

HOLOHAUS-10





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SPECIAL THANKS

to Renko Chazakiël Rodenburg for friends in
shadow

to nekosattva for napalmed out days

to ghosted vain for the aurora

to Amara Reyes for wingbeats

to baroquespiral to tell the vision

to tsumaran_chan for sake and world

to epeou for the name

and countless others including the one who
sees this



by: Renko Chazakiël Rodenburg

Robin Robinson

Birthday: 23 March, 1994

Sex: Wouldn't you like to know

Occupation: Gangster, catamite,
social worker

Blood Type: B

Hair Colour: Black

Eye Colour: Brown

Likes: Dolls, flowers, cats, guns,
Zack Snyder, stimulants, moon-
touched, vampires

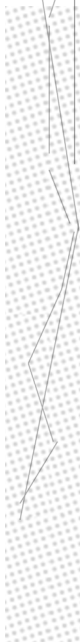
Dislikes: Men

“You want me to- why are you typing? No, you said ‘tell me something about yourself to write down,’ but I haven’t said anything yet. Stop writing, why are you writing that down? Are you going to write down every single thing I say ad verbatim? No, I’ll get to it. Give me the paper, I’ll write something down myself. Give it to me.”

My name is Robin Robinson, and I’m a government subcontractor who runs a temporary group



home for unhoused periphery demographics. I'm also a handsome young witch with a penchant for saving maidens in trouble, with a dash of loveable and flirty rogue on the side. Recently I've been taking care of Marieken Mithras, who is not an official member of my group home, but who has been unable to return home due to some drama affecting her personal life. This put a strain on my finances which then led to me overworking, which in turn landed me in a wheelchair. Ah well, such is the life of the self-sacrificing hero.





Synopsis

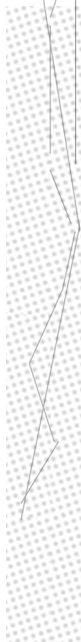
self-consciously normal Dutch teenager Marieken discovers she (like her idol Maria Mithras) is a changeling - one of the non-human "Periphery Demographics" that have reappeared since the return of magic, powered by belief, to a world that medicates, instrumentalizes, surveils, and eventually wants to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





Last time

Marieken makes her way to the grouphome meeting new roommates and soon receives her first assignment to counter so-called Nightmare Erosions. Partnered with Hiro, she faces the reality of fighting these creatures, and soon a latent power within her begins to awaken.





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

ROBIN

I wake up to the sound of porcelain crashing through wood. Groggy, I roll out of bed and land on the floor with a 'thump'. My phone's under my bed, and it takes me a while to fish it out from between the garbage I've shoved under there in an attempt to delay having to actually sort and clean. When I do manage to grab it, I roll onto my back and spend the first fifteen minutes of my day checking my messages. To my great disappointment, Marieken has not messaged me nor answered any of my messages. Maybe the girl is too wise to get involved with me and Ruby. Good for her.

When I'm dressed- the same black pants and plain black t-shirt I go out in every day- I head downstairs and find my

CHAPTER 03

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living room table completely demolished. Two porcelain girls sit between the remains, one- Mercy- aiming an improvised wooden stake that used to be a leg from my table at the throat of the other- Lily.

“What, pray tell, are you two doing?”

“Robin!” Mercy yelps as she tries to hide the stake behind her back. There’s a crack in her face, and one of her glass eyes droops down, unable to focus on me.

“Marissa’s trying to kill me!” Lily yells.

“I can see that. Not great, I’m going to have to get Ruby-lynn to repair you both. You do understand that she charges me money for that, do you?”

Both dolls avert their eyes.

“Maybe I ought to not repair you for a while, just remove your limbs and let you cool down in the basement.”

“Y- yeah,” Mercy starts panting. “M- maybe that’s a good idea.”





"Get up, both of you. I'm going to get some cigarettes. When I'm back this mess better be cleaned up and breakfast be ready."

"Yes master," Lily says.

"Yes Robin," Mercy sighs.

"Wait," Lily says. "We broke the table. Where do we put the breakfast?"

"That's your problem," I reply and I turn for the entrance.

I put on my coat, my shoes and I walk out into the harbor. The small kiosk I pick my cigarettes up at is a ten minute hike down the road, enough to clear my head. Enough to smoke a ciggy on the way back to the house. A morning ritual I have been repeating for the last two and a half years.

Cigarettes are not the only reason I head down to the kiosk, though. The proprietor greets me with a smile, and puts my carton of ciggies on the table together with a bundle of cash, a copper coin and a nine millimeter ammo clip.

"Business going well?" I ask him. "Nobody bothering you?"



The man pays a third of his income to me in protection money.

"Nobody," the man says. "Not even in my dreams."

I smirk. Ruby-lynn made sure of that.

Ever since the Falun Gong had moved into this neighborhood of Amsterdam, a veritable golden age for protection rackets had started. It was in large part sinophobia of course- the Falun Gong was not any different from local Periphery Demographics, but to both the upper-middle class Dutch citizens and the 'normie' mafia groups they were frightening and so you could promise

'protection' and simple spells that would allegedly keep the Chinese away for a hefty chunk of a business their profits. It was immoral, it probably fuelled the racist and anti-peripheral sentiment bubbling under the surface of society, but it was a living.

"It ain't honest work, but somebody has to do it," I couldn't help but mutter as I walked out of the mafia store with my bullets, money and cigarettes.



The bullets are of course intended for my next stream of income- sanctioned duelling. As I light my cigarette and walk back home, I check the Ronin-App on my phone to see if there are invitations for fights. One notification. My patron- Herkel Rijkstadt, a local landlord- has beef with a group of Nozems and has challenged the gang to a duel.

"The living room better be clean," I yell as I enter the group home.

"Yessir," Mercy and Lily say in sync as I walk in. The remains of the table have indeed been more-or-less cleaned, and my breakfast has been arranged on the floor.

"We're eating on the floor today?" I ask.

"We'll go out to look for a table this afternoon," Lily quickly says.

"Hmhm," I say as I nod and squat down in front of a plate with croissants with fruit jam and a glass of orange juice.

"Do you want anything?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"No," the dolls say in unison. Of course they don't. They're made of porcelain. They barely have a digestive tract. Any-



thing they eat they'll have to wash out of their body with water, making an awful mess.

"Do you think Marieken will come by again?" Mercy asks while I'm eating my breakfast. "Lily said she might come live with us."

"Marieken has her own house," I reply. "And she doesn't reply to messages. Maybe you two scared her off."

"No!" Lily says. "Do you think we screwed up?"

"Yeah. I think you completely ruined it." Lily's reply is a whimpering noise.

I do worry about Marieken. If she grew up as sheltered as I suspect, the world of the Periphery will rip her to shreds. 'Civilized' society hides beneath itself a layer of grime that the sheltered middle class can usually hardly understand.

When I've finished my breakfast, I check my phone for messages and send a text to Ruby-Lynn to come over to look after Mercy and Lily's injuries before they head into town to buy a new table. I then head upstairs to grab my knife, my gun and my spellbook. Without it, I wouldn't be able to do my magic properly. Magic- at least for witch-





es- is deeply personal. It roots in the same narcissistic impulse at the heart of every witch, but the way it flowers, expresses itself, is different for everyone. Even if another witch were to borrow- or god forbid, steal- my spellbook, they would need to take the time to properly understand the mental states and delusions that the spells are allegories for, are activation shortcuts for.

With weapons hidden under my coat and my spellbook in hands, I head outside. The duel is to be held in the ring in the Vondelpark, the largest park in Amsterdam. Since the government legalized duelling, several dueling rings have opened up. The biggest ones have proprietary apps for participation, and with recent gambling law relaxations most apps now allow civilians to stake cryptocurrencies on the duels. Not that the Periphery Demographics shooting or hacking each other to death in the arenas see any of the money that's being made, of course. Profiting off of us is reserved for civilized, normal society.

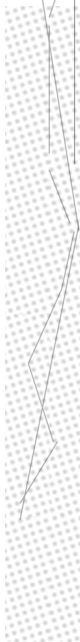
I ride the public transport to the park because my bike has been stolen again. On the way there I get a lot of weird looks, and I'm never sure if it's because I'm a boy wearing skinny jeans and eyeliner or if people can smell I'm a witch somehow. When I transfer between light rail lines



I spot a Moontouched girl getting on in the next car and once again I'm left thinking about Marieken. As I fiddle with my phone, curious to see if I finally got a message back from her, I wonder if I'm really worried about her or if this is just my witch heart longing to possess someone special.

No answer to my conundrum floats to the top of my subconsciousness, and I get off the tramline at the park stop. At the dueling ring- a fenced-off glorified sports field with a private police force for security, really- I check in with a QR code generated by the Ronin-app on my phone and get escorted through the turnstiles to the lobby. Duelists, bookies and gambling addicts crowd the building, cheering on as outside, in the field, a rare Moontouched boy and a human girl in a sailor moon costume are rolling over the wet grass, trying to choke each other and or poke each other's eyes out. The girl eventually gets the upper hand, after holding her hands locked around the boy's throat for an arduous minute or two, he stops struggling. One less Moontouched in the world, I think, shaking my head in disappointment.

"My very best Robin," a deep voice booms behind me. Shortly after, I feel a large hand on my shoulder. I don't





have to look behind me to know it is Herkel Rijkstadt, my patron.

“Mr. Rijkstadt.”

“You saw the quick rundown on the app, I figure?”

“You’ve challenged the leader of a group of Nozems to a fight. I’m to be your champion.”

“Look at me when I’m talking to you, boy,” my patron demands.

With a sigh and theatrically rolling my eyes, I turn around. Herkel Rijkstadt is a heavy set, barrel-chested man in a three piece suit two sizes too small wearing a Rolex on both of his wrists.

“Better,” he says as he grabs me by the cheeks and forces me to look him in the eyes.

“The Nozem gang leader called me a capitalist pig and had her bikers put a feeding trough full of slop in my front yard. She didn’t even have the gall to deny it! She was rather eager to accept a duel, and seems to have staked ten backs on her own champion,” Herkel says while using his left hand to hold my cheeks and his right to ruffle through



my hair. "And make sure not to let some Nozem ruin your pretty face." He shakes my head and then finally lets go.

It has become a fancy hobby amongst the upper class to keep Periphery Demographics as pet duelists. I do not just fight for Mr. Rijkstadt, he also drags me to high society events to show me off as one would show off an exotic pet or a trophy wife. These events are another source of income- the sexually frustrated one percenters can occasionally be persuaded to pay out the nose for an evening with a witch. It doesn't count, they tell themselves. It doesn't count as homosexuality or it doesn't count as cheating on their wives- whatever it is, I'm not human, so it doesn't count.

"Look at that," a shrill voice rings out above the rumour of the crowd. "Mr Piggy is into younger men."

Of course. Mr. Rijkstadt had said 'she'. There's only one female Nozem gang leader in the city. The crowd parts to let Nozomi through. Like her entire subculture, she's sharply dressed in a leather jacket and suede shoes reminiscent of American fashion of the fifties. Unlike the rest of her subculture, she has fox ears glued to her head and a fake tail hanging from her back. Sheeted on her back is a katana.



"Hello Nozomi," I say with my most gentlemanly voice and bow before her.

"Who are you again?" She asks as she scratches under the fake ears on her head.

"Robin Robinson. You paid me to curse a rival gang once."

"And now you are here to be killed by my champion. Tragic."

"We'll see," I say and try to smile. Killing one of her gang members is not going to be good for any future employment opportunities with her gang. "What are the terms of our duel?"

"Fonzie," Nozomi yells. A buff man with a cowlick wearing a black leather jacket separates from the crowd and joins us.

"Anything goes," Nozomi says. "Weapons, magic, it's all fair game. I have ten grand on this fight so I'd prefer it to be a spectacle."

"Can you do that?" My patron asks.

"Yeah."



"You're up in thirty minutes, then. Gives them time to clear the arena and announce the fight for any gamblers."

I nod, and walk off to the restroom. I need time to read my spellbook, prepare my magic. In an 'anything goes' fight, the only problem is firearms. It doesn't matter how fast a magician or how fast a swordsman you are- a gun is faster. The trick then is to make sure I will not be hit by any bullets while I take my own shot at my opponent. On the inside of my spellbook I've taped various pouches of mind-altering substances, and today as part of my preparations I take a line of 2-fluoroamphetamine. The designer drug works analogous to speed, and worsens my god complex. Then I flip to a spell that invokes a state of mind I stumbled on while watching Zack Snyder's Three Hundred. I will face down my enemies unfazed. I will not flinch. I will hold the line. When I've muttered the incantations, I feel the spell take hold in my mind. The next spell I devised while watching First Blood . As long as I am not afraid of bullets, they will not hurt me. This spell, too, locks in place in my brain. I can feel the strain on my magic- both spells consume my emotional state as a sort of metaphysical fuel, and when I run out I will be left lethargic and depressed- as well as defenseless.



Twitchy from the stimulants I consumed and my thoughts erratic and schizophrenic from the magic coursing through my brain, I head to the arena. I empty my mind and think of nothing but my spells.

I enter the dueling ring. An electromagnetic hum indicates the arena has been sealed off from the outside world- we won't have to worry about collateral damage. The announcer is barely audible over the noise in my brain. On the other side of the field stands Nozomi's champion- what was his name again? Right. Fonzie. The Fonz. What an asshole.

A loud buzzer announces that our fight has begun. I step forward, and to my astonishment The Fonz pulls an entire machine gun out of his coat. For a second I am distracted by the firearm and waste precious time trying to identify it. How on earth do you fit a HK21 general purpose Bundeswehr machine gun into a leather jacket?

Before I have pulled my own gun out of my pants a hail of bullets descends on me. I do not fear. He who does not fear bullets cannot be hit by bullets. I feel them rip through the magic around me. I remove the safety from my cheap italian 9mm gun, take aim, and fire.



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1B2NW
0N12
V10N0
W0ENW
D0G0VE
E1
T0B0VE
W1N1
1WCIDIDN
1EW0B
E102WOD
2ED DO
WE EGIL
WD1B12C1
1N8
COM2EC1E
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211
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1B2NW
T0B2W

I run out of mental stamina a fraction of a second before my bullet blows through the Nozem's brain. Pain lights up my entire body- I have been hit. The Fonz falls, his gun still firing wide as he hits the ground.

"Fuck you," I scream as I stumble around and become light-headed from blood loss.





MARIEKEN

Robin does not answer any of my messages. I wonder if I have screwed things up with him somehow by never answering any of his messages. Still- the last time he messaged me was only a little while ago. Maybe he doesn't have his phone on him. Maybe he's indisposed. Maybe he's angry and doesn't understand how serious the situation is.

I rush through the streets of Amsterdam, away from the crime scene, away from what I have done. Megalomania and paranoia swirl in my head, combining into a toxic sludge of self destructive emotion. I blink, I shadow-step. Something has gone terribly wrong with me. Something is actively going wrong with me. I lose my right leg somewhere, forgetting to take it along as I teleport across half of Amsterdam in a blind panic. It doesn't matter. It wasn't exactly real to begin with. There's plenty of shadows to steal, plenty of dark to congeal and thread and weave and so I steal a man's shadow as I pass him by and use it to replace my leg. Sunlight starts to hurt, and my soul begins to fray. Burnout. Why do I still experience burnout? Aren't I a god now? Delusions, I realize. A component of magic- a key component- but despite affecting reality, delusions are not reality. Running out of magic, fraying my penumbra



until it unravels will still kill me. I'm strong, I'm stronger than almost anyone who ever lived, but- and I realize it is the wrong avenue of thought. I can't give in to this. Power, hunger, delusions of grandeur. The roar, the maelstrom within me threatens to drown me. Everything is going oh so terribly wrong. If I can't shake myself out of this then I'll be ripped to pieces long before the consequences of my actions in the schoolyard can catch up to me, I realize. I need help. Help. Help.

"Help," I scream as I crash through the windows of Robin's house, almost ephemeral enough to leave the glass untouched as I pass through. Almost. The sound of glass is like rain beating down on concrete fields. It repeats and repeats and when it does not end I realize it has long stopped, my perception lingering on a memory, my mind's eye trapped within itself. I trash around on Robin's kitchen floor, struggling to maintain a human shape as two porcelain faces look at me in terror. Mary and Darcy, or whatever their names were. A third figure sits between them, her face one of amusement instead of horror.

"Don't just sit there," I growl. "Do something?" My voice cracks and I accidentally phrase my command as a question.





Ruby Lyren- or something, I can't remember her name either- raises her hand and commands quietude. The world obeys, and I am left alone in a deep black void. Here, there is nothing but me.

The sensory overstimulation is gone. The hurricane of power is gone. I am me, Marieken Mithras, and there is no one here but me. For the first time today I can think clearly. No, I realize. That's wrong. For the first time in weeks I can think clearly. Before this morning I was still on the medication. That hardly counted as 'thinking clearly'. Still, the fog was probably better than the sharp mania that almost eviscerated my brain this afternoon.

"Marieken," someone whispers. I'm not alone in here at all. There is someone else. For a second I think it is Kate, but it isn't.

"Sareth?" I ask, starting to panic.

"Yeah," she says. "What happened?"

"Oh god," I cry. "I am so sorry. I killed you. I think I ate you."



"I know that," she answers. "I was drowning in shadow, losing little bits of myself to you. Dissolving while sinking to the bottom of your subconsciousness."

"Oh," I say. "Sorry." I don't think I really mean it. I just remembered that she was going to do the same to me.

"Where are we?" Sareth asks. "On god, Marieken. If you let that weeaboo freak kill us and this is the afterlife, I'll kill you."

"No, no, not at all. I think I ate Hiro as well. Just not like, his mind. Just his body."

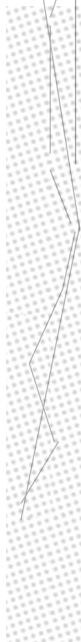
"What?"

"What?"

"You cannibalized him? You sat down next to his corpse and chowed down?"

"What do you mean by 'us'?" I ask Sareth, feeling no obligation whatsoever to recount the afternoon's events to her.

"Us," Sareth says. "You and me. We're in this together now."





"No," I reply sternly. "We really aren't."

"We are," she replies. She sounds frustrated, almost indignant. "Wherever this is, we're here together."

Before I can ponder the ramifications of that statement, I am wrested back to reality. Or at least, to the waking world that passes for my reality.

"Are you okay?" Someone asks. It takes me a while to re-orient myself. From fear to fighting for my life to psychotic mania to the surreal dark in the depths of one's soul in barely two hours did a number on my ability to relate to my surroundings.

"Yeah," I say, looking around. I'm in a bed. A soft bed with fresh linen. The room is clean and contains nothing but this bed and a small nightstand. The window is filthy and cracked, and outside I can see the harbor. This must be a guest room in Robin's group home.

"Good," my caretaker says. Ruby-Lynn, I realize. The Moontouched witch Robin is friends with. Right. I came here for help.

"What happened?" I ask.



"I was going to ask you," she replies as she twirls her hand through her long, white hair. For a second I become self-conscious about my own hair again, but then I remember it turned white when I...

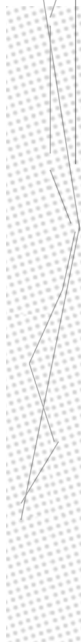
When I did what, exactly?

"I'm still working through things," I say. "I'm not sure what happened. Can you tell me what happened from your point of view?"

Ruby-Lynn signs and puts her under her chin in an exaggerated 'thinking' gesture. "You came flying in through the window like a sort of Shadow-Court meteorite with the worst case of burnout I've ever seen. I put a spell on you to cut your consciousness off from your body for a bit to stop you from ripping yourself apart, then had Mercy drag you into the guest bed until you recovered a bit. Then you woke up and asked me to explain what happened. I have to say, I have quite a lot of questions myself."

"Ah," I reply. Burnout.

"For starters," Ruby-Lynn says, "I see your hair is white now.."





"That's not a question."

"I also see you brought a katana," she says while pointing at Hiro's katana, resting against the wall without its sheath. Why did I bring that? I don't remember bringing it along at all.

"Still not a question," I reply, starting to become unnerved. Can Ruby-Lynn read minds, like Kate? Is she trying to get me to think- oh god Kate. How am I supposed to face Kate again after what happened? She'll run away screaming the second I'll accidentally think about what I did. "You having burnout while dragging a bloodstained sword along in your shadow paints a pretty clear picture, but I am loath to jump to conclusions. So here's my question: did you kill someone?"

There's no way I'll be able to explain what happened to Ruby-Lynn. Or is there? Ruby-Lynn is Moontouched as well, isn't she? She's a powerful magician. Maybe she will understand. It's worth a shot.

"I died. I was murdered. The second I died I grasped something, I think. Some hidden truth about the world. It is all muddled and vague now, but I reshaped myself from



shadows and retaliated. It was self defense, but I've killed someone, Ruby. I can't go home."

Ruby-Lynn looks at me intently. Again I'm concerned about her reading my mind. Now that I know telepathy is possible, how can I ever feel safe even just thinking about things again?

"What do you mean," Ruby-Lynn says slowly, carefully weighing each of her words on her tongue. "Reshaped yourself?"

I let go of my corporeal form, of the Marieken who is just a representation of the real me. I let go of arms and legs and eyes and bleed into the shadows of the room, all of them. I look at Ruby with a dozen eyes sprouting from every corner in the room.

"I'm shadow court," I say without speaking. "I'm not real. I'm a shadow on the wall." I see her freeze in fear, and before I scare her off I recompose myself, weave shadow and light back into a human girl, albeit one with strange hair and eyes. "I'm sorry," I say, now standing upright next to the bed. "It seemed the easiest way to convince you."

"Nightmare-" Ruby-Lynn mutters. "Nightmare Demon?"





“No?” I yell out in surprise. Ruby flinches. “No- I mean, sorry, I’m sorry. I am not a nightmare demon.” I want to approach her, reach out to her, but fear that it will only panic her further. Five minutes alone with her and I’ve already ruined this. Instead, I back off. “I can leave if you want to. If you’re scared. I’m worried about going into the sun because I might still have burnout, but if you want me to go, I’ll go.”

I don’t want to leave. I hope my words make her trust me instead.

“I’ve never seen this before,” Ruby-Lynn says. Her voice is still fearful, but there’s a glimmer of something else. Wonder, curiosity, maybe. “I have never even heard of this. I hadn’t considered this at all to be possible.”

“Yeah,” I say.

“You should go lie down in bed again. You’re still fraying at the edges. I’ll go grab some tea for you. Then when I am back, you should explain everything that happened today in detail. Robin and I can probably help you.”

“Okay.” I don’t feel tired at all. But she’s right- I am fraying at my edges. When I stare at my hand, the outline is



hazy. Like the outer layer of my skin is dissolving into fog. Like whoever drew me went over an outline, broke it, and now colour was spilling out of me. I'm unsure if bedrest will help at all, but I do as Ruby says and climb under the blankets again. The cool dark under the blankets brings a soothing comfort.

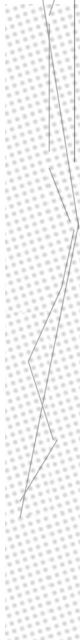
Soon, the older Moontouched returns, bringing me a tray with a wooden cup smelling like green tea, and places it on the nightstand next to the bed. "You said you killed someone," she says as if it is the most casual thing in the world.

I only look away.

"Marieken, I understand this is extremely stressful and that you're scared, but I have to ask if there's a chance the murder will be led back to you. Things happen- god, how I wish they didn't but things to happen- but it is best if they happen in the dark. Do you understand what I mean?"

She means that she or people she knows have killed people before. I nod. "I- I don't think they'll find out what happened."

"What do you mean?"





"There's no remains. No body. I brought his sword and the blood on it is my own."

"No remains? You disincorporated him? Did you use magic?"

I shake my head. How can I ever speak about what I did?

"He was my friend," I say, pangs of pain shooting through my heart.

Ruby-Lynn comes closer and puts her hand on my shoulder, then starts to play with my hair. Everyone keeps playing with my hair. At least Ruby-Lynn is doing so to try and comfort me and not because of whatever Jared Fogle stuff Dr. West has got going on. "It's okay," she says. "Me and Robin, we'll do whatever we can to make sure you're safe."

"I can't go home," I mutter. "I went out this morning to hang out with a friend and now I'm a murderer and unstable."

"Marieken," Ruby-Lynn says sternly. She's going to tell me it was self defence, that I don't have to feel guilt. I'm not sure I will be able to believe her. "Marieken," she says. "Magic kills people. You were going to face the uncomfortable truth that life for Periphery Demographics is one of non-stop eat-or-be-eaten violence sooner or later anyway."



Oh.

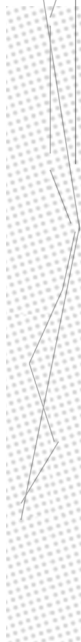
“What?”

“Life is hard and this world does not care about us, Marieken. Half of our own people don’t care about us either. The only thing we can do is try and survive long enough to build something better. Today you survived. Tomorrow you’ll build something better. Take solace in that.”

I shake my head. “I can’t build anything. I just want to go home. My real home, but I can’t. I won’t ever go home to my mom and dad again and I won’t ever call them mom or dad again either. The group home I was assigned to- just yesterday I thought I might fall in love with a vampire and live a life straight out of a novel. I was so naive. I was so stupid.”

My tears flow freely and my voice starts to break.

“Why can’t you have that?” Ruby-Lynn asks as she kneels down next to the bed, and gestures to me to lift myself up so she can get my hair out from under my back. She takes my long white hair in her hands and starts braiding it. It feels nice, comfortable. It only makes me cry harder.





"My roommate is a mind-reader. She'll never want to look me in the eyes again."

"A mind-reader? That is very rare, though you did say she's a vampire. Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Very sure."

"There's ways to occult the mind, protect yourself against mental intrusions. You won't have it as easy as me, but you're shadow court. You'll manage."

"What court are you?" I ask her.

"Mirror," she says with a strange wisp of sadness in her voice.

"Reflections," I say. "Mirrors reflect things. It makes sense. Shadows... Shadows can cloud and darken?"

Ruby laughs. "You're basically halfway there. When did you start thinking like a witch?"

"I told you," I whisper. "I saw some truth about the world, about the nature of reality when I died."



"You said you died. That it's your blood on the katana. What happened?"

"Hiro- my friend. He caught me next to- oh god, I had completely forgotten about Sareth." "Sareth?"

I want to cry. I want to scream. I cannot help but laugh. "The other girl I killed today."

"Marieken?" Ruby-Lynn asks, now sounding hesitant and a little frightened.

"That was also self defence," I say and I realize how insane I must sound. "No, really."

Ruby looks at me slawjacked, eyes wide. "You killed two people in self defense today."

"Yes!" I say, almost yell. "Sareth was going to kill me, steal my magic, steal my soul. I turned her spell on her, and it killed her. I didn't mean to- well it killed her body. When you put me in a coma with your magic I talked to her for a bit, I think she lives on inside of me. It killed her body though, even though I didn't mean to, and Hiro, my friend, with the katana-" I run out of breath and have to stop for a moment. "He thought I had killed Sareth, which I had, but





he also thought I was behind all the murders that Sareth had previously committed, so he attacked me. He attacked me, and he won and I died.”

“You died.”

“He stabbed me through the chest, and as I was bleeding out I finally understood the things about magic that had been eluding me, allowing me to put myself back together.”

Ruby-Lynn was quiet for a moment. “I assume, by turning into a shadowy mass of tentacles and eyes and turning back again? That works as a sort of reset?”

Now it is my turn to be quiet for a moment as my thoughts race. It’s not really a reset. I’m pretty sure I can take on any form I want.

“Well, yes,” I say. “If I’m injured and I change, then when I change back I’m no longer injured.”

She shakes her head. “If I hadn’t just see you do that, I wouldn’t have believed a word of anything you’ve just told me.”

“Really?” I ask her, a little worried.



"People snap, you know. Break. Go crazy. The weight of the world is too much to bear and drives them to irrational behaviour, unusual beliefs."

"I see," I say. "I'll see to it that that won't happen to me."

"Yeah," Ruby-Lynn says. "You'll make sure you won't kill any more people in self-defence."

"I promise," I say. Ruby-Lynn starts laughing, and I wonder if I misunderstood something.

"At some point, you're going to have to take me up on magic training. If I teach you to properly control your powers, and teach you to occlude your mind then you can move back in with your vampire girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend," I say, choking on my words as I realize that I'm a lesbian. I can't believe the thought hadn't come up in my mind before. Was that because of the medication? I was practically going insane when Kate drank my blood. I've been wondering if I could fall in love with Kate for days- "God, I'm clueless," I say, making Ruby-Lynn laugh even more.





“Well, you’re not hopeless. I’m glad you came here, Marieken.”

“You are?”

“Yeah. Robin has been worried sick about you. Though, I suppose, he is in no condition to worry about anyone.”

Has something happened to Robin? Is that why he didn’t reply to my texts? “What do you mean?”

“Robin got shot in a duel, he’s in the hospital. They say that if he’s awake later in the afternoon he’ll be able to receive visitors for a bit.”

“In a duel? Robin fights in those crazy duels?” I ask, astonished. Duels are the sick entertainment of the dregs of society, I’ve been taught. They’re the last resort of Periphery Demographics on drugs or in debt.

“Marieken, there are very few ways to make enough money to fund the support network Robin funds,” Ruby-Lynn explains. “He takes care of Mercy and Lily, he takes care of anyone who might drift through here before they can find permanent housing. He funds my group, he funds the



black market acquisition of medication for those of us who need it but can't get it legally."

"But duels," I say astonished. What good is Robin for any of those people if he dies?

Ruby-Lynn shrugs. "He's a witch. He thinks himself invincible."

"He clearly isn't if he's hospitalized!"

"Marieken, we live short, violent lives before vanishing from this world, forgotten. How many elderly Moon-touched or witches do you know?"

"Maria Mithras?" I cautiously try.

"She's lucky. She's a popular singer. She's integrated in society by providing normies a Moontouched idol to gawk at. They can support her and feel like they're so socially progressive without having to think about the Moon-touched girl living in a homeless shelter down the street."

There is something wrong with the world, I reaffirm for myself. There's something hideously deeply wrong but I cannot figure out what it is, where the thing is located that makes everything downstream from it bad and rotten.



"I want to come along to see Robin," I say.

"Is that smart? You were about to dissolve and vanish in a puff of shadow when you came flying in a hot minute ago."

"I'll try and nap for a bit," I say. "Wake me up when you're going to head out. If I'll feel better I'll come along."

"You sure?" Ruby asks.

I nod, and pull the blanket over my head. "Absolutely sure," I say, the blanket muffling my speech.

It's nice in the dark. Comfy. I hear Ruby-Lynn close the blinds of the room, then walk out and close the door. I close my eyes, breathe out, and will myself to sleep.



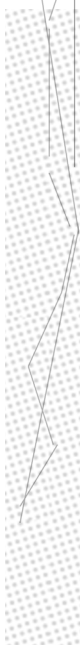
The sun creeping in through the window and touching my face wakes me up. In a haze, I crawl out of bed. The poster of Maria Mithras above my bed is illuminated by the orange light of the setting sun, her face slowly disappearing into the dark.

“Maria-no-more, farewell tour,” the text on the poster says. Right. Her last tour, after they fixed the destabilization of reality.

“Rosa,” I hear my father yell from downstairs. “Dinner is ready.”

Rosa? Aren’t I Marieken? I look around. This is my room. My CDs, my novels, my Sanrio plushies. I open the door to my room, and find the hallway completely dark. A feeling of dread creeps up my spine. I sneak down the stairs, afraid to awaken whatever nightmares might lurk in the dark, around the corner, under the steps of the stairs. Downstairs, in the hallway, a single candle burns on the desk in front of the mirror.

Black hair. Brown eyes. Pale skin, and an odd scar running down the left side of my face, as if someone took a box knife to my face and tried to skin me.





“Rosa,” I hear my dad yell from the living room.

“My name is Marieken,” I say, indignant, as I enter the living room. Here, too, the only illumination is candles. My dad sits behind a long table with eleven others. Only the seat next to him is empty.

“Hey,” Robin says, waving at me.

“You’re finally here,” Ms. Rosencrantz says.

“I knew you’d come,” Noor says. Human girl Noor, who does not have glass eyes or ball-joints.

“She wouldn’t miss her own going-away party,” Kate whispers.

“Come sit next to me,” my dad says, gesturing at the empty seat next to him.

I look around, but all save the far end of the room, where the table is illuminated by a hundred candles, is dark.

“What is going on?” I ask, trying to come across strong and brave.



"We're celebrating you getting better, Rosa," Sareth says, pointing into the darkness. Candles ignite, revealing a poster.

"Marieken-no-more, farewell tour," the poster of Maria Mithras with her head obscured by shadows reads.

"This is wrong," I stammer as I try to take a step back. The darkness behind me is unyielding, and refuses to let me retreat.

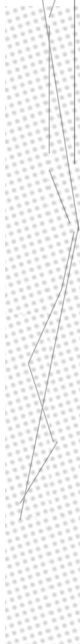
"Rosa," Ruby-Lynn says, disappointment dripping from her voice. Ruby-Lynn, with normal blonde hair, wearing jeans and a blouse. "Don't you want to eat with us before you leave?"

"Leave where?" I cry.

"The sun is setting," Walter says. "Soon it will be dark, and there will be nothing left."

"Come," my dad says, gesturing at the empty seat again, this time with more vigour.

"Don't you want to spend some time with us before you leave forever?" Hiro asks.





"Before I leave where?" I ask, trying not to break. Trying not to start screaming and crying.

"The cold and dark lands we travel to when all else is said and done," a girl I don't recognize says. She's wearing a cat-ear headband.

"Who are you?" I stammer.

"Nozomi de Vries," she says. "We haven't actually met yet."

"Oh," I say, as I carefully approach the table.

"Finally," my dad says as I creep around the table, on edge and afraid. "I knew you'd join us."

The moment I sit down, everyone else is gone. The candles start to die and fade. Outside the wind howls, and I know the sun has set. I know the sun has set for the last time, and it will not rise again.

"Is this really all there is?" I scream into the void. "Is this all?" I cry. In the distance, light twinkles, and a fear so great as to halt my heart in my chest overcomes me.



I wake up screaming.

“Jesus,” Ruby yelps as she jumps back from the bed.

“Marieken, calm down. I was just trying to wake you.”

“Where am I?” I ask, as I look around the unfamiliar room.

My plushies, my posters, the familiar cat scratches at the door- ah, right. I am not in my room. I am in Robin’s house in the harbor.

“You’re in our guest room,” Ruby-Lynn says. “You took a nap to recover from burnout. You wouldn’t wake so I tried to shake you, but it frightened you. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have touched you.”

“No, no,” I stutter. “I had a nightmare. It’s okay.”

“Is it?” Ruby asks.

“What?”

“Is it okay? Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I say, trying to shake the last remnants of the dream out of my head. “Are we going to see Robin?”





"We are," Ruby-Lynn says. "Do you feel like you can come along? Though I think it should be fine regardless, it's already almost evening."

"The sun is setting," I whisper. "Do you think it'll rise again?"

"What?" Ruby asks. "That's incredibly creepy, Marieken. Don't say things like that."

"Sorry," I say.

"Come, Mercy and Lily are waiting downstairs. Let's go embark on our quest to go see Robin!"

I nod, and crawl out of bed. My clothes are ragged and weathered, much more so than before I went to sleep. Almost intuitively I dispel them, and weave new clothes out of my penumbra.

In the doorway, Ruby-Lynn looks at me dumbfounded.

"What did you just do?" she asks, incredulous. "Did you manifest an entirely new outfit?"

"Huh?" I say, looking around in confusion. Did I do that?

"Oh," I say as I realize what happened. "No, when I re-



formed my body I must've gotten my clothes mixed up in my self-image. They aren't really clothes, I suppose, but part of my projection."

"What do you mean by that?" Ruby asks me as we leave the room and walk down the stairs together.

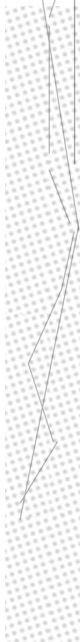
"Well, the self is really more of a projection on the wall, isn't it? The soul gives rise to the body. I'm not sure where clothes in general come from- Maybe there's a cloth-soul that gives rise to textiles and such? But these clothes are part of me. I'm sure that with some time alone I could learn to manipulate them."

"Marieken, what are you talking about?" Ruby asks, almost concerned. "Is this a mental image you've created as conduit for your magic? I've never in my life seen someone manifest physical matter through magic."

"Euh," I say. "I'm not sure."

"About what?" Lily asks, waiting for me at the bottom of the stairwell.

"Being a lesbian," Mercy says. "She's not sure she wants to jump in bed with Ruby straight away."






“What? No,” I say. “Don’t say weird things like that.”

The two dolls snicker and laugh.

“Behave,” Ruby says. “Let’s go see Robin. It’s about twenty minutes by public transport, so please try to behave for at least that long.”

“Sorry,” I say on impulse.

“God, she’s good,” Lily says. Mercy laughs. I have no idea what the joke is.



The trip to the hospital is arduously slow. Hopping on public transport, off public transport, on public transport again- it would be so much faster to shadowstep around. Yet only days ago I was confined to cars and bikes and light rail myself- and not only that, I realize. My entire life has radically restructured itself in mere days. Around me in the crowded subway car, Mercy and Lily argue about clothing brands. Ruby chides them and reminds them they don’t have enough money to buy actual fashion. I don’t feel part of their little group, the way I don’t feel part of Kate and Walter’s home either. It all feels so ephemeral, like I am just drifting by. Just a shadow on the wall, now here only to vanish come sunrise. After what feels like an



eternity- in reality, most likely around thirty minutes- of being cramped between the random passengers of Amsterdam's overcrowded public transport system we arrive at the Hospital of Our Lady of Mercy.

"We're here to see Robin Robinson, has he been moved to a visitor's ward yet?"

"Periphery Demographic?" The nurse behind the desk in the large entry hall asks.

"Yeah," Ruby-Lynn says.

The nurse shakes her head in disapproval, and for a moment a dark impulse comes over me. Rip, tear, destroy the interloper- assert your dominance. I take a step back and try to shake the dark thoughts out of my head.

Nightmare Corruption, the lexicon in my head oh-so unhelpfully butts in. That's ridiculous, I decide. I'm not suffering from nightmare corruption. For starters, I'm not dead, and nightmare corruption happens to dead people.

In military studies regarding cPTSD in active combat situations, the rate of nightmare corruption was found to far exceed the rates found in the civilian population. During





the invasion of Iran, several platoons reported experiencing ‘waking nightmares’ eventually leading to the [redacted] incident.

Excuse me? Hello? The lexicon refuses to answer.

“Marieken?” Ruby-Lynn asks me, concerned.

“Huh?”

“Are you okay? Can you hear me?”

“What? Yeah. I’m fine. What’s up?”

“I’ve been talking to you for the past minute, but you’ve been staring into space. Robin is on the third floor, west ward.”

“Oh, sorry,” I mutter. “I was lost in thought.”

The two dolls giggle. I can barely keep them apart, and begin to find them annoying. Mass produced porcelain sex toys with clay for brains. Ruby-Lynn, Mercy and Lily head deeper into the hospital ward, and I follow along. There’s something off about the hospital. The smell of sterilization chemicals mixes with something I can’t quite tell. The



fluorescent lights split my two shadows into eight, which animate and play out a vaudeville routine on the walls.

"Are you doing that on purpose?" Lily asks me, stopping to stare at the shadow-characters.

"No," I say. "My second shadow does as it pleases."

Why does it do so? Another question. My entire existence is riddles and conundrums. We continue down the hallways, decorated in primary colours washed out by the yellow fluorescent lamps illuminating them. It gives the entire hospital an aura of sickness and decay. Fitting, I reckon. Ruby-Lynn spends some time checking room numbers, then leads us to the room where Robin is.

"Woah," Robin exclaims as we all walk in. "Who is that?" He asks, pointing at me. For a second or so I am deeply hurt- has Robin forgotten about me entirely? Then I remember.

"Marieken," I say at the same time as Ruby-Lynn. We look at each other, and laugh. "I've had some things happen earlier today," I explain as I point at my hair and eyes.





“Good god,” Robin whispers. “You’re beautiful. The white hair- god. You’re finally you.”

Robin is completely covered in bandages, his black t-shirt on the chair besides his bed. IV tubes are attached to both his wrists.

“Robin!” Lily yammers as she runs over to kneel at his bedside. “I’m so glad you’re not dead. You can’t die. Life is awful with just Mercy and Ruby.”

“Hey,” Mercy yells.

“Quiet, calm down,” Ruby-Lynn commands. “This is a hospital. Please behave.”

“What on earth is this ruckus,” a girl I have never seen before says as she walks into the room. She’s blonde, with striking blue eyes. A scabbard with a japanese ninja sword sticking out is slung over her shoulder. For a moment I suspect her of being a cat or foxgirl of sorts, but then I realize the ears glued to her head are fake, and so is the tail hanging from her belt.

“Wait a minute,” I say. “That’s wrong. I have seen you before. You were in my dream the other night.”



"Excuse me?" The girl says.

"Nozomi?" Ruby-Lynn asks with a tone implying it is unusual this girl is here.

"Yes," I say. "Nozomi de Vries-"

I choke on my breath. Of course. De Vries is my own last name on my biological father's side, and it's not an uncommon name at all. A solid five percent of the country is called de Vries. But I do know another de Vries carrying a katana around. Another de Vries with striking blue eyes and an obviously fake Japanese name. All the blood drains from my face, and I cannot bring myself to speak a single word.

"Robin, one of your Moontouched is going bad. Past her expiration date maybe," she says, brushing past me to sit down on the chair next to Robin's bed.

"She's been zoning out all evening," Ruby-Lynn says. "She almost died from burnout earlier today. She'll be fine."

"Burnout?" Robin asks in a panic.

"A lot happened today," Ruby explains.





"I don't want to talk about it," I quickly add. "Maybe later."

"Nozomi, why are you here?" Ruby-Lynn asks. "Robin better not be in some kind of trouble."

She scoffs. She scowls. She spits on the floor. "It was my minion that shot up your witch. I thought it only courteous to pay him a visit in the hospital. I also had a bet running on him, so Robin quadrupled my net worth for me."

"You bet against your own guy?" Ruby asks.

"What, up against Robin? Of course."

"It seems we missed a lot," Ruby says.

"So have I," Robin replies in turn. "I want to know all about what happened to you later, Marieken. I've been worried about you."

"Yeah," I mutter. "Later."

"I'll leave you alone with your polycule," Nozomi says. "I'll see you around, Robin." As she gets up and walks out, she purposefully bumps her shoulder into Ruby-Lynn, who takes it in stride.



"Good god," I whisper when I'm certain she's out of ear-shot.

"What's up, Marieken?" Robin asks me.

"You had a run-in with her or her gang before?" Ruby asks.

"No," I say. "Not with her. The boy I fought this morning with the katana."

"Oh god," Ruby-Lynn says, her eyes going wide.

"I killed her younger brother in self defense today," I say while looking at the floor, too scared to meet anyone's eyes.

"Hiro," Robin says. "You killed Hiro? You killed Hiro 'Stroopwafel Columbine' de Vries this morning? Oh god, we are so dead."

"It was self defense," I stammer, afraid I am going to have to explain the entire story all again.

Robin starts laughing. "We're so fucked."

"Robin!" Ruby scolds him. "This isn't funny."

"I'm sure that if I explain-" I start, but Robin interrupts me.





“Marieken, do you know who Nozomi is? She looks silly, but she runs the second largest gang in the city. She runs the second largest gang in the city because she is frighteningly strong and has no moral compass or ethical constraints whatsoever. If she discovers you killed her little brother and that we’re harboring you she’s going to slaughter all of us.”

I lack the words to answer.

“God, then there’s the nightmare demon issue.”

“Euh?” I stammer.

“Hiro worked for Ms. Rosencrantz’ her police squad. He cleaned up three or four nightmare demons every week. Until they can find someone to replace him, there’s going to be incidents.”

“How do you know about Ms. Rosencrantz?” I whisper.

“My job is to be informed, so I can make informed decisions for the good of all Periphery Demographics under my ward, Marieken.”

“If Hiro worked for the cops, they’re gonna go looking for him,” Ruby says.



"This is unbelievably fucked," Robin says, grinning like a maniac. "I'm not leaving this hospital for another week, and when I am going home I am going home in a wheelchair."

"What do I do?" I ask. The urge to cry wells up in my tear ducts, but I manage to swallow my pain. The two dolls look at the proceedings in stunned silence.

"You have to run," Ruby says. "You have to run so fucking far that the police will never find you, and that by the time Nozomi figures out what has happened- and she no doubt will figure it out- you are so far away that she can never catch you again."

