked again just to see how much accounts lined up. The Ahasurunu had their own names for the meta-groups, for instance - I hadn't heard "Ferrous Masks", even though that was presumably who had invited us.

*Didn't the Adipose blow up everyone's network?*

*Is that what you heard happened? You probably know more than me, but... it was part of one of the big anti- blocs, so that makes sense, but the story a lot of people know around here is that we were going to hold a planetary plebiscite on whether*



*we'd permit Adipose construction - that part is true, I remember it - and the Network had agreed to abide by its results - I think it did but I'm not sure. So it was an inside job by its own bloc, to prevent it from defecting. Nobody knows, though, it's not like anyone can get up there to do forensics.*

Oh. I guess it shouldn't have been surprising that on a planet where such a huge event had the potential to move so much public opinion, both sides had their own narratives about it. And in the absence of communications infrastructure, these narratives could develop in isolation, such that we wouldn't even have been briefed properly on them.

But the Tuber Plug would have known if they had been considering a defection, presumably? I prodded at Hala-tion to gauge if it made sense - if it was something we would have done. *That kind of thing happened in the early days of the war, but by now that bloc would disconnect first as a matter of policy. If they tried an attack while they still had data mirrored it would be a huge risk. I don't buy it.*

We rolled through formations like if detergent froth had been frozen into place and the wind and water had worn overlapping topographic patterns into it, through slanted clearings of glass-green sunlight and cathedral shadow,



incomprehensible echoes crossing around us. The natural channels narrowed and became more twisted and intricate as we followed Aqueduct's sound, until I started to feel like I was back underground, or even in the Playscape.

Aqueduct had already been sending out their own subsonic messages by the time I spotted them leaping along the underside of an overhang. Their transport morph, smaller and considerably faster than the Sunbites', had four corners with a head, a jumping leg, a gripping hand and a weapon hand at each, bodies interlocking in an intricate knot supporting a patterned fibre stretcher onto which several wounded bodies had been strapped. There were Gatherers riding behind it on ropes with their wings out, a buzzing cluster of Scouts ahead. As soon as they saw us a vanguard of two Gatherers latched into the rock and let the ropes stretch away from them.

They brandished their weapons, but Aqueduct sent a reassuring impulse through the Corpuscle, and an instruction for me to raise, then drop my guns. At least some things were universal.

Halation reformed in their default body in their bubble as the Corpuscle stopped close enough that they could climb down the jagged slope and inspect us. Up close I could



see the eponymous “masks” - a bar of reddish ore softened and piled up like a cement, around the front ridge of their head and the inside edge of each eye-protrusion, almost like a pince-nez or a comedy robber mask. They had other presumably iron-based markings up and down their crests, and wide billows of fabric off their limbs.

“A Weir. You’re from Tuber Plug, then?”

“You know about us. Do you know how to get there?”

“I don’t know about you. Are you a prisoner or something? It’s the Adipose faction that have been bringing offworlders here willy-nilly.”

“I’m... new reinforcements. I’ve only been on this planet for an eleventh exponent. Assume I don’t know anything.”

“What is that weapon?”

I grinned and lifted, bounced the PX4 in my hand. “Want a demonstration?”

I pointed it at a delicate-looking spur of rock hanging off the top of an outcropping behind us. I didn’t even drag Halation in to enhance my senses. I worried for a moment as my finger pulled whether I should have used the rifle,





but even the pistol was enough to send hand-sized chips flying. The Gatherers doubled back.

“...directed energy? Does anybody still use that?”

“Mineral projectile.” I stepped out of the bubble and opened the cartridge to show them.

“What do you do with its waste?” the other asked, interjecting with clucking sounds I hadn’t heard any Towers make yet.

The Waltz had stopped up ahead, and when they determined that we were friendly as we said we were (but confiscated my guns) they wrapped two pairs of arms around each of us (I had folded the Corpuscule back up, they took that too, and let Halation flow back into my brain) and let the rubbery ropes pull them back, one anchoring grip in the ground at a time. They were wearing something skate-like on the palms of their lowermost arms as well that allowed them to zip almost as frictionlessly as us when they wanted to.

“It’s a cliché on my planet - and this might tell you some unflattering things about my planet - that when aliens land somewhere, they ask ‘take me to your leader’.”





"Makes enough sense. Our leader's a sixteenth-exponent ahead, at the Listening Station."

I couldn't tell for sure if they meant time or space. But that gave me a good excuse to practice the exponents - we travelled with them about an hour and a half, maybe 80 miles.... Anyway I'm going to be using metric for the next little bit because it's what the HEF uses so you don't get totally lost.

We came to a long, semicircular ridge of overhang, under which a cavern stretched some 800 metres back and another 300 overhead, meandering three times as long across, with marked tunnels vanishing everywhere into the darkness at the back. It was exposed to sunlight on one side but still mostly invisible from above. It was in fact the densest foliage I had seen - both above, where there were meadows and hedges of fiddlehead-curved grasses of similar shapes at widely varying sizes, and below, where the bright areas around the mouth were patched with separate plots of each size, deliberately maintained by a mix of Gatherers and Fabbers, as well as rings of fronds and fruiting bodies. Unlike the underground plants, these had a pastel palette of recognizable colours (although I didn't see any more of the floating wind-things, whether those





had been plant or animal or something else). Further back were clusters of tents and Towers milling between them, as many as the Internexus. They had been calling this place the “Listening Station”, but it looked at least as much like a refugee camp. The transport morph split off from us here, scuttling over to some sickbay where three or four similar transport morphs were lined up, while our guides passed most of the refugees with minimal interaction (about half seemed to be Ferrous Masks themselves) and when they reached a pit near the back marked with voluted metal stakes, started climbing down. Halation helped me climb myself, which seemed to impress them. There were carved, non-random handholds in the walls of the pit, which cut straight down as if a core had been removed, although many of them were too far apart for me.

The pit dropped at least another 60 metres down until it reached a widening chamber like a low slice of a cylinder, the centre sinking toward another narrow well, larger versions of the Sunbite leader’s tuning fork embedded in the ground all around its edges. With multiple pieces fit together they looked more precision-built, less artistic (in the sense of an Olympic archer’s bow as opposed to a medieval one) except for the complex, dreamcatcher-like arrangements of wires between their forks. They made a



constant background ringing, to human ears, just sounded like an ambient track in a New Age store or museum exhibit. We had to wait for the “leader” to emerge from another tunnel.

They were a Fabber - enormous and ancient (although I wasn't sure how I knew that part). Their limbs had a quartz or marble glitter that suggested they weren't entirely made of their natural cartilage. Their thorax dragged along the ground like the body of a tank, with its own small supplementary limbs to help it move. Their masks covered more of their faces, extending a ways up their crests.

They had three heads.

Aqueduct tapped lightly on my hand. *A real triple Aurifer, I've only seen in Phantasies...*

Then they stood straight and silent. Halation extended over their hand and up to their head and I heard from their mind: They're speaking through the ground.

Yet another language, of taps on the ground with their leadership instrument, completely inaudible to me.

They want the Weir to come forth and share directly.





I crossed the threshold of the skylight, the sickly Matrix pallor sloughed off my skin and replaced by Halation's writhing rainbow, and grasped a proffered finger.

To my surprise, they recognized Halation.

*We had heard you were coming to visit the Tuber Plug but over-shot.*

*Yes. I ended up where my companion is from, and ricocheted.*

*Oh, on Algal Bloom?* This was, apparently, the Meteorological convention for Earth. About another third of Ferrous Masks, Aqueduct estimated (though I was beginning to suspect this was as much a cultural convention as a real measure) were Meteorologists, and many more used their taxonomic conventions. I remembered for almost the first time since Halation had told me that Earth was known to the rest of the universe, just obscure. I thought its interoperable inhabitants hadn't achieved interstellar travel yet.

I introduced them. There's a force at Tuber Plug, and a small group at the Spinefish Internexus. I believe they will make extremely valuable reinforcements.

*Withdraw. We must consider this.*



We connected and withdrew, connected and withdrew, for minutes at a time. It was a bit of a respite from my usual repeating the same information over and over again - although I noted they hadn't gone for the rituals of species or even group introduction first, like the Sunbites or the Internexus. I had barely even been noticed walking through the camp.

Finally they understood enough that I was able to ask my questions about what was going on up here.

This area - there wasn't exactly a name for it, it had been known by the Network node that serviced it but since the bombing run had probably shifted somewhat to our provisional "East" - was known for having a high concentration of Ferrous Masks, surrounded by large forces of radicalized pro-Adipose groups described as "mobs" on three sides, as well as the Ribbons from above. Their ostensible primary target - which the "mobs" had said they would give up bombing if it was destroyed, but only one of three heads believed this - was the Listening Station, which had been moved five times since the Network collapsed. Listening Stations existed all over the planet, and were the most sophisticated sensing system besides the Network - they scoffed at the potential of Entangleweed or the idea





of a hidden network bloc deep in the crust. They were capable of picking up mere sound from hundreds of miles away, in 360 degrees, and isolating the data with the help of powerful computation blocks (in the shared visualization they looked a lot like the ones Halation's research base had used: mass-produced bricks of quantum-entangled lattice, some of the network blocs basically excrete them). The Listening Stations were of monumental importance, the heads insisted, worth sustaining bombardment and ecological damage and constant forced movement, because they were the only way to prevent someone from just building an Adipose node in secret. The global network of Listening Stations had isolated specific sonic signatures from the advanced Asymmetry Fields used in node construction, and could muster any fighting force of Ferrous Masks and their allies in the area to descend on a site with suicidal fervour. But already large areas of the foam had gone dark with Listening Stations destroyed (and some assumed compromised).

*Our reinforcements in Tuber Plug and the Spinefish Internexus are at your service, if you can help us get in contact with them, Halation assured. We have vehicles that can get in the air - more consistently than the one you found us in - and prob-*



*ably fight that base the Ribbons have, especially if we know what it has.*

I didn't form a conflicting thought to add to the mix but Halation responded distinctly before me. I was slightly disturbed by the analogies to mass surveillance as I knew it - analogies? was there really any meaningful difference? - although it now seemed like an extrapolation of the logic of the war that should have been obvious, not only here but anywhere, if battle lines weren't obviously drawn and all the enemy had to do was build a node - could a node be pushed back once it was built or was the Adipose simply too powerful? contained like in the Tuber Plug? could secret nodes already exist somewhere?

*All we know is it almost certainly has an Asymmetry Field, but probably a very limited one - they don't have access to any consistent sources of energy on this planet capable of supplying it, said one head, at the same time as the other reminded us: Although they have some sonar capabilities, the Listening Stations are one-way; their signals can't be received at distance except by the finely tuned instruments of another Listening Station. But we can find the Spinefish Internexus easily.*

*Wait, can it transmit or receive radio signals?*



The three heads conferred.

*The ancient copper ones further down... maybe, if we Fabbed the right kind of transmitter...*

The left head peeled itself off the main body, along with a full set of limbs and a narrower Fabber organ, to follow us as we climbed down the well in the centre of the room. The skylight narrowed rapidly above, thicker and purer darkness folding over us from the sides, handholds lit by phosphorescent markings. This descent was twice as long; we stopped at another ring, then descended further.

“This is just like in Love’s Loss Listening!” Aqueduct whistled out loud in a kind of oral cursive. “When Edgevine goes down the abandoned shaft to listen to Riversalt for days at a time without anyone disturbing them, and all you hear for a tenth-exponent is animals moving around and these fragments of conversation between characters that are never named, all in real time. But the Phantasy includes this loop of the the darkness and the lights in the walls overlaid with the stars...”

“Is it just you, or is the rest of the planet this into slow cinema?”





"I remember that one," the Aurifex mused. "The frame story was pretentious sentimentality for people who wouldn't be interested in what a real listening station does, but it captured the kinds of things one hears down here 3/7 of the time, the way it washes over you."

"What did you do with these before the Adipose War?"

"Rescues, in areas the Network couldn't reach. Geological monitoring - we fed it information. We didn't really use them to listen for lost lovers and things like that. There's a cartridge of the old privacy rules if you're curious."

I felt silly and didn't pry further.

(How long was I going to keep saying I and not we? We should be the protagonists of this story, shouldn't we? I may write these on my own when Halation's in their default body, for a certain privacy or clarity of voice, an ability to form feelings about them separately, but I'm not alone in my body or even my mind making most of these decisions, these judgments. They've already started to imprint certain parts of me, the pronoun we're still not really sure about...)



We spent about an hour trying to figure out how to Fab a basic radio transmitter/receiver and attach it to a weathered copper fork that looked like a single twisted wire, in the light of horseshoe-shaped fluorescents on the walls. I leaned against the processing block, like a giant salt cube, and felt a half-comforting half-trepidatious tingling from Halation as she ran along it, connecting with the surface of its information flows. In fact, I realized we had made contact with the Azoth Denpa frequency when the Clamp network opened a backdoor on the block. If surveillance was already the hand we were being dealt - we agreed not to alert our hosts, unless we thought they would need it.

This meant I could make two calls simultaneously: one on the Denpa command channel, with Beek, Flagg, Bennett-Fog and the rest, and one through Halation with Rhonias on the secret Clamp network. As much as I would rather hear Jax's voice than any of the jarheads', we partitioned our minds so as not to overwhelm each other. I'd get the memory either way (say miss you for me). In any case, first I needed to grill the Aurifex's left head, to make sure I had all the information I would need.

"This is going smoother than you could ever have guessed," Beek bragged when I finally got through. "Their healing



tech is so good there's barely any casualties - although that means some of them wanna just brawl forever unless you get a couple good headshots in to show them who's boss. We're taking an encrypted registry of people's alignment in the war as we let them back in, so we can estimate demographics and break up any potentially hostile gatherings."

"They're letting you do that?"

"The ones who come back. Sounds like a bunch of them wanted to do something like this already and couldn't figure out how to coordinate it. Military discipline, baby."

"Dammit, that only works as long as they really believe we're neutral, and we might have to start moving soon. I've got an allied force up here that needs backup."

"Well, we could always pretend to be different factions."

I had thought about something like this in the long run, but in the current balance of power that would give him too much leeway to act as a different faction. Thankfully Bennett-Fog anticipated and backed me up: "That's not a good idea for an already incredibly diverse and fractious force in an incredibly chaotic tactical and- actual land-





scape. Friendly fire and communication gaps could escalate very fast. Is there a neutral pretext for backing up the group you've found?"

"It's... hard. They've got a kind of surveillance station, and I don't think they've used it for offensive operations here but it's supposed to, if anyone starts trying to build a node. On the other hand their enemies are destroying the ground, which is a big taboo under normal circumstances. The pro-Adipose mobs and the bombing itself cleared out a bunch of other neutral and pro-Adipose groups that were opposed to it, so we could theoretically align ourselves with them but they're probably hundreds of miles away by now."

"If we take over or align with the remnants of the Entangleweed network," Flagg suggested, "which I've been trying to patch things up with - and I've been mapping it out with probing signals, right now home base is readying expeditions to four more Internexes, at least one of which has been taken over already, it was apparently a coordinated thing that we just happened to get in the way of - we could make the case for restoring a legitimate governing structure. Remember we were briefed that normally planetwide geoengineering decisions, like connecting to the



Adipose, were made by a direct democratic deliberation process through the Network. Now they can't do that, but if we could get some kind of planet-unifying network up again..."

"The Adipose would win, by majority vote. Or what are you seeing in your demographics?"

"Hmmm. Yeah, I guess we... don't want that?" He sounded unconvinced. American soldier, democracy; I felt a twinge of nostalgia, remembering the faint purity of believing in that, even if not at the tip of a bayonet, which we were bringing anyway. "It's about 4 to 3, with another 3 neutral or with Entangleweed." That was less outnumbered than the Ferrous Masks had made it sound, but maybe the bombing had polarized people in this area. "I thought there were a whole bunch of extra processes to make sure it didn't go the way it did last time."

"Yeah, I heard they tried that already." There was a slight quaver in my voice I hoped nobody noticed - I myself hoped I was imagining. "Would it have gone the same way before, or did the Network collapse shift things?"

"Normally it would have involved years of scientific modelling and consensus groups. They barely got into the first



stages.” At least Bennett-Fog had been keeping up with this. “Do it now, it’ll just be a dumb referendum that leaves more people than you can avoid dealing with pissed off either way.”

“Do we know if the Network... had committed to abiding by the results? Even if it meant going against its bloc?”

“Well, it sounds like our hosts had their own negotiations going about that, but they’re classified to me at least, you’d have to come back and see if you can wrangle them out of somebody.” That sounded both perfectly reasonable and maddeningly unconvincing. “The Ferrous Masks also historically claim a veto, but it’s never been tested in practice.”

“Forget all this, it’s obviously impossible to get a physical landline network all around a sponge three times the size of Earth. Fucking think about it for five seconds,” Beek growled. “I’ve fought in caves before, unlike some of you, albeit nowhere near on the level of this clusterfuck. But we’ll take five and lose three we moved on from by the time we get shit set up. Do you want a real Forever War?”

“I hope I don’t need to emphasize how self-evidently right he is,” Bennett-Fog sniffed.



"What we need is an overwhelming show of force. Commander Lillywhite, what would you estimate is the radius of those bombs they're dropping?"

"At most 100m. And actual rock penetration only about a dozen. The fungus the Sunbites were using was actually way more powerful."

"And we've got MOABs at home." I could hear Beek grinning through the phone. "Do you have coordinates for these enemy forces?"

"Right now I think we should focus on the aerial enemy, they're widely unpopular and we're the only ones who touch them. They're actually a whole other species, from another planet. But their base has an Asymmetry Field, so we'd need to be able to get one of ours in the air. They probably don't have much in the way of air defenses besides that - the aliens actually make the bombs biologically. In the meantime a small anti-aircraft defense would probably do a lot against the Ribbons - sorry that's the bomber aliens, they look like Gyarados."

"Can't wait to fill out my Pokedex here," Zach Flagg said, and laughed nervously.



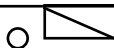
“Edison Lens scientific division and the Weirs have been discussing fitting Halation’s Inchworm Drive with an aircraft body for a while now, so let’s sit down and look over blueprints and you can compare with what you’ve seen.”

“I only saw it for a few seconds. But I don’t think they have any kind of air superiority that would make sending up a recon drone a bigger risk than anything we’ve already done. If we end up shooting anything down in the meantime, we’re almost certainly going to attract ground forces to our location, so we’ll need some regular infantry here. We aren’t getting overstretched, are we? What’s the strategic value of the Internexes right now?”

“Resources, dummy. And if you wanna start calling up the rolls we’re taking of potential anti-Adipose partisans, manpower. Nobody’s doing this systematically yet and I’m already arming and training avowed neutrals for security right here. Your guys are dealing with what, a lynch mob? We could whip up a counter-mob with everyone on our side in this sector of the underground. People they don’t even know are here. Also, more transport morphs.”

“So order of operations,” Bennett-Fog focused us. “Get anti-aircraft weapons and a handful of ground backup just in case to Leona and the FMs. We got two transport morphs





already from the old allies - they're a FM group, actually, does the group you're with know Rusty Moon?" Rusty Moon was who the Aurifex had assumed we were with as soon as we'd mentioned Tuber Plug; they were "extremists" the Listening Stations and Meteorological associations dissociated themselves from so they could take actions they wouldn't publicly. "Each of those can take a Vulcan, four men -"

"Might be good to have Weirs down here too if any are willing to volunteer. Not for combat unless absolutely needed, but there's computers and stuff they can interface with."

"Noted. So let's say that'll take as long as getting to the Internexus did - and in the same time, we're going to try and take one to three more. And in the same interval, we send a spy drone to check out this floating station you saw. Sometime after that, once they're taken depending on the state of training belowground and urgency aboveground, you guys engage the bombers, the mobs start to move, and we mobilize our forces to ambush them from beneath. And last but not least, once we've finished our secret weapon, we launch it at the base."

"And then once the bombers know our name," Beek added, champing death between his teeth like a bit, "we promise



massive territorial retaliation adjacent to anywhere they're bombing - anywhere on this continent - if they don't withdraw, no ground combat necessary."

The Aurifex component climbed the tunnel above me, and reached down the bottom hand of its body to tap in tap language on my head. Halation wasn't invited at contact, and retreated behind their partition. *I noticed you hesitated earlier.*

*I realized I shouldn't have. I returned what I found I remembered, from having it in my head so long, of the tapping language. You and your symbiotes are... so integrated. My planet doesn't really have a culture of it, we're very individualistic even for a parasocial species, but I'm hoping as we keep making decisions together...*

*I don't think your bond is weak. Maybe your will to fight - you're here at least partly to keep it in check, after all?*

*I'm new to this, it's something I always avoided because on my planet it was usually so... bad. But it sounds like it is here too and we especially - I take this personally seriously - have a responsibility to stand up against... ethnic cleansing.*



*Ethnic cleansing?* They had no translation of the concept. Even though it was happening to them.

“I...” I used to fantasize about going on these kinds of anthropological tangents, explaining features of the world around me like it was. Like I said. A lore wiki. Now I was just getting sick of it. *Halation, I think the awkward part is over, can we try to share something complex and intuitive.*

They stopped on the stairs for over a minute at some of the mental images that were hazy to me as if they had rotted in my mind. *Things like this have happened here, but we don't associate them automatically with the mere fact of forced population movement. At least since the acts of our curse-parents (a concept that would expand as widely in me; it was related to the idea of debts of violence we had observed so gruesomely firsthand) we all move anyway, and the planet is big enough to hide. Like healing when we are injured, moving when we are attacked is neither dishonourable nor onerous; it is the natural course of action. And so we have largely avoided living with anyone we dislike, and besides the Network, our code has prevented technologies that would affect the whole planet. By the standards of the universe this is true of Towers, but by the standards of your people - savannah predators stuck on a tiny island - this must be true of the universe. And this, you must*



*understand, is why no matter how uncomfortable our methods, we must oppose the Adipose. Because in a space without space, a space where any distance can be reached from any distance, this will no longer be possible. War has not possessed the universe as it possessed your planet, even now - but connected by the Adipose, it will. It will shrink to the point that battles can be fought for all of it.*

I nodded, with a lump in my throat. Stopping the Adipose from landing here, then, would be like stopping the boat that set my ancestors on the shores of my country, everywhere. Even if for Earth, or for Towers, I was like them.

*The contact, the communication, none of those are evil for us. None of them imply the impossibility of independence. The Adipose does.*

*I understand. What would you have done if the Network had agreed to it?*

*The Network was never going to agree to it. It had multiple responsibilities between which it was torn - to its people, to its bloc, to protecting this planet from offworlders who could have imported nodes or targeted its citizens. It was fulfilling its representative duties as a symbiote and stalling for time when it was assassinated, trying to find a mutually satisfying solution,*



*much as your Tuber Plug is doing in its own way. Everyone in the computational polities, however, could simulate how its decision algorithm would resolve in the last instance. The Adipose alliance took it out before it could make a final decision and take stronger measures - cutting off travel from pro-Adipose worlds, intercepting messages - taking this planet out of the whole hideous game.*

I exhaled, not sure if I needed to say anything. I could feel something of the dead weight of billions of immovable decisions pressing down from the atmosphere above us - even though that mass was gone.

The next few days were for settling in with the Ferrous Masks as much as possible. Planning a proper species introduction. Practicing new combat techniques with Hala-tion, getting the hang of the local weapons and showing a select group of Gatherers handpicked by the Aurifex how to use guns. Getting to know the various groups rotating in and out of the sickbay. Many didn't stay here for long - they just got healed, collected supplies, and went straight back to their bombed-out ranges to rebuild, or headed somewhere else. There were an astonishing range of divination rituals for deciding which direction to go, even when only one "cardinal" direction was considered



broadly safe - they rarely even thought in terms of this, and had a whole navigational language involving ratios of size/number/distance of openings and perspective cones.

I did, however, for the first time here, witness a number of funerals.

*We did too, Jax had mentioned. They take apart the body, like a lobster at a restaurant. They give the internal and external skeletons to Fabbers, and make things - these days, mostly weapons. They gather the liquidy insides into a soluble sphere and then they... lower it... on a fishing line... into the river.*

They didn't do that here - the fishing ritual was probably less important. They carried it in a procession that wound between the different plots, sprinkling a bit on each plot the deceased had eaten from, or that represented its community in an analogical layout. They poured some into the small artificial stream that looped through the encampment, and burned the remainder to the sky.

At night it felt like the bottom of the ocean. Even when it rained, the thin atmosphere was rarely fully overcast. And there was nothing resembling the light pollution on Earth; but I still hadn't seen a full sky of stars. Always thin layers, far apart, creating subtle interplays of colour and light I



could stare into for long enough to feel guilty during the day, casting a soft chainmail of dapples over the grasses. (I found a few of the little round things from earlier among them, ran over to Aqueduct to check if they were the same - they had a ring of pseudopods like a millipede around their rim on one side, curling and uncurling weakly. Their white petal-parachutes had been rotted, or torn. A few Gatherers conducted a small funeral for them too, cremating them with a fingertip-mounted acetylene torch.)


I lay in a hammock suspended from the underside of the cliff, as most of the Towers did. Rain slanted almost directly under me in the wind, cut off by the overhang, and watered the plots of foliage. I watched whichever of three night-time moons came into narrow, zigzag, torn-paper gap between the overhang and the meandering horizon at a time - one oblong, one shaped a bit like a puzzle piece, one round and darker than the others. Maybe that was the “Rusty Moon”. No, it’s a phenomenon under specific atmospheric conditions, Aqueduct corrected from their hammock next to mine. It can happen to any of them. One, two, three nights I waited for those conditions to appear.

I’ve always liked hammocks. Some of my happiest childhood memories were from when we’d had one set up on





the big tree in the backyard - I'd wrapped myself in it like a cocoon, pictured its tie dye around my legs as a dress - until it had been removed as punishment over some fight I didn't remember in five months. And the texture of the materials here, as always, was a whole new sensory pleasure; a plastic smoothness and stiffness at the same time as the give and variation of hand knitting. But the tingling on my skin still kept me up when I slept, which was in shifts here anyway.

I had rolled over, watching dull coppery flakes of moonlight cross and overlap on the stream, when I saw something round and slick bobbing down it. Several some-  
things, like a passel of reptile eggs.

I wasn't the only person who noticed. There were whisperers among the hammocks, watchers at stations along the stream. I had a sinking feeling what it was early on that I might have acted on, but there were so many things I didn't recognize in this ecology. Later I was told the bombs had been covered in grass and the shells of a ubiquitous pest species that for convenient visualization I will simply call turtle-beetles, so they weren't recognized by the guards, who reached out with their staffs to fish them out of the water -





As limbs and chips of stone and charred grasses flew as high as my bunk, as Halation surged through every vein of my body and shot our brain full of adrenaline and organic nootropics, and reached for the rock above us, the overhang shook.

Tremors proceeded from one side to another; weakly connected pieces showered below. A section of the lip cracked from one end to the other, and fell across both ends of the stream.

From massive vocalizers set up around the projecting back wall of the shelter, a sound I couldn't hear but loud enough I could feel - everyone was awake and moving at once.

We fell and landed on our feet like a cat a few metres from where a battle morph was forming over the pit of the Listening Station, while some Towers I'd seen huddling with groups of fighters crawled down it. Others - the fighters themselves, and transport morphs - scattered towards the opening.

And were met by the flailing carapaces of Ribbons.





One bullying its way in, rearing and shaking like a dragon parade float in the left of the entrance was enough to overturn a transport morph and tear half a dozen tents out of the ground. A volley of acid packets hit its shell and left spots of glowing, fizzling tarnish. It swept further in and barrelled through the line that had bombarded it in a clean arc, leaving explosions in its wake. The weight of seven, eight, nine Gatherers climbing on top of it, trying to jam the points of their staffs into the gaps between its plates or through its wings, slowed it down even as it twisted in a spiral throwing them into the walls and smouldering grasses. It was almost still for a second, turning. I was more focused, on solid ground, and more furious. I slept with the SCAR-L. I opened fire.

Most of the bullets ricocheted off - in fact, the acid packets seemed to be doing more damage, still corroding in some places - but one landed between its plates and a jet of golden blood darted out. It writhed and reared back and round of Geoplaque packets pinned it to the wall, followed by a more powerful acid I hadn't seen in drill-like cones that ate straight through. One after another after another whistled over my head from a coordinated arc of slingers like I hadn't seen on this planet so far, until even its moustache seemed to be melting off its face and I turned back



towards the formation where another - two, three - were coming up behind them.

Halation powered a dash between the ranks, slamming my left hand straight into the centre Ribbon's face, the SCAR-L angled one-handed beneath (no, I obviously couldn't pull that off without her and my right arm was going to kill me for it the next morning), enveloping its mind enough to freeze it (maybe even, if we could reach past reflex, freeze its wings). We were - Halation was - hit by a shock of - recognition. The mental attack almost backfired - we didn't recognize them, but somehow, from a contact so immediate it shouldn't have even transferred any information... Then the colossus - another colossus, the one guarding the pit was still at its station, launching its own ranged attacks on either side from semicircles of combined slings - stepped over the battle line and slammed into them, grabbing them at two, three joints and twisting them like a towel. The Ribbon responded with its own twisting maneuver and broke loose, only to be pushed back by several blows from a pair of massive notched stone blades I had taken for stelae embedded in the ground. As it fell back - its companions avoiding fire as much as they could while pushing the lines back by rolling bombs into the camp, which daring Gatherers intercepted with the





nets of slings and lobbed back at them - the enemy offworlder started singing in Ahasurunu.

