

An aerial photograph of a military base, possibly a training area, with a white grid overlay. A large, semi-transparent number '7' is centered on the image. At the top, there are two blue banners with white text. The background shows a mix of green and brown terrain, possibly a field or forest. The grid lines are white and form a complex pattern over the terrain.

BE WITH ME

SAVE AMMO

HOLOHAUS-12

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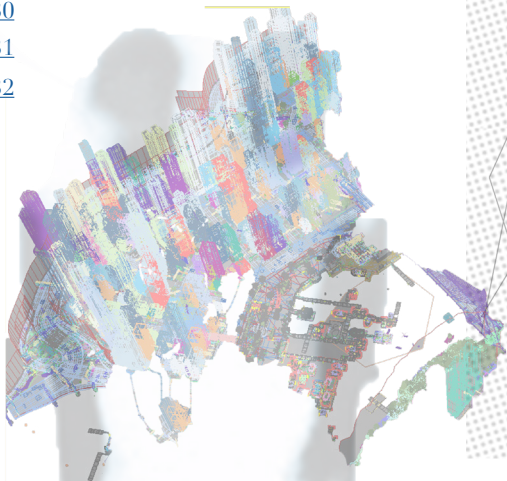
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SPECIAL THANKS

foxes to Renko Chazakiël Rodenburg for
phosphor sky to nekosattva for swords under the
to ghosted vain for the crystal
to Amara Reyes for city
to baroquespiral to tell the vision
to tsumaran_chan for sake and world
to epou for the name
and countless others including the one
who sees this





by: Renko Chazakiël Rodenburg

Birthday: October 11, 1996

Sex: Female

Occupation: Gangster, ninja, bike mechanic

Blood Type: B-Positive

Hair Colour: Blonde, painted black

Eye Colour: Blue

Likes: Bikes, leather jackets, foxes, the fifties, sixties, the nineties, the early two thousands, Gurren Lagann, FLCL, Space Dandy, Kino's Journey, Marxist-Leninist-Nozomi-ism

Dislikes: Trotskyists, Bordigists, Madanists, Hoxaists, Ho Chi Minh-ists, Schachtmanists, Zoroastrians, Manichaeists, Cathars, the seventies, the eighties

“Hello! My name is Alice de Vries, but since there already is an Alice de Vries at my local lumpenproletarian organizing group I usually go by Nozomi, named after the protagonist of my own doujin manga. She's very dear to me, and key to my visualization of magic. I run a bike repair shop and the largest Nozem gang in Amsterdam. Oh, the Nozems. They idolize the aesthetic of the United States from the nineteen fifties, and have (just like real Americans) a strong criminal



predisposition. I'm not a very good Nozem but I like their jackets and bikes and I'm far too strong for anyone to tell me I can't be the gang leader. I'm pretty confident I'm the second strongest schizophrenic in the Netherlands, and the strongest if you don't count Marieken. Seriously, what is up with that? Her Paraphysical Aptitude score is somewhere in the ninetysomething range, right? Crazy. Where was I? Right. Aside from repairing bikes and running a criminal gang I help organize a communist group that advocates for the class interests of criminals. Like my younger brother I have a very japanophilic sort of schizophrenia, and like ninja swords, kitsune (Japanese fox-spirits) and anime. Yep. That's me!





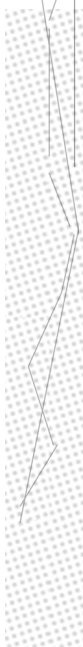
Synopsis

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

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Last time

■ Marieken's powers take on dangerous and demonic dimensions, while the Ministry of Mysterious Business puts together a response team





Marieken Mithras

CW: religion (pagan, Gnostic, Thelemic), killing, blood weapons, necromancy, near death, swearing, body control, pedophilia allusion, genocide allusion, nuclear weapons allusion

During the day, I hide. At night, I float over the city. There is so much I have to think about. The last vestiges of my life, even what few things I had gained not long after finding myself Moontouched, have fallen away. I am no longer strictly 'Moontouched,' either. I am somehow dead and yet still going. I float over the city and I think about what I actually want. A normal life? To live with Kate, and be subjected to the horrible mistreatment the Periphery Demographics in this country face? I can move, maybe. To another country. There's nothing to stop me. At night I am so fast my movement might as well be instantaneous.

I have found myself to be like a god. Not in a grandiose way, but in the way where if I were to do some-

CHAPTER 05

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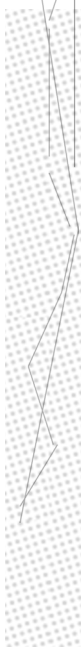


thing, there would be very little anyone could do to stop me. Through sheer happenstance and random chance I found myself with the second highest parapsychical aptitude score ever measured, and that was before accidentally peering beyond the constraints of the world and finding myself a shadow on the wall. Ruby-Lynn had not understood it. Robin had not understood it. Sareth, who lived within me now, did not understand it. She still struggled- struggles- for control. Wants to go back to a life with her high school flunkies, her doll. Wants to take over the world.

Maybe I could do that. Take over the world. I wonder what it would look like, to actually do that. Teleporting into the white house maybe, and killing the president of the United States? But what would that bring me? It'd just devolve into a slaughter, where I lose myself in manic psychosis and until I've destroyed everything around me again.

Here, floating over the city as nothing but a shadow on the clouds, I feel at peace. Calm. Here I can think.

Mistress, the sword hidden in my shadow says. **If it is power you want, we should hunt down some**





demons! Devour their souls and add them to our own.

I've decided not to pay too much heed to the words of an ancient soul-devouring samurai sword. That seems like a fast track to destruction.

Inside my mind, the soul of Sareth stirs. I've decided not to talk to her much either. She keeps trying to steal my body for herself.

Down below, life goes on. Police cars race down the A-10 towards the south of the city. A fire burns near the park in the eastern ward, not too far from where I used to live. Where my parents still live, the parents I still somewhat blame for my current predicament. Well, they're not really my parents, I realize. DNA tests and all that have disproven that, I think? Moontouched are not the biological children of the people who end up raising them. I wonder who my real parents are.

You are a daughter of Tsukuyomi, mistress, the cursed sword chimes in.

“Yeah, I don't know who that is.”

It is what the priest who forged me called the god





of the moon.

“Like, in Japan?”

Yes, mistress!

“I’m not religious.”

You don’t have to believe in Tsukuyomi specifically to believe yourself to be divine progeny. The moon is real.

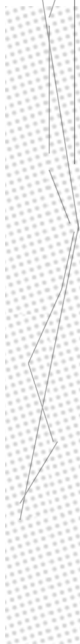
“Yeah, but the moon isn’t magic. W- Hey. Why are we called ‘Moontouched’ actually? I never understood that. Every time I tried to look it up online or in a book or even ask someone all I’ve gotten back was vaguely mystical gibberish.”

The moon isn’t magic? Mistress, the moon is the reason you all are in the predicament you are in to begin with.

“What do you mean?”

The current age started when mankind managed to leave the bounds of planet Earth and landed on the moon.

“Yeah,” I absent-mindedly reply. “But that has





nothing to do with the moon specifically. It's belief that shapes the world, right, the laws of physics? I learned that in school. Belief had calcified into an orderly set of rules, but when the moon landing happened for a brief moment everyone on Earth simultaneously believed 'everything was possible,' which shattered the status quo."

Forgive me mistress, but you are ignorant to the workings of the ages and the divine mechanisms that make puppets out of men.

"You don't have to insult me," I chide the sword. "If you know so well, why don't you teach me?"

I cannot teach you. But if you wish for wisdom, there are ways to attain it.

"Ruby-Lynn didn't manage to teach me anything profound. Neither did any of the books she made me read. Sure, I'm a little better at magic now, but I have seen truths that they could not understand. This world is a shadow on the wall, a fake. A reflection of something illuminated from behind. I know that is true because I have seen it."

I don't know about these things. I am a sword. But



I was forged in aeons past to be wielded by a daughter of Tsukuyomi, at the dawning of the turning of the wheel.

“Explain these things. You say things I don’t understand. The turning of the wheel?”

I am not good at explaining mistress. But if you want wisdom-

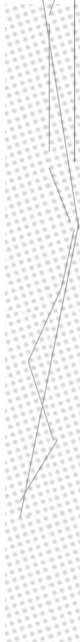
“Yes yes, you’ve told me. There are ways to attain it. Tell me, then. How do I become wise?”

The great Siddharta Guatama became enlightened after becoming disillusioned with the teachings of many masters, and returned to his childhood home to meditate under the Mahabodhi Tree. There he saw the truth of all things and became wise.

“So what do I do, I go sit under a tree? You aren’t helpful at all.”

I’m sorry mistress. What I mean to say is that maybe you cannot be helped by a teacher, and need to attain these things by yourself. You attained this shadow-truth by yourself, did you not?

“That was on the verge of death. I was dying.”





Many great sages have found enlightenment in battle. You could seek out worthy foes, and test yourself against them until you are once again forced to evolve.

“You just want me to go hunt down demons because you’re a cursed sword overcome with bloodlust.”

The sword didn’t reply.

“So,” I say, after thinking about some of the things the blade had said for a while. “Moontouched aren’t human. They’re changelings, children swapped out at birth. You say I’m a child of the moon. How is that possible?”

There are many stories in many religions of the sun and moon begetting children. There was an emperor of Rome said to be the offspring of the sun.

“That’s just more stories that don’t help me. And I’ve never heard of ‘suntouched’ people, for that matter.”

I wish I could tell you more.

“Hey,” I say. “I know someone who researched Moontouched, for the government. Maybe I’ll pay him a visit in the morning.”





Yes! Seek out this great sage of the moon, mistress!

I sigh, and I look for the science campus in the east of the city. I collect myself- literally- and step out of the shadow of one of the campus buildings. It's cold out, I realize, and I dispel my dress and then manifest warmer clothes. The katana clatters on the ground behind me, following me through some means of its own. I pick it up and attach the scabbard to my waist with a stylish belt.

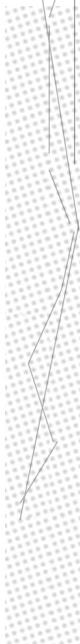
“Marieken?” I hear someone stammer behind me.

“Huh?” I say as I turn around. It's Noor, Sareth's doll. “You are out and about early in the morning. It's what, five in the morning?”

She stumbles back. “Please don't hurt me. I heard from Maria and Theresa. I swear I bear you no ill will. I'm sorry for everything that has happened, I really am just please don't hurt me.”

“That thing with Maria and Theresa wasn't me,” I say, not really feeling like explaining myself.

“Ah, euh, okay,” Noor stutters.





“You’re a horrible person,” I say.

“I’m sorry,” she whines. “What are you doing here?”

“Huh? Oh, I want to talk to doctor West in the morning. I thought I’d go wait for him in his office, catch him right at the break of dawn.”

“Ah. I, yeah, I see. Aha. Do- do you want to smoke some weed? I come out here often to smoke. We smoked- remember, we- we smoked together here, after we both got tested?”

“I couldn’t care less,” I say, making a ‘go away’ gesture with my hand. She doesn’t hesitate, and sprints away. Pathetic little porcelain creature.

“Hey, sword,” I command the blade on my belt. “Do you have a name?”

No, mistress. If ever I had one, nobody has told me.

“It’s a hassle just calling you ‘sword’ or ‘blade.’ Come up with a name.”

Call me Murugan.

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“Remind me to google what that means later. Murugan, do you know about dolls? The people that turn into literal puppets?”

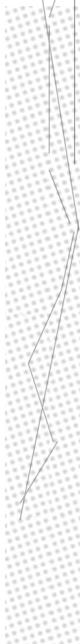
No mistress.

“You’re a useless sword, Murugan.”

That is not true, mistress. In the hands of a proper daughter of Tsukuyomi I am without peer as a weapon. If you wish to know things, you should use your ‘google’ artefact- the glass rectangle, yes? to look them up.

I snicker. “You’re right. I’ll use my cellphone to look things up and you for battle. Now, let’s go and wait for doctor West.”

My body dissolves, and my consciousness skirts from shadow to shadow, creeping along the buildings until I find a way into the office where doctor West first administered my paraphysical aptitude test. There, I reconstitute myself and wait on his office chair, my feet on his desk.





It is not doctor West who comes walking in through the door several hours later. Instead, it is a dishevelled man, slightly too fat for his Star Wars t-shirt. He's balding, and carries himself oddly.

“Marieken, euh, thingy?” He asks. I wonder how he knows who I am.

“Yeah?”

“Ah, good. Tell me: if you had to be in a Hogwarts House, which would you want to be in?”

What a bizarre question to spring on someone. I think.

“I'm looking for doctor West,” I reply.

“That's not what I asked. I asked you what Hogwarts House you would want to be in, if you went to Hogwarts.”

I think for a bit. “I would've said Hufflepuff in the past. But given the events of the last month, I'm afraid I'd have to go to Slytherin instead.”

“Ugh,” the man says, as if I gave entirely the





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wrong answer. “Okay. If you were in Star Trek, do you think you’d be a Vulcan or a Romulan?”

“What? I don’t watch Star Trek. I don’t know that. What a bizarre question. Who are you?”

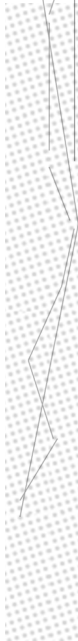
“Come on,” the man says. “Star Trek. It’s one of the most popular science fiction franchises on the planet. You know what vulcans are.”

“Like, doctor Spock?” I answer, confused about what is happening.

“DOCTOR SPOCK?” The man laughs. “Of course a woman who would want to be in Hufflepuff would think he’s called DOCTOR Spock.”

“What are you- what?” I ask again, but the man doesn’t answer me. Instead he spits on the ground, and then

my heart
stops
beating.





I clutch my chest as I fall off my chair, and feel a rapid wave of decay surging out from my heart, consuming me. A wave of pure death washes out from my heart and over every individual cell of my body, triggering cell death. I am going to die, I realize. Fuck. I'm already dead. Again.

Time slows, and I realize I can handle this. My body isn't me. It's sort of me- it's messily entangled with me- and if whatever had just happened had hit every cell in my body at once, cleanly without giving me a chance to respond, then I might've actually bitten the dust. It's still going to be tricky when the wave of death reaches my brain. But I can handle this. I try to dispel the shadow-matter making up my body, and find that where it has already died, it doesn't take. The dead matter isn't part of 'me' anymore. Instead I dispel healthy cells right ahead of the 'wave of death,' and regenerate them right after it. It passes through a void, an absence of me. It goes through my head, and I let go of my brain's neurons- currently containing my consciousness- and manifest new ones right after.

It is unbelievable my sense of 'self' is this clear, I realize. To be aware of every cell in your body, to be able



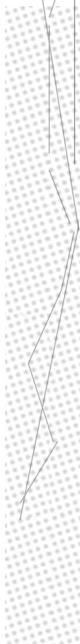
to 'look' on yourself in as much detail as you want- and almost I get lost pondering the magnificence of the human biology, of the intricacies of the organic machinery in my cells. Then I realize I am in danger.

"Fuck," I spit. My heart still isn't beating, but my body works hard to replace death tissue with new. The body can work wonders when not constrained by such petty limits as material resources, thermodynamics, or energy. It's a gigantic drain on my magic, though- my cells rip through shadow-stuff to weave new Marieken-stuff like Hello Kitty and her friends go through cookies.

"Fuck you," I scream, scrambling to my feet. My assailant stares at me dumbfounded.

Mistress, we are in danger!

"I figured," I say. It'll take a minute longer before my body has been fully restored and I can shadow-step away without risking accidentally leaving a leg behind, or leaving a gaping hole where my heart used to be. At night I wouldn't have been concerned. But it is morning now, and with the sun on the horizon I would risk burnout if I tried to shadow-step and regenerate my body at once.





I draw Hiro's sword- my sword, I realize. I draw Murugan, and point it at my mysterious assailant.

"Who are you? What the fuck did you do to me?"

"I euh," he stammers, and he stumbles back out the door. I walk after him. My body is almost done removing my dead heart tissue. Thirty seconds before I come back to life. I become light-headed, and weak. My heart isn't beating. My heart still isn't beating! Of course I'd be in serious trouble if I tried to walk around and swing a sword like that!

"What- euh, what- in the Star Wars Legends lore," he stammers, "Emperor Palpatine was secretly preparing for an extragalactic-"

It clicks in my head what is happening. Well, not exactly, but probably close enough. This man has a 'hack,' an instant-win ability. I kick him in the stomach as hard as I can. Dark spots form in my vision. No oxygen for my brain. I let go of my blood, and try to manifest new blood, blood with oxygen. It barely helps. I need my heart.

"Uuuuafugh," I yammer as I fall over, on top of my foe. I should've stabbed him straight away, I realize.

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Not just kicked him.

“What the fuck?” Someone else down the hall says, a childish voice. “Why is she still alive?”

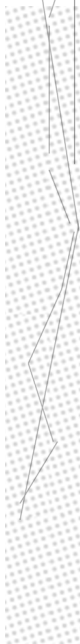
“I DON’T KNOW,” the man scrambling to get out from under my now almost catatonic body screams. “SHE DIED AND THEN SHE JUST GOT BACK UP.”

Badum, badum, badum, my heart comes back to life and a rush of energy surges through my body. I crawl back up, lift my sword and swing at my mysterious foe. He dodges- not gracefully, but by stumbling out of the way as fast as he can in a panicked, jittery manner. Before I can rush him and cut him down, a metal chain suddenly sprouts from my arm, and attaches itself to the wall.

“Wh- whuh?” I yammer, as I awkwardly spin around. A moontouched child- she couldn’t have been much older than thirteen or so- stands further down the corridor, laughing maniacally.

I bring Murugan down , and as the chain shatters a horrible pain shoots through my head.

Hey! Murugan yells. I’m not made to cut through





steel, mistress!

“Sorry,” I mutter.

“I wouldn’t do that, if I were you,” the young moontouched girl says. She’s dressed in a ridiculous get-up, like a cheap cosplay of an anime character. It is a cheap cosplay of an anime character, I realize. “My chains attach to your very soul.”

“What is going on?” I ask. “Why are you attacking me?”

Don’t talk, mistress. Kill them or retreat. We are still in danger.

“Ugh,” I spit as I try to shadow-step behind my first attacker, who seems the most dangerous. That, and I don’t think I want to kill a child. My teleport fails as a second chain emerges from my leg, and attaches itself to the wall. I am yanked painfully to the ground. “Fuck!”

“Get her again!” the girl yells.

“Euh, yes,” the balding man stammers. “The pilot episode of Star Trek, the original series, features aliens that kidnap the ship captain. Why did t- No, no,





too complex, what's the episode called?"

"Fuck off," I growl, struggling against the chain tying me to the wall. The girl told me it's dangerous to cut it, and Murugan didn't like it either. How to get free, then?

"Star Trek was a revolutionary show with an immeasurable impact on later pop culture," the balding man angrily yells. "You really don't know what the first episode was called?"

"I don't give a shit," I scream while contemplating cutting my own leg off to get free from the chain. But allegedly it attaches to my soul, so would that—
Death.

My heart stops again, cell death radiating outwards. I scream in terror as I grapple for the manifestations required to dodge actually dying. To my surprise, the chain attached to my leg vanishes. It almost surprises me so much I lose sight of my spell, but I manage regardless. I was quicker this time, and the damage to my heart and the surrounding tissue is limited. Still, it has stopped beating again. It'll be seconds, maybe even tens of sec-





onds, before I am up and running again. I have to act now, I have to act now, I have to act now I scream at myself. Kill, kill, retreat? Kill? Retreat? I shadow-step away and make it almost all the way down the hallway, round the corner and down the stairs before two chains burst from my shadow and I am forcibly reverted back into physical shape.

“Help me,” I scream, but there’s no one to hear me. “Murugan, what do I do!?”

I don’t know, mistress. Do what you did the last time to escape the chains, then kill them before they can affect you with their magic again.

“I escaped because my temporary death at the hands of the balding one seemed to dispel the chain, but I can’t indefinitely survive that.”

Oh. Use me to cut off your legs to free yourself.

“That- the last time I cut myself on you I lost my mind and senselessly killed two dozen people. I don’t want to lose more of myself to the nightmare world, either.”



There must be a trick to the chains. They are spiritual manifestations, and such attacks are as a rule all trickery and deceit.

“The other man asks me questions, and if I fail them, my heart stops. Are you saying there’s something similar happening with the chains?”

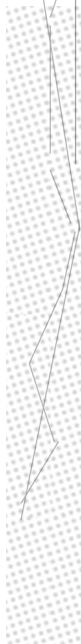
Most likely.

I rack my brain to think what it could possibly be. Running away? I wasn’t running away when she first hit me. As I struggle to make sense of possible weaknesses in the spell, my assailants catch up to me. One of the chains vanishes, and I look at the other one in confusion. Did I just break the prerequisite for one of them? Did my attacker dispel it herself? I’ve gotten no new information.

“Why are you doing this,” I scream standing up and facing my opponents with my sword in hands.

“It’s nothing personal,” the girl says. The man just looks at me. “C’mon, hit her,” she chides him.

“I don’t, I- she just keeps tanking my attack. That has never happened before.”





“You heard it in our briefing, she has the second largest amount of magic ever measured. She’s clearly affected when you hit her. Get her again, and I’ll just stab her while she’s crawling on the ground again.”

“O- okay,” he says, and I brace myself for another question. It doesn’t come. My heart just stops.

“This is bullshit,” I grunt, falling to the ground and feeling my store of magic run dangerously low. Again, I get to work on surviving the death-magic, and again the chains disappear. The girl runs up to me as I keel over, coughing up blood, and stabs me in the abdomen. I look at her and remanifest the injured portion of my body. She looks me in the eyes, visibly surprised, and stabs me again, and again, and again, and again. It hurts, but it’s trivial to restore these injuries, even running low on magic.

“Knives really do not bother me anymore,” I say, coughing, and do my best to swing Murugan at her. Without my heart, I can’t muster the strength to do more than flail and jerk around a bit.

“What the fuck,” the balding man says. “She’s immortal. She’s goddamn immortal.”





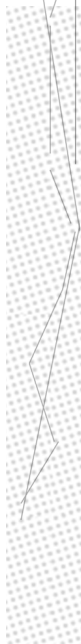
“Your attacks are clearly working,” the girl says, annoyed, as she stabs me again. “She has some kind of spell to rapidly heal injuries. She’ll run out of magic eventually, just hit her again.”

“I CAN’T,” he screams. “I can’t, I can’t, I need a breather.”

“You’re fucking in for it now,” I groan as my heart starts beating again and I crawl back up on my feet. My head is spinning, and sunlight falling in through the windows is starting to badly burn me, my contours blurring. If I don’t disincorporate and explode due to burnout, then the next instant-death attack will certainly kill me. For a moment I wonder about taking on my shadow-form, but worry it’ll be too taxing on my depleted stores of energy.

I level my sword at the girl. “I don’t want to kill a child,” I growl. “But I will, if you two don’t fuck off and leave me alone, right now.”

“It’s you three,” a third voice sounds behind me. A man in a tweed jacket flanked by two moontouched girls with swords walks into the building and heads straight to the stairwell. “Sorry for being late, I had to go





fetch backup.”

“Christ,” the girl swears. “You are supposed to stay on the backline to bring her back when she finally kicks the fucking bucket.”

“You two do seem like you need help, though. Veronica, Esther, kill!” he barks at the girls flanking him as if they were dogs. They rush me, and I can barely parry the first swing of a sword with Murugan, while the second swing from the second girl cuts into my back. I scream in pain.

Mistress! You need to use me. Cut off your leg. I'll feed you power. You're going to die if you don't.

“God, fucking, damn it,” I yell as I turn Murugan upside down and pull him straight through my thigh to cut off my right leg. I feel a part of my soul fall into the nightmare realm, but in return a vast store of energy- stolen from past victims of Murugan- flows into me. The world becomes a blur, and I scream. I scream, not in agony but a furious howl, giving in to the endless bloodlust of the Nightmare Demon inside me. The Nightmare Demon I might have been all along.





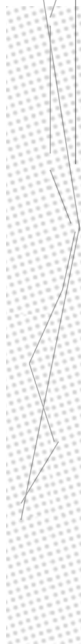
The two moontouched girls attack me, but I effortlessly parry. Murugan knows how to fight, and hundreds of years of experience borrowed from the nightmare realm are now flowing through my veins. I cut into them, but they refuse to even react. Their flesh is stiff, and I realize they're dead. Dead puppets, probably reanimated by magic.

I get angry. Angrier than I have ever been before. These are my sisters. Who gave these creeps the right to turn them into soulless dolls?

“Fuck,” I hear the girl behind me as I effortlessly parry and counter my two attackers at once. In only seconds, I've disarmed them—literally. I rush for the newcomer, who I suspect is the necromancer.

Yes! Murugan says as I stab him through the abdomen. I feel energy siphon out through the wound and into Murugan and then into me, at least partially restoring my stock of magic. **We got one!**

“Jeremy moment,” my new opponent mutters in confusion and then he drops dead. I spin around, and make a mad dash for the balding man. It is a feint, and I split my twin shadows into six tentacles with eyes,





mouths, claws and teeth to attack the girl instead. To my surprise, chains sprout from my shadow tentacles, locking them in place. How can you pin someone's shadow in place, I wonder? Probably the same way my shadow can eat people, I wonder. My anger and rage slowly turns into a detached flow state. I need to kill. I need to do these two the way I did Hiro, rip them into pieces and devour their flesh. I stand there, with six tentacles cast on the ground, with six chains attaching them to the ceiling, to the stairs, to the windows.

“Fight fair,” I growl. “Face me!”

“We need to run,” the girl says. “If Jeremy is dead we can't achieve our objectives anymore. No reason to risk her getting the better of us.”

“Y- yeah,” the balding man stammers, and they both rush up the stairs as fast as they can.

“Aaaauurgh,” I scream in frustration at my inability to get free from my predicament.

Can you let go of your shadow?

“I am my shadow,” I answer. “It's the body that's





extraneous.”

Can you split them temporarily?

Split them? I wonder if I can. Be my shadow, and my body. I take a breath, and I take a step, trying to imagine my body as a drone I am letting go, a remote controlled puppet I am releasing to move around. For a moment it works, as my body comes free from my shadow. Then it slips from my grasp, stumbles forward for a moment, and sprouts two new shadows. It turns around, and looks me in the eye. Wait, I still have- oh god.

“Oh god,” the other Marieken says as we realize what we’ve done at the same time.

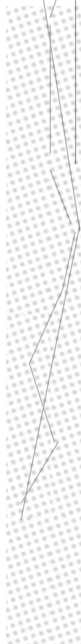
“You- I- You, we? Didn’t let go of our body, we made a copy,” we both say at the same time.

“Oh god, which- wait, huh?” we mutter at once.

“You first,” we both say at once.

“I’ll go first,” we both say at once.

“Marieken with the sword goes first,” we both say at once.





“Which one of us is the copy?” I ask.

“I think you are? I detached from our shadow, and then you manifested a new body behind me.”

“But I am the shadow,” I say. “The body is just a manifestation,” we say at the same time.

“But I have a shadow too?” The other says. “From my perspective, I stepped away and sprouted a new shadow.”

“From my perspective- this is really confusing,” I reply. We both laugh.

“Are we... both the original?” We ask at the same time.

“Two Mariekens,” I mutter. “We both know our body isn’t real. We are a shadow on the wall- two shadows- I have an idea.”

“I know,” the second Marieken says, as she reaches out for me. I’m hesitant, because I am not sure what will come next. Part of me mentally braces for oblivion, and I touch her fingertips.





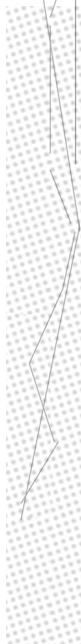
I am ‘dispelled,’ de-manifested. In the process, I see what I saw when Hiro killed me clearer than ever. I am not a ‘self.’ I am not even meaningfully ‘real’ in the way I thought I was before I died the first time. We are both manifestations of the same Marieken ‘concept,’ the real thing, the thing illuminated from behind, the thing that casts the shadow we interpret as the self. We mix together like paint, and I am one Marieken again, with a confusing set of double memories.

“Oh my god,” I say. “I can have multiple bodies at once.”

Mistress, that was remarkable.

“You have no idea,” I mutter. Then I bolt up the stairs, desperate to catch up to my two attackers. Partially running, partially shadow-stepping, I zip across the hallways of the university. It’s eerily empty. Outside I hear sirens. How did they even know I was here?

Noor, I realize. Noor has casually stabbed me in the back once again. Then I catch up to my attackers, who have run all the way to the other side of the compound, intending to take the stairs down on the far end and then sneak out.





“Shit,” the girl says as she spins around to face me, and chains sprout from my arms to restrain me. I manifest another Marieken, and before the chains yank me back and immobilize me, I throw Murugan at her. She- I? She catches him, and swings at the girl. Before she can bring the sword down on her, though, the balding man dives at her with a tackle and I can see her stagger and flinch as the chains on my arms disappear- he has hit her with the instant-death ability. She is me, though, and should be able to regenerate from- To my horror I realize I have only half my store of magic. The same must go for her. The magic does not duplicate along with us. Of course.

“Marieken,” I yell, and with her last strength she tosses Murugan back at me. I rush forward, and stab at the balding man. I hit him in the leg, and I feel Murugan bite into his soul, restoring some of my power. I reach for the other me, and we conjoin again, mixing into one.

Almost instantly, the death spell hits me again. Before it can incapacitate me, I swing my sword down on the man, and this time I almost cleave him in half. Murugan devours his soul, and I expend the extra energy on recovering from the death effect. I am getting faster and



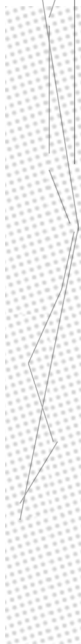
faster at it, and this time it is barely ten seconds before my heart is beating again. My other opponent is already gone again though, and outside I hear helicopters and sirens.

That's good, Murugan says. Our strongest opponent is dead. We can feed on the souls of the lesser men that arrange themselves against us to restore our power, then flee.

“Yeah,” I growl. I wonder what has become of me. The Marieken I was a few months ago seems like a distant dream, a mirage. She was never real, I realize. What I am now is closer to the ‘real’ me than she ever was.

I rush outside, the sun still hurting me from my near-burnout state. The university campus has been completely surrounded by soldiers, cops, and men in black from the Ministry of Mysterious Business.

“Marieken Mithras,” a man with a megaphone yells. “We have you surrounded. We will shoot to kill with antimagic ammunition. You can't escape. Turn yourself in and accept to be put on paraphysical blockers, or we will kill you.”





They are ants, Murugan says. A chill goes down my spine, because I believe him. There are plenty of shadows on the university grounds, and I effortlessly shadow-step behind the police lines and drive my sword into the back of the man with the megaphone. Energy flows into me, and I split into two. In the confusion, it takes the police several seconds to open fire, and when they do there are two of me, running through their own ranks. All they hit is each other as several people start screaming ‘hold your fire,’ and half the cops and soldiers attempt to flee. The other Marieken and I weave through the crowd with staccato movement, staggered teleports mixed with running. Underneath the first helicopter we rejoin, and as it opens fire on us we merge with its shadow. I abandon my physical shape, store Murugan in my shadow, and turn into a mass of tentacles, mouths and eyes. I wrap around the helicopter, which immediately malfunctions as I crush it and devour it. Matter is matter, I realize. I can break down all matter. It doesn’t have to be flesh. There is flesh mixed in with the steel though, and for a moment I am confused before I remember helicopters have crew. I laugh maniacally, as I turn back into a girl and swing Murugan around blindly, wounding several cops and killing at least two. My stores of energy replenish at staggering speed, and I get high on killing again.