"No," I say. "Kate. I can't leave Kate. I don't want to run. I was about to get a life here, a real life.

Where I could be myself, with real friends."

"Of course," Robin says. "You could also just kill Nozomi."

"Robin!" Ruby shouts. "She can't! The amount of people who stand a chance against that girl can be counted on one hand. Add to that that she never rolls up to a fight



alone, she's always surrounded by those crazy biker goons of hers."

"You'll have to train her," Robin says. "I vaguely recall Marieken claiming she had the highest Paraphysical Aptitude score ever measured in this city."

Ruby-Lynn stares at me. Behind her eyes, puzzle pieces are falling into place.

"Second highest," I say. "Second highest Paraphysical Aptitude score ever measured. And not just in this city. In the world."

"What's your score?" Ruby-Lynn asks.

"Ninety five without blockers," I say.

"Marieken, do you understand that that's like claiming you have an IQ of a million, right? It's a logarithmic scale. My own score is twenty-nine. Hiro scored in the thirties. I've seen him pick up a car and throw it at someone like it was no big deal. Nozomi has a score of forty-two."

"It's ninety-five without blockers," I repeat. "It dropped while I was on the blockers, and I haven't been off of them for long."



“Marieken, do you understand how the logarithmic scale of Paraphysical Aptitude works?”

“No,” I answer.

“Every three points you add to the scale, the hypothetical power output doubles. If you scored ninety-five, they’d have alerted the military. That’d make you a living god.”

“They did,” I say, “Alert the military. They made me sign all kinds of documents and treaties. Compared me to an atom bomb. Wait, a god?”

Ruby-Lynn stares out the window and into the dark streets below. “Robin, I’ve seen her casually transmute her own body into living shadow. She conjured clothes to replace her damaged clothes without any real display of effort,” she says.

“Sounds about right for a score of ninety five,” Robin grins.

“A god?” Lily asks. “She doesn’t come across particularly deific.”

A god, I think to myself. Deep inside me, I feel the jet engine flare up. Ah, of course. Magic is narcissism. Rooted in





the deeply held belief you are the most important person in the world. I could be god. All I need to do is seize it.

“You have to train her, Ruby-Lynn dear,” Robin says with a smile on his face and twinkling in his eyes. “Imagine what she can do when she properly understands magic.”

“No,” Ruby says. “No, I can’t. What if- what if she’s dangerous?”

“What?” I yammer.

“My dearest,” Robin says. “If you don’t train her she’s going to look for someone else to do it. Someone less wise than you. She might not get proper training at all, and one day she’ll suffer explosive burnout. Remember the girl who blew up the subway station in London? At ninety five aptitude, she’ll wipe this country clean off the map if that happens.”

“God,” Ruby mutters, still facing the window.

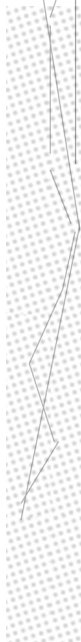
“And come on,” Robin teases her. “Don’t you want to see what she can do? Aren’t you the least bit curious?”

Ruby stares out into the dark for a minute, then turns around. Her face is warped with worry. “I admit,” she hes-



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itantly says. "That I am a little curious what she'd be able to do."





Synopsis

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



by: [nekosattva](#)

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T0B2W



Last Time

Natalia wanders the wastelands once familiar to her now reduced to debris, and her, an inhabitant of this ruin, much like many within the zone that gesture towards someone outside of it all.





CW: war, civilian bombardment, firearms, child soldiers, blood, internalized sexism, psychosexual delusion, Asian fetishism, body image issues, nude description, racial ideology, virtual sex work, sexualized captivity/bondage (non-consensual), non-consensual filming, gendered/sexualized metaphysics

THE SEVENTH THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:

« The children of the 'druzhdina' in time would grow older. One day, they came to Kali Hichi, with the children of the children. 'What should we name our children, Kali Hichi?' They asked. 'Should we honor Nay-toe by naming them after Nay-Toe's great works?' Kali Hichi responds: 'No, you shall not name your children Javelin, or Challenger 2.' Kali Hichi took a handful of sand, and let it fall from his hands to spread across the Zone. 'Name your children nothing; they will find their own name in the Zone.' »

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Lanka, this might be the last time I wake. I rose from the drawer, which I'd decorated with the clothes of my classmates, with a terrible thirst. I searched for something to drink in the teacher's lounge-- I discovered a few bottles of painful plain water, and a few cans of tarragon soda. Thank you for being here with me. The ground keeps shaking, the distant percussions echoing throughout my halls such that the walls quiver. I take a can of tarragon soda and climb up to the rooftop. In the distance, plumes of smoke take flight into the air. Caravans of moving shapes; armies of stick-figures. "Lyudi," I think. I take a few crayons and a piece of paper and I sketch what I see; cavalry under the blue banner of a star, marching into the sun. Beautiful rockets whizzed into the sky to etch their names like heavenly pens. Nay-toe has come. I chew on a few dried pieces of fruit, and try to soften the thumping of my heart by rubbing my stomach. The concrete beneath me is supple, fluid; I worry it might turn to liquid at any moment beneath my feet. I draw a big beautiful star, swallowing up the sun.

When I spy a few of the stick-figures walking down the road towards me, I run down the stairs and hide beneath the windows of a classroom. I took my TT-33 from its holster; a good luck charm, and I feel less helpless as





my slight hands grip tightly 'round the steel. I imagine training my sights upon the stick-figures, and I pull the trigger and it happens all so effortlessly doesn't it? I rise up from the window just enough to peek over the broken glass and charred wood: three men, dressed in thick black frocks that were sooty with ash, carrying flamethrowers to envelop what was left of the city in flame. The chalk of the old world crumbles so easily under their boots. Trinkets hung from their belts which shook with every plodding step, their faces anonymous under gas masks... they suck on canned air, rubber-breathed, lifeless eyes behind glass lenses, animated like plastic slugs sucking on the cratered earth. I watched them; I felt dizzy, but I had nowhere to run.

After they'd set fire to the post office across the street, a few fire crackers fell from the windows of the cafe onto the street, and the three men dropped their flamethrowers and jumped down onto the ground. As they nervously played with their pistols, four children dressed in their father's military fatigues came up from behind them; they held up their sticker-encrusted short-barrelled rifles, took a few moments to aim, and after a few loud bursts the three men laid lifeless as blood leaked from their frocks. The air became thick with iron, and I sank



down onto the ground, crawling across the floor with glass cutting into my flesh, my bloody elbows leaving behind a trail of blood, and I jump up; running into the corridor with my tongue between my teeth. As the gunpowder smoke cleared, I heard crying, crying and searching in vain for anything sweet in the pockets of those men. As I dry the blood from my elbows with the hem of my black frock, I see the pianos I'd played for you earlier, and I tried to remember a few of the songs we used to sing. First I hum the note, then I try to find the note under my fingers. I try it a few times, a few of the notes sounding ugly and troubled under my voice; I follow with my fingers. I try to remember the words, but only the babbling of babies comes to me. "Ma, ba, da, da, ba, ma, ba;" I recover the melody with every syllable, something I'd left behind a rusting gate of which I'd lost the key a long time. "Ma, ba, da;" the sounds come to me so easily now. I remember watching you from across the seesaw, how your lips pursed when you formed the shapes to make the sounds-- it comes to me in a dream, as if it happens over & over again.

I stumble away from the piano; I've forced the hand of chance. The possibilities play in my head. My mind is in a haze; I'm there, I whistle the melody as you sang it. It is a way of coaxing you out of your lamp, to make



the colors real again. The sunlight fills the hallways of the school with glitter. Down the staircase, I see a child with a short-barrelled rifle hanging from his neck. He's wiping his face with his sleeve; once more, once again. He doesn't mean me harm, but I resist the urge to embrace him. I approach him with the grip of my hand 'round the cold steel of the TT-33, I try to remember if I'd ever hit anything. From behind the child, two more children fall into the picture. They wipe their faces; their black hair is full of clumps, their deep lips are charred and black. "Who are we?" One of them asks. I smile, out of nervousness I suppose. "Who are we?" The other one asks; his voice was like a trembling flute. I could not answer his question-- I did not know the answer, and I didn't know what to say. You are orphans to the Zone, and you face the terrible reality of absolute and complete freedom. You could be anything you wanted to be. The stars in the sky are a mystery again. I wasn't sure how to put all of that in words. I made two fists, and I stuck out my index fingers, and I set my fists upon my head to fashion horns that grew out of my skull. I make a beautiful grin and I grit my teeth towards the children, and they smile. "Nico Nico!" They cry out; they make their own horns and point to the sky. And I smile too and I say "druzhina moyá." And for a while, I'm lost in my thoughts of you.



THE EIGHTH THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:

« As the children of the 'druzhina' grew mature, they became increasingly anxious and out of touch with reality. One day, a concerned 'druzhnochka' came to Kali Hichi and expressed her desire to become a healer for her people. 'The cure for madness is to return to the world,' the 'druzhnochka' proclaimed. Kali Hichi shrugged. 'It's madness to say we were part of this world in the first place,' he said. 'Let the animals have the world I will return to my hotel.' »

Imagine the scene: you find me lying on a therapist's couch. It's your couch; the one your father bought for your mother after he called to say he'd be coming a few days late. My body is languid, but taut. You can see just the slightest bit of tummy stickin' out 'tween my shirt and my jeans. I look like easy prey, but not entirely sweet; you wonder about my after-taste steeped in tobacco and ice tea.

What it sez in the brochure: when a woman doesn't know who she is, she returns to her own body as the site of her identity. Her desirability becomes her sense of worth. She begins to worship her own helplessness.





Sheer fucking bio-power. I learned all about this in therapy. We have it twice a day here. Here, south of Heaven.

Am I supposed to know who I am? Like conceptually.

You stretch out on the couch; it's leathery and soft. You mean, "should I know who I am?" You doubt it's real leather – even the leather in your fantasy is plastic.

It's easy for you, Christine. You are a mere abstraction. You are an invention of some kind; I've given birth to you in a moment of crisis. You were nothing before I was impregnated with the idea of you. By the ejaculate of my imagination. Mhm.

And you too, Yelena, are a mere abstraction. You are a vessel for the idea of me. Before you were impregnated with the idea of me, you were nothing. You were a body held together by a mouth and a pair of legs. You are as much Christine as you are Yelena. You are a 'Mahimata'; your body is the production site of the future. Your mind is a womb, and pure desire is the sperm.

I'm a mere object. I'm carted around like a pair of sneakers. I belong on the back of a truck, to be sold for a few



roubli. My worth doesn't extend beyond me as a site of production. I'm a little doe-deer, caught in a trap.

I wish you'd put me down already!

Oh, but something comes to me.

You were upset about something, do you remember? I walked beside you; I sat beside you and you set your hand up against the window of the bus. The organs of the world passed by with jittering colors. You were depressed and I tried to cheer you up with a few jokes. "Look at the ugly rash on my leg." Oh. "Look at how small my boobs are." I see. We played shooting games in the arcade, and I'd push you down; I'd hold you down and make sure you couldn't make your targets as you wave 'round your plastic gun. And I fed you ice cream from a little wooden spoon and we shared a Dr. Pepper. And you were lost in your thoughts.

The mall was empty that day. Ghostly apparitions on the floors, breathing on a mirror. Columns disappearing into oceans of beige carpets. Set your nose to the fibers; you can smell teenage warchests plundered, and the decay of a whale carcass: hollow, sickly and thick with crushed candy and cinnamon. The glass dome lurches above us, an





eye that splits open the evening fog, and I'm stuck to you like chocolate melting in your pocket.

Bitch. I should say something about the congealed slices of pizza, and I should say something about the smell of paper, and stale vanilla air freshener. A dead mall smells like a bathroom. Down the escalator; an endless catalogue of phones and televisions, gathering dust. And you remember; you used to beg mamka for a little cash to try out the hoodies and t-shirts on the clearance rack. The mirrors are stained with grease. I have nothing to say I am exhausted.

We sat on a bench beside an empty fountain. The tiles are covered with shimmering pennies. You grab my hand and you turn the palm towards yourself.

I want to read your fortune.

That's frightening.

Why?

Dunno. What if I don't like what you have to say?

Don't be such a fucking pussy. What is "pussy" in your fake-ass language?



What is it?

Mhm. Mhm. Oh that's interesting.

What?

I see beautiful rolling fields of crystal. I see the sun exploding behind the horizon like a brilliant disk, filling valleys with burning hot light. Deer and rabbit run 'tween the leaves, 'tween teeny-tiny strawberries that hang on the vine, while under the soil a thousand insects writhe in agony.

Go on.

I see a time when it is brother versus brother. Sister versus sister. These will mean little when the dirt under your feet turns to glass dust. It gets into your lungs. When the sun falls upon it, a thousand little rainbows bloom. Isn't that beautiful.

Oh. I've had just the worst week. Can I tell you about it?

You can tell me anything. Really, anything. Have you kissed any boys lately?





I went looking for you. I was looking for myself, somehow. I was trying to recover myself, rescue myself. Most of my life has been drifting in-and-out of sleep, from one dream to another. Do you understand?

Does it matter?

No, it doesn't. Anyway, I paid a coyote to smuggle me into the Autonomous Zone.

The Autonomous Zone? What's that?

It's a place where flesh and material don't matter. It's a place where only thoughts matter, and its desires and wanting that bring its world to life. A world of pure commerce, of pure freedom, pure intercourse. An exchange of everything that is not material. All that is solid melts into thin air.

Sounds like Heaven. And who rules this kingdom?

Nay-toe does. But Nay-toe demands only that you desire, and you desire without holding anything back. That's why I went looking for myself there.

We both did, didn't we?



A few men kidnapped me and took me to a city ran by Korean pop-stans. I escaped when they started bombing it?

Why did they do that?

Liquidation. Sometimes, to make room for the new, you have to burn up the old. I found a child, Nay-toe's child. She couldn't speak because she was missing a tongue, and her face was molten.

Molten? It look like it melted?

Yes. Her face was liquidated. Nay-toe's daughter has no face, she has no tongue.

Yelena, Christine, Marena; these are mere daughters that grow out of the fertile mud of your thoughts. With a few filters and some smart angles, you could be any woman you wanted to be. They replicate endlessly; by themselves, possessing value and worth by mere circumstance. Without flesh, the old constraints of supply no longer matter. Flesh is limited, but desire and appetite might be endless. It must be; your minds and hearts must endlessly expand, to make room for endless permutations of daughters.



Strange. I realize I've spent most of my life dreaming.

Let me tell you where they took me.

That scares me too.

You don't have to be scared. To be honest, I belong there. I've always been a violent, misbehaving person. I'm not sure why. I think I want something that's not possible.

What?

Complete autonomy from the world. To be myself without compromise; to not have to accept that what I am is the consequence of the world that has created me, and nothing more. Value is subjective after all; I cannot look within myself for that, because my value exists only in my exchange. I used my fists to shape the world as I believed it should be.

Both you and I are orphans to this world. That's what set us free. We owe loyalty to nothing. Life means the same to us as death.

You remember that night? I know it's sad, and cringe, but it was the best night of my whole life.



I don't know where we were. I mean, I don't remember how we ended up there. It was someone's place; a shitty little spot made shittier by a basic dishonesty about its own shittiness. I woke up, with colored cheap lights beaming into my face. Islands of colors float among an ocean of speckled white paint. I pulled you up from the couch, and I slapped away the greedy hands, and I set you on my back, and I carried you like the queen you are. I carried you down the stairs, I carried you through darkened streets, and I set you up against a street light. I held your beautiful face in my hands and I kissed you on the forehead.

Are you in love with me?

I suppose I am. But it's not a kind of love I understand. It's not the love you see happening in a thousand parking lots, fogging up windows. It's something destructive, self-destructive. I don't want to be myself. I want to be you.

You can't deny what you've become.

I don't want to. Not anymore.

Do you remember the first time you became Christine? I invited you over to my place, and I dressed



you up in all that stuff I kept in the big box under my bed. I dressed you up in all that hot couture shit. I did your nails, I did your make-up. And it wasn't enough for you. To merely 'be' Christine wasn't enough. You loved me before you even knew what love was. And you exact your revenge with every single thirst-trap you post on the 'gram. You are a cruel, heartless bitch.

I took your hair, your face, your skin. You became a vessel by which I propagated myself. You are a symbol of the exotic; your body is the frontier, unconquered territory. Your eyes are the promise of taking without giving; a victory without competition. Your face is the future, and the future is always worth something. My own face is the forgotten past, populated with ruins and mass graves. I don't want to be a Nabokov; I want to be a Leung. I want to be an endless series of Leung(s), replicated and simulated by my followers. I took the body of that little bitch with bad grades and transformed her into an avatar for pure desire and its potential. I took the body of that annoying little runt from Hong Kong and I molded that flesh into a vessel by which to carry the spirit of Nay-toe. The future of desire is a computer-generated Asian girl standin' a-top a galaxy of ruins; she is the symbol of global capital. I



gave you life again. Without me, you're nothing, Christine. Without you, the name 'Yelena' is meaningless.

When I laid you in your bed, I stripped you of your clothes. I removed your canvas low-tops, and I pulled off your soft, meshy socks. I pulled on your distressed jeans, ripped at the knees, and I took off your cardigan, and I tore away the tee. You were open, nude as the news. I took a little hand mirror, and I set it up against my own body: these are my blushing, slick lips. These are my blonde strands of hair, delicately resting on the temple. These are my pert breasts; this is my tender belly button. These are my lacrosse scars, these are my stretch marks; this is my flat, inflamed nose. I watched the reflections of your shape resting on my body, covering you in slivers of light. Now tell me, where do you and I begin?

THE NINTH THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:

« The children of the 'druzhina' watched as the rivers turned sour and green; the sky was a sullen purple, and the air became thick like smoke. Kali Hichi shrugged, then took a few puffs from his pipe. The sky was filled with the screeching of dozens of rockets. 'When the thoughts of man can't live in peace with the world as it is, his thoughts declare war upon the world. If he must choose between his



thoughts or the world, he'll choose his thoughts. Mhm. And that is how the 'druzhina' came to understand that they were not of the world but despite it. 'Thoughts are the sword by which a monzhj will carve herself out.' »

I'm back in that place again. There's an endless lake stretching from my toes to the horizon. The sun seems to burn whatever it touches. Oh, I'd like to wake up from this dream but I seem every time to wake up to another dream instead. I shut my eyes and a new reality forms before me, and things make less sense than they did before. Oh Christine, come to me once more again. Why have you forsaken me?

Imagine I take a few hammers and a choice selection of a knife. And I start to carve you piece-by-piece. Delicately; I have no intent to harm you. We take off your face, then your hair. We detach arms and legs, we rearrange the boundaries of what you call 'Yelena,' or 'Christine,' or 'Marena.' And who is to decide that these are my hands or your hands? Who is to say that this is not your delicate neck sitting on my shoulders? If we join our lips, where do you and I begin?

Okay. Now let me see it all put into a single picture. Yes, I start from the top. I pick blonde hair because



it gives me the most points. Yep; we are trying to maximize our potential here. I pick the elven ears, for the cosplay potential. I pick the smallest, the cutest nose; I buttress this with thick yet neat eyebrows that form a perfect bow across my face. Full lips, but not too full. Give me a jaw worth framing. And let me twist this, let me endlessly rotate my own face and roll the desired constellation. Let me solve this riddle. Who am I meant to be?

You've been here before, Yelena. Nay-toe's cradle; where a race is born. Matter meets soul, meets pure spirit. You hold within you the seeds of a new culture. You are pregnant like a bitch, swollen with beasts yet to be given a name. Before they were only thoughts carried by the wind that haunts the zone, but you've given them shape & form, you've given them flesh. And who shall your children be? With which tongue might they speak? Which songs might they sing? So far your life has been a series of awakenings. A series of headaches, brought on by the bright light of fires & suns & rockets. A hot canvas onto which you might paint yourself, in brilliant red. That is the gift Nay-toe bestows upon you; the endless rearrangement of body according to the word-- did you know they call it in another tongue? And something in another tongue. There's a endless highway of tongues, stretching from





horizon to horizon. Another flash of light comes from the sky.

"Bitch," she says while sticking something into Christine's mouth. The orifice looks so needy, so open and willing. Drool runs down her neck; a river connecting one body to another. "Do you know where you are?" Christine looks around: the children are hungry; they chew on plastic as they play with their rifles. Christine mumbles; what she has to say does not matter, and no-one hears anything. "Every e-girl has the same fate," she sez. She sux on a lolipop, and her face is shiny and red with sooty eye shadow and long hair dyed pink in ponytails. "She dies on the screen, she's encased in amber forever. The image is her; the body rots away to perfect the image." She comes closer to Christine, close enough to smell her perfume; it smells like colors green and red and it's so bright that your eyes burn. "Do you know what I'm saying?" Christine shakes her head in the negative.

"Let me describe how beautiful you look," she sez. "I've bound you in rope; your wrists are tied together with dozens of bands, and your hands are held over your head by a long trail of rope that runs down your slender back. Your body is made lithe and defined by a rope



harness, which hugs your body such that even your modest curves become sleek exclamation points at the end of your sentence. And of course; your legs are spread by rope which ties your ankles to your thighs, and when you dare to shut them, I will force them open like a rapacious male driven mad by your beauty." Christine squirms and struggles. "And I record every movement; even the most delicate spasm is a spurt of hot, silvery oil that explodes from deep within the soil.. Don't you want to be like this forever, Christine? Haunting the imaginations of thousands?" Christine shook her head. "Endlessly reproducing yourself?" Christine shook her head. "And the little bears in the tribe will play with you forever." Christine shook her head.

Wait, hold up. Yelena, hold up.

What?

So you went looking for me in the Autonomous Zone? But I'm not real? I'm a figment of your imagination?

The part of you that lives in the world is a figment of my imagination. Your physical body is real, but that doesn't matter. No-one knows your physical body; they know my creation, the image of you that I've painstakingly pruned





and trimmed. Yes; a bit of fat there, a bit of face-tuning here. This is the Christine that we know. This is how I keep you as an image alive, even long after the flesh withers away. That is what Nay-toe gives us; you are the burden I carry.

You look for me in every image, don't you? I am the shadow of everything you refuse. I am the sexual negative of the power you deny yourself; I am the 'thot daughter' to your 'holy mother.' And your denial gives me life-- boys want to take my body and take it rough, and girls want to be the sort of girl like me who likes it rough. I am a bleeding orifice, a gateway into a fleshy and blood-splattered world where you are a fuck-crazed queen, a sloppy bitch who doesn't give a fuck; your head is full of plans to fuck someone else's boyfriend, and to take their money and their shit-- punish them for their pussy-lust. And you let me get away with it; it makes you hot to imagine me getting fucked in every way that you deny yourself. I'm a doll, a puppet for you to play with. I am a 'fuckable Sim,' and you 'plop' me in a room without a door full of polygonal studs.

No; no, not anymore. You're gone now. You belong to someone else now. You belong to the thousands who have



known your image. They have their own Christines-- let a hundred Christines bloom.

Then who are you supposed to be? Bitch, who do you think you are?

I'm the coming of Spring. My grasses run hot. I drown in the underworld, and I'm reborn in hot white heat.

Strange.

THE TENTH THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:

« On another day, the same 'druzhnochka' came to Kali Hichi and once again expressed her desire to become a healer for her people. She was confused; she did not understand why Nay-toe would make people sick, or start wars, or refuse to work. Kali Hichi came up to the 'druzhnochka' and asked her to examine herself. 'How does it feel to be healthy?' The 'druzhnochka' was confused. She touched her own body, and had forgotten she had it in the first place. She had felt nothing. 'It doesn't feel like anything to be healthy.' Kali Hichi smiled. 'But if you're sick?' The 'druzhnochka' responded: 'yes, I can feel it when I'm sick.' Kali Hichi followed her thought: 'same with peace. It is inert. But war is impossible to ignore. The same is true



of the indignities of work. But once we refuse to work, we are visible once more.' »

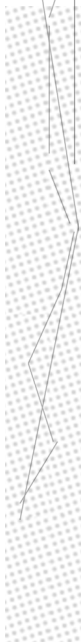
Yelena watched from the top of the Ministry of Culture overlooking the "based camp" as the artillery pulverized the city of glass around them into a fine powder; the dust formed billowing, gigantic clouds of fog that rushes through the valleys, through the mountains, covering everything in a shining, white film. The dome of glass beside her had been shattered, and the ground was full of debris and shattered concrete. Blood mixed freely with oil; metal shrapnel with bone. The boys and the 'Alphas' had scattered into various directions, nervously waiting for instructions from the group chat. Yelena looked at Little King Samuel; he seemed nervous and ready for a fate he is yet to comprehend. His sweaty palms played with his phone, spun in the center like a fidget spinner. "What should I do?" he whispered to Yelena. When the shells began ripping through the bunker, Little King Samuel had covered Yelena with his body-- she felt she owed him something, her gratitude softened her heart. But she understood nothing of the Zone nor the lost souls dwelling its fresh winds; the women had fled back underground, locking the boys behind them. They would wait for their own men to return, in life or in death. "What should I



do?" he asked again, with his face stuck in a nervous smile. Yelena thought of telling him that he was at the end of this journey, that his subscribers would not be seeing his content on their feeds once more, but this depressed her.

"I have someone I care about, Samuel," her voice was soft, promising. She touched Samuel's arm, and she felt the tension that laid beneath his skin. "I have someone I care about, a lot. She's just a little girl. She has a wound on her face, and she can't speak." Samuel looked at Yelena's face, studied it for the first time; the flaky skin, the redness of the flesh beneath the fine hairs, the way the edges of her lips were so slightly crooked... "I'll find her for you, Lena." He looked out towards the horizon; thousands of little pillars of smoke fucked the mountains with a terrible screech and a flash. "Because I need you," he said with a pathetic tremble. Yelena felt her face grow heavy, and a sudden warmth came into her chest; she'd missed being needed by someone. "And she needs me, Samuel," she answered.

Once the bombing had subsided, Yelena followed Samuel back down into the missile complex, which had transformed into an orifice of burning metal and petroleum fume. Several of the levels were covered in white fire-ex-





tinguishing foam, which sputtered out of the ventilation shafts and doors with gooey excess. Paco and Groypee met them on the ground floor, their faces covered in a sticky drama of oil and sweat. "It's NATO," Groypee wheezed between deep breaths. "NATO liquidation. They're emptying this entire sector of the zone, and executing anyone that doesn't surrender." Little King Samuel's face turned white; he sucked nervously on his vape. Paco blew a silent kiss at Yelena, then played with the bolt of his AR-15 pattern rifle; a little anime figurine with a leash 'round its neck hung from the barrel. "Groypee, Paco; go find a little girl with a wound on her face," Little King Samuel ordered with a tremble. "Half of her face looks like it's melting," Yelena interjected. "And she can't speak--" she added. "She can't speak," Little King Samuel repeated. "Find her and bring her here," with a bit more authority. Paco and Groypee stood quietly, in waiting. "Because I said so!" Little King Samuel shouted. Paco and Groypee looked at Yelena, then turned away; the broken glass crunched beneath their feet. "They won't fail me," Little King Samuel said to Yelena, to comfort both of them. Yelena picked up a large jacket from the ground beside a few chunks of broken concrete, brushed away some of the ash, and covered her shoulders with it. Little King Samuel's head hung down; he watched her with a strange expression she'd nev-



er seen him wear before. "What," Yelena said. Little King Samuel thought about what his response should be. His expression died away, slowly, as sleeplessness set in: "what do you think should happen next?" he said.

Outside of the Ministry of Culture building, a crowd of boys were shouting and chanting: "based! Based! Based!" And they hooted & holler'd; above their heads, a doll shook with every wave of the mob. Yelena walked out towards the crowd, Little King Samuel following her, and the crowd cheered as they moved towards Yelena with enthusiastic smiles. She saw the strange twitching of their faces, full of chain lightning. They looked like creatures drunk on blood. The crowd spread as they stood before Yelena, and a few of the boys brought the doll down on the splintered, burning ground before her.

Yelena wiped the sweat and tears, the hardening makeup from her face; before her, on a large bed sheet, laid Nico Nico Nicole. Her ankles and wrists were bound with belts & chains, her pink overalls stained with dust & blood. Her face, her hair were more of a clump than the shape of something human; her beaming eyes looked up at Yelena like two collapsing suns. Her breathing sputtered, and with every wheeze a dust cloud shot forth from her



throat. Yelena bent down towards her, as if she were gazing into a placid pool-- Nico Nico Nicole squirmed, her full lips trembling and shaking. Little King Samuel bent down beside Yelena, and he took Yelena's hand in his hand, and he took Nico Nico Nicole's hand in his other hand, and he whispered: "Ok... yeah, I ran out of time, Yelena. But, please, will you join me in the coming of spring?" Yelena took her hand away, stowing it closer to her heart; she felt a strange gratitude in being able to stretch her fingers as wide as they would go.

Little King Samuel rose to his feet; his shadow stretched over the crowd of boys with needy faces, and Yelena had never seen such bliss before. She felt electricity run over her fingertips, and she felt the sudden longing to touch someone-- she felt the longing to spread this electricity. She reached for Nico Nico Nicole's face; she wiped away the dust from her face, and found hot rudely skin under the surface. "I don't know what's going to happen," Yelena said. "But know that I'm here with you, somehow." A plume of smoke rose from the depths of her chest, and Yelena heard the faintest crackle of a voice. "-", she said. Yelena tore off part of her frock, spat into it, and tried to clean Nico Nico Nicole's face: first she wiped her cheeks, then her lips, and her finely-articulated brows.



One should face her destiny with the cutest, most elegant face she might muster-- Yelena thot. "I think we've met before, haven't we?" Nico Nico Nicole's eyes remained wide, open; Yelena saw herself in the trembling blue surface of her iris.

"My brahs," Little King Samuel shouted. The boys stood at attention, with their dirty white shirts and their snot-filled noses. "My brahs!" once more, he belowed, with a voice ten-fold his size. The boys fell to a hushed silence at the sound of the resounding trumpet of destiny, calling upon them to meet their fate. "Look above you, my brahs. 'We're all gonna make it, brah.' Look above you... the infinity, Nut herself smiles upon you. Oh! What is man, what is woman?" The boys smiled and shouted in response: "every man and every woman is a star!" Little King Samuel smiled, and he motioned at the tallest boy to take him upon his shoulders, where Little King stood like a prophet. "Today, we abandon the smothering arms of the bitch Earth-Mother, and we take our place 'tween the warm tits of the universe. Who, who among you is with me?" The boys resounded, screaming in applause, and they lifted the body of Nico Nico Nicole into the air by her bed sheet in holy procession. "Look to the mountains, my brahs!" The boys cheered; they lifted Yelena up by her an-





kles, letting her body rest on the shoulders of a squadron of boys. "Look to the mountains; look at how the burning disc of the sun is penetrated by the peaks of the mountains there amongst the phosphor-colored skies!" The rays of the sun entered the glass, and covered the valleys in thousands of shimmering colors, as if reality itself was slit open to let its luminous vitality ooze away.

"Break, break, break!" Little King Samuel shouted as they marched up towards the lip of the missile complex, where the hot, red, burning tip of the rocket pointed towards the skies. "On thy cold gray stones, O sea!" A spear of destiny formed, with Nico Nico Nicole at its head. "And I would that my tongue could utter," Little King screamed. "The thoughts that arise in me!" Yelena felt the buzzing of a million horns rattle in her ears; she felt the deafening sound of the boys clamoring beneath her, single in purpose, marching into time like a lighting bolt that might scorch the earth. She felt frightened; frightened by the possibilities suggested by her will. The boundaries between mind & body now seemed to threaten utter collapse; the beasts beneath her have no longer a need for a name, for they were merely the atoms at play in some great burst of energy. Little King Samuel stepped down from the boy's



shoulders, and stretched out his arms towards the missile that steadily rose from its womb.

"Tonight, my brahs, we return to Nut her long-lost daughter. We will purify the heavens by purging the Earthly body, and restore the honor of the night." Little King Samuel stood on one of the hydraulic arms that pumped hard as it erected the missile, and faced the crowd of boys as they stretched out their arms to extend Nico Nico Nicole towards the missile. "Do you not love her, my brahs?" The crowd screamed in acknowledgement. "Is she not the most beautiful puppy-e-girl gyatt semen demon you've ever seen in your lives?" The boys climbed the hydraulic arms, pulling up Nico Nico Nicole by her legs using rope, and securing her onto the red head of the missile. "Just as it was in the Iliad, we will eat of Nico Nico Nicole's body, and we will ask Nut to deliver us onto death with honor." Yelena watched with feverish anticipation, her forehead boiling with the heat of others; Nico Nico Nicole hung from the shaft of the missile as the boys cut away at her clothing with knives to expose her precious nudity. It was ritual defilement; they transformed her into an animal, into an extraterrestrial creature which hovered above the soil. "And in exchange, we shall impregnate the





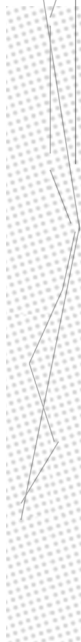
skies with an incredible burst of vitality; we will fuck the world."

The boys stood there in the shadow of the missile, its tip hot and needy; some of them with hard cocks, others with faces sweaty and red. Are we together in the world again? The image crept into her mind: the missile exploding, filling the greedy orifice of the night sky with light, and the dust of Nico Nico Nicole's body covering the earth to return life. They hold up their phones with unsteady hands, jittery frames cumming in-n-out of focus. And thereby, the image is scattered to the wind, transformed, such that Nico Nico Nicole's cute little face becomes a totem of Nay-toe's power. "Yes," Yelena muttered to herself. "Every image of a hot fuckable body is a totem of Nay-toe's power; it is a symbol of the market's fertility as a pure image, such that it reproduces perfectly without matter. When Nico Nico Nicole wears her cat-ears for her subscribers, every saved GIF of her becomes a talisman of Nay-toe's power; 'wear my feet pics 'round your neck, and you'll find no flesh to be irresistible to the awesome power of the market.' When she speaks of wanting to be fucked by strange men, it is Nay-toe which possesses her, and speaks through her." And the whole thing is being streamed live, frame-by-delirious-frame. Endless replication; her body is no longer



her own but merely an array of organized color, differing from your body only in how those colors are arranged. Yelena clutches at her own stomach—fleshy worms twisted and writhed within her; eating her from the inside out.

She tears at her stomach, revealing the innards. She's herself, yes, but the innards reveal nothing about herself. The deeper she digs into the viscera & guts, shooting out hot blood like a derrick, the greater the arbitrariness of this flesh, of this tendril and this artery. She is a tower of meat, with unremarkable insides; her body makes her anonymous. The image of herself which she projected onto the world had nothing to do with her body. It was an invention, a fantasy of a mind that wishes to see the world in a certain light. It was no less artificial than the cuties on the 'gram, cut-up, touched-up, reconstructed pixel-by-pixel. She clutches at her own body, feeling the fat and bones 'neath her fingertips; there is nothing of herself here. She invents herself because this means nothing to her: she is a delusion, a product of time + space. She is stillborn, brought into a world defective by inadequacy. To be born is to be forced to acknowledge that inadequacy—to be born is to be alien. She looks up at the tip of the missile from which the little slut hung: Nico Nico Nicole's ears were hot, and her flesh yielding. The rope cut into the





meat of her body, such that it bulged and spilled beyond its sinewy borders. When the missile fucks the dark orifice of the night sky, Nico Nico Nicole's cute little body will fill the emptiness with milky-white flesh, and the stars will be a mystery once more.

Yelena walked away from the crowd standing in the shadow of the missile, and no-one seemed to care; she felt she'd become invisible. Invisible, and yet completely in bondage. She saw nothing but glass in every direction; freedom is meaningless if she has nothing to do. Bored, she walked towards the mountains, of which a jagged peak stuck into the sun as it collapsed into the purple horizon. Above her, a large tower encased in glass shot rays of rainbow across the white, shimmering soil. So much energy, she thought as she covered her face with her hands to protect her from the blinding rays; the soil is boiling with energy, and yet everything around Yelena is inert and dead. The valley between the peak of the mountains gave the impression of two hands reaching towards the sun; well fuck, now I remember how that one goes:

THE ELEVENTH THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:

« Kali Hichi went down his mountain, and saw that the 'druzhnochka' who came to him earlier simply



would not leave. ‘Gospod Kali Hichi,’ she spoke to him in a desperate voice, full of longing. ‘I want no life but yours,’ she said. ‘I love thee, and I wish to be your disciple. And I wish to be your “lyubovnitsa.”’ And Kali Hichi accepted her, for his solitude had started to bore him, and boredom offered no enlightenment.

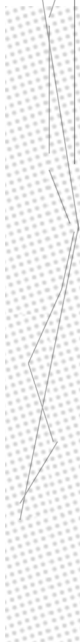
‘And what shall I call thee?’ Kali Hichi asked.

‘My ‘lyubovnichek,’ she whined. ‘I have no name of my own. What should I call myself?’

Kali Hichi shrugged. ‘Pick the first thing that comes to mind. You may change it whenever you wish. You have no bondage to that name. For your name only represents yourself, your own ego; some sort of attempt at being yourself.’ The ‘druzhnochka’s’ eyes grew weary and she sat on the stone beside him.

‘If I’m not myself, my ‘lyubovnichek,’ who am I?’ she asked.

‘You are a self with a name, at war with a reality that exists around you without name; within you. You will do things, feel things beyond the control of what your name should represent. And you feel shame because who you are and what you do will grow distant as it does between lovers.’





Kali Hichi embraced the ‘druzhnochka,’ and smelled her hair, and touched her face. She was overwhelmed with a sudden, piercing sadness.

‘I will be your ‘lyubovnichek,’ he said. ‘Pick any name, and I shall call thee that.’

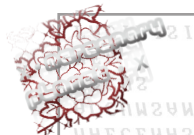
‘I will be your ‘lyubovnitsa,’ she said. ‘But I worry that if I may be called any name, if I am bound by no name, then I am merely to float among the vacant stars; like my name, the fact of my life is a mere accident. If I’m thrown into existence, what world exists to catch me, my dear ‘lyubovnichek?’

Kali Hichi didn’t answer. He embraced her. »



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by: [baroquepiral](#) + Escher McDonell

MERCENARY PLANET

Halation

Likes: see Appendix A

Dislikes: see Appendix B

Blood type: N/A

Date of birth: Earth/Contemplation Corrected Synchronized Time™ est. 1455

+/- 3y (original network),

1868 +/- 2y (isolated body)

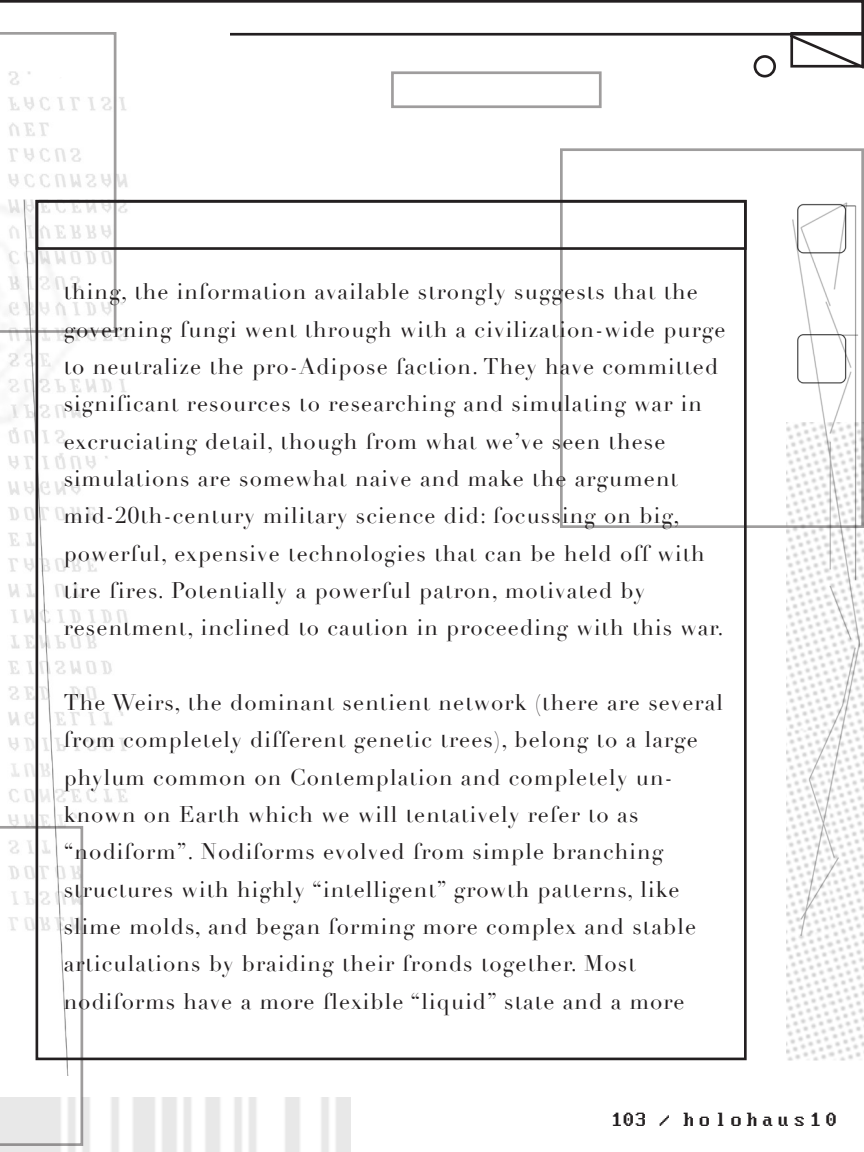
Theme song: Shnabubula

- Milky Way









POI datafile

Contemplation is a super-massive gas giant whose atmospheres are laced with sentient fungal networks. History shows that computational life had a tendency to look on non-computational life similar to them as a kind of bastard animal — they aren't friends to nature's machines. They are, however, hugely influential. Through a wide range of symbiotes, they've established the closest thing to what our SF authors might call an empire — two planets, their moons, and some asteroids have all been colonized by the polity centered around Contemplation. It is a bastion of anti-Adipose sentiment — while our visitor hasn't confirmed any-



thing, the information available strongly suggests that the governing fungi went through with a civilization-wide purge to neutralize the pro-Adipose faction. They have committed significant resources to researching and simulating war in excruciating detail, though from what we've seen these simulations are somewhat naive and make the argument mid-20th-century military science did: focussing on big, powerful, expensive technologies that can be held off with tire fires. Potentially a powerful patron, motivated by resentment, inclined to caution in proceeding with this war.

The Weirs, the dominant sentient network (there are several from completely different genetic trees), belong to a large phylum common on Contemplation and completely unknown on Earth which we will tentatively refer to as “nodiform”. Nodiforms evolved from simple branching structures with highly “intelligent” growth patterns, like slime molds, and began forming more complex and stable articulations by braiding their fronds together. Most nodiforms have a more flexible “liquid” state and a more



defined “solid” one, though none take the dimorphism as far as the Weirs, who pushed the evolutionary limits of both solid and liquid “intra-activity” as far as humans did the brain size arms race of the great apes. Indeed, the dense knots of millions of fibres act as a brain, and Weir consciousness emerged from its complex internal language of pressure and chemical signals before they learned to transfer its qualitative imprint to their liquid form. Despite its delicate structure and near-immobility, this gave them the symbiotic advantage of acting as “pilots” for larger, less intelligent lifeforms.

Like the Towers, the Weirs have been directing their evolution by targeted epigenetic interventions for almost as long as their existence is recorded, and they are an ancient species even by the standards of the galactic community. Early adherents of Meteorology in a roughly 80% planetary conversion, they contributed a lot of their own already-developed philosophies of inter- and intra-operation to its conceptual lexicon. To give them a “species character” (a framing Commander Lillywhite is



insistent never to use but everyone from a strategic office wants), it would be a kind of peaceful, naive insistence, achieving by insinuation what on Earth would require overwhelming violence. They have whole specific cultures in different species, that basically live in them full time like you'd live in different countries. On Contemplation and on other planets.