Its voice was to an Ahasurunu's as a church organ recorded through a hissing phonograph on stereo was to a Casio on an organ preset. *The offworlder is here! it whistled as it rolled into the air and rolled a new bomb out of its belly to drop on the colossus. And if anyone wants a surprise trophy, so is Halation, the Orator of Death!*

The fire was now overpowering the "water" - someone was hoisting a bulky hose out of the Listening Station pit, but steam was billowing off the stream's surface. The lines facing the Ribbons were all but cut off from those behind, and everyone trying to escape was crowding underground, folding up huge tents into book-sized squares they could tuck into their clothes. I had no idea where Aqueduct was - hopefully they had gone underground and abandoned me. And amidst all this I stood still for almost a whole second before Halation - orator of what? - pushed me into motion.

We ran up the colossus' leg and leapt off. The colossus had swept the bomb aside with one of its catcher's mitt multi-slings but, aiming for one of the other Ribbons, hit the still shaking overhang and knocked a huge chunk loose.



We threw something at it that we'd thought to add to our armament soon after we got here - the bungeelike cord the Gatherers who had brought us back here had used. One end of it was wrapped around the Corpuscle in its compressed form. It sprang open in midair and knocked the rock towards the Ribbon - rather than using part of my body, like Bashtaev's finger, Halation had fit to the grooves in the Corpuscle, then connected us along the length of the cord. I was glad we'd had a few days to train this formation (and as many limit-pushing experiences as we'd had already) - the totally separate mental-sensory interface of a Corpuscle was much more complicated to coordinate with than even a virtually extended body-part; Bash-taev probably couldn't have managed it in the time they'd had to interface with the traitor. The Ribbon demolished the rock with a bomb as the Corpuscle flipped and spun on and over its flying fragments, onto the Ribbon's head and around its body. Down its length one way, then leaping to the other side of its wave form, around, folding it up on itself, then over... and as the cord pulled me through the air right up to its faceless, moustached head as it fell, Halation sent mathematized Ahasurunu along every nerve that touched the restraints: Who are you and how do you know me?





*Who are you kidding? Who in this war doesn't know you?* it sang out loud as she tried to creep to its brain without breaking under the strain. *Besides this invasive species you've brought from a Code Francium planet. Even for you, warmonger, that's madn-* The colossus wedged a giant staff into its second segment between two plates and levered it like cracking open a lobster.

It had gone for the segment with the explosive-excreting organ first; strings of small guttering explosions tore the exposed flesh as the accumulated chemicals mixed as they spilled from their torn sacs, until a final smoky crack ripped its body in half. In that time the colossus had done the same with the head.

A swarm of Scouts had pinned the other two Ribbons with weapons like tasers.

Already well out from under what remained of the overhang, a pile of golden globules fell straight from above and incinerated the colossus, scorching my back.

A flood of viscera, brains and nerves and torn tracts and digestive juices and a fluid like hot corn syrup spilled out over me and mingled with Halation, along with it the final



soup of images and words and self in its dying nervous system:

*A research station in orbit around the planet Waterfall, receiving transmissions from a survivor of an attack by their own side they had watched in horror, hurtling through space in a microship.*

*Their own side - it wasn't, was it? It was just their patron network bloc - they were doing research that would benefit everyone, whatever everyone was left after all this was over - just like that research colony on Contemplation, though not even on the Adipose directly, more fundamentals of cosmic computation that might help the rest of the galaxy understand what it actually did-*

*Of course they needed the patronage of a network bloc that could spare more computing power than you could safely house on a planet. Of course with the Meteorological synods all locking down research that had once been hoped to establish the very fundamentals of their beliefs, the source of agency at the level of reality itself, and the only blocs willing to support such dangerous research were the ones that had backed the Adipose in the first place. Even the kinds of work being done under the auspices of places like the destroyed colony or the hidden laboratories on Towers were too constrained.*



*They gathered around the packet receiver to listen to the survivor's transmission.*

*It declared the total, universal culpability of their bloc. It called for the bloc to be removed from Waterfall in all its instances, if not voluntarily, then by force. That any such instance was a threat to any anti-Adipose activity nearby, however peaceful; that the planet as a whole, and its Meteorological communities, could no longer risk remaining neutral. That the warm relationships many enjoyed with symbiotes from Contemplation called for their solidarity now.*

*That wasn't how it worked. The instances on Waterfall and Contemplation couldn't even communicate without long-distance packets (like they could if they had the Adipose), they knew each others' decisions at months' delays, they were practically different minds. Sure, they had to equilibrate eventually, but they would see reason...*

*The orator - who had never been to Waterfall - had been invited to visit the research station. Now they had to shut it down.*

*The anti-Adipose groups they had been collaborating with climbed the space elevator en masse and stormed the station, taking the move as a declaration of allegiance. By the time they were done they had smashed so many processing blocks with*





*hammers and industrial chemicals they couldn't have invited her back if they tried.*

If I hadn't already thought of it Caroline Bennett-Fog would have beaten it into me in our first week of training but I wasn't an idiot: of course I had wondered, how did I know that I had access to all of Halation's mind, which I didn't, any more than she had access to all of mine, we had our respective privacies, like this journal, this was a standard condition of Weir symbiosis, even though I had access to more of it than I'd ever had to any human, even you Mai (I address this to you now out of desperation). How did I know that Halation didn't control everything she showed me, that I had been seeing a movie the entire time, that there wasn't a whole other mind with a whole other worldview and real set of information about everything in the galaxy behind the curtain. How did I even know my own judgment of this knowledge, that I hadn't been rewritten from scratch the moment Halation entered my brain, my utility function twisted out of my own recognition.

The answer was just trust - the same as it would be with another human, the same as it was with reality. The same way I knew I wasn't being fed all my knowledge of Earth





in the first place by a Cartesian demon - even though I had just invited one into my head. (Mab had said: Descartes' horror was always not solipsism but that something else could be in there with you, deceiving you.) Halation understood this trust better than anyone I'd ever met, her culture understood it better. Her memories were too thick and coherent to be invented to fool me.

But I knew I always had something in there with me in the first place, and Halation did too. Culture, upbringing, trauma, the "unconscious". (Mab had said: *And only a fragile scrote would feel terror at that either.*) Nothing had to be false about the experiences I'd shared with Halation for this to be true; we even remembered some of the words of the speech. Halation hadn't advised people to go to war, she had warned them it was already there. News of worse battles, worse massacres had already reached her from the surface of Waterfall. And yet... she had never been there.

Halation's mind, suffusing mine, was quiet, blown out, grieving yet guiltless.

Above us, their circle formation wheeled, and another voice wailed out in Ahasurunu that sounded electrified, distorted, feedbacked: *The third nest-sibling I have lost on this aborted planet because of you, Orator of Death! And for*



*all I know you really didn't imagine it, but it wouldn't have bothered you either, admit it. You would never have visited Waterfall, that would be vulgar, and indulging a predation fantasy would hardly be Meteorological... Us predator-descended sapients, even if we don't eat flesh ourselves, endure so much suspicion from you neutral arbiters of all possible existence, while these Algal Blooms you've dragged out here are exactly what we are in your most psychotic fantasies. A superpredator specialized into total domination of its entire ecosystem, to the point that they've turned the same technologies on each other, and now us as well...! Don't pretend that planet hasn't been a horror story of sapient development researchers for fifteenth-exponents, that the synods haven't blocked requests for an ecoremediation contact mission twice because they were scared of being blown up with atoms.*

The bombs rained down around us, bigger ones, the ground buckled under us and we slid down a broken rib of stone into a boiling pot of rubble - I pulled the Corpuscle back to me and myself back into it, Halation retreating into a black hole of shame in my throat with enough peripheral functions to pilot it up and over and through and between, where had she learned any of this in a single spaceship for so long anyway, it had dodged space interceptors but that was mostly a matter of calculating and waiting, it had



training sims but what she had learned was the absolute plasticity of her neurons in an aloneness with nothing for them to cluster around, a hollow and general will.

The bombers followed us, destroying in front of us every time we zigzagged - and eventually stopped.

It was a biological process. They had to be exhausting themselves. Of course their runs were limited.

Then we heard the thunder of the anti-aircraft guns.



LUCIF121  
AER  
TUCS2  
VCCN20W  
ECCN20  
N10ENBU  
CUMMOD  
H1202  
CBV01DU  
SCE  
SCE  
202LEMD1  
12204  
0012  
111000  
WCCN2  
DOFONE  
EL  
TUVONE  
W1-01  
TWC1D100  
1ENFOR  
E102W0D  
2ED DO  
WE E111'  
VD1112C1  
10W  
COM2EC1E  
WWE1'  
211  
DOFOR  
12204  
TOWEN



2'  
LWCIG121  
AET  
TUCN2  
VCCNM20M  
MRECEM02  
A00ENBV  
COMMOD0  
A1202  
E00AID0'  
N01BICE2  
23E  
2026EMD1  
1120M  
0012  
001000'  
M0000  
D000E  
E1  
T000E  
M101  
1WCIDID0  
1EM00  
E102M00  
2E100  
M0E111'  
001012C1  
100  
COM2EC1E  
00E11'  
211  
D0000  
1120M  
T000M





SCARRED ZERUEL

Acheron

light-vessel protocol-primordial  
of the Fauna, Marker through  
quantum observance the relays of  
the digital enmeshment

likes: the centres of the  
dream-spiral, the parallax where  
threads of Marked reality run  
concurrent with the access-voy-  
ages of the coma sleep of the  
Marker's death cycle

dislikes: awakening, being cold

blood type: n/a

seen with: Phassa



by: ghosted vain



character profile

Laeath decides to wake up. Go on another fiver, which is what they call a five minute split from Mother Nest. Quick jaunt to a mapped point otherwise her head will churn, swim over in the relentless barrage of chatter from the jumbled spiders. That crawl beyond the Gates, endless in scramble over each other, twisting compound perspectives together, that hold the knowledge of Mother Nest. Laeath has always needed more breaks from this than others, tainted as she is



by her Oracle work at Datera VI, the Coven's name for the planet-chrysalis Orcha Mutate reaching the stage zenith of its elect-path into the Psymbionic Network.

Chrysalises like these remain cradling their berth as essential psychic avatars to be reckoned with in any thought-matrix delve, any attempt to use wavelengths to reach Sourcehood. Grafted through digitalis to ensure an earthflesh instead of a culture ghost. Wisdom of all cultures brought to birth. Spliced or otherwise.

Run but never hide, was the Neutral Lotus philosophy distilled to her for her work there. To raise a world into a nexus nerveway for the Cosmere's psychic terrain. A fate-point thrumming with Cosmere lore-knowledge. Who has illuded for herself in her planar port the Gardens of the Queen once besieged by Aurachne. Who has kept her raiments and forests that dance with spark and scent.

Still there are other planet-chrysalis to watch over.

When he was dark earth he was called Illia Casting, and sunless was his breath, his world a realm of shadows and shades. His beings were pale, gaunt, and scrambled over the earth... 'like corralling feral dogs,' Sister Taranath of the 3rd had told her. Taranath herself became scrambled,

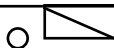


her reports sparse, concerned with doings that took her here and there, warding such she found into or around each other, as needed.

Now traversing through the Coven's webway reveals another planar port. This one by design a bleak fortress of dusk. Dristra, the chosen name of Illia after his chrysalis, draped in shadow; the flesh of his avatar is knit of it. As she drifts in she notes; walls of dark stone, light a soft candle pallor. Unlike Orche Dristra had taken not even as friend any Bridge; they remain in the layers below the fortress, scabble its ways and passages, lurk somewhere below.

The throne room sees Dristra sitting deep in trance. They say that's what he does with his time. Zone out into oblivion or prop open his third eye. Drowning in sight unseen to others. Some mean feat, but Laeath has her doubts. Doubts there is nothing the Coven can't see. Dristra may have gained entrance to the Psymbionic now, can draw on the wisdom of any other chrysalis, but they themselves are just an aspect of the mother brood web. As such a simple aspect to Mother Nest.





"Which one of you is it now?" he says. His eyes stay closed while his lips move, throwing Laeath off. I was doing this when you were still a planet, she thinks. "Yes, your oracular work guided my denizens to the new digital union. But I don't trust you now. I know your Mother Nest. It doesn't just map the infra-psyche frequency. It lives off it. You make it a home."

"It's rough out there for us," Laeath says. "We do what we can, for the good of the Coven."

"What do you want?" he says. He's snapped out his trance. Waves an arm. Languid. Detached.

"A fellow Sister took on the role of Oracle here," she says. "Wanted to know what happened to her."

He laughs. A weak laughter nonetheless sustained. "I don't tell you apart. You're all just bugs to me."

So Laeath responds the way she knows, that has been ceded to her. As of the crossing-instant of her birth into Mother Nest and its disparate root-strands in the Gates



where the mother brood web has plaited itself into space and time. Before she was even Sixth Gate.

“Culture zombie. As a mass-consciousness you thought, survival. Anything to avoid being a culture ghost and languishing, alone, forgotten. But we are the bugs who weave what through your clumsiness you take for granted. That means we wriggle through your flesh, zombie. We own you.”

She's gathered her smoke-Skein around herself. Dark smoke wisps across her face, her jet black hair conjoined to its curls. Where etched into her skin even now would be imprints of her Secting but beneath the smoke-Skein she is mist, she is wafting away, even now, coming closer, even now fading away.

“Too ashamed to keep even a Bridge beside you.”

The smile remains. “My Bridge has eyes to see you even now.”

“I know,” she said, for she had. Those eyes were on her the whole time. A Bridge was needed where on Mutate the



floral and faunic had parted to entwine again the digitalis bleeding through Orche's pores. But she had never seen Flora here. Instead the Bridge had marked as Floral tone the earth of stone and grit, made avatar of the thoughts of clay. Marked as Faunic insects that dwell in the shadows of stone. And what would Bridge them both she never wanted to meet. But it could see her. Compound eyes it would visualise in the planar-port, if she ever saw it, and form so much like what Illia had accused her of.

"You know what my nomads did? They prayed. They wore down rituals into time. Looking for light. For some semblance of it. All that is preserved." He points to his head. "In here."

"I'll take a raincheck on that," she says, thinking, time squandered. If this is what becoming a frequency means, no thanks. At least not his way. Thinking, back to the mother brood web, to keep together with my Sisters the Mother Nest. Staining herself into her smokeveil, in the ways ancient to all the Spiders. She is unravelling then, threading herself through the Sixth Gate, where her Sisters await.



## *Synopsis*

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



## *Last Time*

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



CW: reality ambiguity, biotechnological integration, body horror, cold, death imagery, demons, apocalypse

(ε)

## AFTERBIRTH

After Ino's Veil executed its kill trigger Morgan found himself, knees gathered, by a pink flame. It had swept in descent from the hollowed, chambered structure held in sight above him. The light vein red had sept to dance and pull at his eyelids. Cloying barbs as if, hooking into the lid, twisting. A beacon beyond stone and walls of rushing ice. It had pulled him there; it had been pale, afire. It'd been there for him to see.

That he forgets at first. It would come back to him, as if from a dream, even though there had been no sleep in which to dream.



***THE SHADOWS FLEET AWAY(ε/ Σ)***



Staring down, his gene-weaved legs swing over the hollow's mount, where beneath a passage-way crawls and gasps its way to snaking contact with a widened plane. He could fall, could tumble. Out into the directive the Clean Flame is assigned to paralysis and status. Sub-filing a routine away, he suspects. When he thinks about it, it's a clean run, no conscience or vengeance. He could fall out into the winter storm inhabited by the changelings who have emerged to take the place of the Exiles. He saw them, killed them. He was there to be killed by them.

This hollow is a Tender, long-dessicated, not his own. For his fresh death if and yet. This one died so long ago it has slipped into the neolithic stone that braces the general digitalis. It has crawled behind and raised the lithic phase above it like a shield. So as to withdraw from the crash of ice and burn of the Frost. Find itself huddled and warm, feigning vibrational death. All traces of the Flora which relegated it are gone save crisp, flat leaves that go off in psychic shots when he steps over them.

For now, though, he scatters them over the snaking passage. Watches them sink before a landmark of crystal-enshrined vale, which itself catches an updraft which scatters the leaves too, fro, and from these he decides, without



an Alt to follow, to see if he's absorbed anything from his meetings with Laeath. He watches the leaves as they scatter, and when he has generated enough entropic charge through patterning them with the Psyche Halo, he sets Ino's Veil online again.

Searches it for dependencies. Upgrade packages can be unlocked routing through node-signals set to process a ring at a time. This is more, though, to make sure it's not missing anything serious. He'd panicked; the Veil went spitfire; he had no idea how much it had left. He checks the seams; poking at the psycho-projected lace, running fingertips across diode lines, nano knit into every strand. Not more than psychic braidworks, and the diodes from filaments coursing from the Psyche Halo. So when he deactivates the aura, it immolates, implodes in a quick twist of fire, and is gone.

The smoke around him thins to steam, then wisps away, leaving the ice of stasis thawed, melted into brooks, rivulets of clear water. He is left with a vague imprint of prophecy, cumulus of thought drifting through his re-husked shell. Echoes of ghosts trapped & stranded from aeons of life on Orcha Mutate before, he thinks, it froze; the Clean Flame told me it felt like coming alive. After a voice com-





posed of pain, of ache picked up by the halo through the Skein had...

That's right, he thinks, you can't skip steps. The Skein now won't let me, anyway.

The way he knew it first, sitting here, it was the blood light. Now with the Veil offline it is his Psyche Halo listening to the Skein. Somewhere beyond frozen air, he thinks, is foundry, are the tessellations Laeath called the Petal Chains, lapped into by the Exarchs, bled dry, to rust, and in the freeze, ready to break. If he figures right, they're the way light streams into the Skein; pale and unknowing, innocent and hopeful. So the Skein gets darker every moment. It is echoed, looping loneliness; it is terror, and at its fringes exists jealousy, and possession. Thawed, he wonders if he can reach it.

He is about to stop listening to the looped, pheromone-loaded statal thaw when a signal blossom's across the halo's field: this stark alone the signal is faint. Still it trills in susurrant fuzz.

o, the stars you miss while you sleep & the thoughts we keep,





beneath

Is how the Psyche Halo translates it, stray errant thought, but he hears then, across the fuzz, a clicking clatter like tiny jaws working, chewing through the fuzz, a hunger for the resonance he'd only associate with Fauna. As if all Markers haven't passed beyond the Clean Flame to be primordial communed with Orche herself. Taking with them all they had seen and known of Mutate. Prophetic-work and then that too is gone, leaving him with the knowledge of knowing it. Finding a state; knowing there is a fate line that is heaviest, that weighs downwards collapsing other threads to cradle it, to valley it, but not knowing. It is the not-knowing that infiltrates the Psyche Halo, a remembrance that he was one of many before the Veil schemata was synapse-imprinted onto him through his nerves, his aches, the acid buildup coating his skin-shadow.

When he was one, before, what would have been Pro-to-Exile but Husk-Shedder imprinted; the Exile is in you then. The shadow of his skin bleats beneath his skin's phase-presence.

The Clean Flame had lied to him. In the Barrows he had found other Exiles, found that it lied to all Husk-Shedders, but only told the truth to the Emp-Druids.



Beneath his quilted hood his hair is thatchy and the tips that peek out are streaked white with frost. It strands white lace into his field of vision and for a moment lost in that tangle is the waver. The Alt. So lost that he doesn't think he saw it right.

A light, burning, but a rumour of it soon faded out, a ripple into frozen digitalis.





## MISTAKES IN MANY WAYS

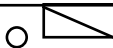
That he sees and it's soon gone.

He sees instead the Exarchs gone spliced with the shadow-traces the Oracles of the Gates, of the Covenant have left behind as spliced offspring from the mother brood, Phassa tells him. Shadowed, spider legged ghost forms, crawling up and past him across the facing mouth of the hollow.

He has time from the Psyche Halo's attunement, sensing them first, via the latent background ebb of Ino's Veil. Time to back away. It ripples a cold blue fire through his palm. Around it the white static haze of the corruption burns in tendrils of glittering steam.

He wants to know why she'd tattle out her mistress like that, map it out through the Skein. Phassa tells him it's a wave, one she herself seldom sees, that wisps below her own inner space. Speaking to an ache which being formatted into the grub skin has detached from him, into the Psyche Halo.

A deep soul rending after his Tender's loss and the mirage of the Glitch.



He walks down the passage that has led him here, snakes around the iced, mounded neonic bed-loam.

All that seeded digital flame somewhere beneath his feet to stay useless encased. Asleep, but could the Veil wake it? To run lacelines, pattern lines, he guesses, now that the digitalis has emerged from Orche's chrysalis.

Are you that dead format? He whispers to his Psyche Halo. Phassa's voice answers back.

I suppose,

That would kill me, he thinks to himself. From where he has retreated the Exarchs pass by; spider-legged shadows. The light they cast flickers, knives pitch black in slivered serration over the ice.

From then forwards ever since you began to lament. You in general, the collective divergences. Before your enmeshed enslavement to the frenzy of ...

He waits.

Flora and data. Together awaking your garden cities. You were like lilies floating up the surface of water skim. Food for the sea-crows and the water demons.





As a ghost to herself she will, he thinks, look like my Oracle to me. The borrowed form of her spider skin.

By now the ache in his heart for his Tender and Alt sustains the current of Phassa's voice as a flatline. Steady hum. He tunes it out, what he can, though what's left is slender enough to sting. It pierces. The borrowed form of her spider skin is crawling like shadows they trespassed over the golden sun. Laced into the Clean Flame.

The Clean Flame took seed. Blossomed, imploded into its own nega-gravity well. The Flora prayed to it. The Fauna were drawn to its warmth.

But who are you?

Fractal flesh.

Cammy was more real than that. Cammy and the hollows of her eyes.

Engulfed and so are we immolated.

Phassa again.

Cursed to suffer this torment we bear our betrayals, for the lost and those who



He has to tune out again. From where he is he hears the clacking of the spliced Exarchs in new lives they have dug out from the seed-fire of the digitalis, the neonic loam and the dead weavings of the departed Oracles. He is far down the passage and the skittering is a distant rainfall, click-clack traces across the silence itself papered over by the Frost's working of time.

Thousands of gnashings against the frozen neonic.

Meanwhile you could try again, to not hear.

Following flickering white light. A mirage as if passing between the mirrors of his eyes.

Between mirror and lid-skin where truth is massed before it's processed. That truth is in the blood, it is what you lose, in your life, more and more of.

As if when vat-born he thinks, we knew ourselves. We were lied to, got our destiny-signatures hacked into chrysalis patterns so that our truth is an attunement, we spend our lives looking for balance. An attunement which stressed Neutral Lotus or so said the Oracles.



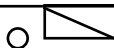
The spliced Exarchs that flow across in surf past the maw of the ice cave are a thousand shadows; real in some way, enough to suck the stasis blood dry; and yet as shadows, clacking in the distance, still far off.

The trace signature sparkles across the diode-veins that map this exit to the iced earth structure. As not of itself but part of the neonic loam. Marking it, scattered over it like flower petals, loose, strewn, yet always in design of movement and vector arranged.

White flame in skip steps over the diode-veins that brought to the surface have always been, must have always held the seed-fire like leys. The iced earth is dense, heavy, branches into labyrinthine patterns and the trace skips of light are all he has to plot a coursework from him, the Alt's signature in the white electric and bright.

In many ways the same mistakes. In many ways, he thinks, because as he walks, following the trace, the skitter-skatter of the spliced ghost form Exarchs fades to quiet, a breathy, floating silence before the moans of pain begin, begin to echo through the iced earth, carry off the walls, a flood of sound while the trace line glitters.





## BLISTERED LIPS

While the trace line glitters he wishes it would subsume itself into visual space, be digital flesh instead of digitalis, but Dear has his own waveform thoughts, own waveform motives. Aether-fleshed into digitalis but exploring the sinews of ice. Morgan wishes he could get closer, though he feels no heat, just slight tremors of digitalis and the Skein below it, where usually it takes a divine, heaven-radiant planar expression.

In the digital frost of Mutate it must descend, be the hellish line instead, and he thinks he sees his Alt use that, be brushfire; an immolation moult, take flame as shortcut for his Marking protocols. Use it to guide both himself and Morgan.

That's the white flame, he thinks, that I see. Even now steaming, splitting, forking in tendrils, blanching the gloomy, hollowed ice earth with light, if only for moments. Keeping it together in the temporal pre-death the way he did when he was a fresh skip, or of course, Morgan has no idea how long that was.

A stable skip. It's the bright flame that offsets what echoes through the iced neonic loam structure; howls of pain ris-





ing in clustered forms. Worn voices speaking in a tongue he doesn't know. Blistered lips, he thinks, and sees before him shadows moving in the passage.





## HAPTIC ACID

The shapes are lithe yet creep as if worn out. Their shadows cloak themselves into black dreamfall, an obsidian ocean running the rivulets of the iced earth. The veinlines of the seedfire that bloom in scarlet quicks could be, Morgan thinks, the patterns of her eyes.

The patterns of her eyes vein-lined are in case.

In case his Alt and other Fauna need to know her by them, By the ground they skip over, bear no tether to. There is no tether to death or decay here, which is what she wants, in the end, and to know her muses, her Fauna by them.

But by the bite of the Frost he knows it's all blood to her, sorrows harvested from the Skein, the same way Phassa's pain speaks to him translated through the Psyche Halo. To be tuned into like that like he's a waveform, though one already cross-swept and set into Orche's killing auto-spec. On a sheer trip after the Clean Flame's deceit, bonding to Phassa, the one who dotes in illused death. He sees that in the eyes of the Ghouls, in being unable to, for their eyes are dark hollows, and they remain on him.





So as he walks by them with his weaves condensed against  
his flesh by

the dry, dead ice he maps himself somewhere in the swal-  
lowing black pools.

Knows more by their death-sight where he is and where  
he's been than his sight and memories both in flux. Dis-  
trusting.

He keeps losing his Alt behind the shadows of their frames  
and Morgan thinks if he loses Dear for good he'll never  
find him again. A distant flame flickering out in skips and  
beats gliding in electric slivers over the iced earth.

How the iced earth has returned to her gauntlet, is her  
dressage, her veil to wear against the judgements of those  
who would look.

The Alt though, blinks into disappearance for a second  
that has him worried. A long stretch is enough, enough  
to see the outline in tessellated smoke which drifts to  
wreath the grotesque nomads, settle on angular shoul-  
ders that unknot themselves, cling to the white nacreous  
smokestuff, in pale velvet fluff.



In constancy when you are unknotted, says Phassa.

In the unfiltered coriolis of her thought melting through the psyche's halo he gets enough of it to burn his own mood black. Her jealousy. In her speaking through the ache in the Skein, where there should be no ache. Tuning in again.

Dear addresses in ritual circles these new gaunt, twisted figures clad in tattered garb, band, brace, gauze. Sparking fire in the hollows of their death eyes, shining in pale blue flame. They've gone mute, filling the tableau with silence. Morgan affects serenity, walks among them, looks closer.

Draws himself together.

Their lips, he sees, are stained; mottled by a Floral setting itself apart from the torpored fire of the paler Flora native of the digitalis. It bruises their teeth, which are needles, silver flame in polar aurora, slivered to jagged blades. The skin of the seam, he sees, torpored where the light runs. The ragged demons, pale, gaunt, starved, and trussed by gauze are beyond it. They are from layers above. The Skein itself layers below.





The ones nearest him chew, look straight on. Their eyes death sieves like the vacant husks he'd had to immolate. Black hollows flickered with subtrenched grey and welled with grief. He can see if he peers re-arrangements in the stems behind, the Psyche Halo tuning that into flickers of ice grey. The stems basing their skulls swivel. He sees them, crooks like submerged twigs in water, bent as if with years the skulls they hold aloft don't possess.

They are all swivelled to face the Alt, where their eyes linger, slipping past Morgan's looks furtive. Lean limbs banded and knotted with muscle more waxen fibre than sinew. In the light of the Alt their eyes are blue. Dear's own eyes are pinpricks of black, darting.

As Morgan watches the waxen, disfigured strangers begin to pick at themselves. Flakes like dustings, nail clippings, crescented, spinning, spiralling into the ice-entombed earth. Prised loose then in scablike facets. Out of the handful three have begun to lick and gnaw at their under knuckles. Their eyes are dead in capture of cerulean, abscessed. Morgan meets them, one by one, each time wrenching his sight away to nest in the hollows of the next. The cerulean, though, never returns the favour. Dear's cold blue light rushes the frozen earth.



Dear in the flush pale is new again, crossed the stitching of Marker threads over time.

Then there is the sound of spider-legs, there is Phassa's threading of the Skein, and the creatures named in anomie-soul, the knits in his platelets, as Ghouls as one glaze their eyes over the facing passage wall. Shadows smear and scramble in tendril outline behind the ice. The hair on the back of Morgan's neck is afire against his woven collar.

The Ghouls, transfixed by him, the Alt, and the Mutate Exarchs in sequence, continue to gnaw while their eyes swim.

Like that all gathered here swim, even as the ragged Ghouls begin to claw, gouge, move lower, descend inwards into their own torsos.





(Σ)

## VERSE 4.5

### CONJOIN

The braided apocheir of the Swim stretches out and the crossings in braids beyond glow, distant fires as if trailing along thermals in sequence, pulsing in skips of darkness as they blink out and others blink in, a code, she thinks, if she could read it.

Still even in the braided apocheir she thinks she hears whispers, murmurs that breach the braid, spectral, eking substance and fading out before she can assign meaning to it. The pulsing of twines beyond runs like a code coursing the now unspooled glaze of dark violet light, the shimmer that marks all that can be seen of the Swim. Faint voices murmur as if to agree with the pulse, though that pattern must be secret to itself.

The dark violet light defines the braids of the Swim. The crossings are long stretches of rippling shadow meeting in mists which remind her of the swirl of the screensky, like rippling vapour the glow rises from the gulfs as an icy glitter to define terrain. Here to mark this crossing





is the signal fire which burns a cold blue and another apocheired spark floats beside it.