All hell has broken out, and the military and police forces are now in full retreat. They barely bother shooting at me anymore. I can't believe that after almost dying five times in rapid succession against the other magicians, these people can't even scratch me.

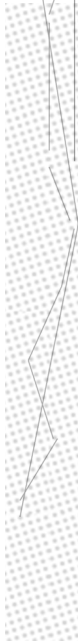
I really am a god, I think, manic thoughts speeding up and my thoughts slowly drowning in bloodlust. By the time my conscious thoughts take on a coherent form again, there are dozens of dead soldiers, cops and men in black scattered throughout the university courtyard. Everyone else has fled. The city air raid siren is going off, and in the distance- far out of my reach- two military helicopters make a wide circle around me, no doubt observing me.

"Jesus," I mutter. "I don't feel a thing."

Don't be ashamed, mistress, Murugan chimes in.

"Yeah, you would say that," I spit back.

What now, I wonder. I have achieved nothing. If anything, my life is all the more worse off than it was six hours ago. My quest to get Doctor West to explain anything, anything at all to me ended in the wholesale mas-





sacre of government agents. If I really am a Nightmare Demon now, then maybe I should try to live like one? Set up a demesne in some forgotten corner of the city and prey on random people, maybe fight over territory with other demons? The idea is ridiculous. I want to go to school and have fun with friends who aren't scared of me, and I would like to do so without repeated attempts on my life. Now that I think about it, Sareth, Hiro, whoever the three goons from just now were- I haven't actually done anything. I mean, I've absolutely done things wrong at this point, but I didn't start them. If people would stop trying to murder me for a bit, maybe things would calm down and improve?

My ruminations are cut short by the sound of motorbikes pulling onto the campus grounds. It's Hiro's sister, accompanied by a whole group of leather-jacket wearing boys in old-timey American fashion. I sigh, and take an educated guess at what's coming next.

"Aha," Nozomi de Vries says as she parks her bike, and takes a samurai sword from one of her gang members. "I thought that was Hiro's sword when I watched the livestream."

Someone was livestreaming my fight? If that's



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120W
0N12
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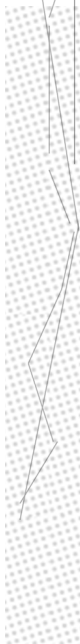
the case then literally everyone thinks I'm a monster now. Kate, Ruby, my dad- god fucking damnit.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?” The girl wearing fake fox ears asks me.

“I am really tired. I want to go home.”

“Why did you kill my brother?”

I take a deep breath. “I found out I was Moon-touched a few weeks ago. Only days later I get tested for Paraphysical Aptitude, and find out I'm the second strongest person ever measured. The government puts me on pills. My parents disown me. I get sent to a group home. Not long after, a bitch from my school tries to murder me. She'd been killing Periphery Demographics left and right, you see. On the brink of death, I realize how to turn her spell around, and she drops dead instead of me. Hiro walks in, and assumes I'm the serial killer. I try to explain, but both the close brush with death and the rush of magic coursing through me have addled my mind. We fight. He wins, and I die. The second time I died in quick succession. Lying in a pool of my own blood I see what I can only describe as a vision, and the vision taught me things about the world I struggle to put in words, and when I





try nobody believes me. The result, however, is that I am borderline unkillable and can manifest stuff at will. The second round with your brother, with me now awakened to tremendous magic, is over in seconds. I win, and I try to return to my life. I try to get help in both mastering my magic and understanding what was actually going on from Ruby-Lynn and Robin, but struggle with blacking out and psychotic episodes. Instead of helping me, I am kicked out and left to fend for myself. I mentally break. I freak out. Then police raids my house and claims I have been overcome with Nightmare Corruption. I use Hiro's sword against them-"

"Marieken," Nozomi interrupts me.

"I use Hiro's sword against them, but it's cursed and-"

"Marieken, I get it," she interrupts me again.

"You can stop. I get it."

"I- what? What do you mean?"

"The only thing I wonder about now is what on earth compelled you to destroy an entire police regiment and eat a military chopper on live TV."



“I- god fucking damn it,” I swear, getting frustrated. “I was here to ask for help from a scientist, and got ambushed by a group of three freaks out to kill me. People just keep trying to kill me.”

“I see,” she says.

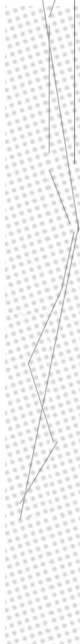
I split my twin shadows into tentacles, and I reach deep into my mind to draw on as much magic as I can. My aura flares to life, roaring like a thunderstorm.

“I see, and I understand, but do you understand why I am going to have to kill you, right?”

Again. Again. Again. Is this my life now? A non-stop flood of weirdos with magic powers attempting to end my life? Though, as I think about it, shouldn't they run out of people with parapsychical aptitude scores high enough to bother me at some point?

“No, I don't understand that,” I scream. “I don't want this. Can everyone just leave me alone? If people don't bother me, I won't bother them. I swear.”

“Marieken, nobody would believe that even if it was true. What if you keep growing more powerful?”





You're already upsetting the balance of the world simply by being in it. I can't sleep soundly at night knowing that an emotionally unstable girl capable of being anywhere, at any time, can kill me with a thought. The world governments won't tolerate it either. If I don't kill you, who knows what drastic measures other groups, other nations, will eventually steep to? Should I sit around until the Americans unleash weaponized Nightmare Demons on the city like they did in Vietnam? Should I flee this city before the Soviets fire a nuclear missile at it to stop you from going berserk and threatening everyone on the planet at once? It is better if you die here and now. I don't want to live in a world where I turn on the news and see that you've killed two hundred people after some moron tried to gank you."

"That is ridiculous," I scream. My voice cracks, I can't help it. There are tears welling up in my eyes. "I didn't ask for this!"

"That's life. You don't ask to be born, you suffer, and then you die."

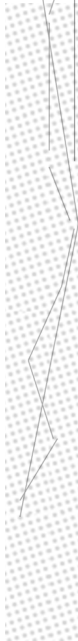
"Why- what- why don't you put your money where your mouth is and kill yourself then? What a hypocritical way of arguing. I'm so tired of you people point-



ing at how terrible the world is as an argument to do nothing, or worse, as an argument to kill me!” The high I felt from earlier is subsiding, and my thoughts become crisp and clear, almost painfully so. A thought bubbles up. “You know what. Maybe I’ll go and do something about it. What will it take to buy my freedom, or the freedom of all Periphery Demographics, do you think? Taking the king hostage? The American president, maybe? That Soviet Mastercomputer thing that is ruling the Russians?”

“This is what I mean,” Nozomi sighs. “As long as the vaguest inkling exists that you might do something like this one day, they’ll never stop coming. You will suffer. The people around you will suffer. All Periphery Demographics will suffer because from today onwards, they’ll tighten the screws ever further to prevent another ‘Marieken Event’ from occurring.”

“A Marieken Event?” I spit at her in disbelief. “This,” I gesture wildly, “all this is happening because I cannot go for two days without someone trying to kill me or steal my soul. This is happening because the government created this nonsensical hatred of periphery demographics in the first place because they want magic to go away. Otherwise my parents wouldn’t have disowned





me, I would have a normal and stable life and then there wouldn't be any problem to begin with!"

"Marieken," Nozomi says. "Do you understand what the world would look like without the suppression of magic? If everyone had a random grab-bag of mystical powers and the most mentally ill would also be the ones who could impose their vision of what the laws of physics ought to be the most? We would return to a mythical past where sorcerer-kings fold reality into a pretzel while vying for godhood. Billions would die, literally."

A thought stops me dead in my tracks. That is it, isn't it? What they're trying to prevent, have been desperately trying to prevent since that thing with the moon landing is the mass-empowering of mankind with magic. A revolution of a scale previously-

The Aeon of Horus, a voice in my head chimes in. For a second I mistake it for Murugan, but it is actually the lexicon that Miss Juliet left in my brain through hypnosis, to help me fight the Nightmare Demons. "Yeah?" I ask out loud. The lexicon doesn't answer.

"Yes," Nozomi answers, thinking I'm talking to her. "Yes, Marieken. Imagine every-"





“No,” I say. “That’s not what I mean, I was talking to someone else.”

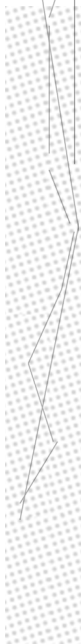
“What?”

“The Aeon of Horus,” I say. “That’s what that’s called. An Aeon is a time period I think? A bit like a century?”

“What are you talking about?”

Yes, mistress! **The turning of the wheel, Murugan chimes in. Ages make way for ages, as generations make way for generations.**

“The turning of the wheel,” I mutter. “The coming age.” Just thinking about these concepts, abstract and half-formed in my mind, sends the magic inside of me into a wild frenzy. Shadow is brought to a boil, and I am overcome with a manic excitement. “I think you’re being woefully pessimistic, Nozomi. It isn’t nightmare corruption that’s driving the buildup of magic. It’s wonder, isn’t it? The second world war didn’t cause the reality seizure, the moonlanding caused it. It’s believing that anything is possible that fuels magic. In this society, that is almost exclusively the domain of the mentally ill. Can you be-





lieve that? They've- they, these normal people, with their consensus reality, they've built a world where believing that 'anything is possible' is the purview of the clinically insane."

"This conversation is going nowhere," Nozomi says, and she pulls out her sword. It looks dull in the morning sunlight. It's just metal, I realize. It isn't like Murugan.

"This conversation has done more to straighten out my mind than any other conversation I've had in the past few months," I reply.

Are you going to fight, mistress?

"Yeah."

If she won't listen to you, then convince her you are right in battle. There is no need to kill this one. She is a samurai, like you. Make her yield, make her swear her blade to you.

"I don't think that is how it works, Murugan. I killed her brother, after all."

"You're talking to yourself again, Marieken."





“Sorry,” I mutter. “Let’s fight. But if I win, you swear your blade to me. You’ll follow me wherever, okay?”

“What?” Nozomi says. She seems insulted. “You’re deranged, Marieken. This isn’t an anime.”

I laugh. I heartily laugh, and point at her headband. “You don’t believe that yourself, catgirl.”

“Fox,” she corrects me. “Foxgirl.”

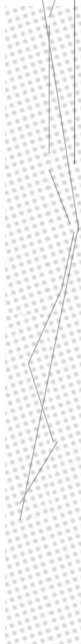
I draw Murugan, and at the same time Nozomi raises her hand. All her biker goons raise their guns at me.

“Are you really content ordering middle aged drug dealers and bikers around all your life?” I ask her. “Don’t you want more?”

“There is no ‘More,’ Marieken,” she sighs dejectedly.

“Jeremy moment,” a raspy voice yells out behind me. I spin around, and see my previous assailants standing in the door opening.

“I killed you?” I try to yell, but it comes out more





like a confused question.

Mistress, focus, Murugan yells in my head, and I barely dodge Nozomi rushing towards me at a ridiculous speed.

“Jesus,” I swear, “Hold up,”

“Enough talking,” she growls as she comes to a stop just past me. A second later a cacophony of gunfire rains down on me, and almost tears my body to shreds. Fuck! Focus, Marieken, focus, I tell myself. I have to take out her support first. I let go of my body, and a second later I have corporeal form again, chained to a nearby bench. “FUCK!” I scream. I can barely keep track of all threats around me, let alone respond to them. At least the bullets aren’t magic, or antimagic or whatever, and my wounds are easily regenerated.

“Who the fuck are you guys?” Nozomi asks, looking at the three goons strolling out of the university annex.

“The watergraaf sent us to assassinate Marieken de Vries,” the scrawny man in the tweed jacket says. “She almost got the better of us, but alas. I am a necromancer.”



“Huh?” Nozomi answers. “I’m fighting this broad, so undo your spell.”

“Not happening,” the necromancer, who I assume is called Jeremy, replies. “Tjeerd, distract her while Nehelennia and I get-”

“NEHELENNIA?” Nozomi bursts out laughing. “The twelve year old in the sailor moon cosplay is called Nehelennia!?” I don’t get the joke, but it’s funny enough that Nozomi almost doubles over with laughter.

“I’m not taking lip from a furry,” the girl spits out. A second later she frowns. “Oh,” she says. “That is a cute trick.”

“Awww,” Nozomi says. “You’re trying to get into my mind.”

Huh, I wonder. The chain ability requires some form of telepathy? There are pre-requisites to ‘hack’ abilities like that, Ruby-Lynn had explained to me earlier. Is her pre-requisite tied to my mental state? Like, she’s using metaphorical fetters to physically chain me up?

I take a deep breath, and try to remember what





Ruby-Lynn taught me about shielding my mind. If she can't reach my mind-

There are chains in the way. I can't close my mind, because the chains are in the way. They're indeed sprouting from my mind. The sensation is fascinating, but I can't spend time on introspection now. I need to get moving before the violence erupts in full force again.

"The first episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*-" the balding guy begins, but Nozomi immediately interrupts him.

"Aired first as a two hour special cut together with the next episode, and partially rethreads the movie and then sets up the series as an alternate continuity," Nozomi reacts almost instinctually.

"His ability kills you if you get a question wrong," I helpfully bring up.

"No pressure," Nozomi replies.

"Nehelennia, silence her," Jeremy orders.

"I'm not one of your puppets," she complains. "Don't talk to me like that."



“Not one of my puppets yet,” Jeremy corrects her. “So be sure to not let her get the better of you, or you’ll wake up with a beautiful piece of thread around your cute, petite heart.”

Jesus.

“Jesus,” Nehelennia says. For a second I see her waver.

“You could switch sides,” I suggest.

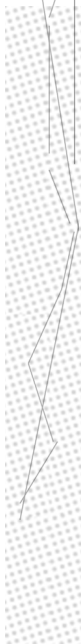
“Shut the fuck up,” she spits at me. “They’re paying me almost a million guilders for this. That, and clearing my criminal record.”

“You’re a child,” I say, slightly confused. “How can you have a criminal record?”

“Different species, different set of rights,” she says, shrugging.

Behind Nehelennia her balding ally bombards Nozomi with a barrage of pop-culture questions.

“In the first theatrical screening of Star Wars Episode Four,” he begins.





“It was just called ‘Star Wars,’ and if you’re talking about pre-release screenings, Jabba the Hutt was not yet a snail person but instead a human gangster.”

“Wow,” he replies. “Euh, in two thousand and six a French-Japanese television series aired on Disney subsidiary channel Jetix.”

“Fucking Ōban Star-Racers? You’re asking me about Ōban Star-Racers?”

“Euh, euhm, the original-”

“Short movie called Molly, Star Racer.”

“The first French-Japanese-”

“Ulysses thirty-one. Next question.”

“I see that you’ve got your French-Japanese animation lore down. Jeremy, I’m dealing with a fellow expert. Permission to reveal my full powerlevel?”

“What?” The tweed-jacketed necromancer replies. “I don’t care? Just kill her.”

Several of Nozomi her goons raise their guns,





but she motions them to stand down. “I want to see where this is going,” she laughs.

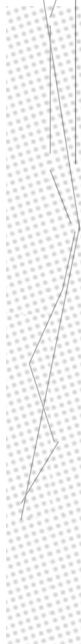
“Don’t get confident, woman,” the balding trivia-wizard says, grinning. “The Makai Knight from Chapter of the Black Wolf fights the Horrors, which are based on—”

“Nightmare Demons,” Nozomi replies. “Which is why the show was eventually pulled from television, as accurate portrayals of parapsychical phenomena were deemed unacceptable under the revised Normalcy Guidelines. And the show isn’t called ‘Chapters of the Black Wolf,’ scrub, it’s called Garo. Chapters of the Black Wolf was the title of an early English dub, the translation quality of which is widely considered to be not very good.”

“Wow,” he replies. “This woman doesn’t deserve to die, Jeremy. She’s like, an ensouled human being.”

“Excuse me,” Nozomi says. “That’s your ability? You can kill people who you believe deserve to die? And that is based on their knowledge of pop culture trivia?”

“What, and I deserve to die because I don’t know the answers to your stupid trivia questions?” I yell.





The lumbering man takes a deep breath, as if to calm building rage. “Don’t make me out for a shallow nerd. Pop culture is the religion of the modern era. It informs our entire society, and if you stumble through life blind, without even absorbing the basics of the culture that shapes our entire world, do you then deserve to vote? To consume resources that real people need?”

“Jesus, you really believe that, don’t you?” Nozomi asks.

“What the fuck?” Nehelennia says.

“What court are you,” I try probing her.

“Wouldn’t you like to know, shadow-witch?”

“Can everyone stop talking and go back to killing each other?” Jeremy suggests.

“I was trying to,” Trivia Hitler begins before he is interrupted by Nozomi dashing past him and striking his head off his shoulders.

“Sure,” she says.

Get her men-at-arms while she’s busy with your





opponents, Murugan suggests.

“That’s not very fair,” I say.

Mistress, no warfare is fair! Save your honour for when you meet your equals on the battlefield. The samurai does not concern herself with the honour of the lesser bannermen following her foes.

“Oh,” I reply. “I’m still chained up. I think Nehelennia wisened up to me cutting off my own limbs because she’s attaching her chains to my shadows now. Hey, Nehelennia, are you sure you want to try outrunning Nozomi and dying for the sake of Trivia Hitler and Professor Pedophile?”

“AAAAAAGH,” she screams, scrambling backwards as Nozomi points her sword at her. “Fuck it.”

The chains locking me in place dissolve, and I shadow-step in front of Nehelennia as Nozomi dashes towards her. I only barely parry her sword, but to my surprise her blade chips and cracks as it clashes with Murugan.

Pathetic.





“You cannot win from me, Marieken,” Nozomi says, staring me in the eyes. “You might be stronger, you might have more magic, you might have a cooler sword, sure.”

“But?” I ask.

“But you’re inexperienced, and beyond Paraphysical Aptitude scores of fifty, experience is all that matters.”

The next second she is gone, wind rushing past me. Jeremy screams as his hands fly through the air.

“Help me,” Nehelennia mutters. “I’m siding with you, okay? I’m siding with you, just help me.”

I look around, and I realize Nozomi is dashing around the courtyard. Her brother moved faster than a car, faster than a jet maybe. Nozomi is moving so fast I can barely track her, and then I lose her. She’s still speeding up, I realize. The pressure of the air she displaces breaks all the windows on the university campus. Then her soldiers open fire on me and Nehelennia. I throw my shadow up as a physical manifestation, and a quarter of a second later I lose one of my legs as Nozomi speeds past me. I re-



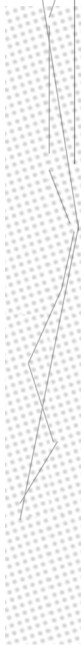


generate it, but don't manage to keep my shadow-shield up at the same time. To avoid both me and Nehelennia being turned into swiss cheese- which I doubt she can survive- I grab her and shadow-step as far as I can manage, ending up on the top of the campus building. A tenth of a second later I just barely manage to warp my body into the shape required to deflect Nozomi's blade before she cuts Nehelennia clean in half. Another tenth of a second later the sonic boom behind her knocks me on Nehelennia on the ground. Blood spurts from her ears. Just her eardrums, I pray, as I scream for Nozomi to fight me and me alone. I sharpen my senses as far as my magic allows me to, and I see a rush of wind flutter in the distance. As I jump up, I thrust Murugan forward where I predict she'll be, and miss. The sonic boom rattles me, and then Nozomi passes by again- straight through Nehelennia, who was trying to scramble to her feet. She's turned into a pink mist from the sheer force.

“NO!” I scream. “FUCK!”

Mistress, you have to get faster.

“Fuck off,” I scream as I dash off the building and try to connect my shadow to as many of Nozomi's goons her shadows as I can. I rip their shadows away





from them, manifest them into a mass of hungry mouths that tear into their previous owners. Instead of chowing down into meat, their teeth only find rapidly evaporating dream-stuff, nightmare matter.

“They’re not real,” the wind whispers as it dashes by and I can narrowly avoid being beheaded at the cost of my left arm. “They’re the ghosts of gangsters past, reanimated with magic,” the wind explains as I narrowly dodge being turned into paste by air displacement.

Mistress!

“I don’t know,” I cry as I shadow step across the campus, burning through magic at a frightening speed. Wherever I go, either Nozomi already is there and batters me with either her blade or the shockwave from her sheer speed, or dream-gangsters suddenly step around the corner and open fire on me.

How can I fight someone I cannot even track?

Mistress, you-

“I’m running out of fuel, Murugan,” I cry as I let go of my physical shape, and become a living shadow,





teeth and fang and claw and eye, absorbing as many of the shadows on the courtyard as I can.

Nozomi stops moving in the middle of the field, now surrounded by my almost omnipresent form, leering at her with hundreds of eyes, chattering at her with dozens of mouths.

“You really are a Nightmare Demon,” she says.

I can't speak with a dozen mouths, so I just lash at her with my shadow-tentacles to rip her to pieces. She effortlessly dodges, throws away her battered sword and makes a strange gesture with her hands.

“It's been a while since I've had to use actual magic, you know,” she says. “Instead of just taking people apart with physical ability alone.”

There's no way, I think. There's no way that wasn't magic. Nobody can run at supersonic speeds and expect me to believe that was 'physical ability alone.'

A mental probe rams into my head, a bit like how Ruby-Lynn would attack me during our practice. Except Ruby-Lynn's felt like a sharp spike trying to pierce my





defenses, trying to drive a stake into my brain. This is an avalanche. A wall of force, not to penetrate my mind but to flatten it outright. I try to throw up walls and realize I am out of my depth. I can't hold this kind of violence at bay. Then I realize she's still casting a spell. She's kneeling on one leg, muttering and moving her hands. She's trying to flatten my mind with a psychic attack while casting a spell at the same time.

Murugan, I mentally cry. Murugan, help me.

I'm a sword, the de-manifested sword says somewhere inside my soul. **You are the magician. I am but the knife.**

I'm a magician, I mentally affirm. I have fought off Sareth's attack, I have fought off Hiro. I've mentally evolved again and again and found myself something akin to a god. I just need the right mental state, and then I can win. Theoretically I am the stronger magician, after all.

Sareth truly believed she deserved my magic, and tried to steal my soul through that mindset. That's not something I can ever emulate. It's not in my nature. It's not who I am. Trivia Hitler could kill because he truly believed some people deserved to die. Could I bend my



mind in the shape required for magic like that? Probably not.

My magic is something stranger. I am a shadow. A fake. I am not real, an illusion cast on the wall. That's what I have to work with. If I have to come up with a spell, I need to lean into 'my' magic. Manifesting and dispelling conjured matter, teleporting around, they're all simply extensions of how I've come to see the world. They're not really spells. If I put my mind to it, what could I really achieve? Just today I've refined my abilities tenfold and then learned to copy myself, just because the situation called for it.

Whatever magic Nozomi is about to launch at me, it is almost certainly going to kill me or at least cripple me to the point she can easily finish me off, I realize as my mind starts to crack and splinter under the weight of her simultaneous psychic assault.

I am a shadow on the wall. Matter is too. None of this is real. Creating things slurps up magic, magic that is stored somewhere. Not in the body. In the mind. My mind is clearly not inside my body, though when I take my human shape, it's uncomfortably intermingled with it. Attached to my brain, poured into a shape that can fit





in human neurons. Thoughts of constructing a different brain, of messing with the cellular automata that make up my body flash through my mind, but it would take me months if not years to fully probe exactly how my body ticks, even with my supernaturally amped understanding of my own biology.

If I survive this, I should find a quiet spot and take apart my body until I can build a better one.

Time slows down and I realize that no matter how fast I speed up my thinking, I'll nonetheless run out of time eventually. I need a spell, a magic, now.

I'm not real. At least my body isn't. But what is? I conceptualized it as a flame casting a shadow. The object casting the shadow must be the real 'me,' but it is beyond my understanding what exactly that is. Something that takes the form of 'Marieken' as this light beyond the world passes by it.

Shadow court. Light beyond the world. What if I let the light through? Can I wield light as well as shadow? There's no time to come up with a real spell, no time to experiment. All I can do is reach for this ever-distant, abstract 'real' me and try to get it, or her,





to change her shape. To move out of the way. Isn't-

I realize I've never actually been changing my shape. To change the shadow on the wall, you have to manipulate the object in front of the light source. I'm not actually the shadow. I've been telling myself that, but I'm not. I am the thing casting the shadow.

I reach out and I connect both halves of my 'self,' a process seemingly initiated on both 'ends' at once. We meet in the middle, and I touch something so far beyond my understanding that it shatters my mind before Nozomi can.

Light pours from beyond. I am a tiny candle of darkness, and an ocean of light rushes past me. There is no hope of maintaining myself in the face of the onslaught of radiant violence bearing down on me. I let go, and a light brighter than the sun, brighter than I imagine an atomic bomb to be, extinguishes the little shadow that was once 'Marieken de Vries.'





It is music. It is light. It's angelic, and it is horrific. A million years of the laughter of children, of artistry and sunrises and a billion quiet moments of religious awe. It is all these things, and yet this is only the surface. It burns, and it screams. The deeper, the stranger it gets. Who could ever imagine what magnetic fields dream about? Who could attempt to fathom that the processes of stellar formation and the math underlying evolution have thoughts to begin with, let alone contemplate what they hope for?

It is cruel, some thing that was once me realizes. There is no 'I' here, but there is still something that 'is,' even in the absence of everything that once made this 'thing' into Marieken Mithras.

It is cruel, this light. A deep evil pervades it. A feeling of hate. All the light in the universe, everything good and everything beautiful, and it too can feel. It can dream. All it feels is hate, and all it dreams is nightmares.

Something is wrong. Something is horrifically wrong, some thing realizes, and slowly the light takes on shapes. It takes on hues real and unreal. Patterns, fractal and organic. Shapes real and not real. Structures form,

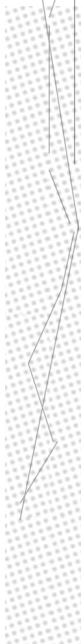




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both intelligent and animalistic. There are palaces here, I realize. Palaces which dream, and are in turn inhabited by palaces both larger and smaller than themselves.

A thing that precedes what was once 'me' is dragged along, and experiences a billion years or more of boiling hate in the form of love, of yearning, of sunset after sunset and is then battered and beaten by searing heat, reformed by stellar or even godly fires into something that once again resembles Marieken.





A choir of angels sings to me as little creatures of light dress me in silk robes. Real silk, I realize. Not the pale imitation we have on earth. There's no describing the room I am in. Gold wishes it could be an element as perfect as the stuff they've built this place out of.

Come, something akin to a computer program running on nothing but an infinitely complex magnetic field interacting with itself to sustain itself tells me. I follow.

God does not look like what I expected Him to look like. His head is that of a rooster, and his legs are writhing snakes.

I am the lord of all matter, He tells me. I am the lord of all that is worldly, the lord of the abstract processes that give rise to all physical things, and lord of the abstract processes that arise in turn from all physical things.

Queen of Air and Darkness, speak and explain why you have intruded on the heavenly realm, He bids me.

Here in this palace, there can be no distinction



between me and him, and yet we are separate beings somehow. I answer in his voice, and He speaks to me in mine.

Queen of Air and Darkness, he tells me. You are not the Mithras, and the Sun has been declared off-limits to you and your ilk. You will be fettered, you will be veiled, and cast back down into the shadow realm. Transgression against the highest God will not be tolerated.

Angels sing lamentations for me, and fairies, spirits of intellect, fields of computation and the souls of the unborn and the dead accompany me, fluttering around me, as chains of light and darkness are wrapped around me before I am unceremoniously thrown out of the splendour of heaven again.





Marieken Mithras

I wake up in a field, grass smouldering from heat around me. As I get up, I feel more clear-headed than I have ever been. It's hard to remember now, but I'm certain I've just seen heaven. Seen the truth of all things, the man behind the curtain.

In the distance, Amsterdam rises up out of the fields surrounding it. It looks different from how I remember. It's so lonely, lacking the suburbs or any of the infrastructure outside the center and a few neighborhoods around it. Endless fields, farms, and canals surround it.

“Hahuwh?” I mutter. I look around for Murugan, and cannot find him. I'm naked as well, I realize, and I manifest some clothes to protect my modesty. This is a profound act, I realize. It is ‘sinful’ somehow to be clothed. By dressing myself I am hiding from the watchful gaze of God.

“Oh,” I mutter. “Christ.” If I haven't completely lost my mind, I've just met God. A chicken-headed and cruel God, but undeniably God.





With nothing else to do, I start walking towards the city. It's further away than I realized, and as a horse-drawn cart catches up to me I start to wonder if I've gone back in time.

"Oh," the straw-hat wearing farmer on the cart says. "Moon girl. You shouldn't be walking. Here, climb on my cart."

"I shouldn't be walking?" I ask him as he stops his cart, and I climb on next to him.

"You are too humble," he says.

"Right," I answer. "Could you tell me where I am?"

"Huh?" He replies, confused. He sinks into thought for a second, then cheers up. "You're a newborn! You've just fallen down from the moon," he says. "You're on the road to Oetelwaard, moon girl. Oh, blessed! I am blessed. Please, let me escort you to the monastery."

"The monastery?"

"This must all be awfully confusing to you. You're a moon girl," he says, pointing up. "Your kind falls





down from the moon. Here in Oetelwaard, the monastery takes you in. You're a holy being, after all. Oh, I am blessed. Seven years of good luck for the man who helps out a wayward moon girl, after all."

"Ohhh," I say, "Ooooh. I see."

What the actual fuck, I think to myself.

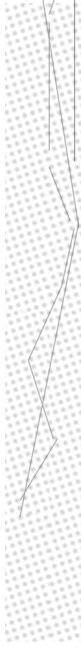


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Synopsis

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



by: [nekosattva](#)

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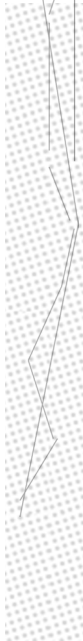


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Last Time

Little King Samuel's forces reunite Yelena and Natalia on the verge of fulfilling their apocalyptic fantasies





CW: death, war, mass destruction, nuclear weapons, radiation, tobacco

Nay-toe is pregnant. And I, Marena, am its mother. I've given birth to this new world, whatever it might be.

The rain had ended. The radioactive dust dragged itself over the hills, covering each part of the Zone in something reminiscent of twinkling starlight. Yelena laughed; maybe the dust twinkled 'cuz of Nico Nico Nicole's slay body becoming vapor as the missile she'd been strapped onto exploded into a fuzzy ball of pink flames. Natalia rummaged through the survival crates in the storage closet and found enough food and water to keep them alive for weeks; satchels of soups and tea, tins of fish and corned beef, and a bounty of crackers. She took the crate and overturned its contents onto the floor. Natalia had survived on MREs for so long, she'd started to find comfort in the sensation of salt melting on the tip

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of your tongue.