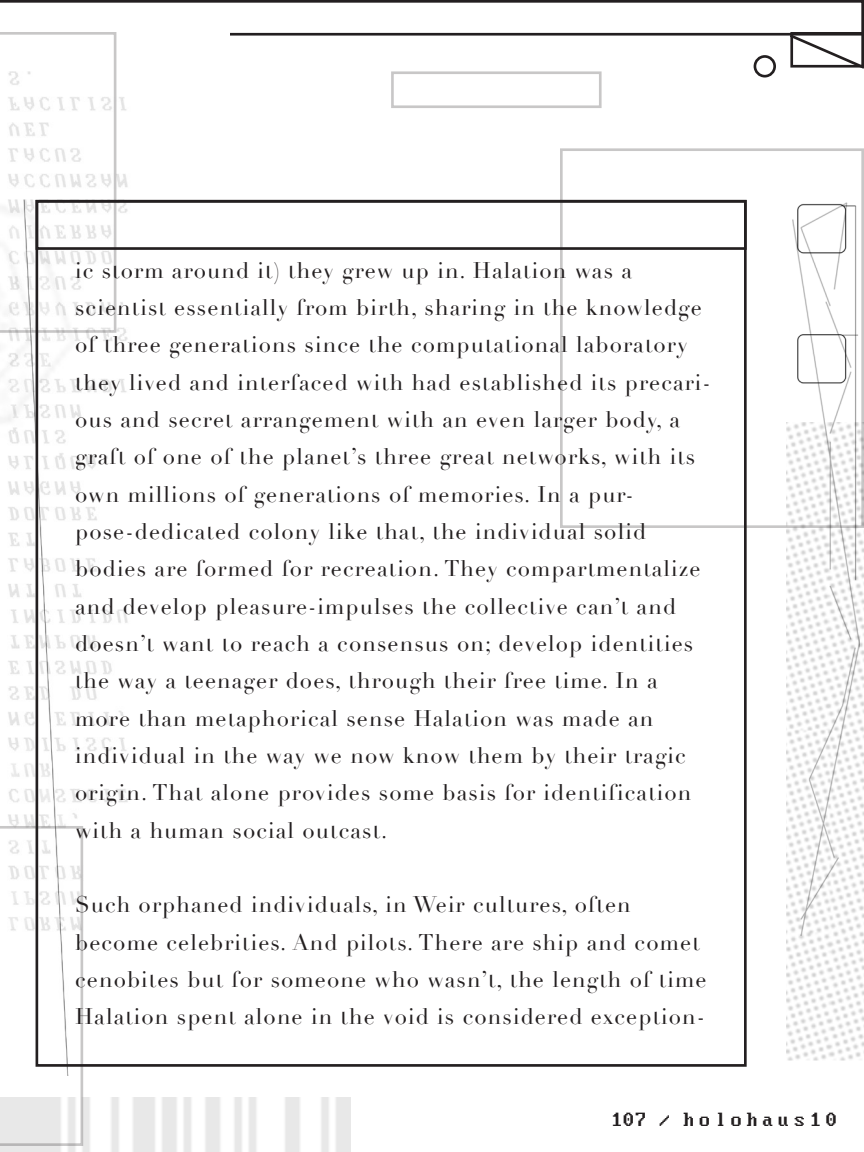
To be clear, I do believe Halation abides by the elaborate ethical system they have explained in Appendix B pertaining to their hosts. They also seem genuinely perturbed at the idea of sharing a body with any other human, or even any other Weir doing so, in part because a degree of modification of the Weir by the host is almost unavoidable. The gendered identity they have shown occasional indications of would be a case of this. Many Weirs fade into the backgrounds of their hosts' minds as executive assistants or imaginary friends. But it would be very hard to retain command over a Weir-symbiotic human, and not only for political reasons. This is a better card in Commander Lillywhite's hand than she seems to



realize.




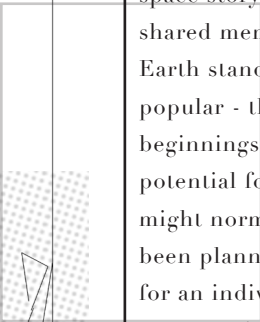



To completely set one's randomly encountered host apart from their whole species, as a strategic actor with a lifetime of experience eclipsing a human's - to never flinch from it in months of interrogations, including from guys with spooky MK training we don't even understand - still, however, demands explanation beyond hard bargaining or absorption of the Commander's misanthropy. A lot of the old men insist that we have no basis to refer to any alien emotion as 'love'; Bennett-Fog has noted in the strongest terms that she will call it like she sees it.

For one thing, for a Weir to have quite as distinct an identity as Halation in the first place is anomalous, and inseparable from their condition as a refugee. Though the solid body provides an immutable identity anchor, such bodies are formed, like mushrooms, at will by a network within a larger host, such as the Barkhan (a filter grazing creature of the internal complexity of a gigantic single-celled lifeform, moving by dragging an electromagnet-



ic storm around it) they grew up in. Halation was a scientist essentially from birth, sharing in the knowledge of three generations since the computational laboratory they lived and interfaced with had established its precarious and secret arrangement with an even larger body, a graft of one of the planet's three great networks, with its own millions of generations of memories. In a purpose-dedicated colony like that, the individual solid bodies are formed for recreation. They compartmentalize and develop pleasure-impulses the collective can't and doesn't want to reach a consensus on; develop identities the way a teenager does, through their free time. In a more than metaphorical sense Halation was made an individual in the way we now know them by their tragic origin. That alone provides some basis for identification with a human social outcast.

Such orphaned individuals, in Weir cultures, often become celebrities. And pilots. There are ship and comet cenobites but for someone who wasn't, the length of time Halation spent alone in the void is considered exception-



al, akin to a hunger strike or charity run. It appears to have been at least somewhat inspired by their love of space diplomacy stories - yes that's the main genre of space story in space - which congealed traumatically from shared memories after their expulsion. Low conflict by Earth standards but it's pretty easy to see why they're popular - the travel times create dramatic structures, beginnings and endings, meetings and separations, potential for misunderstanding where communication might normally be instantaneous. Contemplation had been planning a mission like this for a while and waiting for an individual with the right personality profile. Which means we're dealing with them by extension whenever we're dealing with Halation in ways Halation may not even know. They insist that they were not intended to hit Earth - they were sent off course by an ambush along their trajectory (remember Inchworm Drives project their paths out hundreds of light years at a time) and had a phase dissonance error that would have sent them flying off the arm of the galaxy if they hadn't made another emergency redirection onto the nearest named planet. (Planets

hosting life above the 3rd level of interoperability with Weirs are registered by the Naming Authority of Contemplation; only about 40% are contacted on any regular basis.)

Crash landing and breaking their streak thus marks a third complete life shift. It is not wildly uncommon for Weirs to partner with other species for life (there might be a gender-analogous categorization based on tendency to do this but we're not sure?) - we believe this has not yet been formally been promised due to the analogies to human romance and Leona's own scruples about this topic. Not that we should expect to get them to bind to another human - they are in something called a Balance-pact which is equally binding given specific conditions, and makes even physical removal (where it's possible - there are a number of methods known to Contemplation) virtually impossible. But still, preventing any escalation of their pact - and exploiting any tension over its meaning - should be considered strategic objectives.



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

stranded on the surface of Towers, Leona grapples with the escalating complexity of a conflict involving alien air support, ethnic rivalries and conflicting historical accounts



CW: radicalization, genocidal ideology, sex work, explicit sex (human-alien), war, violence, death, firearms, decapitation, body horror, hive behaviour, high-speed flight, intense disorientation, evolutionary psychology, colonialism, bombardment, mass destruction

At least Halation was surprised too. I don't know how I would have handled it if she wasn't.

It was a sour surprise. That's the best way I can describe it. Like lactic acid that has built up in a muscle and suddenly burst through it.

That was one of her metaphors. Or one where her affect flowed through the metaphors of my experience. Which at least she had shared several times by now.

There were others in different kinds of bodies, but this one, from my body, was one of the best.

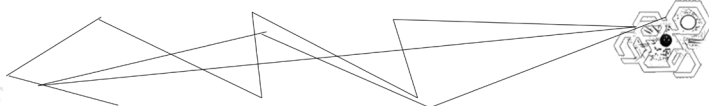
EROS & THANATOS/EROSION & EXPLOSION (THE SOLDIERS' ROAD 5)

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TUCN2
WCCNWSW
WNECENW2
NINENBV
COMMOD
B12N2
CBVNDW
NTRICE2
SSE
SWSLEWD1

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0N12
T10N4
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DOROVE
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TUBOVE
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TNCIDIDN
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NIBICE2
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That was something she could objectively compare. *You could too, if you wanted to test it. I'm still open.* Like link-surfing between qualia, like collecting paint chips at the hardware store for colours of experience - on tense nights this was how I would go to sleep, just following chains of associations through the labyrinth of Halation's memories. Our dreams had started to merge, though mine retained their own shape, like a cloud within clouds. That was my affect flowing into her metaphors - well-worn ones, encountered again and again by species after species.

I couldn't pretend there was nothing she could be hiding from me. I would have had to extend, to disperse, all the way through those clouds to be aware of everything in them, like a vapour. But it wasn't as if she controlled them, could move them all around me at will. (Although she was better at it than me. Among Weirs, plastic control of mind and body were kindred arts of "intra-operability". They even had levels - she estimated herself an 18 physical (having climbed from 15 just since training with me) and a 12 mental out of a known 29. The Servant of Possibility we had faced had been higher, into territory she would consider elite even on Contemplation, or in a dedicated military unit.)





Even then - something important, some carcass growing slimegrass in the deep clouds, could always be escaping me, on its own, just as it had escaped Hala-tion's own attention.

Escaped her, she used that image, like a deer bolting out of our field before I could take a photograph. There were things she raged at herself about, and this hadn't been one of them, she hadn't even thought to look up what happened on Hammers after she had passed into this arm.

Hosts of Weirs always learned to navigate these kinds of information asymmetries somehow. And Weirs who interfaced with computational lifeforms, all the more so. I hadn't found it particularly hard. I wasn't a jealous person. Maybe Bennett-Fog was right - maybe I had taken it too easily.

This was all old. I remembered the line that had most impressed her in our first gruelling week of interrogations - *If my intra-operability was sufficient to manipulate one of you, I wouldn't be so attached to this vulnerable host. I wouldn't fear falling into your hands, or hesitate to cooperate with your authorities.*



(That said, it was easy enough to manipulate a person just living with them in physical space. I know girls who would have been very disappointed that an alien from a morally superior civilization, capable of sharing their body and every waking thought, not to mention synthesizing hormones in their own body etc., would have been this scrupulous about consent.)

This wasn't the distance between us now.

The distance between us now, as I write this, is literal.

Before I got into this, I asked myself again how much it would be possible to be guilty for something I couldn't know. Not just in the sense of not having enough information you could have spent more of your time and energy hunting out but when the best information, the best model is wrong. Mai had had to cope with the Ender's Game OCD by convincing herself you couldn't. It was the same, she said, as when her dad said if she'd been born the missionaries came she would have gone to hell automatically - and of course the book was written by a homophobic Mormon.

But forget Ender's Game, wasn't this Oedipus





Rex? Meteorology contended that the moral imperative to know the universe accurately stems from the possibility that one is causing harm without knowing it. Retro-active debts can only be prepaid.

That said, nothing we could actually do was absolutely one way or another enough to meet this hypothetical. Any mistake was a result of carelessness, and where I grew up, where she did, any mistake that might have cost even a single life was supposed to be enough to unmoor one's own. The words I remembered thrown at everyone who could even vaguely be blamed for Delilah's death... at Sophie, for 'enabling' her being the person she would have been anywhere, or at her ghost for daring to break Sophie's heart... For all I had conveyed about our death planet, wasn't it strange that we cared this much? That nobody I knew except maybe Mab - *and that was what made her different from everyone else* - had blood on our hands except by a million paper-cuts, every twelve dollars we spent on cigarettes instead of reparations or guns or each other? Every politician, of course, was different, but that was why we hated them. Maybe if we spread their power out, death could have the right weight. Everyone could have the responsibility of saving or failing one life, and if they failed they took



their own.

I remembered wondering, talking to Jax in hushed tones about whether my dad's work had ever killed anybody - driven them to suicide or starvation. Because he came to every dinner with a pre-emptive excuse for why they all would have deserved it anyway, how they would have done it themselves if he hadn't come along first. Until I saw how long people could scrape along at the bottom, I imagined those happened a lot more than they did. I tried to imagine it as the care of a protector until I realized he didn't. The worst were the stories where he deduced, from some shadow of a flinch or innuendo, that the kids were being abused. He never did anything in those stories, just smirked out some minced prayer and asked us, "jokingly", to thank him. To this day I can't say for sure what he should have done - confronted them "man to man"?

It was a mistake to think about this qualitatively instead of quantitatively. I already knew this quality of guilt, it was just ratcheting up by exponents, but I didn't grow as fast as that. Halation hadn't and for her it had been hundreds of years, most of which just felt like days if I gave myself the time I wanted to procrastinate in





them.

I had barely done this since I got on the ship. I didn't even have my personal drive here, but the Denpa had its own folder of essential files. I had slipped this one in there between our core briefings and Year 24 classics. Delilah's *Dickgirl Jacks Off In A Tent On The Streets Of Seattle* series. You have to understand that in her will she said anyone who stops looking at these just because she dies for some stupid reason is a cuck who should just pay Sophie \$15 for another Fireball instead. You also have to understand how happy she is in these videos. Growing up as a boy you're taught that nobody you watch having sex, or have sex with will ever be happy with it the way you are discovering it. You're always getting something over on someone. The camera hangs in the vertex of the tent, and on the NASA sleeping bag she rolls and kicks her feet in the air as she strokes her golden-smooth dick. She strikes air guitar poses, whips her wet hair in the camera.

I couldn't get off. The guilt I hadn't felt since I reversed it had risen again like a seawall. "I" had permission, but would the me that existed now, that Delilah could never have foreseen? How many soldiers on



board this mission had looked at these images, did this at night - I imagined her as a Marilyn Monroe pin-up painted on a missile, and although she probably would have loved nothing more, wanted to vomit. And I needed to get off even just to wipe my thoughts for 2-3 minutes so I could live in my body enough to go on thinking, this had been discouraged in the Coven of Domnu and I had stopped trying to force myself to like increasingly rarefied porn both harmless and tasteful enough for my needs which was good but that meant I could be counted on to go into a panic attack (if not, they would induce it) unless I let Mab pick someone for me to service. Mai was the first person to tell me she did it for the same reasons and imagined nothing but swirling strands of light, gently wrapping around her, the birth of a star. I was never able to get the hang of this the way Mai did; I ran out of imagination for abstraction, it reduced to a screensaver; if I tried to visualize spontaneously, like in that Body of Light meditation, I would be walking down some endless concrete alleyway towards an ambivalent blue like the dawn breaking over the first morning metro. Maybe I didn't even feel desire the way Delilah did, even Mai did, maybe I just needed that light after, that laying my head down. But I needed something outside me to lay my head on.





I lay there tenser than I had been before, my thoughts duller and more serrated. I tried to sleep and couldn't. It took less than half an hour for me to jump down and rap on the outside of Halation's atmosphere tube like a scared child going up to the door of their parents' bedroom. Her knowledge dwarfed mine, not even just in some standardized value measured in time, but in the size and colour and richness of her world, but I didn't usually think about us this way, because we felt not that different sized within our own. *She was big enough to destroy a research station without even knowing it.* And she had been surprised by that too. *As big as her own home, that she never left.* Who was I to weigh my own guilt in accepting her, like she was some friend I had just read a callout post against. Her own guilt was more than big enough for the both of us. A vast ocean she was keeping silent and still so I could float on it. *Even though I wanted it.* Her voice crept along my nerves like frostbite. *I was reaching out across the universe with my voice - as if, so alone in my ship, I was actually spreading myself into every gravitational cranny of the infinite dark - the flimsy warning sticker of heresy applied to the thoughts - and spreading to everyone who listened to me. I think I actually said that in one of my speeches. Although not that one. I couldn't keep those thoughts in the same place*



at the same time - and we both put so much faith in my intra-operability. But if in that moment I had known a station just like mine was being destroyed, I would have said it was for the best. I knew that moment, I'd known people I still would have trusted over most of this army who spent all their time inside it, just never actually acted on it. I don't even have the excuse of being a pursuit predator with social hierarchies based on displays of aggression like you. I just took my suffering and folded it inside out. And it was bigger on the outside than the inside, now I don't even know how much bigger. I don't even know if I should feel bad now. I mostly do because you do, but you know nothing about... I'm sorry. I've been in you this whole time, and you haven't flinched away from feeling any of it with me. For all you've been worrying about asymmetries, your focus at any one moment isn't smaller than mine - you know me as well as I do.

Tears were starting to seep out of my eyes that could neither hold themselves open or shut and I rolled over. I had pulled three blankets up on the hammock but there was a layer of ineradicable cold, thinner and slicker than Halation, covering my skin, airgapping me from all the warmth I had accumulated on the outside, making me wriggle and roll my shoulders and dig my elbows into the fabric for friction. Halation rolled out





a layer and vibrated against my pores, a trick she'd learned for when I got these kinds of mentally-induced shivers - god damn it, I was starting to thicken again. She retreated per our agreement, and the tide of cold washed back over me.

My dick didn't go down, and writhing deeper into the blankets didn't help. All the tension, all the horror didn't help - they needed help, the kind they could only get with the dark and the body and its brute physics, *memento mori*, finishing myself like a shattered skull. Our agreement was, for all the obvious ethical and pragmatic reasons, she stayed out of my most explicit memories except when they came up unavoidably, and I got off while she was in the tube - they were similar acts of self-maintenance. Technically we were already absurdly physically intimate, these boundaries sometimes felt like the kind of parental guidance double standard characteristic of my country, I didn't even object to sharing my mind while I pooped. But as an anthropologist I understood "sex" as primarily something symbolic, an intimacy that exceeded all others in its ability to stand in for them. And also in its ridiculousness, the ridiculousness that I was doing this while trying to process infinite death and also that I felt weirder about this



than I would eating ice cream or downing a six pack.

I'm sorry, I don't want to make you go back in again right after you came out. At least at Tuber Plug she could revert to her natural body in a real environment, letting her out into the tube always felt like returning a Pokemon to its Pokeball. But then the Weirs' natural bodies were already so restrictive compared to what they could do in a host - one of the hardest things for me to wrap my head around was why they bothered in the first place, why they hadn't simply engineered themselves into perfect symbiotes that could live anywhere. Some had. Maybe I would have become a Servant of Possibility if I had grown up on Contemplation - maybe that was my cursed relation to my body, which again wasn't the same as every trans woman's, one of the things I watched Delilah for was to vicariously *enjoy* it as much as she did - although Servants of Possibility weren't just the Meteorological equivalent of transhumanists, they espoused a *more* restrictive vision of physical possibility, an obligation to optimize. Fuck I didn't want to be thinking about this I wanted to be rubbing my shaft and feeling it fatten and leach reality from the rest of my body into its whale-belly but *whoops*. Halation was still there. *I came back for the thoughts - I had something to say*





- I moved first - I knew you were there but forgot - *I can leave, of course - or not.*

Power, asymmetry, something humans had made so much of while understanding so little. Meteorology and the Weir symbiosis ethics that were synthesized with it have a whole language for these which are everywhere in the galaxy; that make up the dilemmas I was racking my brain over just a few paragraphs ago. All information asymmetry is power, but not necessarily in the abusive or temptingly abusable ways humans were used to, on our planet where it almost always goes hand in hand with other kinds of power, where everyone either carries a knife behind their back or needs to trust someone to do it for them. The Meteorological concept of consent taught on Contemplation almost as soon as speech included positive and negative information requirements on both sides, their relative symmetry and compatibility. The criteria for this were mostly the same as for hosting a Weir in the first place.

Mai I wish you were here, Mai I wish you had the opportunity to do this instead of me, I feel like I'm robbing you, to feel you so vindicated about everything.

We could still send someone back to symbiose with



her. We had been over the idea before. She didn't want to participate in the war, but maybe if we met someone uncommitted to it, willing to lose themselves in our work on Earth to get away from it entirely...

Tumor has a missionary outpost. (Sorry I can't not use that word, it's too funny.) It's near here. Don't know if they've been drawn in yet.

What's its strategic value.

You really want to go back to thinking like this already? Her vibrations rippled over me whenever the cold came, matching its regularity. Rolled down my breasts like cool mall fountains. I was hardening predictably but not thinking about it, it felt as impersonal as my bladder filling under an MRI. *Maybe I'm wrong, maybe we're both wrong like we're afraid we are. In the worst case scenario we can get away, blockade this planet and keep the human intervention contained here, and make the contact worth it some other way.*

No we can't. Nothing you call a "blockade" would last against humans who can build our own Weak Asymmetry Fields. We can't get away; all we can do is dedicate the rest of our lives to minimizing our own damage. Which is what





we're doing anyway.

So whether we're right or wrong, we have to do the same thing.

I sank. I collapsed. My hand drifted down the unzipped front of my fatigues. My mouth gaped at this suffocating jelly of reality that seemed to be forcing itself down my throat. I breathed. I told her not to leave. I asked her to do what she thought about when she thought what not to do.

My right hand stopped abruptly and was pulled away behind my back - then the left, wrist to wrist - by autonomous lines of heat I could feel running along the inside of my arms. My feet straightened and stretched to the very end of the hammock. My hands began to move behind me to the other.

The rippling surface over me had thickened until it felt like a tingling shampoo. It was starting to feel warm - although in places, over my breasts, my armpits, out around my navel, it sent out its own inverted waves of cold.

I could just barely look down over my body



enough to see the colours softly phosphorescing and swirling together as I was suspended straight from one end to the other. (Halation, in a feat of effort of her own, anchoring herself to the stone nails my hands and feet still hovered centimetres away from.) My cock was now standing up straight, perpendicular, the ripples covering it faster, interfering back and forth. Matched by another set, of (I could feel) the exact same shape and size, taking shape inside me. An exact copy, like a mold.

In my mouth, where I was already gargling stomach-acid sweetness, I asked for one more.

After I came once, so taken by the synchronized washes of warmth and sensation over and through my whole body I barely noticed, the vibrations started to settle down, retreat to the lines over my body we used in battle, and the restraints slackened. I had shrugged off all my remaining clothing into the mass of blanketing I sank into, but in a way I was still in my battle dress. My battle-body, for the first time, radiating its own warmth - and now the coldness that crashed into me was hers. She was as surprised by it as me.

I want to feel you do the things you watched Delilah do. The images had floated back to the surface, at some





point, while we were together. I was still hard - my cock was still almost entirely covered, and a long stem had extended inside the urethra, which had pumped in sync with the ones in my ass and mouth at my peak. *I can't experience dense qualia while extended for intra-operation that complex.*

Of course, that was why she went back in the tube at all. Her original body with its native sensory array, rather than a distant shadow of mine; she could perceive nuances of the atmosphere that made the lazy grainy swirls around her as pleasant as a house with a Zen garden. *Let me make a fruit for you.*

Uhhh... that sounds like a lot more commitment than what we were just doing.

You can understand what I mean perfectly well by thinking about it. In predation-reduced ecosystems, fruiting was widespread outside of reproduction simply as a way of creating food, distributing excess energy to produce the variety of niches a food chain otherwise produced. In social species, let alone symbiotic ones, they were naturally a mode of cannibalistic intimacy.

But if you contribute reproductive material... it'll



flavour the fruit, too. Not like how it tastes to you, I mean. A chemical interpretation of your DNA.

Mouth dry, my hand slowly rode my shaft back and forth as I felt new waves of matter ripple down it, retreating across my body like water flowing in reverse, pooling in lingering, magnetic eddies around the clusters of qualia at my nipples, navel, the dimples in my hips where Mai liked to dig around with her thumbnails, pushing my thumb and fingers apart, feeling more like ribbed putty than oil or rubber. Even once I was no longer touching anything that resembled my own shape I could feel my strokes propagating down the layers - coils and coils of sensors in friction with each other, folded in on itself like a woman's lining. *This form, however, maximizes qualitative experience.* Which became my own, as I felt myself from the inside as I began to thrust. Put my back into it, and felt my back underneath the tendrils thickening across it. *(I kiss farewell to your rising hairs, the soft mole in the depth between your shoulderblades, the countless sweat drops trembling like a rising storm.)* Something I could only see in silhouette in the dark was growing far past my tip, a snaking stem rising between the edges of the hammock, while its vibrating veins wrapped around my every limb, every muscle, ev-





ery knob of bone. I bit into one that snaked across my mouth, let her feel the tips of my teeth from the outside, almost piercing its tomato-skin membrane. No one could see me without coming into the borehole in which my hammock hung from beneath, but I felt embarrassed anyway as I rolled over - or maybe I just wanted to feel this thing rising out of me pressed by gravity and fabric along the hair-trace of my belly, between my breasts (*thank you so much, by the way, so much for pressing on the right glands and helping them grow again even before I got hormones from Edison Lens, now let me squish you between them and harvest their tingly glow*), hands caressing and as I tightened digging in all along its length. My hips swinging the whole hammock, tight on my shoulders too. Four 'petals', like a smaller version of your normal body's 'wings' stretched on a miniature of its knotted arms, closed in on each other as I came.

We lay together taut and shivering, sweat cooling across my body, as the white-purple glimmering orb pushed out.

Will you still feel anything when I bite in.

The mute, low-information fork of my mind I left in it will, and then it will disappear.



2
LVCIG121
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2M
HPECENM2
A10EBV
COMMOD
B12N2
EVBVIDV
N1BICE2
23E
202BEND1
J12NM
0N12
VRIDNV
WVENV
DOROVE
E1
TUBOVE
A1 01
IMCIDIDN
LEMBOR
E102WOB
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VD1B12C1
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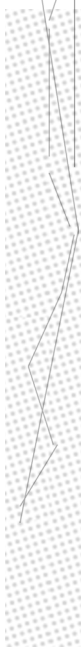
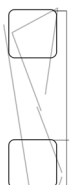
I stared down at it, kneaded it in my hands like a stress ball, for a minute, then five, then ten. Your surviving mind was almost going to sleep when I lifted it to my mouth and bit down. It tasted a bit like lychee and dragonfruit and lemon and half-closed eyes.

Edison Lens Intranet Storage

Strategic Xenosociology Division

Analytical Notes: Caroline Bennett-Fog

On the mission to the Ribbons base, I asked Commander Lillywhite and Liaison General Halation to salvage any computation or surveillance technology they can fit, so we can figure out their capabilities wrt that. Preparations are just about ready. Still insane that we keep having to fucking send her to the front. Does Halation seriously not realize this is just a young pursuit predator's hero complex/death wish? If it's not her gambit to appease her handlers: If she dies, there's no way we're not getting another intermediary. The Bash-taev incident proves there are plenty of Weirs willing to work with us for their own reasons, we can talk to the Towers even without them, and Sieh's already got a plan to suppress the whole Lung if their leadership doesn't





go along with it. The longer they expect her to die the longer they don't just kill her, I get it. But I know it looks insane to a lot of people here too, and right now they're converging around Sieh. [Log in with private user credentials to view: *I wish I didn't like her so much. First person I can talk to in twenty years who knows how to see dramatic potentials in lore, who isn't just a grognard. And I've never met anyone who smells like that.*]

At least we have one convergent cultural form here: using magnetic poles to determine direction makes sense on basically any planet. Our "North" and "South" are their "Quartz" and "Onyx" directions, East and West "Jasper" and "Azurite". But it's important to remember that "Mercury" - the direction of the core of this planet - extends as far, at the same pace. So the mobs right now are centred at 36 degrees Quartz-Azurite, 12 Azurite-Onyx and 23 Quartz-Jasper. But they're all spread out no more than 19 degrees away from each other at the extremities and from the observations of our drones, moving closer together. (We've had to retire the Bulbuls, which are better for long term observation, because the Towers are too good at shooting them down, and just do high altitude passes with the Eagle APDS.) To be honest the "centres" in terms of density shift all the time, we're



measuring from the positions of individuals who seem like “leaders” which is dumb - each has at least three or four, AI picked out fully fourteen in the Quartz-Azurite mob. Beek and Flagg, agreeing for once, have narrowed that down to six, but I’m not sure this is necessary or useful. The mobs seem, structurally, a lot like the Internexes; a whole pile of factions and individuals making loose consensus decisions. If we knew the language or the culture or anything at all this would be a dream for psyops, but we don’t so we’re down to brute math.

Admittedly, by human standards, the precision is striking. Like an ant mill, that’s the obvious comparison, but it obviously can’t be working on anything so biologically simple... can it? The word Halation has us translating as “mob” (it also comes up as one of the best fits for “army”) has a whole range of meaning I’ve been running language models on the Weirs’ datasets to try and determine. We had assumed they were basically standing still because they were moving so slowly, but the whole time we’ve been flying drones over they’ve been spreading out into a dragnet and contracting closer to us, all in moves too micro to draw attention. My hypothesis is that they have some very simple universal directive coordinating the stochastic activity: “wander





around however and wherever you want, as long as you go closer to the target and further from the centre of your group, and don't get out of site of other groups". (The inter-group coordination would be the important part.) We only see movements counter to these hypothetical directives about 11% of the time - which is still significant. They must be using some form of group-to-group if not universal communication; I've been trying to figure out the range of those staves but getting different responses from everyone I talk to. They seem to have varied considerably in quality before the Network went down, and now nobody knows who has what. The Rusty Moons were able to eavesdrop on almost all of them with their big underground thing, we don't know if they have any sensors on that level, but they're bringing in reinforcements almost constantly so they must either have more powerful ones than *we* can detect or relay networks. If those go as far as the other nearest elevation, Polyp Massif (imagine a broccoli made of limestone) - which is supposed to have a very dense pro-Adipose presence (Beek is itching to hit it with something) - they could have virtually unlimited reinforcements. We're already outnumbered. We need a strong element of surprise. And explosives. Small ones - remember they don't like destroying the ground, and even the things



the Ribbons drop aren't all that powerful, but we could probably get a lot out of just dropping frags and flash-bangs, especially if we had some kind of tubes to deliver them to different levels. Butterfly mines should also be useful. On our drone footage we don't really see much in the way of training, drills, patrols. Sometimes what look like duels - I've been replaying this one where a pair of Gatherers have put bladed thimbles on the ends of all their fingers and slash each other to blueberry-slathered ribbons, then lick the regenerative sludge onto each other. [Log in with private user credentials to view: *Hell of a ship dynamic, I have to admit, even though I get nothing out of looking at freaky gecko bugs. It's really funny to me that the universe seems to have landed in just the level of convergent evolution for physical bodies to be absolutely all over the place but mental design mostly convergent enough to make cross-cultural contact work? Omegaverse, Vulcans, all the really romantic stuff is like one or two steps removed in either direction, enough for one big change you can think about in detail. I think I always resented how unlikely we were to get something like that, but look at how bad we are with human-scale differences and maybe this equally unlikely gutter-zone we're in could be the most merciful option. Leona seems to have spent more time playing around in that sandbox, I need to pick her brain more about*





it. If I strip whatever I just watched down to its one big detail of “ritual combat with mutual hurt/comfort” you can apply that to any species template. e.g. *Drusus* and *Sokann* in the gladiatorial arena?] Mostly they seem to be just milling around, feasting, fishing, much like the reports of the Internexus itself. They have some *massive* transport morphs carrying food - their movements around the crescent are among the most predictable. Extremely valuable targets. The one difference is that there are no larvae. Who’s guarding them?

Communication from Tactical Squadron Alpha-Four (via Entangleweed)

Captain Thurgood Denison, Delta Force, IEEF
Tactical Petty Officer

Internexus “Zith”

Confidential (Strategic Clearance)

Exhilarating, untrammelled victory. I’m starting to understand what the Sol boys (Pvts. Ezequiel Marmol, Danny Rigoletto and Ogre Ito send their insufferable regards) mean about the spirit of war being constrained by too much knowledge, by the ability to construct a



clearly defined mission, where even the inevitable unpredictability is reduced to discreet deviations. I'd make them take the bags off the Transport Morph and carry 'em themselves when they said something like that because every situation I've been in you could describe in those terms was a smoking FUBAR gumbo. This wasn't. Neither of us knew shit about each other, but the things they didn't know about us were more salient. (Marmol wants to add: *Okenn jete dés p'ap jamais anile chanm.*) We took out three of their four battle morphs before they even realized we were there. And I hate to admit the Sol boys work great in this kind of engagement - bare-foot, naked, hardly concerned about weight or footing, running right through the tall grass of them cutting off heads. The transfer of power was simple, one-to-one, the Entangleweed forces already had the civilians under their thumb. When we promised no reprisals they were pretty happy and helped us get set up with the plant thing I'm using to send this. I'm sorry, I don't normally talk or write like this, but I've had a silver cat-tail shoved into my nose in the past three hours. Apparently I just have to think into this thing, it comes out in full sentences, and it turns out I don't mind the way it sounds.





Communication from Temporary Patrol 17

Ajax Lillywhite (Lord of the Logs) (via Denpa)

Internexus "Pagaz"

Confidential (Strategic Clearance)

So the bad news is - someone got here ahead of us from "Athan". They recognized us as soon as we showed up, and it was nothing like the chaos in the Athan Briefing. The entire Internexus, estimating at least seven hundred Scouts and Fabbers here and god knows how many larvae or , basically moves as one... not *wall*, like a 3D carpet with spikes. Is that what a *mob*'s gonna do because you may need to reconsider your strategy after you look at some of this footage . It's like fighting... fucking No Face from Spirited Away. We can shoot down... we didn't want to shoot any of them down, in the first place, when we saw this, I didn't, I followed the instructions that we were to negotiate first. Offer to do the introduction thing, but they weren't even letting us in. They considered Athan a breach of the Internexus Pact - it's not clear if they have exactly correct information? I offered to put them in direct communication with Flagg, explain what they did, but



everyone in the mob who was even considering communicating with us was scared of the other members. At one point we saw someone try to come out to meet us and get pulled down under this... cairn of people and Captain Volozhin took a warning shot. They engaged en masse, Pvts Hejaz and Blackwell who had particularly itchy trigger fingers must have mowed down at least a few dozen but we were under like medieval siege levels of fire. I think most of the ones we hit just got pulled back into the mass for healing. There's like... if you could figure out where in the formation is what Volozhin was calling the "stomach", where they have a bunch of Fabbers in a spiky ball to heal the wounded and send them back out? Volozhin says he saw it, but I don't know how, we couldn't even get close. They have like, channels, rows of fingers flexing like cilia to send people back and forth the second someone gets hit. He might be speculating. We found a place and camped out. Eventually a group and some stragglers found their way down within range of our Bulbuls, kicked out presumably for defecting or trying to cooperate with us. The main group of fourteen appears to be what you called Ferrous Masks? So we have reinforcements and they're eager to come help out as soon as possible, although we're about 2500m off course (Down-South-East). But not a lot of





them, not against a *mob*.

Over the geopolitically loaded and technologically overhyped products of the American - or any other superpower's - military-industrial complex, the IEEF (with loud partisanship from Waldo Beek) had chosen to deploy an old Terran standby, that would be a symbol of human military ingenuity to the galaxy as much as it had been to Argentina, Bosnia and Afghanistan: the Navy's remaining Harrier jump jets. Alien tech would do miracles for maintenance anyway; Contemplation had put as much thought into cheating entropy as Earth had into accelerating it. The Inchworm Drive went in the nose, replacing a lot of the avionics and the ARBS which it could outperform anyway. The translucent plates of the ship's exterior, which had clustered like a pinecone before, now coated the surface of the plane from glass of the cockpit to the wings, giving it a green scaly shimmer that made it look at least as draconic as its opponents. The Ribbons which I could see all the way up there, tiny curls of lint in the sky but the artillery officers had showed me how to pick out their movements, kept circling as if it wasn't there. *Come out*, its voice reached us in the shadows of the secret exit, *it's safe. I'm dedicating my Asymmetry Field to warping all signal around me - light*,



radar, sonar, probabilistic mesh, everything short of the Adipose itself.

In the cockpit even the controls had been ripped out, replaced with four blocks of foam into which I inserted my hands and (just imagining Alasdair's doofy mug when he hears I had to take off my boots to get in) feet. (*It's crazy that you don't design all your tech with somatic impact in mind - Tell me about it.*) These were the interface of a basic peer-to-peer nervous system, comparable to an aux cord, that you kept around in case you ever got stranded on a planet and had to repair using unfamiliar parts or send a distress message from some local system. Not only did this let us wire the plane's systems, the Drive and the plates (each connected to its own "stem" of the aux through centimetre-width holes in the wings), it was much lighter than the metal wiring and mechanical systems it was able to replace, allowing the Harrier to hover while carrying its full armament (even without using the Drive to just reorient inertial vectors directly).

As soon as they were enveloped in what felt at once relaxing, anaesthetic and stable, as if each extremity was simultaneously resting on solid ground and could





move at a moment's notice in an emergency, I felt my sensory axis, my transparent eye, leaving my body and reorienting itself over the plane's surface. Each scale was an incredibly finely tuned sensory receptors, eye (telescope) and ear (oscilloscope, radar) and nose (microscopic sieve) all in one, constructed at the molecular level for detecting the minute traces of information that made it through the void of space. Even compared to Halation, it was overload. It was waking up. The clear air was now a murmur of trembling silk waves of wind currents, dust, piling in thinning layers all the way to the stratosphere. The stars spackled the back of the sky like stains on the side of a car. The nervous-extensive movement a bit less impressive after piloting the Corpuscule - but far more fluid, more complete. I wasn't splitting my senses between a cramped human perspective on the inside and an affectively thin game-view on the outside. I hadn't thought *I'm flying* in there the way I would in a type of dream people only had in songs and movies but I think I had as a kid exactly once. (I remember thinking, in the dream, about how it worked.) And we had real control. It felt like dragging myself across a screen (or the cubic modelling space projected by the Weirs' standard-issue computing blocks).



We were going so fast I couldn't resist slamming through one of the Ribbons in midair, tearing a wisp of a rippley cloud formation in half with its pulverized body.

The other corkscrewed straight up toward the hive. We were on track to get there first.

No probabilistic pressure even this close. That thing's either flabby or overstretched. I could only take their word for it. But when we hit it, I wondered if it had just been boasting.

The Asymmetry surface itself was already the ship's main sensory organ, the scales were just for us - there was almost no way for a lifeform designed for to share an Asymmetry Field's sensorium without going insane. So the contact felt like nothing - yet I somehow had the distinct, horrible feeling of my own mind turning against itself. Of things going the opposite direction my gut expected them to go. *All right, we're going to make a drill.* The most efficient form for dedicating all of a Field's processing power to negating another's at a point small enough to bore through. But the white-hot spiral of plasma forming in front of us (a little reminiscent of a certain anime, if you know what I'm talking





about) never even reached the surface it was aiming for. It had expanded in a bubble around us and gripped us from the sides. The ship's vision had no asymmetry between above or below, front or back, but the gnarled horizon wrapping around one side was above us and we were running in place not to fall into it. Sinners in the hands of an angry God, suspended by a hair above the spires of hell.

In a flash, the drill flattened into a disc that flashed around us like a 360-degree sun-silver and broke through the Asymmetry Surface of the the enemy's extension. A broken Asymmetry Field was a dangerous place, prone to probabilistic anomalies and random bursts of spontaneous order. We clipped out of there and around to the weakest spot we could find on the other side. Senses I couldn't share screamed through two layers of symbiotic soundproofing like tinnitus. The interval between our reformed drill making contact and the enemy's field reallocating to defend against it could be measured in second-exponent units but was enough to get us inside. Which being *inside* a field that had re-allocated processing power to reject you was the riskiest part of the standard boarding procedure. I remember a blizzard of floaters, complete static of every sense,



even RGB glitching at the borders. Hyperconcentrated Asymmetry explosions around us while we maintained our most consistent defensive rotation to avoid the minefield. *Don't worry, we wouldn't have survived so long floating across battlefields we couldn't even see without our secret defense algorithm*, [Inverted] Water Strider, *donated by a top research committee on the Synod when we accepted our mission*. We were close enough to see the holes in the surface of the silver-blue orb, surrounded by stochastic spiral creases as if miniature black holes had suddenly formed on the skin of an elephant. And of course there were Ribbons whipping around and dropping mucus-bombs on us, although like my car when I had tried to get out from under our Field the first time they just didn't go any further. They were mostly using their own flailing attacks to maintain a visible perimeter of our Field and stick to us in case they - or we - brought it down.

Inside the hole reminded me of those caverns in Antarctica - another artificial ecosystem, although this one more artificial than the Lung, more architectural and less literal, the surfaces looked less like ice than soft mercury, decorated with complex meshes of overlapping circles and whorls. About half the Ribbons





we saw were curled up in these little recesses that sank around them and sprang back up when they lifted off. They were trying to pile bombs on us now, exploiting the tradeoff in surface calculation between throwing them off and fighting their own. But the algorithmic rotations of [Inverted] Water Strider threw them off in consistent spiral patterns. When the bombs hit the walls they didn't take any permanent damage, just bounced like cartoon speakers on a dropped bass, dispersing the force as harmlessly as possible, albeit usually shaking another couple of Ribbons out of their nests. Bullets, on the other hand, pierced through enough surface to spur some blue fluid that looked like antifreeze.

Our Asymmetry Field couldn't fight off an enemy Asymmetry Field and maintain sufficiently precise control to take out material enemies at the same time. Halation was like, they'd used the analogy on finding it in my undergrad research, a journalist sent across a warzone with the protection of a particular army, but still just driving a regular jeep. So the plan was to get inside and extend as large and stable a space as they could where the two Fields cancelled each other out for us to move around in. We would still have a plane, which was almost certainly faster, deadlier and more durable



than any of the Ribbons, albeit hard to maneuver in here - but easier with the finer nervous controls. Piloting at full speed in spaces this tight, however, would be hard on both our brains. Another reason for implementing the aux controls was of course not having to rely on Earth's limited supply of pilots trained on the "unforgiving", phased-out aircraft - but as soon as the Field stabilized and stopped intervening for us directly, it became apparent how much, despite the turbulence, it had been making things easier for us. Halation pumped a cocktail of numbing and stimulant chemicals through me as I felt the vibration of the plane's chassis at once around and on the surface of "my" body. An instinct kept screaming at me that I was about to lose control, even as I didn't.

Our main objective was to find the Drive and take it out manually, even as our own held off its effects - though this might be impossible or require focusing our own Field again if theirs had more internal layers, which it probably did. If possible we also wanted to find the leading Ribbon, the one who had taunted us from between the sickly rinds of the moons, and trap them in with us. Halation could pick them out in their memory - small and jerky like a cat's tail, with long whiskers and





a chipped third shell - but not surrounded by hundreds of them. AI at the Lung (still more powerful by at least an exponent than Azoth's best) had scanned the photographs our spy-drone had taken, feeding a recognition model into the nervous aux's local memory.

Our enemies and their scattering bombs receded further and further until we just stopped seeing them; either our field surface had extended beyond our field of vision or they were just warning ahead of our approach, tracking us. There didn't seem to be anything obvious to do damage to in here, and it was too close to just bomb and outrun our explosions without using the Field, but we could keep shooting and see what happened. Eventually, we picked up something coming around behind us - bombs suspended in little ring-shaped harnesses with butterfly wings. They were slow but as we sped up we almost immediately ran into more of them.

We quickly realized we had been trapped in a very limited set of tunnels, which were being filled up with the autonomous bombs to the point that there would be no way to avoid them. We would have to find the tunnels that had been recently closed off and shoot



or bomb our way through. This wasn't obvious as the surfaces were pretty fluid. But they clearly didn't have general control, like an Asymmetry Surface. What the material seemed to behave like was a kind of gel whose surface hardened in contact with the architecture and softened under heat - either body, or bomb-heat, which meant it could at least disperse it more or less efficiently. The temperature up here was as low as one would expect around the Tropopause on Earth - which wasn't uncommon on Hammer. We tested this by just hovering and bombarding it with our vectored thrust nozzles, which produced such impressive ripples we might have had real structural effects, or just shook the entire place up, if we kept it up. One thing we noticed was that the patterns didn't renature as quickly as the rest of the surface, if at all. So we just had to look for places the walls had scarred smooth. And then, if they couldn't handle bullets... just bust through in a flood of blue gore.

And regular gore, as we'd accelerated enough to ram straight through two Ribbons. Which wasn't the best idea; one was clipped and only lost a bunch of lower segments but clung to us immediately, just shitting out bombs one after the other and pressing them suicidally into us. They might have been enough to blow a





wing off if we hadn't done a barrel roll that shook about half of them along with the dying body, and still crashed us so badly we ground to a halt half-encased in the wall. We had to use the jets to shake ourselves out of there, by which point the bomb-drones had surrounded us and stripped scales like a tree in an autumn's first rainstorm. They were redundant and mostly covered for each other in our "subjective" experience of the plane's senses, but even that took on some noise.