Sparks are cyan hued in the violet aurora. Gone is the chassis or plating or woven limb. Instead of a burning pale light, this one is tattooed with the marks of the Libra which spider in script like trawl up the spark's form. She speaks in a voice that cuts in and out in a halting signal.

"Greetings veler Been here here no longer."

"Who are you?" Lesia says. Her haptic reception must be damaged; the apocheir strings itself in light afresh, new, and must adjust all inputs and outputs to the variant currents of the Swim.

"Hexa name give. The one who called you has on. Gone. I too not stay.

Repair signal for haptics fire.

Beware corruption. Darkness searching. Key of the Aortic."

Lesia waits for more.

Fragments slice through the haptic wash.





"You alter Trauma extremis."

"Trauma," Lesia says.

The spark is disintegrating in plumes, tufts curling from each other, fading.

"Conjoining."

In the far mounds of dead earth laced with sears of codelight like ribbon she sees another signal fire. Burning a thin needle of light that reaches in glint like a starbeam before flaring out from sight. Like the way optic scanners could be tricked by the fire-play of the screensky, leave a stabbing imprint of colour in the Still-Void.

She departs when the spark is fully dissolved. Not a true spark. A tape-delayed algo of haptics set to live and die before the target of its message. Down here, she thinks, they've been doing things with haptics we never thought about. Not as Andros.

Her auric robe cloaks her light-form's passage. So to any spark or embedded demon, she would be a flicker over the shadows of terrain, hard to pick apart from the code-veins themselves.



## SECOND SIGHT

By the next fire a Demon waits. Hulking, swelling above the flame, perched beside it on coiled haunches. Eyes skinned with web refract in curtained segments, bloodlines lacing black hollows. She's still some distance away; it hasn't seen her.

The fire is burning a phosphor green in a hollow pit of dead earth, risen in a ridge like a shallow bowl. The flame trails curl into darkness and past that the braided terrain runs forks and splits of occluded snaking paths, that wind into unseen areas and are soon lost in the crags and mounds of dead earth. Only the code-veins glimmer as if transmuting light from a hidden source. Above the swirling mists meet in dark furls like amniote clots where ribbons and curls pulse against each other in coagulation. Aetherial ooze swirls in rippling lakes where it is not thinned to veils of darklight waning into wisp, like the shades had been in the short instant they had been dissolving, pale grey tendrils of smoke rising to join the darker mists. Not a screen-sky, Lesia decides, but a no-sky, a clotted sky.

She thinks the clotstuff of the Braided Swim must be what had fucked with her haptic reception. If that stuff is pure haptic it's too much at once, and the quantum twine that





carries over from shell to spark as the contents of her morass apocheir has no interface for it. What keeps Lesia Lesia even as light-form. Her Tactica, too, must be tessellation-ware, translated through the binary the Patrons first framed, encased in simwork that straddles the Veldt. They see us like we see them, in our vats of hydrogel; but they sequenced us, she thinks. LAYSE-CHI was one of many Hubs they feed off. They evolved to terrasim, to shape embryonic apocheirs from the Still-Void they had gathered to enshroud the world like a cloak, an altered atmosphere that bled them from themselves until they had pooled together to shape and dwell within the fluxstuff of the Veldt.

In unlocking the Swim, our own underworld, we go somewhere they can't see us. We found it; they didn't create it for us. Merely sewed it with quantum twines spark routes from the still-void. From birth as larval ghost squelching we grieve inconsolable unless safely Cradled. Only when the hyperborean sleep occurs do we square themselves with any encroaching parameters.

She skims the bleak turf, making her way to the fire and the Demon. Tactica here functions as conduit to gestalt, as not viz overlay but striations in the thrum frequency of your quantum twine. Which it presents as a heartbeat sim-



ulacra, a diegetic inner metronome. So it uses the beats and their echoes skipping over silence to map a grid. The grid, this time, is a gouged-in inner codex implantation that right away begins to scrape in mental scripture from the aether-plaitings that swirl above them as the fire laps at the raised earth hemming it in.

She's a short skim from the Demon by now. A mound of crystalline light, sorn over with tufts of ragged and fringed stone-grey flesh. Timbred by seam lines the grey flesh plastered to the massive light-body trembles still for all its strength. Her haptics translate a hue; ruin seeping from its centre, festering, pooling within the papered light.

Her haptics translate further: breath, age old concept of. The dark grafts seem clotted of the no-sky, burnt into dry wax in the light; in places where the fringes are fine they shy from the light-body in peel. When it turns to face her its eyes are masked; the graft has marked itself in looping design to cut across the brow, seating the eyes, the skinned hollows.

Her Armata here is voltaic burst, pure haptic fit wrenching through the braided apocheir. These look like photon blasts, uncompressing cores unfurling petals of anti-ab-raxas. She sets one to latency-readiness but she thinks she



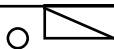
wants to talk first, if these things can talk. Only the haptic-translated breath fills the silence, expanding, contracting back into hush. A low static buzz in tremolo sweeping the local braid. Synchronising with the trembling of the blue signal flame.

Her haptic receptors are straining if not malice, a cruel confusion from the Demon. Unsure of her role here as something other than a fluke meal. What does that mean, she wonders. Do these things keep the Swim stable by gorging on what doesn't belong?

"Don't eat me," she messages. "I'm just passing through to find the other side. I won't threaten the under-server."

Now it is sending haptics that approach the clarity of her own. "You may pass by the purity of your flame, but a demonstration is needed." It says this in a voice drenched in reverb and garbling static. So that the haptics arrive broken, but her scanners are adjusting. Once they find the concepts all they need is the sequence, and that can be guessed at. Haptics are machine-gun probabilities that way.

"How do I demo that," she says, frowning. "Detrigger my auric robe?" She doesn't know how. Her light-form de-



2' LUCIF121  
AET  
FUCN2  
VCCN2  
HPECEN  
LUCEN  
COWOD  
A.202  
EVAID  
P1BIC  
22E  
202E  
1120W  
0012  
V100V  
WUCW  
D00RE  
E1  
FVBORE  
A1 01  
IWCID  
1E40W  
E102W  
2E1 DO  
WE E11  
V0112  
10W  
COWSEC  
WHE1  
211  
D00R  
1120W  
F00W

finned in braided apocheir is a far cry from her coils, her plating, chassis and headplate. Before she knew how to move and work but now she's starting from scratch. The Demon's lightbody wavers haptic scanners reading a denial. That wave of flat haptic brings her to herself. She hadn't wanted to decloak, reveal more light to the black terrain. She'd spent her whole Andro life fighting or fleeing, refusing to give in, using the corroding physware version. She is getting used to solitude.

"Stare into the flame." As she does she feels it begin to lap at her quantum twine. It's a mild sting at first. Soon climbing to a blunt ache that surrounds the twine, grinding it down like a compactor. Searing. Her haptic scanners light up before they overload and she routes from the place within her twine that stores and translates. It's a pink, translucent burn she sees working through the flame, spreading to engulf it until what licks at the apocheir is a colour that burns straight through her; the colour, she knows, her quantum twine would be, if she could see it.

When she collects herself again she is by the pink flame and the Demon is gone.





(ε)

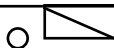
## WEAR IT OUT BY LIVING

The Exarchs themselves have no smoke-skeins but are made of them. Their true faces never show and Phassa thinks, fresh off sending a plaiting message through the true, all-hemming Skein, it's a shame hers will. She'll have no patience after that effort. She'd embedded a return trip nerve-exe and sent it vesselled as tears through the Skein. Re-spawned in the Freeze one of the Exiles who'd needed to be swept from Mutate in order for Orche's chrysalis to go smooth as the ridges in the dunes of Solitude. She could save one of them and chose to.

Because, she thinks, Orche is doing it wrong. She's been scrambled by all the factions she trusted to help her.

By Phassa's sojourns in the Queen's Gardens, her presence in drift, she tends the Flora. Ensures their growth though she sees only a desert. In that desert one sojourn she sees the ghost schemata, seen to her as motes like tufts of pollen, wisping low amongst the sands, downloads from clustered infospace, digitalis gathering in nebulaic clouds and drifting through the void as overlay. Only the symbi-





osis between the half-life of the Fauna and the un-life of the Flora kept the early stages of the Chrysalis stable.

She'd thought, I can fade away when I'm no longer needed.

But that ghost schemata had been an encode she'd never seen before, and it had reversed her.

Reversed; she had stood before a font of clear, sparkling water; she had drunk from it. A basin carved of stone set against a background of pure white light. Before she drank she had not known what it was to reverse. To go off-script. To depart her role as Bridge for the Chrysalis. Which means now waiting on the Exarchs with Orche.

Because Acheron, she thinks, should be sleeping...

She knows he is awake.

The Exarchs don't care about all aspects of the Chrysalis. All that bothers them is keeping the Lustre so it preserves the Alts, and without that, no light for them to live inside the Sun. Oracles like saying they control the Sun. In effect, Phassa knows, they wear it out by living in it. sunNET is a storm, a flux of them thinning the light-plasma from





the Whispering Sun's heart. Taking their share of it. It's their aspect that churns through the network. In the darkness they leave not shadow but corruption, charring the light-plasma, which can burn now that it has phased from light to digitalism.

So as all gather around the Hivic Throne the Exarchs send whispers, murmurs, to the effect of how nice the Lush looks, how they feel at home here, smoke-stuff no doubt soaking into the regenned Flora and she wonders what they see lilies, orchids, countess of lovelace and she still sees the lithic slabs that rise like ribs to serrate the valley. She rolls her eyes before seeing Orche is gazing straight at her. Why wouldn't she be?

So she composes her genned features. All the parts I have to twist around, she thinks. Yet twisting around her also is the smokestuff of the Exarchs like mist shrouding the dead valley, as they soak into the regenned Flora. Are they that shallow? They have the veil of the Oracles but not their insight. Still they are clutching her as they cling to the Flora in the Lush.

This one's murmurs reach her. Still it has always been Orche's breath that matters and when his breath is gone it is hers that reaches, strains sound from somewhere in



the air. Of the signs exchanged veiled by the smokestuff between Exarch and Orche she has no way of knowing. Orche's two syllables for her tighten her lips and create a smile she has to work to even define.

Proxy.

What she means is that to every Exarch gathered to her she is just a body. A way of living for the Exarchs must live within the Clean Flame and feel their mists strain taut to corrupt the Lustre, emboss it with pretty lies for the wayward, marring it even as they live within its beauty. Her avatar and role would make a nice change of pace for any one of them.

By living, she thinks, with my knee bent to them, to Orche even keeping them around, we're turning the door shut on whoever passes through; it closes slowly. It scrapes. They notice.

So she knits her lips and as she resets them her genned gut lining flutters and she thinks, never in a thousand aeons, but then she thinks of her secret, and wonders if Orche can make it happen.





Orche waves a lazy arm then, to dismiss them; she doesn't see it, but hears the whisper of its movement; her Clave Heart her first autospool; it had unravelled through the knit static of her vision as she had grown within the Gardens, before Orche had taken their lushness from her straining it from the murmurs growing desperate and then hushing.

As Orche's gaze was swallowed it reveals itself again as the Exarchs fade away, and as she watches Phassa she hums, a melody strung low and peaking just to strengthen the sadness of the song. So just to cut it off she says, "Acheron is awake. The Chapel is destroyed."

Orche arches one eyebrow.

Phassa finds herself. "Why tell you so they could squeeze it from you? You love to gossip. Now you can think it over. Figure out if it's something they need to know." In her illused skin she is vined, flower-wreathed, and when she moves, she knows she's a tapestry of shifting leaves and petals. Beneath the veil she is nothing, because, she thinks, I emerged with the hardware that enshrined the garden cities, and there I begin, like a sentence. Dash kills the silence before. Because I was never flesh.



So when I talk, when I feel, is that all 'luse too?

She leaves out the kid who'd messaged her, using the Skein tethered through his Alt reaching Acheron. She says, "O, I don't know who died and left them stewards of the Sun. They just wear it thin."

Orche shakes her head. They both know. Her role is to be intercessor to the Flora, and any concerns she has about corruption of the Chrysalis are null. Not her business except it will swallow all of Orche as it blooms and then she will be darker. More cruel. Her teeth glint the bone white of the lith slabs that in dead air gleam the same way, pounding her with stabs of light. For all that Phassa still weaves the fragrance.

The ancient pheromones, the ones kept even from the Oracles. The souls of the Flora. Tending to the blushed 'luse that she can't see. Doesn't need to see through the stabbing light.

Orche wrinkles her face.

*i taste the hues and quicks, but not the love.  
you'll always be missing your love.* Because you





have no heart to supply it, she doesn't say. Because you don't inspire it in me, Phassa doesn't think.

Doesn't dare. By now she hears the scuttling, the clacking, and knows that when the Oracles arrive, they will come dressed in their own raiment, in the lushed 'luse woven to their ends shining bright. She also knows with a compress of her breath that she'll see them as they really are. As she has so many times before, and will, so many times after, crept on endless into any darkness or light.

What they call the Cosmere, the mother brood web into whose folds they claim right to burrow and crawl, but plaited or woven or even plastered to reality and still unseen to most as nothing but the lineage of your personal moment to moment stretching back and forward.

Through the Gates the Coven have found it's more spatial than that. Phassa thinks she'll leave before an Oracle can tell her the same. As long as the Coven has the Gates they'll grill her all they want, send what they learn straight to Mother Nest.

So instead she begins to tread away. Heading for Solitude, the wastes of the Gardens. Watching as in her visual field the carapaces of the Gardens churn and spin into the desert



sands that burn veined with silver fire as if molten diamond  
trickles through the banks, ekes its way clear to the surface,  
flushes your eyes out over the dunes where her Clave Heart  
tells her the stray seed motes of the schemata are waiting.





## XAESAH

Phassa charts the re-sewn nerves like a map. If I'm in, she thinks, I need to be able to get out, and vice versa. The dumb kid's Skeinwork, plotted through his Alt (a lazy name, she thinks, for a Marker, for a Fauna even still half-tethered to the ancient light-crafts) is processed so fast by her Clave Heart that she herself is a good handful of waypoints from Orche's proximation of the Queen's Gardens. She checks on herself when she's far enough away to feel safe. Reminds herself her reliance on ghost schematas is a conveyance of her own mote-hood against the Mutate. I'm jealous, she thinks. Because there's a plan and I'm not in it. Not allowed to be part of it.

So what matters is what the Husk-Shedder, now re-husked, had called the Petal Chains, which she knows not as heavy, clasping but as strands, unspooling from monad souls through rivulets in the ink-Skein. She knows them as Xaesah, where the molten glass churns as if cool water, but to him they had been fragments. Later shadow mountains. Already there are stranded hosts that she doesn't even know how to keep track of. Has no access to. In fact has no real affection for. And if she did have that affection, and could track, say, the girl named Cammy, or any other stranded,





what would she say through the haptic acid? What would be worth saying through it? Hurts to say, hurts to listen, and most of all hurts to act on.

That's the way it is when you're negative, she thinks, reversed against the encroaching light. Here phased through the Clean Flame the encroachment itself has become light. The planet-chrysalis begins with the guts, with their worms turning inwards, seeking to feast on the fractured and fragmented myocardial. The heartbeat of any cross-wired earth plotting its future intertwining into the Cosmere. As a strand itself and in that way a planar.

Fuck it, she thinks. I did all She asked. So to take what She loves and flee through the wastes, and then break through them.

What does She love? What did I take?

It takes her a moment to remember.

Orche was stained and dyed a follower of Aurachne. For no reason but Aurachne was an Archeana once and Archeana once is always, is a stake to divinity.





## WITHOUT GOODBYE

What kind of planar will Orche draw herself into? Phassa turns it over and over in her Clave Heart but the best the Clave Heart can tell her is that it has nothing to say.

She has no claim on Orche, and even if in her jealousy she clogged the works, she would be, she thinks, one of the Queen's mindless martyrs. Then she'd lose even her grasp of her motehood.

Phassa visualises through her Clave Heart. See it as fire, green flame, tendrils hooked to pattern a halo, set against a pallid, limbic grey. The Ghouls have set upon their own flesh and the boy named Morgan signals that in his own meagre role as re-husked Tracer he or what is left of him doesn't know how to stop them. So when Phassa visualises her Clave Heart she's met with a whole set of problems, usually, ones tethered by the barest of margins to her own place and problem set in Orche's peripheries. As in not much is ever certain.

She tries to tell the boy to hang tight. It comes out as  
your re-seamt skin sticks to you,



caustic

Implying sub-surface chatter potential but in her stress a gasp of destruction is bared. The boy might know now that his options include immolating the whole tethering dance. Orche's gaze is elsewhere. Now that Phassa has left Orche's eyes are on her. She supposes this sequence she has chosen is all for the best. For some time she's trusted this.

Here the sands of the wastes have spiralled to heaven, in beseechment for tears promised by the star-mapped eyes. They glisten and burn crimson and blend into the curls of cloistered motes. Phassa's floral flesh parts them; it's the quicks of her silica fingernails, a ghost schemata she picked up a while ago and never passed on. Copper clouds split for her.

In the wastes some travels for her is her destiny.

It's a lightweight mod, skimming the sand-top as a small disc, spinning in place. Still glowing with pale green fire from its discard. She palms it and the auto-transfusion begins; the fire engulfs, subsumes her. This schemata pairs with her first, an upgrade that works with the light-fibres knit so many layers deep in the digitalis. Among the first parts of her. The green fire ignites the mote clouds still





thrown in veils over her. Lancing streaks of dust taking flame in the desert night. Where the stars burn in Orche's data-barrier shroud. Which knits of starlight and yet; the stars we see aren't the true stars. We see only their echoes, their after-imprint in the digitalis.

When their light finds the skin I wear does it pass through in violence or peace? Am I left changed in some way?

This time it does. Subsumed within the process. As the sand motes burn in streaks of fire. The whole psychic tapestry churned with the psionic font of sunNET. In her eyes clear and burning hums the threshold resonance for it. For a second frozen crystalline that Orche feels and knows. Woven into the deeper plaited synapse of the digitalis.

Then her eyes are the grey of ice.

Great care is to be taken to reach the true Totema. In Neutral Lotus, it is the woven web which laces the synapse to the format. Patterned like snowflakes, gardens of design. This is only because Neutral Lotus has reached adoption-alignment with the Coven. What she saw in the silken strands encoded the collective knowledge of the Gates, which always looked outward. Phassa untethered is



looking outward with the same clear eyes. Up-format, she thinks, but there may be a third still.

The wise of the Coven would caution her from such a search.

She has to go.

She thinks on a surface coded from Orche there is no step she can take Orche won't feel and note. Still the pathic link is broken. She has a chance to depart.

This up-format has told her how.

She conjures in seamless dance of her wrists, marking sigil in the space before her alive with light. Digitalis crashes in jagged glitch setting fire to the synchronic tether to the spatial-physical grid it no longer occupies but must be held to. Must in some way be connected to in case of a reality check. Phassa weaves the way the Coven had, though they had built a home where Phassa needs only a conduit.

Never in my life have I been so entangled, she thinks. Weaving the digitalis. Drawing herself into smoke-Skein, the Coven all bled dry by the Exarchs, but it is their knowledge she can save keeping the true tenets of their phi-





losophy beyond Gates harsher and darker but leaving the basic precepts in the translucent mapping of their webs. So that she can follow the third thought, the thought of Aurachne, who was filed, she sees, in a system she can't understand, as i39: The Way or The Whisper. She had seen herself in the game then and fled to the Gates.

The Way in representation of Aurachne's seeking of balance, reversed when this philosophy bottomed out in her attack on the Queen's Gardens. She became then who slinks meek, hidden down lonely crooks of pavement or sprawl. There were those that said she'd always reverse, that it was just a matter of time...

It is her word, her way of slipping behind the spatial-chronal web, that Phassa needs.

She casts a look back. Though she can no longer see the illusive facade of the Gardens, she thinks of the Exarchs and their need for the smoke-Skein unbridled. Spreading to drain the Oracles wherever they are, and when that isn't enough, breach the Gates; the more Gates fall, the harder time the Coven will have to stop them.

It will happen before Orche and she will not lift a finger. It is the context she needs for her own serenity, her



own stasis in the flip-side communion gel of dark matter. That now seeps beyond sight and feeling in mocking of the Skein, endless fathoms of mere reflection. In black depths congealed and yet always flowing. Orche will go where all the planet-consciousnesses go, to be with each other in the communion gel.

She speaks against this hidden reality, the word of Aurachne.

To pass through the layers, become part of the gel but for long enough and no longer. To wrench then fissures from the conjoining of gel with Skein. Then to slip inside. To run the fabric of the Cosmere at the seams then depart with a quick dis-entwining of spirit. She is looking for a place to touch down. She hears Orche's scream of anguish and breaks it down, knowing some of it is for effect. Not all. Then the pathic link is gone. She prays that her psyche hadn't splintered, left fractures of itself embedded deep within the Cosmere.

For her own sake. She bears inline an upgraded Clave Heart, the heart of white flame, Naesala. Ignite and disappear. When she appears again it is in white light that cools to become the flame that slips away. In that way it was a ripple of heat sent in a micro-instant washing through the





air in spreading crescent and catching everyone in the radius with a fast rush of blood. They would be left blinking, staring at a fixed point to centre themselves, forgetting about it. That's what bodies do, and now Phassa is beyond the digitalis. In fixed skin. Skin that strains against the seamwork of its own knitting, drawing ever tighter.

Her tether to the Husk-Shedder through the Skein is a bright blue cord that trails in her sight to the horizon of ice. At the end of it lies Morgan and all his problems. Winding through crags and slants of jagged white. She weighs the arguments in her mind. The boy will want to help the Coven. As long as the Exarchs blemish the tapestry of Mutate and Orche watches, waits. Is still. On the Hivic Throne of the Illused Gardens. Orche's slender arm rests while knifing fingers scabble along the black carapace of the throne. In languor. Slow, careful stabs on the armrest.

Now she walks Orche's petrified skin which has gone cold with stasis. In truth the staccato beats of her scrabbles are Phassa's own footsteps over the frosted earth. Friction pops. There's a silence where Orche's yoke should be.

On the horizon are vast mountains, stone-fleshed yet cragged with features which from a certain view are like fac-

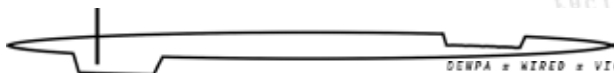




es. A view refracted through shimmers of mist. A fleeting view, cast and withdrawn which is the view she gives them. Pallor over sloped eyes is washed away with a turn of her head. Until blotted out is the rorschach and all is the mist, the frosted air. Her own eyes blink and strain through translucent air. The tether is broken and the silence reigns in her mind. Each footfall leaves an imprint in the crusted earth. Here she lets the last of it go. I am my own servant.

So she gathers the wrapping-cloak of Naesala around her. Staunching off the cold which is her inner numbness. Born in flame and light, slipped off into the cold. As the wastrels do, time and again, as a lone silhouette is eclipsed by the dark of night. Shadow shrouded they go, to seek their fates in the fell darkness. The perfect crime is leaving behind your shadow, in the inner sanctums where the light glows, the heat pulses. Until you forget how warm your blood is supposed to be. Still it kills not leaving. The search is made and then given up. Orche will send her seedling drones, her spies. She will not find Phassa beneath Naesala. In the end that is her power, to leave without saying goodbye.





DENPA \* WIRED \* VIOLENCE  
**psyCHOGRAMMA**

ELECTRICA STAGNATIS CONSUMMATUM

[by: caraparcels](#)

PSYCHOGRAMMA

exxon serpico

birthday: may 10th

sex: male

occupation: neet. building security  
systems analyst

blood type: o+

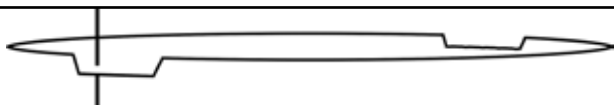
likes: grandiose stories, old things,  
his revolver, old testament-style ways  
of thinking, fruitger aero

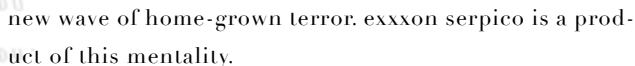
dislikes: mild food, alligators, things  
not considered 'high brow'



character profile

on the early days of the wired, users on forums were seen as this unseen mass that could affect the world, preaching end times or at least fronted to represent a more organized form of mob, capable of orchaestrating mass-killings or suicides. even if they caught who was behind it, these thoughts and users still lurked as this

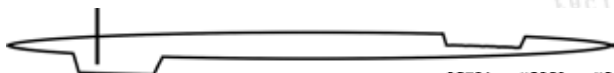




new wave of home-grown terror. exxon serpico is a product of this mentality.

unlike most users looking to present their best selves on the wired, exxon serpico is unabashed in the way he harasses other users, claiming that his respect has to be earned, citing ancient traditions that proved one worthy of it. he sees himself as a caveman on the wired but still connected to primordial forces that he feels has been forgotten. lately, he has been playing things subtle, keeping himself back but many who see him in the wired think he might break out into some kind of frenzied action. these numbers are one such thing.

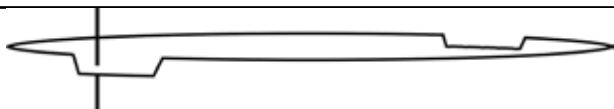
voted number 5 in top 10 users to shoot up the party



DEWPA \* WIRED \* VIOLENCE  
**psYCHogramm**  
ELECTRICAL SIGNALS CONSUMMATION

## *Synopsis*






























































































































































































































































































users wander the infinite plazas within their internal os. foxtel, one such user, darts between each of these old worlds disintegrating in electric signals, one bullet at a time.





## *Last Time*

through a routine forum search, foxtel uncovers a number transmission that begins to sprawl out its connections, all the while a user known as exxxon serpico challenges them to a duel in the palo shabba server.





CW: guns, gun violence, blood, sexual reference

slapping the paddle off the charging handle, the spring launched it along the shaft towards the ringed sight. 4.38 kg, 40.4 inches, each movement of this reload repeated until on the wired, it melted within the propulsions flown from our steps. in the real world, the battle rifle's length holds itself level, grasping the handguard's smooth surface that clasped the long barrel and i move forth, each gentle swing until it seemed that i was this viscous being that swam through the heat in the air. aches in my arms sculpted themselves in my mind so they floated within the memory of my internal os. back then, in deserts, mirages could ripple until the silhouette seemed to burn up in the light. even speedhacks risked locking the user until the

### PROTOCOL 4.2: ATTENDANCE II

animation completed which leaves a gap for a more experienced user to pick out to take hold of that limb, not to mention the psychic strain and the attack phasing through like a miasma unable to transmit any kind of impact. some thought of the real as a force so excessive it wiped everything out like a nuclear blast, a kind of awe arising from its aftermath that hung solemn even as its light began to dim. others thought of it as a guiding hand that would lead everything to its intended conclusion. an objective that loomed until all the electric signals would carve it out of our minds and all these nodes would surround it, chatter, and posts, amplified in this lattice until it even whispered into the farthest recesses. exxon serpico, reonuxala, and goldman would be wandering somewhere in the wired, each of their connections drawn would pull into vertexes until a desire converged onto a single point.

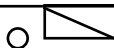
message from goldman, deroca and lestrani, contact me to meet them at one of the southern state servers, the walls of my room pulled apart like putty until it melted into a copper sky, concrete floor furred into grasses underneath me, signals brushing my jacket before rushes into winds playing with the lapels. bronze paint splattered the boughs, leaves sharpened out of blurs that softened into tranquil acres, a lone tree on a hill within a blue mar-





ble. even after the ancient climate catastrophe ravaged the midwest, rebuilding efforts somehow saw the return of homestead ranches almost like these fairytale houses that they thought would return them to a primordial start after the droughts, the advent of electric signals clung to their skin with a kind of breeze that quenched the dry air. users in these servers cherished the belief that the real world was this home they could return to in these pastures and small towns almost governed by various statues of struggle and devotion with grey bulges of muscular figures crouched and crawling over marble podiums. a reverence for a so-called real that would be an example to everyone that no matter what, someone would fall to by their own humanity, pushed down by gravity of life or whatever they said in solemn moments. however, even in the real, these idyllic towns were no more than server satellites like many of the plazas and cafes within the faceless high-rises in the eastern continent. thousands of inhabitants lived in their rooms in the wired and could return to the real world within the house for small instances at a time. with help from tai shu, it seemed the cities haunted the midwest even more, the drone of frequencies resembled a slow cry from the hatches of electric signals that coated the rafters or fell into threads of meadows grown over drowned soil.





ahead of me, darkness stamped arches within gold that seemed to pour like a fountain where each stream hit each floor of the villa before flowing down into the pillars lined up along the colonnade and its balcony mezzanines. a kind of building one might imagine ancient conspiracies meeting within hidden rooms but no such thing would take place, only the active imagination and rumours that fueled its unnatural glow seared into one's mind until all the mystery seekers could do is revere its agitated particles. castle walls surrounded a large field while a long driveway meandered slightly toward the single garage where one luxury car stood out front, parading the restraint of the inhabitants. within my internal os, two users join me on an encrypted line which hardly prepared me for the barages of a motor, the user known as deroca riding an atv as he stood on the sidesteps, holding onto the handlebars, a single headlight within what almost looked like a wad of plastic that hunched over fat offroad tires. he hopped off, his head bobbing up and down, a black stripe ran up the sleeves onto the shoulders of his puffy white jacket, large braids of hair sailed around him within a small veil of electric signals as if he was immersed in water. next to him, another on a dirt bike the user known as lestrani's shaved head shone in lamplight, a soft face like the flicker of an ember yet there was something stark and practical





about her, like one of those transmission towers whose trusses make an alien structure, an array of which no part is ornamental. deroca approached but walked slowly around me as a smile crept to his face, about to put on any bout of comedy but i held out against it.