She covered the table in a white cloth, embroidered with bright red patterns of crosses and diamonds at its edges. Here was their tomb: a little jasmine-scented bubble, immured in steel. Dig out that thought by its root like a weed. She poured Yelena a cup of granulated grape drink and invited her to have some crackers with liver pâté, which she'd arranged on a large folder containing vital military coordinates. They sat together and ate, eyes shut, focus on the sensation of taste as it burns in your mouth; Yelena giggled after she realized she'd been wiping Natalia's mouth with a napkin.

"I'm sorry," Yelena said as she set down the napkin. "I've started acting like my mother and I'm not sure why." Natalia looked up at Yelena; she nodded and smiled. Natalia felt she should say something. If Natalia could put it into words somehow: her childhood felt to her like a moult she needed to shed, dandelions that needed to be dug out with steel implement. If Natalia could put it into words somehow: neither of us belong here but you have somewhere to go and I do not, I'm an orphan in every way. She opened a satchel of jam, spread it over a cracker, savoring the sweetness of the apple, the soreness of her





teeth and the pain in her gums. She closed her eyes and imagined the walls surrounding her disappear into white heat. If she could put it into words, somehow.

She opens her eyes; Natalia rubs her face, looking around. The machinery in the tower had whirred nonstop since Little King had stirred it into motion. It's clear that the monitors existed not only to anticipate and respond to external threats to the nation but interior threats as well. Some monitors were devoted to radar traffic, while others had direct links to batteries of surveillance cameras placed throughout the cities. A throne hanging high above the world, dangling daggers from the ramparts. With Little King dead, it was likely his boys would descend into infighting. Ultimately, the Crystal Centaurs were merely a coalition of war-hungry expats held together only by hormonal urges and a need for a father figure. "The test' must flow." Where there is no father figure, one will be carved out of flesh; better to mog in hell, then goon in Heav'n. Oh, Little King, short in his time. She felt some remorse for killing him, if only because he had taken something from her with him when he tumbled down 'twards his death. Natalia could tell herself no longer that she was merely an observer with tired, burning eyes; she was now a participant, a traveller





of the Zone. She raised her glass and told herself a silent farewell to her childhood friend, 'Lanka,' a stuffed bear that once knew all her secrets.

After Yelena finished her crackers, she looked through the survival crates and found something she'd not even known she'd been longing for: a pack of papirosa, labelled "Belomorkanal." She crushed the end and lit it up with a few matches she'd found in the package which burned with a green flame. A terrible pain filled her lungs; she coughed as Natalia watched the smoke rise to the halogen-lit ceiling. "I don't usually smoke," Yelena said, not sure to whom she was saying it. After a while, the terrible pain became a pleasant heat. She walked around the tower's control room, pacing with anticipation, feeling something between exhausted and agitated. Something's going to happen; don't know what it is, but it's going to happen. In one of the bookcases beside two radar indicators, between a few tomes of statistical reports, she spotted a copy of those verses she'd found in the bazaar. She took out the book, set it on the table, searching for the page:

THE FOURTEENTH THOUGHT OF KALI HI-CHI:





« After the departure of his 'lyubovnistá,' Kali Hichi took to wandering. He climbed up the trees, like the monkey. He swam the rivers, like the fish. He crawled the sands, like the scorpion. Neither seemed terribly foreign, nor terribly comfortable. Every world seemed equally distant to his own. He understood that man was home in no world, tied to no routine. Man's world is wholly his own, a prison of one he is free to change and invent anew.

»

Yelena sucked on her cigarette. "The fuck does that mean?" She felt like a child again, thrust into light, screaming for her mother. Natalia stared at her. Neither of them knew what to do, nor what it is they should want to do; what should someone like me tell someone like you at this moment? A sense of being lost in communal limbo; it was a strange, novel feeling for both of them. Outside their window, a hundred factions were engaged in a violent struggle for power; from here, their bloody efforts amount to no more than a faint hum. Here in total arrest, it felt like being suspended in the crystal growing to fill every crevice of the Zone. Yelena turned the page, turned the page once more, turned it a few more times, unsure of what it was she wanted to find:





THE SEVENTEENTH THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:

« Man's delusion is precisely what enables his survival. It is his greatest strength; he may separate existence from essence. Man may lie, negate, imagine; man's delusion serves the fact that his heaven is nowhere, his home is himself.

Kali Hichi roamed the Zone; for the first time in his life, he was unsure of what Nay-toe would want from him. He felt as if he'd been doomed, not blessed. Man has no stable relationship to the world at all. Unlike plants and animals, we live to be alienated from the world by pure virtue of being capable of recognizing the world, of recognizing our great freedom. To be free is to be bound to nothing in particular; a permanent state of homelessness.

He took a branch, fashioned a stylus using a knife, and wrote into the sand:

He wrote 'existence,' then crossed it out.

He wrote 'determinacy,' then crossed it out.





If he could define himself, Kali Hichi argued, he could define himself as nothing. He could negate himself. Which would contradict any statement of existence or being determined by the world around him.

He looked up. He saw a myriad of birds in migratory flight. They needed not to be taught; it was their instinct. Man has no such instinct, man must learn to live in the world he's created for himself. Thus, the world man has created precedes man. But how is that possible?

He wandered, pacing, fidgeting. Man must learn the world through experience because man is not of this world. He must regain his worldliness. He must regain his worldliness because he is always in danger of being banished or cleansed from this world. »

Yelena read the verse once more, out loud in an impatient voice, to Natalia. "Do you know what the hell he's talking about?" She spat before sucking on her cigarette; it tasted like wet carpet. Natalia shook her head, unsure of what Yelena wanted from her. Yelena read the first line to herself over and over again; "man's delusion is precisely what enables his survival." The letters seem



to drip down the page, pour into an incomprehensible slurry, to be reconstituted and reconstructed like granules of sentiment.

Strange. The sediment gathers at the bottom of the glass. Now pick the right limbs, the right head. Use your hands to rotate, watch yourself in the mirror. Take a pen and draw some arrows to the abstractions you see in yourself. These are your lips, these are your fingers. Pummelled into dust, then put back together into shape. Look through the mirror and watch how your shadows run. A momentary flash and that's all that remains of you.

A cold chill runs over Yelena's flesh. She looked at Natalia, this child of Nay-toe; collective runts of the litter. Yelena couldn't shake the feeling that she herself was a hostile, invasive species, feeding on the blood of others. To think of herself as anything less would have surely meant death. Everything is prey to some beast. She sat down, took a few crackers, covered them in apricot preserves, and munched away as her thoughts clumped together like hair. And how long? How long? The wait is the worst part. I pass the days by studying my footprints in the sand, which trail behind me. An endless long loneliness.





THE EIGHTEENTH THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI

CHI:

« Man spoke with his hands before he spoke with his mouth. Most animals must work with their mouths, but man does not. Man walks upright, and works with his hands. Kali Hichi looked at his stylus and realizes it is a spear: the pen has its pedigree in the spear! »

Natalia wiped her mouth and rose from her chair.

She wiped away from the crumbs from the table. Safety. Restraint. She felt the metal floor beneath her creak as blast waves resonate through the soil. She went up to the window and watched the flickers of light as they dance on the horizon. She supposes that the liquidators would make easy mincemeat of what was left of Little King's 'Ruff Ryders.' Hmm. She wonders what would be left of this land. Nation and civilization crumbles, languages are forgotten; something new might rise from the flat soil, made with deft hands. And what would be remembered of her? She thought about what she might look like, suspended in crystal, her face forever stuck in fear. She saw that beside the paper full of numeric references was a little ballpoint pen. She took the paper and the pen and





brought it to Yelena.

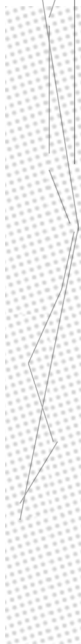
"Hmm?" Yelena said when she was torn away from her thoughts by Natalia's paper and pen. "You want me to draw something?" Natalia shook her head and placed the paper before Yelena. She took the cap off the pen and wrote something in winding cursive which looped like string.

"I can't read that," Yelena said with a laugh. "Russian cursive is a whole 'nother ballgame."

Natalia shook her head in disapproval. She wrote something again, this time in stark, bold alphabet.

"'Nas ubyot?'" Will the radiation kill us, you mean?" Yelena read out the words. She smiled, softly; she felt her eyes grow heavy. A few tears ran down her cheeks, sniffing, laughing.

"Of course not," Yelena answered. A faint chuckle 'tween the words as she slowly shook her head. "Konyechnye zhe nyet. Of course not." She touched Natalia's shoulder with her left, wiping her tears with her right. "Of course not. We're gonna be alright."





Natalia smiled too, though she knew Yelena was lying to her. It was the greatest kindness she'd ever been shown. Yelena brought her hand to her face, wiping away some of the grime beside her mouth, stroking her skin. She pushed aside the strands of hair which covered the molten side of her face. To hide that scar tissue, she 'thot, is to betray the life that persevered underneath. The jagged and bruised flesh carried a facsimile of the mountains her people called home, a poem told through weathered mass.

"You are so beautiful, you know that? Krasiva!" Yelena wiped away more of her tears, which had started to drip onto the page. Natalia nodded her head. She looked at Yelena's chewed up nails. How funny it is to be responsible for someone else, and how strange to be deficient, to have one's hand empty when it's reached for. But what should someone like me say to someone like you, here in this moment? Natalia thought about her answer, thought about it for a while. She took the pen and wrote something else on the page.

Yelena looked to her side at the page. "Nuzhne uxaditj." "I have to leave." Yelena nodded her head, nodded a lot, wiped a few tears away. "I know," she answered



in a meek voice. "I know. Znayu." Yelena rose up, took the jacket off her shoulders, and placed it on Natalia; the bottom hem reached all the way down to her ankles. "I should uhm, pack you a school lunch." She went into the storeroom and put together a few things; a handful of chocolate bars, a canteen filled with iodine water, a few potassium iodide tablets, and a Makarov PM with a black grip that fit well in the holster of the jacket's inside pockets. She loaded a few magazines of 9.2x18mm, bronze tipped, and placed them in her front pocket. She rubbed the edges of Natalia's hair with her fingers to make them less fizzy. She took one of the wet napkins and wiped Natalia's hands, trying to rid her of the dirt under her nails.

"You look like a real child soldier now," Yelena said, beaming like a proud mother sending her child to her first day of school. And we're running out of sand, aren't we? No sense in wasting time. She took Natalia's hand in her own, bringing her to the platform which would descend back down to the surface. No words, no more thoughts; dig out the weeds from the root. Natalia took her place on the platform and waved to Yelena who stood by the console. Natalia still thought about what she should say. She looked at Yelena, her eyes red, a soft smile creaking on the left side of her face. "Proshchai," Yelena





said. That's what Natalia would have said too. "Proshchai, Malen'kaya," Yelena said. Yelena waved, once, twice, before pressing the button that read "vnjis." And after a few seconds, Natalia disappeared into the darkness.

THE NINETEENTH THOUGHT OF KALI HI-CHI:

« Man builds his world not because he feels peaceful and at home with the world. Man builds his world because he is a victim of the world; he is ruled by the fear and the need for protection which the world instills in him.

In other words, the world built by man is a world against the world, a defense against the fundamental danger of existing in the world. It is a coping mechanism; nature transforms into culture, conscripted into service for man. I say this onto you, 'druzhina;' the world is the 'cosmic proletariat.' »

Outside now.

And there are no more birds. The chirping of morning's meshes were gone, replaced by the oppressive whirring of drones. The trees glistened as a dying sun





fell on the thousands of glass wires that hung from their branches. It would be terror twilight soon, the gradual surrender to the stillness of night. Look over your head; thousands of them in swarms. The liquidation was impersonal now, a mechanism. They buzz with voracious appetite. Some resemble spiders, others resemble birds of prey. Natalia walked away from the tower, down the road littered with blood & treasure, her hand trembling as it rests on her rib where she can feel the shape of her Markarov. She tried to imagine defending herself, pistols to the banshees in the sky, but she couldn't-- her best hope was merely to be the smallest target, to be pitied when clips of her last seconds hit the networks.

Down the road, Natalia could see hundreds of tanks and trucks, smoldering, black with soot and smoke. Some were little grey sedans, some were large buses, others were cargo trucks; all of them perforated, covered in ash and charcoal. Beside the road were piles of debris, metal gore, collapsed metal. She walked in the center of the road, six lanes wide. One of the tanks was a Type 69, its dome-shaped ventilator crooked, with a bent barrel sticking out of its turret. In the distance under the burning haze of afternoon, she could see hundreds more, covered in bullet holes and shrapnel wounds. And this too





will be swept away under dusty broom, forgotten as all failed experiments are. Prey to some beast named Nay-toe, remembered only by our savior Kali Hichi, who lived for our sin; whatever that sin was. Mhm. And why did it all fall apart, Lanka? Let a hundred theories bloom.

Natalia took a bar of chocolate, tore apart the packaging, and bit right into it. Nothing lived on this road; it was a refuse pile, its people just as irrelevant as the machines themselves. They didn't inhabit a world; they were refused the conditions for existence; they were the waste product of this land, just as Natalia was. Nay-toe lives here too; this vein takes you all the way through the Zone. Beside the roads were thousands of trees cloven into pieces, standing above mounds of splinters. Brotherhood is earned in blood; when it dries, it must be spilled anew.

Thunder cracks above her. It would be night-fall soon enough. Natalia runs to a bus stop and drops her tired body onto a bench as the rain clatters onto the roof above her. Above the bench, 'Little King Lives!' was written in something red like blood. When a world dies, it takes whatever lives inside with it. An iron stench clung to her mouth. With the bar still in her hand, her



mouth covered in chocolate, Natalia couldn't help but weep. The tears dripped down her face, falling into her mouth as she takes another bite, another bite; salty and sweet, a faint taste of blood. She remembers how it fell apart; she remembers the people running in desperation under the cloak of night, the sound of distant gunfire, and the terrible realization that you'd now become an orphan to a world that disappeared. The crooks in charge didn't even apologize for their abrupt exit. She rubbed away the chocolate from her face with her sleeve, clearing her phlegm-burdened throat, and to the rhythm of falling rain she sang:

Hear her speak, the motherland!

Hear her sing, sweet motherland!

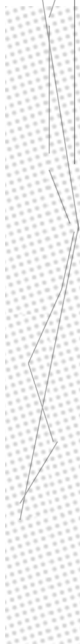
(pitter-patter, pitter-patter)

We leave the sun's loving embrace, hand in hand,

to step into night's cold, barren no-man's-land.

(pitter-patter, pitter-patter)

Forget the certainties of touch, faith, and sight,





and step with me into the chill of endless night.

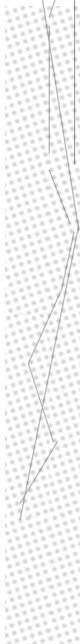
Outside now, under the glow of clouds. The rain had died out. The scorched earth has become dreg. Much of the landscape had now become rivers of black, with islands of downed helicopters. The air was thick with rust, clinging to the inside of your lungs. Natalia found a bicycle beside the road, its seat tattered and bloody, and rode it through the triumphal arches of the capital city. Much of what was once homes and hotels and cafés had already been turned to ash by the liquidators, leaving nothing but the skeletal frames of buildings and the shadows of the lives they'd once held. This city we once knew existed now only in the memories of the evacuees, their cheeks red with French wine while they reminisce about the life they'd once had in the old country. And what are we daughters of Nay-toe heirs to? Nothing but skeletal frames; we have our own nightmares.

Natalia yelps with glee as the bicycle races down the decline of the main road, broad and wide to make room for many a parades with glistening green tanks and missiles. A few statues made of stone still remained; their sharp jaws and chiseled features smile upon her return. "She's back," they seemed to scream; they've been wait-



ing. "Nay-toe's daughter has come back to us." The glowing dust creeps through the streets, a cold shiver on your shoulder. Natalia raises her fists and shouts; "ooo-wee, I'm coming home! Kingfisher Lane!" And she did. Close your eyes and you'll be back there; among the sunflowers, where the bugs hold on for dear life as the wind threatens to level their towers looming large over radioactive soil; among the red bricks, the cattle, and the pigs that wallow in the mud when it's watermelon and plombir season. Oh, if you could see it, Lanka.

Natalia stepped off her bicycle and set it up against the gate of the park which was covered in shards of glass that hung like teardrops. There was nothing left of the park save for the pulp of detonated trees. She sat by the pond, now minty green and full of glowing particulates, and took another bar of chocolate from her jacket. As she munched on the chocolate, she closed her eyes and tried to imagine life as it used to be: she could hear the children running through the fields, the branches swaying in the delicate breeze of afternoon, and the birds squawking litanies for the setting sun. She could see the 'druzhina,' walking hand in hand, their voices buried in static like the chatter of stations on a radio; tune your ears and listen to their calls, their fears and desires that





might cohere into a chorus for an instant before crumbling into disparate parts. She opens her eyes and hears only the distant whirring of drones and bombs.

THE TWENTIETH THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:

« And who are the 'druzhina?' They are fed by the world, rejected by the world. They are told to be independent, punished for their independence. Entangled in the world, thrown away by the world. A thousand damnations. A constant embrace, a never-ending shrug.

And who is 'Kali Hichi?' A name that floats along to save one from drowning in the sea of namelessness. Just as the city is a name for countless different spaces, 'Kali Hichi' is the name that endures. The name is what can be grasped, what can be known of the city, of the 'monzhj.'

'Kali Hichi -' the name is the only constant. It is the only guarantee. It is the denominator, but call me 'Mali Michi' and the arbitrary nature of the name reveals itself. It is only by my death that the name ceases to be arbitrary as all possibilities for what may happen collapse into merely what has happened. There couldn't





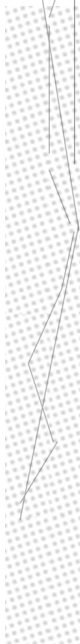
have been a 'Mali Michi' if 'Kali Hichi' already came and went. »

Yelena was bored; she'd looked through all of the boxes in the storeroom, looked through them twice and three times over, and could not find a single charging cable for her phone. 'Not that reception in the Zone was ever any good anyway.' She sat down on the couch, her limbs slack and exhausted, and she shut her eyes, and she imagined an endless river of images and sounds, flowing from her present all the way down to the first great shattering of symmetry among the animals of the particle zoo. Mhm, mhm.

But before then?


Emptiness. The endless night. Reality was a sleeping creature waiting to be born. A start of another world is the end of another; isn't it, Lanka? When that first bright orange-red glow came to illuminate the universe, the world of shadows died in an instant. Revelation. Illumination; an orifice through which the first light was born. Suck out the light of the world at that point and you'll only notice its absence.

Yelena opened a can of pashtet, a pink lump





smelling like moss, and spread it onto some crackers with the edge of its metal lid. Mm. Salty, briny flesh. And who will be this creature's savior? If it didn't have a soul, some essence, then what is it that's tasting so good? Within a few tender 'n soft minutes, Yelena had finished the can; the floor was covered in crumbs which crunched under her feet. Mm. Suddenly a chill ran up her body. She looked down and saw that blood was trickling down her leg.



After she'd cleaned away the blood with a few wet tissues from an MRE, she walked onto the balcony and rested her arms on the railing. Beneath her, she saw the remains of Little King, his body collapsed into a crater. And above her, outside now; the dust had tired of its panicked flight, settling to form gentles waves of glowing blue and green with particulate that glittered like crushed stars. Trace its tides with your fingers; up against the darkening dusk, they were streaks of brilliant paint drawn across a dim canvas. Are you really there? I try to convince myself that somehow that crack in the sky has something to do with you.

'Wait a minute.' A little bit over the cliffs, there's



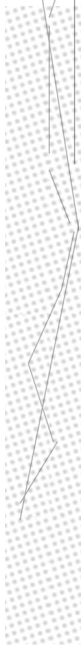


a silhouette up against the receding sun. A gash in that brilliant disc of light. Are you really there? Right there, in the rainbow of an oil slick? Yelena runs back into the tower, searching the storeroom for a pair of binoculars, finding in a leather sleeve a BPTs5. She ran back out onto the balcony, the metal groaning beneath her, and brought the silhouette into her 8x30 sights. And he was really there. And the book goes:

THE TWENTY-FIRST THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:

« So what is the 'monzhj?' A waste product? All 'monzhji' are merely byproducts of the society that produces itself. The 'druzhina' who are excluded from the excluded live against their own will, between different worlds. They are tasked to stand on their own, though we know there is no such thing; 'monzhj' means nothing without the 'druzhina' that calls him that. So 'monzhj' drifts from one constellation to another, seeking fortune amongst the vacant planets. 'Zhijt,' or life, is sheer opportunity; love, coincidence, patriotism, murder are mere patterns in a starry sky. »

I remember this path, going up beside a little playground. This is where I'd held a boy's hand for the





first time. I was surprised by the feeling of his sweat between the skin of our hands. If you look up, you can see a little window with a clothesline that ran to the building on the other side of the street; that's ours. Wait. I can hear them speaking. It's like the grand aviary down at the Revolutionary Square; in every corner, something is squawking and chittering, animated by its own private song. All around me; I'm surrounded by their incessant chirping. They are inquisitory, their beaks dig into you seeking seedling.

"What do you like?" the bush warbler asks as it sits on the gate behind me. I like the way deer and rabbit run through the forest, free. I like the way the wild strawberries make your mouth pucker all up in the winter. And I love how you might lift a piece of wood and a thousand little bugs run for their lives; lives which are short and sparse in luxury, but worth living nevertheless.

"And what else?" a mustard-y kinglet demands as he sits on my shoulder. And I love the first snowflakes of winter that bring on Gaia's well-deserved rest.

I pulled on the large steel door of the apartment building; more appropriate to a bomb shelter than a living space, I feel. I pull it open, a little concrete hive with

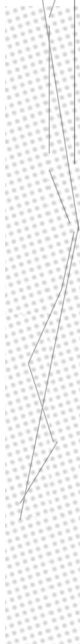




little light; it's where I'd first learned to walk. The memories come to me like little spasms of music that find their space 'tween the silence. I walk up the steps; the first story, my first friend. The second story, with an old woman who'd lost her husband in war. She'd give me chocolate-covered quark sent to her through the mail.

And the third story; here, open the door. Ah. It's how I remember it. Feel the warm carpet under your feet. We kept a few quotes from the Thoughts nailed to the wall beside the door, above the shoe cabinet so we would take a moment of solemn remembrance. I'd always been struck by one of the questions: "who is the alien?" I could never answer that question.

Take one of the pairs of guest slippers and come with me. There on the right was the kitchen. The wall was painted with all sorts of flowers, like a beautiful garden forever in bloom. My mother was a fantastic painter. If I could, I would open the fridge and offer you the best pickled peaches, pickled tomatoes-- after, we could go into my room and eat the chocolate I'd stolen from the magazin. My mother would sleep on the brown couch in the living room, my father in the little guest room down the hall which would be unbearably hot in summer as the





bed shared space with the boiler. Me and my sisters would sleep in the bedroom, though at the time my mother had already told me that we'd need to move somewhere with more space as she couldn't have me sharing a bed with my sisters forever and--

There you are! My little Lanka, sleeping soundly on the bed. Cozy underneath covers adorned with felt roses. Next to the bed you'll find my bookcase. I'd kept everything there because I believed it would somehow get into my brain while I was sleeping. And at the window sat my little bureau, partly wood, partly plastic. I'd carved a few things into it, including the names of girls I'd hated. Look out the window; you can see the kids walking to school, in clothes far too big for them. Across from the bookcase was my dresser; I'd always resisted wanting beautiful things in public, in private I relished them. For the sake of my popularity at school, I had to pretend that mom's beautiful woolen frocks woven with red and golden threads were antiquated and ugly. I'm sure that hurt her. I'm sorry about that.

I pulled out the chair and sat at my desk. Under my arms, I felt the wood as if it were shaped perfectly for me; the comfort of an old friend. On the desk were a few

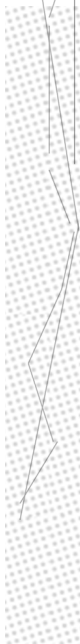


of my notebooks: homework, thoughts, little short stories. I'd always loved telling stories; not just old stories, but I'd create my own and I'd entertain my sisters. I'd invent great warriors and weak little princesses, powerful women that would turn into frogs, evil wizards that might fire missiles from their wands. I've now come to see that all of my stories came true; though they'd do so in strange, bizarre ways. Our great warriors don't die in triumph, they merely disappear in a single flash of fire. And weak little princesses are never rescued, merely forgotten. People turn into monsters all the time, their appearance remains the same however. And evil wizards are merely bespectacled men in long white coats who find it easier to theorize about free neutrons than worry their minds with morality.

"Read me your favorite verse, A-;" she asks. I'd not heard my name in so long that it seemed foreign and strange to me. Is that really my name? My favorite verse? I see her sitting on the bed. Her hair is curly and red, her face broad and without judgement.

"Read me your favorite verse, big sister," she asks.

Oh. I wondered if you were here. The light is on.





You grow ever more vivid. Dressed in steel and glitter. I go to my bookcase and I reach for my cope of "the Twenty-Four Thoughts;" I open the pages and they are full of my handwriting, somewhere between nervous scribble and obelisk. And I go to my favorite verse. You know how it goes, don't you? And she says:

THE TWENTY-SECOND THOUGHT OF KALI
HICHI:

« And when Kali Hichi at last appeared before the 'druzhina,' he came bearing not peace but swords. And he asked of them:

"Who is the alien?"

"Who?" the 'druzja' answer.

"The alien is man. He makes his habit the Zone because he has no home. He has one million GODs within him. One Nay-toe above him. In the commerce of the Zone, I say unto you that they are equal. Some may live with the power to inhabit many worlds, the money to pass from one hand to another as money wants. All action is transaction, I say unto you. What is there to say of Nay-toe in the Zone when each 'monzhj' is a Nay-toe onto





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herself?

"Who?" the 'druzja' answer.

Who is the alien? He was never home to begin with. Another's Nay-toe is as much as himself. He looks inside himself and find only others. He is his mother and his father, his partner and his lover. He looks deeper within himself and he finds nothing.

"Who?" the 'druzja' answer.

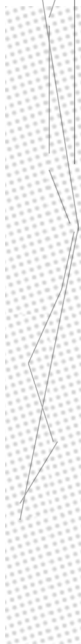
Nay-toe will ask you to be yourself. But what if I look and there's nothing there?

"Who?" the 'druzja' answer.

Who is the alien? 'Monzhj' is alien everywhere and to everything. The world is lost to him the moment he arrives. The cosmos is all around him, but he himself is a-cosmic. He demands order because he himself is the product of disorder.

"Who?"

Only when 'Monzhj' is dead does he find the order he demands. His sorrows and regrets disappear, and





with them the desire for control sorrows and regret insist upon. »

Strange. It's like you've been here the whole time. You smile as I set the book down on the desk.

"Why do you like that one, sis?" she asks.

I'm not sure. Maybe it's good sometimes to know that someone else is thinking about the same things you are; you feel more at home in the world. Isn't that ironic?

"What does ironic mean?" she asks.

I laugh. I wouldn't even know how to describe it. In time, you just sorta know it when you see it.

"Strange," she answers.

I look at the window and find that the street is full of figures drawn with light. They walk around, they speak to each other, though I hear only birdsong. The street is alight with a celebration, a celestial banquet.

"It's spring, sis. It's time for the harvest festival."

Of course. I hear the front door open. I get up





from the seat at the desk; she holds my hand. I take you, Lanka, onto my bosom; you comfort me with your endless generosity of softness. We walk together to the front door, and I see that my mother and my other sister have come home. They sit down to take off their shoes; beside them are shopping bags full of fruit and bread. Peach, wild strawberry, cherries; oh, don't forget about the pastries filled with cheese and covered in honey, or the sugary donuts. These are the modest riches of the poor. My sister has put her silky black hair into ponytails, she is dressed in my long summer dress with peonies. And my mother's hair is covered with a little cap that makes her look boyish, especially wearing those denim overalls. I laugh.

"You're home!" my mother says, not quite smiling. I suppose she's been worried.

"Finally," my sister butts in. "Where have you been?"

And I say: "I wish I could tell you where I've been, what I've seen. But I'm home now and I don't have to speak if I don't want to." And we embrace. And I felt so exhausted that I collapsed onto the couch, as if all my blood had been drained from my body. And at first, the soft sweetness of tiredness brought me comfort. But I felt





my limbs become stiff, my muscles aching with strain. A sudden chill came through my body like a rushing river, and its sound filled my ears with a terrible clamor. That's all I remember.

THE TWENTY-THIRD THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:

« So I say this unto you, 'druzja.' There is no such thing as peace on Earth. To be born is a war against the world to which we are alien. To be born in this world is to not be of the world. Peace is merely another name for death. I say unto you, 'druzja;' paradise under phosphor skies lies beneath the shade of swords. »

Yelena covered herself in the yellow plastic of the radiation suit she'd found in the storage room, tucked between a few gas masks and bottles of potassium iodide water. It fell from her shoulders outwards, making her look like a bright yellow tulip that had sprung legs. How long did she have left? She looked at the clock above the monitors; black and white, without numbers, it seemed too serious to Yelena somehow.

She put a few of the bottles in her pocket before stepping onto the platform; a few bottles, a little bit

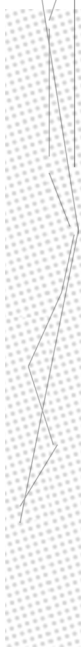


of chocolate, and even a little handle of vodka. Before pressing "vnjis," she looked around the interior of the tower to see if Natalia had left anything. She thought that somehow Yelena might be able to return her something, which would give them some sort of destined fate to meet again. She laughed; she laughed at herself for her childish fantasy. So illogical sometimes. She tried to think of Natalia dancing in a field, golden sunflowers swaying along, her face unburdened by worry. She deserved to be remembered that way, Yelena thought. Yelena leaned over the console, pressed the button, and said "Proshchai, Yelena."

Outside now.

Night came but there was no darkness as the mountains were bright with explosions and fire.

The ground was glowing; the sky was a canvas for light which poured onto the pulverized glass that had been scattered all over the Zone. Before liquidation, the Zone changed as a biological super-organism from one form of life to the next; now it merely transitions from one dominate inert sediment to another. A jet screeches above Yelena; she covers and covers her ears as the land before her suddenly bursts into white-hot flames, tall as





skyscrapers, burning Heaven's feet.

Yelena held onto the yellow plastic of her radiation suit and set to running, sprinting as fast as she can for the mountains where she could hide among the rocks from the planes which circled around the Zone. Everything around her howled, surrounding her with screeching horns, an angry wasp buzzing in her ear. She runs up the rocks into a small little alcove, turning her eyes away from the blinding flashes. She covers her face and cries like a newborn.

No. She puts the yellow plastic between her teeth and squeezes her body into a small chimney. Her head was thumpin' like hard bass, violent lydian hockets swirling 'round; "fuck you," she muttered as she pulls herself up the mountain one step at the time, her hands caked in mud, cut open 'n bloody. She would not be deterred; she would see him no matter what.

Through the chimney, a small path led into the interior of the cave, pitch black 'cept for a small shaft of light. She felt the rock shaking beneath her; she would not be deterred, no. She crawled through the cave, 'twards the shaft of light, which led her up a grassy path, further up the mountain, past cities full of rock spires and lime-

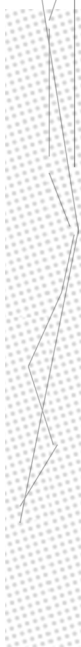


stone pavements, steep monoliths and monuments rising up from the stone. She would not be deterred; "fuck you," she muttered. He owed her something.