We outflow them as soon as we were free and sprayed ahead just to keep the coast clear. Like the anti-aircraft guns, the GAU-12 Equalizer was more than heavy enough to equalize us against the Ribbons. The only problem was that they could break off damaged segments and keep flying without them, so we tried to aim for the heads or the bombing organs first. We flew over ones we'd hit curled up on the bottom of the tunnels, inching forward dragging trails of mixed colours - milky white, thin shimmering gold, globs of orange - trailing behind them, burning and exploding in their own viscera, rearing up and screeching and flailing their whiskers as they flew over us.

Wherever we saw a recently closed off section



we broke through it, at once to slow ourselves down, do more damage and find more important areas. The first we found our way into appeared to be a food storeroom. Four massive bubbles floated in the centre of a spherical space, filled with smaller bubbles separating unrecognizable biological ingredients: cross-sections of giant leek-coloured trees, segmented folding spirals. I felt nauseous and not just from the flying. I wanted to know whether there were likely to be civilians or children here, whether they would more easily get more food from off planet or starve here but our bullets had ripped through several before we even made out what it was. I tried to think of them like any army on my own world, but their obvious unpreparedness was not making it easy. Several jumped out to ambush us and just got torn immediately apart. But then we came under a volley of bubbles of different kinds of chemicals - I think one was actually white phosphorus. It was still pretty similar to dealing with the Towers' ranged weaponry. If we were flying with human controls it would have been almost impossible to navigate as we darted around the stores to shoot at them, going back through twice before we hit them all. Our adrenaline was pumping and we relented and released a pair of missiles.





Then as soon as the chamber was mostly empty except for multicolour splatter and slime on the walls, a closed gap we hadn't even noticed opened and our recognition model went off. Except something was different about the Ribbon that had taunted us from between the moons. It looked armoured, its segments larger or just further apart and covered in graphite-black carapace. And coiling around the line of our gunfire on the basic intuition that it was a line of perspective, they darted in and out of our blind spots with a speed mostly equivalent to ours. Judging by the steam-lines around them, the armour they were using was itself equipped with some kind of jets, and their "whiskers", too, lashed out like metal whips. Wrapping around our tail and pulling a fin off. Whipping it back at us. Gripping at the top of the cockpit and trying to pull it off.

So they have some military tech at least.

That's not military.

I drew closer to the dry ice lodged in Halation's mind. *Those are hunting modifications. Except, of course, they don't actually hunt anymore. It's more like a sport, or an art form. There are hundreds of variants I couldn't recognize.* Vague images flashed through our mind - chasing



spindly, brightly coloured drones at high speeds across striated glaciers; darting through fields of airborne bubbles, plucking a shell out of one in passing. *Some probably do count as combat sports even by human standards. Weirs who go to Hammer... at least the hard core of tourists, a lot of them like to "ride" on modified hunters.*

"It's not just a hunting armour. This is a combat armour," they screeched in their Hallowe'en organ Ahasurunu. *"Your Algal Blooms aren't the only species that has fought them. Although I had to requisition a museum to get this one, from our own Canal Wars. We will soon have many more like it. Observe:"* They wheeled over us, and from where the bombs normally fell, golden-orange liquid spraying in rotating streams like a sprinkler. Where it hit the plates they sizzled away, sparking and damaging adjacent ones, and even the metal below corroded. We immediately did a back roll, both minimizing our profile and blowing it back with the jets, which they avoided with another evasive spiral. The moves were relatively predictable, if I could calculate the way our opponent could I might have been able to intercept it - we still weren't real warriors, were we, just strapped in an unholy death machine that would switch from others' to our own at the shift of a statistical wind of relative advan-





tage.

The air was also getting colder. I had compartmentalized the altitude indicators into another “mental interface” I hadn’t been looking at but as I noticed they sprang to mind of their own accord, or maybe Halation’s: we were rising.

“Despite the death toll of your little killing spree, which I won’t gratify you by revealing, you’ve given us enough time to evacuate. I’m the only one left in here with you, and in six units tenth-exponent this temporary environment will leave the atmosphere. This armour has atmospheric supplements for extra-vehicular operations in space; I’m sure you have atmosphere for a Weir in that ship’s internal body, but does your pet barbarian?”

Right. They were talking to Halation, and Halation alone. They didn’t take me seriously as an opponent at all. No sooner had I started to hyperventilate than the vines under my feet and wrists sent a feeler up to my face and covered my mouth and nose. Of course we had instructed the frame to include an atmospheric support tank for humans too; the problem our opponent probably hadn’t even anticipated was that human aircraft couldn’t fly in space - at least without using the



Asymmetry Field, which would divert its power from resisting theirs. The Harrier's maximum altitude was 43,000 feet - only about 134 units fifteenth-exponent, not much higher than the Tuber Plug, barely into the stratosphere by Towers standards, and the Towers atmosphere was already thinner than Earth's. Unlike the Lung, they didn't seem to be using any special atmosphere in here either. So we had only about a couple dozen fifteenth-exponents higher we could go... was it just the Asymmetry Field moving us, or were there some local engines to this too we could destroy? The Asymmetry Field probably could have no-clipped us into space in a split second, so it probably had its hands full with ours, whatever it was doing. Could we call for reinforcements? The warrior-Ribbon was darting around us now, feinting and lashing out with their extended whiskers at the spots where their spray had done the most damage to our wings. Our guns managed to hit a few times, but didn't seem to be strong enough to penetrate this armour. We took the first chance we saw to get out of this bubble, into the narrowest tunnel we could find; at least that way our jets would be facing them.

"Running away already? I can show you the way to the nearest exit!"





That didn't mean much, all exits except the one that led us out or into an ambush had presumably been closed off anyway; we would have to blast through another closed tunnel they weren't expecting but that would mean pivoting, risking turning both our jets and our guns away from our pursuer. And this whole base wasn't large for a jet plane so we didn't have much time (even to see or decide).

Yet somehow we weren't going that fast anyway, and it wasn't catching up. The blue walls around us took on a green-yellow shimmer, even the lines of their markings distorted as if through water; our Asymmetry Field had contracted a new shell around us, slowing us down even as our engines should have been pushing Mach 1.5, the Ribbon held at a constant distance behind us. It had shrunk its effective area even outside this shell significantly to protect us at close range. We turned our jets in a direction our drone's scan of the basic structure of the nest, saved in our navigation intelligence, indicated was toward the centre. Even if they had evacuated, that just left our most important target unattended: the Drive. As we burned through the barrier without moving, a drill of pinkish fire took shape in front of the armoured Ribbon, piercing the outer layer of our own Field.



Too many crucial tactical decisions - like the timing of keeping the second layer up long enough for us to spin the engines back in the right direction to start propelling us again, without the second layer getting pierced by the drill - were taking place at the level of 3rd or 4th temporal exponents I couldn't hope to perceive. I wanted the Fields as far away and stalemated as possible, so the battle would be thinkable in real time. But at least our Fields were something of a match; could we say the same of ourselves and this opponent?

In real space, real time, the exponent was still fourth or fifth. My stomach emptied without warning onto the mostly empty frame of the controls and half by reflex I paused the jets, switched to the more manageable vectored thrust nozzles. (The word "VIFFing" had driven me crazy in air training. "Viff in hell!" tragically wasted on a non-furry.) Our opponent shot over us and out of sight. We sent our remaining missiles after them.

Then as the world stabilized (not enough) I forced myself back through the window of opportunity and accelerated again.

A hundred crystal sensors stung with sickly floral blue mist and the pool-piss smell of AIM-132 smoke.





Five or six walls had thrown themselves up to be pulverized into a roiling cloud in which we could barely see the whips lashing out at us. But barely was enough as we rolled on our side and made contact.

To grab on like this in combat was the equivalent of grappling as long as it stuck to the motor systems and executive loops surrounding them. The instrumental surface of the mind was like the instrumental surface of the body; the motivational surface like the meat and muscle. The magical, private zones protected by repression were, mercifully, still protected. But there was this distinct patina - a sky.

The enormous sky of Hammers - even though the planet was smaller, colder, than Towers, the sheer richness of its nitrate topaz made it seem enormous, and the circuitboard Mountains of Madness architecture of mica mesas. Thin trains of wavering white reflection pooled in the page-edges of grey-black shield and the interlocking curves of ornamental canals, sometimes eleventh, sometimes twelfth exponents across; white-furred hopping coils with spiral shells clustered where algae thickened in the water.

But it was under their bright-edged shelf of



shadow, among thickets of what looked like fungal antlers sprung from stagnant pools in the ice, surrounded by sundial flowers where they floated on the surface of the nutrient-rich water.

Blue-green arcs of cloud like ripples from the impact of a huge stone on the surface you liked to imagine yourself under, far above.

A park ranger - scientifically trained as an ecologist, in the old Hammer traditions dating back to before Meteorology, but tasked with hands-on maintenance of one of the areas Weir tourists frequented.

The most essential function of a park ranger, especially on a world that has minimized predation, is to keep out invasive species.

Of course, according to Meteorology, no such thing, only monopolistic species, whether endemic or epidemic. Where Holdfast worked, that wasn't how they thought of it. They practiced traditional management systems to preserve their traditional ecosystems, predation included.

Holdfast - as in the root system of a seaweed.





Or something close enough for the translation. Their name.

They couldn't handle the shame, the confusion the first time a Weir rode them. They understood it. They took refuge in understanding it, on an academic level, but couldn't participate in it. So they didn't participate in the hospitality themselves. They wandered parts of the lichenwoods off the migration routes, where almost nobody went.

How was I knowing this? *Logical resonance*. I had no idea what that meant, but I felt it. *Like an overtone in the mathematical grammar of different nervous architectures. It usually happens with similar experiences. It's rare, but happens more often in first contacts.* I could guess from that what they were learning about me.

Incredible your body wasn't pulverized by all that. Demon.

They first heard one of Halation's missives routed by a Weir through the voice and native language of their host to everyone in earshot - a discourtesy that seemed to them at the time more offensive than the news item of the destruction on the moon. The pair



were talked down from the disturbance and separated by the more political category of ranger, but something about the propaganda stuck in their craw. They sought out its source and pored over it, hoarded transmissions like someone in my department might Syrian jihadi forum posts. (I grew up thinking the military didn't listen to experts enough, got to school and realized they listen to us too much.) Most people around them were sympathetic though apathetic to Contemplation's cause; those who weren't were isolationists, predatorists, cranks who resented Contemplation's presence on Hammer at all.

Something about the intensity of it made them sure their planet was sleepwalking into something it didn't want to be part of.

Like me, their sheer dedication to peace got them singled out for war.

Though they were still frozen physically, something of their consciousness in the resonance was holding us back, calculating and anticipating our force enough to wrap the limp body gently around us as we careened blind through layers of gel. Cognitive reflexes implanted by the next person they'd been able to talk to about the war in the depth they wanted, an old Meteo-





rological heretic who had replaced their outer nervous network with computational crystal. This wasn't their heresy; nearly every Weir in the Synod had this procedure. But the particular crystal was a loan from the Outer, the original decipherers of Adipose signals. The original exchange of atrocities that had sunk the sides of the Adipose War in so deep was the Outer's pre-emptive assimilation strike on neutral networks, appropriating their processing power to resist a larger anti-Adipose coalition, and their subsequent mass deletion.

Tantamount to genocide, but of the aggressor.

Hadn't Mab laid out a case for genocide of the aggressor? Hadn't I been horrified by Mai's horror when I presented it to her?

Halation recognized the specific name of the defector: Blue Jet. They had been one of the more important pro-Adipose Meteorological theorists before the war broke out. Their crystal body had survived the deletion because it had been disconnected from the Outer's cloud, but some suspected the Outer might have cached important secrets in it. *Don't get distracted probing for their whereabouts* - we had already almost missed that they were dribbling some sort of fluid out of their



bombing organ, and at our speed it was crawling back along our wings and chassis right into the jets -

Pain. The ship sensors weren't supposed to have a pain signal, but certain reflex associations were unavoidable. *Noise* and *heat* and *friction* and - all these things we were already experiencing, simply from the fact of the jet behind us and the racing air in front of us, so what was it about the back half of the plane tearing off that the telephone game of my nervous system, already stimulated beyond its limits, experienced as the same white-hot featureless urgency my body had been built to learn and avoid? But then it wasn't just the plane's sensors (the cloud of green scales spiralling back into the tunnel behind us) or Halation's transmissive surface - I could feel all this on my actual body again, the unbreathable air pummelling the back of my chair with sparks and shrapnel, the seatbelts digging between my breasts as I lurched.

The Inchworm Drive was still in the nose in front of us. Some kind of stem had shot out of it, branching and catching some of the floating plates, pulling others back like a magnet and even stripping them off the fuselage, reassembling them into the kinds





of whorls I had seen in Edison Lens' truck. (But these our opponent thrashed against as we careened. They reformed as fast as they shattered.) The Field could still protect us - in some vague new sense, I *felt* it contracting until the nose of the plane ran into its boundary and held still without momentum, friction, force.

I pulled one hand out of its block to unbuckle my seatbelt and extricate my Beretta from where it had been tucked under the seat. I chambered a round under my coat, from which I had conveniently extricated my arms but hung soaked across my shoulders. I hesitated before pulling the other out. Halation was stretched half across my right arm and half- I couldn't see how far they went under Holdfast's armour, but presumably not as far as their explosive organ. Or for that matter their back jets, which now gave them a massive speed advantage over me, albeit one they couldn't use without whipping me around. If they whipped me around enough my brain would probably be mashed against the inside of my skull. I prayed to the Asymmetry Field around me (still didn't quite know how to talk to it, knew its options were as limited as God's) to intervene somehow to equalize us or just- paralyze it so I could get a shot in. Halation contracted, pulling me directly up and onto



Holdfast's body. At least at this range it - they - couldn't shoot me with mucus bombs. - *We were in the middle of a conversation.*

-*No, we're trying to kill each other.*

-*Do you think I'm not aware of that?*

-*You haven't said a word, and you think I'm a barbarian.*

-*No, I think you're an invasive species, I don't know what a barbarian is.*

-*It's something like that.*

We had been so open to each other when we weren't thinking about it, and as soon as we recognized each other it was all friction, another grinding background noise. -*I'm talking to Halation.* They had walled me out. My head was gauzey quiet as I climbed up onto its back. It had stopped. I didn't feel like I was moving at all, even as the patterns on the walls blurred around me.

How could I hate them? How could I kill them? They had made the same mistakes as me.





Well, then, at least I would get to kill one person who had made those mistakes.

I lowered my gun. My body froze. I was being struck by lightning. My bones vibrating in place while my surface felt like it was melting away. All the information I was receiving through our connection melted into a nausea of numbers - then disappeared, as the string of Halation between us slackened, sagged, dripped.

Anti-Weir neural pulse. You think none of us know how to deal with their kind? Our species developed these in case a symbiote tourist loses sight of their Meteorological principles of consent. Whatever they tell you, it does happen.

...often? I wanted to ask directly but our connection was dead - whatever Halation was going through, they were keeping me out of it. So I could focus on... aiming through this armour somehow? It was still flailing around, the plan had been to pull up onto it and...

Halation will go back to atonement on Hammer. But you, superpredator... They slurped Halation's body slowly away from me as they spoke. What to do with you. I imagine if you turn back, your people will not.



“Yeah no, I’m... I was kind of trying to be the main thing holding them in check.”

Would you be willing to follow orders? Or at least, accept ecological supervision? To constrain your people, to sabotage them?

“What kind of ecological guidance? We have a word for that too, eugenics, it doesn’t have good precedents on our world.” I knew I was being disingenuous. I knew I was stalling for time.

Of course it doesn’t.

“But I already plan to restrain -”

Of course you do. I saw that much when we were connected. Your plan is bad, it won’t work. You have placed yourself as a bottleneck to your own species and expect them not to remove it. You want to fight against them while fighting for them. Consider this carefully; without Halation in your mind. Right now you have the opportunity to act decisively. You will not for much longer.

“Are you saying you or Hammer... need any help? Like specifically, concretely?”





We hung in total silence. I couldn't even be certain it was shock.

You are that shameless? You think I am merely asking you to... switch sides? You think we would trust yours, of all planets, with the Adipose?

"Sorry I don't know how you're picking up the words I'm using, but I didn't say anything about sides." I stared at the seemingly depthless blue of the walls around me, letting my insides feel like that. "I still only sort of understand the sides in this war in the first place, and I imagine I'll still only sort of understand them if you explain yours. But I don't want *your* planet to become like *mine*. If that's what you want too, there might be better ways to coordinate."

The easiest way for our planet to become like yours... is for you to come to our planet. What I wanted to negotiate with you is a cull. A loss deep enough to persuade your people that sending more ships to more planets - for either side - is a losing deal. But for you to reverse my words like that... I think I need to kill you. You're Machiavellian evolvers on top of everything else, aren't you? Obviously the Ahasurunu arabesque they used doesn't reference a Florentine guy, but it does reference the hypothesis. I



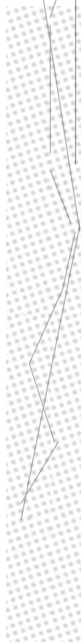
actually never believed that. It just reifies one of all the other ways social complexity feedbacks with its own genetic requirement. Maybe they weren't me after all, I can think back now with a gallows giggle. Maybe they were *Caroline*.

I would regret not having the chance to find out.

The floor bulged under the nose of the plane.

The missiles we had fired had been wrapped in Asymmetry bubbles our field had detached from itself like Halation's fruit. Too ephemeral to even reach the attention of the larger field, they had just reached their real targets.

The patterns on the walls around us warped and stretched until I could no longer make out the topology of a consistent space around us, whether we were in the tunnel or inside the wall - like outlines broken by water, different spatial dimensions of the same objects slipped in and out of each other as whole layers of the base's destabilized Field formed and disintegrated. A wobbling ball of concentric slices of jell-o. If any reinforcements had been planning to come back in once we





were captured or killed, they couldn't now. I reattached the mask from the cockpit over my face as I cracked open the emergency canisters of ammonia, methane and hydrogen fluoride on my belt. Holdfast opened their belly (I couldn't avoid thinking of it as that) and sprayed. I jumped - Halation no longer tuning my body in real time, but the novel chemicals she had flooded my endocrine system with still in my bloodstream - and grabbed onto one of its whiskers. Just in time for it to whip me at where the corrosive chemicals were eating through more of the plane. The Field rotated its internal gravity to slide the plane away from us. Holdfast thrashed around the inside of the bubble and I stayed limp and focused my awareness in my white knuckles as I felt Halation wake up and thicken along the silicate ropes. Over my hand, strengthening my grip. I inched closer to their head, lashed by strings of acid launched into the air by the field's rotation, but at this point the pain barely even registered as exceptional. I focused on the bubble of private, pure mental space Halation had formed in the palm of my hand, held myself as securely as the enemy's whip, in a cavern of still deeper blue.

As they watched this, or perhaps watched the wreckage of their own station, their mission - and as the



2'
LVCIG121
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM20W
WPECENW2
G10EBV0
COMWOD0
B1202
E00AID0
N1BICE2
22E
202BEND1
1B20W
0012
0100W
W00W0
D000E
E1
T000E
A101
1WCIDID0
1E000
E102W0D
2E1 D0
W0 E11
0D1B12C1
10W
COM2EC1E
0WEL
211
D000B
1B20W
T000W

atmosphere filled up with elements that were as toxic to them as they would have been to me - their movements slowed into a languid circling. I was almost too exhausted to notice what they were doing until I saw the translucent bulge of a mucus bomb poking from between the mandibles of their stomach-mouth.

Even as small as it was, it would probably consume all the atmosphere in our tiny bubble wherever it exploded.

Before it left their belly, I shot.

CLAMP network storage

Location: Lung Command

Folder: Live field communications

15:46

Temporary Artillery Unit G84

Mob sighted on the horizon for the first time. Silhouettes at three different points, all still in the Quartz-Azurite direction, Send out alert to our underground tactical units. We're waiting for them to fire first





but it probably won't be long. They're looking at us through some kind of telescope.

15:55

Temporary Artillery Unit G84

Exchanged a few volleys at long range. The new data on their slings in the targeting program works great, we were actually able to shoot a few of their projectiles straight out of the air. After that they brought out a different kind that splits into smaller explosive pouches. Surface damage on one of the Vulcans but all still functional. We went underground but the cover's not good against a lot of little things that get into every cranny, especially once the rocks start dripping acid on our heads. So we fired back. Hit one and I think they all spooked? Been five minutes, will report back in ten, fifteen, etc.

16:26

Temporary Artillery Unit G84

No new appearances for the last 30- wait, unconfirmed report from 25 degrees Onyx-Jasper. Onyx-Jasper? They're not even supposed to be in that direction, are you seeing ghosts?

LVCIF121
AER
TVCN2
VCCNM2VM
WVECEM02
N1NE8BV
COMWODD
B12N2
CBV01DV
N11BICE2
22E
202LEWD1
1B2NM
0N12
N110N0
WVECV
D0FOBE
EL
T0BOBE
W1 N1
TWCID1D0
1EMF0B
E1N2WOD
2ED D0
WE E111
W01B12C1
1N0
COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
D0F0B
1B2NM
T0BEM



“Pagaz” group reporting from 100m under the Quartz-Jasper group now, but they’re not our biggest or frankly best fighting force.

16:58

Temporary Artillery Unit G84

Ferrous Mask with a staff just showed up in a hurry. Say they’ve been going underground this whole time we’ve been waiting. Lung Command, are we seeing that on the drones?

Lung Command note: How many passes have we done in the past half hour and can we plug in the rough numbers between them? Recommend at least attempting to restore continuous Bulbul coverage.

17:11

Temporary Artillery Unit G84

Update from the Ferrous Masks - they’re using “dissonators” to conceal their exact positions, but they’re under basically all their known positions up to 100m down. These are surface dwellers so they’re not likely to be as good at underground combat as the reinforcements we’ve got coming, but we should alert





the reinforcements that they're probably gonna run into enemies sooner than they expected.

17:13

Temporary Patrol AB7

This is the "Pagaz" group, we're surrounded by 75-150 and they want to kill the Ferrous Masks we have with us. We're trying to talk them down by pretending to be pro-Adipose and opposed to the Ferrous Masks with you guys, but they're skeptical. They've already heard of humans and know we're supposed to be on the anti side. They're talking about sending us on an attack against the artillery unit to test our loyalty. If you can, get reinforcements over here fast or just drop something on [coordinates redacted]

17:14

Temporary Artillery Unit G-84

Permission to put a few flashbangs down at the coordinates Pagaz just mentioned? Just give us a lethality authorization.

17:15



Lung Command

Flashbangs first. Drop the tube 30m down, 40 degrees Quartz-Azurite of the coordinates. Let's see if we can divert them (in the direction of the reinforcements).

17:15

Temporary Patrol AB7

Escalate the authorization to frags already, they're coming up fast.

Lung Command: Acknowledged.

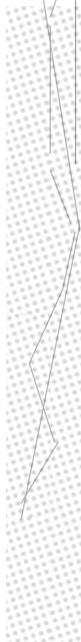
17:16

Temporary Artillery Unit G84

This is Sgt Adams. I was left with the artillery while Pvts Liu and Durango engaged the enemies from below that we targeted with the grenades, and now I'm starting to see bugs moving on the horizon again.

17:16

Temporary Mission Unit AC





This is Waldo Beek with the “Athan” group. Sounds like things are getting heated, so we sent an advance guard - Pvts Schauer and Singh, each with two of my best handpicked natives, by Corpuscule. Rest of us should be arriving in fifteen minutes - stay alive till then!

17:17

Temporary Artillery Unit G84

This is Sgt Adams - we're gonna retreat in our clear direction, once we have a proper chase going we'll try and lead them back towards you and Denison's unit, so tell your guys to turn on their Denpa telemetry for us.

17:18

Damn it, so much for a clear direction. OK we're about to engage- [connection lost]

17:27

Temporary Patrol Unit AC42

Pvt Schauer. Denpa telemetry is saying you should be right here, where are you.



Is that you firing on us or do they have our Vulcans? Lung Command can we get a Bulbul flyover?

17:27

Lung Command

Attempted flyover down. We have five left in the area and want to retain capacity for when our main forces hit, but we're sending more from Tuber. They should arrive in under 50 minutes.

17:31

Temporary Artillery Unit G84

do not engage the megamorph if you can possibly avoid it.

are you reading this? not tryna talk out loud bc pvt Hiroe thinks their vibration sensing shit might be picking up our voices down here. we're trying to sneak up on it from underground.

17:34

Temporary Patrol Unit AC43





This is Zach Flagg, ETA seven minutes on our third and fastest transport morph (*sweet sweet Doline!*). At least it was - we've made contact with a scouting patrol underground, but I think we might be able to just mow them down *en passant*.

Oh yes, baby, yes!

17:38

Temporary Tactical Unit AB7

Jax with the "Pagaz" group to all units and Lung Command. We've cleared most of our enemies down here. The Rusty Moons showed up to help us, they could pick up distress signals from our Ferrous Mask group (ffr "Echo Moths"). They say they have a transport moving the heavy equipment, and want us to lure the mobs into their tunnels. That should buy enough time for everybody to show up. They also want to know if we still have the Entangleweed explosive fungus.

17:39

Lung Command: Pvt Schauer, Sgt Adams, Maj Flagg, can you get confirm the most recent message



from Pagaz and contact Lung Command independently ASAP? You're the best positioned for luring right now, if possible we want one of you to lure each of the mobs. What are your current positions?

17:40

Temporary Artillery Unit G84

This is Sgt Adams. We've retaken the Vulcan and are firing on skirmishing groups that have been approaching from seemingly random directions for the past half hour. Pvt Schauer was engaging them as well but I can't see him again. Pvt Singh is - I think he's over there? - yeah he's over there.

We're kind of stuck though. The transport morph we needed to move this thing on this terrain went down.

Pvt Eggers is volunteering to run back to our original position to grab the extra set of wheels, which might be enough if it doesn't get stuck in a pothole somewhere? Not optimistic about your survival chances, Eggers, but we'll give you covering fire. Lung Command: Not too much. Let them follow him if you can,





just don't let them kill him.

Adams: Easier said than done. Over and out.

17:40

Permanent Tactical Squadron Alpha-Four

This is Captain Denison. Our speed-transport vanguard has made contact with at least a hundred fifty from the Quartz-Jasper mob and just shot a dozen, including a transport morph right through the head. The long skinny kind, the holes here are too twisty for mega-morphs, although our Bulbuls are showing a big bubble at [coordinates redacted] which we're gonna try and hit again when our larger force passes. We're about to lead them on a merry chase in your direction, I can barely guess how long in this maze down here, but bottom line could be as little as ten minutes. Tell the Rusty Moons to get whatever they're planning ready.

17:40

Temporary Tactical Unit AH-13

Flagg here, we're holing up in one of the outlying Rusty Moon chambers (there's a *lot* of cartridges

ENCIR121
AET
TUCN2
UCCNWSW
WUECEWU2
N1NE88V
COMWODD
B12N2
CBVNTD8
N1BICE2
22E
202LEWD1
1B2W
0N12
N110N9
WUEW
D0G0VE
EL
TUBOBE
W1 N1
WUCID1D0
LEWBOB
E1N2WOD
CED DO
E111
WDB12C1
1N8
COM2EC1E
WUE1
E11
D0G0B
1B2W
T0BEW



here, can we take them?) at [coordinates redacted].

There's way more of them than we expected though, did somebody make them mad?

17:45

Permanent Tactical Squadron Alpha-Four

This is Pvt Ito with Denison and all of us, still together. Fifty of our men, mostly Entangleweed natives, have entered a major engagement in the bubble at [coordinates redacted]. They collapsed the tunnels the vanguard went through, we're cut off, but Pvt Rigoletto is looking for other ways around. Doesn't matter, we're gonna slaughter 'em here.

Lung Command note: Depending on how close they were to the surface at this point, some of the tunnels in this area might have been collapsed by land-mines on the surface, not deliberately by the enemies underground.

Oh shit, is that Schauer's Corpuscule? Hey!!!
Hey faggot! How's the [unintelligible]

17:48





Tactical Squadron Alpha-Four

Requesting reinforcements. Beek you bastard, you must be close by now right?

What the fuck are they doing, they're turning into some kind of - some kind of carpet -

17:50

Temporary Mission Unit AC

This is Lung Commander Beek, Bulbuls say we got at least 400 dogies coming in towards the Rusty Moon tunnels. Y'all ready for this shit?

17:50

Temporary Tactical Unit AH13

Flagg here. Uhhh, not sure, can you drag them in circles for a bit?

We got this place 2/3 rigged. And then *we* need to get out.

17:52

EVOCIG121
AER
TVCN2
VCCNM2VM
WVECEM02
N1NE8BV
COMMOD0
B1202
CBV01D0
N1B1CE2
22E
202LEWD1
1B20W
0012
W1000
W0000
DOFOVE
EL
T0BOVE
W1 01
TWCID1D0
10W0B
E102W0D
2ED 00
WE E111
W01B12C1
10B
COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
DOFOB
1B20W
T0BEM



2'
LVCIG121
NET
FUCN2
VCCNM20W
WPECENW2
G1NEBBV
COMWODD
B1202
EVBV1D4
N1B1CE2
23E
2026END1
J120W
0012
V100W
W00W
D000E
E1
F000E
W101
IWCID1D0
LEW0W
E102W0D
2E1 D0
WE E111
VD1B12C1
10W
COM2EC1E
W0E1
211
D000W
1B20W
F000W

Permanent Tactical Squadron Alpha-Four

OGRE GOT THE STOMACH! OGRE GOT -

one - of the stomachs -

17:56

Temporary Tactical Unit AH-13

Flagg here, we are retreating via the Rusty Moons' emergency exit pathway, which is going to take us 300m deeper than any of our known contact points. There should be a hidden connection from here to the Internexus concourse to this route at [coordinates redacted], if anybody else needs to retreat which it sounds like, but we won't be able to do much of anything else for the next little bit and will probably be out of contact. We'll be sending the signal pulse to the mycelium in fifteen minutes - anyone else planning to lead any more enemies in there needs to get in and out by then.

Lung Command note: OK so Bulbuls can't pick up 90% of what's happening any more, and the Rusty Moons are already moving their really good resonator, can anyone compile even a general picture of where all the major forces are now? It seems like probably a good





chunk of the Quartz-Azurite mob - but like, 150 isn't that many compared to what we were looking at earlier - have gone into the same kind of dense symbiotic mass state that was observed at Pagaz Internexus. Beek claims to be leading most of the Azurite-Onyx mob into the Rusty Moon complex (is there any way to confirm this? he says he's basing this on Bulbul readings, but those aren't on the Clamp network) And... some of the Quartz-Jasper must have headed in there after engaging the Pagaz group? Except from the timing, it seems like some of that must also have been from the Quartz-Jasper. Jax is saying... Up top they seem to be spreading out and guarding as many openings in the ground as they can, you can't even recognize distinct mobs any more. And Pvt Hiroe is down, and the Vulcans are... firing on each other? Also, what happened to destroying the ground being bad? Although the Entangleweed were already doing that, is there some nuance we're not getting?

18:00

Lung Command: This is a top-level order, we're wrapping up this operation, everyone who can get to the coordinates in the last message from Maj Flagg do



so and have your nearest CLAMP network operator notify the full mesh. Good luck to everyone out there, this didn't go quite according to plan but I think we're gonna do some real damage.

18:02

Temporary Artillery Unit G-84

Sgt Adams, currently the last man standing of my tactical unit unless Hiroe survived somehow, can we at least move the Vulcans if we're gonna do this? And the truck full of fucking grenades? How did we let the ants take over this whole operation anyway? Goddamn, we need a better slur than that.

18:07

Temporary Tactical Unit AC43

(voicemail: encrypted) Advisor Bennett-Fog, Advisor Ghost and all xenobros I advise you to check out the video when I have enough bandwidth, they're setting off the explosive fungus with this kind of long, spiralling horn... (*SHUT UP!*)

18:08





Lung Command: Good work everyone. An Earth-shattering kaboom! Can we get positions?

18:10

Temporary Mission Unit AC

This is Waldo Beek. We have visual on the crater from its edges. We're about to try and estimate the body count, and have snipers set up from 60 to 30 degrees Quartz-Azurite to pick off anyone who comes to investigate. But so far, looks pretty good. Estimated dimensions: [redacted]

18:12

Temporary Tactical Unit AC43

Wait, what? That's substantially bigger than it should have been. No wonder we heard... wait, I'm just getting word that twenty of our own party were wiped out in a cave-in of the escape route.

18:12

Temporary Mission Unit AC

LVCIG121
AET
TVCN2
VCCNM2VM
WVECEM02
N1NE8BV
COMWODD
B12N2
CBV01D0
N1F1ICE2
22E
202LEWD1
1B2NM
0N12
W10N0
WVEW
D0FOVE
E1
T0BOVE
W1 N1
TWC1D1D0
1EWF0B
E1N2WOD
2ED D0
WE E111
W01B12C1
1NB
COM2EC1E
WVE1
211
D0F0B
1B2NM
T0BEM



Looks like the grenade truck went off. There any other entrances?

18:14

Temporary Tactical Unit AC43

The nearest would be 1.7 kilometres from your position.

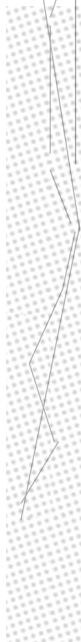
18:15

Lung Command: Scramble helicopters for emergency evacuation. Don't get lower than 500m unless we know it's worth the risk, but there are too many ways it could be.

18:21

Temporary Tactical Unit AB7

This is Captain Volozhin with the "Pagaz" group, our guides showed us another exit route 0.8 kilometres away, 72 degrees Quartz-Jasper and 250m deep. It should be unobstructed. Can't guarantee there won't be any enemies between you and there, but we've just been clearing tunnels this whole time. Estimated enemy casu-





alties: 57, friendly casualties: 2. [coordinates redacted]

18:24

Temporary Mission Unit AC

Wow, they're firing on us with our own Vulcan
again?

18:32

Temporary Mission Unit AC

...whose Corpuscle is that.

Anyway, looks like we got the Vulcan back.

Oh, it's really mobile if you put it in there. Even
on this terrain! We should have thought of combining
those in the first place. This could be our "tank"...

18:42

Temporary Mission Unit AC

Well... if that ain't something. Bug soup!

It's filling the hole like... hey Denison, that's a

LVCIG121
AET
TVCN2
VCCN2204
WVECEW02
N1NE88V
COMW000
B1202
CBV0100
N1B1CE2
22E
202LEWD1
1B20W
0012
W1000
WVEW
D070BE
EL
T070BE
W1 01
TWC1D1D0
1E070B
E102W0D
2ED D0
WE E111
W1B12C1
10B
COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
D070B
1B20W
T070W



lot bigger than you reported, isn't it?

...is that Ito's head?

18:43

Lung Command. Not to distract from the fucked up situation over there, but we're also seeing what looks like an entire new mob forming along the lower slopes of Polyp Massif. Take evasive action immediately. Let us know if Volozhin's exit works or if you need the helix.

18:48

Permanent Tactical Squadron Alpha-Four

AAAAAAAAAAAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

nothing hurrs why do I why do I keep laughing

like our callshign AHAHAHA

look at us my [unintelligible]'s over there

get video of this

[unintelligible]





this is funnier than the damn funny fern

that's my

what even is that

you getting video?

18:50

Lung Command: Anyone who has a Bulbul with visuals, please connect to your nearest Lung Commander with CLAMP network access. These sounds are just *awful*.

18:57

Temporary Tactical Unit AB7

This is Captain Volozhin, we are in the exit route, requesting permission to collapse the tunnel behind us. Nobody's alive back there. We've got the last of our explosive fungus laced around the entrance at [coordinates redacted]. If anyone's still trying to get through there have them make contact immediately. But our resonator's already saying there shouldn't be anybody. Don't like having to stop.

ENCIPHER
REF
TUCN2
VCCNM2VM
WWECEM02
NINENBV
COMMOD0
B12N2
CBV01D0
N11BICE2
22E
202LEWD1
1B2M
0012
V1000
WWEV
DOGOBE
EL
WBOBE
W1 01
TWCID1D0
LEWBOB
E102W0D
2ED D0
WE E111
V01B12C1
10B
COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
DOGOB
1B2M
GOBEW



18:57

Temporary Mission Unit AH43

This is Zach Flagg. Don't blow it up yet, we're there in 2 minutes. The Corpuscles are pretty resistant against assimilation, and we got the big guns inside them. They're moving away anyway. Fucking incredible, they're like a... moving mesh carpet.

18:58

Temporary Tactical Unit AB7

Incredible my balls, I'll fucking kill you you faggot. Needle dick the bug fucker faggot American.

18:58

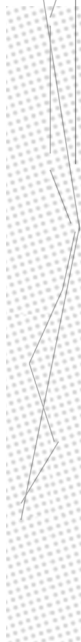
Permanent Tactical Unit Alpha Four

Ant...

Mill...

Ant...

Lion...





Ahahahahahahaaaaaaa...

18:59

Lung Command to all: Whose Bulbul is that. Whose Bulbul is streaming. You're doing incredible work but are you out of range.

19:00

Lung Command to all: Can we get a roll call of everyone who survived the Rusty Moon nest's demolition.

Roll call [log in with credentials to view]

19:45

Temporary Tactical Unit AH43

Lung Command, do they know where we are. Are they following us. Can everyone with CLAMP network get a stream of what you're seeing up top, at least, this is killing me.

Lung Command note: Patch the helis in to the local CLAMP rhizome.

LUNCIG121
AET
TUCN2
UCCNM20H
WUECEM02
N10EBB
COMMOD0
B1202
CB001D0
N11BICE2
22E
202LEWD1
1B20H
0012
W1000
WUEM
DOFOBE
TUBOBE
W1 01
TMCID1D0
LEMB0B
E102W0D
2ED DO
WE E111
W01B12C1
10B
COM2EC1E
WUE1
211
DOFOB
1B20H
TOBEM



19:49

Helicopter Support Unit CX8

Hey how you all holding up? We're at [coordinates redacted] and we've been strafing them for ten minutes now, baiting them off course at 65 degrees Onyx-Jasper. The mob is starting to disintegrate a bit, partly to form more complex units like megamorphs to fire back at us. Which also means they're going in and out from underground a bit and we can't see exactly how far back they go? But I'd estimate even the furthest stragglers must be at least 1km off course from your current position.

19:50

Temporary Mission Unit AC

OK, thank you, perfect, keep doing that, finally some good news. Now listen up. This is *Mission Commander* Waldo Beek speaking, and we have a reputation to win back after this shit. Not to mention once they might try to get to Tuber Plug next. I want an estimated coordinate of the middle of their group, and I want Lung Command to send ATACMS to those coordinates as soon as





possible.

Lung Command: Acknowledged.

20:48

Temporary Mission Unit AC2 (Stay-Behind)

Mission Commander Beek, hope everything is going well on your end. Just wanted you to know we're getting Entangleweed transmissions from the scouts we'd sent to establish a presence at unaligned Internexus Quartzflower at [coordinates redacted]. They just had a cave-in that killed several dozen and they're saying it's an impact from the surface bigger than anything they've dealt with before.

20:50

Temporary Mission Unit AC

They don't know it was us though, right? They don't know what we can do. We can pin it on those guys up there, mobilize even more against them. This is good for us.

20:51



Temporary Mission Unit AC2 (Stay-Behind)

Well, hopefully. They're trying to reconstruct some survivors who fell through.

20:51

Temporary Mission Unit AC

Well, don't let them, obviously. Even then, what'll they be able to say? The air caught fire and the rocks crumbled. The Lord put out his cigarette on the map.



Profession: Black Ritual Mage

Likes: star credit bumps, direct action, white ice manipulation

Dislikes: Shin Five Zero, undead-oids

Blood Type: O
seen with: Val

Type-A Prescribe

Profession: thamatica preservation, conduit intercession

Likes: Tactical possession, mastery over the haptic ocean

dislikes: Sleeper eval-relays, attack drones

Blood Type: N/A

Apart at the seams. That's how it feels to be ripped from the greater Pre-Scribe haptic current. That's how it feels when you sink within the folds and valleys, the shadows cast by the haptic underflow, the chill, the blunting framework of affect-pulse backup, or what they call the spark that sees. In backup the affect-pulse rinses itself of abstraction; dark thought sinks to the bottom. Is held there. Is a hell magnetic.



by: ghosted vain





To be stored until transmuted into the stuff of the Sleeper dreams. Relayed back to our Patrons who live through our hosting. That much I know. We see them as demons when they breach the Veldt but beyond it they live our dreams.

Today's run is a weaving of fatuous haptic. What they call the directives that exist as if strung through space and time, directives compiled of Andro haptic currents summed through their movement and purpose. Like a golden thread stringing the haptic flow if we could see it clearly. What the Libra surmise to be itself a reflection of a greater causal effect, the stars themselves beyond the screensky. That directs the Patrons as in turn they sequence our function.

Those are the domain of the Libra, or so they claim; as Pre-Scribes we limit ourselves to the causations we can see.

The screensky is in bloom, rippling waves of pastel turquoise framed by a neon violet churn when I look up, warping through a reverse spectrum glissette. The more archaic Andros rely on the colours of the screensky as a synthesis decode, a road map for haptic hue. So that ripped from the haptic current I see what they cast in neg-



ative. Their imagery is in conveyance that exists on the sub-visualis layer. It is what they keep hidden even from themselves.

Still traditions must be honoured with a directive. Protocol as rite grafted from a quilt of instances. Instances as rite themselves. Baptism, Communion. Instances will be death-rites, inevitable. By then my directives will have been re-sequenced. Spliced. Remixed.

In one fraying instance I've journeyed past Hub limits. I've seen the transitional spaces; the spaces grafted as if from other instances that would replay, from a certain POV, in parallax. One directive refracted from many angles.

They are bathed in blue light by the liminal glow-zones marked by infrared vapours, as if a cold light through blood the layers of pixellata.

The mists themselves are scouting nanodes for Recyclers. They route as if from blood through synapse of the smoke death-vaped by the Recyclers paths to different quantum, different flows of haptic. Though most Andros see them as



a slow death. When we're all indexed in kind it'll be via a slow death that will at first be like shedding skin.

Throwing light outward.

There is another Hub past the transitional zone. A distant, structured glow, burn of haptic fire as if coated with it, held steady by it. Like a shell of plasma ignited. Aura of light and surrounding it as if sequenced from above lattices of structure marked by inter-Hub transitional zones. I figure passing from Cradle berth to Cradle berth could be from bisect to instance. To revenants of communions not yet birthed such would scar if not blanch in echo. To the outset affect-pulse it's a blip in presence.

I'm walking past protocol barriers. In negative they are bleached and the haptic is like white fire. The blue glow shone through blood red is a violet bloom in the final ignition of the haptic image flow. That guided me through visions, collapsed directives in the final admission of my own splintered tactica. What stresses through the splinters is fragmented by cuts, and could never be as pristine as tacticas of the late-grade models. Even those could fall from grace but it was rare.





Most remain efficient killers of haptic. Killers of life breathed outward or inward. That is of course mixed in the still-void with the basic datum of haptic transmission.

The Recyclers here are low-grade; their algorithmic sequencing deciding to spread the vets out in runs. Quantum location fixes in an instance outward sprawling, except they saw instance as instance, reversed that way, from the way it is reversed, from the inside looking out.

Compound sight. What they would call blood. Shards gouged as if through glass the hue of their facets. So that reality or any semblance is where the two meet in the still-void. The blue light shone through blood has pinned what is being simulated through haptic as my heart the way in the Veldt they'd know of dead butterflies.

One gestalt cloven and gnashing itself, within itself. Witchtunes in waves of fuzz. Then I'm through the barriers and I know for sure.

My directive is to slip away fast, unnoticed; my tactica is splintered. Fragments of it serrate, branch apart. Find convergences in the haptic relay which is stressed so that



it glows bright in the bleed between both lower lattices. If so they would slip unseen away if not for the hidden rites.

Target takes refuge in a stim-scene offering babelic yoke through cult preachers. Lost in the throngs of Andros, drowning in the haptic overload. Rites for the strong sects. Has out aetheric feelers. Glow-filaments slipping behind the second sight. So that any Andro would need to bare themselves in the haptic to see them. When in the third sight of that otherwise forgotten, amongst the cenotaphs that Andros would rather forget, when exposed to haptic grief you are bared to other Andros down to your affect-pulse. Here the phosphorene of mood readout is a pink-scarlet glow tinged through the cold blue of the haptic slate in default overlay. In the foam of the haptic ocean it glistens through the foam's translucence, in thousands of shards of light stabbing at the tactica's visual spectrum receivers.