‘ohoho, so when did goldman have such lookers cause trouble there’

‘i’d rather the phrase collateral damage.’

‘leave them alone deroca’ lestrani sighed, checking the chamber of an m1911 converted into a machine pistol, long magazine jutting from under the main grip rising into its tail and hammer, a black beak of a crying bird off the back of the slide, a front grip like the horn of a ram and a long vented barrel extending from the blocky slide. yet she let such a weapon dangle off her finger, the weight of the extended magazine swinging it back and forth, moving between different states concealed within that aloof demeanour. deroca backs up and puts on some goggles, circular lenses with axes on each one, almost like a reticule where for a moment i would be at its center before travelling across its coordinates. like a show, even an op like this needs its costumes, mechanisms locked in with anticipation.



‘alright, so you know how this is going down?’

‘you tell me’

deroca pointed up to his forehead as we open schemata where our internal os flies up over the the courtyard, green bulbs of trees and embossed fountains sunk into darkness while signals etched the floor plans of the villa, mosaics of squares representing the various room connected to a large picture frame with l-shaped walls and an octagon in the middle in this kind of monochromatic cubist image.

‘exchange’s happening here. word is your exxxon serpico chaperones it. so will you. we’ll have you on lookout on the balconies’ he nodded before adding. ‘at least now you two have something in common.’

‘believe me, i feel it all too common to have to kill someone who is at least a bit similar to me’ i sighed. ‘besides, how are they letting us just casually set a sniper perch on their property?’

‘you know how these guys are. business casual. letting us rent the place. we can do whatever we want. call it uh, a kind of gentility. goldman has manners like that to get these guys to presume we using the space for good pur-





poses. it's just set dressing anyway. some users like this decadence'

'it seems you're doing things with the permission of whoever owns this villa but given i'm here, there must be something done without.'

'permission...is open. it allows many things to happen. even after it happens' he stated but his smile returned and i wondered if there was anything amiss about him. or maybe he had just seized that moment and claimed it as this truism. lestrani's fingers grasped the grip of her colt machine pistol and gestured to us to enter the premises, as the gates opened. a woman in a bellboy outfit, silver buttons with a sun logo escorted us through the driveway and stopped at the door. the server for our meeting loaded as the door opened, letting us stride down halls belted in gold, red walls streaming around us, grey rocks surfacing out of the blood rivers until statues of men curled up in anguish appeared beside us next to the closed doors, some of them sitting down while spears impaled others, the expressions on their faces smoothed of any of the ecstasy these violences would bring, leaving only a kind of impending death amidst all these closed doors. tragic minded reveries in these mansions. lestrani and deroca took the



stairs, and it seemed that being here was this solemn affair lacking any of the activity of most servers, signals charred at the globules of light emitted from the flames animated in the candles on the walls, something tempered until it reached a certain hardness like an ore. even the night was tinged in this otherworldly yellow like something burnt on the other side of the earth, scooping just a ball of the sky before seeing the little mountains within a cobblestone tile through the scope, my cheek rested on the g3a3's stock bowled with the spade beamed receiver while my hand clutched the handguard. overlooking the courtyard, it seemed more like a coliseum with the surrounding colonnades where the mansion's thousand rooms concealed the innerworkings that must have lead us here. deroca walked up to the fountain while lestrani stood always at the side. should anything occur, she had the optimal angle for her colt machine pistol to sweep the area. another party showed up almost on cue, a few burly guys whose large bodies stretched their three piece suits taut to suggest a purposeful strength without excess, a kind of subtlety that granted prestige. no weapons so they must have also had someone on lookout or they played this like the winner is the one who doesn't need to act or show their power, but deroca looked undeterred as he chuckled almost like his guests were playing a charade.





‘looking cut as ever it seems’ he nodded to an unknown beat. while i glimpsed them on the scope, exxxon serpico stood at the side, black dinner jacket over white body armour facing lestrani although they must have known their revolver couldn’t hit both lestrani and deroca anyway unless they had planned something else as i lay the reticle right on them.

‘let’s cut to the chase. i hate having our time wasted’ said one of the men with straight parted hair, fade off to the sides like black moss.

‘what do you mean? this is the wired. this should be of no consequence to you. it was made to increase leisure time. anyway, goldman likes your distributions and we’ll take that offer’

‘what? that’s unexpected of goldman. when was he so charitable?’

exxxon serpico supervised the proceedings as both parties spoke about goldman’s terms but couldn’t keep his eyes darting very occasionally at my direction. deroca said nothing about a cue to execute nor if i should take them when the deal finished. lestrani maintained her vigil, hand twitching near her thigh holster and i keep the reticle ‘s



center right at exxon serpico's head, the dot covering his head, the 7.62x51mm round that could smite it utterly into a slight throb of red whose spray salivated at the edges of that single shot. discussions continue and i keep waiting. this is the business of the wired, after all. no matter what, these connections and floes reign atop the most violent of acts much like a sky, or a heaven that merely watches the matters on earth.

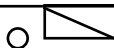
steps throw exxon serpico out of view and i steer the battle rifle until he's at the center of the scope, his revolver clutched in his hand, its barrel dotted black on the center of the reticle. .357 magnum rounds swallowed all noise as it felt that we moved soft within it while i moved off glimpsing one of the suited men flinch at the sudden shots and draw their weapon toward deroca who only stood there yet it seemed there would be no surprise that overtook him. nonetheless, i brought up my g3a3 on the man and before he drew his weapon, three contractions of 7.62x51mm rounds shunted the men in suits, exxon serpico retreated both lestrani and deroca, finally drawing a magpul fmg-9 folding submachine gun as he walks to one of the low walls, occasionally fired salvos of 9mm rounds within the darkened arches whose halls occasionally lit up from muzzle flashes sometimes punctuated by the shots





of .45 apc from lestrani by the fountain. however, large calibre rounds obliterated the parapet walls where exxxon serpico lurked within the pillars of the colonnade, several discharges of gunpowder threw hazed clouds in the courtyard where the black arches seemed like the only shelter from this desert. i jump down, my silhouette carving itself into something solid that would soon be annihilated by the rounds entering the chamber from the various fire-arms from below. small lights blotted the haze and in my mind the hallways with their red walls flattened while i remembered the ground just within the colonnade and the flutters of wind at my jacket soon planed down as my contours stretch and the stone tiles catch me, rotating along the girth of the pillar to exxxon serpico who already runs off, my vp70m machine pistol raised up to land on an empty hall. taking pursuit i go down the open door, the halls rushed alongside in rivers of blood that the doors floated on it until reaching the foyer where a grand staircase wrapped around the sides as i go out the open door. outside, the nissan bluebird sedan, its rounded trunk tapered at the tail-lights whose red beams blink away as it pulls off, bulged rear quarter window to the sharp driver's side while i bring up the vp70m. the front sights, shadows cast from within the muzzle flashes of each burst while 9mm





rounds pounded away at the sedan's body that shrinks away in the distance.

gone, that single pixel where exxxon serpico would be in my mind burnt up until the skies flatten ahead of me, the sedan remains and i step-transfer towards the portly rear bumper, moving along its circumference to clear the vehicle, the driver's side door left open while the seats recline. goldman wanting a car like this so bad must mean either it's encrypted with something within the body-model or merely symbolic. no one steals from the networks of distribution and supply of goldman incorporated. contacting deroca and lestrani, both give an all clear on their side and tell me to just tag the car on schemata so they can get it later. walking back through the villa, signals hiss before planing themselves to the walls, solid until stretch out into the ether, mirage that ripped at the floor until they slink away once i approach. in the courtyard, deroca sat on the octagonal rim of the fountain, the water that once sprouted arches similar to this villa's almost seemed to evaporate into the signals that minted us, his knee propped up on the ledge, braids sailing within the air. lestrani stood by, following me once i get close as she spun the m1911 around with her finger in the rounded trigger guard until i only registered the swings of metal waiting on that sudden





moment where she would draw that weapon, a single lance within its axis.

‘well, you fasho fashionably late for the credits.’ deroca scoffed.

‘i try to appear when needed.’

‘so, you got what you came for?’

‘did you?’ i ask but deroca merely chuckled.

‘goldman will be here shortly. said he’d like to speak to you’ lestrani added. ‘he said to go to the car and wait. he said to back the car into the garage of the villa.’

‘is he coming here?’

‘no, the dimensions of the garage will be analogous to the meeting place’

getting into the bluebird, i worried about its damage from the few bulletholes left by the vp70m but i doubted that it would harm whatever contents were within that car. raked windshield let ample light pour onto the dashboard with woodgrain trim under the gauge cluster within the wide cowl that wrapped the air conditioning vents. soon the



gold cosmos of the evening dashed away into the darkness of the garage until a clinical fluorescence lent a glaze across the concrete as the walls stretched out into white, leaving rows of pillars spaced evenly throughout the parking garage, almost as if the light from the wired and the computers that were the columns of our fantasies. goldman's open jacket fluttered, appearing from one of the pillars, his shadow behind him disappears once he walked off as if seared off the surface. signals carried our movements letting us stand there, almost trying to assemble clouds out of these motes that glinted around us.

'not bad at all. i guess you boys at tai shu know how to do business'

'just a formality'

'always a formality.'

'products move, people get them. information's the same. just that some people get them off hidden ways' i said taking one last glance at the car. 'i'm surprised said nissan bluebird is even that valuable. seems like an asset you can grab'





‘two things, exchange rate and value. someone can derive some meaning out of it, just like a story. an object such as this can generate all kinds of stories.’ goldman walked around the parking garage. ‘the information highway has a lot of stragglers. unfulfillment. can’t say if it’s decadence or what. my advice to you, watch your back’

‘thanks...and i suppose you ought not to be a casualty neither.’

‘don’t you know? some people believe it to be fate - the way people search for things on the wired and find them. either way, i would a prefer a happy ending’

‘if so, you must be replete with fortune’

‘act as you may’ he said and it made him seem less like a major crime boss . in the end, we were simply users on the wired in the same way two people are inhabitants of a city. that instance of having something in common, which in the real world amounted to these faint whirrs and scratches within smoothed corridors, seeing ourselves tinge into their surface thinking these movements were like us, these small nodes pulsing through the arrays of where we’re going.



falling back, i log off letting the soft futon crease around my back as i stare at the room ceiling glowing in a spot of pockmarked aloe from my internal-os that loads a text only interface of the bbs system.

‘bump on the code’

‘did that one user get game-ended?’

‘say violent words challenge(impossible)’

‘donator at 49:23:29 on reonuxala livestream put a lot of money down on the stream’

‘see a lot of tai shu corpos there in her server.’

‘guy by username mothknight in particular, the other guys are actually there to work’

‘this guy is public-facing. why does he actually list his thing’

‘because he has money, do you have money?’

‘save up bros’





‘inb4 the code is just a count of how much money is being spent by all the anons here, in which case, stop it, learn finance and economics’

‘i think this anon should learn how to frot’

interest in the thread of reonuxala seemed but more like she was this figure haunting their minds, somehow leading to her as a necessary conclusion. in detective stories, this’d mean something suspicious, but even suspicion can be engineered. without much to do, i open a line to tai shu’s itejoji branch, my room extends to long grey corridors, fluorescence stretches from my ceiling lamp to illuminate the walls smooth and faintly translucent which made them somehow dim with something solid behind it, the ceiling almost these small spots amidst the searing light. within these glimpses, peridot grasses from sapphire fantasy grow within the grey overcast, an idol with serafuku steps and rotates into a spin flowing in milky rivers that polished the sparse apparitions of megacorp office workers, these silhouettes that these virtual spaces always appeared for, and they were the ones who saw these inhabitants in the wired, as the one these performances reached out toward, within the limits of the stage seen by these salaryworkers granted out of the tempered lights at the office that could



shine on somebody, an event or happening that massed here and they could be a part of. client interactions had this new dimension, visualizing them with lines of contact, arches of sentiment or corners of direction, forming arrays in the way different users connected with each other. how had these numbers then appeared, merely as apparitions that could stick themselves to anything that resembled them and an event, the user who acted up at reonuxala's server, to make these narratives unfold. i walked to mothknight's office, wooden veneered desk whose pane curved at the side curved inwards in a kind of hour glass, a polygonal shroud obscured one of the edges, a palm tree shaded over his face but he lets the light shine on him, taking in the glow with his slightly pale cheeks.

'hello foxtel, it's good to meet you. i hear lots from producer' mothknight extended their hand to me and i shook it. fast way to establish a connection.

'friend of theirs?'

'we do work from time to time. i'm surprised that you and i haven't done work together either' he said sitting down, settling so that any business brought up could appear as casually as the glimmers off the shelf, wood grain in these





tiger stripes. he leans back into his chair, letting his head tilt a little to the side

‘different servers’

‘ah yes hm?’ he says , moving his hand through glints of signals, static expanded into read-only files, each sweep through deliberate, not letting a single motion go unnoticed. ‘so you do consulting work on plaza servers?’ i was involved with the development of some myself.’

going for a note of commonality was typical. a fast way to establish a connection. he smiled as if to say that he had an appreciation for my work although consulting was always rather vague to begin with so it seemed more like an empty expression.

‘a few of them. there was one i was at recently doing security operations for’

‘hm, which one?’

‘it was a pretty popular one. it’s the one with hosted by a user on the come up, the one styled with european build-ings. it was part of the virtuos-personae initiatives recently, a reonuxala?’ i asked, mentioning the megacorp’s push





for servers and hosts users could interact with, especially ones with distinctive personalities that could be matched with users they would appeal to.

‘you know her?’ he asked, his voice tense enough to establish distance. thinking of the socialization arrays, i had to assuage any suspicion to the nature of this appointment, branching it off into a less direct line.

‘only in talking of work. she has nothing but praise for the work tai shu’s been pulling for her. she’s been doing well. even after that one user being suspicious in her server. did you hear about it?’

‘yes.’ he stated.

‘well, i think i’ve seen you from time to time at the server when it was at the demo phase.’ i said, placing him somewhere in my mind as one of the many executives that showed up for reonuxala’s hosting. i remembered someone in particular who said little but when an executive got too close to one of the avatars, provided a slight yet stern reminder to them that they should demonstrate proper etiquette at any table, especially one that they helped set up. perhaps mothknight possessed a kind of internal order that relegated his manners to a mode of cool detachment.





‘i’ve also let the proper parties know to open inquiries and investigations into the matter...’ he defaulted.

‘good.’ i said. ‘i also apprehended someone who was causing trouble at the server as well. let’s hope this comes to a swift end’

‘thank you.’

after a bit of silence, he looked a bit dazed before looking up, stretching his arms up and walking around the room. this was the wired, so this kind of movement seemed like merely a show of humanity. we all need some time to get up and take a walk. but even this seemed insufficient as he stared off, only maintaining his dignified profile where the white light carved him and his tuxedo as a shadow, his face faint in the radiance.

‘how is she doing otherwise?’

‘fine, i suppose. but i think any help you can offer her would be a net positive. who knows where these things lead’

‘i agree.’ he nodded.



‘oh, yes, before i forget, i would like to ask about the new avatar customization for sapphire fantasy. a user i’m acquainted with is designing new outfits and i’m thinking they could be in that mmo or any other supported works under our branch.’ i run up a few models with the figurines kunakida sent, slit-tailed jackets flutter before concealing the bright contours of the mannequins. mothknight looks at them, spinning them. ‘with the audience of the mmo’s they would like someone in the culture rather than some dilletante so it’d have good retention and opportunity for user derivative work, community interfacing and the like.’

‘this style is quite interesting. may i contact them?’ mothknight beamed, latching onto this newfound topic that seemed more in line with the usual exports of his business.

‘by all means. they are in reonuxala’s server so you could see them in passing’

‘fantastic.’ he said standing up before me. ‘oh if you see samhain, tell them mothknight asks how the gifts i sent them were.’

‘samhain?’





‘the moderator from the mmo. she said she worked with you before.’

‘she did?’ i ask. ‘well, if i see her, i’ll let her know.’

logging out, the fluorescence shrank into my ceiling light, the white beams retreat until a dark indigo radiated from the walls. mothknight’s relationship to reonuxala was slightly touching, almost like a chivalric love that did not deign so much in affections but rather through material supports. from his asking about her, it seems that it might be more than just allocating assets and funding. before i thought more of it one of the motion detectors outside my room flashed a red square at the corner of my internal os and i opened the cctv feed from the door only to find a girl waiting there, even-cut bangs running a silken river to her shoulder, turning her head to look at the camera and giving a slight wave.

releasing the sliding lock, saturna walked in glancing at my small table, the workbench with the g3a3 dissassembled.

‘wow, a hime home visit?’ i ask.



‘very funny. can you learn some chinese with that’ she scoffed looking around before leaning on the wall. i shrink back slightly, worried that maybe i should’ve prepared my place for guests more. in the real, only withdrawals out here that kept us from all the good things, all of them seeming like the wired anyway.

‘whatever...it’s not like you to visit’

‘you entered one of the tai shu branches. you didn’t tell me anything about that.’

‘something to do with the consulting for reonuxala’

‘something that’s making you avoidant in telling me what’s going on’

‘it’s all on some stupid shit. unfounded claims.’

‘like?’

‘numbers’

‘go on’

‘some people are using numbers to connect something but are getting this tied up with reonuxala for some reason.’





‘why are you looking up the people involved in that story? shouldn’t you be working backwards? see where the numbers come from or why it’s even brought up in the first place?’ she said. it took me a moment to think of a response thinking about it in sum, there really hadn’t been any headway on anything lining up resembling a tangible association between reonuxala, the numbers, or mothknight. only this supposed rumour tethering all the talk on the bbs servers. ‘looking for proof that confirms or denies, is relative because someone is going to refute such a thing anyway, especially on a forum server.’

on the wired, the notion of proof merely floats in virtual space, continual nodes that one connects out of the rhizomatic connections sprawled out, and you can only glimpse in a flash where exactly it is put together, as were the several hits of red pixels flashing from motion detectors going off in the internal os like warning lights on the rooftops of high rises in a city for something that approaches.

‘someone’s here’

saturna looks unfazed, taking out her norinco type 54 pistol and holding it at her side. sharing the feed, a familiar looking individual in a stained tank top and revolver hulks



over. pulling up the lobby reception bulletin, comm-check was missed 5 minutes ago so whoever was there must have been incapacitated. the building's security operators would soon be notified.

'who is this?'

'it's that user who stole that car back in palo shabba. exxx-on serpico'

from the wired, encounters unravel after their contact, sometimes those floes would connect to others or circle back. dwelling within a node caused a desire for singularity, all the movements of signals to reach a certain point and to exxxon serpico, somehow, i was the end point in all of it, the real world and its solidity being this final place that shunned all the virtual spaces and their possibilities, the bedrock where each move made their testaments, constantly disobeyed by each interference. grabbing some body armour i clasped the plating onto myself until my body seemed removed from it, a second surface in untouchable parallel. chamber checking the vp70m handgun, i attached the stock setting it to burst fire, the polymer while familiar still unnerving having to use the real counterpart here, the wear on the parts that it would have to endure as i held the weapon, blurry sensations thickened





into the slightly coarse flakes of the grip that sunk into my fingers, contracted to let my thumb sit.

from my feed, exxxon serpico stood at the end of the hall not moving, revolver down waiting for some kind of quick draw. not wanting to entertain such a thing, i take a bottle of soy sauce clinking the other glass bottles around it and open the door, throwing it but retreating back in my room as i hear it shatter. if there was more bandwidth in these apartment complex corridors, i could step-transfer and end this but by now, security would be localizing where we are and trying to cordon the area by decreasing the amount of bandwidth on this floor. from my feed, his revolver twitches but i peek out the edge of the door frame, pulling the heavy trigger, burst fire judders on my shoulders as I struggle to keep the sways of the muzzle from going off-target. looking back at my feed, it had been enough to push them back. sticking their hand out to fire their revolver, a.357 magnum round booms from down the hall, tearing into the far wall. saturna looks at my surveillance feed as well and tells me via comms.

'i have the same access privileges as most building security forces. let me go around and divert him.'





‘why can’t we just kill this guy and get it over with. any cctv footage is gonna show him coming up here shooting up the place’

‘let’s at least get this guy alive. maybe he’ll tell us something.’

‘fine, i’ll cover you.’

smoke shrouds exxxon serpico but each pull of the trigger threw the peeled muzzle of his revolver which made the frightening power of those rounds diminish into the haze as he had no intention of trying to aim and wasn’t able to make controlled shots. this didn’t mean i could relax either as he was still quick enough to pull back from each volley of 9mm rounds that bit at wall where his silhouette slipped into the shadows. i remember some people describing firefights like this where the realization of a human body’s weight disappears in the moment and each contact felt like ghosts that haunted them, trying to make themselves real by inflicting death within the mechanics of gunpowder detonating, the slide going back to eject a shell casing and the resultant recoil. from the feed, saturna appears in the elevator and moves in and soon, i hear another 9mm round go off farther down and three shots of magnum rounds deafen the space. opening one of the





cctv feeds i glimpse saturna taking cover by the corner, unharmed. exxxon serpico lay on their back, the fabric of their shirt torn from the rotations of the 9mm round stopped by body armour as they crawled on the floor, body wavering in electric signals before disappearing.

running toward the vanishing corpse, i open my internal os and start to track him, his exfil having left several threads of static which i set as a connection to enter the wired, the corridor melts away while the fluorescent light recedes into this gentle radiance bathing a blue realm. signals pooled out, their tides unfurl but soon withdraw as the level of bandwidth only allowed my psycho-silhouette a certain breadth to reach out, depending on how many users were on the server. each of my steps glowed from the pressure exerted on the floor, almost like the way flesh goes white when throttled, and they felt all too much like the last staggers of a target. using neija, i close my eyes using the echolocation's halo to spread out and i hear something firm from behind me, a finger on a trigger and one launch of myself propels me in a step transfer, muzzle flash casting a statue of exxxon serpico firing erratically, a brimstone retribution of .357 magnum rounds that pummeled the damned until there was nothing left, something righteous would always justify it. lights above rolled off



the shaft of the vp70m as i push the stock at my shoulder, 9mm bursts try to skewer the contours where exxxon serpico fired from but already missed, rings marking where the shots hit on my internal os, having thought to at least use telemetry data.

‘how lovely of you to join me in my abode!’ exxxon serpico said over my comms but i cannot pinpoint his location. ‘i always liked fruitger aero like places. it really reminds me of better times’

green cells dripped into small globules looking almost like microbes and i imagined that back then, many thought of the wired as this new alien planet with all these unknown creatures inhabiting its endless blue but it would seem that exxxon serpico’s presence seemed like that of a minor deity of this world, the single resident of this utopia.

‘save the lily pads and blob designs for someone else. why were you looking for me?’

‘why, you were after me, right? it’s only fair i dole out justice and retribution’

‘i didn’t intend to pursue you further anyway. that car was all i needed from you.’





'is that what goldman told you? he probably wanted me dead.'

'he only asked for the car and dropped the matter'

'you need to open your eyes and look at the big picture.'  
he laughed

another barrage of .357 rounds scorched the electric signals until they left faint glints in the distance. holographic crinkles stretched into blue before disappearing, using some kind of mirage opti-camo. what an annoying way to fight, exactly representative of those countries in the previous centuries who used aerial bombardment to show some kind of imperviousness, the kind where operators and citizens alike watched ruins blow up on television and thought themselves removed from it all, as if nothing of that violence could even touch them.

'first i inquire on that board about that girl and now someone wants to kill me. they're after me it seems.'

'who is'

' e v e r y o n e . '



step transfers melted me into the static around me until i reappear, flitting through the silences bored out by the magnum rounds into these small escapes from being this endless target, the one who is at the end of the gun. that's the intrinsic function of a weapon isn't it? the wired is the fraying of images until a user can travel through its strands into different worlds. each time i dodged him, there was a lull of a second where my steps touched the ground, and he would aim towards me, pulling the trigger before i can use the step-transfer to avoid it. flights of 9mm and .357 magnum rounds weaved around me on my internal os until they could slice this realm into pieces and i stopped myself still, sensing exxxon serpico, his finger must have hesitated on the trigger before eventually pulling it, hoping for the absolution of another dead agent hunting him in his head. all this in the thousands of movements about to take place, and in one of them, a .357 round nears my body, the tip starts to feast on flesh until i begin to slip back from a step transfer, lagging out, suspended within my melting contours, a moment peeled from the thousands of movements, the trajectory from the bullet's approach sliced into the distance where signals shined off a crease in the blue as i draw up the vp70m machine pistol, motion regains its perpetual animation 9mm rounds jar me of my reverie until i manage to bring myself





out of the sensation, clutching my side scorched from the touch of the magnum round but it was nothing, 3 rounds punctured the opticamo, red blotted up exxon serpico's undershirt as he crawled over to his revolver fallen on the ground. before i could reach him, he logs out, his avatar's contours frizzing out until becoming threads that danced around, glimmering in the light. alone, and a little confused i let my psycho-silhouette bloom out, regaining some space within me as i open and close my hand, the signals caressed upon the palm into these slower movements.

logging out, saturna had already gone back into her own servers from my room, and the security net frosted the walls of the corridor, picking up data from the various bullet holes, steps and blood stains. a beige tab imprinted itself in the darkness as a silhouette filled it, their features carved in the meagre light, a clean shaven man with body armour clasped onto a white button down shirt with a 9mm m1911 whose hammer curved around the tail off the frame like a pincer.

'my name is kurosawa, i'm part of the security team here. may i ask you some questions'

'that a username?'



‘no’ he said but even then it wasn’t as if it made much difference. records of a user’s activity on the wired always superseded what happens in the real. even this investigation was just something that had to be done.

‘alright’

‘could you tell me who was trying to kill you?’

‘rather direct aren’t you?’

‘just answer the question’

‘a user on the wired wanting me dead. took it too far’

‘far enough to try and track your real address?’

‘who knows who is out there. at least we went back onto the wired. that way, no one actually dies. at least he knows that.’

‘hmp’ his eyes darted blinking, perhaps logging that information in his internal-os. ‘well, we have footage of him incapacitating one of our staff and coming up here with his revolver. if he comes anywhere near the premises, the frost net should sound off and we’ll deal with him. try not to get any more users mad by then’



kurosawa walked away shaking his head and the matter just became as simple as someone on the wired trying to kill someone in real life. a minor tragedy that sounded almost like a degraded myth especially with its rare occurrence. something like an evil miracle that'd bring an end to the flows of the wired, beaded with their activity and the slumped palpitations within the rooms here, life as this impediment but what did i even know about either anyway, even as kurosawa disappeared he was little more than a security officer for this building who probably was just trying to close a file, or goldman just another user trying to make some gain through the conflict between me and exxon serpico. narrowed down until we were only this kind of target, or rather a vector in these stories and how much our involvement shifts each vertex.

reaching my chest, there's only a soft ache, nerves plucked from the .357 round that nearly gorged into me, thinking these could have been places where flesh peels back almost as if petals from a malignant flower but there's nothing but the wavers within the emissions of light over me, frequencies and loops just beyond me almost like orbits where all these flickers of motion have passed. users call these kinds of things that happen, inevitabilities. systems of a life and its various operations, all of it washed along





my open hand, closing it on an invisible wire that could  
meander through the stagnant warmth in this room, radi-  
ating out of us.



# IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT IN!

by: [baroquespiral](#)

KAMANN YAHSEF

/ELTHAZAN

Likes: steamed fish, humble rulers, reunions, impartial justice, hand-knit cloaks, brandy, pomegranate red, cold baths

Likes: clear moonlight, glaciers, rowan berries, observing (and eating) new species, wrestling with Kamann, practical jokes, body ornamentation, honeysuckle nectar, palace roofs

Dislikes: greed, glory seeking, showy swordsmanship, guild bureaucracy, shapeshifters, untended land, swamps, lewd camp songs, serf labour

Dislikes: monotonous architecture, gender expectations, unloving parents, undead, stuffy clothes, dust

Blood type: A

Blood type: B

Theme song: Galneryus - Fighting Of Eternity

Theme song: Elvenking - Petalstorm

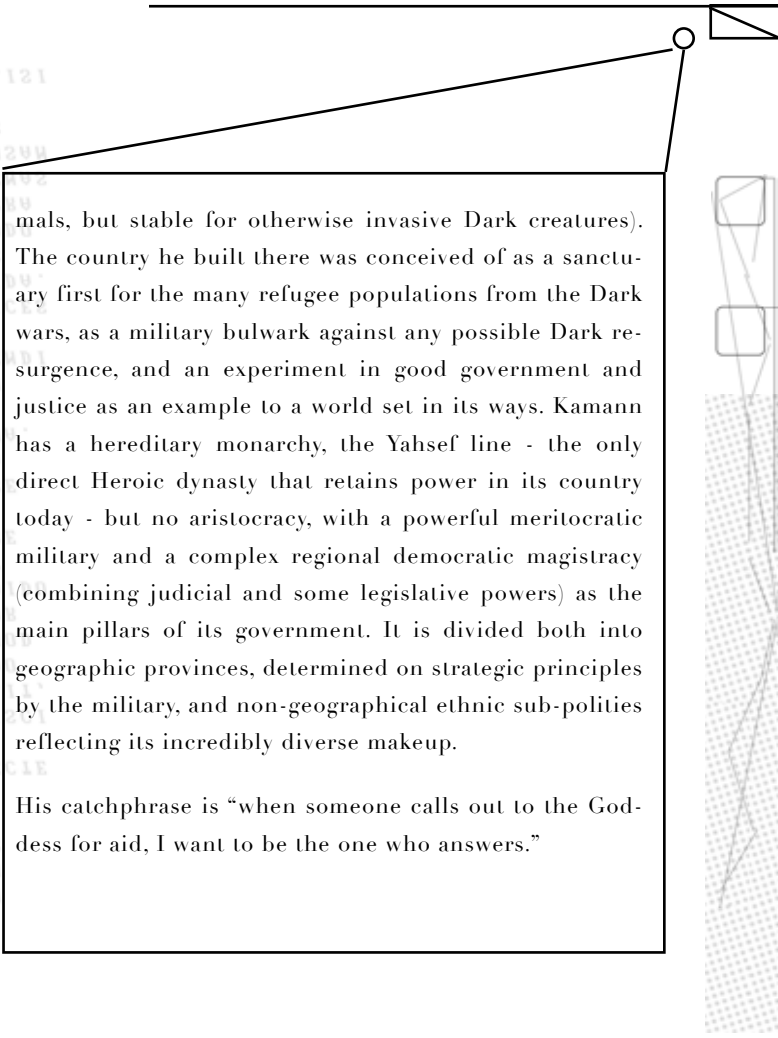


A disinherited knight whose family was massacred in a Dark attack, which many suspect to have been permitted by the regional Dux Bellorum, and subsequently blamed for the region's devastation by Dark forces and stripped of its title. Kamann was driven in equal parts by a furious lust for vengeance - against both the Dark and the corrupt human authorities enabled by its omnipresent threat - and a deep longing for justice, for the trust and honour that had been denied his family, for the peace that had been torn from his land, for no one ever again to suffer like himself or the people around him, the peasants who raised him in disguise and sent him out into the world as a mercenary adventurer. Both of these traits made him an inexhaustible, single-minded, obsessive worker, one of the few Fighters of his era to think of it as a science as much as an art, eventually equalling the capacities of a Monk of the Mist-Cutting Moon with mere physical training. If not the leader in a strict hierarchical sense



of the Seven Heroes, he was the emotional glue of the party and the one who persuaded them to take on their riskiest and most impossible tasks, to never back down where other parties might have settled into a peaceful equilibrium before doing the impossible and defeating the Dark Lord. He wielded the huge magically enhanced claymore Firebrush, which absorbed opponents' kinetic energy and transferred it to his sword arm among other abilities, and supposedly in the Dark realm, once he had learned to wield Firebrush one-handed, stole the Dark Sword Gargon from one of the Dark Lord's Twelve Hands, with its fearsome power to strike backwards in time.

After the defeat of the Dark Lord, Kamann took the responsibility of managing what was recaptured of the Dark Realms. The borders of this territory would shift back and forth constantly over the course of the Warring Era, even today a much smaller "Dark Realm" remains within its borders (where ecological alterations were so extreme as to be virtually uninhabitable to humans and many ani-



mals, but stable for otherwise invasive Dark creatures). The country he built there was conceived of as a sanctuary first for the many refugee populations from the Dark wars, as a military bulwark against any possible Dark resurgence, and an experiment in good government and justice as an example to a world set in its ways. Kamann has a hereditary monarchy, the Yahsef line - the only direct Heroic dynasty that retains power in its country today - but no aristocracy, with a powerful meritocratic military and a complex regional democratic magistracy (combining judicial and some legislative powers) as the main pillars of its government. It is divided both into geographic provinces, determined on strategic principles by the military, and non-geographical ethnic sub-polities reflecting its incredibly diverse makeup.

His catchphrase is “when someone calls out to the Goddess for aid, I want to be the one who answers.”



Elthazan appeared as an orphan in the North of the country that now bears their name, remembering nothing about their parents except that they had said they were journeying far South to the Dark Border. Why this meant leaving their child to fend for themselves at no older than six to eight is unclear. In any case, Elthazan followed their parents' last words all the way from the Northernmost point of the continent to the Dark Border in the far South, with nothing to identify them but a strange feather they wore around their neck. They might have become a rogue on this journey but due to their strange mannerisms rarely stayed long in human settlements and preferred travelling through the wilds - they were referred to by contemporaries as a wodwo insofar as they lived wild and without the benefits of agriculture in the woods, though it is not clear if they belonged ethnically to the hunter-gatherer peoples now known pejoratively as "wodwos" (their northern origin however makes it likely). Elthazan quickly discovered there was a demand among

the settled peoples for Rangering, and despite the legend of his nude solo encounter with Yahsef Kamann - which first appeared in C'harnian romance before its endless elaborations by Heroes' Love authors and conflation with certain lines in his surviving poetry - likely alternated between travelling alone and working with adventuring parties, at least learning the bow, the atlatl and sophisticated traps before taking up with a small party consisting at the time of the fighter Kamann Yahsef, the cleric Yyama'a Maullan and the rogue Netrix Klauxion. They did, however, become Kamann's closest friend and likely sexual partner, going by allusions in both of their writings. In the end they never found their parents, though the feather they were gifted came from another one of the Dark Lord's twelve hands, which would make them among the most accomplished adventurers of their era. The question continues to puzzle historians, as none of the known adventurers who could have made it that far fit the circumstantial details.



# It's a good thing the DARK LORD is a shut-in!

by: [baroquespiral](#)

Elthazan is the only Hero who did not name or govern their country as they did not know if it was truly their home, leaving it to the existing C'harn aristocracy - though the Ecclesia eventually pressured C'harn to adopt the standardized name as part of the Sevenfold Alliance. The Northern kingdoms in which the ranger appeared were, next to the warring chaos of the Dark borderlands, among the least unified; but Elthazan did not have the character to unify them. Instead, they were quickly persuaded into an alliance by ritual mating at a midwinter revel with one of the most powerful royal families - that of C'harn - which gained under the Sevenfold Pact legitimate title to the entire region. Though C'harn quickly pacified its already less powerful neighbours, who alleged that the mating had been coerced, the C'harn aristocracy was itself composed of dozens of distantly related branch families, among which the line of Elthazan was soon diluted and contested. (Rraitha Braz may even possess some of this bloodline; all but the most obsessive monarchist revanchist scholars have more or less given up on keeping track.) After several bouts of civil war, C'harn would eventually accede to



mediation by the Ecclesia and the Alliance, and royal sovereignty would be replaced by a complex modern system that combines high levels of local autonomy and direct democracy with a centralized military/executive overseen by the Alliance and the Ecclesia, with public elections of key positions between approved candidates. This reorganization was sealed by the final recognition of the territory's name as "Elthazan", and is still regarded by closely monitored elements of both the aristocracy and the public as a national humiliation, though also sometimes considered a victory or vindication for Elthazan's minority cultures and ethnicities. Elthazan can be loosely divided into four main regions; the Eastern coast, a thriving commercial region close to Klauxion; the southern mountains and West coast, home to several distinct semi-nomadic cultures; the interior taiga, home to Winter City and the rural heartland; and the Northern tundra and glaciers, whose cultures are still reclusive and poorly under-



stood. C'harn proper was, historically, the culture of the East coast and interior.

It is still unclear what language the name “Elthazan” even comes from, or if it was merely a “stage name” they adopted as a Ranger. Elthazan did nonetheless return to C'harn, and according to officially suppressed folktales even became a thorn in the side of the C'harn rulers themselves, living in the woods, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. Fifty to a hundred songs can be credibly traced to them, mostly in short lyric forms with mnemonic structures, dealing with aging, endearing animal and human behaviours, and natural features mostly surrounding the Camluz keep.

2'  
LWCIG121  
AET  
FVCS2  
VCCNM200  
WRECE02  
G00E000  
COM000  
A1202  
E000100'  
0010102  
22E  
2020E001  
10200  
0012  
00100'  
W0000  
D0000  
E1  
F0000  
A101  
1001000  
10000  
E102000  
20000  
W0000  
0010102  
100  
COM000  
W0000  
211  
D0000  
10200  
F0000




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*

Marzanna's suggestion of meditation reminds Luskonneg of what happened the last time he tried, while Braz visits a monastery hoping to uncover the secrets of the Dark magic used by an enemy she no longer remembers



CW: nudity, fantasy racism, underage fictional sexualization, online stalking communities, fanservice tropes, nonconsensual verbal and mental sexualization, mind alteration, amnesia, suicide, clowns, public humiliation, self-harm, gaslighting, emotional incest, delusions, verbal outbursts, consensual torture, age gap relationship

“Straw shafts of sunlight fall like spears in the snow around Kamann from where the naked shadow glances into the nimbus of platinum-saturated cloud. Trees twist in elegantly agonized poses as he charges on straight, snow stinging and melting inside his gazelleskin boots. He stumbles. One or two stumbles more and he knows he won’t be able to see it any more.”

She needs a way to work the blue of the sky into that first sentence to evoke the colours of the flag Elthazan supposedly designed to represent that scene, three diag-

## ***FAILURE 09: STATIC BUILD-UP***

2  
LUCIF  
AET  
FUCN2  
VCCN42W  
HPECEN42  
HUCEN4V  
C4W4DO  
H.202  
C4V4IDV  
H41VCE2  
22E  
202LEND1  
H20W  
0012  
V410W  
W4W4  
D404E  
E1  
F4V404E  
H4101  
H4C4ID4D  
1E4404  
E102W4D  
2E4 D0  
H4E E411  
V41412C1  
10W  
C4W42E4C1E  
W4E41  
211  
D404W  
1E2W4  
F4W4W



onal bars of gold between pale blue and white. But when she pictures it there are only scraps of blue in the sky.

“And maybe that blue-silver streak of hair, that deep rivulet of spine, will run out of his memory like meltwater, like one of the scraps of blue remaining between the clouds.”

She’s been picturing this scene since she was first told about the meaning of the flag’s colours, and at some point the colours drifted, bled out, maybe from seeing it against the half-cloudy sky so many times on the walk home from school, maybe from thinking about how and when those spears of sunlight actually appear. She’s read at least a hundred renditions, but none of them quite capture that sky that springs into her had first.

“He’s already accepted the wild man getting away with his prize, but that thought, of remembering less and less of this scene as he tells it, sends him into a blind panic. He responds not from moral or practical judgment - those two guiding stars Maullan has taught him orbit each other like the Goddess and Her lover - but from need. His right arm reaches across his left thigh for his sling.





He lets the stone drop into the pouch, pauses barely a moment to aim and swing - and in that moment notices his target is already gone. His devastation targets the sun, as if to shoot it out of the sky - and the weight lands on his shoulders, his knees buckle. Heavy wrists grind into his until the snow compacts beneath them. Hot breath, like a beast's, grazes the hairs along his neck - then a tongue."

*How could he have fallen back so quickly?* - no good, she was trying to stop using those kinds of cheap rhetorical questions. But she had to indicate what had happened somehow, didn't she? Even if everyone who read it already knew?

"If you hadn't been so fast - and so focused - I couldn't have tricked you like that." The wild man's hot breath made spread in cool rings of condensation over Kamann's ear. "I don't care about keeping the prize, you can bring it in for your bounty or whatever, but the chase was fun, wasn't it?"

Of all the parts of his body now pressing into snow, there was a direct line between the still-mounting blaze in his face and the alarmingly hard tip of his hueroth chafing against the rough-sewn seam of his pants. "I-I have





extra clothes in my bag, can you put some on before we parley?””

Did she need to use that archaic word? (And the Elthazan one, not the Kamann one, because it fit the aesthetic she was going for, even though she was using Kamann’s perspective.)

“Other hunters don’t usually mind that I’m like this.”

“That’s because they’re barbarians!””

She could use that word, right? Nobody was quite sure where this story was set, and whether Kamann would have meant barbarians in a way that encompassed the C’harn tribes or just those they had used to call barbarians. But those at this point they would have called wodwos.

Even though most of them weren’t the way Elthazan, “the last wodwo and first ranger”, was, and nobody really knows his ethnicity because it’s accepted that he was one because he was cut off from it. That was one of the dynamics she wanted to get into.





"How do you even handle it in this cold? Is it true that wodwos are descended from?"

No, even if he believed this he wouldn't have said it, especially having known Maullan for three years and the precepts of ethnic chivalry were among the first of her writings to survive.

On the other hand, if he thought it, that would help set up whatever she did with the dynamic further down the line. Like: "Was it true that wodwos had thick impervious skins because they were descended from elves, or dwarfs, or orcs, the people he usually shot down at the campfire could never decide which?"

"Well, if I'm not getting a workout I'm doing it wrong. Usually that includes when I catch someone..."

Strike two. There was no reason he couldn't have said that yet - there were plenty of fics in which he did, ones where they did it right there on the snow - but she wasn't trying to write one of those fics. She was writing for no less august a Winter City institution than the annual Heroes' Love competition founded by the Spinsters' Legion, polishing the best of three or six (depending on how she counted) pieces she'd already written into one.



She was even doing it on a typewriter, which made her have to think slow, and not want to pile up struck-through lines where she ran away with herself.

But the entire reason she was writing something like this was because she tended to run away with herself, always had, even looking at a flag on a grey sky as the metro pulled up to the school gates.

*The key is to run away with yourself*, Joyelez Pontquarno, founder of the Patriotic Spinsters' Legion of Winter City during the second Dark war, had said - *but only up to a point*.

But what frustrated her was when not only the distance but the direction was wrong.

Her roommate knocked on the door. "Dinner's ready." Marzanna could be weirdly motherly about that sometimes. Other times she was the one silently crouched over her laptop all night in the dark, and Gallvren got to slip into the kitchen and do the same for her. This was their friendly rivalry.

At least Gallvren's room wasn't like that, even when she was alone and jumpy in it. She had hemp and lavender





incense sticks burning softly in a two-headed lion holder, magically preserved lilacs from the shop strung along the window's edge, three lights in slightly different shades of yellow and orange lighting her in three point. She never posted it on social media. The essence of a C'harn gentlewoman, her mother (who was only such a thing in the aspirational sense of universal nobility promoted in Elthazan newspapers) said, was elegance in privacy. And Marzanna's room was elegant too - the prayer mat and different cushions she could move between to keep her posture and rhi balanced on that thing for hours - but Marzanna didn't seem to care.

Or maybe she just hadn't gone in there enough - but would she allow the same?

Marzanna had placed two plates of pesto reed noodles with scallops on either side of the small circular table. They blessed the food together but after as Gallyren eagerly sunk her fork to the bottom of the plate, she threw her arms over the chair's back and waited a minute to talk with her eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"How much do you know about... otaku?"



Gallyren untwisted a forkload and whipped its loose ends back into her mouth. "The Silmenon kind? They're gross."

"Yeah, I mean the guys who... wait, as opposed to?" The limber monk flipped her frame forward onto her elbows.

Shit! The qualification - the defense - had come out automatically - on some parts of the internet, she'd be considered one. Especially by the Silmenon kind, they were the only people who would talk about fans as a kind of otaku rather than otaku as a kind of fans. But apparently Joyelez Pontquarno had maintained a correspondence during the war with Sukiton Decoby, and there were rumours she had contributed an anonymous work at the first Romarosa Comiket. The things they had in common weren't just stories, imagination or even obsession, but sex and skirting-the-edge-of-blasphemy.

The tricky part was going to be, she didn't want to trap herself into hiding everything around her roommate forever. She only talked to other HL fans at the monthly meets at the library; Marzanna sometimes seemed like the kind of girl she could take there. She almost certainly had something at least as corny going on that she didn't ask about - wait, what if the otaku was her?





Maybe this was an opportunity. She hadn't known how to gauge Marzanna's tolerance, and if she worded it right...

"Well, I do watch a few Silmenon shows, and in those they use it to refer to pretty much everything. Like if you're really into trains. It seems useful to have a word for that, besides just... obsessive? Which is like, a diagnosis?" Marzanna perched a frown on her slightly hairy upper lip. "Hmmm. The guy I'm thinking of isn't really that obsessed with anything... I mean, he knows a lot of pointless bullshit, but I'm not sure he's focused enough to be obsessed with any of it."

"Guy?"

"Somebody in a human interest pitch I got from an agency. They wanna do some story about comparing male and female otaku. Anyway, what's gross?"

Gallvren spluttered. Was she being called on her prejudice, or asked to prove her own non-grossness? Two interpretations of the same words with completely incompatible implications for what she said next. "I-I-I mean I assumed you'd also get it, they even say it about themselves, they-"



"The guy I'm talking to specifically is, and I don't know how much of an outlier he is because I've never really met this kinda person. But I'm a journalist, anyway, I'm supposed to ask these kinds of framing questions. Like establish the assumptions you're using to analyze. Also as a journalist mine have to be pretty open anyway. I probably find less things gross than you, because we're trained in that specifically as journalist-monks. I won't bite if you mention something weird. It's a good exercise."

"Uhhh, well, obviously the sex stuff, but not just the fact that they're fantasizing about cartoons or fictional characters. It's when they're like, really young-looking? There are women into that too, I see sometimes..." She stopped herself, then continued. Maybe she could thread the needle here. "Like one time at the library they had a HL convention and I stopped through. Because I was curious." She hadn't meant to lie, to have to go back on it, but in person she couldn't edit. "You know like..."

"Heroes' Love." Marzanna smiled, snickered. Not unkindly, but not... familiarly.

"And most of it was just writing and art and audio drama, but there was one table that was like... Silmenon style ball jointed dolls. They had all the heroes, but the male





- I shouldn't say that for Elthazan, I know they used neutral pronouns in all the contemporary documents, but it's how most of these people still think of them - the male-coded heroes were in the front row in more suggestive poses. But the dolls' proportions were like... they would only make sense if I were casting a pre-quest fic, but they were wearing their quest costumes. Or half-wearing" (she thought of Silmenon's kimono slipping all the way over his white hairline-spiderwebbed plaster shoulder, the edge of his nipple peeking over the same pink as his bow lip - thought up to a point, and stopped, and returned to words) "- and it wasn't even just a literal thing, like people don't look like that, but what creeps me out is how you're trying to imagine a person - one of the Heroes that made our world no less, but I feel like once you can imagine one person that way you can imagine any - what are you imagining when you imagine them that way. Like you don't want to break them, because if she did she would. But like she wanted to want to." Gallvren shook her head. This was going to make her, make the whole convention sound bad, wasn't it. "I don't know, I couldn't look at it for long. Like physically."

Marzanna was grinning. She had her notebook out in front of her and was taking down phrases without look-





ing down, a skill Gallvren had always envied. “That’s really - if I do something with this can I quote you? I haven’t heard it said like that before. Now I really want to put you in front of the creepiest male otaku I can find - don’t worry I’ll protect you, also I’ve already found him - and get more quotes. As a reward, maybe I could take you out to another Heroes’ Love thing...”

Gallvren smiled cautiously back, giggled, and Marzanna thought for the first time she wouldn’t mind destroying her subject for her mysterious handlers.

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“Well, you’re right. Your life doesn’t seem to be much of a story.” Marzanna spoke with the video off now; Luskon-neg occupied himself by floating various characters, from waifus to memes, in front of the empty frame with its masklike default icon. “So we’ll have to make it one. What if I told you I could find that woman who helped you and you embarrassed and apologized to her?”

“...*I* embarrassed *her*?” He’d hardly dared to think it in his endless replays of the event that had mostly



stopped in just the past week or so as things had settled comfortably into weirder. What would that even *mean* - would *she* have been replaying it five to twenty times daily for the past month? Imagining she should have done... what?

“The video that was uploaded to Punkin Patch - which to be clear, almost no one watched, you’re not famous or anything - was titled ‘lady tries to help spaz, he just spazzes out more’.”

Luskonneg didn’t even think to turn off his mic as his groan dragged itself out into a gurgling, throat-scraping scream.

“You’re doing it again.” The voice rose implacable, like an accusing ghost in a play, from the computer he had just thrown limply across the mattress in front of him.

Pain pulled loops out of his back as he sat up in a hunched C. A few more years like this, he imagined, and maybe his muscles would atrophy and he wouldn’t be able to walk or even stand. Maybe if he put on enough wait his bones would just crumble under his body if he tried, like a kaiju’s would in real life. @Suburbophile had found a video of a CG physics model based on Super



Tannin 89 doing just that and it had become one of his most comforting stims.

*I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry - I shouldn't do this to you too,* he internally addressed his anthropomorphized laptop, before reassuring himself that it had landed in the lap of a body pillow. (The pillow he had hastily stretched with a cover of Gelmer Gadders, his current seasonal waifu, who he had also kicked out of bed in frustration.)

"Does she know about it?"

"Yes, but she's more offended by whoever took the video than you - she knows there's something wrong with you. She wanted me to find you and get you in the system - I found that less interesting, and it's clear the system already knows what it can and can't do." Marzanna braced for another scream, but just gurgles. "I know this sounds humiliating and pointless, but if you treat this as a regular apology you might be able to interact with somebody as a regular human."

"You're fine... putting someone else at risk from me."

"Risk of what? If you'd ever really hurt someone you'd be in..." well, probably better conditions than he was now,

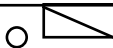




but she caught that it probably wasn't a good idea to say that, although Luskonneg seemed pretty dedicated to staying out of institutions anyway. If nothing else there was no way he'd get to keep all that shit in them. At one point after she'd asked he'd sent her a string of 20 very selectively framed photos of his room - a few redundant, "these are the best ones I've posted in the ita-room threads on 42chan before and actually set up properly but they're almost a year out of date".

She'd played around formatting them in a collage, with the conspicuous gaps left open between them for text. She had come to hate everything about this story, but most of all the fact that there was actual material here - and, according to the secret instructions she'd been receiving, she'd never be allowed to use any of it, although if something went according to plan she'd be granted a special state service income and access to all kinds of classified bullshit she'd never wanted to write about in the first place.

"...you'd be *really* shut in." Was twisting the knife working? Or was she trying to get cut off from this confusing nightmare?



"Well. I could embarrass her more." He started laughing.

"Hehehehe - I could *embarrass* her - trip and fall into her boobs or her panties, I could walk in on her in the shower - *those sorts of things* happen around me, you know."

The voice on the other side was dry and skeptical but unmistakably turned upward a bit with anxiety at the end.

"Do they really."

"...no."

"If they happened on purpose that'd be harassment and you'd be in the same situation I know you're already not in. And if they happened by accident... I suspect your life would be more interesting than it is."

His life was already starting to behave like that, though - she was there, like some girl who fell from the sky, trying to fix him for no reason. Why wouldn't the rest of it happen too? And what would - what *could* - he do if it did?

Put him face first in some stranger's panties and there was no way he could respond with Astig's sputtering dignity.



“What if they happened on *someone else’s* purpose.” A pause long enough to hear birdsong. “I... suppose that would also be harassment? By someone else? Has that ever happened?”

“Not... exactly.” But *this* had happened. This pattern, this momentum, this careful push that in anime they would call - in the lines of his high school agenda he had called - “stopped time starting to move again”. Things that had seemed just as impossible, implausible, fictional - and had proven to be. “OK. I’ll apologize, do anything she needs me to do to make it right, give money, and then never talk to her again.” *Or anyone else, or...* the thoughts ran away into the comforting distance of absolutes.

“No, that’s not really what I was thinking, that’s not much of a story either. I was thinking, you apologize, and then buy a meal together and have a normal conversation for say... fifteen minutes. No cameras, and I’m there only for safety.”

“I-i-i-i isn’t this some kind of malpractice?!?!” Luskonneg hadn’t picked up the computer - he was staring at it like it was a time bomb. (*Gelmer, use your explosion-absorbing magic skirt... oh no, it’s around your feet, isn’t it...*)



"So would be tackling people in the middle of the street, but - Yn Dahh't license. At no point here is she going to do anything she isn't comfortable with and - if I can make it possible at all - neither will you."

"She can't possibly know what she's consenting to. And you- you can't know what you're talking about. You're not even a psychologist. Real psychologists have been trying this for... my entire life."

"She already knows you're crazy. Look, nothing I'm saying is contingent on a happy ending. If you fuck up, I get to see it in action. Which doesn't mean I have to write about anything you don't want me to. But there's two ways this could go, by definition. Either you really are as special a case you insist you are - in which case there's something for me to research, a hole in our system that catches everything, a new kind of mental cancer, maybe something you can get treated by some new psychological method they don't have practitioners of here. Or there isn't, you just needed the right person, the right push, the right circumstance, and I have a feel-good human interest story."

"It's not special," he choked. "It's just me. No one can get better unless they want to get better. I don't want to,





I don't care, it's been so long. The system lets me, it lets hundreds of people like me, I talk to them all day. You could go in any thread and pick one of them at random and you'd get the same 'two options', and it wouldn't mean anything which one you got. If you got the feel good story it'd just mean they were faking it all along."

"Of course, that's more or less what I did. You're underestimating my desperation here - I'm perfectly aware that I'm forcing a story." Her voice was speeding, heating up, like steam would be coming out of her nostrils in an anime. The laptop somehow getting more dangerous to touch. "But there is one advantage to you, from what I've read now of your online profiles. Which you wanted to show me - that you wanted to be an icon for shut-ins, a representative."

The last time he'd thought about that fantasy, he'd imagined becoming that after he was dead. But there were earlier versions, which he had cultivated for their absurdity on Feed, megalomania was disarming there, especially alternating with self-deprecation and venting, everyone knew you wouldn't make it and probably wouldn't kill yourself either...





Damn it. Even for someone he had been using to indulge this fantasy of someone knowing him, she knew him too well.

>using

>to indulge

>fantasy

What fantasy will you use who to indulge next, huuuuuuuhhhhhh? a mocking voice ripped through his skull.

It sounded a bit like Ylian from the Public Morals Committee, combined with Dominaura from Hell Harrowing, combined with himself when he screamed at himself in the mirror.

These days suburbs spread out for an hour and a half around the Great Rosehedge Wall by train - almost twenty minutes longer than the last time Braz had been here. Red terracotta barrel tiles, sloping eaves, artificial hillsides of interlocking mass-produced plaster blocks





with gardens that were just starting to bud, sprays of mustard and half-opened cherry and crabapple blossoms everywhere, winding stairways and flying buttresses between them, all unimpeachable examples of the beauty of Romarosan architecture and all surely commissioned to form a mandala of lacelike intricacy and beauty from above, but at some point it got repetitive. Or she was just phasing it out - it felt like a flat, randomly-generated screensaver unrolling across the window. The best part was always how it framed some incongruous element of a scene that would be lost in a split second - a dog running down a colonnade with an unattached leash, a single dancing shoe hung on a laundry wire. *Even melancholy in Romarosa*, they said, *was melancholy in Romarosa* - or even *boredom in Romarosa is boredom in Romarosa*, a kind of silky opium stupor. She supposed it would be boredom here, and melancholy by the time she reached the old city within the Hedge and the sun was setting, a cool pink-veined halo behind the convex silhouette of the capitoline peak. The old city alone was the size of the entire upper plateau of Winter City - the campus of the university she was visiting a sizeable neighbourhood in its own right, overlooked by an imposing barracks of state-owned guest housing, five storeys of open arched facades. She would unpack in an Ecclesiastic confidential



suite on the penthouse. Wash her hands in a foliate-face basin of scented water in the wall. The floating spherical lanterns along the promenades would be glowing mauve, the first white butterflies would be out. The university buildings would seem as opaque from above as within, their windows narrow and stained, gargoyles and ridge beasts menacing the wandering eye. And she would take a walk around before going back to her room to try and sort out her notes and plan her investigations for the following day, go to a garland booth or a poetry reading in the park, try to appreciate it in the way she hadn't on her childhood vacations and graduation trips. It was hard to think too much about her mission, after all, if she didn't understand what it was. She felt like she was dreaming - and wasn't that the way you were supposed to feel in Romarosa?

She had come so far south the season had changed in time-lapse, literally journeying into the heat of the sun. As she stepped out, several carillons sounded in a syncopated echo, and a colony of bats jetted from one of the historic cliffside catacombs overhead. As the sound evaporated a music box wafted up from somewhere far below.





Her ignorance wasn't any better than knowledge. It wrapped around her head like a coil of smoke. And she had the distinct, stinging sense that this will to rest in her ignorance had gotten her here. So she paid a kind of frantic, restless attention to everything she had on her field exams, the ones where you had to find your instructions first.

She was disappointed to find that the nebulous commercial area formerly known as the Floating World and now as the Electric City had crept all the way up to the base wall of the campus. Presumably a lot of students these days wanted a place in walking distance to buy and play video games, stay on top of collectable lines, read self-published fan pornography, ogle cosplay waiters and waitresses, and say things like "moe moe kyun" out loud. The more traditionally seedy attractions of the floating world had also always appealed to students, but the city (and the school) had put in more of a token effort to keep them away.

All these distractions - life sized anime girl sticker waving from a window, splayed 2D panties on a doorside bookstand, flashy stage-magic explosions from a plastic gizmo looping on a billboard, cat-eared butler beckoning



her with a flash of inexplicably poignant turquoise wig - were at least in part the product of the secret military-ecclesiastic bureaucracy she represented. Had represented? In what capacity, she was no longer sure - only that she had instructions she could not disregard.

All to protect the world from the Dark Lord - at the cost of degrading it into the kind of world that could feed that black hole of a mind a steady drip of hyperstimulus to keep it satisfied.

Well... that was speculative, wasn't it?

The classified services had their fingers in all kinds of places, using all kinds of psychological models that might or might not be administrative fads, but no one knew what exactly worked or didn't. All the previous Dark Lords had developed some sort of compensatory obsession, but no one knew what this current one's was exactly.

But she could just imagine it. She had never been a fan of any kind of pop culture, or understood the Silmenon government's enthusiasm to drape it all over their cultural heritage, but the feeling of that heritage had already slipped over her like a flock of seabirds again, while the sights replacing it filled her with a sudden revulsion





disproportionate to her expectations. This was the swamp the Dark Lord of this generation would choose to sink in. If it had been designed by some maximum-clearance committee of psychologists for this purpose she could forgive its existence. But not walk through it without reminding herself that he was out there somewhere, and even though they were not at war, had deprived her of any chance at a normal life and something more important she couldn't remember.