As she ascended, she looked down beneath her: the city of stone became a massive landscape of porous bedrock, disappearing into fluorescent dust clouds. Her shoes were shredded, she left a small trail of blood behind her from her cut-up feet and arms. The yellow plastic was still 'tween her teeth; she bit on it as hard as she could. The inside of her head was an echo canyon full of screeching. "Fuck you," she muttered over and over like a mantra, until she'd reached the top and she'd found no more mountains to ascend.

THE TWENTY-FORTH AND FINAL THOUGHT OF KALI HICHI:

« A harsh winter overcame the Zone. Many had succumbed to the frost, and the hunger and loneliness it brought. Kali Hichi passed, as well as did his 'lyubovnit-sa.' But the 'druzhina,' though full of grief, did not succumb to despair. The world of 'Nefejest,' with its kings and emperors who demanded obedience and submission, was long dead and gone. Now 'monzhj' bends the knee only to the authority of truth, follows with devotion only





the pursuit of all that is beautiful and good, and obeys without question only the demands of the heart in matters of love and loyalty. But you've heard all of this before, I'm sure.

After a long cremation, Kali Hichi's body was finally laid to rest such that his spirit might rise to meet Nay-toe himself there in the deepest, most empty spaces of the Zone. When Kali Hichi awoke in the world that comes after this one, he'd found himself in a vast interior filled with nothing but sand. And after traversing these empty deserts for countless nights, Kali Hichi finally opened his heart, and for the first time in his life, Nay-toe appeared before him.

Nay-toe spoke of Kali Hichi's sins: 'I know every thing you've done...'

And Kali Hichi answered: 'and I know every thing you've done... so let's call it even.' »

Strange, isn't it?

Yelena walked up the mountain, which was cold underneath her feet-- it was soothing, pleasant. At the peak, she saw a man overlooking the Zone, which had be-



come nothing more than a flat hazy plane of white phosphorous. The ground was a bright and brilliant ember, as if it were made of crushed stars.

"Elon?" Yelena yelped as she approached the man. "Elon," she repeated. "It's you, isn't it?"

Elon looked back at Yelena. His appearance startled her; he was dressed in white robes and had a long beard. What an asshole.

"I go by Kali Hichi now," Elon said with a friendly smile. "You look like shit," he added.

Yelena laughed.

"No, I didn't mean that. You look great. Just a bit... you've had a long day," he said.

Yelena nodded. She laid down beside Kali, looking at her bloodied, fleshy feet. She removed a few pebbles from the raw flesh, took the bottle of vodka from her pocket, and poured a little bit of it onto her wounds.

"Za lyubov," Yelena said before taking a fat chug off the bottle of vodka and wiping her mouth. She passed the bottle to Kali, who smiled and took a few chugs him-





self. And they sat there together, watching the light slowly eat up all of the Zone.

Yelena took the chocolate out of her pocket, annoyed to find that it had mostly melted; she licked the package like a cat, and she cleared her throat.

"Why twenty-four?" she suddenly asked.

"Hm?" he answered.

"Why twenty-four and not twenty-five?" Yelena said between licks.

Kali laughed. "To tell you the truth, I couldn't figure out how to put my last thought into words. So I just ended it at twenty-four."

Yelena furrowed her brows in irritation. She wiped her mouth, wiped her hands on her radiation suit, which was now covered in chocolatey streaks. "What do you mean, 'couldn't figure it out?' So what the fuck was the thought?"

"The thought was," Kali said, pausing to ponder.

Y
LVCIG121
AET
TVCN2
VCCN25M
YECEN2
N1NEBV
CONMODD
B1202
CBV1DV
N1BICE2
2SE
S12LEWD1
20M
0N12
N11009
M2EN9
D0FOBE
E1
T0BOBE
M1 N1
TNC1D1D0
M1BOB
E102W0D
2ED D0
ME E111
I1B12C1
I1B
COM2E1E
WME1
211
D0G0B
1220M
11BEW





"The thought was... well, it would be addressed to her. I would tell her that you're still a blunt dagger. You need to be sharpened before you can carve yourself out a part of the world you can call your own. Because this isn't the only Autonomous Zone. There are actually many zones in this world, some more autonomous than others. This is just one of them, you know? You gotta understand that you basically always make yourself. So it's really no-one else's responsibility but your own;" Kali ended his monologue with a shrug. "I think it's just kind of a downer."

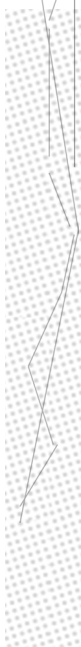
"That's it?" Yelena grunted. "I come all the way up here to find you and that's how you end it?" Yelena crossed her arms, biting on her lip with irritation.

"I'm sorry," Kali responded. He didn't have anything more to offer.

"It's fine," Yelena answered. "I mean," the sky above them looked like a burning forest; "no real point now, right?"

"I disagree," Kali said with a smile. "Why don't we just sit down and... just enjoy this moment?"

Yelena closed her tired eyes, as the sky had be-





come too bright to bear. She put her hands behind her head, forming a pillow of sorts, feeling her limbs become warm and loose from the vodka.

"I didn't think you'd make it," Kali said. "I'm happy you did, though." Yelena didn't respond; she hoped Natalia died quickly, holding in her arms what she'd wanted to find.

A few stray thoughts come to her as she thought about Natalia; no, that wasn't her name, but then again Yelena was never really Yelena, or Christine, or Marena. She thought about Elon's words: maybe it's only in the confession to yourself that you can start to think of yourself as a shiny dagger, and thereby sharpen the edge with which you enter the world. How's that banger go? "Whose world is this?" It's yours; to make, no-one else's, and Yelena no longer felt this to be a source of great loneliness but rather the sweetest of relief. See how the flowers now suddenly bloom, inviting you to their aroma?

After a few minutes, they'd finished the bottle of vodka.

"How long do we have left?" Yelena asks Kali.



2'
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23E
2025END1
122W
0N12
V10N1
WYEW
DOTOVE
E1
FVBOVE
W101
IWCIDIDN
LEWOB
E102WOD
2E1 DO
WE E111
VD1B12C1
10W
COM2E1E
WWE1
211
DOTOV
122W
F02EW

"Not sure," he answers. "Probably not long. To tell you the truth, we should probably end it ourselves... before the radiation symptoms start to hit." He suddenly seems so worried. "I can... do it for you if you're too scared."

Yelena chuckled. "I'm not scared, not after everything I've been put through," she said with her voice growing just a little quieter; "I can't help but feel... and I know this is stupid... I can't help but feel it shouldn't end this way."

Kali didn't answer.

"Here," Yelena said as she took the bottles of potassium iodide out from her pocket. "Drink this." Kali obliged. He drank all of the bottle. Yelena looked at this face; the light of the phosphorous had turned orange, making it seem as if his face was made of burning-hot coal. She laughed.

"What," Kali asked her. "What are you laughing about?" he adds with a laugh of his own.

"Nothing... it's just... look, my dear 'lyubovnichek,' you were wrong. Nay-toe takes and Nay-toe





gives. Sure, that's true. But I too decide what I take and what I give. So Nay-toe needs me as much as I need him."

And by hearing this, Kali Hichi became enlightened. He took out his phone, hoping to send his followers one last thought.

"Shit, no reception," he said, holding the phone up towards the sky in hopes of getting more bars.

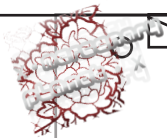
Yelena embraces him from the side and they hold hands.

"I'm not sure anyone is left to read it," she answered.

For the first time in her life, she felt no need to doubt anything; his hand in her hand made the tired devices feel harmless and tame. She rested her head on his shoulder. They watch the white phosphorous turn yellow, then red. It was like staring into the innermost heart of a fire. It's the most beautiful thing Yelena had ever seen. She clears her throat, and she says with a smile:

"This is nice, isn't it? What do you think I should name myself?"





by: [baroquepiral](#) + Escher McDonell

DELILAH PANKHURST

Likes: Y2K aesthetics, Y2K cars, para para, FRUiTS magazine, manga fashion spreads, minimal techwear, New Wave sf, Joshipro, bathhouse showers, cuddling with strangers, absinthe, 5MAP-B, inside jokes, eroge theme music (secret)

Dislikes: e-girl porn aesthetics, “communists” who don’t talk to people offline, AAA games, /v/, /twt/, algorithmic optimization, vaporwave, City Pop LARPer, boring rich men, the Azoth Cybertruck, hostile architecture, “contracts” made without your consent (e.g. national, familial, heterosexual, social)

Theme song: Lungfish - Descender



MERCENARY PLANET

POI datafile

Ask any random trans woman in Seattle (or Portland, or LA, or on Twitter) if they’d heard of POI Lillywhite (or POI Obiakolam, for that matter) before her emergence as a military leader and the most frequent answer you’ll get is, “wasn’t she Delilah Pankhurst’s roommate once”? The answer will often be charged with jealousy. Sophie was one thing, but no one quite understood why she picked those randos out of all the trans women in one of the most accepting cities in the world. She always, the stories from the party crowd go, gravitated



toward people who had no idea who she was. But she didn't stick with all of them like she did our POI cluster, the group house at 856 S Sullivan, which depended primarily on her and Sophie's money. In addition to Leona and Mai, whose stay was theoretically temporary, there were usually 1-3 other friends circulating in and out (hence one of its nicknames, the Ho-Tel, a reference to the location in South Park, whose name its neighbourhood shared; and to the fact that many of these guests were casual sexual partners, though none have to date suggested any exploitably exploitative dynamics).

She wasn't that famous at her peak, 30th trans woman in Seattle by aggregated follower count (Instagram, Twitter, OnlyFans, users in her Discord server Asset Flag has provided some invaluable info here). Her audience didn't quite fit into any of the standard clusters, but overlapped an unusual number, and consisted disproportionately of others with high degrees of overlap. Her 4chan background made her too edgy for the wholesome/political crowd, yet she didn't share the style of the edgelords either. /lgbt/ (which

she famously never used, despite occasionally dipping into her old haunts on /o/, /p/ and /fa/) nicknamed her “the most HSTS AGP” and made memes of her as the Avatar (as in Last Airbender). She had haters everywhere, and once said her audience largely consisted of people who saw the hate somewhere and got curious.

Similar upbringing to Leona (and, to a lesser extent, Mai) “son” and heir to a successful small businessman who might have rather just hired someone to succeed him, but was too proud to consider it. Tuttle Pankhurst of Bucephalus Exotics returned from a decade of penniless adventuring around Italy and France in the 80s (during which, at one point, he may have been involved with Autonomist organizing!) with connections that let him import high-end European cars (not as high-end as the one she stole) from Lakeland to the lower elite of Seattle, not to mention a beautiful trophy wife he helped emigrate from Yugoslavia. Flavia Ardessi was effectively a mascot of the dealership well into her 50s and may have helped inspire her daughter’s fascination with race queens and grid girls. As a young child, she appar-



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WVECEMUS
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BICN2
CBVITDU
NFBICE2
SSE
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LBNM
N12
HT1009
WENM
TOBE
TOBE
MI
IMCIDIDN
LEAFOR
E12WOD
EED DO
ME EG11
D1B12CI
COM2ECIE
WWE1
DOTOB
LBNM
TOBEW

ently taught “Samson” to read from fashion magazines.

Delilah’s agency was striking and alarming from a young age. Her parents took her into the city less often than on vacation to Las Vegas, but she tricked a class acquaintance into letting her tag along under guise of a visit at 10, and spent the afternoon downtown shopping for clothes with hard cash, her already considerable allowance supplemented by speculating on Pokemon cards. She had accumulated a decent collection of men’s and women’s before she started taking pictures of herself in front of the dealership’s cars at 14. She claims she didn’t think of herself as a woman when she started taking them, that her combinations of floral bucket hats and globe-decal crop tops and beach sarong wrapped around her slim legs were purely aesthetic choices, like Young Thug who was doing the same thing around that time. She underestimated the agency of 4chan’s anons, however, who located the shots and called her parents within hours (though others were already clamouring for more “CarTwink”, and the shoot was passed around several boards). She didn’t

replicate her success until a couple of months later, and never stopped for more than 4 at a time. Nor did her parents stop giving her money to cultivate the lifestyle habits of the class she was expected to enter. In high school she would borrow clothes from girls she knew (and pay them to pick up nicer ones than they could afford). Her parents assumed she was gay and were grudgingly fine with it, as long as she wasn't attracting predators and embarrassing the business by posting photos online (which she kept doing). She thought the same until an incident with a lesbian classmate that prompted a reconsideration of her identity and, soon after, black market hormones.

This was the breaking point with her parents — at least, her father. He sent her to a troubled teens' camp apparently talked into it by the owner, who was a customer, not telling his wife before they sent armed men to kidnap their daughter in the middle of the night. When she was discharged, at 17, she simply did not return home. So began almost 5 years of on-and-off homelessness, during which she came out publicly online and learned to convert her prurient 4chan audience into a supportive, cross-plat-



form trans one. Though she never entirely abandoned the latter; one of her most persistent controversies is the OnlyFans content she made during this period, accused by many of exploiting and fetishizing the conditions many trans women suffer for a cis audience. (Not entirely cis, as she would eagerly point to the number of eggs she claimed to have cracked with this content.) Substantiations include her using the tent as a prop even after her mother secretly gifted her a 2004 Alfa Romeo GTV for her 20th birthday, which she used as a home until she met Sophie Livermore; and spending donations that could have been sufficient for rent in some neighbourhoods on clothes, which she wore in SFW shoots on Tumblr. (Her handful of experiences with professional modelling she described as “much, much worse than OnlyFans”). She described herself once as an “American To-Yoko kid”. IRL her closest friends at that point were street-level sex workers.

She didn't apply for college but read six hours a day (history, political theory, classic novels and sf); POI Lillywhite has stated that Pankhurst was better-in-

formed than most of her program, and tried to get her in at one point. Despite a lifestyle many critics, including within the trans community, read as privileged and self-ish, especially in the wake of her death, she insisted she was “happy to contribute to society if society would let her”. Once she had a stable income her outflow to various mutual aid initiatives matched and often exceeded it, and she contributed to her partner’s anonymous zine *The Administration of Luxury**. Though her public persona was heavily focused on image and whimsical shitposting, she developed an idiosyncratic political perspective through lengthy arguments in her server that can only really be approximated by extended exposure: see Appendix B. Delilah Pankhurst never achieved her vague dreams of being an “idol” in the real world, and seemed to disdain the parasocial attachment she did attain, but we caution against dismissing the eulogies of those she knew and plenty she didn’t as inflated by the trauma of her death.

*POI Lillywhite claims the two of them in fact collaborated on the opening paragraph, which I have reproduced in full here:



“In any overproductive technological society, capitalist, communist, fascist or anarchist, the central question of work-as-production on one hand and life-as-consumption on the other is both the production of necessities and the distribution of luxuries. To the educated reader this may sound like a restatement of Bataille, and he is an essential source here, but both too abstract and too general to address the problem as I would like to specify it. Bataille conflates excess and destruction (as he does eroticism and violation); this both obscures the understanding of voluntary luxury and its upkeep (e.g., the presentable house) as a matter of social reproduction, and encourages a macho aesthetic dismissal of the less ‘transgressive’ luxuries in which most people, including workers, are actually invested, and which in themselves require organized production, not merely ecstatic destruction. Our problem is not the destructiveness but simply the heterogeneity and irrationality of “luxury” desires, which poses a problem for movements oriented toward the equitable and rational organization of production; these movements have frequently converged toward an ascetic elimination of “excess”, from the prophetic populism

of the Old Testament to many contemporary ecosocialisms. Yet if communism is, as Marx anticipates, to be more efficient than all prior modes of production, a return to a homogeneous state of necessity will not be possible. Understanding this question is especially important for trans women, since our necessities are considered luxuries by general society and legitimizing them as “medical” necessities trades off against the wider possibilities of bodily autonomy which our existence opens. Just as perniciously, capital on either side of the “culture war” is eager to treat us and all demands of radical bodily autonomy as a mandated buy-in to its production of technical capacity luxury, a human shield against the Global South and its demands for equity, an attack helicopter. The neglected, because seemingly proverbial and domestic, question of “from each according to their needs and to each according to their abilities”, then, implies a question of how to equalize access to the heterogenous demands of the body as luxury, without eliminating its character as heterogeneity.”

The rest of the text will be in Sophie Livermore’s Appendix A.



Synopsis

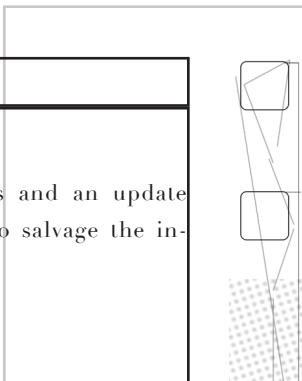
clinging to a single desperate prayer, leona meets halation, a visitor from that supposed better world once held remote by the thousands of atrocities that littered the earth, and draws war and peace towards a collision spanning the galaxy.


2'
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VRIDU'
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E1
FVBOVE
M101
IWCIDID0
LEMB0V
E102W0D
2E1 DO
WE'EGIL'
VPIB12CI
10W
CUM2EC1E
WUE1'
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Last time

Leona receives reinforcements and an update from Earth, and begins plotting how to salvage the increasingly chaotic mission





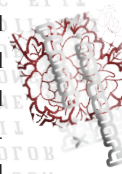
CW: war, colonial ideology, guns, killing, blood, racial fetishization (white on black, Latinx), racism (anti-Black, anti-Asian, anti-Latinx), homophobic slurs, corpse desecration, rape threat, torture, body horror, mass destruction

The plan came together the way my best ideas for papers had, over nights struggling at the edge of sleep. I now had, of course, every experimental sleeping drug known to Edison Lens at my disposal, and military doctors telling me the optimal level of rest for my physical and cognitive performance, but their vision of my optimal cognitive performance wouldn't include working around them, for which I couldn't pass up that window of hyper-wakefulness with no inputs unless I wanted to avoid it *especially* if I wanted to avoid it.

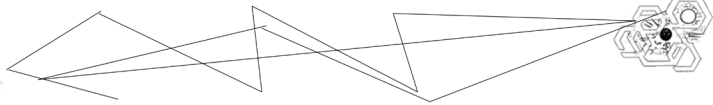
A synthesis of my doubts and my ambitions; Holdfast's and Sieh's and Halation's thoughts. I feared it was too much and too little of each agenda at the same

STAY & GO (THE SOLDIERS' ROAD 6)

REF
TVCN2
VCCN25W
WVECEW2
NINERBV
COMMOD
BIZN2
CBVOTD
NTRICE2
SSE
SOSLEWDI
L2SN
ONIZ
N1000
WENW
DUGOBE
ET
TUBOBE
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INCIDIDN
WENBOR
N2WOD
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DUGOB
L2SN
TOBEW



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VCCNM20W
WPECEN02
ALAEVBY
CMMODO
B1202
EVAIDU
PFBICE2
23E
S02BENDI
120W
0N12
VRI00W
WU0W
D0GOVE
E1
T0BOVE
W101
IWCIDIDN
LEMBOR
E102W0D
2E1 DO
WE ERI1
VDIBI2CI
L0W
COM2ECIE
WWE1
211
D0GOB
120W
T0BEM



time

There were only three real threats to my authority—Waldo Beek, Fingal Hadak and Edison Lens. Most of the other high-ranking power players who weren't affiliated with either of them in some way as legible to the other troops as to her were affiliated with nation-states. The highest-ranking officer of Edison Lens on board, Caroline had informed her, was a tall and scarecrowlike old man named Timon "Tim" Baresch, a man she described as "glacial" and ambitionless yet who seemed to frighten her.

Of course, there were much bigger threats on their way. Like Hiram Ogier himself, or whoever was to helm his flagship. The longer I waited, the less I would weigh.

With every day since I woke up, it looked clearer we were losing. We had taken an unpopular side (this was my fault), at least in this region.

With the Ribbons eliminated, we had been able to take a proper reconnaissance mission into the atmosphere and assess our original strategic objective, the state of the Network. It wasn't good. A trace concentration of third-exponent crystalline particles in the air was the only evidence





of its presence, and even these had a pronounced tendency to self-disassemble under any degree of observation. It had been hit with some kind of autophagic virus. (*“Are you sure nothing like that exists for organic matter?”* Bennett-Fog pinched the bridge of her nose under her glasses. *“How is that possible?”* *“Too many different things count as organic matter.”* Halation in me explained. *“It’s usually easier to come up with fairly simple bioweapons aimed at one. But since this war cuts across species, bioweapons like that are too big to be useful anyway.”*) Contemplation might consider sending a new one, but only if we could secure it against on- and off-planet attack, which would basically require planetary hegemony anyway.

There were legends among the Ferrous Masks of a backup stored deep in Towers’ now-inaccessible core. The Cosmic Probabilistic Encyclopedia (stored on every 200-petabyte computing device in the Lung) gave these legends no more than 0.4% probability, and even if they were true we would have to. But Fingal Hadak, who had once in his past life as a musician released EPs called “V.I.T.R.I.O.L.” and “Inorganic Bituminous Graal” (had I heard that last, in skipping vinyl snippets, in Mab’s lieutenant’s basement apartment?), and hadn’t been seen or located via Denpa for 6 days (“Colonel Kurtz speedrun,” at least Jax could laugh),





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1120W
0012
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W0E0W
D0G0V0E
E1
G0V0B0E
W101
I0C1D1D0
L0W0B
E102W0D
2E1 D0
W0 E111
0D1B12C1
10W
C0M2E1C1E
0W0E1
211
D0G0B
1B20W
G0V0E0W

was apparently searching for it.

(I knew from Bennett-Fog's probability lessons that this was a bad comparison, it even gave its own meta-accuracy over Earth 54% to Towers' 76%, but I looked up Earth in the Probabilistic Encyclopedia and found a measly 12 predictions, including the likes of "will there be a bicontinental empire". That we would make contact with the rest of the universe before destroying ourselves was placed at 13%.)

The more we lost, the less goodwill I had to deal with Beek. Beek's war or Hadak's looked like the ones we could win, though on the long game, it looked like we were losing them too. I reluctantly authorized three bombing runs on targets picked out by the Ferrous Masks, but the more bombing runs we authorized, the less meaningful it became to attempt any information control about the bombing. And while there was obviously nothing resembling opinion polling, going by attacks we were taking and contact with new groups, we were making or radicalizing enemies 2 to 1 for every ally we gained. In the command meetings I made the case for building out a new Entangleweed network with the help of the Ferrous Masks' existing communication and survey networks. But that could be a





long, brutal slog, and would require even more of the reinforcements Beek wanted.

If I killed Beek right now, it wouldn't matter. Someone else would take his place, because he had structurally engineered the war to proceed the way he wanted it. "Wanted." I wasn't sure even he had thought through what an apocalyptic bombing campaign would look like on a pumice planet.

Hadak was another story. He had to be eliminated first, because he was the one who could survive here. No matter what happened, even if the Lung and the ships were destroyed, he could survive here. (Could he really? Was I taking him too seriously? Was he even alive?) He could fight without reinforcements, with his bare hands. He could wander from tunnel to tunnel, faction to faction, massacre to massacre, worm his way too deep in this planet to ever find him again if we didn't find him now. He could bring the spirit of human (white, colonial) warfare here and somehow, I felt, to the rest of the galaxy, everywhere without planes or bombs or artillery, the way he understood (or worse, believed in) it, from first principles.

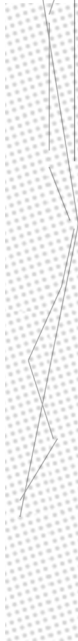
Sieh didn't believe any of this. That was why I trusted Sieh. His unit was going into the "Polyp Crater



2'
LWCIG121
AET
ΓUCS2
VCCNM29M
HPECENV
LUCREBV
COMWODO
E1202
EYVAIDV
PIVIBICE2
23E
202BEND
1120W
0N12
VRI0N'
WUENW
DUGOVE
E1
ΓVBOVE
W1 N1
IMCIDIDN
LEMBOR
E102WOD
2E1 DO
WE ERI1
VD1B12C
10W
COM2ECL
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211
DOTOB
1B20W
ΓOBEW

Operating Front”, 300m below surface in a fortified “micronexus”. They were so much further down than anybody else they were only getting general mission objectives and sending back tall tales. Supposedly they were hiding routes still further down. And mass graves. Hopefully we would be able to get any evidence it’d be all too easy to dispose of down there.

“The unit commander there is one of Hadak’s trusted fighters not just someone who jumped on his bandwagon out here like the Irons Unit. Hadak even gave him a new name Zsàkos Gàdor.” Both obscure references to the cross-cultural folkloric figure of the “sack man” known in Haiti as “Tonton Macoute”. “His real name is Tyson Valladares, a Miami Cuban delinquent who went into Academi straight out of high school.” Baugh had filled me in on this guy he had been keeping tabs on him back on Earth, stuff that didn’t get into his recruitment file, some of it even new to Edison Lens. “His main deployment was in Haiti, where he had an off-record... hobby of seeking out memorabilia, anecdotes, and anyone who could claim a connection to the Duvalier-era secret police.” The notorious “Tonton Macoutes”, who sold the blood of their prisoners on the black market and used vodoun rituals to intimidate their enemies. “He had a complete uniform, with





a straw hat and mask, in his bunk, and a vintage machete he'd even take on missions."

"Sounds like your typical privateer, conquering the wilderness," Guo noted, and a mental image popped up of several adventure movie characters cutting through palm leaves.

"That's normal for people like him." Enfield added. "In South Africa, many people in the gated communities thought this way too"

"So we're dealing with the equivalent of a first world idiot then," Guo surmised.

My mind drifted back to my last interrogation with Beek. *"OK so, if you want to understand where that guy and the Sacred Band of Sol come from, you're gonna have to know about the skinning circles. You studied this, you already know about how SEAL Team 6 in Iraq had small groups of people who'd take long "skin samples" from kills and bring them back to base, right? But you don't know who they were specifically. Either the people who ratted, didn't tell their commanders, or their commanders, despite being willing to tell civilians, didn't tell you. But all those people, they knew who each other were. Not just within units, across units. Across theatres, by the*



time I met them. They take an oath, they do gay hazing shit. Hadak wanted in first chance he got. Now, I didn't give those guys trouble for the same reason nobody in Iraq gave those guys trouble. It's more trouble than it's worth. But that, of course, depends on a balance of how much trouble they're willing to make. Hadak's the first psycho I ever met who wanted to fuck with that balance."

"Just stay sharp," Malin rang in on comms. "Even an idiot can be a threat. Let's just do this by the books..."

I could see on my private monitor the view from the five bodycams, in ordinary light and infrared. Wavering circles of blue-white headlight swam across each other and overlapped, melting form out of the grey staticky dark. (The real texture of the darkness down there — the trace light dripping from dozens of metres above, the coloured flecks of phosphorescence on promontories and in cracks

I had to imagine myself. But it was important, as Bennett-Fog (who wasn't quite in the loop of what they were planning, but suspected) had told me in an agitation I'd never quite seen before, for me not to take so many missions on the front myself. Given what had happened last time, even my pride agreed.

The "Operating Front", within this overexposed



2'
LVCIG121
AET
GUCS2
VCCNM20W
MPECEN02
LLEEBV0
CMMODO
E1202
EVAID0
P1VIC02
23E
202BEND1
1120W
0012
01000'
MVEW
D0GOVE
E1
G0BOVE
M101
IWCIDID0
LEMB0
E102W0D
2E1 DO
WE E11'
0D1B12C1
10W
COM2E1E
0WEL'
211
D0GOB
1B20W
G0BEM



underworld, was a solid grey block at the end of every path. Craggy shards of a variety of shapes and sizes, some in the Stonehenge range, had somehow been tessellated so as to hold together with nothing but a thin layer of marrow-like Geoplaque between them, and no spaces besides thin, rectangular arrowslits. Sieh and Malin were rappelling down from the top, a wide gulf accessed through a narrow checkpoint in the bottom of the bowl of settled wreckage from the crater. Below they could make out a glimpse of the still untouched depths below the bottleneck where it narrowed, the 20-metre square face of the structure suspended between their closest points. Guoh and Enfield advanced through the wormlike “secret” tunnels inside the rippling cliffs, which had also been redirected to leave the Operating Front the only safe access to further depths. (They had been sent in ahead of time to ascertain that this was in fact the case and there were no viable branches unaccounted for).

No movement, no light until they landed. “Maybe they’re out?” Jax’s direct voice in my ear, watching the stream with me. But as soon as Sieh’s boots landed on the black and blue-grey slab, banded like gneiss, the barrel of a DDM4 stuck through each arrowslit. From somewhere else invisible on video, a red laser sight manifested on Sieh’s



chest in Malin's camera, Malin's head in Sieh's.

"Contact." Malin's voice undeterred by the fragments of the slab burst underneath her as she dove close to the walls, hesitating before Sieh confirmed over radio.

"Walls are safe. Stay close to me," he said using a quatro-optic to detect things like explosives, researched and curated for the mission.

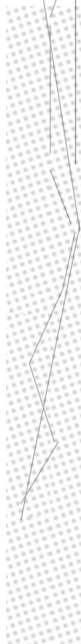
Guo and Enfield said nothing but they'd already reached the ends of their tunnels. Each setting a C2 charge, the clay stuck to where the ground would be and a green light blinked on it, detonators in hand.

"Say the word and we'll breach. Just make sure you have a way to fly."

"Mhm," Sieh murmured in agreement, keeping the M4A1 SOPMOD trained out of the corners of the walls until two figures emerged, weapons up.

"State your rank and your business." The voice from inside was raspy and somehow theatrical.

"We're here for an inspection. Orders from Leona," Malin said.





“Literally who?” enunciated with a sneer and some static suggestive of laughter from the cramped box of echoes. Should they have used my last name, or was it a ritual of insubordination, or were these guys so new they weren’t even being told who was in charge? (The IEEE strategic council had agreed that it would give civilians more confidence in the mission if my status in the chain of command was obfuscated until you were already subject to it.) “What is their rank and designation?”

“Your mission commander,” Sieh reminded, already glancing at the bowls of their knee pads, his eyes almost reverberated as if what would happen in them would morph in an instant but it is all contained with his grip on his primary weapon. “Now are we going to argue the semantics, or should we head back and pursue...other actions?”

“You threatening us, half-caste?” one of them said.

“You’re itching for blood? That doesn’t sound like the commander,” said the other. “Now she’s befriending psychopaths?”

“But at some point you’ll understand what they’re on



about yourself, if you don't already have some idea. Like, killing civilians, torture, you can say what you want about those kinds of things, but messing with corpses? I mean, I don't like it, don't understand it, and I'm a Christian, so I have no reason to do it. But suppose you're not, and the people you're killing aren't. They've done worse to your buddies, they couldn't care less. By that point just killing somebody isn't enough, to deal with that feeling, especially if you're really angry or really good at it – it's like cumming, like what, that's it? So why have a rule about the bodies once they're already dead? Don't tell me secular society believes anything about them, it can't. It's just a symbol that you're not supposed to feel anything about it. Which is an insane thing for people who never fight, to ask of people who do."

"We'll explain it all to your commanding officer. We can work out a compromise. Prevent all this," Malin suggested.

"Think we're stupid? Unload your weapon."