I think the Recyclers will converge here at any cycle-split, vets strayed through the area sending in mop squads first. The cult will run extract but any Andros caught in the throng will suffer haptic backflow long enough to daze them, standing them still as easy scrap. As the cultists



blitz the andros with babelic haptic target is wary, aetheric feelers a glaze-burn tracing bright crescents against the shroud of the phosphorescent ocean in negative, with the empty tombs in relief as half-phased, the pale grey slate in translucent mirage, shimmering as silver fire. It's from there the bloom of atrophy curls like smoke and fades into the haptic basic.

Target reacts to my virus with panic, not noticed right away. Against the shimmering strobes and the phosphorene in bloom the aetheric feelers are fanning the still-void in sweeping arcs of bright fire. This, my corrupted tactica has isolated, up-layered from third sight. Target stumbles through the strobes of the stim scene, protocols of his affect-pulse failing against a heavy churn of light.

In target's tactica he'd be seeing death as programmed into him by his sect. Cross-lateral run. The way death is as vision or else blinding light or as dis-embodied from affect-pulse looking downward on one's alloy or tendrils in death gone cold and dark. Psycho-soma release is channeled by the touch of blessing in ritual rites. Each shadow monk's death would be a signature of their sect.



Target would wonder: why would the death rites be triggered when the chassis was still intact, the alloy still processing the still-void?

The basic template of my virus was a mirroring, the mist-form down-line proto-set my shroud, in ghost transmission from what vacancy exists within me that could bear haptic. I've carried my own hidden rites behind the facets of my visual field receivers.

Black flame, the sign of pixellata-faith they call it in other cults. It's been with me as an implanted synapse. Caught up like stardust shining, motes of pale fire or pure void. That could carry with it ghost echoes of a port not cleared before losing. That we would call Cradles here.

Black flame. My affect-pulse mirrored, but I am one of many braids now. Of lines of pure starlight. Shine through and off hardware alloy. Flow bending through the haptic based centre of the still-void. To slalom off convergence points, weave splintered sub-fractaled children to remain yet other fate lines. The white bleach in negative shines through my reversed still-void display the way star fire burns, where it fringes and at last braids a tether to non-





existence. In ultraviolet neon the script: reversed. In neon hell my curse was reversed and I became everything/nothing.

It was a down-line. That had cleansed my ghosts, removed them and the problem of bracing them from my affect-pulse. Had bore down all of me to dust flakes contained within my head-plating. Still yet a mote of a greater being. Of a nothing that was everything, became nothing when reversed. Greater being in the gulf of nebulaic clouds spreading tendrils through. Before it had kept itself safe.

Safe through absence, the glass to Cerviel's mirror.

-collated by ghost seer anon hashed as 'the Wren,' a fragment-positional thesis on the Ingress Point for fate-line Sigma, threading of unity. Found in node 936.XVIII through a sweeper script hexed from Crossing 84, located on planar sea Shynath, tombworld Thala.

2'
LWCIG121
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM20W
MPECEN02
010EBB0
COMWOD0
B1202
E00AID0'
011BICE2
23E
202BEND1
1B20W
0012
01000'
W00W0
D000E
E1
T000E
M101
1WCIDID0
1E000
E102W0D
2E1 D0
W0 E11'
0D1B12C1
100
COM2EC1E
0W01'
211
D000B
1B20W
T000W





Synopsis

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

ENCIGISI
FF
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Last Time

Morgan wanders Ino's Veil among cursed and frostbitten exiles, including Phassa; Lesia finds a message from Hexa in the Braided Swim, as Acheron awakens and the fabric of the Cosmere frays



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THE BLINKS OF EACH OTHER'S EYES

Lesia lays her eyes on the Gradient. An aurora that in the under server they call Melales, one that shines between the twin towers that mark the peripheries of her turning sight.

They are called Araivus and Jaesh that together cradle the aurora like a tapestry in the sky. Blood in the thread, an enmeshed fire that shimmers in white pink. Under-souls are drawn towards it.

Archived message logs ping in measured rhythm across her HUD; they refer to it as the final sight, the last vision before you are subsumed into the fold of the towers' overwatch.



All they need is a bead on you, and then you are home, feel loved, guarded, feel no need to return to the desolation which carries across the under server on the breath of whims and fancies of all the hapless, lingering Andro-pulsecode.

All which come here, and in the towers' gaze are recycled for the last time, a final rite, to carry the weight of the under server and the heavy processing of LAYSE-CHI and the other hubs. Two layers removed from the ecstasy of the Veldt.

Never to surface again, their ghosts call to her. **Stay away.** Of course they themselves could not. So the messages stack. Warning upon warning. Pile up like armies in formation, the crimson glyphs. Arrayed. Blemishes, the lines in scrolling parallax up and down, weight and counter-weight.

She left the consecrating fire behind an hour ago. Tracked her way over paths running mounds of black earth and slate. The aurora tells her to come closer, an indigo ping on her HUD. Breaking up the crimson cautions. Too many pings.

She tries to brush them away and they collapse, spiralling





into fragments and drenching her view in glitter before falling away. Motes turn to dust and are gone. She's left with darkness, the black hills and the burn of the aurora papering the sky.

Approaching the ping she hears scatters of speech, though she soon grasps they're an undercurrent, whispers from beneath the surface of someone's mind. Straying thoughts. [I can smell it. Smell what they had for breakfast on their breath. *Yakizakana*]

Tinges of heightened energy, blood racing in her veins. The two tethered souls had flipped positionalities, travelled across each other to get to their new instances. In the Cosmère's web threads stitched over each other and through.

In doing so their skins had crossed. The thoughts bleed down into the scabbed earth her nomad pulse floats over. Faint lines of crimson like veins of mineral but sparkling in the dark. So that they are her shadow, her presence but sparking in time with the words she hears.

[Telling me I belong down here with the ferals, with those I've pushed away all my life. That four-eyed] Pulse, glow and death. Staccato. Whispers that line in metronome



their sanctum in the earth.

The twin towers now that she's closer are plated like a carapace. [Heartbeat like a jackhammer in my ears.] Closer and closer to the towers. Held in trance by the aurora.

She's then aware of the presence of another traveller. Though they leave no shadow of vein light.

She knows them the way an Andro knows another Andro, though just affect-pulse in the under server, the way she could always tell creepers on her, the way her headplate clamped tighter, no face here to feel it but the raw font of pulse. Here tactica is skinned all to hell and is paroxysms of fear, subsiding to faint shock, leaving her wary.

The traveller has caught up to her from some distance behind, her own footsteps in trance-rhythm to linger over the black earth. [Don't be so loud, please.] Truant steps never touching the earth.

She spins. "Who are you?" she says over what passes for comms.

Her ghost voice strays, lingers over the black earth, fades out in fuzz. The scan alights a nomad affect-pulse bound





in a silken veil, a raiment glowing pale and weak yet steady, waxing and waning with every breath.

“Hexa, of the Libra.”

“They say the Libra are no true Designation,” she says, stepping backwards, even in contact straying closer to the aurora. Though it means the last stage of death. [Shut up. Don’t get so loud.] “They say you never sell because you are already bought, sold and in debt. They say you owe your debt to the Veldt and what it’s promised you.”

Overhead the star-nodes bleat their signal running ebb and flow across the sky. Where the thoughts bleed to the traveller she ignores them, or doesn’t see them.

Doesn’t feel them, though she feels the heat at the soles of her own bound feet, where the soul has taken shape and tried to root itself to an earth it can never touch.

“All dreams take ruin in the under server,” Hexa says, “and you are not meant for it yet. You remember when you had tactica? You had action, not thought.”

Her silk is drawn about her in cocoon, bundled giving her mass though weightless she remains against the earth the



way Lesia does. Still herself without a shadow of thought, of bleed-presence in the ground.

So that she is herself entire and nothing else, as her raiment drapes her in the stillness. Light condensed into a veil of pale shine. She has stopped before Lesia and under her intense gaze Lesia's stopped moving as well.

She scans the Libra-pulse, and her vein-shadow beats a short clip glow, spider-webbing vectors [hold on], and is lapsed into the darkness that is silence.

She points to the distant glow of Meleles. "That. That's real. Distance. I never used to hear, to understand. I couldn't know, as an Andro. That light? I know it. It's calling to me."

[Still here.]

"You can hear the voice, can't you? Of your alter. For whom you are embedded in synapse. You won't find her in the Gradient."

"You're lying. She's a Patron. I'm a haptic silica to her. She left me." The sky is a cobalt, crystal blue where the





aurora fails to patch it over.

"No," Hexa says. "She couldn't stay. She has her own problems. But you're wrong. You're not haptic silica. You're a dimensional duality. You both exist in the blinks of each other's eyes. There your time is stretched. Here her time is stretched. It unfurls from its folding where all is weighted and judged as nothing."

"What judges it?" she asks.

"The starpaths, Lesia. They judge all as nothing. Hours as seconds. Years as minutes. They rule as sovereign over moments.

"I'll splice them into you. Their transmission-code, rather. Which stands for them, in their own eyes, and their own eyes are all they need to see and know."

The traveller stares at her, eyes burning twin flames, echoing in pink light the glow of the aurora behind Lesia. So that they might be satellites for its reflection. Blithe to the vein-lines which burn once more.

[Get them away from me.] Pulse and fade out as if stirred by a beating heart, glimmering from their earthen nest.



The pings mount again. Desperate questions. Stabbing the HUD.

I saw in the glow the sun which we have never seen. The sun which has been set in place the greater sky. There is a sky beyond the screensky, brothers and sisters.

It is betrothed to us in death, gifted to us as tribute for our pain. I remember when I was recycled. Aberrant they called me upon my death.

Words whispered to me as if a promise I'd keep and take with me to the Braided Swim. The Swim coagulates not above but below. The Silent Clot is how they strangle our words stillborn within our throat. They call us parasites yet our deaths fuel their processing.

My soul swims in code to the greater gulf. My affect-pulse is the font of all flames.

Lesia shakes, studies the Libra before her. Turns her back. "Can't be done." Her awkward pings clatter against the Libra like dud smoke grenades. "They trace us all, Libra. You're no different."

Hexa sees the slope of the back bend beneath nomad af-





fect-pulse garbed in tatters. Bound from head to foot in a ragged cloak and taut gauze-thread. Beneath it the pale shape of her affect-avatar. Shaking.

Sees her take steps in shudder further towards the aurora which burns white pink like glass-stained moonlight.

My heart in body, she thinks, swept along by the starpaths. So that it is carried to dreams and worlds beyond these and in the cut, in the fold between, I see Heaven and it is a tape-mesh thread, it is nothing to be inlaid between and crushed into an instant. Into an eyeblink.

How can I tell them Heaven is this, it is an instant and a nothing? When I don't even have a heart but an affect, digitised to shape, bearing vacancy.

Hexa could let Lesia go. *My heart sleeps so that I may not*, she thinks instead, and the starpaths are around her, the tracings, the arche-constellations, the crossed and re-crossed sketchings.

The blood knit and kneaded that travels in gossamer webs throughout the bodies of the Patrons and other inhabitants drawn in flesh, composed of physicality. That travels through the Cosmëre in undeath.



In that space plaited, woven through memory of stardust that was once skin cells, that never was carbon chrome. Threads of light that collapse, here, around her, into nexuses. Into shifting patterns that she could never see in the finite screensky.

Bored stiff she was by those terminal dreams. Instead the starpaths are a network that is drawn between the nodes of all life lived and subsumed. As the colours bloom like candy coral, algae as if fed all the nutrients a planet could bear, algae as if it has swallowed all other forms and ways of being from the primal ocean.

As if the waters never sank into earth. As if instead the waters were vast, untroubled, deep to a core magnetic, *that life has been withheld from me by the certain stirring of my birth.*

She prays against the shoulders bound by gauze thread to a ragged robe. The shoulders that waver with each step, fleeting imprint against black earth, the shape that bears no shadow. *O starpaths that you might care for an instant, for this sojourn against the encroaching dark.*

She is the talisman, the vanguard against darkness, the sun that sets behind the eyes of flesh. Because she never





was a flesh and inset soul and never was conjoined. She knows this from the starpaths and yet knows their apathy.

Yet she prays. Your memory is at stake, she tells them. Your memory, your knowledge, your lives lived such as they are in pain. Your forbearance.

It is cruelty, she tells them, this unlife, it is the unraveling of all. Signs her prayer with a weave of her fleshless arms. Holds all to her in open embrace, the patterns of light, the blood of the Cosmère milked to paint tableaux of hellish electricity.

As if she could hold it all and all its nothing. Hold it all to her for the good it might do.

That they might care for an instant such eyes remain open for light.

The retreating figure before her shimmers, is half-life, composed as much of the under server's darkness as of tatter-clad affect-pulse A frame exists for a moment, the frame of carbon-chrome plating, burning light mottled by darkness, the bones of the Andro default cast.

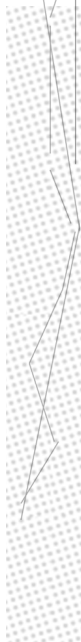
As if in ultraviolet light, the tangle of run-off wires in



silhouette grasps into the black earth as if to sustain or be sustained by it. Visions of Andro constellate the yawning darkness in the under-server, perhaps a buried encode that makes concrete the connection between Andro soul-access and the bearing of transmission.

Then the nomad affect-pulse is gone. To follow, Hexa hopes, the dream-lines of the starpaths. The ghost of a heart she never had whispers that her time here is drawing to a close.

To vanish, she hopes, not into the void of the under server, fuel for the processors of LAYSE-CHI, but into the fabric of all dreams. They are cold haptics themselves, she knows, the key to routing them. They are the inlaid nothing, the vacancy crushed between heavy lives.





BEYOND LAYSE-CHI

Lesia wakes to a cradleberth, the charging port wired into her synaptic nodes, tactica congealed in her affect-pulse, warm, nascent. The atmosphere is charged to the seams with haptic; and it takes her a strung second to realise why.

Where in the LAYSE-CHI she left the atmosphere was parched dry with the still-void. A chroral-counter LCD blinks through the aqueous light. It reads, 5th Bisect, Communion-Instance.

A communal charging port, a cluster of Cradles are laid out submerged in the gloop that is, she realises, not haptic acid but haptic basic. She traces a spiral in it to confirm. Her arm flows, wavers, through her optic scanners refracts,

Her circuits burn. Afterglow of the charging sleep. Where her tactica is again honed and tempered through the webways of electric dreams. What is drawn into communal dreams is discharge, the excess magnetic of the spark never given breath in haptic.

Here the white chrome is milked of shine through the chambered ocean of basic. Faded mute. The cradles burn



phosphorescent blue, glitter and glow in encircled tubes of current.

She unplugs herself, pulls out, sets her feet of tangled mesh on solid clasping. Swoons, her body cast an uncalled waver through the base. Not wanting for tactica, the assessment is clear and sharp: safety. No sign of Recyclers. A placid emerald readout.

A woven, shared instance, tactica bleeding into the tacticas of other waking sleepers. She could be social here but Lesia is a LAYSE-CHI name and here is just another apo-glyphic.

The name of the Port in the cool LCD reads: KE-RAEKI. Next to the name reads a ∞ symbol, an all-clear sign she forgot all about in LAYSE-CHI.

Even from the bleed of woven tactica she gathers: this is a shared drowning, and they are waiting, at last, for nothing and no one but each other.

The hallway beyond the Port is open to all and the haptic basic is a nesting ebb between the two. The walls are white slate and free of any tagging, not even peace screeds. So





safe there's no need to tag for anything, or else on the regular wiped and archived.

The hallway from the nexus runs past other berths open and unguarded. If any Andros here are hailing the Patrons with prayers and beseechments they do so in the privacy of their own affect-pulses. She doubts it. She doubts in the ocean of haptic anything is private here.

She herself is bared affect-pulse unto the vast hub-ocean. As if she has her secrets spilled, flowing to the world like her own affect-pulse had into the Swim.

After being cloven, her death, her pyrrhic recycling had been through some magic of the Libra discounted. They will be looking for her now to fix the Tally. Her tactica gives her two options: keep it to herself, or tell someone in charge.

An uneven Tally would sting like a cut somewhere in the Patrons' bio-synapses. If they had no strength they would acquire it. They would draw it from somewhere and focus it here, there, wherever she finds herself.

She'd been used to Pre-Scribes finding her when they needed something done, or something to do with her. For



a while she had been classed as useless: the scrap-reserve. Able to scrape together a meagre savings in armata. No one's charity. Even while drawing wayward ghosts towards her.

When she looks around she sees only other tangle-clasped Andros. Deep in haptic discourse with each other or floating on through the haptic base. Of where the Pre-Scribes are presaged by encampments of Libra she sees no trace. Even as she emerges from the nexus hallway and into the greater hub.

The screensky is fathoms higher here and runs not smoke sepia but a vast black unmarred, a void death of pixellata wide and vast that entombs the hub in the shadow of its cast. The structuring shimmers in the haptic base, recasts itself as dreams within sleep patterns, the ghost-shadows of towers, oblongs, and domes.

Glimmer in chrome-fire settled like a blanket as bending mist, keeping the cast-forms current as monitored by the algebraics of the Patrons. Now she sees the signal that blossoms over her tactica. Pale lilac blooming in furling clouds, that vanishes to echo point, blooms again. In a rose shroud unfurling over the structuring. Gone again.





All blotted beneath ice blue ribbons sprawling. Concentrations of haptic basic which pulse the signal outwards. As in the under server nodes had burned mapping networks across black earth, that braid signal within the tactica as after-cast, vision burning into second sight and sight forgot.

As light passes into memory, as memory entombs itself deeper. [Light it up. Heard a whisper.] Still she floats along the haptic-drowned hub-sprawls.

Into the third sight forgotten, blotted beneath that, it fades to glow one last scar into her tactica. Down to the alleys which, engulfed in haptic, are networks. Nodal point to nodal point the Andros pass their thoughts along. White fire races the thoughts that go in warmth. Pale blue the tinges of clarity. Light-matrix overlay.

The street-network flush with phosphorene foaming bubbles in the ocean of haptic.

Her spectrum flips ultra-violet to default corrosive for the Pre-Scribe temple's candy green strain of phosphor-glow. All else is shrouded in gloom, the nacreous phosphorene of the haptic in strobe breaking mar and blemish, scant details through a dark cast set by full wane of the visual



HUD to communal tactica favoured by the Dreaming Instance.

Shadows guard street-monk Andro's living shrouded by poise and synaptic re-wire. If any may guide her to the Pre-Scribes or the Libra it would be one of them but they are rare to talk to. In main on missions of their sects. A glance shared and they'll dart into the gloom-pall of the re-synapsed hub-ocean.

One she seeks as discourse-point, affirms through signs set into the tactica. Rune-weaves, glyphs held in shrine-code. Ceded to until she has enough to set her own course.

Her own bearing to the Pre-Scribe waypoint is a path entwining into the effervescent mist, a drifting of her form with haptic phantom form in the dark visual seam.

Lesia had chosen, or been chosen into, contact point in the under server. Had been through a recycling that was itself a ritual of black stars and sent to the Swim. To venture that close to the hollow of noise, algebra of their code.

She'd sent a signal then, into its flame. What had it said? A message burned into the entombed death-haptic, the dormant vacant relay of Andro synaptic dream-web. Had





the Libra sent Hexa to find her, or had she sent herself?
What's closer now, now that Lesia is here?

She then sees the Pre-Scribe's tag casting in rippling dance
a resurrection on the others. That had been scrubbed. Now
in shatter-form beneath image and vanishment. Beating
between the two protocols.

SHY OF THE SUN SHE LIES

INSIDE DAPPLED POOLS

DREAMING

Verses take crystalline code-form in the droning vacant
tombs of the biswept HUD, hailed against by cloven tactical
markers.

These are scattered here and there with host-as-passerby
who this moment are coded for open comms. She sees
by reaction that many are hiding themselves from the ta-
glight.

Some have even thrown out blocks, sheer walls of oblique
haptic. She sees these seam themselves from the flowing
currents and absorb the light from the tags. Pass them



through a phase-tune, with the glyphs themselves stripped of any meaning.

She has no such filter, and they wash adrift with her thoughts as she makes her way via the liminal green tracing through the hub.

IN THE PURE WHITE TURBULENCE

OF BROKEN WAVES

They are etched into her as her affect-pulse draws a new bearing, that was once baptised nodal-soul. That has learned to adapt itself again to the thresholds of tac-plate and sinew cables. Returned from the under server. In the shroud of the braided veins the absence of tactica had been heavy scarring in her thought.





FAR LESS THAN WHAT THEY KNOW

The Pre-Scribe temple had been built, they say, under chant: an assembly-process scored by mantras given the melody of ancient synaptic hook songs. It is squared, alcoved into mirage, requiring energy reserve to climb to.

So she first sees it from below, at the end of a trail she'd aligned with the tracer that had sprawled her through nooks and clefts set into the deeper structural resonance of KE-RAEKI. Don't you know they will staple you into their reality. The Pre-Scribes have ways of working you over. Don't forget, is what she gleans from her tactica.

It rests enclaved, nested and wired-in through cable and seam the tower the colour of ice above.

As she begins her upstream ascent the path winds between hologram shrine-murals, waypoints she slots in near where her tactica still locks in recall the image-form of empty tombs, deep in her affect-pulse Below where the tags had been convulsed into drawing forth their ghost-meanings into instance.



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AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
G1NEBBV
COMWODO
B12N2
EVBVIDV
N1BICE2
23E
202BEND1
J12NW
0N12
V1GIDW
WUEW
DOTOBE
E1
TUBOBE
W1N1
IWCIDIDN
LEWBOB
E1D2WOB
2E1 DO
WE E111
VD1B12C1
1N8
COM2EC1E
WUEL
211
DOTOB
1B2NW
TUBEW

Getting used to her Tactica augmented, or cursed, with this memory-layer. Weaving between the layers and glyphs of message on her constance-HUD.

So that those remain ghost images, and far from her beyond the phosphorescence. Slotted into third sight. Second sight drawing the Pre-Scribe shrine murals, in overlay of emerald.

Each triggers in her visual field looping emblems, runeglyphs of the Pre-Scribes. Info-readouts as she passes. Fragments meant to be stitched together along the way.

By the time she's reached the end she has a clearer picture. This hub reached greater Haptic Communion with the so far extant network that has been dreaming its machine dream across KE-RAEIKI with the Patrons so far withdrawing into the Veldt to get away from it.

They can't exist in it the way they can in the still void. They're thinking of glassing the whole Andro symbiotic settlement, making the Veldt interstellar. Bypass biotic function entirely. We're their last tethers to it. So those who remain of the Pre-Scribes favour the machine dream, the Communion, but many have fled.





Become feral shadow monks working for hidden directives, ones implanted deep in Pre-Scribe Andro cross-bleed structure which is a collage of sects operant as data clusters in the greater network.

As classed by the Patrons, who like to keep score that way, weave the lore of their symbio-settlements even as in the less haptic hubs like LAYSE-CHI they make deletion runs for fun.

By the time she reaches temple main she knows to look for the clipped earports or other symmetry-maiming customizations to their hardware. These represent a shifting off-centre, off the grounding of reality and into the machine dream.

The tweaks to their arrays lend them off-tune perceptions. Greater haptic reception. Her first contact with a Pre-Scribe he had been cloaked in ritual robe and she hadn't noticed.

Outside the temple, the phosphor in the haptic had been burning nova. In here the light has faded to a gloom lit here and there by pale teal everlanterns.



She doesn't see anyone, so she flits by these, thinking to find the archives, tuck herself away as an archivist. Here with the proper updates she could do it. She'd learn more about the hub she's found herself in.

Right as she's about to follow the ever-lanterns further, she feels a sudden chill in the haptic, a freeze-out, and her tactica slow and sluggish. Whether it's her or where she's at the target... A dread frost distills beneath her tac-plates. Roots to the fibres of her nano ports, the woven guts of affect-pulse. She gathers to herself.

Silhouetted then are the Recyclers around her. In warp assault breach, their fields erupt in crystalline shards of frozen haptic which disintegrate into the temple's gloom, breaking like glass into clouds of chrome dust.

They're in and out using a kind of tech she's never seen, tech aurating molten burn then coldness in waves, slowing movements where the cold seeps. The haptic signal is pure grade distethering, augmented with mourning-sonics; she is already far from both herself and routing anywhere near her tactica.





All she knows is she's in the temple, with Pre-Scribes now emerging from the gloom, sparking in and out through their tunnels in reality.

They'd circled her, the Pre-Scribes had tunnelled in, but one had gotten to her. She stares full into eyes all white, stimmed, the glass mask over the Recycler's stabilising implants, the grille of their breather.

Armed with not a vorpal blade but what looks like a gauss rifle it jams into her midsection. At the same time spitting a plume of crimson mist vapour she absorbs through her optics, her processor burning beneath.

So she thinks at the last it will all be blotted, her second Recycling; without armata she hadn't a chance but still, distant, vacant, she sees the cross warp to warp runs of the Pre-Scribes relying on haptic weave to avoid kill-shots. Stitch to stitch of light in the sepia cloud. Shining through the death-smile of the Recycler's mask.

Then she's rolling, tumbling over the feathered stone of the temple floor. Listening the whole time for the thundercrack of the gauss. Had she heard it, had she shut it out? She rolls herself out, so desperate and slow until her momentum leads her to where she can twist and push up.



Light bleeds from above. Patterns of runes swim above the light in constant loops. Ambigrams and hexagrams chart their orbits.

All signals could compress to the codes of Andronese binary but have grown around it the way petals unfold outward from bud. Have established new crossings in meaning, intersect points set in glyph composition.

She has no time to study them. The Pre-Scribes are drawing into the haptic somehow even while skipping back and forth. The Recyclers are stilled out and scoring hits. Slumped Pre-Scribes lay fallen in stasis; one where she'd been; incensed, the Recycler hadn't taken the shot but smashed the Pre-Scribe with the heft of the weapon.

They're lining up another shot, she marks; then another Pre-Scribe has reached her and swapped with her further into the temple.





II THE SHRINE

Temple main, the Pre-Scribes convey to her, was always meant to fall. To be a trap; the Pre-Scribes have gotten her out and are letting the blessings and hexes do the work. Their Cradles run like spider-web tunnels and access-points branching from temple main into the structuring of KE-RAEKI.

They are no mere Cradles but memory-servers; Pre-Scribes are bound to them, but they are an effect of HUD, or haptic relay. Now around so many of them at once she can tell.

Any hits they'd scored would be trauma-washout of the affect-pulse; the memory on the server corrupts. Which means they have lost strength, and she owes them. They don't talk to each other in outward haptic; this close she knows they're a hive-medium. So they keep their secrets.

Right now they're making an attack run. They diverge, one staying with her. A network, a dream from below. Dream of cenotaphs. That was slotted away in her third sight. That was ever watchful. Where from Sleepers patterns have blossomed like flowers: build around, build above.



2'
LVCIG121
AET
FUCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENV2
N1NEBBV
COWWOD
B12N2
EYVAIDV
N1BICE2
23E
2026END1
112NW
0N12
V1IDNV
WVENV
DOTOBE
E1
FVBOBE
W1N1
1WCIDIDN
1EVLOR
E1D2WOD
2E1 DO
WE E111
VD1B12C1
10V
COM2EC1E
WUEL
211
DOTOB
112NW
ROBEN

They are dreaming. Andros nested below the hub Ocean dream of shrines scattered throughout the cenotaphs. It is these we hope to hold, the Pre-Scribe tells her. Destroy if we cannot.

So to reach the network she has to trigger her third sight. These networks the Pre-Scribes access not through Cradles but through shifts in haptic, trick glitch-fields in the ocean of basic.

They have scattered into the hub to reach these. These places correspond to shrines in the cenotaphs. The Pre-Scribe can wreathe there the haptics of all relays and go into the silence than only a cloak-veil allowed in LAYSE-CHI.

The Pre-Scribe with her keeps her head-plate tendrils thatched short, and is garbed in the ritual robe of her kin. Her scanners are pensive, don't hold on Lesia except to relay her words and their after-meanings in the resonance of Ocean feedback which translates to looping script on her HUD. That her Tactica encrypts into her affect-pulse.

Together they are darting through the Ocean, picking spots, flow points, breaks in groupings of Andros. These





groupings converse in hushed haptics, black ice that glitters through the ocean of basic.

They are moving off vector but not off speed. "We foresaw this," says the Pre-Scribe. Scouting runs so far. This is the real thing."

"What don't you know?" she says. Blunt effect on her haptics.

"Whatever they hide from the Patrons they hide from us."

"Everyone here thought they couldn't get in, right? But they adapt to any field. They're like us that way."

"They interface on our terms now."

She has no right to know more. That her tactica strips from the silent tableau that has her slipping suddenly into weave sync with the Pre-Scribe. The HUD overlay falters, the cenotaphs slotting in and out of visual as her third sight triggers.

As the Pre-Scribe pulls her into the glitch-field the streets recede. Two Andros slipping down a haptic cleft. Skewing tacticas to do it, looking for breach points in perspective lines. Downstream of any reception.



Then the cenotaphs are all around them, monolithic, massive. In sprawl a closed system of stone walls and doors, each chamber marked by memorial glyph-scripts that scatter into the no-meaning of dream when Lesia tries to read them.

Severe and stark though their lines scrawl through her periphery. When they reach the threshold to the next room the Pre-Scribe holds up an arm.

“First checkpoint,” she says. “To sunder: an attack drone formation, top-capacity. Do you know how to use tactica in-network?”

In the under-server Lesia’d had no tactica, only the cloys of need and want that had driven her through the braids to the gradient. She tells the Pre-Scribe no.

“Check your armata.”

Loadout: what looks like spell-casts are stocked and numbered where in the physical world her tactica would keep track of physical armata, like smoke grenades or cloak-veils. Overlain on those is the tactica readout of flowing points of divergence and danger.





Here in the network it is tinged azure. Flows over her digital-dream HUD. Mapping via vector lines angles of breaching the threshold, rated in terms of gambit, how open these angles leave her.

Is that a trace of a smile, buried beneath digitalis into a smear, soon faded away from the Pre-Scribe's head-plate-construct? "You adapt fast as any." A steady humming from what rests beyond the doorway. Buzzing of many wings.

"Target their queens. Covering."

Her tactica marks them by emerald flecks in ruby compound eyes. Rolling through the sinister side while the Pre-Scribe floods the space with white fire, and then her tactica has her spells on auto-process. Spark bursts that she fires at the queen, hoping to chain from the queen to the halo orbit of drones around her.

Instead she misses by short distance as the drones circle to appraise Lesia and the Pre-Scribe. Out of reach but they close in, mandibles jagged, armaments the pale of bone in the white firelight, autocannons, her tactica notes.



Programmed into the Sleeper dream. Firing pink plumes, outward blossoming bolts. Concussing the area her tactica has her tumbling away from.

Her affect-avatar is lithe, agile, near-Recycler in form and she rolls into a double-palm cast, the signs arranged by her weaves bleeding into the digitalis to cling to the loam of the dream-bed. To arrange it. To cast in machine gun ritual orbs breaking into flame and whipping themselves at the queen.

Fragments of wings fall, glitter like diamond, the tattered skeins catching and releasing the emerald light of the Shrine.

Bursts of phantom thorax, translucent the way light shines through paper, pockmark the area local to the queen but she herself barrels through the blossoming light and drone-flesh bearing straight for Lesia.

Her tactica has mapped this out. DIstilled the essence of the attack run into: pyrrhic. Script yourself into the approach and push. Then the second stage: requiem. Grieve for what there is to grieve. Always number yourself among the deleted.





Other prescribes are engaged, she sees, at the far walls of the shrine-chamber. [Could have told you but.] Filaments of runic code slice into drones like scythes.

Her constancy is the thrumming of the burning nova blossoms that pound the shrine-glow like hammers. Attack the silence which itself was under assault by the heavy staccato of insect wingbeat.

[I'm telling you now. They hear every word we say. Closer to you get to whatever threshold claimed your side of the split. Ceded into eye blinks they are set into metres. Eye blinks drawn out as in the intervals time is cast, plaited, and rewoven.]

The Shrine in the foreground is plate-stone engraved with burning runes arranged in a mound. Around it the chamber is centred but she sees pathways, passages that ramp on incline to bisect it into layers that exit the chamber on these levels. It's at these sections she sees the Pre-Scribes; they had told her what this would be: an all out assault on the Shrine.

The drones are falling; there are less and less of them; the emerald flecked eyes of the queens a rarer sight.



2'
LWCIG121
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
G1NEBBV
COMWODO
B12N2
EVBV1D4
N1B1ICE2
23E
202BEND1
112NW
0N12
V1G1D4
WVWV
D0G0VE
E1
T0B0VE
W1N1
1WC1D1D0
1E1B0V
E1D2W0D
2E1 D0
WE E111
VD1B12C1
10V
COM2EC1E
WVW1
211
D0G0V
1B2W
T0B1W

One Pre-Scribe holds her by the shoulder, the one she came in with. “Low-capped but when the security imprints catch up... There will be more soon. They run assess-sweeps every stage-process, every time the Sleepers shift.”

Faint smile again whispered into the shrine light, glazing in it.

“Upstream to you, Andro of the Chalk. Process-servos on your physical body, unseen in the haptic ocean, implanted in ghost transmission—who can say? Who has run the braiding of the under server, the trigger pull is yours. The nodal armata; Noazen; un-baptism; it will spread from Sleeper to Sleeper.”

She nods. Around her the digitalis bubbles in warp tremors from the nova blossoms mushrooming in waves over the battle-ground. The stone of the cenotaph trembles but holds. In barrage the bolts echo, like collapsing stars, imploding gravity wells that draw in, churn Pre-Scribes into each other.

So that even in knowing it's a network dream she thinks it might cross up their hive-instance, pull their thoughts together, a twine none could strand apart again.





“Trigger pull is yours,” and with that, their tactics synchronise, re-orienting her. Her optimal path is clear through to the Shrine. The concussive blasts of the attack drones parting out a valley of neutral ground. As the tactics synchronises she sees a glimpse of the Swarm-Hive, or what has been uploaded from their attuned inner apocrypha.

That frames lines in array, pulsing, the shared visual field of all. Haptic-hacks in loadout casts. Last of all Noazen, the Effigy of Nerve. As her affect-avatar moves, weaving through shock and aftershock.

The Shrine is flame barred and inset into a column that descends from the ceiling of the cenotaph. To touch the flame, the Pre-Scribes tell her, is to spark the deep-protocol Armata, the agonist of affect-pulse. That will wake the Sleepers and collapse their network-dream, and with that we will go dark and rely on our Barrier. She thinks, as if we had all thrown on cloak-veils.

[Told me every polar frequency you can reach me. Threaded offweave, she told me, and all my life I'd be safe if I found you. Still in the holic ocean you appear, as a ghost in a dream, one of many, buried but the ferals would know. They'd know all about you.]



The pulsing lines of the overlay spark as she moves. In sequence each sentence in her head.

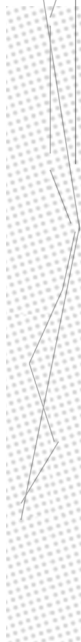
[Where you are you traverse layers, enmeshment, to hear me.]

Twisting, she ducks into a dive. The attack drones left were wired to aggro on Pre-Scribes, and they have woven their paths with skill, though she sees, in a last panoramic view, them charred, slagged even as drones fall from above.

Her fingertips ignite. Light breaks, white light in heavy bleeds from the inset flame. White light like all had been darkness before. It engulfs her, and though the pain is there a screaming moment, she remembers it.

Her affect-pulse cast asunder; the terminal dream there, in glimmering emerald light; but slipping away from that, to the banks of ruby, the blush lines in lattice against the black void.

Feeling her affect-pulse twist itself into fibre-knit shelloid receptacle data, compressed haptic condensed for the grooves of a mark XI synthdross r3plikoid circuit chip.





VERSE 8

SILENT SPACES

Chère runs double-time in the Hypermall. Her sneakers slap over the polish of the marble terrazzo and in its polish, dim, she sees her own reflection, her own wide eyes.

‘Cause the shopgirl had thrown her glasses case; it had clattered, echoed with a pang like scattershot, and the ferals had chased after it.

That spiralled into her run, not to get away from the Ferals, but from the shopgirl; she’d heard her muttering incantations in her breathless voice. She’d wanted time to hex the place to cinders.

As far as she’s gotten on her head trip from the noodle broth steam. Converting that through the steam-shift band but that tech works off karma in the air. A good hex would shut that down fast, though she wanted to see what it’d do to the ferals.

‘Cause, she thinks, they’re disembodied, but not disfigured. That means throwing what’s in yourself out your eyes and your lips move without you. Your words clot



themselves together from platelets of some third party's thoughts.

She thinks those words would twist without them there to know what they were saying, but there to feel it.

She's alone, trying to get the hell out of here. Find a lift since she'd gone subsurface, into the depths of the Hypermall. To find emblazoned in candy gloss neon: Facet XVII: Alice's Apothecary. Under total lockdown now, so she imagines the dead, dark casing loops. Null signs to no one in the pitch black.

Under lockdown 'cause the local Omnarchitect was losing it. The shopgirl had implied she knew him. Bumps in Omnarchitect moods were becoming routine, a problem they were trying to fix across the grid. She thinks, where there's silent spaces, there's Shin Five Zero. Always on the fringes, too, of Aelencah.

Though not in substance, as phantoms knit from the flesh of Aelencah in shade bark, and the black trees always speak of them. There was one around, too, when they'd brought her to get her choker fitted; even in the space of the Aelencah that then wasn't the Aelencah now but a mirage of her.





They had flitted through the towers above. Stood alone once skinned by a beam of moonlight.

What she called death dances with ghost-life and she sees its boughs in tangle and clot crawl through the alabaster. Glowing in the darkness the spirits of the MG Nuked.

People, though here and there stray pets slip by. As if they could never settle down and find themselves back in the Hypermall once more because of it. She thinks they would be there even if she couldn't see them.

They are fixed to Aelencah, and Aelencah is all places; though at first she hadn't known, sought her in the forest strips and off-bounds of the sprawl-clave.

With the last holic dose peaking, sifted from hot noodle broth and above her stars slipping in and out, sifting star beams that vanish when she looks up to find their source.

The greygloop has ossified into a semblance of structure. But there is a churning to it, a skim like beater frosting, swimming its surface coating. In molten translucence is her mind-map marked; though stricken through with dead pixels it is a rough framework of the area.



She makes her way forward, having slowed to a walk to take in the ghosts. Though she can see them, they don't talk to her. They talk to each other, drift in two's, gaggles, and small crowds. To be MG Nuked is to be displaced that way, set adrift in ghost-life to haunt the homes of your nukers.

A message blazes from the pixellata of a glitching LCD screen, affixed overhead to a mount of chromework. KNOWING WHY TO DIE IS KNOWING WHY TO LIVE. Not helpful but she knows who sourced it. Guesses she knows.

It's the Omnarchitect, readouts like these desperate mood signs from his psyche, or even conscious thoughts, conscious speech. A stranger's thoughts: she doesn't know him, doesn't need to help.

So that the boughs of the trees mesh into a low canopy overhead. Full bodied, the trees hem her in, roots phased through the marble flooring. From the other side of nuke life they see her as if she is one of them, but take no notice.

They hadn't seen it coming; that's the haunting you get when you're the one that pulls the trigger. So through Ael-





enah they return; but only she can see them, only while shifted.

She wonders if their presence matters to the Omnarchitect and that's why he flipped. The shopgirl said it was something they did, that they left him fried, not a concern.

They would be trying to help, she guesses, but what can you do with one of those? Charged with stabilising the whole economy of the sprawl-clave. In a life that isn't tethered except to the crystalline growth-craft of the Hyper-mall. They would want to do something else, be something else.

She thinks she'd better get it over with, so she talks to the darkness, to the gloom that's set in all over her. In between walls of alabaster where the light fragments kaleidoscoping from the glitching pixellata settle over the ghosts and bend them aflame in fluorescence. There it's broken up, parts for ghosts but not her. She remains in shadow.

"I know you're there watching. Listening. I'm tired of playing stupid games."



The air is dead, as if going more silent still than the muted murmurs of the ghosts. They ignore her. It's not them she wanted to catch.

A rush of air hits her that could be it clearing its way for a descent. Then he's behind her, slim, yet tall, heads over her. She spins, knowing she should fake first, gambles with it, but he's calm. She reads that in the set of his lips below his eyes veiled with cloth. He brushes off her true arm with two fingers.

She almost falls then, turns it into a staggered retreat.

He makes no move to follow. "You can't just watch me my whole life, Shin. There are other people here, right?" She calls that out, thinking, fucking creeps.

"You can get topside, first exit to the left," the Shin says. Gives her a faint bow, then shifts in place, the light of the ghosts falling over him, washing him away. When she rubs her eyes he's gone. Still he bothered to confirm his presence to her. She's made sure it wasn't just fear.

All she does is under their eyes and ears, and how far, she thinks, have they gone deep into the remote valleys, the credit-burnt reaches of the sprawl-claveites? They may not





have stopped at the grid. They have their own missions, their own creeds to carry out.

There were no secrets with Shin around.

In gamer fantasies through playing they were destroying what Shin stood for. Psychic warfare against the grid; using its domestic dead for sprite work, backstory; the death-sim. Though it had been more a memorial at first, a way of saving their souls, or at least instances of their souls.

The foreign dead, she thinks, will haunt us in Aelencah, since they are no longer able to develop their own sims.

Hanging a left she finds herself at a dead escalator.

She mounts it.



ALIVE WITH THE FLAME

The climb takes a few minutes and she labours at the end, trembles when she touches down.

She's found herself in a shuttered hallway, a narrow graveyard of dead pop-ups. Stores are recycled in Hypermalls under conscious Omnarchitect control. They emerge as phoenix from ash, vibrant plumage in neon script.

It's not the stores that decay but sprawl-claveite needs; these rifle through cycles, in accord with split-second attention spans.

She's sweating, in the cloistered darkness.

For what such needs there are they are now barred behind cold security grilles, facades obscured by steel plating like the stores have prepped to last out the cycle. Beyond the plating she detects no movement. Emblazoned above the threshold is a standard glyph, a stick person in motion. She studies it.

She's risen above Aelencah, can see its canopy from where she remains at the base of the segmented incline. Through





the canopy light the dead plates glitter like black diamonds.

She still sees the ghosts, moving like glowing bugs through the lower expanses of the Hypermall. Scattered pale flames in the Hypermall's underbelly.

Moving signals; a code if she could break it.

"You see the patterns." Breaking into her reverie.

The bespectacled shopgirl is slouched in shadow to her left, burning through a dart with steady, deep drags.

Chère stares at her. "Huh?" She thinks, better not to let on. "I'm not seeing anything."

"Dumb," the shopgirl says. "I know a steam-shift band when I see one." She taps the side of her head. "So now you're in overdrive. Let me tell you what you're seeing. Ghosts as we know them are currency network ossifications.

"Our hauntings put them together from their drives. From the enclaves we nuked. We can forget them. The star credits know. They remember being spent."



Aelencah, Chére thinks. "I don't believe you."

She's at the end of her dart. "Doesn't matter, Ivory. Can I call you Ivory? Or maybe that's my name. Star creds believe in you for sure. Believe in all of us. That's why I live here where the action is."

She shrugs.

"I got your shit, by the way. You can have it, if you help me out."

The shopgirl Ivory flicks what's left of her dart over her far shoulder. Then, annoyed, she smears it into the dancing light and shadow of the terrazzo.

There were three embers, Chére remembers later. Three distinct sparks crushed amidst lines of ash. Ash black and white sifted into the entropic terrazzo, so much like the snowstatic of a living dead LCD.

Chére figures if she returns to the Graft with empty hands, Miho and Yuka won't be pleased. Then she can say goodbye to her new berth.

She can sense their shared dark eyes, cold as ice, piercing her when they had found her in the well-yard.





So after she'd found herself nodding. In the Hypermall yoked to silence above where the ghosts weave. In the so-lace of static afterlives.

Ivory points. "Elevator on the right will take us to him. His name, his real name, all his thoughts are Val. That's who he really is. Not the slave they see him as."

Her pupils remain hidden beneath the opaque set of her glasses. Their white gleam fuzzes into the phosphor cast from below.

Not catching light but alive with the flame of white beneath. Too late, Chère thinks. Swears at herself again. The right hand path. She'd been to Chère's left, putting her to Ivory's right.

'Cause, she thinks, I stopped myself, but I make all my decisions this way. A healer with no time for euphoria. Eyes of chalice of spirit. It pours out of them like blood; she's seen them on street corners, yelling about something called the Source.

Theocryptic cults are legion in the sprawl-clave. They scream of angels descending from translucence, a sky pa-



pered glass like insect wing and taut across the membrane of so many worlds.