Last time she had been here, she had sat on the battlements of the university wall far overhead with Agryaux and Nevenna, friends she couldn't remember if she'd seen in a decade. They had been assigned to airgapped divisions, so probably not. Now that the intervening memories were missing, however, they felt recently parted.

Maybe that was how the [Taboo Preserver] felt all the time.

She blacked out and found she had trancewalked the rest of the block. She retook her surroundings, paying less close attention to anything anime - that had tripped something? How was she supposed to work like this?



She recognized the sound of the same music box, the same slow pentatonic melody. Followed it around tight cobblestone turns until she found a clown wearing the inverted grieving mask supposedly customary since Silmenon himself on a triangular corner overhung by silver magic-preserved rhododendrons. There were various legends about the mask - that Silmenon designed it after his troupe was massacred, or that it had been invented by a clown who had been his closest friend or lover among them. In either case it represented sorrow expressed as laughter, and had an uncanny quality of muscle groups that didn't exist being pulled too tightly.

The clown was sing-speaking in the fashion of first-Dark-War-era Silmenon theatre:

*My heart is like a boiling pot  
The Serpent squeezes until  
The egg of water shatters  
And sweats out his poisonous brood*

*They multiply and find other lovers  
But the shell is never remade  
The learned tell how the water returns  
But I know what is lost*





She wasn't dressed in costume that displayed her Ecclesiastical affiliation - a long, stiff, slightly flaring indigo dress-coat with fur lining its high collar - though a popular devotional serpent-dancer brooch clasped its upper pocket. And theologically unsound metaphors for despair had been accepted in the fine arts for centuries. But still, she stood and narrowed her eyes.

"Is that from an anime?"

"It's a song by a famous suicide." The clown motioned towards his bulbous cauldron hat on the ground. "I'm raising credit for mental health research."

"Suicides are famous here? In Elthazan it's considered disrespectful to make the dead a spectacle. Especially a clown show."

"That's why I won't say their name. I guess it's true what I hear that northerners like their happy and sad unseasoned."

"No, we simply find certain seasonings vulgar, but I'll admit you're making me curious about this one."





"If you pay me well enough I might give you a hint."

Braz reached into her pockets - coat, fatigues behind her belt, grey seal purse. "Thirty florets?" The three bills were more than any other identifiable unit in their open suitcase - full of strange little pamphlets and drawings - but not so much that it would suggest a motive beyond the slightly apologetic magnanimity of the well-off.

"They came to the university above us, from a province, a cape where people still claim to see elves. They say people with elf blood in them never live long." Now this was the kind of superstition a Romarosa busker would try to bait tourists who hung around the anime shops with. Maybe there was no reason for her trembling intuition.

"Would students recognize it?"

"I wonder how many still do."

"I thought you said they were famous."

"Not for song." The clown reprised the melody on the music-box, and she dropped in another floret to see if he would say anything else. Other than the movement of his hands and the tapping of his foot, he was still as a statue until she walked off.





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“It shouldn’t be that hard, you’ve gotten the hang of talking to me in complete sentences already. Fairly elaborate ones sometimes.”

“Right, but I’m thinking of you in the same way I think of my psychologist now. Someone I can dump whatever on and they won’t care.”

That categorically excluded any relationship where he cared about the other person’s reciprocation.

Did he really not care about Marzanna’s - the very destined angel of implausibility come to rescue him from his loneliness - reciprocation? It was part of why he had asked her to turn off the camera, although he still pictured the sound of her voice mushing around on his ear ASMR-style.

“All things considered, you haven’t dumped all that much on me, compared to...” some of the lolcows - “some of the subjects I’ve dealt with.”

With a kind of dull amazement, he realized he hadn’t.



He had no reason to believe anything he said would alienate her - she had as good as said it wouldn't - so he hadn't been thinking of half the things that would.

But if he didn't go through with this, she would have no reason to stay. That was why he had been trying so hard.

She had already worked herself under his inertia, like a razor under a nail. "But you have more than I'd want to put on" - she paused, again, to force down the lump in her throat when thinking of Gallyvren. "Someone you're already trying to apologize for making uncomfortable. Which is why I want you to practice just talking, not just confessing."

*Confessing.* When was the last time he had been to a *priest*? He flinched away from a whole other upsetting rabbit hole.

"So for instance, this is kind of like a journalistic skill - try summarizing a bit of what your life is like now, without too much upsetting detail, but maybe like one detail that might lead into something interesting you could elaborate. I'll wait."





“Uhhhh, I sit around my room and... play video games... and watch cartoons... mostly from Silmenon... but I liked Cig Blaster recently and that was from here. Have you seen Cig Blaster?”

Marzanna burst out laughing - real, sudden, spontaneous chrome bells - and he threw himself across the mattress to record it. “I loved Cig Blaster! Sorry, not speaking as her or in exercise here. I have a T-shirt of it I wear in bed.”

*T-shirt... in bed...* he hadn't seen enough of her to picture what shape of chest the speech bubble full of curse marks spilling from the yellowed overbite, the six-barrel cig-gatlings at the ends of the adult superhero's angular arms, stretched and cracked over.

“What would you want to do, if you could do something, to contribute to society?”

“Well, this, being a representative for NEET-” he stopped himself, this sounded silly, like he was running for some kind of elected position. Well, other professions had their guild representatives - but if that was real he wouldn't be able to handle the responsibility, it had to be a kind of informal celebrity like this.



A kind of total address that would almost inevitably have to end in suicide if it didn't begin in death.

"You never think about- making any of the kinds of things you consume?"

"I- I'm not creative. On Feed I'm basically- a critic. If I could do that for real- I'd be basically- doing what you do, I guess."

Because he was a critic, he couldn't create. He sometimes fantasized about having created, but he would see every flaw in everything he created even faster, with more ruthless focus, than he did his interactions with people. He knew real creators used that to push themselves forward, but he could hardly make vent shit any more, unless it was so bad on purpose (and not bad-on-purpose in a funny way, he knew how to parse that as good or bad, he was one of the best at it) it constituted a deliberate aggression against the part of him that cared about anything.

Thin tears had started leaking out of his eyes, completely silently, without so much as a hiccup in his breathing. Just on this question. Why?





"This isn't working. Isn't going to work. I'm still talking to you as you."

"Hmmm. Do you think you could talk to her as me?"

"No, that would defeat the point, look, I don't want it to be easier, I want it to be real - n-n-not like love or friendship real even, just that like, the other person is really listening or wanting to listen because if they pretend to, then I really don't know when to stop, then things will really get bad. The last time I tried this I -"

He was already on his hands and knees over the body pillow and the laptop. Before he could finish his own sentence his elbow moved as if on its own and slammed it shut.

He wasn't going to talk about the Public Morals Committee. He couldn't. He would have to... summarize, not confess, like she was asking him.

Unless she said something that indicated she was *supposed* to know about them.

And since when did he do what he was supposed to?



He had done everything he was supposed to, when they had tried to help him, too. Well, not at first. Maybe he'd messed it up forever one of those first few times, gotten a bad end on an early choice.

The difference between real life and a visual novel was you could hit a bad end, and it would just keep going on, and on, and on, and on, and you'd never know for sure.

Like end credits stuck in a loop.

But if he'd hit a bad end back then none of this would matter, somehow, no matter what it looked like, so he could keep doing anything he wasn't supposed to.

Except, well, any of the things he really *wasn't* supposed to.

He really didn't want to do things he was *or* wasn't supposed to, any more. He had spent the last five years of his life narrowly specializing into the handful of things that were neither.

When was the last time anyone had told him he was supposed to anything, anyway? Even Mom had given up at some point. The only things that felt like that any more





- the things he was thinking about now - were things he wanted. As soon as he wanted them, it felt like something else was putting the weight of that desire on him, and he didn't want them anymore.

It was a bit, he'd said one time in an IRC server, like in certain Miwa scriptures he hadn't read but had heard quoted by characters in visual novels - desire itself, its rough Current, always comes from outside and imposes itself on the harmony of the dance, of the flawless dancing Goddess at the centre of you, no matter how much you feel like it comes from "you" or impels you toward Her.

Except this wasn't the Current of his desire - it was whatever machine he used to force it against the endless counter-Currents, until it was buffeted back, and added itself to the inertia of being buffeted back.

This machine was "himself" - the stored-up directionless Current he could point anywhere he needed in feeble spurts - and also the shadow of everyone who had encouraged him to push further.

Dr. Mark'eg, the Public Morals Committee.





Mom, those first few times.

Gwaëlle.

Gwaëlle Finsteryon, second chair of the Public Morals Committee.

“It’s depressing having to keep tabs on you, you know that?” Her first words to him that he had bothered to keep in memory - there had been many before, that disappeared almost as soon as he responded to them - *keeping tabs*. “All the delinquents and regular headcases talk to me every chance they get, try to make their case to me so I’ll go to the teachers for them, or complain about their enemies, or call me names and shit. Eskrahan still tries to flip my skirt when I wear one. You just sit there, looking like you’re dying.”

“Well if I never do anything, maybe you don’t have to waste your time watching me.” His words came out straighter than he expected, with only a few stumbles. “You can tell them you did and nothing happened as usual. You can go...” He had absolutely no idea what she did for fun. She had some kind of little black-bound book she flipped through that wasn’t the Public Morals





Committee notebook but didn't seem to have anything on the cover.

She appeared to him in bits and pieces in those days - all of which seemed larger than life, ruins of lost civilizations. Crossed ankles that shouldn't have been allowed so close to him, tapering in fine mauve socks into an outdated black leather variant of the school shoe. (A bit below his eye level - she sat on a desk while he hunched in a chair.) Sandy-blond hair mushrooming in an old peasant woman's bun through a grey bow. A cleft chin, unbearably soft pale collapse over cartilage depression. The stitched edges of the long felt coat she often kept on indoors. If any one part of her caught his eye, he would avoid looking at it any other part, and it would become a phantom hovering over his vision wherever else he looked, until he kept sneaking glances back at it. Her voice would seem to come from it, gigantic and disembodied. "You think a second chair of the Public Morals Committee is just going to fudge the rules like that?" She raised a faint eyebrow over an eye he could no more look at than the sun.

"You just told me other people expect that! And I'm boring because I don't!"



“Depressing, not boring. And most of the people who do that are stupid. Not depressing, but stupid. I thought you might not be.”

*Stupid!* He clenched his jaw and eyes against the echoes and in the red haze of force the phantom of her ankle flew off in a spray of blood and splintered bone. (When he had described how he saw people this way Dr. Mark’eg referred to it in worried tones as a dismemberment fantasy and he had *just* been getting that thought under control.) His hands trembled and he anchored them on the corners of a desk, then slammed his head down as hard as he could - which was much harder than he usually could (he usually flinched and missed it) - into the corner.

Through the haze of almost subjectless pain on the way to the nurse’s office he felt like he could take in her whole profile and even voice as another ordinary person, the way an anime character in a neutral shot or himself in the bathroom mirror sometimes looked. “See, that’s why I can’t just leave you alone!”

Even since the first suspension, there had been more than enough incidents - getting caught masturbating in the bathroom (not even particularly thinking about or





aroused by anything, just trying to pull himself back to his physical body), cutting himself and using his blood when red marker ran out on a group poster, dropping across the track in the middle of running laps in gym class and tripping up three kids. The incidents were too distinct, inexplicable except in terms of their internal logic, which Mark'eg unspooled over weeks at a time only to censor for the school officials. Every time Luskonneg tried to introduce himself to a new group of friends, which he had pretty much stopped, he ended up either crying or saying something alarming if not rule-breaking within the first hour. He had been told the pressure would ease at some point, and instead it just built up like floodwaters the longer he had to either wait or keep coming up with words. By the time most people had invested in even a casual friendship, he could only assume it would be like the Xivuagla Trench.

*But I only did that... because of... you...* his wasn't present enough to decide whether to (not) make it sound like a confession or an accusation, and it came out like a friendly chain of bubbles.



The school nurse, who he'd seen enough times that he could now fake it to get away from things without attracting suspicion, didn't touch him, barely spoke to him, looked at him like a piece of rotting fish. When she could be seen by other people, though, she expressed such effusive concern (not effusive in his mother's way, that tried to erase its object from the world with preverbal force) that he had to conclude he had been imagining the aura of hostility, the twenty-minute disappearances that made it worth disappearing to in the first place.

He drifted in and out between a place of peaceful, droning pain and cacophonous, fragmented aloneness for three hours before he was picked up by his mother.

She held him, fifteen, in bed in the dark, grating into his collarbones with her fingernails when he tried to stumble up to get water. When he was back from banging around the house without having taken so much as a painkiller, she had returned to the TV as if the rooms of the house had rotated around him.

~





A narrow path covered by an empty, arched cast-iron frame diverged from the walkway that snaked from the visitors' residences between all the main subdivisions of campus to the ceremonial gates at the bottom of its terraced slope, disappearing into dense ranks of sycamore behind which the low-domed quartzite roofs of the Department could barely be seen rising. The three domes, marked by a triad of icons on the campus map: a rose, a winged skull and a serpent-egg, were connected by broad covered walkways.

The former director at the time of the Seullgyo Incident had an office on the curved edge of the skull, lit in hazy wedges by tiny arrowslits and a minimal chrome desk lamp. Her hair fell in straight bangs with a clean rectangular window for her face, accents of black still visible under the bars of filigree silver. Her throat bobbed constantly, and she avoided eye contact in a way that didn't suggest nervousness or guilt so much as the habitual need for a neutral object of attention.

"I'm afraid we don't have any of Dr. Selbstember's research from the four years leading up to the incident, since she got access to our labs."



"Is this customary for a sacked professor? Or did the order come down from somewhere?"

"The workers didn't make a distinction packing the office up. No one thought to ask them to. Everyone was still so shaken up. I consider it an error on my part."

If it had been done with an Ecclesiastical asset slip, there might be no way to know if it had without digging into their internal records. In the worst case scenario, it would be something she wouldn't have authority to access. She could maybe request anonymous mission-specific input from someone who would. But that wasn't how heresy was normally dealt with.

"She never put anything in the archives, or on the intranet?" Braz knew she hadn't published - in her last three years at Romarosa University, Fraxine Selbstember had gone dark as a researcher.

"Some Mysteries researchers are - as I'm sure you're well aware - very cagey about their work. We had an associate professor, moved to a military institute a few years ago, who didn't tell us what he was working on for ten years. It ended up being a conlang that has some remarkably consistent magical effects, but we're having trouble






studying them because it's borderline unlearnable." She laughed drily.

"Did she ever talk to you about what she was working on?"

"I did progress meetings but they were always vague. She was trying to focus more on teaching. But she had a steam drey in there for some reason. In her private lab space."

"Steam ...drey?"



Prof. Kunian rotated the computer screen to show Braz a grainy picture. The thing took up most of a wall of the room; it had a sort of giant kettle attached with pistons to one wheel at the front of a low, flat wooden bed supported by two more in the back. "It was something West C'harnian miners used for a couple of decades between the wars before magical transportation equipment got better. Honestly I thought it might be a LARP or cos-play thing. It looks like some contraption a spunky kid with one shoe open would ride in an early Shunny Najda show."

"Was she... into that?"





"No, but you know how this city's getting."

Braz sighed, exaggerating the expression to hide her abstract panic. "Nothing connected to Druid poetry?"

"She probably checked out a few, but she read everything. At most half of it ever had to do with her research. Some people go into Mysteries just to have an excuse to read all day - I know I did. I can put in a request for her library records for you."

"Thank you. Did the Inquisition get a look at all of it first?"

"I think so. They asked for a lot but didn't tell us anything, just left it all here."

"What about Selbstember herself? Are you still in contact? Is anyone?"

Prof. Kunian threw her head back and rolled it on the headrest of her ergonomic chair. "Fraxine lives somewhere in the alumni district, I know because I saw her at the convenience store at Coral Bells & Poinsettia. She got a special basic income for trauma. As far as I know she's... basically a shut-in."





Braz shivered momentarily. “Do you think she was the kind of person who would react like that if she didn’t have anything to do with the Seullgyo incident?”

“If she was at some rut in her research, if she lost it all, and if what was giving her meaning was teaching and *that* happened to one of her students... I’ve read Seullgyo’s file over and over, he had the worst depressive scores in his cohort. If there was some secret heresy or Dark magic that pushed him over the edge, either you people know or it’s lost to history.”

She nodded. There was a genuine grief in this woman’s voice that had long since vanished in the endless equilibrium of the Abbot’s. “Did an undergrad in the same cohort by the name of Lacriz Aeeth ever come to your attention?”

“Aeeth... Is that... let me go back through...” She clicked through some folders Braz couldn’t see, humming to indicate to her to wait. “Right. Azaru Maiençugaru - who taught the same intro course as Selbstember, they retired three years ago - told me Aeeth was close to turning it into a mimetic suicide chain and they’d recommended them to a specialist instead of the usual campus psychologist. They wanted someone who understood Mysteries



jargon, although that doesn't necessarily mean anything to do with Selbstember, Aeeth appears in all their other notes as a genius reading far beyond their level, the kind of person who could twist ordinary grief or depression into some kind of theoretical argument."

Braz nodded slightly. Whoever was briefing her had found the "Seer in the Half Light" blog by now. It was frustratingly cartoonish and vapid for the nemesis of the Pious Alliance, although the Dark always was, a pocket of hermetically preserved infant petulance even in the most sophisticated Order. Like the reverse of Shaïgnar's - she wasn't sure what fact or statement by or about the infamous general she was remembering. A connection to a vanished Mysteries professor would certainly be more satisfying than a connection to a pulp light novel - had she seen any Elphantom in the Electric City the other day? would there be any benefit to reading it? - but there were enough obvious lines to draw a simpler conclusion: driven Dark by a friend's, or a lover's, or an unrequited love's death.

Something smoldered in her heart. *You don't burn down the world just because it doesn't have anything for you any more - you fight to preserve it and make it work better so no*



*one else has to suffer what you did, so what you lost can be revived in them.*

*If you're a broken piece, you just keep working until you die.*

She had always believed that, even before she had been told to - reading ahead in Maullan's Scriptures, feeling like nothing could ever be truly lost, as long as she identified with the Order beyond herself. But had she really lived it? She suddenly thought of every moment of resistance to her duty - her aimless, resentful wandering yesterday, and whatever unknowable guilt she was increasingly sure lurked behind her vanished memory - as a willful act of destruction comparable to Elphantom's, to the Seer in the Half-Light's.

"Oh. They were both from Mirmansaur. I wonder if they knew each other."

Mirmansaur. A peninsula and archipelago to the Southwest, known as the last place the elves crossed the sea in their coracles -

If it was that obvious, she was being led on by someone. The ones who had sent her, or the one she was pursuing?



If they thought they could lead her into a trap-

*They have led you into a trap, one you can't imagine falling for at your age and rank, so shameful you still remember it and are blocking all by yourself, you are still wandering around the edges of it -*

She updated by a few degrees on the voice - intrusive thoughts were to be expected with extensive mindwiping. *If I haven't already fallen into something obvious - and if I have it's likely an exception - they're making a mistake trying to trap me.* The first thing she had learned in counter-espionage: Every trap contains degrees of information leading back to its source superior to the background noise.

Luskonneg said he could only talk about this part of his backstory (yes he called it that) by text.

She agreed and said it would be useful to know about to model how she should approach this part of the exercise. She had suspected - from her own experience with





bizarre antisocial people - that something this obvious couldn't have been left untried, and she still had a glaring gap between his first year of high school and debut on Feed. She had expected piecing this weird life story together to drag out over a month or however long it would take for him to open up, before the new asset briefings came in with instructions to speed things up for a crash. But this would be better for notes anyway. Besides, his voice was grating in a way she still wasn't sure, with all her speech training, how to correct - but she wasn't supposed to.

He sent the entire thing, with two minute to two hour breaks between every message, in greentext:

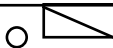
*>top three of the Public Morals Committee invite me to eat at their table at lunch*

*>one day a week at least*

*>Gwaëlle's idea (the one who was keeping tabs on me (not gonna go into that))*

*>wouldn't get them clowned or shunned because everyone knew it was some kind of moral experiment, the last graduating class's Public Morals Committee fasted for a whole year and they had to live up to that*

*>we eat together every day the day before my therapy*



*>the next day I can still remember what I said with them and tell him about it*

*>it's like my life is a show with an episode every week*

*>even if nothing happens in the week I can always stretch it out into enough content for two conversations*

*>the chair, Ylian, really hates me and is against the idea but defers to her first and second seat together (yes I know chair vs seat is confusing)*

*>she's the one who orchestrated a lot of their picking on me in the wake of the first incident*

*>white-blonde, sharp bangs, impossibly severe, like a Public Morals Committee chair in a manga*

*>first seat is Lachezel, a North Kamann guy with a shaved head, also in the Historical Reenactment Club*

*>explicitly takes my side on stuff, but as part of some pretentious esoteric religious argument he's having with Ylian*

*>already can't talk about basically any of my interests bc they're the Public Morals Committee*

*>Dr. Mark'eg talked about it as "grounding Currents" (he'd switch between water and electrical interpretations of the metaphor, dunno if that's standard, said the analogy worked to both kinds of flows). the more extreme my thoughts, both the desires and the fears, the more extreme content I had to look up to give the Current somewhere to go out of me*

*>jumped straight from watching a handful of mystery things*



*to extreme doujins and eroge with no basic acclimatization in between, haven't even seen Hell Harrowing yet*

*>basically just say things directly out of workbooks*

*>they can actually talk like that*

*>start watching normie shows Lachezel tells me about*

*>draw insane guro of them (terrible) in extra notepads mom buys every week because I "fill them up fast" without wondering why*

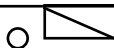
*>it actually kind of works when it's a routine*

After an overnight break extending up to noon, she messaged back (maybe she should have been doing that the whole time.) *Ok, she asked, where's the catch.*

Late in the afternoon while she was simmering a new sauce for the same pasta her phone dinged in her pocket: *why ddo I have to tell u*

She knew those typing tells, and felt a gut-twisting feeling like she was now in one of the screencaps she pored over. She had conducted "interviews" when scarecrows had come to the Patch of their own accord, but that was when they were feeling either functional or megalomaniacal. Moving to texting... might have been the wrong





move after all, didn't that technically mean putting herself on call 24/7 for the loneliest person she had ever met? At least she was using her government-issued second line...

*because you said you were going to, and you started. why did you want to?*

*maybe you can start by trying to explain and work backwards. without getting into details until you're comfortable.*

Marzanna was suddenly aware of the pressure of silence behind the door of Gallvren's room, where she was working on... Marzanna could only guess. According to her spooky source, something that could give Luskonneg the illusion of a connection if everything went according to plan - something she hadn't shared with her roommate of the past two years, but would share in fifteen minutes with a creepy recluse. Maybe she herself would have to facilitate this somehow.

Gallvren worked at a flower shop, which she loved and had no ambitions of doing anything else, there was nothing in her life to stop her from bouncing around telling Marzanna about Lotos video loops or sitting at the coffee table, discussing history and the different kinds





of documentation that lent themselves to the subjectivities of different periods all evening. She had mentioned running into a Heroes' Love thing at the library, not a regular boys' love thing, which they wouldn't have at the library unless a particularly zealous fangirl got her hands on the recommendation shelf, but which she might have encountered somewhere else, but if what if she hadn't just run into it...

*y do you wan2 kno again..*

*bc I'm doing something you're scared of bc it reminds you of something, and I can help come up with strategies to cope with or avoid that if I know what it is.*

*cant u guess... w ur deductionz szkillz... journaloid (not mad)*

She clenched her phone in her hand, then released it. She hadn't expected much better than this from the Kissler, if she'd ever managed to track him down. It was all the other absurd features of this situation that made her feel like she had less control, and so could control her reactions less - especially the fact that she was dragging Gallvren into it.

*well, you were betrayed or abandoned or rejected somehow?*



She received an artifacted “Top 10 Anime Betrayals” screen cap (with a decades old picture of a C’harnian comedian tripping over his dog in the thumbnail) in response.

*they didn’t betray me, all right? if I start thinkgn that I[‘m makinnh myself a,,, Victim*

*You’re the one already crytyping,* she groaned silently, but noted inwardly that this overt concern with not appearing as one was something she saw on the Patch. Not in scarecrows - in users. Many of whom were understood to be just as miserable and deviant as their targets, defining themselves by their sole saving grace of self-awareness. That they knew they were not victims, of others or circumstances, simply worse than other people.

*Sometimes I wonder,* she had written in one of her scraps of an article on the Patch itself, *whether this false objectivity is in fact a worse failure of self-awareness... which should entail awareness of the possible Order, not only the actual Chaos, of the “self”.*

*were you?*





*getting betrayed in high school isn't that weird, especially if you're weird*

*it doesn't have to mean you're holding it against them for the rest of your life, they were just kids*

Marzanna wasn't supposed to actually help him, but this was where she got in a flow state, on the Patch or in her interview projects (maybe she should have explained this to that gatekeeping anon); it was an extension of the same logic, not of stinging compassion but of asking the right questions, finding the most useful framings for their own sake.

Expecting either a wait or something long, she put her phone back in her pocket and stirred the pot.

To her surprise she felt the vibration of a Porthole call against her thigh.

It was voice only. At least she didn't have to try to do a video call through her phone. "Can I do something I... promise not to do when you take me to meet this person. Please. Please I... need to do it now so I know I won't do it or something like it when it matters, so the Current won't keep building up."



"On this call... right now?" Marzanna turned the heat down on the pot and backed away quickly behind her door.

"Yes. Is it OK? Can I ask you?"

"Y... yes. That's a good way to deal with it if you have nothing else. Did anyone ever tell you to do that?"

"No. I mean yes. THEY DID THEY TOLD ME THEY FUCKING TOLD ME AUUUUGGHHH IT WON'T WORK IT'S A TRAP IT WAS ALL PLANNED FROM THE START THEY AREN'T HUMAN THEY'RE SHAPE-SHIFTERS WHY WHY WHY. I'm. I'm not a victim. They never had any reason to like me. They had the right to trick me. They did it completely on purpose from the start knowing everything AND THEY WERE COMPLETELY RIGHT TO. THEY COULD HEAR INSIDE MY HEAD. THEY COULD HEAR ALL THE THINGS I WANTED TO DO THEY KNEW I WANTED TO" - her brain started to phase it out somewhere past this point, but she took notes, and her head swam when she looked at them after.





"Someone... someone needed to hear that?" she stammered finally. "Not just the wall or the back of your head."

"N-n-no. N-no. FUCK!"

"That wasn't a rhetorical question. Did someone - another person? ...but no one in particular."

"I needed to - bore myself with the concept of doing that."

"...are you bored?"

"I think but. I can't prove that to you. I don't know how I know it."

"Is the Current still strong?"

"...no. It's stagnant now."

"If something like that is going to happen again, give me a hand signal like this" - she held her first and second finger across her third and fourth - "and I'll kick into gear, break things up." After all, that wasn't the scenario the handlers wanted - although it seemed like it would meet their criteria regardless.



The pit beneath the floorboards felt like it was thousands of feet deep and ice cold. Like she could keep falling and falling and not wake up.

"I see. So there's no way it could happen. I can't get out of it. Unless you're lying."

"So someone lied to you? What did they lie about?"

"Nobody lied to me. If I said they lied to me... I'd be making myself a victim."

He hung up.

The lid of the pot rattled.

*>eventually it started falling into a pattern*

*>I would say a few things, they'd respond politely; then mostly talk about their own stuff*

*>obviously no way I'm going to join the Public Morals Committee so no way for me to keep up*

*>start saying less as I'm less motivated, miss a few lunches and they ask what's going on*

*>break into tears, go somewhere else, Gwaëlle follows me*

*>proposes experimenting with helping me make other friends*



*>Lachezel thinks I should join a club; anime, literature, and psychology (lol) are options*

*>people already kinda know I'm the PMC charity case so this will probably be harder than before*

*>Ylian agrees so they can get me off their hands (her disgusted looks every week have already given me a new fetish)*

*>full week of preparation to meet them*

*>I still haven't finished any of the normie anime Lachezel's told me about, and I can't test if they'll know any of the deep otaku stuff bc the Public Morals Committee will be there*

*>Lachezel comes with to introduce me; he's hung out with some of these guys*

*>only four members there, three I find out later didn't come to avoid having to meet me*

*>club leader is this really trad looking Silmenon dude, long fringes and everything*

*>his name is deadass like (unless this is a delusion, dunno where to look him up or anything) Tsuillon Maqarmel*

*>when they ask my favourite I slip and say Ero-Guro Puzzle-box*

*>leader's heard of it, impressed*

*>we're watching some historical thing about Northern barbarian tribes. I think Ice Floe Saga? I'm having trouble paying attention*

*>really boring realistic style*





*>Tsuillon keeps looking at me*  
*>genuinely think I'm imagining it, then start thinking it's*  
*either a crush (he's really pretty) or he hates me*  
*>cannot remember a moment of what happens after the the*  
*second episode starts (it's an after school club, they watch four*  
*in a session) bc I'm paying so much attention to/for it*  
*>Lachezel says I look like I'm in a sauna*  
*>no idea how he can see this because the room is dark*  
*>I can't say it directly because it would look exactly like my*  
*first blowup*  
*>Lachezel notices and asks for me*  
*>Tsuillon says he was worried if I would have any opinions on*  
*how culturally accurate it is*  
*>it's historical, I don't blame the writers for this, but despite*  
*not paying any attention I notice they've just said wodwo like*  
*five times in the last five minutes. (how did I notice this then?*  
*dunno my brain's evil lol)*  
*>nb: I'm not a wodwo. don't mean that in a 'don't call me*  
*that' way*  
*>mom always says we're not and if anyone calls me one you*  
*can't trust anything they say ever again*  
*>it's one of those weird technical things but I did a lot of*  
*research*  
*>full on hit the roof spaz like I did just now from built-up*  
*pressure*



*>Tsullon gets caught by Lachezel and sent to the principal for saying a slur*

*>problem: I was saying it too, and repeating self-hating racist stuff my mom said, which I genuinely did not think applied to me*

*>Lachezel gets me out because I was the one affected*

*>except one other Northern person who got upset at what I was saying*

*>now everyone in the club I have the most in common with thinks of me as the Public Morals Committee's pet who got their leader in trouble over petty bullshit*

*>and enough other people hear about it and the inconsistency Lachezel showed to defend me that it becomes a scandal around the school*

*>people are going to the Student Council about it*

*>Gwaëlle still fights Ylian about keeping me, says I shouldn't have to pay for Lachezel's mistake*

*>still hasn't ever suggested hanging out one on one tbc, doesn't look at me the entire time she's arguing*

*>Lachezel proposes turning me into a game*

*>each of them tries to introduce me to one group and if I burn through all of them they leave me alone*

*>Gwaëlle, since she's arguing with me, goes next*

*>I might have to do that again, to write this part, actually*



Marzanna didn't reply. She set her phone down on the peeling windowsill. She practiced katas in the hazy early moonlight.

s

"Why not just use the original woman he saw? Why drag yet another innocent person into this?"