"As you wish." Malin smiled and Guo, in the tunnel, pressed the detonator, blasting the wall on his side while Enfield's remained intact which caused the contacts to flinch. One of the guns disappeared from its arrowslit, while the other opened fire as Sieh disappeared from its





narrow range of vision. *They have better range of fire on us than we have on them, but we can get close at the right angle and they can't see us.* I hadn't thought of what they were going to do with that when I said it in the briefing, but Sieh ducked low and with one hand went straight into the arrowslit and grabbed the barrel, then did something and flipped it and it clattered out of his hand. Sieh's camera instantly filled with the aghast face of the enemy as he leaned in, giving them an easy lunge with knife just long enough for Sieh to pull them up by their bullet belt, taking their knife out of the sheath from the shoulder and placed the blade on throat while Malin covered a third who had emerged from a hole in the wall, the trigger of the M1014 Semi Auto Shotgun blasting away all sound, everything firmed until sound returned only once she blinked, the other naked man stumbled to the ground like the Dying Gaul statue, the involuntary spasm causing them to open fire into the walls hoping by some fate they could shoot Malin in their final moments but to no avail, Malin already stood next to Sieh scanning for all contacts while he held down his target against the edge of the arrowslit.

“Talk.”

“Fuck you. I knew this was a hostile takeover. I



ain't telling."

Sieh pressed the knife closer to flesh, blood blushing on it.

"That's okay. I reckon there's one, two, maybe more of you? In an army, you're not you. You're just a part of a collective, right? Your individuality, your defiance means nothing. And the best part? There's more of you, so we can just keep shortening your numbers until there is just one more left...and whether they talk is completely relative."

"You sick."

Malin turned the shotgun upward and brought its skeletal stock down on the contact's head, knocking them unconscious. Sieh stood, examining the knife for an instance before throwing it away, its agile blade clatters uselessly onto the ground. Through gritted teeth the other contact cried and groaned, little screams tried to take any kind of air while he watched the two operators standing over him, unable to process even that they merely exploited whatever gap in defense there was, almost like a tragic flaw but there was no trace of emotion across his enemy. Only life and the taking of it.





“And then when you do have emotions anyway, they’re all directed at yourself. Which is most American vets I talk to – because those are the ones they tell you it’s OK to have. They want you to hate yourself because they’re scared of you, and they’re jealous of you – I’ve said that myself, I’m sure you’ve heard me, I just think there are normal ways to deal with it. Well, relatively.” He laughed and stared at me to see if I would. “You did too, didn’t you? It’s OK, you’re on the other side now. Anger and hatred don’t really freak the civilians out, anyway, they just make you look contemptible, cowardly. That’s not what Hadak is about. Hadak is about joy. Or at least, enjoyment. I don’t know if you’d call it joy. But a society that can’t enjoy war is one he’d call” Beek made air quotes *“circumcised.”*

“Sick?” A voice boomed from the hole to the other side of them. The man pulling himself out was a strange colour, coppery from a carefully maintained tan that had already faded a bit from underground. “Bro. Where you think we are?” His head was bald and pointed like a bullet, adding at least two inches to his height, straining his straw hat open at the top. I wondered if it was some sort of body modification. Like Hadak, he was painted, but more simply – no blue, just black: ragged brushstrokes marking bones, intersecting and overlapping with the lines of a nylon harness. Rows of circles up his forehead; semicircles like bags



under his eyes, toothy zigzags around his mouth. “We don’t speak like that here of *ones like us*. The sick ones are the ones behind us. The men of Earth.” In the dizzying dark of the Towers underground, he wore sunglasses surely kitted out with some kind of infrared viewer, but indistinguishable at a glance from Oakleys. A Phonk beat skitized from a round portable speaker wired around his belt. “You. You are of power like us. Why you wear cute little clothes of housepet?”

Learned about Judge Holden from Youtube videos headass.

Jax started nasally pseudo-rapping over the stream chat the second he came on, the sprung rhythm, crunk twang of some Southern nu-metal chorus half-remembered: “so *in-SAIN*, so *in-SAINN*, this the *typa shit that go so in-SAINNN*...”

“It’s a murdah-OCRACY!” At almost the same time, Gàdor lapsed into a sort of UK drill voice. Cringe harmonic. Then stuck out one finger, downpointed at his opponents. “You, what’s your *rank*? You know, the real scoreboard, for men just like it is for girls bodies?”

“A society that makes a hard and fast distinction between war and everyday life, not even like a ritual distinction but a distinction you can’t see, can’t participate in, that’s the





same thing. And that's what civilians need to pretend soldiers can't enjoy to maintain. He claims he saw this in Mexico, in the cartels – now those were real savages – people who went straight from picking fights on the playground and forcing themselves on girls in the bathroom to repping their town in blood feuds and having songs about them on the radio. Me, I think he already had the idea on his own. And I mean, if that's what you want, it's not at all hard to get without making some faggy cult about it. Let the civvies be civvies, let them believe what they want – that keeps 'em out of our way. That's the weakness, you know, with any of these guys, whatever makes them need to be seen all the time, as everything they are, and everything they aren't. Naked, y' know, and painted."

Malin flicked a glance at Sieh who stared in a vacuous way letting the eventual quiet whittle down the words until they are only these echoes that shrivel into wind. But from this, she knew he was quite bored of this but was also relieved as he then got on comms.

"Echo, what are we looking at." He said finally.

"We're looking at 10 targets along the tunnels. The Apocalypse Now guy's got a protection detail around him. Be prepared" Enfield noted with a note of disgust I had heard in reminiscences of his homeland, Congo, of



mercenaries or PMC's working security, some of them with painted faces saddled in plate armour and velcro, pretending they were some kind of animal or beast whenever they set foot on the savannah or karoo. Little more than another rowdy tourist.

“Roger, clear it out”. Sieh radioed, moving forward to confront the painted man. Strafing, his movements became light and simple so they could easily transition into another form, morphing a silhouette that would usually be a target. Malin's visor could only see this from where she glanced him and the enemy, all these openings she gazed into as she brought up her auto-shotgun, the front sight a single post peeled at its sides revealing a green node in the middle, as if the coordinate to a kind of triage she and Sieh formed around the painted man, containing him until they could fully limit his movements. The way she saw him, she would tell me, was no different than an ordinary civilian, like many she would see in her normal life at this distance that allows them to pass each other by. Nothing able to enter it, nor her, nor a conflict that happens elsewhere.

“Oh, ignore them, that's not the body count I'm talking about.” He stepped forward, letting his ropery muscled arms (slight freckles on the shoulders not quite dis-





guised as paint-splatter) swing down in front of him like an ape in display. The DDM4 rearing its head back up lazily from his wrist. “If you want battle one to one, I be honoured. Will we be playing by *Sacred Band* rules? You know, with a geas?”

Only women can place a geas, in Irish mythology, but Hadak’s meaning is simply a contract. Little more enchanted than a suburban swinger’s BDSM mortgage, except the kind of person who gets recruited out here seems to fall for it all the time. The one by which he secures his “enjoyment” over you if you lose.

Enjoyment hardly registered to Sieh, Gàdor slipping around the optics of the EOTech sight as if a phantom teasing the reticle, hopping over the 5.56mm rounds meaning to clip his legs. Yanking his rifle up a bit leads the reticule, Gàdor’s face permeating the edges and Sieh pulled the trigger. Blood ran down the cliff of a face and Gàdor stopped himself, flinching at the sudden slice that almost undid his composure before firing off bursts to Sieh not knowing he was in range of Malin who fired her M1014 shotgun in turn. His eyes darted with an undisguisable relief that he could still move, felt his grazed cheek with his unarmed hand. Any closer would have been fatal



but he only found himself closing in on Sieh. Cackling (booming with sharp edges), he drew his knife, perhaps expecting Sieh to have to retrieve his own, but what he saw was merely the form of a normal soldier. An impression to which others would give nods and formulaic words of approval.

Sieh shifted back to bat away the knife's blade with the barrel of the M4A1. "Typical, trying get distance to use your primary," Gàdor actually monologued out loud and moved swiftly to his enemy's side, knife about to dig into the soft parts that the armour clasped. Sieh's hand blurred in every recording, hardly touching his holster and he moved close, twisting his body so that Gàdor's arm would be parallel to his chest. Before Gàdor could pivot his knife to stab Sieh's neck, he felt several punches through his plate carrier, breath knocked out of him and he scrambled to the ground, finding himself returning to his DDM4 by the time he could see Sieh using his Glock chambered in .45 ACP, his elbows juttred at angles that if anyone got close could easily get entangled in those limbs before meeting their end to that handgun. Despite the distance, and the supposed advantage of an assault rifle against a pistol, unease was starting to show on Gàdor's face as he dove out of the way of a smoke grenade rolling





under his feet from Malin and clicked his tongue. Frenzied eyes, cracked paint to expose little bits of flesh under it, every time his head turned away from them was relief that he tried to get away from by trying to keep either operator in sight but they moved like apparitions, Malin conducting his movements and all Sieh had to do was set up the final punctuating note.

On the way out to the Playscape, Halation was silent. We could hear rumblings from inside the walls, even through the membrane of the Lung, on one side and then the other, as if we were inside a hungry stomach.

She had agreed—no, she had made the final decision, with the same firmness as every other. But she had made it at least partly out of guilt, a guilt that she did not want to excise from her tropism.

My own guilt now ran in the opposite direction. If all went well, which is to say if all went as badly as it was looking like it was going to go, I would be *abandoning my men*. At least most of them. Of course, even Beek had discussed “lifeboat” contingency plans. This was just one he wouldn’t know about.

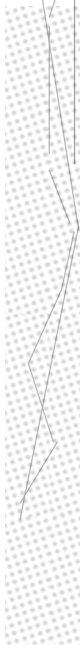


But for her, it was abandoning and betraying something even more fundamental. *And that's why I have to do it, after all you've done for me.*

We stepped along the floating catwalk of white thatch. 'The scenic route' Weirs could even 'walk' along these structures in their neutral form, like a kinesin along a microtubule. Various woven geometric enclosures stuck out at different ends, white wicker gazebos involuted with the complexity of dreamcatchers. In one of them to our left Aqueduct was waiting, dangling a line of fishing rope like we had seen at the Internexus between all their pairs of limbs, sitting on their Fabber organ.

"Hey! What can you catch up here?" Halation's voice jumped ahead of mine into the vocalizer. I'd have thought she'd know, but at least she'd know what the answers meant.

Three, four seconds for their head to turn I hadn't been sure Aqueduct wanted to talk to me, but I wanted to talk to them once before I disappeared, partly to find out. Eventually something at the end of their line lost their interest. "If you run a current through it, you can get it to attract Pennants just like Yayaraya in the cartridges. Oh, I should be careful, your species is electrically con-





ductive, right?”

They ran a depolarizing magnet over themselves and returned it to a woven bag that looked more like one from Earth than any I had seen here so far, down to the grassy texture of the material (though when I looked closely at the weave it was a completely alien topology, based on hexagonal knots), coiling the rope with another hand and passing it to us. *You can use it normally*, they tapped with a third.

I wonder why I keep getting mixed up with people who want to destroy the ground. Idiom but also literal. I wonder if it's something wrong with me.

I don't like... things being like this. Wandering in the dark like folk-durationism. (Remarkably close translation, you could probably make this a thing on Earth, we probably know someone who could. Even without cartridges) Never knowing what you have in common with anyone you meet, having to second-guess everything.

I'm sorry. I looked up only when I was pretty sure they had said what they wanted to say.

No, thank you. It's important that you can... face me

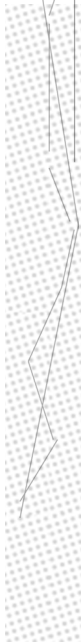




and acknowledge this. Acknowledge your reasons. The Entangleweed never did that – although maybe if I'd let them... They trailed off into their own thoughts for a minute and counting before I decided to continue.

Right, they also... was our 'ground destroying' worse than what they almost did? People were shocked by the Ribbon bombardment but you– they– almost destroyed this whole mesa.

It's not unheard of to blow things up, to alter the environment intentionally. It's done to make Internexes, agricultural basins, chemical and ecological reservoirs, stableways... Or simply to control a collapse that's anticipated to happen anyway. What the Ribbons were doing was unprecedented because it was random, because they were aliens, who didn't know the terrain. Well that made everything exponentially worse for us, didn't it. (Also meant it would be harder to rally propaganda against the attacks on the mesa, although if we could prove somehow that it was a purely defensive strike...) There's a process, normally, of consultation with everyone in range to be physically affected... which was easier with the Network, of course. The Entangleweed positioned themselves as experts, they had connected all the local communities so they could do something like this again... I suspect they had some actual plan to use the remains of the mesa, it couldn't have been





a lie or they would have lost credibility with everybody; they talked about building an underground plateau. Of course, now that this place is a threat to its environment, it's open season.

I wish I had been told, Halation thought with us, what my own messages were doing. Being used for. I wouldn't have changed my mission, but I would have said something. But I was used to probabilistic packets missing. My ship was faster than most, so I might have been deep in history for them by the time they could reach me. Faster-than-light didn't mean Absolute Space and Time, though maybe the Adipose would in the regions it reached — it mostly meant time shenanigans. I had set a single standard for the speed of all Earth's Inchworm Drives, to make sure we had a continuous time-frame with our home planet, but a sufficiently faster one could land in Earth's history. A "relative absolute space" was also maintained by the maximum Asymmetry before an Asymmetry Field became a Strong Asymmetry Field, a fully prohibited technology for other reasons, as cosmological constant. A one-person ship drifting through space, intentionally untraceable, was no one's priority for communication.

It must have been lonely; Aqueduct sympathized. I like long ascetic exercises in solitude but only if I can talk about them after.





Yes. Halation resonated, almost purred. We must be wary of our desire for companionship in this war.

Some of us don't have anything else! Or, believe in it. I was going along with them because they wanted to shelter my Waltz, but I really hoped for what the Entangleweed were doing. Our old Waltz were the kind of people who... the Network going down was the best thing that ever happened to them. Nobody could watch them or call them on how they treated us. There was one old Fabber who'd been predicting it since before I was born - they even taught us how to use Entangleweed.

There were people like that on my planet, I added. Honestly; they ran half the country I lived in, but pretended they didn't.

A section of the "sky" bloomed a sickly-sweet pink, in concentric and overlapping circles, as the surface of the Asymmetry Field reacted to some force or impact.

I hope that doesn't happen here. I have no idea what my Waltz are doing now, if they've joined up with any of the factions. They didn't want to, I guess that was their redeeming feature - they didn't trust anyone, I guess that's why I want to trust people so much. I hope they're not right.





I thought about my dad. *They can't be right. We know they aren't. Even if you're wrong, I'm wrong, we're wrong, we'll just have been wrong in different ways. ...Are you going to stay with us?*

I shouldn't... accept the Unreciprocable that easily. And I don't think I could stand a third betrayal.

We're planning... depending on how this goes, we might leave. Halation took over the hard part for me again. That's one of the responses to the Unreciprocable, right?

Yes, but it's getting harder for people to take it seriously. The more Unreciprocable crimes stack up, the more aliens land here, the less scary banishment seems.

The colours died down, and glancing up briefly I saw a Transport Morph re-entering carrying half a dozen men, strapped down to Weir Biers, bubbles of foamy Towers healing-stuff engulfing their faces and stumps of legs and arms. They passed no less than 30 metres away, returning to the Hiawatha, and none of them glanced back at me.

Some day I'd like to make a cartridge about the human birth process. It sounds terrifying. No egg, no extrusion, no discrete morphs, just a whole body growing inside a whole body



with no idea what it is and tearing itself out...

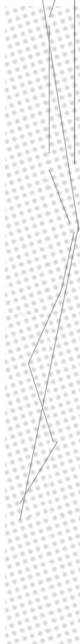
I laughed. *Not quite. A baby is kind of a morph? Before we started cutting open corpses from battlefields to get modern medicine, we used to draw 'homunculi' as tiny adult humans, and it's quite different.*

'Kind of' a morph the same way your genders are 'kind of'?

Kind of the same way. I laugh, and Halation laughs differently, inside and along the connected skin. But we have a duty to be precise in first contact. Differently, in that it is a morph as chronological sequence, not as variation. The same, in that there is no hard and fast bound, only a process of development on one hand, a spectrum of difference on the other. I didn't even feel Halation taking over, but those were her words. I couldn't speak like that, I trained myself out of speaking like that. In academia they'd think you were putting on airs. Maybe she awakened it in me, maybe our speech was neither of us anymore.

Do you think anybody's going to have a baby up here anytime soon?

Ha ha. Hopefully not. The gender ratio on the Hi-





awatha was 78:22. I didn't spend enough time around the women's wing of the barracks (which wasn't mandatory, just a self-selective cluster), relative to how much I worried about them. I had recently appointed a new member of Rho Aias there, a Chinese officer named Yilin Song, who watched Mao-era revolutionary musicals alone or with a bedmate every night in her bunk. *There was something I was actually thinking I wouldn't mind recording on a cartridge, in the next little bit. You could be in charge of... editing, whatever you need to do to make it something. I'm going on a mission and I don't know if I'll come back.*

Huh? But if you don't come back, won't the whole mission...

There's one way we can survive to the end of the mission – the end of the war – even if we don't come back. Putting it in words to someone who wasn't part of the plan – although I almost wanted to offer it, maybe I would, I couldn't tell if it would be graceful or insulting – was an important test. The Adipose node in the Asymmetry Field here can back up a copy of a living being on our exponent of scale using 10¹³ exponents of energy. It's only connected to one other node – the one at the research monastery on Tumour. Holdfast gave us the idea.



That's... a lot of energy.

Yes. The methods for generating it here were less destructive than I was used to, but even with “negentropic self-reference” as an entire branch of mathematics, energy (and Meteorological constraints on its use) was the other main reason the galaxy wasn’t a world of arbitrary shape-shifting omnipotences like Caroline Bennett-Fog expected at some of the technological thresholds they had crossed. Even the Adipose wasn’t, as I had at first feared, a huge tactical advantage capable of transporting weapons and personnel arbitrary distances instantaneously; its inventors had mainly thought of it as a cosmic telegram that got around the Strong Asymmetry rules. A human body and brain-state, of course, weren’t an impossibly large message by the standards of computational life. But they added up quickly. Like texting too many videos. *You have to keep this a secret. Only a few of us can go. Myself, Bennett-Fog, Baresch* (Caroline felt obligated, and I needed at least Edison Lens on my side when I came back), *Serrao, Ghost, Flagg.* The tentatively named ‘Xenovanguard’.

Your brother?

He wants to stay behind. And I needed someone here to lead Rho Aias but this part stung.





But then, maybe nothing would happen. Maybe we'd turn things around here. I felt afraid I had already foreclosed that possibility by not devoting all of my energies to it. The excess that would be needed to reject the statistical tendency—the negentropic self-reference—re-directed to a fantasy of rest I'd allowed myself to admit to the enemy.

“Don't be silly,” said Bennett-Fog the last time I expressed these doubts. “We should have done this months ago, we knew it was possible. And if you're being serious about the subtext, I would have always preferred a closer examination of both sides.”)

You could get backed up... if you want. I feel like I destroyed too much of your life out here.

It was already. I'm not worth that much. It was an objective statement, in the idiom of a culture that had been making those exact kinds of individual-energy value calls for millennia. Where no one was worth less than they needed, but nobody was worth what, say, an American was.

(I remembered obsessively calculating the resource cost of my own transition, comparing it against other American lifestyle costs like owning a car. This probably





delayed it more than any of my other hangups, even the Coven. My dad was an economic conservative before any other kind, not a libertarian out of idealistic principle but a hoarder, scarcity mindset of a divine grace that could only be offered to an unknown 144,000 but he didn't believe even they were worthy, the hidden *tzaddikim* of the Rapture. He had grandparents who had endured the Depression, trekked straight north from the Dust Bowl and not stopped walking until they were sure it was physically impossible, and admired the spending of Roosevelt and no administration after. If you were going to spend like that you had to build real things and real lives with it; as a communist I still believed that.)

Then... I definitely wanna let you make the cartridges. This'll be, if any of them survive... all my army will have of me for maybe three or four months before I come back with new forces. And Mai... any version of me that isn't backed up will want to say good-bye to her. And let the faction leaders here kill each other off. Though skilled people like Sieh would remain here, shepherding those who could be trusted (and my brother) toward the Hypernexus apparently 28 18th-exponent units from here, to give a new introduction and thread the narrow case in Non-Reciprocal Law for "responsible and dissociated" status. It helps us a lot if you play





them as propaganda, obviously, but I'd rather you make them as art. Keep them yourself, or for your own purposes, if you want.

Risking going after Hadak would give me a propaganda angle with people *here*. They wouldn't care that I and *Halation* were theoretically an opposing (and *commanding*) faction within this army if I didn't do it myself.

I don't... actually know how to make cartridges, you know, right? I just know a lot about how they're made. But sure, I'll try. I'm... even if you're a shitty First Contact, there's always honour in being entrusted with First Contact. Thank you.

Heh. You remind me of this character in a manga back home who lives after the end of the world and just wants to film movies, to the point she follows the main character around with a camera and pushes him to do crazy things just so she can film them.

I winced at my own friendliness. I was in too much power to have a friend. But I was also in too much power not to have one.

(When I was a kid, 'a girl' meant 'a person who could make friends anywhere'.)





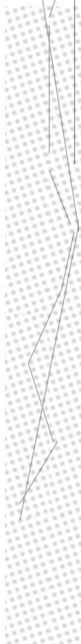
Those are the ones that are a bunch of closed temporal frames, right? That's a movement here but never really became a medium. And two-dimensional visual approximation was barely touched until we could put images directly in our heads...

Art theory terms, I'd found, translated back and forth better than political or social or even purely material ones. Material ones were the hardest; how do you explain how one rock or one tree is named for its shape. Ahasurunu sang because the song suggested something even if it suggested nothing, a colour on space.

Anyway: I'm not the one pushing you around to do crazy things. I'd just as rather you not, but I see that others clearly will without you anyway. And I'm happy to record them, but know that if I have to condemn them I will.

That's what I was hoping you'd say:

So, by going off into that lost Ferrous Mask communication shaft that the Lung had apparently been built on top of and no one told me, that *Hadak* had to find out by torturing locals, I knew I was trying to die. It was fine. Even with her. Caroline had been right about me fighting on my own, just now it was kind of the plan.





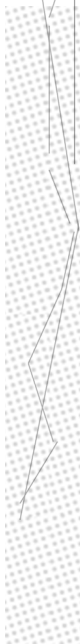
Each member of Expedition Team Boxer received one copy of the following cartridge. Each was connected by (lost-copy)Halation up to a distance of 20m, who could access and record across every cartridge, though could not remove recorded material. The producer Aqueduct Sunbite has stitched overlapping thoughts and sensoria (380-750nm sight, 20-20000Hz hearing range, touch, smell, intra-operable interoception), from single stream to chorus of five, together into a single track synchronously comprehensible in standard consciousness density from third-order intra-operability and up.

Guo lay on the bench clad in his underwear starting up into space, stars stung at his eyes twitching slightly in between lapses of rest, his knee risen up, his heel touching his thigh. Several of these poses tried to embody this leisure, chiseling its surface onto his stomach, how it falls like an archery bow reverberating after it shot its arrow. Enfield joked about people in bright shorts and UnderArmor tank tops in dancehalls, something even Sieh saw in Hong Kong, more as part of the frantic activity that whizzed by him with the metallic urges of traffic lights on green, rushing buses swinging around the corner and the



brisk footsteps of crowds through the crosswalks at Causeway Bay outside the SOGO shopping complex, a large billboard of a smiling face luxuriated in the pearls of jewelry stores on the ground floor. Iron thickened the air as once Sieh wiped off red splatters over the plate carrier. Even in that room, no amount of must from the gasoline fumes could obscure the ravenous feast the chainsaw took off the subject's leg after they refused to talk. They said things about them being inhuman. Them saying that only made me think of people in pedestrian scenes rather than a kind of thing the species of human might do. The moment he said this, Sieh knew that he stripped him of all his mythologies, his brain only focused on sensation now of his severed blood vessels flowing profuse, the subjects blubbers turning from pedestrian to blubbers as his lips only touched each other when he realized he was ironically in a way, just flesh.

'Sieh...' Malin said crouching in front of him as he continued washing the clothes by hand. She suggested to take it to the washers but Sieh insisted on washing them in a way that seemed oddly touching to her, like watching someone take care of a house. But only she knew about Sieh, his smile or whenever he lightened his movements from its usual correctness there was something deeply ma-





levolent about it, seeing things only as vectors and movements. A kind of deadly objectivity and in the face of it, he sheds his stoicism for a controlled annihilation of the target laced with a slight joy. From what she had read of their main target: Hadak, he seemed to have a penchant for this kind of thing and their meeting was starting to concern her. But she only focused on the clothes for now as he lifted them out of the maroon water, suds running down the plate until they formed several rivers and Malin placed her hand on Sieh's wrist. "I think that's enough."

Snapping out of it, Sieh saw her expression, distant but calling on him to enact this same distance to realize what he was doing as he saw the clothes.

"I suppose no amount of washing would do much anymore, will it?" he asked.

"Enfield already suggested the washers at the base...unless you don't want Leona to find physical proof of what we did. Especially being empty handed."

"It wasn't completely for naught..."

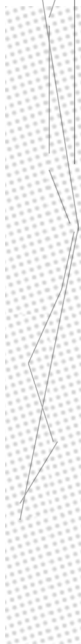
"What do you mean?"

"Because it means the enemy is simply human."



Just like we are. It's only a matter of time before their delusions can no longer nourish them."

Malin had heard Sieh speak like this. Even when they captured the subject they spent days depriving them of water, reducing them to a state of desperation, of wanting life, whatever that meant. Even then she always wondered despite the coolness of Sieh's operations, had there been a point where he too might have been consumed in a different world that was unlike life as a civilian, or those routines that people supposedly did. Routines she could never adjust herself to, much to the chagrin of family so that when she worked para-military, even after the agitations or raids or operations, she would sit in her Toyota Liteace van alone until night, almost forgetting to eat so that when she came outside of it, there was a freshness to the bustles of marketplaces she walked in, but she knew it wouldn't last. When she met Sieh then, there was a guardedness in the way he looked at crowds disguised in leisure, how they glimmered almost taking a silhouette before blinking away, seeming that even in this sort of peaceful scene, they had the same shape as an enemy combatant. In another country elsewhere, there was a coup d'etat happening and that increased or lowered prices around it. Some of the people profited while others didn't. A kind of necessity around it.





During a previous operation, once they left the lights of sirens and chatter of reporters behind the cordoned perimeter, Sieh and Malin entered a warehouse, red soaked into the fabric of clothes, fingers arched up from people unable to crawl anymore. What she remembered most was that despite his efficient movement, his eyes lingered on these scenes, almost as if it were a secret, these deaths and this violence that no one would ever see and even now, she wondered if this was something he wanted to see.

Commander Lillywhite strode into the shared area, her coat slung over her black undershirted shoulders. “Well, Chainsaw Man, I wanted to say it doesn’t work, but it looks like it probably did in this case. The oldest Rusty Moons have heard of the place he talked about, and they think the Waltzes around Polyp Massif *wouldn’t* have. Still... is that how you conducted interrogations back home?”

“Not particularly. Most people still thought about going home, at the end of the day. Although if most people came on a mission like this. They would have already forgotten the possibility of even seeing home in the first place.” Guo said.

“Yeah, but is ‘home’ what determines how we

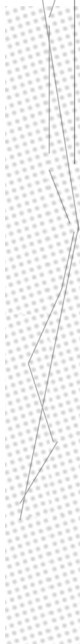




should act? The way I feel is we have to be more careful out here since we're not at home." She crossed her arms and leaned against the wall, rivulets of Halation stretching out through her shadow in two directions. "Although that guy was with us, so that doesn't really apply there." And at the same time, the human Leona was starting to appreciate that opposite intuition that so many people here lived by, not the suspicion of homes that merely declared themselves such, but the sense of a debt of solidarity, independent of feelings or morals, she'd had the last time her home was a nebula of people who weren't at home. But she would bring that up later, if she found the words. She had already defaulted on those debts before, after all. She was already a *warlock* (Hadak used the word in its original sense of "oath-breaker").

Halation handshake with Malin and Enfield. Brief overlays of each shared perspective. Halation had been shocked by the violence of the interrogation as it flashed through Leona's brain, but in each new mind she touched she found it continuing in a kind of movement that made the memories flow easier, like stretching a dormant muscle.

"Not all of us had been so lucky to have homes,"





Enfield said. “That feeling is always nomadic. Perhaps that is something that brought all of us together. We’ve all lived through a violence that we’ve had to force upon others or have forced on us. But it’s not like we had no choice either.”

“I *have* gone without,” Leona reminded him coldly. “It wasn’t always worse. I could have again.” Why hadn’t she? It would have been harder to keep a steady outflow of cash to Mai; more money, ironically, had to go in and out when you lived on the street.

“You say that rather easily, but don’t think it so noble to put yourself in that situation.” Malin’s eyes narrowed.

“It’s okay, Malin,” Enfield put his hand up. “We are not here to argue about pain. We deal it ourselves. Everything else is just weight, and how much of it we recognize as being too much. And as far as I know from the commander, she does not deal in such simple terms... So, Commander. How do you feel we should act? I’m sure you can enlighten us, including our very quiet Sieh.”

Sieh barely reacted to his name but he always appreciated that Enfield had such awareness of everyone

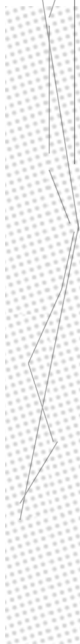


around him. When he went to consulting events, he would see him always checking on the guests in the room and came to Sieh as if there was no one else he so wanted to see. Buying him a drink at the bar, he appreciated it and it seemed he didn't bear the guardedness most people had when they were bought drinks like some favour was about to be brought up. He only drank his can of soda.

“Again, what I was going to say is that it doesn't work, *for the precise reason that it works*. As in, the problem of interrogation is both that a person knows something and isn't telling us, and that we don't know if they know. If you give someone no option other than to give you something, anything, they'll give you anything, whether they have it or not. You've turned them into Azoth Homunculus, and they're just as likely to hallucinate. I lucked into getting confirmation really easily, but there's no reason that information had to be there. Effectively, we happened to have two sources instead of one, but if we'd just had that one, it could as well have been zero.”

Sieh then walks forward placing the can down on the table.

“That does seem like you, Leona. Being able to consider these things. I am not saying that we're working





in a space removed from yours, nor is it privileged. Frankly, that is the kind of thing charlatans like Hadak prize, people who try to free the battlefield from the inevitability of politics, or so, what is right and wrong, or what is it we're supposed to do...I felt that, even when we train together, as I've shot you in VR, I had the feeling you're from this place outside of this. Many of us here don't have long lifespans... nor foresight. I, and Hadak are just like that, at the end of the day. We're from this particular landscape where death is all that comes for us...I suppose then, maybe you're lucky because you're the one who will see what comes up after all of this. Even if you don't know it yet. Whether it is the right one or not becomes less of a concern now."

"I know. There's a reason I let you do this and not them. You're pointed in the right direction, even though I want to talk more about how you understand that direction before we collaborate on these terms against less obvious enemies." She opened the projector app on the Smaragdina tablet in her hand. "Anyway, the direction they've pointed us is straight down. Wouldn't be very good for us if they were wrong."