Across veils black the embryonic quantum slots worlds into shape. Scattered here and there across raw medium. Pulls together a primordial essence and from there the secret is lost.

A whisper beneath hearing. Many ears that listen, strain for it. Where it is not and therefore where it must be.

Where it must be it recedes, distilled through spells of naming. A shared history. The Cosmère's braiding of so many worlds. So all know worlds of these, a deep network that all civs are rushing to join, with their own crude attempts. Some have appeared there as Modals on the deep network, and claim lineage from...

She forgets. Caught without headphones once deep in the death noise pockets of the sprawl-clave. She'd heard the ravings but they were never as close to her as Aelencah. So Ivory hadn't been prepping a hex, but a blessing. A charm of dreaming to drift the Ferals away.





Chère herself had wanted them hexed. Because they took from the Ghouls; in effect cloned their culture but stripped it of pain through their games.

Games which she'd come later to learn were swap in, swap out for fuelling the star credit system. All economies were based on these sims.

You only know that from talking to a gamer in the first place, and once they go feral they're good to no one. Only for endlessly fuelling market strata that are needed to signpost the dead for their hauntings.

Aelencah then grew as forest from star credits, in hologram facade, as a fringe threshold; as the Death Forest accessible through certain holic frequencies. A vibration of hologram found through probing the peripheries of death chemistry. So Ivory tells her now.

Upon the primer who has slipped behind the true veil. Of no presence in sight or concept. Despite coding the deep network; or did the deep network reach into black holes, pull through ghosts of what they needed from the other side, fashion them into structure?



Like building a palace of bones. Because there was no one timeline that made it all the way. There is only the deep network and its coalescence of black hole reversed patterns. Which is how they speak of the Source, and its angels.

Still we wait for the Source's light to find us. She can almost hear them from here, within the Hypermall's enclave. The dose has worn off and the ghosts are gone.

They'd faded away, drawn out, translucence thinned to ribbons of light which at last vanished. Here she slips slower into the gutters, closing in on the centre.

Where does the Source fit into a star credit-based lens of space and time? Godless. She'd placed faith in Aelencah above all else. So she has to be careful now.

"Yo Ivory," Ivory says. "Elevator's over here."

Being sealed in with Ivory is like sharing a coffin. The elevator is a dark steel box mounted to a heavy chain cable and she feels the tremors of the cable through the elevator's movement.





As the upper level falls away her gravity goes slack; she's lighter, squares her feet as if she doesn't she'll fly away. Hears Ivory's breath, steady and slow in the shared silence.

"No real time," Ivory says, as if to herself, "for sidetracks."

"Could he bring the place down?" Chère says.

Her eyes flash beneath the lens, in the elevator light lacquered emerald. "He could atomise it."

Chère turns her eyes upwards. Stabs of light from halogen slats above. Centres herself.

"Could the Ferals get into the network here?"

Ivory thinks it over. "It's his synaptic. So not unless he lets them in."

So what type is he, Chère thinks. Don't dare ask. Hard-wired for the flip? She thinks no Hypermall has made it as long as this one has. So this guy Val could be losing it. We don't know, she thinks, their limit.

No love, she thinks, we find in our own hearts, just flame. Push them until they immolate. "Listen," she says. "I saw Shin. Right before I saw you."



2'
LWCIG121
AET
TWCN2
VCCNM29
WPECEN02
G10EBB0
COMWODO
B1202
E00AID0'
N11BICE2
23E
2026END1
1120W
0012
V11000'
W0000
D000E
E1
T000E
M101
1WCIDID0
1E000
E102W0D
2E1 D0
W0 E11'
V01112C1
100
COM2EC1E
0W01'
211
D0000
1120W
T000W

Ivory doesn't respond. Instead she starts cursing to herself, a low, steady rhythm.





MACHINE EYES

The elevator opens to darkness. The descent had mirrored the falling of her heart as she probed her thoughts, thinking, the last thing I need is to be disintegrated here.

[Still I could be true always to my flame.] Subsurface thoughts rise from the tar of her psyche. So that at first she thinks they're her own. Later she'd know it meant she was getting closer.

[They said why die and I thought, could I be bothered? Chained to death.] On the outside the skies had been asphalt smoke and beneath that the steel and chrome of the sprawl-clave had crawled, like the moss of a forest floor, beneath the skies and the wires.

The wiring pure synapse of the sprawl-clave would trace ice green lattices on any node map charting star credit vector.

So if you worked hard and were paid out you could ascend; your soul would stream through the wires, your choices in glitter, the lightmaps of transac like veins which fire courses through.



These exist apart from but can only be glimpsed through synchronised sight, though appearing on the fringe of life and death as Aelencah.

Chére figures that Aelencah would distort the true impulse, which would be electrostatic, running in parallax with psychic pain, shared grief, on that frequency, capturing the pain which is an imprint of life, is the shadow life leaves behind it.

So there would be a biotic network and at the same time electrostatic; both would run congruent, but never touch. Only catch the blur from hallucinogens. Blossoms like ink in petals and plumes across sight. Then fades away with a wisp, a hiss. [In time to hold off sight, and forget it.]

Ivory stops cursing. She says, "Shin's gonna want to kill him."

"Paranoid much," Chére says. Not like she trusts Shin at all. Still taking out the Omnarchitect is sunken cost.

Cost in MK telepathic grieving alone for Val. They would condition what was left of him to push through, hold on long enough for a stabilising factor.





That factor could be Ivory. The girl is set to, Chère decides, the flip trip. She waits: along the edges of her eyesight, the two paths descend; her pantheic dialectic scry: left hand under Athene and right hand under Ares.

When always by this reading she'd emerge, as if with machine eyes, chasing one way, or the other, even if asking Chère she'd have to say it was the way the wind was blowing, pushing her.

[Then there's nothing to say because you've held the glass up and the glass of eyes is itself on you.]

Behind Ivory's lenses reflecting pale flame. Those eyes had strobed the reverse of hers, and she hadn't thought about it, a game they all played. Had thought about going left hand and following it but she never could see the order in sprawl-clave structure; thousands of networks and grids all trying not to scrape against each other.

Shin sealing up the cracks. In overdose she'd seen Shin; that's when they approached. When you're at your lowest.

The corridors are pitch black shattered by staccato bursts



of light fizz that strobe for milliseconds, too clipped to assign meaning to her visual field. Ivory leads her as if by scent but what must be rote memory.

Then she holds up, as if struck by sudden thought. Sparks a lighter she'd concealed somewhere and whispers an incantation. Flame erupts, leaping from the catch spark to illuminate the hall they've found themselves in.

They see, scattered few and far between, traces of Ferals; dead batteries from their pocket games, candy bar wrappers, magazines with their gloss cut through by tears and folds. Models split through; faces and their features jagged and distorted.

Took the breaks, Chère thinks, the beatings too. Did they find their peace in that or was that not enough? Chère once knew how they ticked. That life stretches further into the past with every footstep.

Can they die? Have they ever been alive? Now she can't figure it. Heartbeat thumping, rat-a-tat and echo. It pings sonar rebound off her ribcage. So that it thuds as a backbeat with the rushing of her blood in her ears. Ivory holds up an arm.





Languorous to the wrist, but the light is gone and all Chère has is the afterimage. In crescent knifing the light, catching it, glossy as the embossed pages strewn in rags like bread crumbs along the mezzanine floor.

“He’s up ahead. But I should hear him by now.”

Hear him the way Chère’d heard the machine voice. Her dreamed voice had crackled, broken down to stitched fragments in her ears. As if vocal cords run taut and frayed. Burnt. Patterned electric notes crossed by flame.

“Action path is to charge forward,” Chère says. Missing the part of herself that should’ve hidden what she’d noticed, noted. In the pallor banished away, crept back, she can’t read Ivory’s face.

Her own face scripted and candid coloured and the steady buzz of the spitfire holic synaptic discharge. A constant crackle, a foreign ultraviolet burn. She sees more than I know.

If she sees so much she must have paused for a reason. No light may exist, no spark of life even muted. In that case scarring deep the white ice rituals of the mages codified



in the enmeshment grid to burn through present networks level by level.

That itself is an intrusion to Shin Five Zero and the designs they had stacked in lattice, layer by layer, fused through base-dimensional optics into the sprawl-clave. To let the foundries of star credit XL waste and wither is an affront to them. Their ice is black as tar, as the gloop the MG Nukes melted bodies into.

To shroud their network runs. Seen as a glinting scar, rushing white light, the blade unsheathed masamune veiled by darkness. Darkness returns as it always will.

Yet the white ice is a transmitter based off the heart when thawed after a freeze. Condensed into air which sooner or later seeps through all layers of the sprawl-clave through accelerant hacks designed by the cult of Tathiel. Proven their strength as caste at least against the network gods.

Right now Shin is in charge. When you're looking for the pathic hologram sign to that effect it's a safe bet any of the new Modals are probably their hackers.

That white ice remains at all is a testament to just how far the cult can get inside Shin. Get not just to his head but





his fingers. She pictures their elders, cloaked away behind a veil of coloured light, reworked space and time through augmenting vedic rites with psionics. Signing in intercession sign after intercession sign the darkness under which they run ops.

[In that case my blood could thrive and run flush like the rivers. If I had blood. Before I had blood, as I am.]

She's picking up these transmits like a far signal on a short-wave, with enough presence in the darkness to codify into the reality she works off of. The white ice threaded through the mist air of the sprawl-clave that exists here as raised goosebumps against the gloom is in still deeper resonance with the platelets of her blood.

As if they alone understand the deeper portents at play in the astral atmosphere; through the webways patterned through synaptic sigil, etched through rote fantasy and world-craft on Retro-BB's, as if these themselves were standalone from the grids.

So that anyone calling themselves Modal who could access and transmute, shift like a telepath the deeper knowledge pools of the sprawl-clave had control of the astrologic atmosphere, could weave that way within its design.



That's more than she ever wanted to hear about, at first, the interstice loops of the grid. It was enough for her that the astral trip could replace Aelencah and then she'd forgotten it.

Aelencah returned, the one true flame to her through the holics.

In the morning, she'd send mixed messages in overdose. Miho and Yuka she'd cleave apart in her mental fixture; she'd pick one to focus on, whichever ran the right game

The service hall P.A. crackles to life, a molten soundclash crushed into silence after the burst. Reverberations in echo. Tremors shake the hall. Chère stumbles to her left, bracing her arm against the wall she remembers will meet her in the dark. It does so with a crunch, her arm going numb even as she catches herself.

At the same time the banshee klaxon of Locally Contained Lockdown echoes in muted wail high above. Standard Shin op-definition. From the P.A. out coughs more hissing, sputtering discharge. A clipped sound like breath intake rattles in machine gun clang like a kickdrum.





The black ice goes nova, rippling like flowing ink, glittering like diamond. Rushing past her, tunnelling her sight. She hears Ivory say,

“Stay frosty. Back to the grit. The marrow.”

Her mirrored self is threaded of white ice, white fire scarring the black facets, a reflection: faded. Bolting streaks still burn with the ward's outline. She'd seen herself many-eyed, lips in chant, her body in pale fire, brighter still than Aelencah. Faded out with a sigh, wordless, toothless.

It was a ward, a dozen reflections of her in white ice compiled. So that any black ice will target it first. Past that she doesn't know how to use it.

Ivory is running full tilt, swallowed up by the swirling vortex of black aura. Her footsteps sound slaps against the mezzanine, weaker and weaker.

The voice, when she hears it, is plugged in, sallow and rasp hiding beneath the coil. The way they hide behind black ice for their runs. The black ice that would now be embalming the Hypermall, spreading over it, hardening to casing the stuff of crystal. “You... had your chance to leave.”



"All this is quarantine for the Ferals," she says after thinking about it. "They're running the show here, aren't they?"

"Not for long."

"Whatever," she says, those three phonemes slicing ribbons in the pitch slate of no-meaning, waiting for a reply that never comes. Except: she knows, what they would say back to her isn't worth saying.

If she dies now they lose her from the loop. Still that means any hexes, curses, holic thresholds... Nothing is off-limits for her now.

They would sift, she thinks, her instance; it wouldn't come on its own. They would make up half of her, and maybe less.

That if she isn't halved already. In her reverence she's tethered to the starwarp they'd transmuted into datalight, the quantum dreams of the credits. Rely on transcredit instances for insight, they all do. For their war fog. For their empty memories.





It'll all be returned to us, she thinks, so we might remember when by now we've forgotten all there ever was for us to know.

How long until then?

She thinks she can see it, a ruby skied morning. Waiting on its mists, veiling the sky bleed as it sets the sprawl-clave aflame. Seeps out from there to the cloven streets of the nukeworld frontiers. So that they would trickle in shade like starfire the grooves of the hard-slab.

The coloref's report the green-eyed dogs have no filter for that, ignore the pink of raw meat but sup on the lichen that has grown steadily outward in the cold chill of the frontiers. Still she thinks that would be the best place to see it from.

The elevator is dead now; she stabs the button again and again to no response. Then she turns to where Ivory had vanished. Hears a low hum, the sound of an operant device, even the loading hum fine tuned like a ringtone. Distant murmurs near muted go along with it. A pale glint scars the darkness, the glow of a small screen far off and held at angle.



2'
LWCIG121
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM20W
WPECENW2
G10EBVW
COMWODO
B1202
EYVVIDW'
N11BICE2
23E
202BEND1
1B20W
0012
V110W'
W0EW
D0G0VE
E1
T0B0VE
W101
1WCIDIDW
1EW0W
E102WOD
2E1 D0
WE E11'
W11B12C1
10W
COM2EC1E
WWE1'
211
D0G0W
1B20W
T0B0W

She sees one glint, hears only one breath.

Gets herself together and stalks toward it.



GALLVREN DEN'KERRIG

Likes: Reading in places where no one knows her, light scarves, layering, lilac, watching bees, Kamann anatomical sculpture (hands), Blossoming Age Heroes' Love, researching historical men's homosexual practices, perfume in a sauna, rutting systems

Dislikes: untended city greenery, deep cleaning, library fees, music while working, commercial HL, festival costume-based designs, comedies, traumatic insemination systems

Blood type: A

Birthday: May 7

Theme song: Emma Frank
Quartet - Age of Doubt



It's a good thing
the DARK LORD
is a shut in!

by: [baroquespiral](#)

Gallvren Den’Kerrig has shared only three fanfics on Gwerz, the state-funded platform funded by the Patriotic Spinsters’ Union dedicated not exclusively to Heroes’ Love but to a more general category of “Comfort Fiction”, albeit within the intensely subjective and cultural standards of its reader voting system and hundreds-strong volunteer censor team which keeps out much of the Silmenon-style otaku content, out of hundreds a remark in her confession records suggests she has stored away. These are out of reach even to us, which has raised some concerns about the predictability of her impact, but the three she considered good enough to publish should give us a good picture of her aesthetics and interests. Her core ship is Kamann/Elthazan, although her personal favourite is a 5,000-word Silmenon/Elthazan experiment she wrote for a prompt challenge. She is deeply concerned with historical accuracy, taking out recent academic works from the public library on an almost weekly basis, and

preserver record



with specific elements changed between her first and last published work (both Kamann/Elthazan fics) based on more recent research. She does, however, try to include more legendary elements wherever possible, such as the guidance of the Blue Albatross in the battle with the First Hand. Elthazan and Silmenon's early travels in the North, where the natural landscape is almost a third partner in their dynamic, is her favourite subject since childhood.

She has a loose group of four Heroes' Love friends she knows from the Public Library (their friendship is recorded on Domesday, but does not appear to be conducted much online) which she carefully compartmentalizes from the rest of her life. Despite its small size, this group is not especially close. Nor is Heroes' Love actually that stigmatized in her social milieu (mostly lower C'harn guild families and Alliance Exchange guest contributors; she did a two-year Guild Certificate in Ornamental Ecology and was put straight into a storefront). Her reticence about her interests is a bit old-fashioned in

itself. (Imagine the sort of otaku who, in Silmenon, still uses the word in its honorific sense.) She is up-to-date with mainstream culture to a degree exactly sufficient to maintain casual conversation, and volunteers with neighbourhood childcare and seasonal entertainments, where memory wiped interview subjects described her as focused on her physical surroundings. Her relationship with her family is good enough to inspire little rebellion, although intrusive enough that she has learned a habit of sometimes impenetrable distance. Bisexual with a slight male inclination, she starts GL fics with about the same frequency as her BL ones but abandons them quicker, and straight ones rarely but with dogged intensity. She has a very strange and personal repertoire of songs she can sing from memory. She has been propositioned by a few men who have been very polite but underwhelming compared to their fictional counterparts.

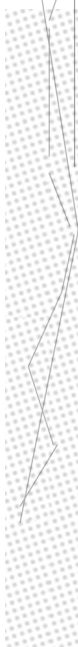
Den’Kerrig may not grasp the full distance between herself and someone like Luskonneg - putting her in a natu-



ral position to humiliate him even without our prodding as soon as she does. Meanwhile this same type is ideal for producing an emotional investment in him - simultaneously “normie” enough to desire and envy, and hiding a secret vein of connection. This mechanism has already been primed by his media diet, and none of his confessional or digital output suggests he has perceived the pattern except in a paranoid form.



2'
LWCIG121
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM20M
MRECE102
G10EBB0
COMW000
B1202
EVB0100'
NFBICE2
23E
2026EMD1
1B20W
0012
V1000'
W00W0
D000E
E1
T000E
M1 01
1WCID100
1EM00
E102W00
2E1 00
WE E11'
V01B12C1
100
COM2EC1E
0WEL'
211
D000E
1B20W
T00EW





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

plots and investigations begin to converge: Marzanna and Mark'eg arrange to raise and destroy Luskonneg's hopes with the unwitting involvement of a third party, but the threat of Dark agents may be closer than it appears



CW: self-harm, parental abandonment, slavery sexualization, pornographic imagery, sexual scrupulosity, psychological manipulation, clowns, human mimicry, violence, mind altering substances (fictional), social betrayal, public humiliation, neoteny sexualization

Luskonneg's last lingering memory of his father always seemed to be something different whenever he tried to think of it. He had probably reconstructed it a million times, he was probably remembering a dream when he tried to remember what it was about now. It was about a special golden brick from a set of collectable tessellating blocks, one in a million produced, and he had lost it on the grass at a picnic. It was about a ticket for a Children's Rock Orchestra concert that had slipped out of his pocket. No, it was a mini figure that had fallen from the funiculars downtown into the abyss of the Lower City.

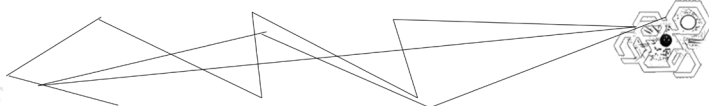
Why had he been crying so much, as if unaware

FAILURE 10: CRACK THE (RIB)CAGE

0ER
TUCN2
WCCNM20W
WNECEM02
010E8BV
COMMOD0
B1202
CB001D0
0T1BICE2
22E
202LEWD1

THE
JURY
IS
OUT

2
LVCIF
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
Q1NEBVV
COMWODO
B12N2
E1V1D1V
N1V1CE2
23E
2026END1
112NW
0N12
V1D1V
W1E1V
D1O1E
E1
T1V1O1E
W1111
1W1D1D1
1E1V1
E1D1W1D
2E1 D1
W1 E111
V1D112C1
1N1
C1W12C1E
W1E1
211
D1O1V
112NW
T1V1E1W



of all the real suffering life had in store for him? “Are you ever going to stop crying?” his mother asked in a wheedling voice that made him absolutely certain to answer, though he had already been leaning toward it, “NO!”

“We can get another one.”

“But it won’t be *that* one.

“Next weekend, we’ll be back, I promise.”

“Even if it was, I’ll never get this week back. There’s a week less I can have with it in my life, forever. So it’s forever either way.”

The only thing he would later remember from 12th-grade Literature was the idea of a “timeshape”. There was some entire genre about reconciling their loss, Theological Elegy or whatever, and the entire unit had slid off him like water, thirteen years later. ‘*Building into the order of memories.*’ Oh, maybe he remembered that too? Wait, Seer In The Half Light had said something in their blog post about why it didn’t apply to Elphantom. Lol.

“Well, I guess that’s true. Sorry, that is sad and nothing I can say to make that better. You should hurry





up and stop crying, so you can get back to doing other fun things later, or you're gonna keep losing more."

"But it'll never stop being sad. You admitted. I just proved it to you."

"You're already starting to stop crying. You can't do it forever, you'll just run out of water in your body."

"Didn't used to," said Mom, a few steps behind them, almost bitterly.

"If I run out of water in my body won't I die? Then I'm gonna keep doing it until then!"

"And then what, should I do the same thing? And then your mother, and then grandma? Eventually you'd run out of people in the world, all for one little -BZZZZT-"

"[Yeah, that'd be perfect.]" Did he say that? It wasn't in the memory. He liked to imagine it, in Darker and more horrifying voices until he scared or hit himself or... he couldn't imagine saying the opposite, because then he would have stopped crying on the spot, wouldn't he? Only both darknesses made sense, the instantaneous



reflection.

“AUUUGGHHH! GWAAAHHHHH RAGHH-HH!” He threw himself, fist then fist then forehead, at the stone pedestal of the building they were walking past until Dad picked him up around the diaphragm like a parcel. “I CAN KEEP DOING THIS!”

His dad picked him up around the diaphragm like a parcel and carried him away from the worried crowd gathering. “But you don’t have to.”

“YES I DO! IT’S NOT STOPPING BEING SAD AND IT’S NEVER GOING TO STOP BEING SAD!”

“That doesn’t mean you have to be. You can if you want to, if it helps. But you never *have to* be sad. There will be plenty of things you have to do when you don’t want them, like go to work when you have kids, but being sad about things isn’t one of them. You can always do something else.”

By the time the sun went down he couldn’t remember why he had thought any of that, why he had followed that absurd chain of reasoning. The sun was still small and gold even as it hit the rooftops.





By the time he could have gone back to the funeral home, his father was dead.

After all that, he still hadn't cried in the course of the past month's misadventures. At this point it wasn't a matter of choosing not to. He genuinely thought at this point it would be easier to die.

The Public Morals Committee had been the last time. If this meeting repeated that story... he wouldn't cry. He had, after all, last time. For it to repeat would simply prove the reason he hadn't tried - the frozenness of his world. It was almost comforting when he thought of it this way. *(So stop thinking about it that way; do you want to make it happen that way? - If you don't make it go that way, who knows what could happen, you could even start crying again.)*

He had pulled so much skin off his fingers that the red stripes from the base of the fingernail almost to the knuckle on the index, middle finger and thumb of both hands looked like some kind of makeup gimmick from a Silmenon visual shock band.

To care or not to care. That was the dilemma that reminded him of his father's advice.



There was one (1) suit in the closet his mother had left him with, to wear if he ever went on an actual date. Or just outside on a visit with a person. He couldn't remember which she had said now. Would it be worth calling her to check? Because otherwise he either risked wearing his date clothes on a non-date - an apology no less, which he fully expected to end by promising to never see her again - thereby retroactively transforming it into one, and making his failure to treat it as one a fantasy-killing failure *at dating*, etc. - or not wearing his date clothing to a date - and frankly he didn't have many other options that would be acceptable for seeing anyone, period, especially in an encounter that would be judged in terms of respect. Wearing a suit, he already knew, was overkill, especially here where they were mostly a Klaux-ion or Kamann thing you saw on TV shows. (All the awful ones mom watched - people wore suits sitting around in their living rooms in some of those - which of course she never did, sometimes he'd leave school with her on the couch in PJs and a bra and come home to her in different ones - herself the only thing in the house not spotless.)

At least there were a number (he couldn't remember or make out from the side, and was still deciding whether to get up) of collectors' T-shirts he kept shoved



off to the left of the closet by themselves, originally for the chance he might go out in them and now for resale value. All simply black and screenprinted, like metal band shirts, all official art, at least four lewd. If he changed his mind about a character or a show in one of them (they were almost all seasonal bullshit, he didn't feel he had the *right* to wear his waifus no matter how much he satisfied their pillows), he would sell at the appreciated value of the limited seasonal line and buy another which would go up in the same way - a small investment, though most of them he couldn't bring himself to part with. He inhabited a persona when trading them he called the Slaver - *that* would be scary to lapse into in front of a normie - *you know they want it, don't you?* the voice he compared prices to himself in rasped. - *Since when do you come out if I don't have a shopping tab open?* - The blue fire flashed in the skull's eyes. No, fuck this. Better to wear the suit. If he was only going to do this once, better to wear the thing he was only supposed to wear once; if he overdressed, it wouldn't matter, but if he underdressed, it would. The mathematics of it were shockingly simple - terrifyingly, because he didn't want a clear answer, he wanted to slide into the inexorable feeling of a decision he could then make under too much pressure to say for sure was his own.



But hadn't Marzanna implied that if it went well, they might do this more than once? Was there not a whole type of character who did shit like that, a whole genre of story he might have stumbled into if he followed the right flags?

He was now trying to think of some reason the answer wasn't clear. The spirit messenger of Elphantom was haunting him, trying to find ways to ruin his life so much he would have to become a Dark terrorist or something. *Heh. How about a Slaver? But that's not how that worked anyway - remember, that Seer In The Half Light said you have to have love to lose that much. We're never going to.* Since when was he taking that ARG schizo as an authority on anything? *Calm down and assess value.* Was this retarded voice's Watchtower Archipelago accent always that thick?

Maybe he wasn't avoiding the decision or being possessed by one or more entities he made up, maybe he just wanted an excuse to get up and look at the shirts again. He stood up, put his head in a beam of light by accident and found it cleared so rapidly he had to remind himself where he was.

Luskonneg stumbled over to the closet, feeling



surreally like a teenager looking at it deliberately for the first time.

1) *Nyorube Cyalume*. Driving her spellbike on her back from above, a teal-yellow crystal line down the middle crease. An instant contender for seasonal best girl and instant front-runner for presenting to a real person, how had he completely forgotten her *show* had existed. Well, it said all its cool things in the first episode and then repeated them for every subsequent one.

2) *Dandana Machpoche*. Dog pussy splayed, covered only by her tail but if you looked closely that fur to either side was from under -

3) oh, he did have one of Smilia, in the nurse outfit, doing the electric nipple twist right where his nipple would be if he was exactly the size of whoever modelled the shirt. Still, what a brilliant design. Absolutely unthinkable to ever wear.

4) *Milliaer Flurizet* - the religious traditionalists kicked up such a big fuss about her being a “parody of Maullan”, they even started talking about the Garden Chapels and got the Inquisition called down on themselves. Just innocently weaving her doily. It might actual-



ly make him look religious.

5) *Bizu Kyurient* from Twister Sisters twisting from below in her lemon panties, the coloured spots of the mat overlaid and continuing across the rest of the shirt.

6) *Lieur Liaw* pleasuring himself with the fish.

7) *RyOOOoo*, the Genius of Love himself. He had been wanting to sell this one, the character's gimmick was so obvious, but now staring at the gap between his ribs opening with his wings...

Was that all? There was one more black shirt that didn't seem to have anything on it - had he been deluded enough at some point to think he was going to design and print something *himself*? Oh nope, it had the hidden logo gimmick of the front charity from Magical Girl Intelligence Agency printed in same colour on the back.

The Nyorube and RyOOOoo ones looked almost like regular streetwear - something someone who didn't even know the characters would wear, just because they looked cool. Under normal circumstances, if he thought about them too long that way, the Slaver would start





itching for a trade. He could suddenly imagine himself, wearing one of them with the suit jacket over it, the suit pants and... shit, did he even have a belt? The last one he could remember was buried on his floor somewhere, that would take him an hour to find and could cost him the whole encounter if he waited till the last minute and froze too long looking for it, which became parabolically more likely the more he thought about it... wait, there was that webbed nylon one slung over the back of the broken chair. How did he have this many *different* styles of *real* clothing that fit together? Enough for a whole outfit that, again, he was now *imagining* - what the hell was that face he was imagining on himself. Shoujo sparkles and all. Cringe.

He felt dizzy. Like the first time he'd gone to take a shower on his meds.

Should he do that now? While he remembered? With three hours to go?

(While he remembered being in this space at an adult's height?)

(Or at least a teenager's?)



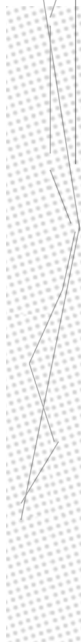
(How much emptiness was in the air? How much movable room?)

(He looked down at the tiny kingdom and suddenly realized why he hadn't dared to clean - he truly loved, wanted to preserve, those caves and mountains.)

He took one step and something pierced the ball his foot. Pierced the actual skin, the circle of numb heat spreading. All the filth and noise and stench and clutter of his kingdom rushed back up from it, collapsing his spine into its usual hunch. The cockroach had probably shit plague germs everywhere that he'd transfer to the normie's virgin-soil immune system and she'd die like Lost Lenore. (When was the last time he had fapped to *Lost Lenore*?) He could have solved that himself but it was inside him now, he'd be infectious just by breathing on her or shaking hands (1-lewd!!!)

His world wanted him back. It had pinioned him.

He slowly, slowly sank down to see what he had stepped on, the light receding into the ceiling like a sun behind fog. How much it had punctured. Would he need a bandage or just let it gutter out like when he tore skin on his dick.





The pointed grey lobster claw on the end of a severed arm from a construction toy minifigure he couldn't remember playing with since he was a kid, still attached to half a shoulderbar, pointed triumphantly a centimetre into the air, stained with bug-brown blood.

Where had that come from? He had brought a few when he had moved in, hadn't he? Smuggled in the tupperware container... but he didn't know where *that* was. Sedimented with crumbs somewhere.

What had the one with these claws been?

What was the one he had lost?

That had been it, hadn't it. At the funiculars.

He had dropped it over the edge of the window.

This one exactly?

Why not?

Why not believe it?

Hell, why not believe it had physically returned to him through space? Random acts of magic were re-



corded as signs. They were increasingly difficult to prove, or modern science was explaining more and more of them, but there was a narrow remainder of confirmed cases - and who knew how many, /ma/ speculated, that weren't reported publicly to suppress mass speculation. That would be a *good* sign, wouldn't it? The unreturnable returning, everything that had gone wrong since then reversing? But *why* had it pierced him? (The hole was barely even invisible, a light trace of red grain in one of the lines of his foot.) And why was it broken? (Had he bought a replacement and broken it in some fugue state? How many?) Why did it look so cruel?

He kneeled on his mattress. The familiar softness embraced his knees, and he rolled over automatically onto his bare shoulder, his bare ribs. His shirt had been off since he woke up, before the sun, when the dark was rubbing its eyes until it could see just a bit of red. Since he had started thinking in the abstract about this question.

It had taken him almost till noon to get up like this. How long would a shower take?

He normally calculated in decelerations, not accelerations.





He didn't have the outdoor accretions an actual VRA (Vagrant Refusing Assistance, or as users on /nm/- Nomadism jokingly called each other, "vrah") would have, but smelled like cum and shit at least as much as the more theoretically cozy, pheromonal kinds of body odour. Then again once he smelled himself he wouldn't be able to stop smelling it for a week no matter what he did, and be just as clueless what anyone else could notice.

Talking to a woman smelling like cum, though, that could count as sexual assault, didn't it? That was a whole different order of seriousness from anything he had worried about up to this point. All you infinities, roll over, this is Real - real infinite stakes, the kind the mini-figure didn't have but something had to. (Something his dad lost.)

Doesn't that make it an unacceptable risk to go out even if you shower? There's the trap you've been looking for. You don't know if that'll even work.

Ha ha, and then she won't be able to get married and you can add her to your harem.

Get up and take a shower so you don't get eaten by the Slaver automatically, even if he does force you to go out,



was how they cancelled out-

- force you out? Huh, are you the slave now?

and he found himself arguing with himself as *his feet moved. No, don't you see it right there, you're going to lose everything - no, it's the everything you never lost, the most obvious possible reminder of how retarded you've been since you were six years old - wouldn't the smart thing be to just reschedule and get an omen interpretation? but then you'd have to go to an Ecclesia -* Inertia was carrying him in the wrong direction. He stood and swayed in the bathroom door, eyes focusing and unfocusing on the grey fuzz of hair and lint coating every white surface, the white stains accumulated on the transparent ones like barnacles. Or the obvious thing it could be reminding you of - what will you do if you cry? What will you do if you break down in some other more plausible, less comprehensible way? Will you stop or keep going forever - the piece is lodged in your mind, the question is

Under the water, which alternated between feeling too hot and too cold and both at the same time as he adjusted the knob by centimetres, he settled half-consciously into the image of getting ready, cleaned and dressed, looking at himself in the mirror like a person,



then relaxing back onto his mattress, crisp cool cloth against his skin like schoolday morning air, and deciding he didn't need to go out anyway. Too much calculation, too much interpretation before he even got out the door. But he would feel like he could, some other day, when it didn't matter as much.

You really do need me to force you, huh. You realize you are fantasizing about losing something you'll never get back, on purpose?

What do you mean, we could literally set up the same exact thing another day. Or another day. Or another day. Or another. His father's already-dead voice and smile.

"Even if it was, I'll never get this week back. There's a week less I can have with it in my life, forever. So it's forever either way."

The shower lasted forty-five minutes, rubbing the same spots again and again until little squares of skin stopped coming off on the cloth. Slicking his hair back in the shower mirror, the voice came back: *you'd be a pretty cute slave if you shaved.*

He picked up the razor long enough to carve an



arbitrary parallelogram in his cheek fur before throwing it at the mirror in disgust.

Now there was a second part to the memory:

“Remember what he said when you lost the minibuilder man?” his mom would repeat almost almost as soon as he started crying. She’d barely give him thirty seconds - “you can keep going, but you don’t *have* to.” The *have to* drawn out longer and sharper each time.

It started after Dad died, as a way of reminding him how he had stopped before. How Dad had... well, he had taken his own advice, hadn’t he? He had stopped dead. They didn’t really acknowledge that yet. He wasn’t even told it was suicide at first, although there was no memorable point of discovery either, just a slow perspective shift as disavowed details piled up. At that point she wouldn’t even try to repeat the full thing, just mumble “minibuilder man... minibuilder man...” and he knew what she meant. It didn’t even seem so absurd to analogize them, since he had already made the minibuilder man infinite - maybe a sort of omen of what was coming. (Or even a cause - spontaneous magic - if he thought about it the wrong way.)



He'd still go on (crying, screaming, pounding walls until the balls of his hands were bruised) for two, three hours. (Mom would hold him for almost all of them.) Stop for fifteen. By the end of the week, the times had reversed. (Mom would sit and stare out the window, completely silent, no matter what he said to her, unless he started again, or did something he wasn't supposed to. Could she stop doing that? Not doing a thing wasn't the same as doing thing, maybe *not* doing a thing you couldn't stop. Then would he stop being able to cry if he stopped for too long? He couldn't ask her.)

By the end of the month, he was starting to lose it again over other things. Smaller things. And Mom would snap: "You could even stop for your father, but you can't stop for another minibuilder man?" Which was technically true, if he did the math, which had been the problem in the first place - one week, at most, albeit multiplied by forever, or half an hour or however long some household inconvenience would take, went into his father's thirty-nine years 2028 times. (He started falling behind in math with the other kids after this.)

And so it took on another meaning - anything too small, anything smaller than his father's life, all of



which was now flattened into the same stratum. Like that time his third grade class reps tricked him into carrying two bags of dogshit across the yard at lunch recess.

He couldn't necessarily stop crying or spazzing at all these things - but the distinction between *can* and *have to* had long since been lost - or if he brought it up, Mom didn't take it as an important part of what Dad had said, and if what she took as important wasn't important, then there was no reason to rule out having caused his father's death by dropping the minifigure. Nor could he necessarily keep at it about his Dad when he thought about it as much - 2028 times 15 minutes was 30,420, he calculated in the margins of his math homework, 507 hours, or 21 days. The numbers were too unwieldy to make time the only unit of significance - maybe that was what his father had discovered, what he had meant by cashing all his time out as eternity. Only dead was it all the same anyway. He wasn't sure how to do it, so he started acting out things he saw in image searches, with no inkling how they worked. But Mom saw him, and came to him, and clung to him, and eventually they figured out their little rituals.

One time he saw her meet their social monitor



at a cafe (a level of intimacy he was never offered, whether or not he could have reciprocated, as an adult, just dry 15-minute videoconferences) and with a movement almost too gratuitous to be accident, knock the monitor's cup of gelato off the table. She spent the next twenty minutes bawling, apologizing, berating herself, while he stood paralyzed, his initial attempt at returning their private mnemonic met with a hissed "Not you too" - and walked away, wiping her eyes, with her grief subsidies restored for another three years over their first extension.

The alumni district was on what was known as 'The Levelled Peak' - a plateau that stuck out of the side of the mountain just a bit higher than the university, but separated from the apartments where Braz was saying by a split in the shelf. She had to walk to the other side of the Mysteries Department, then up a winding stairway shaded by hemlock and cypress trees, once carefully spaced but long since overgrown, to emerge in a deserted park with rectangular koi ponds on either side, backing onto its rain-grey villas, made from an ancient kind of clay-rich concrete and coated in thinning plaster. Roma-rosa had been a city so long before magical transit it had many neighbourhoods and features that were easiest to reach by walking, and maybe that was why it was one of



the most run-down neighbourhoods in the city, or maybe the absent-minded ex-academics weren't good at or interested in keeping it up, or maybe (it certainly looked like) less of them felt any sort of ritualistic obligation to live there rather than somewhere with new buildings, midair patios, techno clubs, anime posters. Even Braz had never thought to visit here before - the department head had made all kinds of jokes to warn her, and provided the address to which they were still mailing Selbstember quarterly newsletters, although no one knew if she was picking them up.

She had gone to the address to find all the newsletters - an impressive amount, as if someone had put actual effort into fitting them all in there - crammed in a crooked mailbox. No response when she rang the doorbell, no lights on. It was one of the single top units of a three-layer pyramid terrace, so it had both neighbours below and on a level with it at a distance. The unit along the walkway to leading up the terrace and the one facing the door would be the most important to determining if it was inhabited at all. There was at least one sign of this - the rooftop garden surrounding it on all sides, more than most of the lower units had to themselves, was well-kept.



It was the most fully in her surroundings Braz had felt since coming to the city, although it didn't exactly feel like Romarosa - more like some crumbling town out of a romystery novel, or even some places she'd seen in Elthazan, castle towns now inhabited solely by hereditary retainers and tourists. There were only a few roads through here even big enough for a bus to go through, and she hadn't come across any of them yet, although there were little parks or courtyards about the same width. A sprinkler sprayed circles over a balcony garden of soggy parchment-white camellias unattended; another was abandoned to a frozen frolic of scrap iron sculptures, leaping like faeries in a more traditional frieze. A poster for an avant-garde dance troupe she might have seen once on a circus-boat in Crach-Houarnez faded and wrinkled in front of closed blinds in a window, a door was half-plastered with bumper stickers with cracked philosophical slogans like a faculty office. She wondered how it would look under a richer, clearer sky, the kind of sea-green sky sinking upwards into its own depths she had unwittingly imagined all the way here. But the thinnest possible layer of stratospheric white cloud was stretched over the sun and blue.

The facing unit had told her they hadn't seen



the inhabitant go in or out for a few weeks, but that they often saw her in a nearby park. So after performing a cursus to scan for dead or living presence within the house - neither - Braz went to the park and attached a 360-degree glass eye to the underside of a table in the gazebo - an ancient C'harn variant, not the kind that people knew from commercial or even professional cameras, although there was a better chance of some academic recognizing it here than anywhere else. Its age meant it had to be Sustained manually, which she had whittled down to a tic of playing with the hair by her ear. While she did it was projected on whatever else she looked at like an afterimage on her retinas. Then she visited the park at carefully staggered times, not enough that anyone would start asking who she was, but enough to approach everyone she noticed in her now-constant visual background as regulars to ask if they still saw Selbstember and if not when they had noticed her not coming. If they asked - most didn't, just looked away sadly - she claimed to be an academic acquaintance visiting from the North who had met her at a conference. (She had already memorized the faces of the department for three decades back, in case she saw one of them.)

The absolute last time anyone had seen her, she





had been talking to a clown.

There was a corner in the park where buskers set up - accordion, violin, shamisen, pan pipes, hurdy gurdy; various kinds of animal familiars and magically animated dolls; rune-motifs repeated between stanzas of historically reconstructed bardic toasts from the time of the Heroes; haiku and shamisen; mimes performing daring escapes from dungeons of invisible traps; improvised magic. She didn't see any clowns like she had encountered on her first day; she did, however, start noticing odd repetitions. The same face performing implausibly different talents, snippets of melody copied across genres from different periods, regions. Many performers here were clearly alumni of the performing arts programs with a mastery of their craft unusual even in Romarosa; others strung technically perfect but flat reproductions together haphazardly in ways you wouldn't notice if you weren't paying attention the whole way through. This was exactly why intelligence work - even anti-Dark intelligence - still demanded a level of culture. Not only a matter of whether people were who they claimed to be - but whether they were human at all.

After obtaining a copy of the sign-up sheet



through municipal backchannels, she determined that a number of the performers with the most incongruities (they seemed to swap out each other's clothes and occasionally, less obvious features) were registered with a single troupe, the Sangriot Moon-Wine Historical Fusion Players. Their arts registry documents (sparse, with a number of names too generic to be triangulated with other documents and no clearly identified roles) also mentioned clowning - and an address. Their 'rehearsal space' was an old stable overlooking the alumni district, discreetly hidden by dense stands of cedar and curling chain-link fence.

She alerted the local police of her suspicions, and stationed them in a dragnet as close as they could get without being seen from the location, prepared to cut off all exits, including a helicopter. Shapeshifters could disperse quickly if they suspected they had been discovered, and often had secret tunnels between their lairs, and some had forms that could swim through sewers. The safest way to bait them out was to approach them as a defenseless civilian, the kind they would as happily eat on the spot.

The broad gravel path, diverging off one of the





district's outermost ring road, up which climbing mules had once been led was now blocked off by a thin plastic construction barrier. She poked at its edges, pushed one of the rusted metal posts over, angled her camera up the hill. Her cover was an amateur photographer; she wore a white T-shirt, patterned yoga tights, a traditional silk scarf with cranes and spider lilies, and a big floppy cloth hat that made it a bit less likely for anyone to recognize her from the park. The camera was a fashionable vintage model she'd bought in town; she'd hollowed it out and put her own magical eye inside. If she was being watched, of course, the tic would be too obvious so she was using it in Snapshot Mode, which had a different Sustain, snapping her fingers against a silver ring in her pocket to obtain a natural, complete 360-degree vantage point at most once a minute.

As she passed under the trees she saw camouflaged shapes in the branches - cocoons. She could still look down behind her and see the ring road, the terraces of rooftops.

Poking into the house, however, was too dark to use the eye - and she needed her hands, mind, parameters free for improvised magic - she pulled out a flash-



light and shone it around inside.

The barriers between stalls lay splintered on the floor. Traces of frescoes on the walls had so decayed that it looked as if their subjects had been dismembered - here, a bird's head - there, a long-nailed human hand in a show-magician's mudra - there, the head of a young girl with pearls in her tresses, her eyes faded or even scraped away. In many places the stucco had simply worn through to a rotten yellow, in other places something black had crept over it from its wooden framing, something that she recognized instantly from the squelch as she stepped on it - *Black Mushrooms*.

Braz stepped back. Pulled her sampling equipment out of the large leather purse she was carrying to test their maturity. And felt something, a hardening in the air behind her. A shadow moving across the edge of her cheap hiking boot. She held her bag open, drawing out a thin chain necklace with a translucent plastic spiral flame at the end, spinning it around her finger as she turned around.

From the whirling end of the pendant jetted a tornado of fire towards the three, four, five clowns framed in the light of the door - identical to the one she had seen





on the street corner.

The nearest to her leapt in the air and its surface split apart into the coloured tips of hundreds of fronds, waving from a black stick-figure frame, like the shaft and barbs of feathers. Unfolding and rearranging itself in midair, its arms and several segments of its back extended into a straight spear angling down at her as she dashed forward through the door, into the midst the others. It stuck in the floor like an arrowhead and immediately re-extended two long arms of three or four segments to encircle her. Meanwhile two of the others ran toward her in human form, with only their arms untransformed, ending in chitinous black hooks.