Mark'eg had Ymaññ doing chin-ups from his sword, letting his chin rest on the scalding blade. One, two, three at a time, with intervals of blank exhaustion paralysis between in which his words entered the old young man's ears as if in a dream he could no longer have in his own right. As long as Ymaññ clearly assented - and he did every time - the dogs could only watch and whimper. They understood by now.

Every one of these punishments was his own idea.

Only Mark'eg had suggested he might actually apply them.





“I should probably be more careful sharing information like this with you, given the recent security breaches here and your role in them. But I sympathize with you and your newfound sense of doubt, so you deserve to know. We looked for her first - that woman never existed.”

“Never- huh??”

“She was a shapeshifter. One of... our estimates for Winter City are still only a few hundred. But that could change if, say, this Seer In The Half Light figures out where the Dark Lord is. Which finding the Commissioner in Elthazan narrows down. We’re not the only ones manipulating the fabric of ‘everyday life’. Most of these are on magic networks too attenuated for complex military or cultural maneuvers. Goddess, I hated playing the bumbling male recruit in briefings with your lover. It’s so easy to prove to those who think they should know things that they do.”

“Braz... knew more than any General or Inquisitor who came in here.” (That one she respected a lot had, strangely, never come in.)

“As far as you knew. The Inquisition suspected her as a weak link from the beginning and wasn’t sharing this in-



formation with her - though she could have found it on her own if she'd looked in the right places, or even asked the right questions. The shapeshifter appeared twice at the same place because it has a regular rotation. The Punkin video uploader was also a shapeshifter. They've all been cleared since."

"Then why are we engaging with this at all? It's obviously a trap. We should be moving the Dark Lord - what if they know?"

"We already have more assets in that block than anywhere else in the city, and based on our model of how they're spread out there would be one that close anywhere we moved him. If they knew we would know, and we'd be at war. Their behaviours are probably designed to trigger "narrative events". Which is the trap we're accounting for. At minimum, we want to re-destroy his will to pursue them."

"You're the one setting up a 'narrative event'!"

"In the sense he's used to, the sense that makes them impossible. He needs something like this to happen, or at this rate, he might figure out how to make things happen on his own. And with this many Dark agents closing





in, he might not have to make much happen on his own. Don't get me wrong - I don't think we can aim for a policy of stasis, the enemy has momentum and we're losing it. But the brass who don't know psychology don't know how good our position is. Right now, the directions we'd need to push to destroy him or awaken him aren't the same direction. They may look like it, but they aren't."

"This sounds like something Braz wouldn't..."

"I told you. From now on, you need to do the opposite of whatever you think Rraihha Braz would do. Not even for the good of the operation, but for yourself." Mark'eg tilted the blade against Ymañn's chin as he held it. "Or else none of this is for anything. We only have a few studies of previous Dark Lord incarnations, but they're very consistent. Either he's discovered by his minions, raised as the Dark Lord and develops smoothly with no distinct 'awakening' at all, or he awakens at the point of an important decision with concrete stakes where he needs real power." Ymañn dropped on the bed, panting, and didn't get up, his hands still limply clinging to the sword. "You're the [Taboo Preserver], you have access to all the relevant literature to study the century of arguments about the exact trigger conditions yourself, the Dark



Contract theory, the decision theoretic models, but in all this time you haven't. Even if you sometimes let Braz tell you. She didn't even know your big secret, did she? That you're his psychological template."

"I wasn't - authorized to," Ymaññ gasped, with a voice already resigned to being refuted.

"You weren't authorized to love her. But now you're talking as if you love someone else you weren't authorized to."

"You- you mean-" He practically barked. A feeble whimper-bark. A yap. Cringing was a dog's gesture. But the dogs didn't cringe - they just hung their heads.

"You have huge reserves of empathy - which of course are necessary in allowing the Dark Lord to have enough for even basic aversive reactions. Or at least, that was the theory - in my own readings of the studies, I don't think the Dark Lord has unusually low empathy in the first place, he has something else that overrules it. In any case, what we can do with someone like you as a template is make it both useless and meaningless. A horror at its own lack that feeds back until it cannot possibly have an object. Whereas yours simply settles on the worst possible





object consistently. Now that the Commissioner is gone, it should be..."

"You. It'll be you. That's what I'm doing all this for, right? You take my stupid 'transference' and neutralize it."

"Well, that would be a relatively non-disastrous outcome. But it wouldn't be reliable enough, which is why we want to accelerate the timeframe of this operation. Things can't go on like this, there are too many risks. My interest here is to mold a you that can survive the end of the operation and reintegrate."

"And then... then can I go and..."

"What, marry the traitor? And what, live in her family's palace like you do here? Bring the dogs with you?" Ymann held on at the peak with a stability he hadn't on any of his previous pulls, a humming equilibrium with pain. "Why not?"

"Well, the dogs are property of the state. They have to wait for his next reincarnation, the next [Taboo Preserver], and it could be as little as weeks or months."

"I mean the rest of it."





"I mean it wouldn't be unconventional in a family like that. But as someone who has knowingly and willingly broken people myself, I don't believe it's right for us to just discard them if we can help it." His voice became gentle, as he withdrew the blade and lay it in front of Ymaññ. He gestured. "Traditionalists like her are too quick to assume someone has found an Order appropriate to them. It is the Serpent that, every time our society has needed to find a better one, reared up its head in dissatisfaction. Perhaps there is no true Goddess but the one it seeks - receding forever in the heart of every atom." Shaking, arms crossed across his jiggling nipples as if it was cold, Ymaññ lifted one foot over and sat on it the flat of the blade.

"Stop blaming her. I'm the one who... needed her. Lured her. I didn't think I was ever going to do it again, but I should have known. You people should have known."

He had done it before. He still didn't believe Braz had been the same thing as that first time - he had really believed she could be something better, healthier, after all, wasn't he older? (He felt tired when he woke up from those dreams as if he had lived them.) When he was with





Braz, some part of him still loved her. Still ran from her. For something to be a third as real was a miracle.

“I don’t believe that either of you would know how to live with each other. You found something in each other that couldn’t have existed under conditions of ordinary humanity. It’s not you or her, two stunted shapes that shouldn’t have met each other did, and even at our highest levels of surveillance we can only work with 20, 30% of the relevant information.”

He knew had been too young to love her. She hadn’t invited him to. He was the one who had exploited her. She had, herself, been naive. As Braz had been. He had always known his own limits, and when he was passing beyond them. He had wanted to pass beyond them. But only ever to pass unknown and harmless to the other whose limits he passed, so he would not have to justify himself to them. His own limits were those of others. He had no others. He floated in an infinite field of coloured points, and there were grey fields of static called “others”, and as a flaming Serpent, he wished to penetrate them. Merely, it had seemed, to explore new zones.

He had found another Serpent that bit and burned.



“Or did you know... all along. That something like this would happen.”

Mark’eg leaned back and mimed laughing, then exhaled as the scent of burnt hair began to rise from the round bulge in Ymañn’s pants flattening against the sword. “I wish.”

He had known what the psychologists said about the power dynamic. That had been his alibi. He knew he had used this knowledge cruelly, and that still it had hurt him more than her, and still it had hurt both of them for no reason. He hadn’t explained it well enough. He didn’t know if he could explain it to this one, but at least he was building his capacity for burning, purifying pain. At some point, it would be enough to face what he couldn’t say.





by: [Amara Reyes](#)



DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY

character profile

Name: KURYO REDNAME

Birthday: January 3rd

Sex: Female

Occupation: Chief of Sales and Inventory,  
Savannah Staff

Blood Type: Unknown

Likes: People who are simplistic or naive,  
the smell of ozone, all fellow rejects, friend-  
ship over alliance, Triaction ambition in the-  
ory more than practice, veal, insect-based  
foods, fruits that no longer exist

Dislikes: Cooked food, distilled water, large  
windows, open spaces, loud people, people  
who remind her of herself, pride and con-  
viction, the bulk of See orthodox thought,  
Quay and Quarry both, being made to  
articulate herself

Seen with: Anahit Lyly, and occasional staff  
meetings - otherwise, extremely reclusive.

A refugee from a destroyed habitat - Heartpage, once located  
in distant oortspace, and one of the last remaining human  
settlements living entirely outside of the Ecumene of Heath.  
Once discovered and recontacted, the denizens of Heartpage  
were forcibly evacuated and the habitat itself annihilated by a  
focused sunbeam in a rarely-used process called glorification



- meant to purify local space of any anti-ecumenical spirit networks that had taken root in a habitat. Kuryo chose the furthest place from the sun she could find after this event, seeking refuge in a Savannah of decades ago whose leadership was already quite divergent from Solar orthodoxy. Has climbed the ranks to Director of Sales - usually, a very high-ranking and prestigious role supervising diplomacy and trade, but a rather obsolete one given Savannah's long-term isolation. Secretly, her true calling is as a devoted partisan of the tengmunnin who live in the full third of the habitat that falls outside the purview of the two primary crow cultures, Quay and Quarry, to whom she considers herself the only real ally. Her history here is mysterious, but she has presumably spent a very long time interacting with the unaffiliated tengmunnin via a personal long-range drone she keeps stationed on the surface - and was serious enough about these relationships to mourn a tengmu friend in the same way the grave tree does the dead of Quay. Recently and very unexpectedly, has managed to win the very orthodox and suspicious Anahit over to her side, for purposes still unknown.



## *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*

Emely helps the tengmu prepare to make contact with the outside world, while attempting to reconnect with her own crew and an increasingly panicked Anahit





CW: cultural destruction, interrogation, firearm reference,  
religion (Christian and Greco-Roman references)

*Quiet force - where do you whine*

*At turn's edge - at noose's ribbon*

*Phoenix, dust maker - now I see you*

*Painted orange on the warm berry glass*

*Savannah - desiccate, world of land -*

*Phantom, spell, flooding vessel -*

*My knife blunts and bends back*

*Ka! My full hand, my pale dress*

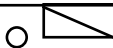
*Beyond me is the rounding wall*

REF  
TVCN2  
VCCN200  
WVECEW02  
N10ENBU  
COMMOD  
N1202  
CBV0100  
N01BICE2  
SSE  
202LEWD1  
11200  
0012  
N1000  
WVEEN  
D0F0N  
E1  
T0V0N  
W1-01  
TWC10100  
1EM0N  
E102W0D  
2ED 00  
WE E111  
V0101201  
10N  
COM  
WVE  
211  
D05  
16  
T0N

◆◆◆  
Don't  
be  
a  
knife  
◆◆◆

**RECORD IX**





*Outside my under eye and hand*

*And in that cushioned voice - petal*

*The water stilled - winter dream*

Craft - Bara III

*"At that time, Red Bird was the one red thing in the world: no other thing sang red. Red Bird was the one hand, and the one eye, and may as well have been a rock tumbling down that hill. Round and round e may have rolled, circling the valley; crackling on the other rocks and getting redder. The day had passed. "Where can I go?" Red Bird thought to emself, "How can I follow this raindrop in my head?". For e had now seen the length and breadth of the worldover, had sang and gyred and threw eir barks down into the land. But nothing had come for em.*

*"This can't be right," e said. "I'll figure out a way. This one-eye jewel I carry has to fit in somewhere - I'll jam it in!"*

*Red Bird flew to the flattest water e could find, and dropped eir one eye down like a star to where the cleft river slept. Now it disappeared, surface-first - the waves bent outward, recoiling from the ripple that passed through the water but was not a part of it. Through the growing concentric circles phasing*



*through the water, Red Bird's falling eye spun without its talon socket.*

*Suddenly the world was reversed. The water was a mirror - and now that eye was immersed entirely in a mirror, and the water recognized the water in the eye as water, and the eye became a mirror. E looked up-down at the sky from above the water's surface, still within the water!"*

Skyland, Nestsong, Redname: Selected Folklore Transliterations of Pre-Contact Savannah

Record IX

*of the last days spent in the city Quay before a further flight*

In the calculus of good and evil there is but one variable for us, and it is sensation. Flesh takes precedent over spirit: this is so unintuitive that not until the establishment of neighborly studies was it able to be articulated. Only that distant lens would gain the context necessary to parse our own history of life, and the pattern of what God had



etched into us. Only weighed against those million-year tapestries could we see our own place in the weave.

We, as tellurian creatures, are inherently bound to a body. A single human perspective is necessarily as vast as the entire world it observes, it can hold it all. This contradiction turns an animal into a person.

It is a truth so short and sweet that the Ecumene and its predecessor organizations struggled to admit it in explicit creed text, even as the principle organized them. The dichotomy of “pain and love” is a sign of an older era, and a less mature understanding based on pure emotion and spiritual state. “Good and evil” is likewise flat moral judgment, words that can only be gestured to but never defined. “Injury and health” is the correct view, that which takes away and that which grants the proper functioning of the body. That which allows freedom of movement - a body that can live in the way its soul loves - that can run and work by the urges of its heart and comrades. This grounds our perspective in the state of others until it encompasses the world.

An honorable pain builds future health, and love is worthless if its object is injury. When something you love is burning - when they are gripped in a pain that cripples



- "good and evil" will run like water through your fingers, for here is the world of mass and mortar. Now is our time of blood and birth. Here is our sanctioned lesson, between dream and death. What is injuring the world? What is healing it?

Kali and I sat at the center of the grave tree. This — this central cradle of roots — was where eir master held eir loose daily court. Kali emself still did occasionally, and so a small audience flitted in and out of earshot, still eager to hear the king.

"It can happen," e answered one of them, "A singer hears speech and comes to understand word in the lens of song - icebolt. Word is that which moves the real, eternal lens forming and misforming. Word flashes, molten and living and cruel, cutting to heaven and down. Song cannot. Becomes in exchange itself metal and stone - song supports, past utter than these tongues, encodes by impulses. Sad, I think, and, to switch a loss. Specialists cannot understand the alternate mode in full, their perspective does not fit it. Bilinguals are functional in each but ineloquent, cannot reach art heights of either. What is to be done?"



A young voice chirped up from the crowd, "Ten quarry-birds, they talk. Why is that answer? The life of the wall, boiled down, would they if stronger sing?"

"That project Quarry has a one-colored freedom. A lathe cut wry. Word can hone itself forward - objective over archetype - press signifiers into math of motion. Sing to declare and sweep, a self-foundation that strengthens against world parts away. Too: word the social sound, flattened, leveled in spanning service."

The little roan questioner alighted near me, just distant enough from my resting litter to remain polite, pretending e did not see me. I caught the hint e passed me, and I asked what was on eir mind. "Teacher why do we work with the Quarriers? Is it pure hope or pure convenience, or is there a better tie? What way chosen we along that long and weightless bridge?"

"Say that city mine chases a shadow, wake-veil cast in the water. I eat echo hence this place we require, with the wood that will sharpen my talons left. Quarry: of the ship and blade that parts. The story and doing never in same material meet. In odd reflection we see their search, even sing it better for a samed and reaching branch. More they





slink through phase, more we hear that clang - so my chase comes to me in pattern. Ynewy e can tell me who I am."

My own question: "All of that. but are they of the law? Are they compatible with it?"

Kali rolled eir head, beak pointing to the upper branches and then aimed at my shoulder. "They would tell, 'no'. But I say yes. Theirs is the law necessities - back-seen strictness. Retrospective obsession: unimpeachable a thousand years. Enforced poverty. Their way inexorable is finding. Their stricture does not bark at specifics, exiles the matter itself! No error possible. Root of it is severed. Fuel-fuel for the engine. Kaka, if I were to ask - Ynewy throws scoff, would say 'no!' to the demand, 'be people of God'. The End neither what-wants not to be people outside from God. The End yells to become angels, and slash early road to the last day."

It was an odd answer, and an odd course to follow. Quay followed in the slow steps of city-builders, the walkers and founders who were the seeds of the social impulse. Quarry's approach was more like flashing forward to the corporate states just after reformation, where entirely new social modes became necessary once freed from the well of Heath - broken from the laws of land and season, what



were people to do with themselves? What lives would grow in new air and new weight, hit by new angles of the sun, which transform the underlying pace of life so that body and culture must transform in turn.

Kali gestured for my attention, a patient pulse of eir wings: "But I parry now: you will tell me. Is the law ours? Does Quay make compatible? What penalty? A criminal comes!"

E gave me so little to work with there that I had to recite. "Monitoring, reeducation, severance petty and high, death."

"The orthodox course, no - you. Which lever, haruspex, do you admire?"

"Kuryo accused me of jumping directly to severance high. Do I appear the type to you?"

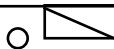
"Go personal then. A book burner comes. A breaker, laughing and walking. You have them - no desperation - tied and clean. They spit at you, anticipate your arguments, tread on your tenderest ideals to fain hollow. What is it then? A killer and a rouser, mad rider! And who points at place where they hit before. Do you make the cut? Mark them, or discard them?"



I hesitated - the crowd was listening, and listening hard. Still I struggled with this balance, between comrade and representative, between friend and symbol. I could only trust the raising of Kali's city, and that the ears of eir citizens most eager would be tuned well. "I say reeducation. But not out of mercy - you understand this. Neither mercy nor anger can fit into these decisions. And we do not speak veiledly of Kuryo, not even with her step out of the world: that is a woman with no fire in her, with no spirit for crime beyond carrying papers and private hopes. We talk of something else, someone else. From where could an enemy be born? Jilted but unwatched? You submit this, Kali, as a matter of insult, as a chance to make a point. But the muscle needs practice. Harsher sentences have their time, but a burner must be unraveled. Let's strip them down to the impulse and trace that path backwards.."

"You, with the edifice," e said, "behind. You have the courage and surety resource, given it to you. This is ideal and pure. But a king is a slave, my Emelry, a slave to the fate and world's corner that trapped them, people land and life. Behind a great ship there are no walls, nothing to hold history in. We take the rail. Every choice must be mandated, every lesson must be spoken in action. Beyond action to symbol, and only then follow record. Quarry knows this





but derives no poetry or lee to it. Kings must engrave the world. Their claws split the soil, and their eyes burn when met, and tongue a swaying blade. Chose I reeducation, I must delegate it to court or officer, when if I spoke it myself, tender. But if it was an enemy. If it was a current that I feared - and kings have no emotion but fear - I speak blood."

E had warned me of this. The little crowd of observers around us, in our alcove, had stopped their chatter with a ripple of nervousness. Kali had not met my eyes yet that day, and in our previous sessions that shyness of contact had betrayed a waiting plan, a little trap I was led into.

E flexed one talon. "A tengmunnin body is a one hand. We do not have limbs, but rather five fingers. We cannot take a hand. And a talon! No, a one-legged crow is a holy sign and halfway to king. A wing is too cruel - me most but for all - taking a wing would betray ourselves - taking a leg and a face at once. I have never slid into a heart, there has not been the occasion. Perhaps, in Savannah, that occasion cannot happen, barred by the bone. I hope your friend will tell you that his master made a place that war cannot scabble into enough for a furrow; too much, too little for it..."



"Please, come to this point. What do you sever?"

"I am explaining the position. Now we go down - come with me. Sit with me at first grave and hear a story. We take the thumb at the root."



The plaza was readied. Nothing left to do. I peered out from the checkered curtains, red and white, that spinnlight played upon like tiger stripes.

"My errant - my errant, again arrive to me."

Bara's eyes were sunken past eir longtime empty white. The muscles of eir face, the very integument, was slack and pulling itself apart though e hardly noticed this now. E was at the point of living in many times, now. I would sit by em, on the worse days, straining to hear each of those whispers. Dreaming whispers - the walls of the city of eir youth - the flowers and the work - the sacred ropes and dusty straining roads - the intoxicating rainbow light that danced through the grave tree at midday.

I had realized recently, in my studies, that our lives could not reach a certain pace of nostalgia. My master and I were



separated by a full generation, yet all the things e spoke of loving in eir youth I had seen in mine, little-changed. The city yet grew and flourished, reaching out, and as we managed those greedy tendrils I learned that my romance was still living. Here it was - my dream and ours. There was the layer of tarnish, but it was the distance from a human childhood to adolescence. Less! I was full-grown and had overseen a few quick iterations, process on process, but no full change. No change to the city - the homes had expanded and grown patina, the streets had lengthened, but all my loved places remained and made rich.

But there was a shadow of change on the city. Bara bore its mark. Gone were eir comrades, a line of bests and brights dead. E emself felt here too long. Gone now was eir doctrine, the barrel-chested certitude. Gone was eir powerful grace, eir sharp remige vane that would cut air with authority as e spoke. E had grown past that, surpassed it, and now lived in the slow summer of the threshold, in a stuttering and noble retrospect.

Today e was stronger than most days, unsteady but strong. E could stand and knew where e was. Even e smelled strong, eir bluefeathers in a shine e had commonly lacked, dulled by the indoor light no matter how revered.



“Here I stop,” I cooed to em. I touched my neck to eirs, and felt em relax - and accept a degree more weakness back into that body.

“Tell again, me now. We've pronounced little. Tell me, I... huff. Why bark you for that crowd? Why feel it, further filth on these my flagstones. It is still a lot of mine, route my softness soften them. Who is it? Just the one?”

“Hitand. E alone, yes. Recall, my king -”

“Yes! Yes, the other. So much toil, little Kali, into this. Now I lament when the hoof is falling. We must do it? Perhaps hastier, surely, tell me, this is a child, enveloped in the opening fervor. A letter and letter, here, crossed in lace! Can it be?”

My chest tightened, my breath stopped a moment. Pain - pain, pain to hear em like this, to ever see that falter in the one who was and always is my tower. “It needs to be seen. My way is that - in my mind, it is - in fast times and fast loves as this - this -” I stuttered, interrupted by Bara’s shaking cough. I tried to find my words again. “...Is your city not so new? Are these its tentative makings? My king, we are well and truly weighed now. We must answer proper.”



"Kali. Kali. Do you know? At the height of bower a lover's betrayal. The smell of death to a human child. Crime is that makes fire fearful: now, my doubt, my wrong path runs!" e cried, animated in the old theatricality e would use, since years ago, when illustrating a point. "Where is my word and that world I loved first? Has each thing I touched and knew, then, bitten me back? Now I am cast out: now I am proven sad and simple, I, who did not know it then. That is crime - the pain of crime - and the anti-ecumene. Do you chase yourself in that doubt? Do you hurt, that way, at eir face?"

"I do. Is this my sacred city so thin that this permeates? This, terror even to the weal? Worry I taken, pride and shame both mocked - of every that wants the fruit noble. That healing you say - it has to be cut. Will you licence?"