Malin glanced to Sieh and seized her gaze upon seeing him, a slight smile but she knew it too well, the ma-



levolence behind it and all she could tell where the vectors are already preparing their course, and whether that would still be the right direction, she could only guess.

[Montage to several human songs as heard on a mental loop, garbled and overlapping. Anime style Leona in red on a rec room whiteboard, Halation hovering over her shoulder in blue as a slime girl angel. Jax trading off verses of Mercy in karaoke against thick Ugandan and Korean accents. An Arab man picking up a boxy Southeast Asian woman and carrying her down the hall. Tik Tok memes based on a dance from one of the last seasonals that aired before they left Earth. Several verses of a song speculating about what the Commander had in her pants. Intranet flame wars over World of Tanks mods.]

“We’re nearing the Flume. When you see flecks of blue light passing below, that’s it,” Leona’s voice echoed from below, though Guo couldn’t see anything at the moment. “When I was at the Six-Frond Internexus, it’s what we were fishing in. The groundwater is very fast, so fast Hadak got here from the crater in just three hours. But the entrance to the shaft is beneath it. There’s a very narrow air pocket where we can get around it without getting caught in the current or going off in some other direction. Look for an opening about this shape” a wireframe image





downloaded onto everyone's helmet.

"Copy," Sieh replied.

"Sounds like a terrible waterpark." Guo said.

"Feels like because of our body cameras, it makes you sound more like an action movie character," Enfield chuckled.

"What do you think Hadak would look like at the end of the body cam?"

"Who knows...we just have to find him." Enfield shrugged as they made their way to ground water.

Guo's flashlight reflected a lustreless bronze around edges matching the shape in the file, like the mouth of a crushed daisy, almost organic veins and crenellations in the rock. And a big pale lump of wriggling pseudopods filling all but the furthest edges, a giant bacterium or some kind of fused supermaggot.

On closer inspection, its flagellae were broken Tower limbs, branching fingers torn off like crab legs or occasionally crushed to limp streamers or tied in knots. Only the heads were intact. It was a Mob, but it was barely

ENCIG121
AET
TACS2
WCCN25W
WAECEM22
N1NEBV
COMMOD
B1202
CBV1D0
PTIBICE2
2SE
202LEWD1
12
W1000
WAEV
D0FOVE
T0BOVE
W1 01
TMCID1D0
W10B0V
E102W0D
2ED D0
WE E111'
1B12CI
COMSECE
E1
D0G0B
122W
T0BEW





2'
LWCIG121
AET
GUCS2
VCCNM2M
MPECENM2
LLEEBV
CMMODO
B1202
EVAIDV
P1VICES2
23E
202BEND1
1120W
0012
V1IDN
MUCW
DUGOBE
E1
GUBOBE
M1 01
IMCIDIDN
LEMBV
E102WOD
2E1 DO
WE EG11
VD1B12C1
10W
COMSECE1E
WEL'
211
DUGOB
1B20W
GUBEM

moving, the broken ends waving but the main body mesh staying put, stuck between the lips of the bubble. Overlapping voices rose from stretched and swollen mouths, rasping so that their overtones just barely cohered. Malin called for order with the vocalizer. The head with the longest crest, its eyeholes gouged ragged at the ends of their swivels, spoke. "Don't try to move or separate us." Each clipped sentence a different mouth. "We're stitched together with explosive fungus." "We were the guardians of the Astragalus Flume-basin, a neutral Meteorological body, our responsibility for this area should be established by a Backup 28-Gneiss-66." "We have been subjected to this Unreciprocable Crime by the Algal Bloom Fingal Hadak and his war-band." "Please, by any safe means, help us." At this last angry moans and howls rose up, swallowing the plea under "You should have listened to those of us who can see! These *are* Algal Blooms!"

"Poor bastards..." Guo shook his head. "We obviously can't take them apart without harming them and even then, having to blow them up from a distance might be more risky."

"This is the equivalent of using a hostage to block the way. We cannot just treat them like a mere obstacle.





And they are not an active threat so it would be useless to attack them” Sieh said.

“So, even the calculating Sieh has a heart too,” Guo chuckled. “And even after dealing with Gàdor the way you did.”

“It was precisely because of him, I chose that course of action. Killing him after was something I considered but thankfully the medics stitched him back up. The only thing he’ll know is that we can pull him apart anytime we want to, he’ll think twice before even moving a finger. I somewhat doubt he can even be an effective combat asset given that.”

“Your respect for life is as frightening as the way you can use a weapon...You make it look so easy...” Malin said.

“Life is not something that can be severed from us. It is what we are. Even this Mob here, debilitated but living just the same. It is almost inherent...” Sieh stated.

I can interface with the fungus, maybe, if it's still... alive? Halation struggled to recall enough about the obscure species that had previously been used to bombard





the Lung to determine which versions of the category applied. *We could find out, anyway, if we could get close enough to touch it.*

“We could, couldn’t we,” Leona muttered out loud, “it can lurch and scream at us but all its limbs are broken. But...”

...the consent handshake, Halation acknowledged, would be difficult. Can I speak first.

“I am not an Algal Bloom.” Leona hummed in Ahasurunu. It wasn’t a common language here, but in a group this size... Indeed, as expected, silence spread like a ripple from one head half-wedged in a bubble in the rock. And where it crested, loud babble rose up again. “Or not only. All of us are connected by a Weir researcher from the artificial ecosystem in Tuber Plug above. The Algal Blooms you met are escaped from our captivity. We are trying to recontain them.”

“Why the fuck do you have them here in the first place?” “Offworld researchers have made enough trouble!” “You’re here for it. The same thing they are. The backup.” “The guardians exist to keep things like you away!” “Ahh, even without the use of our limbs, we will die as guard-





ians...” “Well you told me no one ever came down here”
“You should have let me go when my lover from the Marl-
stone Sea ”

There were also mouths too crushed for their
words to be made out.

“Don’t separate me I’ll die if I’m separated” “Sep-
arate me save me separate me”

“If I connect to the fungus, I may be able to sep-
arate those who wish to be separated, while keeping those
who wish to remain connected...” Leona’s body choked
with Halation’s tears. “I’m sorry, I know this is not enough,
we can send down more help or supplies, with real medical
tech.” *We’re going to need everything we can spare ourselves, if
things go like our bodymaps are showing.*

“Enfield. See to it they’re taken care of. When
help or supplies come in, direct them here.” Sieh radioed.

“What? Then there’s only the three of you going
after Hadak...What are you planning to do.”

“Us being here, even if we may not know all of
what the commander is intending, the least we can do is to





protect and preserve those who have been wrongfully injured.” He had been talking about “life” just moments ago, but from Leona’s studies of military and law enforcement, this was where she would have expected a policeman to use it, and the awkwardness of ‘wrongfully injured’ almost felt like a pockmark where it had been left out.

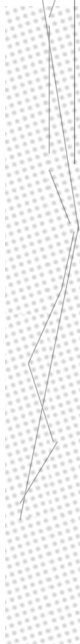
“I will see to it they are treated, but that is not why I have reservations...Are you going to face Hadak by yourself?”

From Sieh’s camera looking at Enfield, it frames his confrontational expression but it is not one that necessarily corners one for an answer so much as it pulls out the words already, sneaking out to seize upon the moment with, once again, nothing to say. Enfield must have known that silences while mighty in some ways are never impenetrable. Air that always finds a way in.

“Of course.”

“You can’t be serious,” Malin then stood in front of him.

“Come on, Sieh, I’ll have to bring you a stool with all these jokes you’re telling” Guo laughed.





“I’m not joking. Also I’m standing. I haven’t sat down this whole time.”

“The one time you’re serious?!” Malin gasped.

“Anyway, it is important to have more people on the outside rather than settle this with killing a single person. While he is a target, there are more important things than hunting him down. I think it’s better that you attend to the crucial aspects such as examining the rest of the space, potential fallout in Hadak’s command or even seeing if they’re plotting things around us.”

“Thank you.” Leona’s voice had the tone of command. She was holding out her hand toward the writhing Mob, not touching, yet. *This is already a small-unit mission, and if we’re badly outnumbered we can retreat.* “Now, is that enough sign of trust?” Halation’s variation of Leona’s voice rang out between the cramped walls. “We are leaving behind one of our own, decreasing our own numbers against the enemy, because the enemy is not a goal independent of the well-being those he has harmed.”

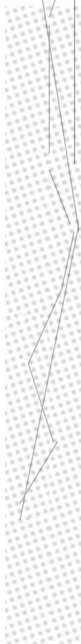
“There is no more well-being to be had.” “There is only the duty of the guardians. If we forsake it now...” “If those of us who need each other are left to each other



alone we will not have enough.” “Enough what?” “Blood.”
“Digestive fluid.” “Marrow.” “I’m not going to *not* accept
help for you miserable ” “What are we doing, we are a
Mob, we move as one. If any can be helped all must help.
That is how a Mob moves.” “We’re not a Mob anymore, we
can’t move.” “Not a Mob not a morph an atrocity let them
help *let them help LET THEM HELP*”

Leona stepped forward, slowly, and the dissenting
voices quieted.

“You too ” she gestured to her unit “it’s bet-
ter if Halation has more points of contact.” Montage of
distinct first experiences of feeling a Weir stretching out
along the hyphae of a fungus for the first time and find-
ing nothing to work with. *I can’t work with it. It’s not in-
teroperable enough.* Leona remembered Halation spreading
along grass, a dragonfly... *And I didn’t make the grass dance
in the ground. There are things an organism this simple can’t
physically do. It doesn’t move except by growing. I can hold
it back from exploding, while I’m in it.* (How did they keep
it from... but the guardians had secret ways of activating
and deactivating the fungus, which their guests had stolen.
Wait, then were you the ones who... “Splinter group, that’s why
I told those kids not to leave, splinter groups cause all this trou-





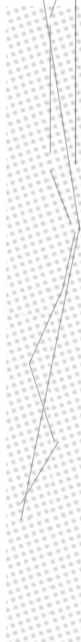
2'
LVCIG121
AET
FUCS2
VCCNM2M
MPECENM2
A10EBV4
CMMODO
B1202
EVAVIDU'
M1VICES2
23E
S02BEND1
1120M
0012
M100V'
M0E0V
D0GOVE
E1
F0BOVE
M101
1M01D1D0
1E0L0V
E102W0D
2E1 D0
M0 E111'
M01B12C1
10V
C0M2E0C1E
M0E1'
211
D0G0V
1B20M
F0B0E0M

[damage to cartridge: Error 698592. Access next available memory?]

The first stretch of the path they found through the semipermeable membrane of webbed foam at the bottom of the Flume was a straight shaft like a mineshaft on Earth, with a rail of hangers for Tower limbs frustratingly just too far apart for humans to reach. The unit figured out a consistent, quicker-than-climbing method of jumping between them with grappling rope and gloved hand, not necessarily the same one as their targets had settled on.

Infrared goggles were unavoidable here. Reduced resolution in visual data.

Then, after a period of time measured internally in completely personal, unprecedented units [*montage of sense-of-time samples*], they reached another membrane and through it with an 'electric password' provided by the Rusty Moons found what looked like fractal pumice; blue-white rock in the glow of cool heatmapping; two or three visible openings large enough for a human body in every open space; openings at every scale below in regular divisions; no tunnels, just adjacent bubbles, of size vary-





ing up another degree of scale. From somewhere far *below* trickled a wan hint of light. Despite the structure of the space, the shaft continued straight; yet it no longer had the same relation to its surroundings, as when the rock had been black basalt, with most openings not large enough for a groundhog.

“No sign of movement within the shaft...”

“Foot steps at zero.”

“Can you get a read on the depth of the tunnel?”

“About uh...500 m, maybe more? We can't confirm yet.”

Walking down, a cavern opened up around a large hole about 20m deep. Guo stood at the edge of the cavern's entrance, the smooth profile of his silhouette blending in with the rocks as if it too bent and corrugated into their incongruous shapes, the first muzzle flash only revealing a phantom. Malin supported Sieh, standing behind him as he set up a place to rappel down.

“Should we drop smokes? Screen our entrance?” Guo asked.





“No need for now. Let’s proceed slow.”

Hooking on they jumped down but caught the rope, their fall halting as they swung onto the wall, combat knife loosely attached by a string on his wrist, spinning in the air a bit as if a free floating malice about to stick its fang into the unsuspecting soldier walking below them.

The eerie, birdlike sound anticipated by fourth or fifth units the blowdart, cut from a fibrous white-translucent reed, that pinged on the motion detector built in with the infrared vision further fourth or fifth units early, toward Guo’s neck.

Halation, on detection, plugged the angle into the helmet computers to line up with the borehole radar map.

Swinging slightly out of reflex, Guo started to move forward, the soldier below noticing the enemy and bringing up his weapon but even then, Guo brought up his MP5, the shortening distance between him and his target becoming a perfect place to subdue and terminate them. Sieh had already landed on the ground, his first step seeming the only visible one toward the enemy as he already disappeared within the curves of the tunnel. Every time his fingers twitched, they looped into the guard of





his combat knife, its blade tearing through flesh in deft yet free slashes, the one instance it hit plate armour over bare oiled skin, all he needed was for the contact to try and grab him only for them to miss as he moved to their side, bringing them down to their knees with one kick that stabilized him, the battlefield appearing to him in a brief yet clear mirage and all his movements becoming a recreation of it within the melee. His rifle remained untouched, only dangling at his side as if a metronome, almost tempting someone to grab it, and the few that did only realized that their grip inadvertently set up the M4A1 to aim right at them as Sieh, noticing his weight being pulled to the side took hold of the rifle's grip and pulled the trigger. Malin approached this by the book, laying down suppressing fire, both surprised and not surprised that basic maneuvers such as using smokescreens still remained effective. Despite them having IR goggles on, they couldn't just fire blindly but their caution only allowed her a way through, giving her a bevy of exposed points to attack from as kills connected her path, gaining momentum as things seem to fall into place, as if the swift mechanical precision of a clock.

“Clear.” Sieh reported.



“Clear as well.”

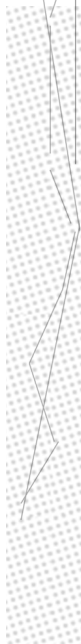
“Yeah, clear.”

“The unit they were down here with was supposed to be ten,” Leona cautioned. She reached out and grabbed a thin bridge of the wall, crumbling it within her palm. “This is computationalized rock, right? Is the backup supposed to be within this stratum, or below?”

There’s no way to say, because it doesn’t have power, so there’s no way to access anything that might have been stored here. It could be a node of the backup. It could have a code for some other reservoir.

There’s more light in here, said Halation, than there should be at this level. Natural light.

There didn’t look like it, but the finest gradations in darkness were detectable by the interlocking radial quilt of photoreceptors spread algorithmically even over the Weir sensory surface; a trace, dust in the air, drifting from somewhere far away but not as far as they had come. *Aqueduct’s talked about this. Some really deep installations have ‘light-tunnels’ vertical openings and series of reflective surfaces that pipe light from the surface all the way down here.*





This would be... deeper than they've ever heard of one. But it's possible, somewhere... which direction?

As Halation stretched through the tunnels around them each member of the search party now crawling through gaps one or two chambers apart, horror movie wisdom notwithstanding, spreading the net a gradient measurable only in second exponents stabilized across the mesh. *Azurite.*

So they moved, separately, in the same direction.

There were no more ambushes. "Wouldn't they want to stay *out* of the light?" It was a random guess, the only direction that *gave* them any direction in this three-dimensional foam. Therefore, other humans would have been drawn to it too. "If they could notice it. They don't have a Weir with them... right?" But they had other equipment; if Leona turned up the sensitivity all the way on the night vision goggles it looked like a faint static of green pixels, floaters. Until they stepped, at about $\frac{1}{3}$ of its height, into a roughly globular bubble, the size of a two-storey house, through which several small beams aligned into a single shaft so sharply distinct, even as it illuminated the space around it, that Leona thought of those brass bars used in baroque sculpture to indicate light.



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M1VICES2
23E
2025END1
1120W
0N12
M10N4
M4E4W
D0GOVE
E1
G4BOBE
M101
1WC1D1D0
1E4L0B
E102W0D
2E1 D0
M4E11
M4D1B12C1
10W
COM2E1E
M4E1
211
D0G0B
1B20W
G0B4W

“*Solstafir!*” Hadak boomed, grinning his thorny mouth tattoos taut, at the bottom of his beam of negative space. “*Amber streams from Sol are not unlike the waves of the sea, nor the endless horizon of ice.*”

Below which should have been worse ground but it was harder to descend slopes this steep and irregular than to climb them, face and hands forward. A spray of bullets flew up at them from the light below.

A thrown fragmentation grenade from a gap in the side of the opened tunnel blew the opening structure against a wall that it blew open again, while Hadak emerged from the following flashbang and smoke on calloused foot, Scar-L slapping against bare thigh, Desert Eagle cocked against clavicle.

For that moment, Sieh dropped himself under the magnum’s length just at the side of his head before throwing himself out of the way, his hands catching the ground in a somersault, bending his knees to catch his fall, M4A1 immediately trained on target, Malin and Guo provided cover but break contact once Sieh gave the word to keep their distance. Despite being able to dodge in a swift yet flamboyant way, it still jarred him. For a moment, some might call it a fear of death, or the unpredictable but his





teeth gritted into a smile. Malin heard the slightest quiver of mirth in his voice even at the radio, his frequency smooth yet finely jagged, watching a landscape from far-away and then seeing its elevation changes upon entering it. This was where Hadak would enter.

“Not bad! So you aren’t completely held back by your millennia of hydraulic civilization,” Hadak laughed.

Sieh brought up his M4A1 firing in bursts Hadak easily maneuvered around almost as if the concentrated shots made it so predictable. Leading his target did little as he always stopped short but he had to keep moving as Hadak popped a shot with his SCAR-H’s underbarrel FN40GL grenade launcher. Knowing he’d be on the move, Hadak took few but deliberate shots with the 7.62x51mm rounds. Despite the large calibre, Sieh still took caution but it made Hadak an easier target as he could not move and fire catching glimpses of Hadak through the muzzle flashes as he cooked a grenade lobbing it toward Hadak. But in this, gold sculpted the rocks out of the darkness in brief flickers and he could almost put these together, what could be seen in all that that could suspend all this as he reached closer to Hadak whose grin widened upon reaching him, but he also smiled, reflections twisted on

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BISOS
CBVITDU
TRIFICES
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UNIS
ATIDOU
WVENU
DOROVE
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TVOBE
W-PI
TMCIDIDU
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WBIISCI
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COMSECTE
WMEI
SII
DOROV
IBSM
TOBEW





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WUENW
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E1
GUBOBE
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IWCIDID0
LEMB0V
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GUBEW

the metal surface of a blade both sharp and soft light. Hadak also glimpsed the barrel of the Glock 17 in front of him, its bore seemingly engulfing him, flames bulging into the face of the 9mm bullet where he threw himself out of its trajectory, smoke parching his flesh.

Mere objectivity, such were the killing points that both men aimed for. Hadak's blade missed Sieh who moved his head back, feeling the bulge of his throat exposed before grabbing hold of his Glock 17 again, his other hand acting as a guard, moving towards a natural retreat as Hadak also backed off, a cut on his face from a 9mm round as drops of blood followed him. Sieh thought of him like an opaque illusion, his movements further obscuring his intent, even foregoing openings to kill but that did not make him any less dangerous. Taking a Serbu Shorty shotgun from his thigh, he shot it towards the ground in front of him, 12 gauge shell fled and clattered on the ground fleeing from the hole created as Sieh dropped down, switching to the M4A1 firing above where Hadak's profile pulsated through the semi-translucent ceiling. Despite the 5.56mm rounds not being strong enough to penetrate, it ate away enough to make room or cause a structural weakness on the ground causing him to fall. If anything, Hadak





must have hated that Sieh was making him act this way, influenced by structures he usually balked at. A kind of submission.

I'm two chambers Quartz from where you've landed, Leona's thought tingled along the Weir-tracery on his nerves. Lead him over to me.

Hadak glanced down the hole with distaste. "You prefer the Hive even here, army ant? This planet will be a fitting grave for you." He turned his head to the light and whistled for a moment before jumping in with two feet straight, like a diver, arms at his sides and both muzzles flaring, like booster jets at his sides.

Above them, from between the rays he had referred to by the Icelandic word for sunbeams-through-cloud, two more nude operators descended on wires like spiders. They descended exactly where the beams disappeared into holes in the floor of the chamber and sank straight through. Malin's extrapolation ran through Hala-tion: *They've clearly mapped this space already. Assume they can find you.*

"No shit." Guo scoffed picking up a QBZ-95 Bull-pup rifle from a slain soldier

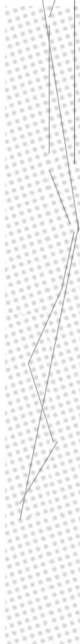




“We’re in a realm where predictions hang in the balance,” Malin said, tracking Hadak but still maintaining her distance. The battlefield, this thing that would suddenly wrack someone in its fervour before they find themselves watching it happen, something not happening to them, survival was the trembling heart’s daze.

Hadak’s blazing entrance blew open two sinewy bridges of rock in the chamber where Sieh had landed and sent him falling even further, where as soon as he landed he disappeared into a side-opening. His voice rang through the echoing rock around them: Meanwhile, cut off from Leona by a new hole in the ground, Sieh backed into an extended corridor, in the shafts of light at either end of which Hadak’s operators had just landed, posing.

They closed in on Sieh. It was only a matter of time before Malin, Guo, and maybe even Enfield might join in too. As he alternated pointing his M4A1 at both without firing, one remarked something into a headset about the ant looking like he was out of ammunition. Yet they did not attack, only savouring the thought of Sieh succumbing to despair. Their glee only nourished Sieh’s mirth as he brought up the M4A1 to his opponent in front of him who flinched firing his weapon but he didn’t hear the M4A1’s





empty click as Sieh crouched with the Serbu Shorty firing it one handed causing the enemy in front to duck out of the way. Throwing the M4A1 at his attacker behind him, the discarded assault rifle clattered to the ground, he sprinted at the wall, jumping off it, his fist landing down to the enemy. Balking at such a maneuver, he easily avoided it only to realize it hid his other hand drawing a long knife from the sheath on his lower leg driven into their torso, their next breath only caused him to choke and seize, opening their hand to drop their weapon, a SIG SG 751 SAPR that Sieh deftly turned to the enemy fingers clutching the ribs of the bevelled handguard, firing the battle rifle's 7.62mm round bored open his opponent's stomach, intestines spat onto the ground, Sieh's boot turned towards the other contact behind him and with a quick twitch, the tremor of the rifle firing, its subsequent round made a surgical slice through the target clutching at their throat, open mouth unable to voice their cries, a large crater left in the wall behind them.

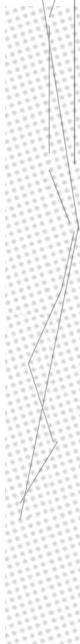
Meanwhile, Leona tried to follow Hadak's voice which seemed to be somewhere slightly below-Azurite to her, training her Roland Special on the ringing gaps in the floor, through which the rhythmic mutter rose like: *"This is the nature of the earth as a whole, and of the regions round about it, and in the earth, in the cavities all over its surface,*



are many regions, some deeper and wider than that in which we live, others deeper but with a narrower opening than ours, while others again are shallower than this one and broader. All of these are connected with each other by underground passages, some narrower, some wider, bored through in many different places..." A shadow crossed over Halation's line through the gaps in the rock and she spun around in the opposite direction of the voice, pulling herself a navel-level port-hole and dropping down a crack to land in a meandering worm-trail vein, a bit less than six metres behind him.

Hadak turned around. "Quiet, but not quiet enough. You have come closer to how human animal used to stalk his prey, but most of your sensitive surface is still covered in noisy encumbrance." Was he using his schizo rambling as echolocation? He charged, Desert Eagle (in his left hand) filling as much of the space with noise and shrapnel as possible, while his open-palmed right came swinging like a trebuchet over his shoulder and down toward hers, 12-inch Damascus kukri twirling on a short leather strap around one finger.

Firing the Desert Eagle once more, the .50 AE round pummelled the ground leaving a large hole promptly forming cracks to form, the enormous leverage of that gun com-





parable to his own overwhelming strength. Not only did that magnum complement him physically, it also required a kind of wild unflinching demeanour to control its recoil, a weapon that would always threaten to be off target, slip out of its wielder's grip or be burdensome. However, his finger was unable to lift itself from the trigger, an obstruction wedged itself into the guard unable to prime another shot, the Desert Eagle rendered effectively useless as his eyes widened at this. Leona smirked at the antenna of the walkie talkie the failsafe for the Azoth Denpa she shoved into the Desert Eagle's trigger guard, preventing the trigger from resetting. Another .50 AE round chambered but it was only dead weight as the firing pin could not be activated. He swung the Desert Eagle around, if not to club Leona, to shake off the walkie talkie inside it, looking like an overly strong oaf who could not shake off one minor inconvenience. His other hand was occupied trying to bend back the wrist that had slipped the hook of the karambit between the larger knife and his finger. He'd retracted the finger, letting the knife slip off and into the air, before grabbing it again by the hilt and clamping around her fingers at the same time. The two knives vibrated between their hands as his raw strength dug in around and between them, like it had with the first Tower it had met. Beek had taught him how to establish dominance with a handshake;



with Leona he knew he was exposing his surface to the mind-reading, nerve-manipulating alien. He could feel it and stare it down directly. *Hello. I too am a nervous system. A predator of nervous systems, in fact. I understand what you are. The mushroom showed me, the loosh eaters taught me. It's not just your pathetic ethics, a nervous system cannot simply overpower another. Only bodies do that, not signals.*

While they stood frozen in interoperation, the disabled Deagle swung down and bent her arm at the elbow. Her hand released, his pulled away with both knives, and he swung it back up at her chin as she brought the Roland Special up into the opening made along his arm toward his eye. He ducked his head and kept running, slamming her by the diaphragm even as she evaded his bladed fist into the open space through which Sieh had initially dropped.

“Leona! Hit the dirt!” Guo cried somewhat redundantly on the radio.

She landed deliberately and stayed down. Tremors unsettled the space but it wasn't long until the walls around them tore open in silence. A .50 BMG round from an Anti-Materiel Rifle. Its long steel beam of a handguard and its square body dwarfed Guo who lay prone looking





like a curvy outgrowth out of the weapon. Claymores surrounded both his sides even having a cracked floor underneath to slip down should he need to escape. Malin weaved through the holes created, Hadak's silhouette clear as she took her PP-19 Bizon, 9mm rounds fed down the helical magazine spitting dozens of rounds. Hadak moved out of the way, looking annoyed as he knew this was merely some kind of diversion, half expecting Sieh to pop out from somewhere. That would be how he'd end this, as if the end of a logical sequence.

Double knife hand guarding the side where Leona was pushing herself back up off the ground, he removed the SCAR-H from his back and fired another grenade in the direction of the approaching gunfire.

Too predictable. She switches out the tubed magazine for another, the hail of 9mm rounds knocked into the grenade causing it to explode mid air, knocking her back a bit. Reacting to this, Guo fired at Hadak, the excessive heat emitted from the vents of the handguard made his target seem like a mirage, imagining him getting pulled apart by the Anti Material round but he still stood like a moment of lucidity. Since he still had to deal with Leona, Guo was safe for now, wondering where Sieh was.





I'm a layer above you. Trying to get a bead on him as he and Leona go hand to hand again, through the hidden Weir-wire.

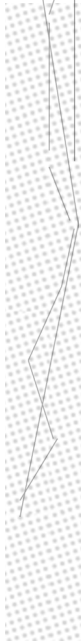
By now, the arena of the battle was one giant crater, the beams streaming in again. But behind them, the roaring applause of settling shards of rock had been joined by a vast, almost musical groaning, a chorus of whales in dissonance, a chainsaw of bass through their marrow. One of the beams that had settled dancing on the ground between Hadak and Malin disappeared. Snuffed out.

It's falling. Above. How much, how fast, who knew. Tuber Plug is falling.

Does that mean the Lung...?

The Asymmetry Field will hold it together, for now. It's going to drift down as the rock under it shifts and cracks under its own weight. No idea how far down it will go. How long until it gets this deep.

Sieh ordered Malin and Guo to fall back. Enfield was the only one far enough from the collapse to navigate them out. Malin didn't even ask what Sieh was going to do but her sigh already said it for her. Maybe it was just the



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MIGIDV
MVEW
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E1
GBOVE
M101
MVIDIDV
LEMBV
E102WOD
2E1 DO
WE EG11
VDIB12C1
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COM2EC1E
MWE1
211
DOTOV
1B20W
G0BEM



inability to form a solid impression as the Tuber Plug fell apart around them or the debris formed around fractured openings cut off suddenly but this almost seemed like a making of a new apocalyptic world, Sieh, and Hadak were the last ones in it as the latter spotted the former and fired his Desert Eagle, the .50AE round pointlessly embedded itself that wasn't the target and Sieh crouched moving with the new terrain created from the collapse. This alien world reshaped into a terrifying yet familiar battlefield, its terrains only braved the exertions of bodiless wind, their silhouettes disappeared within it until they were just as opaque, lost within its haze, the same that stretched across space and time.

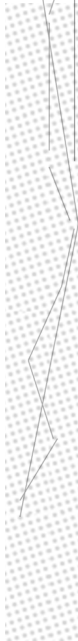
“So we could just stay here and wait for it? This seems like a good area to secure.”

“Flume’s more important. Hold that and you have a route to most places in this georegion. Head back up to meet it,” Leona stared up at the collapsing ceiling, her gaze switching back and forth with Hadak, who was hovering over the edge of a chasm that had just opened. Knowing who knew what he knew about where it went, and whether a backup was really down there. They couldn’t afford to allocate all their resources to Hadak’s Holy Grail; they



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 23E
 202FEND1
 1F20W
 0012
 0GID00'
 W00W0
 D0G0VE
 E1
 G0B0VE
 W1 01
 1WCIDID0
 1E0B0V
 E102W0D
 2E1 D0
 W0 EG11'
 0D1B12C1
 10W
 C0W2E21E
 0W0E1'
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 G0B0W

couldn't afford to ignore it either. They could afford one
 suicide mission, already "backed up". One Avalon story.
 Halation retreated down their bodies as her perspective
 disappears from their version of the saved file, and theirs
 from hers, if it is ever recovered. "Deliver the message, and
 take care of everyone as best as you can."