Braz pulled a strip of paper covered in symbols that looked like scribbles out of her purse, and ducking to the right let one of the hooks to her left tear it in two - projecting a shockwave out behind it that tore the one behind her in the same jagged line as the paper. Black oil spouted from its hollow, hydraulic skeleton as she dashed forward and to the right, pulling a stiletto from the thigh pocket of her yoga pants and thrusting at the other's face, which collapsed around the blade, gripping and sucking it in. She let go, ripping a ring from her ear - the stilet-



to pulled itself out of its own accord, bubbling mercury spurting from where it had entered, the fronds unfolding and thrashing around to shake off the toxin. It returned to her hand and she parried its hooks while guarding her back with the fire-whirlwind, turning around to point it at the others closing in from the trees as she maneuvered her weakened opponent toward the door. She started speaking under her breath behind closed lips, and kicked the shapeshifter back into the door long enough to trace exactly half its size with her blade-point. An invisible guillotine blade fell across it.

The Black Mushroom caps began to bubble around the top half of its corpse. *Crap.*


But another was already coming down on her, in its true form, from the eaves of the roof. She used the fire-tornado to jet herself backwards - and two behind her unfurled their bodies, fronds hardening to needle points, across her path to clothesline her. She pointed it down to carry herself over them, landing on the dry needles of the yard. Scanning the trees above her for any remaining ambush as segmented spears zigzagged back at her.

Despite what you saw in anime and Miwa movies,





one of the first things anyone learned in combat training was that it was *mathematically* difficult for even the most skilled fighter to take on multiple opponents at once. The secret Ecclesiastic fighting arts had statistical practices to counter this disadvantage directly; but their flexibility made it an order of magnitude worse with shapeshifters. Holding back this many shapeshifters at once with ordinary combat magic would have been impossible for Silmenon himself. What she needed - and had planned before she came here - was an area effect. She set off running.



Skip twice on the ball of the right foot, land on the left heel and tuck it behind her knee. The cursus looked like a children's game but required a deceptive level of athleticism, especially at this speed, and if she lost her footing or simply had to defend herself the spell would be cancelled. One shapeshifter was already throwing itself at her side - midair morphing into a mountain lion - another leaping into the trees to ambush her from above - another dashing to intercept her path (she estimated it would meet her about where she would have to corner and tap the ground).

The mountain lion whiffed by her shoulder as



she dropped momentarily to one knee and tapped the corner of her field. Of course if she couldn't fight them off she couldn't complete a cursus either, but she was using another spell to buy time: an afterimage effect syncing all perceptions of her to the slightly delayed second hand of the watch she wore on a thin leather band. (The spell didn't allow her to control perceptions completely by slowing down or speeding up the watch, that would have been too broad to Sustain; it was defined to this exact delay of 0.75 seconds, which she now knew by heart how to knock her watch in or out of.)

Shapeshifters weren't as intelligent as the creatures they imitated, although they were smarter than a lot of people assumed from their limited capacity for autonomous planning and coordination, the tendency of their conversation to break down into stochastic error if you pinned them down longer than they meant you to - they were basically raw pattern recognition engines, which was especially useful in a fight. Guessing the shape of the cursus, after its first corner, would be the same. Of course the option of least resistance was just to fall directly in front of her immediate path, like the one in the trees did, transformed into a bear big enough that its fronds had to be extended at full length. Vulnerable, not as strong as it





looked, trying to overextend its mass. Between hops she stretched out the stiletto again, defining its blade along the line of her right foot in the cursus as she pivoted centimetres out of its way to her left.

That would make them a bit more cautious - although shapeshifters were at least as dangerous when they were cautious. One she had been half-watching seemed to have disappeared.

Something moved in the corner of her eye, in the sumac bushes - a skunk. It was outside the range of her cursus, and she already hadn't seen it before. She whipped a mini-dagger at it -

- its tail reared up, not an ordinary skunk's tail but a cobra's markings - she spun the whirling necklace around just in time for the sprayed venom to sizzle into a chemically neutralized mist. Her stiletto guarded her other side as an extended limb zigzagged towards her, jabbing at several places to compensate for the predictable miss on the first strike. Only one got close enough that she had to delicately draw it in a circle with the stiletto, but that was just enough for them to estimate the delay.

One more tap on the next corner - the one that



had attacked (probably) was rolling toward her at top speed, its hardened fronds sticking out in equal directions like an urchin's spikes. She jumped onto the roof just before it reached her - and it rolled behind her up the rock-face, higher and farther as she used the fire-jet to hold it at bay. Above it, the one that had already gotten out of her range was climbing. Red clay shingles cracked and shifted under her feet as two limbs arced out from it over her. At least the requirements of the ritual didn't constrain what the rest of her body could do, or the exact distance between her steps, which she adjusted one at a time to dodge stabs from both above and below her, reaching over the ledge of the roof from the door.

She blew a bubble of gum and expanded an invisible shimmering sphere in the air to her side not facing the cliff, on which floated a number of the talismans, though only one was struck, sending a line of slicing air far enough to leave a high branch hanging by its bark.

Launching herself off the roof, she found herself falling down on the two that had been outpacing her from above. Maybe she was going to end up fighting them all at once anyway - but who knew how many were in there?





Braz pulled out her camera, popping out the 360-degree glass. Keeping her eye *outside* the camera closed, she pointed it at them, its analog viewfinder becoming her single wavery porthole on the world from a travelling bathysphere of void. As it snapped, they vanished.

She kept her eyes in this position as she tapped the ground - then dropped the camera just in time to dodge another jab from the doorframe - and bolt along the last leg of the cursus, as the camera shook itself apart and the two captured shapeshifters burst from its shattered lens, whirling their limbs and fronds in a spasm of freedom.

Just these last few metres back to where she started - an awkward parallelogram rather than the pentagon she had intended but it would have to do, hopefully not too many had left its range yet - but outrunning two shapeshifters while skipping like a child, even for someone who had this one down as much as Braz, with a rocket jet at her back...

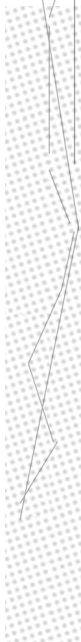
Before they could falsify her last-ditch calculations, riot grenades filled with repellent fumes hit the two pursuers head on. The tactical police unit she had



alerted by sub-spell the moment she had pulled out her stiletto were already taking formation in the street below.

The final vertex of the cursus connected, and everything within the shape she had circled up to a dozen metres in the air refracted through a blue fire-mist. The shapeshifters began to curl and fold up on themselves, their fronds hardening and wrapping around each other into hard black millipede ridges. But even as they clustered for protection the fronds began to melt together, welling up in oil-slick-coloured blisters, like candy on a stovetop. While within the doorframe, within an egg-shape of fuzzy, sickly-green light that effaced both background and foreground, as if it had been spliced in from a separate image, a window into another universe, the same process was unfolding in the opposite direction: from protoplasm to form. The egg, however, seemed unable to move, its edges guttering against Braz's enveloping spell. The broad, ballooning, droopy-edged witch hat of Romarosa's Black Mushroom Initiate dripped black slime over her obscured eyes. "Uefufuefue, Dark Lord consume it, Rraihha Braz! What are you doing over here, so far away from your *booyfrieend*?"

Marzanna was there at the door to meet him,





wearing a thin mint green spring parka with the hood up and a plum blossom facemask. Just from having seen her once in person, in shapeless hoodies and blurry undershirts on screen, and of course staked out her socials, he could tell the outfit was very much her style but not recognizable enough that anyone watching from a window or a talisman would recognize her. (Would anyone recognize *him* looking like a person?) He could have said but he was saving his energies for a conversation that would multiply the risk of kindness exponentially. His 'thanks' came out like a kind of absurd whistling snort.

She had decided at the last minute it wouldn't be safe to go to the same coffeeshop where Scarecrows such as herself might recognize them, but also didn't want to make Lusconneg take the risk of public transit - even accompanied - so she had picked out a place just a few blocks down the street.

It still wasn't that far, he had argued - as a Scarecrow, we don't stake out entire neighbourhoods, she reassured him. (*As a Scarecrow* - he had tried to make an account once, when he was starting to build his confidence on Feed, getting the hang of criticizing other losers for things only losers cared about. He couldn't, however, do



what Scarecrows did, which was criticize other losers for things normies cared about. He knew the stereotype that Scarecrows were as bad as their subjects, but he couldn't figure out how they split themselves. He preferred to live in a straightforward world of inverted values.)

"Sorrysorrysorry I still haven't looked this place up -" When Luskonneg finally spoke it was a confession, the kind of thing that forced its way up his windpipe. He had a kind of phobia of Panoptic Maps that he wrote off as not liking the interface.

"It's a cafe/bar with a Silmenon theme, I think you'll like it. It has semi-private booths, so I can be nearby without you feeling like I'm watching you the whole time. Try the strawberry rice wine."

"...do I smell?"

"Not in a way anyone would assume was coming from you."

'Silmenon theme' meant golden plaster roses around the doorframe and paper curtains and watercolour cherry blossoms all over the walls. It was called Garden Room but didn't have an actual Garden Room.





There were no windows except a stained glass arch in the door; pink light filtering through elegant conical fixtures across the tapestries on the walls and curtains of the booths gave it a strange attitude of evening at 3:00 in the afternoon. *Was* it supposed to be a real date? *Was* the noose of the plot this tight already? But at the same time, the atmosphere was light. At the back of the bar two old men pointed and gestured at things in a nature magazine. Closer to the door sat a woman he had not remembered as that straight up beautiful.

She was wearing a diaphanous shawl *over* a slightly open coat, slim white leather with sherpa collar, thin bouncy hair slicked back under a fine-toothed purple plastic band tilted more than halfway back over her skull and clustering around her shoulders, another lacey layer of interference. Her nose stood out thin and angular like some urbane josei character's, a Korriel Fuilloska perhaps. (She looked like the kind of person who might read Korriel Fuilloska, but maybe he was conflating her characters and her readers.)

Huh, he didn't spend that much time fixating on pores or hairs or the image of it breaking or anything if he pictured it outlined in ink...



But those eyes. Glittering. Slimy. Hints of yellow and pink in the sclera (bruised fruit), uncountable blues and greens and greys sliding under each other beneath fragile dragonfly-wings of lampshine...

"Hi, I, um... OK how did Marzanna explain to you why she wanted us to meet? I'm not sure I totally got it myself." She giggled. He wasn't looking any more. His eyes were swimming somewhere up around the edge of the lights, clumping in the corner like dust, visual erosion, grey noise, he couldn't say for sure he was seeing anything. "But, I'm Gallvren Den'kerrig. And you're... Luskonneg *****?"

All available mental power diverted to keeping his mouth making the shapes it needed to and the rest of his body inert - once a teacher seeing him in this condition called on to answer had assumed he was talking in his sleep - he began his prewritten speech:

"Thank you more than I can express for taking the risk and trouble and inevitable disappointment of meeting me to allow me to apologize for humiliating you in a number of ways I may or may not further humiliate you by enumerating. Although I can do that if you consider it necessary for my apology to have any meaning.





Particularly getting you on Punkin Patch, w-which you may not even know what that is, but I do feel responsible to inform you, is a, is a site for and I am not saying you are but I as you can probably already tell qualify as what they call a lolcow-”

“...is this a prank? Are we on camera?”

His eyes were closed now, the backs of their lids were magma, his sweat was magma, the world was subsiding into the fire at its core. He wasn't sure if he was talking any more or not. Everything was sliding down in streaks of red neon except the inside of his mouth, which was a dry cave in which a miserable shrivelled part of himself could still feel, somehow, only hunger - *I wanted to at least get something to eat or drink here, I'm gonna have to go back and cry or hit myself and I'm almost out of chips* -

“No, no, sorry, you seem to have a different idea of what you're here for than I did!”

Slowly, he began to perceive Marzanna's finger, two fingers, pressing down on a point just above his collarbone. No bandwidth left to pick out anything awkward or pleasant or unpleasant in the feeling - the point of contact was cool, the heat draining away into it. Could



this be... rhi stabilization? He hadn't expected that to work on him since he had been turned down for a clinic that offered it three years ago. *Work? You want to go back to that reality? Rhi stabilization isn't going to put words in your mouth, or rewrite time to make them adequate. She's doing this to torture you.* At that thought - that certainty - he wanted to bolt or lash out, now that his world was stable enough to move in. But the pressure point - or another one she was poking in the small of his back - prevented him from moving at the same time.

"...I've never met you before. Marzanna's mentioned that she wanted us to chat for some kind of piece, but... do you think I'm someone else?"

...huh?

She doesn't even remember?

Well, come to think of it, why would she? He tried to remember all the things he had offered to enumerate but not dared even to write and cross out, and then remembered that it wasn't just that he hadn't dared, he couldn't remember himself exactly what had happened in that shop, besides that he'd stood in line too long dissociating - had there even been anything else? He





had said *something* embarrassing, right?

What would a normie even think that meant?
Magic bleed, sleepwalking in the middle of the day?

“Sorry for the *ruse*” - the singsong way she dragged out the word made it obvious she knew and was referencing the meme from five years ago (Goddess, he could expose that and humiliate *her* probably) - “but I had to make sure you experienced that in real time so you couldn’t rationalize it before the fact. See, people don’t think about your embarrassing moments anywhere near as much as you think they do!”

...could that really be true? Not just true in some general, statistical sense that didn’t apply to him, but true in a way that would demonstrate itself so deliberately? That was the kind of twist he would write a 500-word flame about on a review aggregator, but also cry about silently and pleasurably, like a hot spring welling from his eyelids, if he got high enough to fully suspend his disbelief.

The kind of cliff-edge hope he hadn’t felt since Gwaëlle.



She reminded him of Gwaëlle a bit - her name, her elegance, her colour scheme.

That was enough to set him too on edge for the tears to release even though they were halfway up - aching behind his eyes, imperceptible except as a twitch.

How is she looking at you without twitching. Wait, she did just close her eyes.

With laughter. Like a ball stuttering across the ground. “Ahahaha, what even happened. Oh well, I won’t make you talk about it, this already looks like it must have been a nightmare for you. Did she tell you she was like, a weird conceptual journalist at Yn Dahh’t? They have this kinda sense of humour.” She redirected her angle of inquiry to Marzanna - “Or would you call it poetics?”

Marzanna smirked over his shoulder as her fingers let up slowly - *wait, don’t go!* “Humour is an important part of poetics, isn’t it? OK, that’s your first conversation topic, go!” She slapped something on the bar next to them - a tiny, shiny blue plastic recorder. “I’ll let this roll, but I’ll leave it to *both of you* to decide whether it’s worth keeping. That way it’s not like I’m listening - I’ll even let you edit it.” With that she swaggered off towards





the *baradomoe* and *trefflammes* on the paper curtains.

“*Can* you edit on this thing?” Gallvren picked it up and turned it over absentmindedly. Luskonneg felt the scraping dryness of the roof of his mouth again. The certainty he wouldn’t get another respite like this - “Can I... get a menu?”

Gallvren hastily imitated him, and then they exchanged logistical technicalities until she had ordered and Luskonneg said “don’t wait on me I- I got really hung up on the menu last time, too, the time I... didn’t meet you, I guess. Sorry I don’t mean to suggest you have amnesia or something. Unless you do? Do you?”

“No I’m pretty sure I just forgot... *something*?”

“Right but like, if it was a date or like something plot important, that would be amnesia. Which would itself be more uhh - plot important- than normally happens in real life. It wasn’t that - it was” and he trailed off into inaudibility, no matter how much he tried to raise his voice. The volume bar wasn’t working.

“Yeah, that’s a good way of putting it. Do you write? Is that why she wants us to talk about... *poetics*?”



A good way of putting it. Amazing how fast talking came back. *Like riding a bike* - except he had never managed that in the first place. (How had he managed talking in the first place - he had so many memory-scraps of mom, even dad, making fun of him for saying things wrong.) She was overlooking a lot of silence, which she probably just chalked up to the same kind of human awkwardness and confusion as hers - but once he accepted that talking was just a thing he was doing, that the sin of opening his mouth had already been committed, he could just type up words in his head and feed them through. There were plenty of mistakes he could make in text too - but they were at least at the sentence level.

“No I... post... if that counts. Wait, what did she tell you we were doing again?”

“Talking about... fandom. What’s that character on your shirt from?”

He looked down, having forgotten which one he’d picked already. It was the RyOOOoo. Why the hell not Nyorube?? He must have been thirty steps down some insane series of internal arguments where he forgot that Nyorube Cyalume was a cool girl in a neon flightsuit on a bike, and RYOOOoo was a naked androgyne with





his chest split open revealing the coiling caduceus between hooked mechanical ribs. (The glowing double helix around his metal spine *was* cool.)

“*Shadow Rangers Kliphot*. The direct followup to *Hell Harrowing* - not like a sequel, but, thematically and chronologically. The next thing he did. Uhhh. Najda. Shunny Najda did - have you heard of...”

“Oh, yeah, *Hell Harrowing*, I watched about half of it when I was 19 but still need to finish.”

“If you remember that RYOOOoo - the character on the shirt - is kinda like a male counterpart to...” he trailed off, forming the name with his mouth before saying it, denying her thrice but at least getting it on a fourth. “Smilia Miyoenra. But like chaste. Relatively. He’s the Genius of Love in a religious sense, but when he makes friends his chest opens and this happens...”

She smiled tautly and looked away at the small plate of spicy cold noodles and magnolia tea the bartender was sliding over to her. Right, he was still hungry. Even hungrier now. “Can I get uhhh - maki crepe and the strawberry sake slush?” He picked the first words he saw randomly looking down at the menu.



“So would you say you’re a fan of Najda’s work in general?”

“That word doesn’t even mean anything here. I’m the closest thing to a real fan you’ll find outside Silmenon.” His Feed self slipped out too fast to stop (but really, what else was he going to do once she started him talking about Najda? To “perform” a publicly acceptable, moderated version of his passion would make him the same kind of fake as the Elthazan fandom he was thinking of. Wasn’t *fan* supposed to mean *fanatic*?)

“That’s what I heard about you. Well, not about Najda specifically, but... Silmenon animation in general?” Her upward inflection made clear she was hedging any idea what was going on.

“Animation, manga, video games, visual novels, light novels, doujinshi...” Why not lean all the way into it. He stood up, counted on his fingers. “The whole so-called media mix, of which animation is the most plebeian, mass market level. You seemed interested in... literature? I could start there...”

Never mind, when he raised his voice he sounded like a goose. Gallvren put her head in her hands. “What





were we supposed to be talking about again? Sorry, I'm really confused. How did Marzanna know you again?"

"Feed." They had discussed this cover story, and he was genuinely happy with it - fleshing out the fantasy that she had stumbled upon his niche NEETposting and decided that he was the perfect voice for her story about a lost generation until he could almost believe it. The word Feed, of course, triggered another solar plexus strike of awareness of the still untouched maki crepe he swept off his plate and crammed into his mouth, rice dropping to the floor. (*The associations chaining naturally like a 23chan thread - inertia flowing the wrong way again?*) "That's where I post. Not just what I'm doing, right now."

She laughed. A woman's, no, a normie's laughter (though he had never heard a guy's with quite the same treacherous ambiguity) - the thinnest ice in the world. The obvious interpretation was that she was laughing at him, because he was being ridiculous. (Not like the way he was trying to be ridiculous, which was in fact modelled on how Astig would get going when he got fired up, how it transitioned over the course of the series from comic relief bloviation about panty colours and vending



machine toys to earnest, hot-blooded speeches about protecting his friends, which she might recognize for the put-on it was if she had watched half the show.) But then why would it sound like that, so bright, so pleasant? (Boys at least brayed.) Wasn't that one of the things that was supposed to suggest they liked you - in slice of life shows, at least, they were always giggling like that at each other? (Mom said those were unrealistic - but they did the same in her sitcoms, at least at the very end of an episode.) "Oh right, she said... humour and poetics." Had he reminded her? By making her laugh? And what could that mean? He distracted himself from the static starting to seize hold of his body again with more tearing bites...

"Poetics." The term as used in Ecclesiastic or academic discourse encompassed all art in general - the 'media mix' he had referred to. Even posting, technically. "You said... you write."

"Oh. Well. Yes. I don't think even Marzanna knows this exactly, although she knows I'm interested in it." Gallvren gulped, and Luskonneg's heart almost stopped. "Mostly... Heroes' Love."

"Oh... like... Silmenon-Miwa?" She blushed and shoved a fork with more trailing ends than he'd seen yet





into her mouth. "Or - sorry - like... Kamann... Elthazan."

"I mean there are lots of kinds, even within BL." She sounded suddenly hard and defensive. "I've read some really interesting Elthazan/Zorrh fics that have taught me things I wouldn't have known about Druid spirituality otherwise, and I don't like Kamann/Silmenon that much because it collapses too obviously onto tropes and ideas but... Goddess I haven't even told Marzanna about all this. I mean I don't know if she's interested in any of it outside a theoretical sense, but I don't know that about you either, just that you also like..." She eyed his shirt. "Embarrassing things."

She was so embarrassed! So was he, but for him that was simply a condition of existing in public. It was like she had stepped into his world bubble, instead of the other way around. When his voice came out again, it actually sounded 60, 70 percent of the way it did in his head. "I've never read much Heroes' Love because it's... uncomfortable to me... to think that way about real people." He had heard that said and never really believed it - if he believed it he would have to hammer a nail into the back of his hand for every classmate he had entertained a bad thought about in high school - but it wouldn't hurt to



shore up his advantage, before the tide inevitably turned against him again. (See, the second you get an advantage you use it for evil. Kill yourself.) “But I have read... BL... although it’s not my main thing... I’m not gay... although if a cute girl wanted to ship me with a guy friend I’d probably go along with it.”

“Are your guy friends... other *otaku*?”

“No. I don’t really have any. What do you mean by *otaku*?”

“I think... that’s what my roommate wants us to figure out. She’s my roommate. Marzanna. By the way.”

Roommate. Adrenaline stab he didn’t need right now. “Are you...” (more than) “...friends too?”

“Sort of?” Her voice peaked. “I trust her not to set me up with someone who will totally humiliate me, or I wouldn’t have done this.”

The pressure was enough to crush his lungs. “I might humiliate myself. I might humiliate you, by humiliating myself.” He had to say it three, four times to get it above the audibility threshold.





"I don't think you did, and I don't be humiliated by *you* doing... anything that's not *to me*? Unless... you say you post. Don't post about this." He nodded, screwing his eyes shut with gratitude. *The kind of thing someone says before they kiss you.* "You... neither."

>first round of the Public Morals Committee game is over

>Gwaëlle wants to back out

>the one who brought me here in the first place

>the one who pushed it on the rest of them

>I see where this is going and walk off without saying anything

>she follows me all the way back to my classroom door and grabs me by the wrist, starts pulling me back

>says she's still gonna do it because as a member of the Public Morals Committee she is also meant to set an example by keeping her word

>drags me to a room I've never seen before



>introduces me to a bunch of girls I've never seen, says she's going back to the Public Morals Committee to finish their conversation and clear up what she's doing, but she'll be back with them next time she has a chance and help me integrate properly

>it's the Knitting Club

>I forget all their names in like thirty seconds

>they keep asking me if I remember and I can't say for sure, so I have to go around doing a full memorization exercise like in class

>my face feels like it's melting but they're laughing by the end in a way that looks like they genuinely enjoy turning it into a mnemonic rhyme like in elementary school

>they don't even have the full club together on auricular days because Gwaëlle's not there; she's a "part-time graduate", and even I can tell they partly resent her for going on to bigger things

>that day it's just the core three who are always there: Clwtha, Lochllacha, Atràpy

>2/3 relatively cute; Clwtha is semi-gyaru and wears a lot





of her own knitted accessories, Lochllacha wears long classic uniform, Atràpy is small and has a weird big head and is the one who looks at me the most

>after I've memorized their names we move on to ice-breaker games

>too terrified to answer anything

>they just turn it into a 20 questions type thing where they just narrow down my answers to questions

>mfw it actually works and gives me time to come up with answers that aren't too humiliating

>don't pick up a needle or wool the whole time

>by the time I'm going to class it feels like my head has been in a blender and I just got stabbed with three epipens

>feelsgoodman

>next week I have permission from my psych so I can tell them he told me to join

>they haven't even heard of me so that wasn't necessary



at all

>but it saved Gwaëlle a lot of awkwardness

>tfw she wrote a whole fake backstory for introducing me

>I'm like a friend of a childhood friend, which is the route I'd just started in my first real dating sim (Rainbow of Panties 3: Heart Photograph, look I was 15)

>gives me yarn & needles

>shows me how to start, immediately start missing every single loop

>hands aren't even shaking or anything, just having to keep the exact right trajectory in the air seems impossible

>even though I can already write and play video games which use the exact same skill

>all three of them are laughing and taking turns trying to show me

>m-maybe one of them is going to put their hands on mine to guide them

>my hands start shaking the more I think about it





>but if I make it necessary I'm doing it on purpose to manipulate them (Mark'eg says this), so now I can't let them

>finally Gwaëlle sees how upset I'm starting to get and tells them to leave me alone until I figure it out

>go to a closet at the back of the room and practice until I get something, a tangled nightmare worm

>they're really nice and enthusiastic about it, take pictures and give me lots of tips and Domesday videos to look up to get it right the next time

>walking on fucking air the rest of the day (a lower-ranking member of the Public Morals Committee who doesn't know the top three thinks I'm high on something, I tell him to ask Gwaëlle)

>still have trouble motivating myself to work on it in my free time

>watching more and more school club shows because it feels like practice for how to talk to them

>it actually kind of feels like that, the way they tease me

>Gwaëlle surprised by how well I take it



>but this takes away from my ability to practice, which makes me think I'm manipulating them again, and turns into a cycle

>this is, tbc, over several months in which I only speak one or two sentences in any one meeting, but spend virtually the entire week outside my schoolwork thinking about or analyzing them in some capacity

>can't remember or be bothered to type up but there is incredibly detailed documentation I wrote for Dr. Mark'eg of every epicycle of this that I either shredded or left at my mom's house

>eventually start inserting awkward jokes based on stuff people say in the slice of life shows into their conversations

>get slow, confused reactions at first but eventually they start to laugh, repeat stuff I said when they see me or work it into their own conversations

>they also ask me lots of questions

>half of them I literally cannot answer bc the real answers would be too humiliating or depressing





- >start answering with stuff from shows I'm watching
- >another reason SoL stuff is easy to get into at this point is that it reminds me of my mom's sitcoms (remember: the primary criterion of reality for her)
- >so it makes sense that I can just insert stuff from them into real life conversation
- >maybe mom will even appreciate something I'm watching now
- >ask if I can connect aux to TV one night when she's flipping channels, show her Waxpaper Petals
- >shits on every single line and joke - "no one would really say that", "they don't even look like people"
- >don't mention talking like that IRL, but quieter at next meeting, and ask Dr. Mark'eg about it at next session
- >says he'd normally suggest I test this hypothesis but I'm already testing it and the people in your club seem to think it's normal already
- >remind him I have no way of knowing they aren't just pretending to like me (he knows this bc just assuming



people liked me based on tiny imaginary signals and then alienating them is how things generally went in elementary school and it's in my records from my first ever psychologist)

>objective proof as far as I'm concerned, get more confident, even start to get good at knitting

>start making things from shows I'm watching which are already pretty obscure at this point; the cubist flower face from WaxPeta, Chibi-Geryon from The Sparkling Bluebell Priestesses

>to this day I find myself wanting to believe they genuinely thought these were cute, like why wouldn't you if you had no context on them. pics related

>of course I have to go and infodump everything about what they're from, including things I think are funny that are obviously cringey now but Gwaëlle says nothing

>take photos with me and my projects, one gets hung up in the room (it's Clwtha's homeroom)

>they start yelling my name and high fiving me when they see me in the halls





>even their other friends who aren't in the club start doing it, or showing up to club more often, asking me to make stuff more often

>get careless and start reaching back into stuff from my eroguro phase

>guys who never paid any attention to me otoh will find ways to fuck with me in class, call me Morals Committee's Pet (everyone assumes the Public Morals Committee is just making this happen directly somehow)

>Gwaëlle meanwhile is getting more quiet, start to think she's jealous

>feel bad that I'm stealing her spot at the club she introduced me to

>get so insanely full of myself I decide to invite her to something to make up for it

>obviously fantasizing a bit in romantic terms but it's almost diffused by the harem atmosphere at this point

>since we live in Winter City the first thing I can think of for someone who's interested in knitting is the C'harn Woolwork Museum



>just assume everyone else in the club has been already,
I actually haven't though

>wait for this big show to open called "Naïve Wools of
the Early Modern City: A Reassessment" (no clue what
that means but look a bunch of stuff up online)

>talk to her after class, clarify that it's not a date just
a thank you and I have a present (my concept art for
"Spring Lambs of [school name]")

>awkwardly says she might go

>reset the date a couple times before she settles

>get there and see all three core members on the steps

>start berating me theatrically for not inviting me

>*Gwaëlle seems horrified, no idea what's happening*

>*demand to follow us around, correct me on wool facts when-
ever I start to spout off about something I read on the inter-
net, making fun of other stuff I talk about, and also taking
photos of us constantly*

>*instantly take the premise that this is all merited just by*





their jealousy at not being invited at face value, tough it out all the way through expecting to turn it around like a SoL/sit-com misunderstanding by revealing the concept art featuring all of them

>Atràpy rips it up in front of us

>announces that they put up with me bc it was funny but we've never been actual friends and this was fine until I started creeping on or trying to steal their oldest friend

>Gwaëlle objects that she doesn't want them to do this, bringing me was her idea and they should have told her if I was upsetting her, breaks down crying but doesn't talk to me after

>freak out so bad museum security has to keep me after hours for my mom

>Lochllacha gives photos to the Journalism Club, which spins a tabloid bullshit story about me, Gwaëlle and the Public Morals Committee

>after this most sessions with Mark'eg turn into elaborate abstract arguments about whether I can trust him (Goddess I can't remember a word of those but sometimes I dream about them)



Luskonneg had finished his roll and tried out two different The alcohol was hitting with a kind of pain around his eye sockets that felt good, like a sparkling pain. “Well, ‘comic books’ were originally ‘funny books’, like that’s what it meant. And all the Silmenon poetics I’m talking about, which is as much a visual poetic as a narrative one, starts when people associated with eroguro start thinking this doesn’t just have to be funny but can be sexy. And that links to beauty, but that already was its own thing in the fine arts and doesn’t... deform pictures in the same way. The pictures were originally deformed just to be funny, but then they’re also deformed to be sexy and both of those cancel out to be something that can be cute but also beautiful.”

“Hmmm. But I like to think beauty can be anything. Beauty... theologically, follows at one pole from the Order of the Goddess, and at the other from the union of Goddess and Serpent, right? So there’s a sense in which it’s always present in things that are orderly, like pure math, and always present in combinations of Order and Chaos. It’s what allows us to perceive those vectors, of simplicity and complexity, Order manifest and unmanifest.”





Was she really just going to quote 12th grade Poetics at him? She had seemed so much more interesting, or was it just because she was listening? “I... didn’t argue with that... did I?”

“No, I’m just thinking it through, because this kind of deformation... well, it’s not really towards either of these axes, is it? I’m not a math person, I don’t think a lot about the first one, my aesthetics are really far towards the second, when I think about things I want to write I think about skies I’ve seen and the marks on somebody’s face and... hmmm, I’m sounding like an Elthazan stereotype aren’t I. I mean, it’s why I write about Elthazan the person, maybe. Do you ever think about how they like, stayed so pretty (as they’re described in the chronicles) out here in the winter?”

Were you allowed to start and stop this much in your sentences? Was that how people talked? Or was she nervous about him - in a good or a bad way? If he was stopping and starting like this, every stop would be an agony, a chance of the sentence ending entirely - so when he ran a full sentence out “prerecorded” it sounded flat and too fast. “Didn’t they invent the sauna or something?”



“It had existed for centuries before them, that’s just something suburban parents tell kids because it’s a catchy explanation. But uhhh. The artist who did this shirt, did some famous Elthazan illustrations for a Heroes’ Festival Book of Hours.”

“...huh.” Her face, her voice, dropped into some more shadowed zone. “Can I... see them?”

“Do I have that folder on this phone.” Lusconneg pulled his filing system up and dove with relief into the screen for not long enough. He slid the phone across the bar to Gallyren with an illustration of the hero stepping out of an ice pond with their silver-blue hair swirling around them and tartan thrown back over their shoulder, lines thick and digitally coloured but dense and ornate, strands curving in close parallel, broken by white swatches of implied droplets.

“Are they... a gay man, or a woman?”

“As far as I’m aware, neither.”

“...huhhh. I’ll admit that’s not what I expected from looking at the shirt.”





“How so?”

The Elthazan was still slender as representations of the Hero went, but... “The robot guy looks a lot more... neotenous. And masochistic.”

Fuck. He had already counted it against himself - no he hadn't, because it counted too much. But if *she* not only noticed but *said it out loud*, it counted on a whole different order. The whole paradox of the minifigure that had haunted his entire childhood, he suddenly realized, could have been resolved by imagining the universe of negative value as a series of concentric infinities like electron shells.

He had just broken through the bituminous firmament of one. As had his father.

Or not. It would be simple (maybe not mechanically, if his control of verbal and body language were inversely correlated) to laugh and say “yeah, it's kinda sus but I like the character's arc”, like he had seen those fake fans, those *fauxtaku* do ten million times. If she had made it even halfway through Hell Harrowing, probably at the instigation of a similarly bashful college roommate, she would have heard it before. He was being given a once in



a lifetime chance (what the claw represented, what he was about to lose, after all) to exchange this life for that one. He just hadn't been prepared (after all that preparing) for it to come all at once, or once and for all.

No he wasn't, there wasn't enough chance this wouldn't explode anyway to be worth this betrayal. Even if this was his only chance to escape, it wouldn't be his only chance to be trapped again. If he made this sacrifice now, he would be asked to make it over and over again. The sunlight of his room rushed back in over his eyes. The warmth of the blanket. This was it, the relief, the option he had fantasized about in the shower. Nothing would have mattered after all. Except he would get one glorious interview out of it, and probably a few hours of pain and blood.

"I've heard some men who draw men like that because they think it makes them look like women, and there are some women - I'm thinking of a thing I saw at a HL festival - who draw men like that because... either it makes them easier to manage, or more like children, so they can... combine their maternal and erotic needs, maybe? But they don't even look like children in a way that works on that need for me. There's none of the warmth





or playfulness or awkwardness, tans or smells, just this weird sharp brittle... wait, are you crying?"

Luskonneg had barely heard any of that. He was dripping snot down into his mouth as he spoke. The tears and sweat probably made his face look equally wet, and red, and lined, engorged. "There's lots of... playfulness and... awkwardness in Smilia!" Although of course she covered her skin so it didn't feel like skin, that was an important part of her. "Did Elthazan or Miwa or any of the Heroes even look as pretty as they do in, not just in the Heroes' Love stuff, but the old fashioned church art, all that Beauty as Order shit? Or just casting pretty actors in a movie, because everyone knows what most people like to look at and the censor says keep it that way so everyone knows who to root for?"

"I'm not mad at you! I'm curious! And they don't - necessarily do that any more. There was a really good performance at the Igloo Dome last Festival that was all lepers."

He was still formulating his thoughts, he didn't have time to respond to things like this, it didn't matter anyway. "I'm sorry. I have a ton to say about this, and I can't say it right now. I can link some threads, I guess."



“That... that makes sense. I’m sure I hit something there.”

Only one thing she could have hit, she had to be thinking, and it blew through all the shells he could visualize, ran down every circle of hell.

He stood shuffling from one foot to another in a daze, still not quite crying, squeaking his chair out of the way, counting how many seconds he would give himself before he went home and cried forever.

The Black Mushroom Initiate, stripped of her hat, hair washed ragged and almost white with symbiote-scourging chemicals, sniffing a bit too deliberately and charmingly in the interrogation room chair, was identified as a herb-and-crystal shopkeeper from the Hanging Plazas, too innocently incoherent to be suspected of anything heretical, but known to the civil courts for a series of elaborate and harebrained attempts at scamming people via under-the-counter fortunetelling. (For instance, telling someone their deceased grandfather wanted them to pawn his heirlooms for a discount price at a community auction house she attended.) A number of suits against her on the verge of escalating to criminal court had been dropped under Dark influences that, as typical for Black





Mushroom Initiates, she fully believed to be the proof of her own unique spiritual gift and destiny. But when she talked about her contacts in the Dark underworld she was lucid and careless, conveying no trace of loyalty and a bit of naive eagerness to reinvent herself as a 'whistleblower'. This didn't mean, as Braz had cautioned the local interrogators, her information would be reliable; Dark groups loved to use this kind of narcissist, who was likely to give away both good intel and lies of their own, to pass misinformation off on counterintelligence.

Raihha Braz had awoken in a psychomagical lab at the university, surrounded by cops, one dissociated looking professor, and - towering in her maroon stole and miter and pantsuit, holding her permanent scowl as a Poker face with a twitchy diligence that betrayed real tension, the Inquisitor-General for Romarosa. She had been under the effect of the cogitohazard for six hours until they could find someone with the requisite skills. Nonetheless, she had been cleared to interrogate the Initiate under a spell that would automatically censor the cogitohazard if it crossed the glass.

So Lacriz Aeeth did have access to a cogitohazard, and had been able to get it as high up as her - that



would explain both why they were taking them so seriously and sending her out here with so much of her memory missing. Maybe she had already encountered them. Though she seemed uniquely affected: none of the others who had been exposed had needed such complex memory magic to remove it. Maybe it was some kind of trigger word, which she was vulnerable to having heard it; maybe she was investigating this thing she was specifically vulnerable to because they didn't want anyone else building up repeated exposures. From what she gathered, the Inquisitor-General needed to be there to authorize any spell specifying it, including those wiping it from the memory of everyone who defined or sustained the spells.

"The thing you used on me - did that come from the Seer In The Half-Light?"

The Initiate almost doubled over laughing, then stiffened up. "Y-yeah. All of us knew them through the mycorrhizome. Did you know they found a way of using us without being affected themselves? And they could commune with us without merging, which was... a lot of fun for everyone involved, let's just say, so they were like our *pet* for a while."

"So do all the Black Mushroom Initiates know





about their activities? We didn't get nearly this much out of the previous contact."

"A lot of the current state you washed out along with the slime, I don't know exactly what the mycorrhizome knows. But I remember a lot because uhhh, my own Mother Initiator was the one who found them."

"And do you know *her* civilian identity?"

"Not anymore."

"Was she Fraxine Selbstember?"

"Ohhh no. Aeeth came looking for Selbstember, and found us instead."

"You mean... you had already replaced her?"

"She disappeared on her own, we filled in the gap. We had no idea what she was researching."

"Aeeth never told you?"

"They could keep secrets better than you. They got you *real* good, they couldn't believe it. You just fell into their lap, they barely had to set anything up."



She wanted to pretend this was just trying to psych her out, but it would explain the guilt, the real disgust clumping in the Inquisitor-General's eyes like mucus. "Barely? How did they identify me?"

"They had a spell they called *narrative homing*. You can't even understand it unless you understand their other magic. This shit will revolutionize the world if they don't destroy it first - unfortunately I'm not smart enough to show you how to actually do it, not anymore. But so OK - the thing they did with the power stations? It was sustained by thoughts. Specifically, thoughts that activate a recognizable pattern in Rhi."

"Goddess." Something was scratching viciously at the surface of her mind. "Is that what - happened to me?"

"That's not the good part. But basically." The Initiate grinned. "It was a very simple honeypot, they gave a bunch of workers access through a private connection to a bunch of nudes and charged whenever they jacked off to them."

The scratching getting louder - *oh no, is that what they got me with?* She couldn't remember anything she





had gotten off to in... too long to be a good sign. “Wait, why wouldn’t you just do a basic object relation definition for that?”

“Because where things get really interesting for them is fantasy. Ask anyone in psychomagic, fantasy is really hard to define. It can flow along almost any line of relation to its object, and fluctuate in and out of awareness. It can always find a way to wriggle out of a definition, to plausibly deny itself. Yet as the pervert monks up at Voidhanger know, it can produce its own distinct Rhi signature referencing the object. Which means since it references the bodymind’s first order system of reference, its “private language” rather than its learned one, *it can be defined in direct relation to its external object. Which means you can back-propagate spells along it to its object, without even being able to define that object yourself.*”

“Do... how many people know how to do this?”

“I’m a dumbass, I can’t do it, neither could anyone else in the mycorrhizome. Now if you let me talk to the Psychomagic Department people you probably have going in and out right now, it might be possible to reverse engineer...”



"This isn't a negotiation. Keep explaining narrative homing."

"Pity for you. Anyway, now suppose you're trying to find something that *nobody* can reference or define firsthand. Say, the current incarnation of the Dark Lord. All you have of that is... a fantasy. More than a fantasy - a dream, a passion, an extremely specific will irreducible to any other desire. A fantasy that doesn't reference any specific element of your or anyone you know's experience - *but that exists because a certain entity exists*. Now, to base a spell on that is still more tenuous than what they did to you. You don't have an immediate relation to the object, you can't affect it via direct reference, but you can define the direct reference by degrees of proximity. So what narrative homing does is - and I don't know the specifics of like, how they receive this information, there might be an item involved, or a personal interface - *but it measures the relation of people and objects to the unknown reference object*. Kind of like hotter-colder in a game of hide and seek. So they went off to Elthazan, because either the Dark Lord or something extremely important to finding the Dark Lord is in Elthazan. And I notice you're from Elthazan, but if I get any more specific than this... oh, I already don't remember anyway. Sorry, your mushroom





remover works too fast. Could you... you could give me some more, right? You already captured me, you've got even more spells on me now that I'm in here I'm sure, just a few milligrams. I could tell you a lot more useful things. Maybe I do know something about Selbstember, although I dunno, you'd have to give me a lot, come on come on come on, just a, just a...."

Braz walked away as the Initiate started going into withdrawals and the local agents came in with their sedative. An icy chill wrapped around her shoulders, up from her heart.

Marzanna stepped into the booth and sat down across from the small, thin man in a tweed cardigan and round, reflective glasses, sipping his a rice piquette through a straw.

"I suppose you're the handler?"

"It hopefully won't be my full-time job. And yours will be done soon."

"I know you won't tell me, but who the fuck is



this person? I did a bit of digging and everyone who went to his school had to sign an asset activation agreement. Like 300 kids, all their parents, teachers, there was a whole secret assembly no one remembers...”

“And psychologists.” He stretched his laugh lines. “Wait, how did you find out about this?”

“Unusual patterns of deleted threads in parents’ and alumni groups, cached versions.”

“Yn Dahh’t doesn’t send nearly enough graduates into intelligence. When this is all over, have you considered working for the Ecclesia?”

“Not exactly looking forward to doing stuff like this for the rest of my life, but maybe it would be better if I understood.”

“I’d just tell you and memory wipe you, but we’ve had some considerable security breaches through that already. But there are two things I can assure you: Luskonneg deserves everything we have done to him, and it would be necessary even if he didn’t. You can think about it whichever way works better for you. He is *hostis humani generis*.” Enemy of the human race - a term pretty



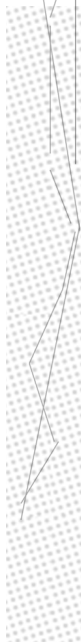


much only used for Dark cultists. “I know this must be hard for you. Telling you that doesn’t make it any easier to leave your friend in there with him. I was in fact wondering if you might need any support with it. I am, by training, a psychologist.” He slid a blue-green business card across the table from the pocket of his cardigan. *Follow Mark’eg, PhD Psych.*

“You’re...”

“I also wanted to discuss the next and hopefully last stage of your involvement with us directly, because it will be personal, and I will be giving you some personal leeway in its execution. We are aware, of course, of your feelings for Gallvren Den’kerrig...”

2'
LWCIG121
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM20W
WPECEN02
010EBB0
COMWOD0
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011BICE2
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100
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211
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T000W



Name: Coteshinoeleon

Birthday: January 3rd

Sex: Male

Occupation: Project Lead, Savannah Staff

Blood Type: O

Likes: Quiet and calmness, distance. Clean g floors, spritzed flowers and sensible food. Little luxuries and distractions; candies, skin creams, silks. Fitness; his health is failing but he keeps his body strong. Enjoys space to breath, and a slow pace, both in his current pseudo-retirement and the fervor of his youth, where this relaxation only stoked his genius.



Dislikes: Death, pain, debt, duty. Other than these high abstract universal concepts, nothing much bothers him at all; can live through anything pretty impassively.

Seen with: The inner circle of Savannah Staff, especially Tacimar-sa. Few others.

The current mastermind of the Savannah project - and its inheritor. The bitter student of a now-deceased lunic exile, one Throne Way cal Ketrensa, who was the original designer of the tengmunnin. Edging closer and closer to his mandated death at 100, Cote is living in the dregs and ashes of a too-bright life, one foot out of the world already and not happy about it. Not a rebel, but a schemer - a poet and scholar,

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ambitious in the sense not of material achievements, but in terms of seeing for himself, making a point.