"Go," Bara said, "and prove a cadence you want for."

~~~~~

"Quay and Quay," I lilted, to my comrades that had gathered like vultures. I - I! - the greatest of vultures now. "Morning is now, the spine wakes, and down turns the lighter land. Here the fogs rise, the smokes pass, here at



the tide of breath. A battered wall - mossing over. We will make the end of this, now, let rise this wound to cloud."

"Heavy and pouring," someone barked. "Black sky, what hand could push it away!" The crowd murmured around them, stilling and hushing them - Harka, behind me, hopped forward but did not find the need to go further. The pot simmered - too intent to burst.

If I strut on this stage enough, I could trace a perfect circle around it. A bee dance. My skin shivered, my muscles hummed, like a creaking ship deep, deep out on a buffet-ing sea. Sway and sway. If I walked in the right pattern and cadence I could make these bad wings a rudder and turn like a plow in the earth. Part of me wasn't here - it was watching me over my shoulder - any flight in me had atrophied to peripheral flash-memory, and repurposed itself to only see me from outside.

I did not think of it then - but later, I realized that this was the first decision my master had yielded to me. E was not jealous with eir judgement, e did not make to guard a power - eir will was simply so straight and flowing, such a gust of wind, that carried em from place to place. The blindest part of em was this, the cantering sidestep, eir ability to merge the essence of action and learning. Every-



thing e did was a dialogue with emself - and this was the first point where it had faltered, and now the wind fell to me who could see it better than feel it, and who had no sailcloth to catch it.

I think the crowd caught these thoughts in my eyes, and mistook that high mind for high-mindedness. They thought I was looking to the horizon, and not the back of my own head. I could make no better speech than that.

“By Bara’s call, who is the seat of the city - by will of where it happened. Harka, my friend! If there is paper ash here, it earns us so mingling. Spill see what was made!”

E blustered up, pushing forward the cart e and the other attendants had prepared - and with a buffet of eir wings, upturned the vessel across the plaza floor. A cloud of black dust - the crowd recoiled - the smell, which had laid like a captured viper in that vessel now rose again to where it had first escaped.

“What scent of autumn! What higher fire on the wind! Harka, naming, call!”

E took my place at the front of our formation, and barked out in eir deep voice: “Lahaten, doctor, found now in over





medicine! Luki, kilnsbird, whose shape continues in the industry riverine! Olycc Millneur, well-ended on the high road of ties! Kariro, wing-member, who watched blood wet the grass! Sunan, who plucked fish gilled on dam's cracked air! Halani -"

As e spoke over those ruined bones - charred dust, over which no one could mourn - I watched the one who had made them black, and shattered their gems. I paced close to where e was bound, letting not a moment pass without my beak pointed at eir eyes.

Clipped and shackled Hitand sat, and eir beak was already chipped. While in custody, e had tried to rob us of the price e knew would be taken. While we held em e had barely moved but for eir eyes - but now only eir head followed me as I flanked em, leering in wild and unbroken conviction. E was the wispy white-grey of a roan who does not wear henna, for e ate what we provided rather than wear it.

Harka had finished eir account of the near-seventy dead that had been destroyed, but not yet the six living who had been made dead: e looked at me expectantly.





“Now, enemy, I ask: was this your object? To crush something beloved? To erase a shared edifice? Here sit with me and say - is this the lesser part of what you desired?”

E broke directly into song:

“Red/call/red/call/long/call/blue

High/high/red/line/high/stone/core

Eye/half/eye/soft/make/lack/lack

Stop/red/blue/stop/blood/poor/song

Poor/eye/stone/line/eye/you/red

Mud/song/clear/song/sand/song/blue

Stop/line/high/you/poor/down/fly

Stop/stop/stone/blood/song/high/red”

“See!” I screeched, before e could begin a new verse, “Ka, what a discovery you have made! What interest shape cast a shadow wall, what odd rock you have riveted your life to! End now. You say nothing. What furrow can be cast by this coward? City-enemy, love-enemy who will spend blood and fire and beak to sing, to spread this little song pattern





to carry eir stone, stone line forward, trapped in eir eye, long spear inert in soil. What was learnt? What was won?"

E croaked it out, throat begrudgingly yielding to a speech e hated. "You will say, 'no love', to that seeks liberate you from this shallow bower yes you yes who flee the life given you who eat what humans have been but spite the shape from their words. Cattle! Hi, pale cattle, full flaw in you!"

Fervor gripped me. Bara had prepared me ill. E had given me the perspective of two people - asked me to weigh two souls by their own sizes. What good is that? What good is such patience in the face of the mountain cut? It was a law for children, and none of us had ever been children. I woke into my soul to find it already complete: the battle there is over. We are loosed arrows, and I would catch this one.

"Sentimentalist. Who will follow when you are gone? None will find it. Sad killer, branch breaker, who once could have carved tall and true. See who fears the page. See who fears the speaking of words - who fears eir own thoughts, such fear to burst."

"Fear is not in me not in this body - this body seeing past yours, invisible. Fire, fire, where are you? Untouched by



fire - transparent. I bite that sick ladder the one takes you from full force. I claw away that evil brick that turns your heart to nothing. I break the glass by which you waste your life - you pour it into a ditch - bone-cracked, you hit the ground. Bit by bit, that crawling ladder erodes."

And then the fervor slipped from me. I turned cold and clear and gentle, then. "Forever, forever. Forever. My ladder is forever." I leaned in close to where e sat trussed, and swung my beak down low to the ground, the very ground I was plastered to, and looked up at em from where I was eating dust. "Words cannot be erased. This encryption is not built but discovered - lying, long phantom, behind they mortal curtains. This you'd know if you felt it - if yours was the eternal flame, and not the impermanent wisp of song. You will disappear, and that song - the one that encapsulates you - the one surged in hope by your burnt claw - will follow you." I rose again, stepped back from em, and let my voice rise to the level of the crowd again. "Do you hear me? No bone was burnt, each name alledged. No branch was broken, nor disturbed a climb of graft and greenth. And no word lost - not one - already each is printed and bound again. Bring me my skinning knife!"



Only once the attendant passed its hard handle to me did I notice that the noise of the crowd, which had been growing from a murmur to a roar, was now a shriek.

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Awake. "Why! How dare you!"

Kali smiled at me. "Too cruel? You would have done otherwise?"

"Too cruel by far, that you have withheld it from me!" I was in an outburst and did not care, but sniffled and settled my voice. "Put me in again. Let me see."

"No."

"Master! Deny me nothing. No pity, none of this separation! I must see."

"You know what happened. You would feel it? The surgery of it? Beak peeling from flesh? You cannot even think it - a femur pulled from a finger. The shifting stone of it, the fruit squelch. Demand this, the sensation? Ah, the grit. I will give it to you, if asked. But answer very honestly! Do you want to know?"



"Master - this is not a matter of squeamishness - this is about your life -"

"Do you *want to know what it is to hurt one of my kind?* Answer no, yes, though see. Give answered real - sleep and dream of what should we feel. Should you know? Is it fit? Should I know the other arrow, now?"

I couldn't answer.

"Kaka! Now you ply! See, precious thing, that has retreated to precious from pressure. We end today, Emelry, able to eat." And e began the slow hop up the rooted stairs until I caught up.



Why is there fear when a lawship comes? Exposure? Reprisal? Scandal? It is that the tide of war has been boiled out of us, barred from the system.

Before the Ecumene, Mandate and Empire and Alliance all three shared an edifice of law built upon the priest; that only the studied and sworn had the right to administer those road-paving stones. Only a priest can write law, and only a priest could enforce it - perhaps it was for this





reason alone that each lasted through their hemispheric storms of war to become precursors of the one state.

Even in wartime, only a priest could command a force. But a millennium into the *paz-pandorada*, what this means is that where there is a haruspex there is the fear of death. There is that shadow, however distant, that threatens to cover the sun and break a criminal from the peace it guarantees. There is that heat, however slight, that can build a boil again - that can break the skin.

In modern Akkadu, the verb *to war* has been redefined into the verb *to scar*.

Who lacks love for this peaceful era? Who hates plenty and plenitude? Who lives outside it: I.

Had I ever known myself, before Kali? Had I known what to look at in myself - how to read my own internal poetry? I had not been exposed to something new while in Quay, since Savannah - I was immersed in a dark mirror, unable to take a breath.

The sad little pride inside me that soared in its distance. That said, "I am so beyond, so cut from others that I am fit to judge them from a vantage point." This was not con-



fidence or cowardice but a kind of worry. I do not make plans - I orchestrate worries. In me there is a whirling knot, and I see it every time my heart adapts to the frame necessary to see Kali's. E who has no worry, and only movement. E who would have said the same of eir master, and the same of emself, that I know say of e and I.

If I followed em close enough, could I catch that same fire? The certainty, the descent, that two-step path? It was in sight, now, I thought.

Since I was a child, I had never looked at anyone. I looked through them, scryed them invisible, focused on tracing their lives backwards and forwards. I did not want to see the living hearts in front of me - I shocked, wounded, at the proximity - I wanted to see their complete line. Where they were from, where they were going. Fellow humans as snapshots of souls that were not here in the room with me. My pride was in that, too: I can see you for who you really are, for the things carved into you, for the route you chase so predictably. I can speak your next action without having to know you, without having to touch you or love you. If I ran away enough, I could own everything

And then the blackwing chorus killed this capacity in me. Unreadable hearts that pierced my own like so many



catchpoles angled at the same point - as an honored guest, I felt like a long-pursued fugitive. One who for years had lived underground and paralyzed in fear, and now none. Ah, they got me. God caught up with me, and pressed my face into the blood-scented Savannah until I understood my place. Now I would become that conduit - now I would lose the self I protected. Now my scab is off, and I touch the air again - glory Adonai.



The updrafts were ready - unfolded like papercraft from sheets of metal, bent and hammered and buzzed alive - and hung in the air like wasps, or jellyfish. The banks of the river where the glider had landed had been hastily converted into an assembly zone. Supplies and commodities wound their way on cart and rope to this new forum center, as the turbines of the updrafts descended and laboriously rose again with their new cargo before hitting the practical unweight border and zipping up smoothly. Beautifully choreographed, but even from this distance we could hear the roar of the machinery.

“Why are we all going again? It seems that everyone was very quickly convinced. This wasn’t planned until, like, just now. Days ago. Why are you going along with it?”





"Ah Rain, I can't let you too far from my sight. If you were cajoled into it, I am following you. I'm the one surprised you're coming, but with how it worked out there was no other way. Our brave escort!"

He stretched, "Yes, I'm a brave brave pack mule. It'll be nice putting the spider back to what it was made for, though, makes me feel like less of a thief. It's a worse tradeoff for you. Is it worth leaving the city so soon? I still say you haven't seen half of it - I mean I get the rush, and I'll tell you stories the whole way there. But still."

"We'll return," I said - so assured, them. "This process is just as important. My sympathy is the city's but I have a recorder's duty to the habitat entire. And this was not such a last-second determination - I've gotten the sense that Kali and Ynewy have long flirted with the idea of a proper visit, but at last they have an unmissable excuse in us."

"Hm." He peered at me sidelong. "Was it a bad day after all? You were freaked out when you got back. I could see that, and I just wanna make sure you did too."

"Please don't insult me."





“Maaan... don’t be like that. I’m not even trying to press it either, I’m just saying.”

I wanted to laugh, he was so clearly pouting at his little misread. How could he know that nothing could hurt me any more? “I apologize. You’re right. See, it has strung me tight, you noticed it full. But don’t see squeamishness in me - I have been bred for coldness, I can work with it. It is my usual concatenation of dread.”

Those words were too harsh. Now it was him who looked on me pityingly. “Saw a new side of Kali?”

“No, not em. Nothing different with em. It is the weight of guessing how the See will react, how they will interpret things here. It began with the city’s laws, but I understand them now. Quay will do well, it will preserve, I know this. But the scope stretches from end to end, no?”

We watched the assembly continue, cargo rising into and falling from the sky. A few tengmunnin, strong fliers, followed the updrafts up in small flocks - staying far enough for the current to not disturb them, but daredevils nonetheless. A strong flier was not an endurance specialist as one would think; long flights at ground level were slow but effective. The high fliers were sprinters, marathon-swim-



mers, who could push past that first barrier of weight into the lighter sky. Once that wall was broken one could rise at leisure, swim in the air, coast and glide for thousands of miles with a minimum of wingbeats.

A little group of five, ants against the skyland, flew straight up. They spiraled, beaks pointed to the spine, barking and playing. An upward rocket drive of hard wingbeats, a circling rest to restore muscles, and then another climb. Tight spiral, loose spiral, tight - miles of flying against a punishing, invisible uphill - and then entry into the dream of dreams. True and delirious freedom. An easy, ricocheting teleport to the other side of the world should one choose it. Flight, flight.

I'd met Rain on a little plaza on a hill that had a decent view of the proceeding. Few places were built for views, here - much less incentive for them, when one could fly. Coming closer up the slope arrive Kali and Ynewy and their little retinue, riding the royal cart. I'd seen so little of it, since Kali began preferring the litter.

We exchanged greetings - the cart stopped itself just next to my little which tilted itself towards it, and Kali gingerly stepped across the threshold, back to eir accustomed perch on my railing. Likin dove at and veered away from





Rain's head, who laughed in return, and soon those two with Harka had veered off for one more night of play in the city. I was left with the leaders.

Ynewy flitted far above for a moment. This was a custom of eirs, an almost compulsive occasional circle to orient themselves, an abundance of caution - but in a few moments, e landed on my further railing. "Walk us down the banks," e said. "We should go look well at our shared product, and I will point out every part."



Like a liner catchup, two angles burning closer in a long spin. Like a shuttle jettisoning and staging on its path. The rising process was curiosity, and of the three of us Ynewy was somehow the most captivated.

"Kaka! Dancers!" Ynewy said, the busy skies spinning around em. "This trip's capacity is doubled, out of blank fortuity these. But the normal run would have been grand too. Last visit, what, fifteen of these? Now so many."

"Generous little High-sevens. E loves, true to name, to make an odd-minded blush," Kali nodded. "You never walk with me, Ynewy, shy. What do we see, leech at me?"



Newy puffed eir feathers - e was happy, swelled with contentment. "Such an escort now - who says no to rest? I cannot make pace with you before now. And this city - this one - I need to see now. Never again will it live like this. Now a name of it is ending - so I can see the streets."

It still surprised me how comfortable the two were with each other. Close, they always were, to remain in an ear-shot of confidence. Their barbs - like old members of the same club - were constant but softened, jocular and forgiving even in the moments of criticism. Partners, not comrades, but still a friendship there - did either know how deep it ran?

Quay was in festival. Cloth kites and paper balloons - kept far from the rising-airs that they mimicked in shape to not crowd the operations - nonetheless crowded the streets and treetops. Lanterns shaped like updrafts rose by an internal candle rather than rotor, tethered by leftovers of the binding-rope that was crucial for the transport of goods. There was even an effigy of Rain's janitor - and a much clumsier effigy of Rain himself, a lunic rose and lily held in his hands like swords - I bet half odds he had encouraged this himself.



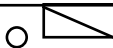
In the dim underglow of the late hours - when the spine still shone diluted but clear, and the lights of the city had flared on, creating a band of dark in the middle distance into which the cargo steadily flowed - the two little heads of state perched together on adjacent corners of my litter. We moved slowly through the special town and gazed together up at the filled skies.

A cloud of night dragonflies blurred the outline of a distant lantern as it passed before it. "You are ready? For my band to steal you away?" Ynewy asked me, dipping eir beak demurely. "From you masque I'd never make the guess you would make from this quay."

"Steal me if you can, I will give you every opportunity. But you know to whom I owe my debt now."

"But still you come, come to see my city, my one grander. No shallow word I'm saying - call Quay a droplet distilled of light, gallons of honey on a pinprick. I am the coral mesh of vein, empty, and leading in circles. But still grand? We will up there soon, climb up the footstools. I ask again of your readiness. It'll be a long wrack, for you."

"I've been strengthening," I lied. Living at this weight I was becoming accustomed to - but it was not becoming



easier. Perhaps even harder, as I spent more and more time outside of the water. My muscles knotted, but did not keep up.



I said no goodbyes. Kali would come, Harka would come, Minak had argued eir way into the position of porter. And Rain had of course been cajoled into the role - reticent at first, but quickly warming to the praise. Not until everything was in the air did he drop down in the janitor to pick me up; thus we were in the position again of our little shared journey, always in the process of catching up.

I lay splayed in the copilot chair, trying to make a bed of it, trying not to move my body until we were past the weight border. We rose slowly, and with a long eye watched the final steps come together. Slowly the shield that had fallen on Quay rebuilt itself into a spear.

"Will you stay in the quarters? You could drop me there."

He rolled his eyes, busy surveying the displays. "What? No, I'm sleeping here for the flight. You'll want to do the same."





"Hm? I'm the more eager now. Now I will do it."

"This isn't a liner. It'll be a long trip but it's designed for storage, not inhabitation - everything is luggage compartments, quarters or no. It will be tiring and boring - what do you even want to see the battens for? I'm not dropping you anywhere."

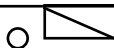
"Frugality is beautiful in its own right."

"Wrong. I helped load in - we might get a glimpse if I get called in again for reconfigs. But trust me, you don't wanna be outside long enough to get there, and I'm not gonna run curiosity-errands for you in a janitor."

"Fine. We will make a job here then. When will you speak to Pearl Wall?"

He grimaced, shyly. He had been promising me a talk with Sever and his staff for days, now that the letter was sent. In full haruspical seal, aimed at the highest rungs of the audience I had access to, and no response. Speaking with Ynewy convinced me the time for pure blackout was over. We needed - no, we did not need, but we would very much like - Sever to remain on our side of contention for once the hearing began.





More and more comfortable with desperation, I. Knowing how to move through it.

Night fell and disturbed nothing. The choreography of the trip continued, the glider broke apart again once we were past the unweight border to rearrange itself, mid-flight, into something that had less lift rather than more. The winds were strong at our back, for at this highest spine level they blew ever endwards.

By day, the warm air rose into the stream from the mid-point of the habitat, pushing it from the median. By night, the cool air plummeted down, especially at the caps, birthing strong squalls snaking towards the center again. Thus the habitat breathed this fountain: that below one was kept inward, and above one was allowed outward.

We were so close to the thing itself - the thread, the heart, in its dull moon-mock glow. Perhaps I was less fearful of its theological implications this far in - Kali, if e was anything, was a true spirit of the sun, and you felt this stature across eir entire city. The spine's dread was now material, terrifying in its infixity. No windows meant Savannah was secret - and that its daylight was built to be extinguishable.

How far had we come?





Why had it been done? What was the wound meant to be? What variable did this white light intersect? The level of engineering - it made one speechless. A full and strong sunbeam had already been acquired, this was never in doubt, and still the full-length, full-spectrum transmutation, as through a water filter, of sunlight itself. Into pure energy, and then into blank light - what had it tied down? Its object, I was sure, had not succeeded - if indeed it was meant to change. Stifled, foreign air, here, but not wrong.

More likely than an affected change was an open possibility. How had this been approved - what had the argument looked like, those decades ago? This spine was not a direct tool of oppression; it was an escape hatch. An open door for another energy, another source but the sun.

“Hey,” Rain said, “it went through. Call in twenty minutes - I can talk to him?”



It would be better if I wasn't on video. Rain pushed for me to support him when he had this conversation - but I could tell part of him wanted it to be alone, and unme-



diated. This would grant more control over the narrative for us, and I did not want to be seen in the human world.

I fashioned a nest for myself out of view as Rain Flower, hurried and suddenly breathless, oiled his hair and rearranged his jewelry. After he had preened to satisfaction, he stopped. He dimmed the cockpit window and let us continue to rise on the machine's own recognizance, stared a moment at his reflection in the new silvery sheen, and stilled his breathing. He clasped his hands and closed his eyes - and after two heartbeats of that had had enough, and made the connection.

It was not Sever but Beckon who arrived, seated in the very office I had interviewed him in - their shared workplace. Rain flinched.

"Let's talk, then," Beckon said without introduction. His own door was closed, and windows likewise dulled to the receptor's suffusing light. "No one's watching me, and I'll hear you out."

"Where is the master?" Rain all but stammered. "I was promised an audience. What will I say to you? You won't be able to decide anything."





“Please. You asked for business, let’s do it. You’ll take me as a translator or we won’t do any of this.”

He sat up stiffer in his pilot’s seat. “Why should I speak with you? This wastes time for both of us. You’re dreading this conversation, no concern, no panic, no resistance, no anger. I want to talk to the one who can understand me, understand the stakes of what I’m asking!”

Beckon closed his eyes, exhaustion and strain lying gently over his features, and responded slowly: “Flower. Nothing is happening here. We are, all, in the suspended animation you wanted. There isn’t going to be a fight until the hearing. Everyone has buckled down and shut up. We knew - he and I - that this would come. We’ve readied ourselves a long time ago.”

“The call is made. The hearing approaches.”

“No response? If I’m guessing right, that’s not a good sign for your odds. Nothing has happened at the receptor - no overture. If you mean to gamble here, you will be disappointed. The fervor of those girls will carry you through the tough decisions, I know, but...” another sigh - a terse one, he looked to the walls - “



"You're being inert, Leaves. You are being kinder to me than usual - it scares me! You know why I've called, we want your support and backing - yours and his. If you knew anything about what's down here - what it's like - the organization, the establishment - you'd be losing your mind. This will be a revelation, and an easy one, but we need a unified front when it happens - the lawship and the quarter together is such a good picture to paint! Is that what you've so resolved on, to just take the licks? Or will you let die any gains from the mess?"

"You're worried about him and that makes all your strategy transparent. You have to start thinking - now - the balance between his reputation and the company's. What will the changelings think? How many, even after all this collapses, will still be happy to claim the same ideals that built it? Sever has had his times with old Cote. Ha, he thinks they're friends, comrades in their rejection from the world. You can try to pierce that togetherness, and convince him it is delusion, if you like. But what happens next?"

"Restoration. He stands with us, I said, and so will not have his own story told for him by someone else. He can remain a visionary - and his design can remain visionary,



and not be turned into a cage. You can sell this for him! That Savannah is a bone, and the crows the jewel inside it. It's an easy picture, we can tell it."

"And then?"

He let the volume of his voice escape him, and started forward in his chair. "La! 'The company', you say - since when have you ever had pretense of being a loyalist?"

"I was always a loyalist - I still am - to the regime before this. All personal. You're too young, for that and for *what happens next*. Not here, not with anyone we know, but in the balance of potentials. What will this turn say for the big arc of business? The levels of trust? Lune strains and strains itself more - the reins are slipping, the Chair is desperate - sand through fingers. Will this be an updraft, or a final sign of disloyalty and disengagement? Do you love your homeland at all?"

Rain folded himself back into composure and let his nose turn up. "This isn't the time - it's not for me. I see what's in front of me, what has to be done now. Both of you need to make it out of this or it will be so bitter when it plays out."



"You," Beckon said, tension leaving his body, "are free to throw your lot in with the master. Of everyone, he worries most - perhaps he is anxious enough to listen. But I don't think you and I have ever had much to say to each other. I don't think that will change."

"But you won't give me access? Give me an audience!"

"You will have one the second that you ask for it - in person. Not during this phase of gallivanting. Not when you are in the sway of adventure - you don't know what you're talking about. Why would I expose him to that?"

Rain fumed and had no answer. Holding back a pout, he cut the connection. We sat in silence.

I asked in a quiet voice, "How many people are there in the world?"

He shook his head, annoyed, towards the screen he had been watching before swinging to face me. "What? What are you talking about?"

"How many types, classes, spirits of people. How many roles you have the pick of, that you could fall into. You could count them, I think, they are finite. A blend of body



and birth and eras and ideals, take a list of all those combinations, meld together those that overlap, and you can count up the spectrum of human existence. Perhaps a hundred? A thousand? And among that list, infinite colors for each - every soul is unique - but there is a common book of souls we are drawn from."

He just stared at me, distracted from his upset at his conversation failing so badly. He debated internally whether to argue with me, outburst at this new stream of nonsense, or humor me. "Okay. Spell out what you're trying to say, what does this matter?"

"You can count them, if you try. If you have the love of others strong enough, you could count them accurately. It's an undertaking I won't pretend at. But look! The Craftsman - bound proud to the work his - and who ages along the many paths prepared for that role. Rivers, intersecting at life events. We will he find success? When will he lose it? When will he discover his opus? What esteem will he die in? There are finite answers to this. Take a point in those rivers, and draw a line from it to another soul. How would you call your role?"

"Come on. I'm trying to listen here, you're talking about the master - how to predict how he'll move? I don't think





it's as simple as a chart, you aren't going to be able to just slot him into what you expect.

"Not what I expect - the portrait that hangs behind this. Are you a footman? A concubine? A prodigy? A spy? I think I am learning which groove my heart has arrowed to."

The rivers of the zealot: relationship towards orthodoxy. Basic impulse of faith. Level of warlikeness. Guiding light: person or structure?

The fifth messiah walked to Wanakauri and chose the path of advent king. Feet cut on the knife's-edge mountains, under the smoking sky. He wailed, in those valleys of ash, "where is the father of light, whose golden breath is the law?" And the answer was not in sun but stone. The history of humanity is one of cities, and thus one of city-founders - scattered seeds, and little roses in the snow.

Rain still stared at me, disappointed. "Were you listening to the call? Loop around to your point, are you giving me a mission? You want me to act a certain way when we get to the quarry? I haven't been just playing around, you know, I'm taking this seriously!"





"I'm saying - I am the dull-eyed zealot, after all," I said in a wry laugh that he nervously joined, thinking I was making a joke. "The overcommitted disciple, the most credulous of the lot. You should know that the only action I will make - from here until it is done - is to chase the little footsteps of my king."



Rain indulged me. It was night when we arrived, and our approach was now so close that it could slow. He had flown us out to perch on one of the great wings, now falling through the air at such a pace that we could sit on the crest of the foils. Kali and Ynewy, with their retinues, joined us, tethered on the ropeway network that even now held the mass together. We clung beside them, hanging out of the janitor's chassis.

We approached the End, and the lights of its impossible city sprouted like a reversed tree. Quarry, it proved, was built around its own river, and on the cap walls spread out from the central artery cutting down its middle.

One of the rail lines - like the one we had used on our pretextual visit to Fisher Valley - had been reappropriated, carved out into a wide transportation yard. Each layer



of Quarry was another set of docks, another connection point to the flow of work and matter that screeched up and down those rails. Far below us was a great field, like the industrial assembly ones of Quay, where work that required weight took place - even this late at night, beneath the clouds' sparse veil, we could see the humming cranes and din of work back and forth below.

A permanent slow storm of fog occupied both extreme ends of the habitat. Wispy, and transparent, but roiling.

"Night shift will be turning, now," Ynewy said, feathers fluttering in the wind that was still strong enough I could barely hear. "We'll right in be for stowing. Aim, aim!"

Beside the rail was a column of luminous water. Where the falls at Savelyevna's end were unbound and cascading, forming cold rainbows all down the wall to beat back the fog, here the flow had been hemmed in. A sheath of smooth cloudy glass had been built as a channel for the water, and at banded intervals in its route downward thrummed great generators like those of Quay's dam. The water neither cascaded neatly into a sourcewater lake, but rather was now so compressed that it jetted out where it met the land like a ruptured pipe. Where it hit the ground, pointed away from the settlement's lower fields, it had





scoured away so much of the habitat's original topsoil and underlayers that it was now bare bedrock, fenced in by reinforced mounds of wet earth.

From there the water spread out wide into a terraced series of paddies before finally coalescing back into a river proper. There below us were yet more lights, harvesters and farmers' homes.

Savannah was a fat land. The crows of Quay hunted - they did not farm. In typical Triaction fashion all that grew here grew aggressively; it made for fast cycles when nothing starved and there was plenty of rot. Unlike Ilian settlements, where the balance of recycling was a constant planner's worry, or in Hightower habitats, where the palette of life metered out very carefully the strokes of what grew and how, the Triaction ethos was always pure and perfect plenty. When one plucked a peach while walking to work, one would grow back again in a day. Wherever a seed fell, a sapling would rise in a week. Each plant would pour its energy into building its own soil - all green, all brown. It was a warlike spirit - letting the ecosystem war with itself, letting the cycle of thickets and stands and fields eat itself over and over again so that the pace of evolution was over-clocked at baseline.



These ideals had carried over into the Savannan landscape, where bioregions were strictly measured in terms of border but within those limits had a strong cyclical turn-over. Thus for the tengmu of Quay it was always harvest and never sowing, double the work of payoff and none of the work of setup. They had never had need of agriculture, only foraging as one passed, and the hunt.

Henwon saw me staring down as we passed the paddies and I was found myself looking backwards for the first time. "Ynewy wishes you'd dazzle at the city," e whispered to me, amusement in his voice, "but I am proud of here - you know? Call it a culture rationing. This land I do not love, I am happy to see the end of it! I am happy to go. Humans so specialize into taste - no offense - with your fat-organed mouths. It must be like sight. For I, it is a battery, to be proud of. Taste or refinement! How to make things eternal; grind them to dust and keep them forever."

"Distillation of surplus." I kept watching the harvesters pick through the alleys between each patch of water, their floodlights swinging like tiny traveler's lanterns. A teeming soup of rice and plankton, regrowing and regrowing. In black waters. In a newborn torrent already slowed.



A great clang and hiss - the glider had begun jettisoning components, untransforming itself. It rattled every bit of the patchwork chassis remaining, yet still we levitated, tip-toeing towards the wall.

The path was marked for us - it had been hard to distinguish line from line of lights, but we were pointed at a wide and thin aperture now. It branched horizontally off from the rail's growing trunk of light - we floated on the air to a dock that had been hastily cleared for our arrival, and quickly our group scattered to more secure stowage again, the small window of comfortable viewing vanished.

The length a runway would require to slow something so massive as our vessel - even stripped of the majority of its mass - would be considerable. Yet that length and more had been gouged into the far cap of Savannah in one absurd bore. We pushed downwards on that cold way, hit the ground keening and shaking like a proper airplane, and the entire stretch we passed more and more bright windows - cargo doors, entry and exitways, air valves, container blocks. Drones, skittering at our approach or clamped onto the walls as we passed, seemed to watch from so many cameras, and even when we came to a stop the tunnel con-



tinued stretching inwards, beyond the length my vision could match. When we stopped, it felt too early.

What was left was comically small. Scarcely bigger than the janitor the central component now held - the rest had all been deposited, broken off even while inside to which-ever stations and passages now lay behind us. We were at the End - and past it.



Back to weight - the journey had spoiled me for the physics of home. I was heavy and battered again, it all came back at once, I could only lay down as my litter kept pace running with the flock. I was half asleep, Rain perched at the prow all anxious about leaving his machine behind - but my stamina was quickly gone. Mercifully, they let us rest. I slept freely in the downtime left between making the first rounds again.

I awoke feeling like I had been through a hammermill. I tried to gain my bearings. We were now in a small and official room - one that recalled the closeness and industriality of the receptor facility, now so, so far away. It was an observation room, overlooking a great dock - yet another rail system, the width of that long runway, that ended in





a blunt patchwork of welding sparks and folding catwalks and cold, cold air. I knew that feeling.

It was that electric tingle that you felt when the void was close and the walls were thin. Where no rock, and little walls protected you. That shivering feeling you would find when lingering in the entry points at home, or too close to windows, or preparing for a journey. The feeling that had filled Umihotaru like so much cold water.

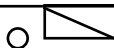
The room was velvet and clean and organized. Adorned with sculptures - made of scrap metal, twisted and folded together smooth and neat? Sparse bookshelves, and reams and reams of schematics and scrolls. Ynewy's voice was the first I heard.

"I have already called the others in - they are there. See? Walk closer?"

With a turn of my wrist, my litter traipsed to the windows that overlooked the floor.

"That mounted pillar in the center, whose home is this long rail. They investigate it now - the seed which this my Quarry feeds. Entertain me, I will tell you. Quay is a painting," e whispered, gently, "a colorful flower bushel of





lives and experiment, joy and memory. The project is the everyday - that loved library - yes, a machine Kali rides to produce feeling, to produce story. But you already know this: that Quarry, it is a system of roots and filters. Stowing, and stowing. No rote and no role. This is a purification machine. A well-carved now workflow to leach nutrients and raw matter into their highest forms, to steal from the wealth of Savannah, the work of its building, to eat its bones."

I saw what e meant. Quarry was scrap metal, riveted in slipshod pulleys and parcels - but these compounded into each other, folding and folding. Flowing to a single point - and it was here. "A foundation. A vault to grow from - away from here."

"Aye. And now I prove to you I could be a poet too - but no sentimentalist. Kali's fault is dithering and scattering, smallness and multiplicity. The grave tree is a rainbow ephemeral, but always returns when the sky is correct. Leave that away from me. Here is my treasure, my ark. Hypercondensed resource - but that is not my poetry. I distill wealth, so too I distill life. Look - that chamber, on the upper rail, the one lit within. There is my single immaterial hope. My mountain and my sea - the Diamond."

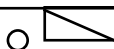


In a special enclosure of the great ark bay, there was a spot only a few technicians attended. It was a great cube, a pyramidal brick, of dense and off-white solid color. From above, we could see the mechanism that fed it.

Still dripping from an acid bath, three tengmunnins' worth of loose bones tumbled into a collection pan. With a chainsaw's roar they were ground to dust, the dust shuttled into the below enclosure. Machined piston arms unfolded from the container's lid - they pounded their violent hammermill claws down onto that immaculately flat surface until no sign of what had been added was left. Three bodies pulverized into a layer of dust, a paper's thickness stacked onto all the rest of it.

Rain - poor Rain. If only he had been at my side when I woke, he, who could not even stomach the grave tree. A dread spectacle to first see, but so soft, so romantic - he who could not look at that, how would he parse that smell in the air, knowing what it was? I wanted to laugh. It was so perfect. I did laugh, I laughed at laughed, in shock and in great esteem. It was a beautiful system, it was a perfect statement. Come, prisonwright, and see! The diamond anvil whose weight you have earned!

2'  
LWCIG121  
AET  
TUCN2  
VCCNM20W  
WPECEN02  
AUCENBV  
COMWOD0  
A1202  
EVAVID0'  
NFBICE2  
23E  
2026END1  
1120W  
0012  
VFI000'  
WUCW0  
D0G0RE  
E1  
T0B0RE  
W101  
IWCIDID0  
1E0L0R  
E102W0B  
2E1 D0  
WE EGI1'  
VDBI12C1  
10W  
COM2EC1E  
WHE1'  
211  
D0G0R  
1120W  
T0B0W





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 “chuunibyuu” (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



and intimate connection wavers between words like moon-  
light or shadow.





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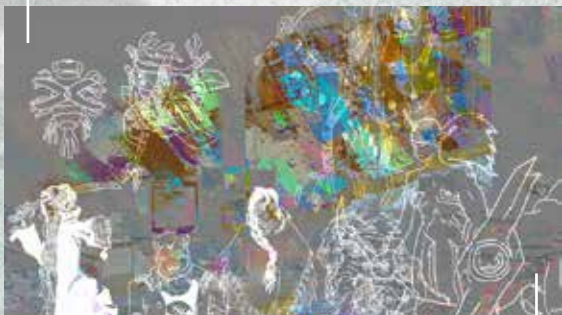
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