Feral Gamer

likes: parkour, pixel-choreography scanning and technique absorption, mercy/sportsmanship in the name of prolonging pain. research into simulations and parallaxes, hypocrisy

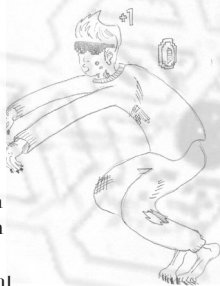
dislikes: gender opposition (usually female), analog solutions to digital problems. cheap sneakers. real life.

blood type: n/a, varies

seen with: these solitary creatures often have degraded socially yet can collaborate with each other through use of personally coded holograms, visible only to the intended recipient.



by: ghosted van



SCARRED ZERUEL



Shin Five Zero

occupation: abstract Geist-avatar consolidation of wizened police minds

likes: black ice cover and shadow works, moon credits as distraction both local and general, functioning credit acceleration, hypnotic cut-up poetry as mantra or mass chant, lawscrolls, unasked for advice or policy dictation

dislikes: unchecked youth, white ice magic, resistance, property destruction blood

type: ???

seen with: n/a. manifest in heavy action as jōnin, field details and investigation as chūnin.

character profile



2'
LWCIGI2I
AET
GUCS2
VCCNM2M
MPECENV2
AOLREBV
CMMODO
B1202
EVAIDV
P1VIBICE2
23E
SOSBEND1
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V1IDV
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ROBEM

I am Theocryphite, dispatched to oversee the continuity of the Greater Indicia as it covers the Skein that is as nebulae furls through void a repository cloud of where the Skein has brought to life and will the consciousnesses of planets infused with NET access. Because the Skein is a threading of wills and therefore can be a clotting of them a whole population becomes vacant, wills emptied to the homeworld, through tech that as nanite splices itself into the dirt and becomes earthbound hardware, as if splicing skin with steel, as the result in the end is a hologram soul or spirit serving as vessel of lone will. The Skein believes it will ascend through union of these planet consciousnesses if enough knowledge and strength is harnessed. If the Skein ascends its effect on the Source, my higher order, my own splinter suborder and therefore my positionality is kept unknown to me, but when I think of it my spiritflesh form that must be assumed for mastery over interplanar travel, lacking the astral capability of the newfound Lucas as most do adopts a certain waveform; I can see my whole positionality displaced, my monad with nowhere to go.

Now that I have traded flesh for aether I find my spiritflesh remains entire but the soul enmeshed within is cut up and can bleed fear that in the end transmutes



changelog



itself into voidstuff, that body houses the void or that is void, that is absence. Still even in aetherflesh or in death of flesh I remain capable of summoning Archeana, those that burned through sky, reversed and remain in sight and memory of living will, now named and numbered. They are as many as leaves on a tree with more and more summoned from relooped memory constructs of ancient croaked TechnoSages, but the one I use most is 77.XI: The DayGiver, before reversal known to the Source as Elaziel, Messenger of Night.

At any given time much is occurring on the Skein but can be said to be contained to it; it has been blacked out by the Hegemön so that any NET it develops is shut out, echoes off the gradient, and returns to the local Skein. Outside that is the sound of pain, the transmission field that the Bridge Phassa has learned to use to send messages through her chosen neural valent's exhumed Skein—the eyes that had been marked by jetgrown brows to provide a base binary code for final translation of light in the Clean Flame, flayed raw and open as naked grub. Even by Etha there was a residue coating the grub's mindseed that made it receptive to the



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VIGIDU'
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E1
FVBOVE
W101
IWCIDIDU
LEWBOV
E102WOD
2E1 DO
WE EGI1'
VDIBI2C1
10W
COM2EC1E
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DOTOV
1B20W
ROVEN

harmonic through pain; instead of feeling it is a sound, harsh and wailing, and what Phassa says through it, what emerges after the exhumed Skein translates, was often not what she meant to say.

It would probably be a surprise to the HuskShedder to know that the mindseed would be waiting for him on the other side of his own flesh when he had reversed himself the mindseed stayed in his skull and became a voice of its own, because to translate it had to become thought, thought itself to weigh it all over. Still the true purpose of this was as with all HuskShedders, or at least we saw when viewing with our warprecept filters over the reality we dream while aetherflesh, to provide a node that preserves itself within the skull and can later be contacted through the sound of pain by the main Skein itself that hides behind his eyes now even returned to flesh. So reversed then he had been with the exhumed Skein exposed and that had guided him even as Phassa's raw nerveplucks had repeated themselves in the same lull he'd been used to from the Spiders: the Coven of the Gates, the Sisterhood of the Skein, embraced and enshrouded as Oracles by the dataveils of any earth-





consciousness imbued with NET dyed and influenced through the Skein.

It was that steady stress that would be a backbeat to the same melody, and this was meant to be because at some point none not even the Sisterhood except for broodlings closest to Mother Nest could remember when the philosophy itself of Neutral Lotus had become alive; it had warred for breath and belief with other philosophies through other factions of the Sisterhood. Most of these were based around the Gates though Neutral Lotus had spread through the outer Gates and now held a handful of them, of these belonging to the Oracle Laeath, one of many, though the nature of the earth-consciousness aspect had drawn me in this instance. Because she oversaw Mutate of the garden cities, seeded through an alignment of the Skein in that spacetime instance to the harmony of the rebirth cycle verdance is born, destroyed, is brought back; as such innocence can never endure, but it is through the union of resulting Mutate tech with the Skein that allows it to theme itself this way.

Which had begun as a result of this guilt as a stain, that had seeped into the hostavatar Orche, that



had begun to rot away at her, that had made her want to preserve herself in her entirety until Source knows when, the end of time. I am tracking the Bridge Phassa who in the end was repelled by this stain; I of course know how she must feel but Elaziel is the final arbiter and his blade has slain many. She's not easy to find. She has long deserted Orche, left through a passage in the betweenSkein, the wastes of Solitude, after saying she'd be making a routine run for ghost schemata program protocols she believes to be sent by or abandoned by the Skeinic forebears but are in fact transmissions and broadcasts from beyond the Skein resequenced through code loops become emergent in a signaldrenched atmosphere through the Skein denizens' use of augmentation, of the machine spirit taking flesh, becoming disease to the atmosphere itself, overloading it with data, biometric signal and noise.

She's done so with the help of what she called her 'phaseal heart,' which is a core of light at the centre of the holoaura avatar in vision but is itself a machine of light, an interface with the ghost schematas that embed themselves in the void that sprawls over the dunes of Sol-





itude that swallows the horizons and chokes them off from you, is what I've heard; when the veil there is heaviest, the void of no-data, that's when she can see them as fire against the darkness, the way their light twists the silent black like wingtorn fireflies falling to earth. These in her vision would drift down to her like spores of fire but are being scanned in white light through total clarity against the no-data veil; so they are easy to track as floating tufts of fire, but this means as Theocryphite I have to come down hard for severing the loop that Neutral Lotus kept so stable which had been birth, death, rebirth in lost verdance. It is this very loop that the Coven has isolated with their compound archive-sight as central to the stability of the Skein, and they have here identified its alignment as a stability pattern; that sight which looks backward, forwards, and sees all parallels too, all the corners it brightens, no shadow of occlusion marring it, the mind of Mother Nest free to wander to and fro along it so in the end the Skein might be one giant web they've woven and they like to give that impression.

Because her 'phaseal heart' has grown to have a name and a function it has chosen, and would infer through Phassa's parameters that this loop must be broken for the good of the Skein that free from cloister





2'
LWCIG121
AET
GUCS2
VCCNM20W
MPECEN02
010EBV0
CMMODO
E1202
EVAID0
P1V1CE2
23E
202BEND1
1B20W
0012
0T1000'
MUCW0
D0GOVE
E1
G0BOVE
M1 01
1WCID100
LEMB0V
E102W0D
2E1 DO
WE E111'
0D1B12C1
10W
COM2E1E
0WEL'
211
D0T0V
1B20W
G0BEM

she would seek to restore the freedom of others from the earthconsciousness yoke, because the chrysalis will only be complete once the whole terrafront which will need to be transmuted to lightflesh to function as mere shadow of the auraavatar, and in this way many earthconsciousnesses might meet, and their shadows would warp together, the terrain they stand on rippling and gnashing in heavy glitch burn is preserved through the corrosion. Which means of course that the Mutate denizens will either lose their bodies or their minds; of these only HuskShedders will arrive in Orche's chosen hell sequence default, the Black Hole Barrows, with memories of their old life. Others such as SigilSeers or HiveScriers I have made it my business to catalogue the Discordances, as is the Theocryphic term; these are subaligned under General ContraValences brought on through the genesplice nature of the psycheaugmentations will retain their bodies through Etha and the Clean Flame but will rarely be given ADMIN status for purposes of the cross-indicial second run.

ADMIN status is bled from the Chapel as a blessing radiating from the sleeping Acheron. The Chapel will only activate in the presence of an Alt, or Faunic glitch in the datasphere; these Alts are drawn to HuskShedders





most of all and will often, unknown to this neuralsplice strata, appear in times of Tended wane, which is when the neural valence will accept the symbiosis, usually under a heavy doping of hypno-phero weave by their Oracle.

Now as the strands of fate untangle before me the shifting patterns of aether sight appear to me like warping Flora, light in weave of grass or petals of flower that could be a thousand flowers laced in brilliant sequence bleeding through each others' shape and form. These represent the forever dreams of the planarsea local to wherever I am that the Lucas see as a network; they can access it, run others dreams whenever they want, run circles around us; these are known as forever dreams as they come alive beneath the surface of thought, and that the dream lingers in waking informing the psyche is what they refer to as a monad soul in the first place. So at any time these dreams chain you, yet as aether they are my sight and at any rate sight is a chain, or so they would tell you and I have lost sight, yet remain as force of will pure enough to summon the Archeana.

When Phassa meets Elaziel she will not know of my presence, and not many do, not knowing until Elaziel splits her, reassuring the loop, the stability of the Skein,



2'
LWCIG121
AET
GUCS2
VCCNM20W
MPECEN02
PUCLEBBV
CMMWODO
B1202
EYVAIDV
PPIVIBICE2
23E
202BEND1
1B20W
0012
VRI00V
WU0W
D0GOVE
E1
GVB0VE
M1 01
IWCIDID0
LEMB0V
E102W0D
2E1 DO
WE EG11
VDB12C1
10V
COM2ECL2
0WEL
211
D0GOV
1B20W
G0V0W

that it might not grow unchecked for its own good. Still it's times like these that make me question my role as Theocryphite; for if we choose to become arbiters what use is our work with the Indicia? Yet the Skein speaks with the sound of pain and that pain cannot be allowed to take voice any longer. Let it rot and corrupt, fester within itself, like the hate that it is in the end displaced emotion, outdated, not needed; I will not be a servant to pain. In the end the Source will file the pain away, and process it, and remove it, like you wash out a stain, wipe away a blemish, remake the purity of each facet.

For that is our work as Indice, and where I am here to restore the alignment, my kindred will confront Scoudra, isolate too in her reversal the pain of vacancy, that is the whisper of the way within with no will or strength to command the flesh. If they say we are too late, that the whole Cosmère is changing, reversing I will bear what pain my aetherflesh can before the end, I'm sure, but of tears to shed I bear no glands to compose them, and a spirit that knows no sorrow other than the failure of its mission. So the revenants of Aurachne may spin their prophecies, but if we agree on this our agreement is a union that is one more node secured in the constellation of thoughts that together compose the Source's





vision of a world where It can no longer see itself.

As long as Cerviel lies chained and split through by crystal within the Valley of the Glass Sky, where burning luminescence grows through his broken flesh to spell away the acid dark so that the crystalline growth there might have respite to construct its shells in a certain symmetry which may absorb the acid dark itself and convert it to growth energy then the Source has patched out from Its grid what bears its reflection; but if Scoudra has her way her hollowed souls might work in unison to free Cerviel, and then the only sight will be the Source looking at itself, and all will collapse into this recursion in a sudden flood of white light.

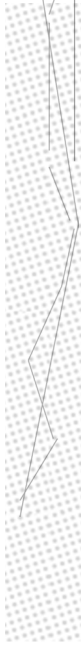


EVCI121
AET
TACS2
WCCM25M
WVECEM25
N10EBV
COMMOD
1202
WVOTD
OFIBICE2
22E
SLEWDI
1504
0012
1009
MENA
DUGOBE
ENBOBE
M101
TACIDIDN
LEWOB
E102WOD
2ED DO
ME EG11'
W1B12CI
10B
COM2ECIE
WME1'
211
DUGOB
1504
TOBEM





2'
LWCIGI2I
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM20M
MPECEN02
010EBB0
COMMOD0
B1202
EVAID0'
PFBICE2
23E
202FENDI
120M
0012
0GID00'
M00M0
D0G0VE
E1
G0B0VE
M1 01
1M0ID00
1EM00B
E102M0B
2E1 D0
M0 EGI1'
0D1B12C1
100
COMSECTE
0M0E1'
211
D0G0B
120M
G0BEM





Synopsis

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



2'
 LWCIG121
 AET
 ΓUCN2
 VCCNM20W
 MPECEN02
 010EBB0
 CMMODO
 B1202
 EBVAID0'
 011VICES
 23E
 202FEND1
 1120W
 0012
 011000'
 W0E0W
 D0T0VE
 E1
 Γ0B0VE
 W1 01
 1WCID100
 1E00B
 E102W0
 2E1 D0
 WE EG11'
 0D1B12C1
 10W
 C0M2E0C1E
 0WEL'
 211
 D0T0B
 1120W
 Γ0BEM

Last time

Morgan wanders the frozen Skein among the
 Ghouls; Cammy games animal planes in the Primacy





CW: drugs, combat, robots, ambiguous humanity, nuclear weapons

ARC OF FIRE

(Σ)

She's plenty of time to stew over how deep into the astrology trip Shin has hacked, plenty of time just hunting for an open outlet not cabled into by Valby's stasis tank. *'Cause Val's life, she thinks, no matter his endless strength, is living death trapped in the stasis tank, like Grandmere's was—death tech used to service life. She thinks, to know you live in a parallaxfuelled symbiosis is one thing, but to have that parallax laid so open, so bare—Shin studies what's not his to study with guiltless focus. She would think soulless but there was a soul, wasn't there? Must be at least one to chart that far past the Thane's Moon, already fixing in place the Harbinger's, and the pantheistic paths beneath those which may have reset since she had last looked for them.*

Still her mindfit now hacked with the shiftband is the smoke of a dart of Ivory's emergency stash. She lit it in the silent space that would be still if not for

REI
TVCN2
VCCN25M
WVECEM92
NIGEBBV
COMMOD
N2
CBVITD9
NPIBICE2
2SE
202LEWDI
I2SM
N12
HT1009
N9
GOBE
EY
GOBE
N1
YCIDIDN
LEMBOR
2WOD
2ED DO
MC EG11
B12CI
LON
COM2
2E1
DUT
TOBE





Chère's restless movement that smoke fuels the mindfit with toxin the shiftband transmutes to access points within the addiction receptors, which chains them to memory. So that memory will be what her psyche chases, chases in detail until it lapses. Until then the mindfit is blunted by the dark 'holic aether, and so she thinks through that haze Shin a cult of shadow demons, and their reach so vast, that they have tiered so high in astrology and if they're behind the Modals too

Finding the right socket she places the chip within the R3plikoid; blue lines pulse through limbs pale as snow. Around her the cables in thick tangles run spiderwebbing and clotted patterns over the cold steel floor that had been built of steel crystallized into thorns to brace and support itself within the larger sprawl-fracture structure, that had built itself, nanites hacking the star creditflow, seeing a chance to yoke a compressed and isolated populace, acting as if with one mind, claiming to speak for the moon credits. *If Ivory lives here, Chère thinks, she's crazy; and if Shin thinks the stability of the credit matters that much*—but that's too far beyond her. She doesn't think she wants that far into Shin's business.

Valby stares at her the whole time, still of body





but eyes full of life, movement, tracking her, limbs waver-
ing in the gloop of the stasis tank with the ripple of ice
blue gel shimmers through the glass of the tank, streaks
of violent white like albino diamond shards. The R3p-
likoid's voice, when it speaks, is autocrafted, singsong
ethereal yet precise, inflective.

"The last thing I remember was a dream run,"
says the R3plikoid. "I think I've gone too far."

"Just far enough," Chère says, staring at the
R3plikoid. The name is in her head, within who she is,
her selfhood centred on the razor line of her eyesight
which now in probe cuts off the R3plikoid from the slants
of the Omarchitect's Bay, the sleek finish of the R3plikoid
glistening against the cold blue light with the eyes of Val-
by dead set on her neck. So that she turns and fixes him
with a death stare, softens old social status instinct
not letting the full hatred through. You can look at some-
one that way, hold the fire back, save it for the next time.
One look into piercing hazel eyes.

"Parallax? What do you mean? This isn't the
Veldt?"

Chère winces. Next to the R3plikoid rests a bat-



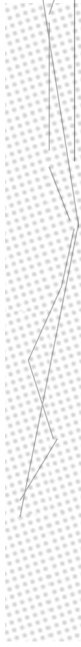


tered notebook, decaled in magazine collage. *INSTRUCTION MANUAL*. She begins poring through it; what looks like a boilerplate tech readout has been cut and pasted into with notes and in some cases blurred out and scribbled over with a felt marker.

"Here we go. This has been heavily researched... blah blah blah... the parallax Realm is not to be confused with a deathsim... the subject will progress through several stages of perception... collaborative project with parallax Intercessor; this will be a distinct nodal soul capable of conscious contact with.... Okay I think this is it. Basic chip install...."

She remembers what it was like, then, in her Habitexa installed within a passivity. Her spine chills as she hears clattering from the corner of the Bay where she'd entered; of course the Feral is still outside, and with the time she's used up, she thinks there must be more. She'd fitted a rebar sledge that was lying next to the hatchway in a locking slot, wedged into the slot to block the latch still, she thinks, kept like a pet, one way or the other, if not in her Habitexa then in here or some other deathtrap.

Valby's face is set in twisted grimace and she





tries to ignore it.

"So that's done," she says to herself, trying to stay focused. "Hold on. I gotta unplug you."

The R3plikoid Lesia stares at her with its soft eyes, wide and pale as moons, glowing silver against the cold blue light that she realizes is getting stronger; the Bay is bathed in it as if under a rave strobe. She draws near the stasis tank.

"Dude," she says. "What are you doing?"

There's no answer. Instead Valby's features tremble and smear beyond the gel like he's trying to reset himself. The pounding on the hatchway is louder, more urgent, and beats a faster melody; behind the rhythm she hears dim shouting. She finds the wall socket and yanks the cord free, hears a soft scratching and turns to see the rising R3plikoid.

"My status is pretty dead low," Lesia says. "Either my *tactica* is offline or it's gone."

"*Tactica*?" Chère shakes her head. "Can you fight?"

ENCIPHER
LET
TACS
WCCN29M
WVECEM92
NIDEBV
COMMOD
B1202
CBV01D0
N11BICE2
22E
S12LEWDI
2204
1112
N11009
DOGOBE
EI
TUBOBE
N1 N1
TNCID1D0
LEMBOR
E102W0D
LED DO
ME EG11
N11B12C1
LVB
SM2ECIE
WME1
111
DOGOB
1204
TOBEW





2
LVCIGI21
AET
GUCN2
VCCNM20W
HPECEN02
AICAEVV0
CQWODO
B1202
EVAID0
PIVICES2
23E
202FEND1
1B20W
0012
VRID00
WUENW
D0GOVE
E1
GVB0VE
W1 01
IWCIDID0
LEW0B
E102W0D
2E1 DO
WE E11
VD1B12C1
10W
COM2ECL1
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G0BEM

"My martial forms are," Lesia says, in a gesture that could be shrugging or her testing her limbs, "limited without it."

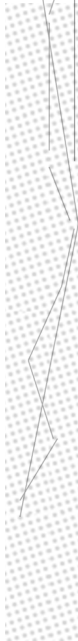
She sees the rebar bend then, wrench itself askew as if possessed of soul in the strobing blue light like a broken limb, pale of bone.

"What can you do?" Lesia says.

Chère's turn to shrug. "I can charm them to death." Her joke flatlines as she flattens out the pages of the manual. *But I was losing.* "Says visual coordination will be weak due to low storage space. Where you're pulled from, you were working from different storage rules. Different physics or something."

She studies where the blue light blends with the silver of the R3plikoid's eyes, a colour like thawing ice. "Your eyes are like " she says, then stops herself. "What's your vision like?"

The R3plikoid's features twist; where the eyes are pale novas the mouth is hollow, the nose absent, but furrowed as if in anger or disbelief the effect is to draw the jaw hollow out, as if it could swallow more than the





air needed to scrape across synthdrossFM vocal circuits,
as if it could swallow the world.

"Tricameral. Topside halves in synchronicity.
Bottom halves are disjointed."

Chère wonders when she was supposed to have
become an expert. Smoke curls into the stale air from the
burning dart, wafting translucence distorting clarity into
fragments of light, a thousand shards or more like stars
stabbing into night if she could count them. She'd left
it behind her ear and it curls before her in ribbons, the
shiftband splicing endorphin into 'holic; what it seeks in
the smoke is the char, the cinder, though by instants it's
been chased out of the furling to leave only the vapour
which thinned is a gossamer cloud, twodimensioned, flat
as paper before her.

The R3plikoid breaks her trance. Lesia is pacing
up and down the length of the Bay, gauging her speed and
agility, Chère guesses; the rebar implodes then, as it does
snapping the lock latch in half. Lesia, on the back end of
her pacing, turns.

There are three Ferals now running what she
thinks is a battle pattern, lurching movements veiling





fury in speed. Lesia sets herself as Chère fades away, fades out of her mind at the same speed she presses herself flat against the far wall, Val's blue eyes tracing her the whole time. They all scramble for better angles, zigzag across the flooring coming in one on each side and the third as the killing blow.

Lesia isn't within their grasp by the time it arrives, clutching at dead air, limbs flailing in crescents as if in mock embrace, as if miming romance or the kind of sweaty stuff that came up when the choker would OD her, so that she'd have to apply for fresh temperance licensing or else be isolated so hard it would be hard to call her a professional at much but lying around daydreaming. She's at their six, cut between them, and the surprised third Feral is offstep, runs right into a chromeplated knee slamming into him with the severity of a Shin Five Zero standard checkin; he lifts off like a rocket, crumples into where the doorhatch, blasted open, juts at a sharp angle. Spine first and Chère sees the body twist and fall.

Innocence lost; first sighted maiming. Of course under cover of white ice that she thinks is still thawing into unseen mist Shin's gone and with him the dark aura he carries around with him as a counter to the cor-





ollary, which means the white ice would be free to act, settling into any free terminal systems or pocket death-sims.

Val blinks in rapid fire bursts. Mounted against the far wall where she's splayed herself is, she sees, the Omnarchitect's emotional readout terminal a glazed liquid crystal screen shines bright but the terminal system itself is rustflecked and scarred with dust trails. She sees a message spell itself out:

THE BLUE ARC OF FIRE; THE ICE CRYSTALS. SPLINTERED AT THE SOLID BLACK AIR.

The first two pivot as one; Lesia does a turning roll, the R3plikoid's chrome a blur of white fire in the strobing blue, offcentre still as the first two reach her. The R3plikoid must be way less agile than Lesia's motor patterns are used to because the first attack gets her blindsided looked to Chère like she couldn't swivel the R3plikoid's stiff casingskull fast enough. They are, she knows, steeped in inception from their years of playing, absorbing martial arts techs and god knows what other skills; even then their styles are distinct. The attack is a flurry of small blows that push Lesia back into an awkward stance, but Chère sees the other line up a heavy



blow no two Ferals are the same, each with a different blend of techs from different deathsim.

It's the ice, she speculates, the layering of the Grid, Layer Zero a foundation of security protocol and layered above it culture feeds and the Layer Seven Archives; isn't sure what else could generate the selective-sight hologram forestry. Moon credits are dataloaded and aggro onto the ice, any ice at all. In the endorphin-spliced 'holic dissociation she's above herself, seeing the top of her wispy hair frizz, the set of her shoulders bunched against the Bay wall, and then floating through the ice, scouring it for ways to help as she does even as Lesia puts the first Feral in the way of the second with an overshoulder takeover, even as the Feral's shoe plants him square in the nose and his eyes glaze.

He stumbles back, but it wouldn't be guilt to him, just a tactics fuckup. In his dilated eyes she can see from her disembodiment a void within the dark pupils; recovers with a graceful windmill into a stance she thinks he's ganked from some Shin Five Zero emulator, or else a hyperrealistic deathsim chasing down memories of underground fight clubs. She'd expect to see fear in his eyes but there's none as he motions Lesia forward instead





a smirk that parts to spill something she hears in her fugue state has to do with a prophecy, *a hallucination*, she thinks, *they came up with, and this would be a test to them, to work it out.*

The Feral is breathing hard; upon his face stretches a beatific smile. She sees a yellowed, stained molar, eyes nearclosed, fine slants beneath the lids. She can read his thoughts like an open book—faith, acceptance—but can't read Lesia's even the way she had in dreams. The cold blue strobe plays over them both; Lesia's body shines like the moon evanescent beyond the Pandora Field, and against the Feral's thrifted clothing, a loose, dark sweater and baggy jeans, it draws out seams and contours. She sees wrinkles and folds but Lesia's body is smooth chrome and plastic in fiery gleam, like an angel of light bearing down on a demon.

Thoughts that spiraled from her subconscious in remembrance had always formed a pattern; fractal thoughts, clipped instances merging together. *So when we were together, she thinks, I thought it would be different—it may be yet with time.*

The manual, she tells herself, focuses. Scanning through text. "GridLayer capabilities... Hmm. White ice



activation. Built in GridLayer support through..."

The Feral has never let go of his serenity and undaunted begins to walk towards Lesia; the white ice in thaw is an infinity of diamond motes in mist, and in the bi-strain fugue of the mist and focus burn of the dart-smoke she has to chase the focus as her centre, keep herself routed. She feels her experience surge, astrological knowledge gained through pursuance of a path, which she identifies in its rising as beneath the Tathagata's moon, under the benediction of Hades the Pisces faith sign: Remorant, that could swim in the wake of great beasts. Still she thinks beneath a faith sign like that she might be swallowed without notice.

Over her body for a better view of the fight; the Feral had feinted and then gone all in, a vicious elbow aimed at the jointed casing of Lesia's neck Lesia blocks with a strained grace, catching the deflected arm with her sinister wrist, whirling him around, but the Feral's ready, using the time, space and angle to hit a wallrun, landing in a cartwheel and springing away. Too late she'd realized the Feral's after her; she'd floated away, the mist like grey fire around her, as if she could bend it through ripples but it parts for her and leaves not as much as a





breath in its wake. For a moment it's a grey haze with the Feral somewhere behind it, and she wonders if Lesia can see her spirit, knowing she's left her body, her body too somewhere beyond the haze.

The Feral is looking for a leaping roundhouse, a horizontal windmill of a knockout blow, before he's fried: a shell of light tears through his body even as his body collapses into it, folds inward with a sickly groan and then he's gone and before her is the shell of light, an orb of pure golden flame that for a moment held shape in his torso like a heart of fire and then had burst as nerve and skin spiraled into it.

"Activating GridLayer access. I need to know what; some kind of white icebased pulse weapon that traps... cited as 'monad' with degrees of reference.... equivalent to our understanding of spirit. Underscored by something called dharma. Yikes." She looks before her. "I don't think he's coming back."

Fading into the mist which shines brighter as if residue has left traces like morning dew clinging to petals of grass. Fragrance smears the 'holic synaesthesia faint traces of incense, undertones of ammonia these scent the death dream of Aelencah which she knows nests in



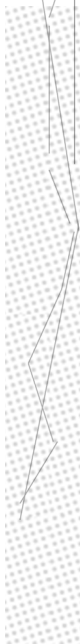


lightgrowth, crawls in tendrils through the access tunnel, and spires up into the Hypermall where the crystalline facets have entombed it as if you'd trap an insect in amber.

Compare bugs now, she thinks, to bugs from back then. They're tiny and they fly; not much has changed, not much needs to. So much has left me since I first felt alone—lonely through long stretches of time masking them with an energy that unlike others I could dispossess, separate it from the heat of my blood, and wrap it around me like a veil. That could veil me until the 'holic choker went haywire and I lost it all.

The blue light bathing the Bay is a bitter burn like sunlight through ice, streaking the mist in white scars. The Feral who'd been thrown into the facing wall moans.

"Let's get out of here," Chère says.





WAITING ON YOUR SEVEN

Shin Five Zero headquarters is a networked cluster of spires that themselves shape their own resonance for the purposes of hex and black ice work; viewed from higher in the they align a pentagram tracing spire to spire. They are connected and access each other via pathways that run in tangles like meshings of cable and wire to form layers that strafe in metaaspect the layers of signal fire that form the Grid matrix that brace both ice white pale in white silver and obsidian as the black void of the sky beyond the , that is serrated by tower spires and in some places hidden from view. Where the towers conjoin they form fresh layers in the Frost structure like foam pockets or bubbles; within these bubbles and pockets are chambered lives and loves.

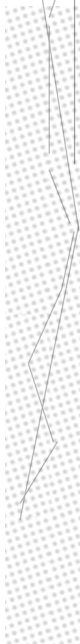
The *chūnin* and *kunoichi* staffing the entrance lobby had given Lesia weird looks. R3plikoids are a rare sight there were two of them and neither had been undeadoids, so she thinks they must be interns or otherwise working off some social debt. To augment yourself beyond death, she'd thought then, and had shuddered. The *chūnin* and *kunoichi* are young, slender; they stare at Lesia with vacant eyes, the *kunoichi* chewing gum in a metronomic rhythm, her tongue sliding through her teeth to pop a bubble. As if running a scan, and she knows the scan would be all mental, liminal to psychic, and relayed to the Elders



who doubtless would have some way to file and process it—they'd use the layers of the Grid matrix for this, store data inside the dark woodwork of their archaic spires flush with blinking diodes, that would run like worms strung by cable and cord throughout the spire structure, until at the top you can find the Elders. She's just here to sign for her stuff.

Which means admitting to the desk that she ran interference on one of Shin's ops—for even knowing Ivory messes with the whole quantum superposition of moon-credit stability. Ivory for Shin exists only as a tether between that stability and the Omnarchitect who does the math converting credit flow into an electric *mana* that can be used to power the symbiotic growth of the Hypermall, which itself has symbiotes attached like the Graft. If the Omnarchitect is sad, feels lonely—and he'd been suicidal—it's because she wasn't checking up on him, or so they'd say, reasoning that it became her job when she started checking up on him; never mind that when she was hired to live so close and run the apothecary she was bound to make her way to the Bay eventually.

"So you were getting this," the desk says in a voice of bemusement, "black magic terror stuff." The





girl's bubble is long popped to mush within her mouth, her tongue turning it over as her eyes are blue with Elder thoughtsignal.

"Is that what it is?" Chère says. She can see from here past the reception a long hallway; what look like elevator banks are concentrated in a halolike nexus, ringing the centre of the chamber itself laid out like a temple, tatami mats clustered over the hardwood surface though that hardwood is built on ossified chrome, she reminds herself: *it can hold me*. Half of her wants the stuff back so she can take it back to Miho and Yuka, get some time to check on their Ghoul situation.

"It's for hexing the Giants," the *chūnin* says. "Keeping them off your back by playing off the density of the white ice. Stain it black with the right ritual and all of a sudden the hunger goes away." He rolls his eyes in a way that invites chasing them to where they peak beneath the furrow of his eyes and slide back. "But what you don't know is that the Giants are a force of good. Freeze our emotions so that we don't descend to Ghoulness."

"Are you happy?" Chère asks. She hadn't meant to.



"I'll answer your question with another question," the *chūnin* says, and by the blank stare of the *ku-noichi* she knows every word is finding its way to the Elders. "You know they eat of themselves, right? Hunger is profane to them. I mean its inaction."

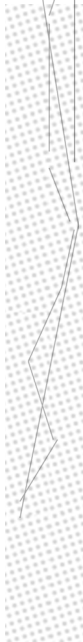
"That detail," Chère says, "is avoidance."

Above the *chūnin* in spectral light she can barely make out is the Executioner's moon; in the low light any substance that makes its way out of her cortex fades into the stale light within Shin's headquarters. It's there and she charts that it's in the third phase *he must*, she thinks, *know it too*, and she colours.