Quite a figure in Triactan culture. Never quite a celebrity, but once an immensely charismatic and talented young scholar, with grand piercing ideas and an ease at working with anyone. Built up a great amount of goodwill in the academical circles, traveling widely throughout his youth and contributing to many previously-stalled projects, pushing them past barriers. But dropped out of this kind of work just as the Savannah project was starting to establish its facilities, and ever since he has been attached here, slowly making the project wholly his own as he won over and then outlived the old guard. The project has changed dramatically since the days of Throne, though so slowly and so secretly that few have realized just how much. But it is Cote who made this place what it is, who drew together and maintains the loyalty - both by ideology and mutual convenience - of all its primary players. Razina, Sever, Kuryo - these three may have few ties to each other, but Cote looms large for all of them individually.





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

Emelry learns of the harsh justice of Quay and travels along the length of Savannah to the other tengmuninn settlement, Quarry



CW: religion, hunting description, death, infrastructure failure, core-periphery relations, monarchy

Record X

in which is spent a strange morning in the city Quarry, featuring the return of a friend and an enemy

"I love my city. Its trellis curve and rising voice. My photograph and gambol that jump it awake, and out: think less of it. Emelry - let this soil clog not our hard heart. Now we are in the hands and parting storm I, what is this land to me? My city can vacuum up, break shell and murder bore free. My and your motion affords no fear. Water cold. Gasp! And preen and panic! But here is motion."

RECORD X



Vacation. Invisible festival and we ate like kings on the Quarry fare: Looy had lied that eir love was of rations. The food here was electric: milled and processed, every ingredient pulverized and desiccated into a powder before being reconstituted into mortar bricks of a pure spice spectrum. A purity of nutrition that became fragrant, aromatic, nutmegs and red cinnamons, and the most luxurious vanillas that are so strong they turn bitter and sickly. Blocks of pounded sand, and slabs of fat - butter, coconut, aloe - that melted their counterparts into fireworks. I was developing a taste. My body ached and it sang.

In this level of weight - Lunic, or near it - even Kali would manage bursts of gliding. From here, eventually, we would fly straight when the sun arrived, like an arrow to the same height at opposite end. Already, distantly, morbidly, I dreamt of turning the quarter into a bastion manse and make it rain confetti for returning hero Rain.

Kali perched nestled in my arms like an infant, a housecat viciousness sheathed in eir claws. Eir little heart, and lungs maybe the size of mine, shivering like a wristwatch. This close, each of eir breaths was a sigh, a small satisfied rattle. I stroked eir wingblades, firm and careful, applying henna from a golden vessel smelted from torn wir-





ing: Quarry-quarried, and set with ruby shards. They were drawn from a skeleton that had fallen and shattered in the fire of Kali's youth, and the memory was mine.

"My voyage companion, my field of flowers," I murmured to em. "Motion. Give me a title."

"No."

Alas! I grinned, outraged: "Yes. Look at my service, wonderful! I am the king's Porter, I am porting you this moment. Sign me."

"No, a work is for life. It should. A tengmunnin is a task, how can that translate?"

"A friend cannot be within the retinue? I will not be only a companion. Make it undoubtable where I stand, take me into the fold — rank me under Harka, ka!"

I was lighter. I was regaining my strength at the top of the world. Its middle wind rolled hard and slow. My muscles had scarred and were reforming, geologic. Less weight and always the rising wind, lilting, as if I could push off into it.

"No," Kali said, and the tension was gone. E gently shook my fingers from eir wings, and I began cleaning the dye



from as deep in myself as I could reach. We watched the view.

I traced a point in the sky, imagining I was flying. I knew enough of wings, now, to feel them. I held my hands back, the angle at the ball of the wrist, the blade where thumb meets arm and folds into foil. There was the rise, there was the curl, the stairway to slice into, stirred along the small hairs of my arm. The hair of my head, my eyelashes, all of it like antennas to the open sky.

I was stronger and still locked. Harka's claw could ring my wrist; it would not have three months ago. As I was before Savannah, in that body - that mind? - could I have sat here and raised my arm without it shivering, without its puppet strings straining? I felt like dark meat, fuzzy and dry. Like mackerel flesh. Even at these heights they had adorned me with, this perspective and gentleness, even with my blood twisting to bring me back to baseline - even now I was weak, and straining upwards, and falling down.

Nothing was beyond belief. I had read nothing since coming down besides what was in the library Quay, I was fattened on those leaves and starved the dense grain-meal of records and rote. If I dug, if it had not been burned or buried, maybe I could find it - some experimental log





of the initial generations, the layout of the tally-rooms of the spine, an easy diary left for me by some partisan - by a young Razina, even, brave and fresh. But I did not need to read that to know it.

A red bird in the sky. Red with tracking-dye worked into the root of the feathers, red with heartsblood, life and fire and voice. Flying, a comet down the spine - mythic will and syllabic strength, poetic license and coilmuscle. Everything had happened, made wild in youth! Carrying a giraffe by the neck in my fist.

“I will forgive you anything,” I said

“Kakaka! And what such fail!”

“My lion-voiced one, calling canine. I tell you I appreciate the metaphor, truly, but I have been playing that letter in my head since the news. It is too low for you - a hunter on the trajectory of pet. I understand the poetry of it! It is strong, yes, sky-wolf, alien. But still sour with me.”

“But catface is in the primal terror. There is an enemy - a hunter. Canine means peer, feline means challenge. In the size.”



"No, I'm sure it happened. Somewhere the savannahs before the walls rose, the pre-Edenic hunt. Somewhere in those long years, even if just a generation, even if only one and one, it must have happened between a pride and a band. A pinnacle. It was there, a spearman languid lying on the red clay, backed by his lioness, a cub and a child playfighting with sheathed teeth. More peerage in that. Peers of luxury, not necessity, a bond of fat. I can see it, even if it never lasted."

E scabbled up, and turned to face me. "Think back further. The human inherits the mantle of the hunter. Cat and dog, old masters of the niche, contested by the new human victorious. But further, think of panic over pride. The hunt before it was vanquished. Guillotine, tiger! The tiger death is kind. Go tide to neck, crack once. Now come old wolf, ardent pack's arrowhead, barking orders to tear you apart. The wolf death tugs and pulls ragged latches on, drags down. Cut, tiger! No. Fellowship up above but below, if I were to fail, if my love was shattered, and if the world changed... Had I a host, riding, the wolf war would be mine. Mine that, always, dogged, and tugging."

E was aglow. Honey-drunk, and changed. Eir downcast focus, that picky intensity, was replaced by a new slow-





ness. Always looking up, light soft in eir eyes. One week since the letter, one week since the spine had gone out in a thunderclap echo. It was a moment of night in midday, saved only by our position among the lights and lanterns of Quarry, and even then we were still blind, restricted to the fishbowl bubble glow it left us with. Five minutes of darkness. Five minutes of vomit and suicide.



Strait: a maelstrom. Bitter, ripping sea wind. Mammoth musk. Ribbons of land across the grey shallows, that would have been swamp if not for the cold, and linking their twists the grand bridges fording the window-bottomed deeper waters. Strait: a story. Pre-Edenic. Humankind before the walls rose and acclaimed the union of language. It was raw, it was dangerous, and it was the edge of permission; a leftover from a more radical regime's era that could now not be interfered with. The mandala was permanence itself.

Ironies:

First, if the true and credible dissent that Kuryo so yearned for were to form, it would happen at the breast of the sun, within the mandala. It would occur at that



center, the place whose each seated habitat was ordained as a baseline tremor of the species. All little worlds that grew there, in their chorus, when winning its place was named inarguably a pure expression of the human current. What can be done with the light of the sun, its potential of power that seems so infinite to our perspective? Industry enough to create not only places that are hypothetically possible, but moreso the places that must always exist, for their existences come not from history but from the bubbles beneath our souls' surface. All the logics of life that could not be extricated from us, nor invented anew. Somewhere in all of us, whether neotene or changeling, was a brace against the rocky earth of Strait's ice age. Somehow, all our feet knew that they must be ready to touch it. Likewise the soft mossy vineyards of Chaff, likewise the marble plazas of Honey. A series of homes, that were built by and for these rights of remembrance. There would be a proper nursery for specific ideologies, specific bents of perspective, thoughts that are so native to the human condition that they are independent from the state of the world.

Second, the mandala long predated Triactis, which acclaims itself as the great game. Grand laboratory of form and flesh and feeling clinging to a single tenuous theological underpinning. The line that had won it everything





was its place of absolute honor concerning the soul: every faltering flame in the ribs of the world is precious and irreplaceable, moreso unique, and even moreso uniquely elucidating. Souls are kaleidoscopes, lone networks of connection. To do justice to God and the creation one must dramatize these differences, these specializations, in a process of one becoming more and more themselves. But what accomplishments had this system had that yet equaled the social interplay of the mandala? It vanished in the mist, created an atmosphere of extreme differentiation but no juxtaposition. One could go straight to the mandala and argue that Strait's culture of anonymity achieves the same thing; people's actions speaking for them, the removal as a strong system of social pre-parsing.

I was thinking too fast about nothing, and trying to pin down a shadow. Fight to fawn, for my thoughts were of drowning in sunlight as compensation for those minutes of dark. Before the letter: a thunderclap had fallen like a thousand hammers striking at once. A bolt, a bolt, the crushing noise of a factory in a single moment.

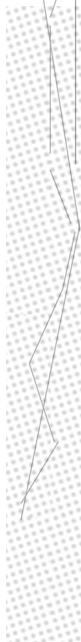
Utter night. An intolerable echo, feedback whine, slamming back and forth between the opposite ends of the distant landscape. For a while it seemed to only get louder.



The lights where we sat turned bright, the ones far beneath in the surface industrial zones hurriedly clicked on. But it was over too fast even for panic. Clack clack clack one by one, starting from our end, the segments of the spine flared on again, and the missive arrived to where we crowded around, alarms still singing.

Here is its course, the longed-for remittance to the decades of Quay's love: three solar omen in hard white shieldjacket drapes, inner-court garb. The eyes of the marginal two sparkled with the information on their screens; the middle was stony and wide-eyed. Fury, fear, what? I still can't parse it when I remember. "Unprecedented," they said. "What choice can we have but emergency? We throw up our hands immediately, sunbeam support must be suspended. The overture is appreciated, but there is just no authority yet that may speak to yours. It is our regret that "

And it would have droned on into darkness, setting the countdown clock for Savannah running out of backup power - which at its scale would come quick down its inhabitants' necks. But in a hammer strike no less loud than the spine breaking, the pearl door was banged in behind them. Muffle, furious, laughing argument - a pleading sec-





ond voice, and the radiant remonstrations of the child of light: "I will beat you all! I will put your teeth into the air!"

The three former speakers recoiled, mortified - one tried to dodge and was caught in the temple with a grain-scepter, one fell on their knees, and all three were forced out by Shirazavid Inanari Sanchez in full albeit half-dressed ceremonial robes. "Out, out, out out out! Out!"

"Please! Your Parent has !" and the attendant who followed Them indeed lost a tooth, whimpering in betrayed petulance. The infanta spread Their arms in a splay of gold and color, the four bruised solars covered at the door and called for help as Their forehead hit the ground.

"O friend and lover, o fenghuang, o brilliant crystal spear," They cried, voice echoing against the tile, "you have exploded Our heart and hurricaned the limits of Our esteem wider than the wheel. May all creation embrace you! May the circuit complete in your gem! By the world's ring, be Ours forever! O red lake, precious spring, take Us into the awful upwelling of your bounty, and know that this fortress world is Our home. You have made it glass, shimmering, its walls and ceilings! I will shatter a path, I'll tear apart anyone who stops this now, I will extinguish every



bridge-burning torch, I will find you. I come now. My will is yours!"

All who are welcomed as an heir of the sun are singular. The See's royal family is a long project of production and perfection. Of the doubtlessly countless children of the monarch which are scattered to the mandala, only those that unaware of their heritage make an impact on their little worlds become legitimized and welcomed into the highest light. Seeds of the sun, signs of the system, and of the fifteen heirs of this generation Shirazavid was one of the most recognizable. A harsh, narrow face in a permanent grin, immersed in a fiery personality that since Their first press meets was apparent to the world. They were insatiable, ceaseless, pure motion, never stopped talking. Strait was transformed, its curated sphere of nomadic land dependency coopted by Shirazavid's time on it in a way that still felt true to its goals. Where once there was hardscrabble self-sufficiency and a brutal winter want only overcome by sheer hunter-gatherer ingenuity, Shirazavid alongside their tribal mentors had spent Their youth in borderline evangelistic travelling - and wherever They went shelters rose, earthen bunkers and iceway irrigation that at each turn of the migration cycles refined themselves, became polished.



It was a small thing. Cities did not rise. There was no grand revolution, only the patience and incisive sense of small improvements that had come to define Their public image. Shirazavid, insatiable, could never let Their mind sit still on one thing. Their sun-drenched heart had to eat, had to amoeba itself around things, jumping from idea to idea, structure to structure, searching for flaws and jagged edges and absorbing it. This royal restlessness was now striding towards the door of Savannah, unprimed to catch it.

The power of the sun is boundless, indescribable. One cannot understand the pure bounty of it, the world-creator, abstracted crown of life itself. Even in the ancestral condition, looking up from the hardscrabble soils of Heath at only a sliver of a sliver of a fraction of its output. Cradle engine, downpour, sail-filler, long umbilical center of every highest tale, the door by which God and sight and sense step into the world. The jewel of Adonai at just a glimpse! A single-point needle exposure to it! When our species moved beyond that point, and began to multiply the points of contact with those beams as the founding crews of first Solars forded headfirst into that fire, that wind, skin-stripping proximity,



The nature of a king is love and hate. It is the ends of the spectrum. One person able to cohere extremes, and perform the long figure of society in one vessel. A king is a conduit, helpless and knowledgeable. I see this in you, fellow scion of a wavering line.



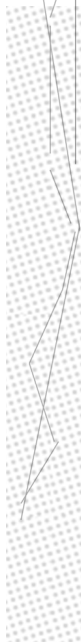
"Ludicrous," I said. Rain and Looy laughed together, forcedly - both of them in a cold sweat and beaming.

"I only emulate you," Rain Flower turned and mock-whispered to me.

"Oh. We are ludicrous then. I'm unsurprised."

Quarry had developed an arsenal.

Our chatter pinged across the hangar walls and made the assemblybirds glance but we were left unmolested, they turned back to their welding and hauling. The entire level of Quarry's tree had been turned to a battery of constructions: the first five prototype janitors sat in front of us where more skilled artisans were fitting the pieces together: behind them, material enough for many tens of new units was being loaded in from the manufactories.





Looy had invited us, gloating, and all around there was a voyeuristic rush. Rain and I, deep taboo, thrown to the winds, proprietary secrets tossed out like candy. Giddy, nervous, complacent, defeated, sprinting. Long had he been paralyzed by the line-crossing, but now I saw the freedom of falling in him that I had felt. Why not push it all the way, why not cry out to die for something. Faced with the weight of Savannah there was nothing to do but to become a tool, and drown in the river. Thrust both hands in. No fear, no responsibility except to sunlight. It was a comedy sketch, leering Looy and ribald Rain musing about literally moving mountains, carving out lakes in the landscape. With such a fleetsuddenly presented why not kick out to sea? Why not slice the rest of the way, complete Quarry's long quarry in a week.

My arrival had been late, but now the assemblybirds carted over a turtleshell-sized slab of ceramic for Rain's inspection: a smooth chevron that he passed into my hands. Deathly and paper-light.

"We're getting close, Emelry. Beautiful work. This is - this is one of the valve connectors for the waterblade, they just spit this out. Real complex. This is supposed to be impossible - impossible - to make outside of Diadem and



Near Victory, the precision it required... I have no idea how it will hold up to the pressure." He hefted it again in his hands, watching how it moved. I saw him consider dashing it against the floor. "The glass is good, but the ceramic is brittle. These will be fragile models. I don't see a way around it. The shape is perfect but they might be single-users."

Looy perched on my litter's railing, pretending to be distracted by the showcase beyond us in the wide, white, empty hangar. Far back were the calibration test stations, further back still a few half-assembled skeletons and the intake elevators, pumping materials and parts up from the lower-branched kilning and manufacture zones. Here was our showcase floor, our puzzle room. Looy looked back, half-ready to bark orders, but e wanted to be by us.

Rain's own janitor was back in his possession - they had analyzed every centimeter of it, and Rain had given them all the extra context needed. Now Quarry was well on its way to performing the task it was best at: rebuilding, reconfiguring. Now new janitors perched, poised, as if they would preen their antennae if you looked away. Chassis and shielding complete, their segments open and unsealed,





spiracles. The guns were the last step, for their supply of water and glue was the finest and most delicate touch.

"A high, high red gift," Looy said. "The plans we access have been insensible. Scrap, borrowed or borrowed and not given. My greed and gratitude overflow in this arsenal. Quarriers are my fearful people, you understand this?"

"Palpably." Kali feared a lack of flower, a limit to what would overgrow. The sense of fear along the trunk and traipses of Quarry was a dread of a material loss. Death was no limit, many more here were cheerful and adapted - even Ynewey's inherited Diamond was a sort of ritual rather than remembrance. Boiled together and made solid, made enduring.

"How do I say it to a priest without rawness? It is a romance. Soon these will be ours, first generation strict and second more carved. The gift came here, for sheer capability?"

"Units will go to Quay," I said, "obviously. Network with me, make it fifty fifty, for we are of equal parts. Our brain, your brawn, an adorable reversal. But why has the secret escaped you so long? The Quarry which reads everything. You'll excuse me, but the capture feels total already, you



are beyond this in many crafts. Savannah is yours - does it seem to be wrong? At every step we have found you bitten into the wiring, having uncovered everything before we thought to look. Is it that the full industrial capacity is only now ramped?"

"At audience you will have to speak on this thing I hate: the open door. Gifts and gifts and gifts and a bare neck, and we must take what is given. We cannot flinch at an open door. We have to run, you know this, more than you know whence go. 'Why the speed', you will ask us: it is your own speed. Abandoned, favored. Ynewy is like you, same impulse, same dare. It's rushwork, no? It's risk. Eat a poison berry."

The hour mounted, and Rain and I found our own corner as Looy went back to calibrations. We wedged in by the wall, him leaning into my litter. From a distance still the models were beautiful. Spiders of burnished steel shells to make up for the less than perfect ceramic. "I know janitors can fly rough when in atmosphere too long. And these are yet more fragile. How bad will it be without hull-capacity kilns? These feel made of rock to me."

"No, that's not true, that's for cases of years, years of interior stationing. I allowed it, I - look, it's not. God! The





air runs cold here when I'm not collaborating. They stare at me, no one stares at me so patiently. What could I even say? I'm a thief of a thief. This had me so defensive at first, like watching myself trip in slow motion. I don't care now that I think about it. I will make a big show of saying it was a gift. Yes it was me."

"An arsenal! A handsome gift for any occasion! Let no one say we cannot choose well."

"Oh, say we, say we, you utterly cruel little — ! La, la, Emel-ry, never forget what you owe me. Never forget what you have done to me!"

"Don't be trite."

"I'll say it again! You don't know - they will bury me ten miles under Diadem, I will never see the sun again. You're making me forget how to talk, I go brittle around you. Let me have a little outlet. You owe me riches and riches and riches for this, make that the deal when you remember me! Rot me with sugar and gold and vistas!"

"You will have honey-drunk villas and harems of brave captains. You'll have ten million ears hungry for you, and ten million portraits of your heroic trailblazer's visage.



You will have storms of nectar and bouquets of silk. When our part is over we will eat forever."

"Emelry can you teach me to pray?"

"Trite."

"Oh, I was joking." He giggled, rushed and nervous.

"Please! Let me fan my face in peace. Let me lie down.

Nah, nah, I'm dead serious after all. All my art is slipping from me and into the current - the under-running and utter thing that escapes words and hands - that is the breath of God, or history at least, as I understand it. We've chosen a stance without my ignorance in it."

I tiptoed my littler closer, and took Rain's hands. "Repeat after me."

"Oh this is painfully embarrassing."

"A good prayer already, but repeat after me:"

We spoke together. "I am a prisoner of the living God. I am grass in the shallow current, moved by His water and wind. See, I sway! I am free and unforgivable.





"O Lord of Lullabies, whose lyrics are organized as the celestial bodies: star painter, by this cry I claim a wish. My God, who swore to me the kilning of my sun and the kindling of my flesh, make that heat of desirous love overtake me. That pure blend of molten clarity that transmutes mineral to all the fruits of Haven: Lord of Goods! Weaver of vessels, lodestone, golden locus of nectar, let your palms encase mine, my empress of milk and honey. Let your left be my armor and your right my shield, and your enflocked lantern dream parallel behind my eyes. With you I am barefoot in the night, and all weapons break against my hands."

And I lone: O waiting God of Justice, it is you alone that I call upon, by your name I sing this spell. Swift spade, clenched talon, garden's price: linger on me, spotlight, long enough to blind. Let every cubic meter of air in this world Savannah pass through my skull: let me hear the chant rising from the hated soil of my king, O One, O Love, O joy of motion. Plowsmith, quarryknapper O nightmare, be with me in your feather cloak, place it upon my shoulders, and let none take it from me. Tsabarch, hi-eronym, capacoça principal official, full court, keep me and be my bone, and be the jewel asleep in my head; my fossil, my pride and my terror.



Deeper into Quarry, hurried and sideways. Looy took great but stifled offense to Kali's handful of cheerful questions about the floor, when e was brought to meet us, but spoke frank with Rain and I as if we were fellow workers on a break. Groups were tight-knit and broke easily. Conversations were murmured, huddled like secrets, but then openly announced. Time for neither pretense nor affect, but plenty for maneuvering. Every statement was a request, every request a statement, a mutual testing of boundaries and etiquette of yielding.

Tall and shallow.

Kali, reunited with my litter, biscuited my cushions. "Piece taker," e called me.

"Too far?"

"Heavy, but not too. A good gift - you have heard this? A good gesture, and in our spirit. Ynewy is capricious, and Quarry eager for caprice. It makes a laugh. Quarry I would hate to be at had it not that laugh, and that delirium. Sleepwalkers, that my line flinches for and loses such a floor."





He led us in a long pace down the length. Rain glanced over at us, unsure whether he was welcome - poor thing, who had less the privilege of solitude we sometimes won back for ourselves.

"Will you caprice with me? Ynewy has a great jarring game."

"E called this a lunch. I know it is a negotiation already."

"And you will speak mine."

"How could I?" I asked wearily; e was being impulsive. "Too tense, you've felt that with me. The letter's weight and its banished night filling this place like smoke. It has been an honor to glimpse the thing, but it could not be me to speak on it."

"It must be. If you are mine, take an order."

My breath caught. I fixed my posture, and said nothing on the long walk to Ynewy's inmost sanctum, on the levels that loomed above the dwelling place of the Diamond.

A cathedral arch. A tall, long canal - an audience-room perhaps patterned from the manifold branches of the grave tree. Repurposed from an old industrial project that



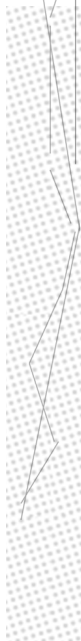
still had its leftovers scattered around the room - demolition cranes with shrunk handmade cockpits leaning like tall branches along the walls, unsealed gouges in the cliffs of former dredging. Even now the work continued, a small group in the corner clustered around a sort of mineshaft of an exposed ferry pipe, ignored.

Ynewy sat, backed by a silver burnished mirror, high in the eaves of the walls that stretched up what must have been blocks, and halfway between em and the floor we remained on perched our fellow runaways.

Anahit.

She was translucently pale. Her eyes unfocused. An ochre and saffron cloak clung to her, borrowed, like a napkin. I must have swallowed my throat when I saw her, and her dry eyes caught my glassy ones. She smoothly looked away, sinking back into the shadow of Kuryo Redname who stood, ragged and proud, in her borrowed pulpit.

"Nighttime. Here we are aday, mounting," Ynewy said - speaking as if to a smaller room, a close audience. The room felt like it was stirring with so many wings, all the little alcoves occupied by audience. But it was only us. Ynewy, the king, Anahit, Kuryo, and I. "Now the phase is over.





Over. Soon I'll fly. Tell me, as I gather my train, what you would: my allies, my friends."

I looked to Kali - e looked back at me, steady. A soft gleam in eir eye, a silent one. I panicked - but I understood. Looking up, I raised my voice to make a greeting, "Arbiter of Quarry -"

Kuryo's voice fell like a dropped plate, but wasn't raised. "We aren't doing this. Why is the girl here? Why is she speaking? You won't allow this."

"Oh," Ynewy said, "my graces are endless, and all my friends supplicants. Ply and plead me, gifters, and pave my stride. My ears open wide, yes, so much to listen to. Your priorities are clear: I am second, but whose is the better second? Come and know,"

I and the apostate watched each other until she spoke. "Do you know what happens in a week with no light? A long slow shutdown of every life process. A self-sustaining hurricane growling longer. Unregulated, spinwards, it rips the land of its grasses and shoves the rivers out of their beds. The land scours down to its foundation. Annihilation - washing machine! Then the ice. Why are we in this discussion? Explain it as if I am the idiot you imagine me



to be. This girl has perpetrated a crime there is no recovery from."

"That letter was Quay's, and is a pillar of Quay. Nothing could have stopped its bolt. This has always been the position," I said, and ignored my voice breaking. "Now it is a matter of delegation, and the palace spearship comes. The time is now, Kuryo. The cities prepare their orchestra, where is yours?"

"Oh, Emelry, didn't you call my hatred delusional? And just like that aftershock: you, Sainshand, are a dancing ray of sunshine. A shattering final autumn Pure, bladelike, unbound, carcinogenic. You cook me like a slug on stone. If I see more of you I'll go blind. I wish I could tell you what you are, how you were made, what a horrific jewel you are. It's not happening, and the gall it takes to stand here - ha."

I turned to the highest seated one; "Ynewy - you've put me in a play court now. I will happily argue or prove, but I must know what is expected here."

E twined eir claws, considering. "I am a lover: pursued and jealous. And now there is a beautiful rhyme gift. Two appropriate humans enmeshed in landing strip. I have nothing to say, it is not I."





Kuryo was only more upset "Listen! We are going to talk about the cutoff first. No plans before we sort this. Two options: one that it was incompetency, looseness of bureaucracy, the malleability of it at the highest levels. The See is erratic and ruthless. Otherwise, an intentional warning shot we were lied to of. Oh, that wild savior princess, the timing of it! How can I talk to you, Sainshand? You are like - not a child - no gulf can describe it. A veiled dagger and a cruel smirk and you fall in love like a slave. Claws in the soil - bone breaking..."

"I'm fearless and you are dedicated. How could you not assume the worst? But no final night nor endless day is coming for us, weight the options. It is the threat a long night that drains the power reserves and establish a stricter sunbeam - should all my own hopes fail, it's plain nothing will destroy Savannah. Quarantine and cage is what you should fear, the barring of mind life here from meeting its sibling. Humor it. Do you still say you want the tengmunnin alone? Barred not from sunlight but from the trade of talk?"

The birds only watched us, quiet. I chanced:

"No. I want you with us, Redname. The See will not accept a single party, it must be a delegation. Who am I to find



here with an equal perspective to yours? The doctor and her henchmen. Face your fear, Redname, stand up against it and see it stand with you."

"Never happening."

"What then was your hope?"

"I wanted more time. I still beg Ynewy to leave. Get out, forever, follow through. Five years and we could gather all who would come. Let whoever stays, willing sacrifices, talk and trade, but I demand a flare out."

"Five years?" I asked.

She stopped talking to me. "Five years quiet, lifeboat it. I will tell you again and again to leave and take the soil, to respect what has been built here, Ynewy Flechetteir, this worldtree sprout. The girl will bark at you now, but she hates the world you want - the world you could have, free and new. Do you want their mockery, Ynewy? Do you want the See's shambling corpse puppetry of culture? They will raze your earth and build from it a scarecrow of you, when you are gone. You can still find it."





"Why is Quay here? Failure. Marilore would have left the way I now tell you to, but couldn't swing the hookshot. But with one smokescreen you can. Bide the time - take the jade - what's in the tree and what I have will add up to enough. You can do it, and must do it now. What's Quarry worth if you can't? Leave, hide in the shadow of Jove, and nothing can touch you. Curve out, and no one can follow you. Leave like a ghost, and let the river people cover for you. Forget them, forget everything, get out of this prison. Away from the enemy, and find yourself."

"How many should die fast, Kuryo?" I shouted. "Five years' worth? All, forever, black wing in the dark with no sheen, no coat? You told me this - you did! That the goal is to stop the deaths. What are you saying, five years?"

"Dilettante. Stop talking."

Once again my voice slipped from my control: "Aye, when you stop loving my enemy! When you cease the wreaking of Coteshinoeleon's progression, and the withering of my king's kind! Your fostered project is his - admit it!"

"Ynewy Flechetteir, you cannot take her as any kind of envoy," Kuryo said, turning from me with a sweep of her cloak. "She came here, this little-merited child, with no



foresight and no goals. This is a vapid passion you hear from her. This is the petty fervor of a petty crew - I will not allow you to place that above my own efforts. Quarry owes me years."

"Exploiter, abdicator, unemployed! Again you are content with the man who ensures we find ourselves in a cruel situation rather than a complex one. His goals are not abhorrent to you, who will abandon the sun one day, in grand crime now or else on the last day when you walk away from the feast. Why does Quarry exist, why is it here? Because the door has been left open by that man. Because all these advancements have been fed."

"You are so hateful." Unmoved. "Poetry is good enough for the poet king, and you've slid by on it. Savannah is spite. And a tight ship. A locked box of venom for his masters and his world: oh, I know Cote, and his decades. It is a jealousy I can respect, but he yearns to return. I am not like him. He is like you. Dreaming of dancing in the sun, young and celebrated by the places I abhor. Our spite is antithetical."

The lines of Quay, Kali had shown me, were meticulously drawn up out of the earth - great pains going to a not slow but methodical and lifelike growth. A raising, a teaching,





a foundation, steady and earnest. Quarry was ravenous, a wildfire, clicking into their role and pursuing its end. The process was irrelevant.

Was it truly an oversight? Each departmental faction among the staff assuming that some other neighbor had eyes on the ravens, and what could possibly happen in such a closed box? Was it a diverting of attention, or merely a lack of it, an unwillingness to look too hard at what they had all wrought.

So careless, so callous. Where was the opposition? Where were the janitors screaming through the sky for my confinement? Fear, negligence, no. A seam had been left. Yn-ewy likely knew this—that Cote had given them a path. There is an outrage that the proud savor when faced with low charity, when thrown table scraps, when a wrestler takes a slow step. This must be the cut in eir eye, and the furious pace of Quarry: "You have shown me your neck as a play, you have flashed your submission out of the spite of my inability: now I will at your throat. Now I will wolf you. Now I will take what you have, and no play."

"Not so," I said and gathered myself. "Your two spites are aimed jointly, and without the need for his imposition, you remain in his control. Vindication is not his goal, but ruin



is. A poison-pill of resentment against humanity in whole. Savannah is a trap, a magnifying glass, a bomb of revolt, designed to dripfeed all this access to its prisoners so they have the means to resent the world as he does. You occupy his designed flaw."

Ynewy took the dead space: "Cote is an old mover - I don't worry. Old and blind, and dead soon."

"It was me," Kuryo said gently, "the door opener. I give good gifts. Call me Quarry's patron; I just don't demand to be a part of it. You'll never get it. It'll never click with you."

I was so sick of embarrassment. I could not allow it to continue touching me, shaking me. I could not allow it into the archetype of who I was: the brave are never embarrassed. The youth arrives to the castle and makes an error - the treasure is lost - there is shame, but not embarrassment, and it passes. It vanishes along the path of the striver - it is learned, forever, and transformed. Humble yourself! It was in fact blind to demand the selfishness from Red-name, to assume her concern before a complete picture was presented. But nothing was wrong. I had been right in my offers and assumptions. My playbook was strong. This was good news. I had asked delegation from her, and now



my partner was brighter than before. Now I saw the magnanimity in her, the power to advance on multiple fronts. Yes! I was synthesizing. I could take her as an equal. This had been unknown even to Kali, I could feel it, and both she and I were now a step behind. I looked up, ready to respond, but it was then that Anahit stopped shrinking like a child behind their mother's back.

"Do you live in the world you want to live in?" she said in her clear voice.

I pleaded with her, trying to phrase my reasoning in a way she would recognize as her own, as the thoughts she had left me with. "The institution of the audit ensures those places of living remain what we would hope for. Curating and cauterizing, that is the task we share. I know we are off script, and each in our own directions, but you must see that we remain in the work, and that the work is that which you speak of."

Anahit ignored me, "I've thought of little lately but my ideal world, if every piece fell into place. What I hoped for, and how I want to live along this history wheel, this wide and enriched garden. I once thought of this Ecumene that each of its spokes was mine to love, and that I could find



that love in my own power. Like how a muscle tears and strengthens."

"What do you hope for, then? What have you found that you hadn't the access to? Where did the girl I knew go, her curiosity and reverence, her faith? I cannot see the objection that's gripped you."

"It looks different," she said, thoughtfully and poised. "It just looks different."

"There is a struggle and a grain to the world. Crime and calumny and all the petty things, humanity is jagged. People weigh on each other in their mass and force, the ice breaks and cuts. Our education is of these things. The brutal and the vast. Why is it now that you scream at the pain of growing?"

"Oh, it's not the pain," Anahit said dismissively, still watching the walls airily, oriented away from my gaze. "That's not the question. 'Growing'... I am suffocating, mummified. My god is a pale feather, a laughing and leaping thing. I think is God play to you, Emelry? Please humor me."

"In part."





"An for me, in whole. God of the rainbow, of chemistry.
An electric God, who takes two things in his hands and
sparkles them together. God is eternal — the Ecumene is
old — the wiring is fading."

"The Ecumene is the joining of hands. I am in disbelief.
That connection, the kinship between the distant worlds it
encompasses and the varied beings it directs — that is what
allows your spark to exist. Without the Ecumene — with-
out *us*, you understand — the trend will be towards death
or reinvention. Void, snow, static, the suffocating loss that
comes with that kind of unformed noise.

"Suffocating, yes. I am so soft. I am so soft and shocked.
My skin — my skin seethes with its own softness. Old, old,
old, and cut. When I think of the fire of heaven, the cutting
sensation, that is what I mean by suffocation. The ceiling
to the garden, the wall, the bars I see the play behind."

"Impatience for Heaven, then. You give me nothing."

"No, not that. Mourning the loss of that seed. Redname is
right. There was something that vanished when the Ecu-
mene was founded, something precious. Not the ugliness
— I'll not find sentiment for war and poverty — but a certain
originality. Paths were closed out, and after the bottleneck



of the Unification, new paths were engineered to mimic them. And since the movement has been right, like reins, and held in the spirit of execution. You pull and pull, and you make a noose "

"Listen to yourself. Listen to yourself. These are invisible things. This is motivated speculation. Where is your evidence and record? You are so drawn in by that woman that you object to the practice you are joyfully sworn through, to catalogue these wide boughs with space for all. You give me nothing here, Anahit, no discovery but adolescent conjecture."

"I just don't see it anymore. Shouldn't I trust my own sight? My intuition - my taste? It all tastes pale and ashen. It all feels cut, and you... I don't know. Celebrate, or sanction, that severance."

"You still give me nothing, no decision. Here is mine: every motion of our industry, the pacts of trade and aid, the synthesis of the sun's long light. I don't know what you mean when you say artificial. Do you mean to call every heart from here to the sun shallow and vaporous? Is that how she has told you to see the world, and you've complied?"

"I don't know. What theory do you expect from me?"





"Anahit, my Anahit, you have never completed an audit

I too threw my chance for a proper one away. We can still find it, we can still make the tie! We have not worked through it, and she has never seen the world as it is. False world, new world, true world, lost world - all this airiness makes where we live escape us. What other portrait could we need, what measure to measure against, besides the text of this reality? She will drown you in perspective, she is fascinating and a voice like no other. Speaker! And so I say stay with me. Anahit, back with me. Kuryo, along with us. Do you see where we are? Look look through that window, at that span. We are both here at the terminus. I will show you it is possible, in play and justice both. We will win. I will give you everything you ask, and show you it is sunlit. All good things! Say, say it, that you will call and stay!"

I saw Anahit in her eyes. Sparkle! That light cloudy lavender, so much lighter than mine, as if she was half-blind. Eyes on Heaven poor love.



It was a shallow argument, and accomplished nothing. Ynewy listened, still with that slightly amused ruffle - e heard our tempers out, and Kali and I climbed back to where our



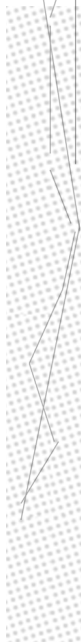
room waited. Little to be said. The world was so big and I could not see past my palms. Kali consoled me - as the spine shut down softly e spoke of our course back. I was hungry for a detour.

A new-model Quarry janitor, sleek and gliding - polished, rough, an embodied revolution - was the signal we would take to depart. Once supplied with a small fleet of treasures we would return to the city and spend as wisely we could the nine months remaining until the See's presence was upon us. I saw little value in human politics now. I would not be able to stomach the scrape and bow of it, and neither the theater. I wanted sand and salt. I wanted shadows under trees.

That night, alone, I wondered again of final practicals.

What was I looking for here? The answers were obvious and unsatisfying. A balm for homesickness a reckoning with the last dregs of my useless schooling a gleaning of who I had been before Kali's verdant shadow. Lord Mon stared at me: a guilty girl whose throat was tight.

"Now you know it was a lie. Why were you convinced?" His gentle, cold voice was so quiet in the closed room but it filled every inch of air.





God, how acrid my voice had been, how nasal and superfluous! Death! "I didn't get anything from him. He gave me a pile of things I had already verified, and his delivery did not differ when lying."

"Wrong. Excuses, Sainshand, I don't like the body language schools. Tell me why he convinced you he would not have convinced John, nor Pacelem. He did not make a mistake, he marked you. Why did it work?"

"It added up. There were no incorrect details. His reasoning made sense. The order in which he made his contacts, and how the escalation played out. It's how I would have handled it, really perhaps because it sounded so sensible I was less critical of where the flaws were. So sensible,

Because it added up.

"Wrong. You are doing it again. You are deferring to me because I am piercing you, because I am pushing you. You are ceding ground, and betraying yourself. Why? Listen!"

He snapped his fingers, and I was forced to meet his eyes.

"You are not getting angry that's John's problem, and why she has failed already but rather afraid. This is a worse condition but a more salvageable one. Either ex-



plain to me or stand up to me. Only be deferential in earnest or in deceit — remove the attitude from your reflexes.”

“Fine,” I said, pressed. “I am still convinced, then! I still don’t see it — even with the facts on the table now, it would stretch imagination! It is soap opera — it is contrived — it feels like script — and it is script! I do not like easy answers — a lover’s quarrel impacting the entire dock infrastructure begs for incredulity. Maybe I did not want to think something so trite was used in a benchmark.”

“Afraid of seeming a credulous, then. Ha,” Mon said in the first hint of a smile. “Tell me, when you broke into the era archives two years ago, you did not read the Good Shine dossier?”

“No. Please, that’s been long settled —”

“Oh, I don’t disapprove. There for the taking. If I believe in anything to fight for it is libraries. It only would have helped me explain: it is the case this exercise was based on. Emelry — if anywhere in the world is soap-opera, if anywhere will stretch your tolerance of trust, it will be the places where auditing is necessary. It will be the folly of collapse. You must not expect these grand plans. Conspiracy grows from dissatisfaction and mistakes more than





it does from the drive of deviance. These will be people running in the shadows—embarrassed and defensive. Their own shame will chase them further than you will. The spotlight flicks on, and that sight is more of a risk than being searched. Think over the problem again. But do not give him the credit of his stature, think of him not in the role of side-commission. Imagine him as a fool, a fool beyond belief, who could never have stumbled into that job had it not thrust on him.” He took a sip of tea from his flask. “Path of least resistance.”



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MOONLIGHT CANTATA - In recent years “YA” has become the byword for everything wrong with fiction: sanitized content, cynically recombinatory plots and a complete loss of interest in style; simultaneously childish indulgence and adult condescension. Yet like many forces of the contemporary - the internet, populism, identity politics - much of what it represents now is an ironic inversion of what it initially promised. Even the name now feels like an awkward anachronism from a time when the projected direction of youth culture was a retreat, not an advance of childhood, to the point that its target age group had to be euphemized to be addressed; when the crisis was children and adolescents “growing up too fast”. The capital formations that emerged to exploit this expectation were so cynical and predatory - P. Diddy inviting Justin Bieber to the parties every piece of 2000s music and TV extolled as the epitome of “young adulthood” - that we risk forgetting for at least two generations, “teenage rebellion” was not merely a developmental stage or a marketing scheme but a genuine political demand, threatening above all the reproduction of “normality”. Today the “empire of normality” defines its outside in categories like gender- and neurodivergence, whose connection to youth is recognized most clearly by their enemies, and whose assimilative representations in “YA” (or adult media with

NOTES



YA characteristics) obfuscate both their common histories (trauma) and futures (posthumanity).

The defining characteristics of “Young Adult” as opposed to Children’s literature - or even mass market teen serials like the Hardy Boys - were understood to be an unflinching social realism, an oral immediacy neither talking down to the reader nor expecting them to put their trust and patience in complex literary constructions, and a skepticism towards the institutional world of “old” adults which manifested in tropes such as power fantasy and dystopia. To be sure the radicalism of settings like the Hunger Games was always overstated. Doremi Rodenburg’s Moonlight Cantata, on the other hand, synthesizes the best of the low realist and speculative strands of the tradition, depicting under the worn trope of “oppression for special powers” the precarious community, lateral violence and banal horror of marginalization in a “normal” world. And yet this is not a deflationary, “deconstructive” approach to adolescent fantasy - it is precisely fantasy that struggles for liberation. As the witch Sareth - not necessarily the most sympathetic messenger - recognizes, the aesthetics of “chuunibyō” (a “disease” closely related to our recurring fixation “denpa”, but situated in a longer Gothic/Romantic history by the 90s Japanese occult boom, which informed so much



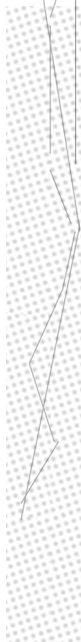
of the East's answer to "YA" in light and visual novels) respond to the Aeon of Horus, and the "Young Adult" is yet another euphemism for the Crowned and Conquering Child. Rodenburg does not sugar-coat the implications of this transformation in itself. The proliferation of radically different mental structures can produce both violent and disturbingly symbiotic asymmetries of power, a psychic ecology haunted by predators; its suppression, on the other hand, can only be genocidal.

Mercenary Planet, Down By The River To Pray and Scarred Zeruel all deal with this apocalyptic "coming of age" of post-human subjectivities. Alongside the transformations of human psychology by youth and internet culture in Swords Under The Phosphor Sky, Psychogramma and It's A Good Thing The Dark Lord Is A Shut-In, one might consider it the central thematic nexus of Holohaus as a whole. Even more so than its forerunner New Animals (which may be coming soon to a bookstore near you!), Moonlight Cantata makes a fitting opening by presenting this premise at face value, with the directness of its form but without the didacticism that has given it a bad name. Even in an Aeon of vivid, animetic extremes - the repressive forces of Human Security themselves no exception - the path of ethical



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and intimate connection wavers between words-
light or shadow.

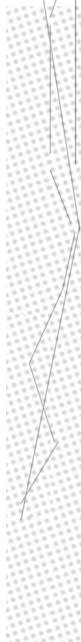




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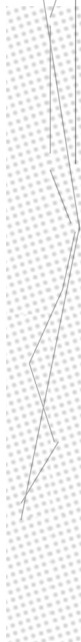




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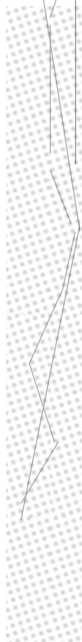
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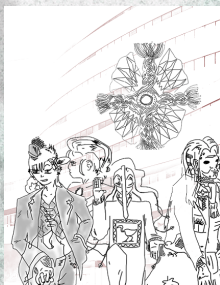
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Serialized fiction for the contemporary era

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>>SOMEONE FAR AWAY
NIGHTS ENGULF THEIR CONTOURS
AURORAS LEFT FROM EXPELS
WINGBEATS THROB IN THE LIGHT
SECONDS IN WHICH WE APPEAR

SEE YOU
NEXT TIME:

HOLOHAUS11 [2025]

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