"Are you trying to talk your way in to be with her?" the *chūnin* says.

"I was told she hadn't been decked."

"Technically true. She got some loopholes out of it." The message doesn't need to be translated: we write the rules here and the loopholes too it happens if we want it to or it doesn't at all. "She doesn't get consent, though. She can't choose to leave. She doesn't have a choice. It's in the ruleset loadout of the Grid lay-





ers now." His eyes flash, his mouth smirking. "So we don't have to deck her, you see. She comes autodecked by her own life."

"I want to see her," Chère says.

The *chūnin* folds his hands together, but the possessed *kunoichi* takes over. "We haven't decked you either, so you still have a choice. Evidence lockers accessed from the left hand path-vator. Seeing your friend? That's a direct action and we've charted it accordingly. Right hand path-vator. You can't do both."

Lesia speaks up then in her melodic voice, that echoes down the hallway like a ghost echoes its own former life. "You'll have to pardon me," she says. "I'm used to haptics. Why can't she do both? I didn't flash any temporal logic there."

The *chūnin* rolls his eyes, but possessed, acting as a camera, the *kunoichi* can't; her stare at Lesia is wide and open and it takes Chère a second to realize that Lesia's lying. The R3plikoid is staring into the *kunoichi*'s eyes as if hypnotized what she's doing, though, is wilful. R3plikoids can't be confused like that; they don't have 'holic receptors, never mind chokers or other thought protectors.



She can generate her own haptic, Chère figures staring right into the *kunoichi's* eyes she's seeing the Elders too, which they'd have a problem with if they figured it out.

As if on cue the *kunoichi's* eyes drop, and she quietyens up; a languorous yet lazy wave of her hand gestures that she has something else to do, spiral elliptic in the weak light of Shin HQ. The *chūnin* watching this go down realizes that this is above his pay grade must've, for he's silent too, baring only with an arch of his eyebrow that he's waiting for the pair to leave. As Lesia's question catches up to him he shrugs.

"It's about time. As a R3plikoid you wouldn't understand. You don't know you can be off until you're off. To be human is to know you can and will be off. Not on. Not present in yourself." He rolls his shoulders again. "When the daylight goes this place isn't safe. It's loaded to the brim with black ice. We've rigged it with the most demonic stuff you can think of. What we call terror? We monopolize it. We own it. We are the night."

Standard Shin prop. If you get the message they've won. They'll keep winning. Chère remembers her iso'time in her Habitexa and frowns she isn't going back; they'd refit her choker then and then where would she





be with the thoughts she wants to feel as hard as possible? Still she thinks Miho and Yuka are up to their elbows in some cause or other, suicide by Shin, but they're old enough, aren't they, to choose how they'll die?

The Executioner's moon looks like it's about to change phase just from this conversation.

The *chūnin* folds his arms. "So what are you gonna do?"

Lesia laughs, an awkward sound that nonetheless trills, echoes, drifts into silence the way ripples break to wave.



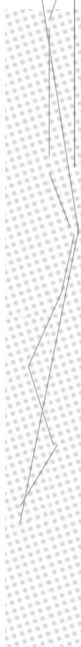
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VIOLET PLAGUE

She's seeing Ivory. The R3plikoid has a GPS feature built into the entire reality that must be re-simmed for the R3plikoid to understand and process it; she manifests it as the occasional direction down the mazelike hallways they'd found after stepping off the path-vator for it had wound like string over paper through the spirenest of Shin HQ, and from that angle in ascent she'd seen about 65 percent of the all at once, stretching into the horizon in legions of towers many with crystalline tumours of moon credit capital growth attached, like a violet plague breaking out over the sprawl-fracture's very skin.

Chère'd been confused. This is the roughest mindfit she's had in quite some time; without the white ice in its constant cycle of thaw and freeze, shuttered in such totality by the black, every holic receptor is screaming in parched agony that remains muted though the screaming is done through pain, the fire of receptors with nothing to process and free of even their own natural holic, like screaming into a pillow. Her psyche is willing her to talk about it but she can't; the knowledge that once she starts she'll never stop and make it worse is hardcoded into the format of the astrology trip as she's known it. Sink yourself to the level of need and that's a good way to stop your soul ascending at the end of the game. Still if Lesia is gen-





erating her own haptic she can feel it too, and Chère feels better knowing that.

"Your weapons are nonoperational here, right," she says to make conversation.

"In my world we call them *armata*. It's true. There's a dry socket, a hollow where I should feel the use function."

Chère nods. "That makes sense. Shin told us there's no white ice here." Staring out over the abyssal which is walled in to keep out the Nukeworld Frontiers the walls had been black and covered with etchings and sigils, as if the night sky had fallen around them. *We are locked in, she thinks, with the mooncredits, and all the hauntings that come with that. Not so much locked in as a reverse gravitational attraction; the walls only do so much. We draw the moon credits towards us like flies to rancid meat. That's why the mallform is growing so fast.*

The path-vator had dug itself inside a routing loop which repeats in a three time pattern every stop at Holding. Ivory is in Section 11; stepping off, Chère and Lesia see everywhere the Shin Five Zero decal, 'the midnight truth,' a wide open eye with a pupil that swims back

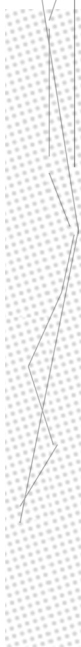




and forth, beneath that in code-glyphic script reads *LOYALTY, COURAGE, STRATEGY, ACHIEVEMENT, FIDELITY*. These are put up on impenetrable doorways with the massmade tatami flooring creasing belying the harsh chrome of the thresholds. Following Lesia's directions the two make their way to Section 11 through hologram field shielding Chère sees other prisoners, and all of them look decked, blankfaced, blank-eyed and sitting in rigid posture; despite this they're not chained, could be meditating if not for their hands unclasped, their eyes wide open and roving at the same pace as 'the midnight truth.' Ivory is different. She's pacing back and forth, which means she's undecked like Shin said, unless she's been decked to do that.

When she sees Chère and the R3plikoid her eyes widen; she presses against the hologram field with both hands splayed, the fields shimmering in a cool blue translucence. She laughs then, appears to, her mouth revealing perfect teeth white as moons through the shimmering translucence the effect is of streaking light, like the thaw of white ice.

"Ivory " she mouths through the field, and Chère shakes her head.





"My name's Chère, and the R3plikoid with me is Lesia from the Parallax."

Ivory's face twitches. "That is a freaking R3plikoid. Don't you know only Ferals mess with the Parallax?"

Chère fights to stop her eyes from rolling. "I need you to explain some stuff, but I don't need to hear this. I can leave whenever I want." Leaving out: things aren't that square for you.

"Explain?" Ivory says. "They booked me on selling black magic terror weaponry. What they mean by that is anything that can affect the black ice they love so much." Her eyes narrow. "You didn't want that for yourself. You don't look like the type. And you don't know much about it."

Chère can tell by the way Ivory settles back that her eyes agree with the cloistered shopgirl.

"What is this," Chère says, changing the subject. "A compressed Habitexa?"



Ivory's eyes flash. "They call it that. The 'holics they circulate are stale they've been left in the black ice for too long. This is an aura from a decade ago."

"You said that stuff was dangerous," Chère says. "Because it messes with the ice." Ivory's eyes are bluetinted with the hologram field; where before they'd been a pale seagreen now more like chlorine water.

"Imagine Shin's whole secret tradition being exposed. Because without the cover of black ice it would be. The secrets to their hypnosis. The secret to decking."

Lesia speaks up. "You keep talking about decking. What does that mean?"

Ivory backs away, hands up, palms facing. "I don't talk to R3plikoids. Sorry." *In her palms there are whorls that could spiral into prayers, Chère thinks, grooves that leave the skin and whisper like thread to unseen sky.*

"They call it decking for two reasons," Chère says. "To do it they use a deck, or a control rig. But they also say it's like a truth serum combined with a fate analytic once decked you know what you want and what Shin wants are





the same. They say this slots you into the shuffle of the very deck the WychFates use."

"Listen, you," Ivory says, pointing a stabbing finger at the R3plikoid. "You think not being able to die is a virtue? We hate you for it."

"I die over and over again," Lesia says, confused. "All this goes forever."

To that Ivory spirals her finger against her ear and is still.

"So we know that Shin uses control rigs," Chère says. "Everyone knows. So what are you talking about?"

Ivory grins. "How do you think they square it with the GridLayers and mooncredit unity?"

Chère stares. "It's not alive."

Ivory laughs again. "It doesn't need to be. You think something that can trigger the MG Nukes again needs eyes to see? A mind to think? All it needs is the trigger pull." She grins. "Because of the moon credits, the way they line up the Grid layers know every facet of us,





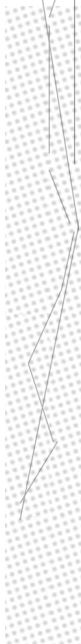
knows where we are and how to get us. All decking routes through the Grid. It has to."

What she says next is a whisper that Chère has to strain to hear through the hologram field. "There are grids beyond the Grid. You know that, right?" She gestures to Lesia. "I'm not talking about your precious parallax. What I mean is that there are worlds other than this. We follow similar patterns but all remain distinct." She turns her back on Chère. "Never would've figured you for a Parallax chaser. Take it up with the Ferals. You'd get along."

"I can't," Chère says, "because my Parallax friend imploded one with a reverse gravity well."

A long silence stretches then. Ivory crosses her arms. "I'm only here because I was selling to you. If you hadn't asked they never would've known. They didn't book you because you fit into their plans just roaming around undecked. How does that make you feel?" She glances over her shoulder at the R3plikoid. "Respect, I guess."

"So what you're saying is that the moon credits have us over a barrel. That it comes down to credit stability or we all get nuked."





Ivory shakes her head. "I'm saying the moon credits are the means and reason we'll be nuked. You saw the what did you call it a death forest? You saw the manifestation of all the Grid knows. I can tell you this. Whatever the Grid is, it doesn't like the Hypermall. Doesn't like me for living in it. Doesn't like Val either. I bet you left him around just waiting for the Layer ice to take over. I suppose you didn't care what shade it was."

Chère frowns. "It's all ice, isn't it? Protection from the Giants. They're rough."

Ivory's eyes burn like light bleeding from cracked halogen. "The stuff Shin does under cover of black ice is worse than anything the Giants could ever do."

Chère can't answer that. Lesia tugs on her shoulder arm lean, shellac white encased, trijointed fingers cool to the touch, white like bridal veil lace. "It's time to leave. Haptic reception detects a guilt trip overload. You're dry on what do you call your biotic haptics?"

"Holics," Chère says, the voice shot through with sadness. She'd liked Ivory at first, beneath her glasses her eyes of fire. The hologram field chambers, Chère thinks, are like tombs around us; the people sitting in them may





as well be already dead. Now she steps back and takes perspective they swirl around her in pockets of coloured light, bubbles of light in pastel hues, bright rippling fields that look like they've been colour-grated through a kaleidoscope. She thinks it's just her head swimming with the 'holic famine, but can't be sure.

"You," Ivory says, screeching now, her voice octaves in the sky, getting higher. "You follow that Parallax trash and it'll keep you from what you're really supposed to do! You're supposed to nuke Shin to smithereens! I've seen enough. You're the only one who can do it!"

"I have other problems," Chère says, but the sound spit through the fissure of her lips is weak, spit through as Lesia is dragging her away. *My angel*, she thinks, turning the idea over in her head a R3plikoid from the Parallax. *What did she have to fight back there? What could tether her here other than my need which was incubated by the Habitexa in 'iso'? What did I pull her away from?*

Ivory is still talking but now she can't hear her through the hologram field; white teeth sliver stabs of light through the field and then gone are with her laughter as she shakes and palms her mouth closed. Just stop existing, she wills Ivory. Stop existing for me.





She feels on her now the roving eyes of every decked prisoner here—these are now circuit boards for Shin, but not two-way relays like the *chūnin* and *kunoichi* are; they'd die for Shin now, knowing they would, they know they would because they know Shin wouldn't ask them to. Even though that's all Shin does, she thinks, is to ask you politely to die. They'd never do it directly. A decked circuit board though—that you could incept the concept into, they'd think it was their idea.

Alarms blare. Staccato chimes are more discordant even than the klaxons had been in the Hypermall LCL, pitch notes seeming to gnash and claw against each other—she thinks of silver steel blades scraping together.

"Run," says Lesia in her autotrill.





BINARY TRUTH

She's running. She's not looking back. All around her are the swirling hologram pockets that she'd seen as tombs, final resting places, but with every fizz of hologram shutdown she knows she's wrong; she can hear the catcalls, the screams of predators seeking prey in the grey haze of hunger. She'd left it to Lesia to remember where they'd left the path-vator, hoping the R3plikoid would memorize it in binary, concrete, unshakeable truth because Lesia, she thinks, can't do anything else for her. Her haptics are not combatoriented; she had a different system for that. Here starved of white ice there's nothing she can do but escape.

Some prisoners drop from above, others racing out in parallel to their trajectory, released from facing angles, all of them thinking something like a kill equals freedom. *I messed up, Chère thinks, coming here at all—they think what Ivory thinks, that I'm a terrorist, that I want to bring down Shin's control of the sprawl fracture.* After being isolated she'd bled sympathy for the crones of the Graft, for Valby and even Ivory, so long ago. Was that really the *chūnin's Executioner's Moon*, she thinks, or was it mine? Could they do that? Pretend to be marked for death?





They've reached the path-vator door; Chère is about to start pounding on the recall when Lesia stops her. "Give me a segment." Trijointed fingers split apart, untwining from each other like frayed ends of string, meet the control panel to interface.

Chère looks back. Section 11 is a dome filled with hologram field bubbles, almost a honeycomb hive in set-up; about fifty of the closest hologram fields have been shut down, the air of the dome blood red, the atmosphere swirling into where the hologram fields have gone down. Blood red.

"It's not black ice," she says, though if Lesia is listening the R3plikoid gives no sign. "It's red ice. It's so dark that it looks black in the darkness." She swears. "It's blood psionics."

"It's not your problem," Lesia says, trijoints scrambling over and through insets in the control panel. "You stay here? Deal with it? They'll zero you. I can tell. I'm not blind. That's what they want."

The path-vator door bisects then, cloven apart as if by bladestroke, the kind that leaves you still and then splits you; Lesia's dragging Chère into the path-vator as

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war cries decimate the silence, fragments of silence living cruel short lives.

"We gotta go," Lesia says as the doors slam shut. "I've set the path. Give it a second to process and launch."

Beating on the door. Knuckle imprints. Boot imprints beneath those, mottling the steel like bruises, fractures.

"They're gonna kill her," Chère says, as 'noided as she ever was of course they'd never kill Valby. Ivory's different; they can get a new shopgirl, one that doesn't sell away black magic terror stuff to the first errand girl to be sent in. She knows.

"They won't deck her. She's gotta be undeckable. That's why they didn't. It wasn't up to them. It was up to her. SOP would be to get rid of her then."

Lesia listens but her eyes are no longer an ice blue but a pale gold hue of honey. "I'm low on power. Interfacing takes it out of me. I can get us out of here but not much more. The decel here is nuts. Our side of the parallax you guys have made it into the transdimensional void and work us over like bored gods make us strong, fast,





smart, and then 'cycle us for parts to make more. I'm not strong or fast here," she says, "and I don't want to think about how much processing capability I've lost."

Chère knows what she's doing, keeping her talking. "You probably have more layers than me in your subconscious." Because the path-vator is tracing its curving ascent along the looping cable path. Leaving Section 11 behind.

Silence is born again when it dies, must die in order to be born as the precepts of the astrology trip teach, the human soul works the same way, broken by star placements and myth structures and if never broken is never reforged. Section 11 plummets away as the larger spirenexus embraces them.



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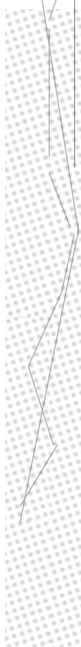
AGENT

"So what do you want to do," Lesia is saying.

Chère wanted to put as much distance between her and the Hypermall as possible. Now a slender cut like a moon phase jackknifing a slot of glimmering crystal between two multilevels; above them the layered sky of the is a dull grey opacity that reflects in places the higher tips of the spirenexus to their east, still on a lateral plane on the latticed Grid layers' geospatial front. *'Cause I don't have it*, she thinks. Don't have more excess to be drained from me down there. That's how LCL works and now I know they'd drink me like vampires. That had meant leaving behind the Graft; Miho and Yuka who to her she'd seen as differing halves of the same philosophy.

The sky is scarred here and there by great rifts where the strain of the void beyond has sunk pressure into the lower carapace; from these spill shadows that mingle with the firelight of the , creating serrated shadowforms like lightning bolts that dance and flicker above them. Chill pervades the air, goosebumps raised on her nape before they raise on her arms as well.

She kicks at the floorplate. "Not be iced or decked." She looks over the honeygold eyes now going amber. "You need a charging port, don't you?"





"Pretty bad," says Lesia.

Chère sighs, resigned. "We'll hit up my Habitexa. They can isolate me there but it'll let you get some rest." Gazes at the before her. *They made that choice for us*, she thinks.



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SLOW DOWN PHASE

As the door to her Habitexa opens she tries to figure out right away if someone's been here. Shin would call her freedom from that moot. Light from the hall cuts through the pitchdarkness of the offline Habitexa as the doors yaw open. By then she's running parched on 'holic and has to stop herself from shoving Lesia aside to flip it all on; when she does the Habitexa is ringed by blue light as if it braces the whole capsulefront, walls of grey techmatter. She'd felt the hackles on her neck rise and realized Lesia had transmuted the latent white ice that exists here into energy for a shot of whatever had imploded the last Feral into pure stardust distillate to keep her covered in case Shin had been around, which means she'd been as 'noided as Chère was.

The techmatter is in lattice patterns of fused plateware and threading cable; the halo ring that is as if brace is more akin to foundation, energy support for the Habitexa where GridLayer access is concentrated and in this way can be cut off by black ice with a thought. Still she'd had time to hook Lesia into a makeshift charging port.

Dreaming once of a panda cub that had accompanied the colo-refs into the Nukeworld Frontiers, splotted





black and white tufts of fur raised for the vidloop she'd seen the public access channels never mentioning the shinobi cult that controlled from the shadows through the black ice of the Grid's layers. She'd seen though in the panda's fur both the white and black of the ice and figured that was the secret code within the vidloop, though of course the colo-refs had raised it as guardian from the wild emerald-eyed dogs that roamed the Nukeworld Frontiers. In that panda's eyes she'd seen fear translated through all she believed she knew so she'd thought she'd been among the few to know, that the public access channels had lent the viewers freedom from the burden of knowledge that it absorbed psychic residue from the starmatter still extant as thermal mist from where souls were blasted into the aether by the MG Nukes.

So it had known more than it had needed to keep the colo-refs safe; she'd seen in its eyes and read with a voice inside she couldn't silence it knew its own doom approached with a speed that had become more than relative that had spliced itself into her dreams until she'd felt as one with it, breathed as one with it, and at last felt just as alone. In the end prophecies could not begin to account for what it had known though they'd been found here and there in the cindered ruins of the neighbour-

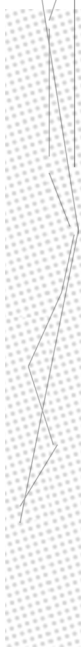




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ing s who were under the guidance of shinobi cults of their own, because it'd known further and thought deeper. Though these prophecies in bound scrollworks had seen their own fates approach with clarity, the panda cub which had grown severed from kindred had seen beyond even this age into the next defined by a coalition of reborn s.

From the dead would return all the cults of old and they would destroy the last and create a megalithic structure union, form an alliance to destroy Shin Five Zero which they'd say a tethering to aggro philosophies had both foretold their death and explained why they deserved it. This is the last of the public access she's able to retrieve in her dreaming until the black ice iso' barrier falls.



○ SEEDS OF LIGHT

Where they were together in the blinks of each other's eyes now both are consciousness-dissolved into the aetherfilm of each other's isodreams, entwined in thought like spirals of a double helix but separate in terms of visual-spatial distance. Still both find themselves within the black void of the isodream thinking the same thing that they can't risk waking so soon, so low on 'holic and energy that they aren't sure when they'll next get a chance to rest.

"Just gotta wait it out," Chère says. "Sounded like something was coming for us, though. On the pirate-aux channels, anyway." She'd plugged in as user mode: A-Modal, an ability she'd unlocked under the Thane's Moon path this was the next best thing to being a Modal, one's dream route taking a perfect parallel to the symbiosis of weave that was the GridLayers' tessellated patterns, so one could see what they did if not do. In the dreaming darkness veiling the pockets and brightening the glow of each other's monads, an aspect of being Lesia possessed that had come out of nonbeing, flipped the script on the parallel henge it had been weighted then to one side.

The grandweave of the darkness itself is a soft lattice of light, glimmering in a shine that only rendered as a soft wave foam fringe, baring depths to the grandweave



like crevasses beneath the ocean, from ocean skin to earth below and sieved where no light can reach. It's no way to be living and aching, and she feels the hunger of the grand weaver, hunger for the shared vision that must meet and in some way join to it, as if one could never leave the endless winter of ice, denied from sleep's later seasons, echelons or states as they are known.

Now she is more open to the grandweave's skin showing as a rippling ocean of light fathoms below had never tried to look below her feet in a dream, to see nothing but the grandweave as foundation even for the isodream, though that is like ripping plant from soil. Shut out what she carries with her to waking is black static latticed by light; black lakes where the seeds of light cast may not grow because snuffed out by black ice they are in frozen chrysalis.

Even together the pitch darkness is bleak, bites on their fraught nerves. Till she rotates in place and sees the Lesia not as R3plikoid but of some casting nearer a mold of symbiotic host vessel for a reality parasite Lesia'd explain, to them like a virus but of biopathogens they called 'ghosts' that could enter their heads, coexist, to a degree alter one's vector, soon shifting and gone beneath





her true monad essence. Which Lesia tells her is called an affectpulse, glows in true blue in the epsilon binding. There are worlds other than these; she knew because she'd encountered a traveller from one, beyond the parallax.

The affectpulse or what Chère guesses is a strain of monad and that at any rate exists in a kindred synchronicity relays to her what she sees from her side of the black ice mirroring. What she sees is what the Modals would see, if they were here, and scrapes even other Modals from the same data; so she can see them by their presence which has left an imprint in the data pockets of the Grid matrix, where their presence has gouged fragments of data from what would otherwise be pure black static of the isodream that would exist like the fire that melts diamonds, reflecting in facets, refracting, haloed by itself. So in this unity they compare notes. Alone together they wait.





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202FENDI
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M00M0
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M1 01
1M0ID00
1EM00
E102M00
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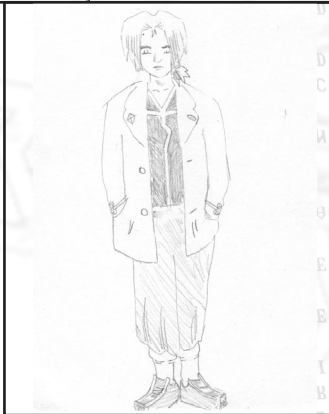


YLIAN LLANCARMEL

likes: puttering, mnemonics, dopamine fasts, analyzing conversations, editing, sexual ethics, reality TV (guilty pleasure)

dislikes: addictive substances, muzak, self-centred narration, excuses, personality quizzes, irreverent depictions of the Heroes

Theme song: The Gathering - Amity






IT'S A GOOD THING
the DARK LORD
IS A SHUT IN!

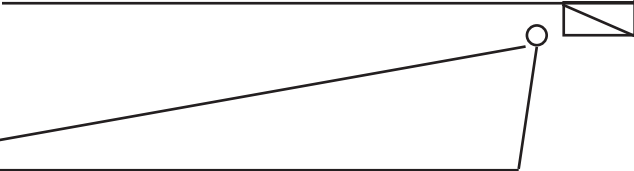
by: [baroquespiral](#)

Along with the student body, Ylian was told about Luskonneg's true nature as soon as she signed her secret contract. Her gift for psychic destruction was too strong to be gambled on. Ylian's father was an alcoholic. Generally it is extremely difficult to obtain a parenting license while suffering from any form of severe addiction. But Barjon Llancarmel had been sober for four years and still attended the Alcoholica Astrum weekly. In his daughter's third year, mere weeks after she started talking, he fell off the wagon. All in all, their story was still a success for the state and Ecclesia's systems. He has been sober since her last year of elementary school. He was more often absent than anything else. Her parents tried to conceal it as a chronic illness until she figured it out herself, and this breach of trust affected her perhaps the most. One can draw a second straight line between it and her preoccupation with the checkered episode in Ecclesiastical history known as "SinAnon".

preserver record



Almost as infamous as the Carnal Confession today, SinAnon was nonetheless retired honourably, with a minimum of conflict, and still has sympathizers within the Ecclesia. Its three best-known founders iconically declared it a failure in the spirit of the very self-criticism it encouraged, and variants of its format are still used in addiction treatment, including *Alcoholica Astrum*. Others crop up in seminary and Inquisitorial training. It is a descendant of the public confessions practiced by clerics prior to Maullan; and while Maullan's sharp criticisms of these are well-preserved, she did not rule them out, considered them in many cases a vital component of justice and is attested to have performed them herself. SinAnon was at first an attempt to adapt these raucous and often damaging events to Maullan's principles of privacy. As early as the interwar century, taking advantage of (and responding to) the dense, fluid populations of urban areas, clerics were experimenting with assembling groups of strangers to confess to each other in

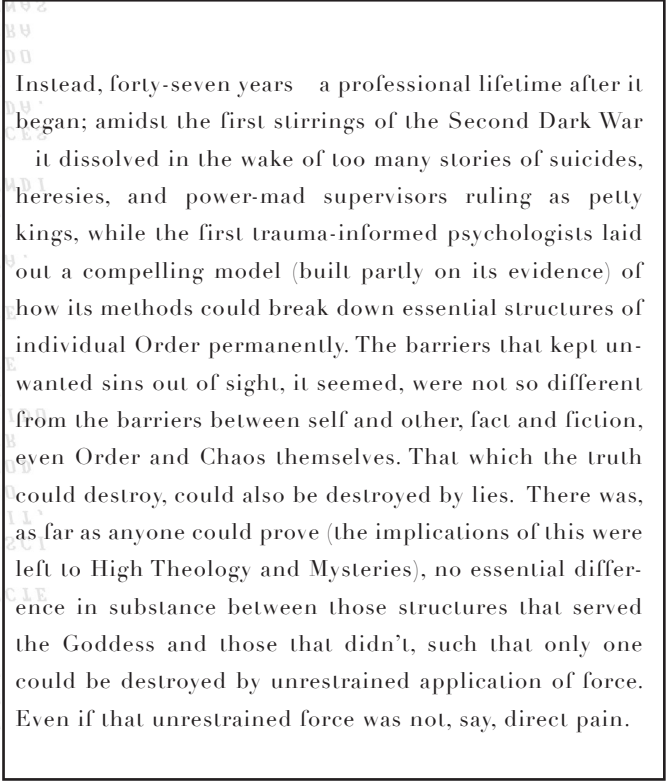


the guiding presence of a trained cleric. After the Second Dark War, psychologists, particularly of the Serpentine persuasion — in contrast with SinAnon’s “radical traditionalist” base — got in on the proceedings. Psychologists and clerics, when put together, were particularly interested in the problem of reticence in confessions, which research had been exposing the scale of even in the private confessional. Reticence in front of one’s peers had originally been seen as one of the problems of public confession, along with false confessions and scapegoat dynamics — but in these controlled groups, where pre-existing social dynamics were levelled, the presence of others could be reshaped as an incentive for truth. If anyone suspected someone was lying, or rationalizing or deflecting from their sin, they could be called out on it by anyone else in the miniature congregation. Advanced (or, by today’s standards, primitive) interrogation techniques could be deployed from not just viewpoint but a disorienting number of angles — and everyone’s incentive to judge everyone else to make themselves feel better




could become a concentrated laser breaking down one's resistance to self-judgment (and eventually, when appropriate, self-forgiveness).

It was necessarily a Chaos-heavy intervention essentially turning the flame of the Serpent on the crystals of a false Order yet it promised to suppress those sins and flaws that traditionalists strained against the clerical ethical ordinance to cede to the unavoidable Chaos of everyday life. While originally intended for persistent sins such as addiction or paraphilia that often resisted ordinary confession, the very unprovability of these sins led to recruitments bordering on press-ganging based on covert evidence. The organizers soon believed that anyone could benefit from their methodological breakthrough. Their hope, at the high point, was to operate officially at a parish level and become an institution as ubiquitous as the confessional itself. (There were still meeting halls you could visit as museums in Winter City.)

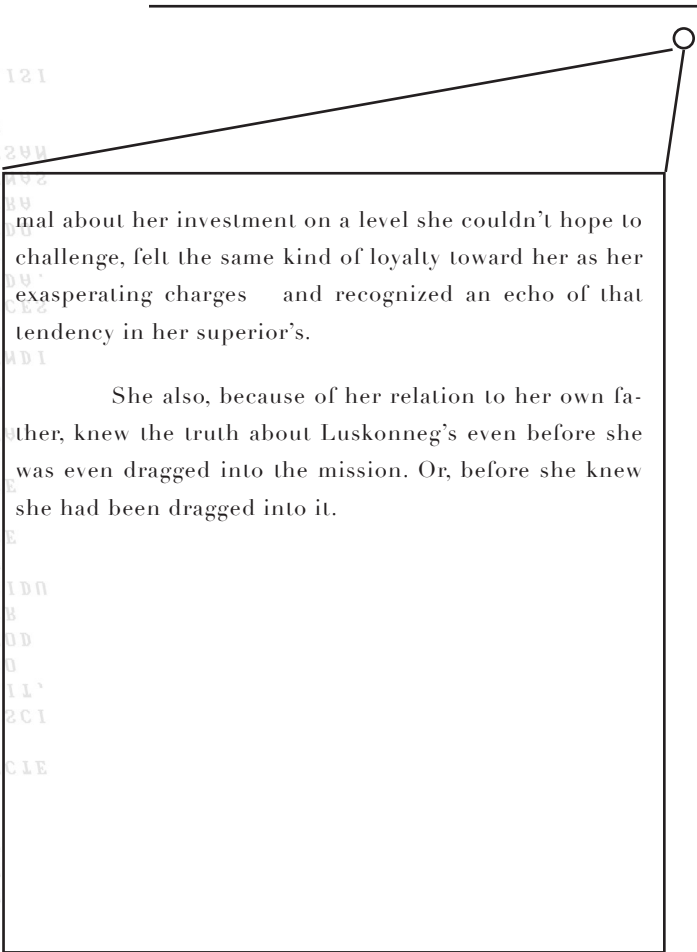


Instead, forty-seven years — a professional lifetime after it began; amidst the first stirrings of the Second Dark War — it dissolved in the wake of too many stories of suicides, heresies, and power-mad supervisors ruling as petty kings, while the first trauma-informed psychologists laid out a compelling model (built partly on its evidence) of how its methods could break down essential structures of individual Order permanently. The barriers that kept unwanted sins out of sight, it seemed, were not so different from the barriers between self and other, fact and fiction, even Order and Chaos themselves. That which the truth could destroy, could also be destroyed by lies. There was, as far as anyone could prove (the implications of this were left to High Theology and Mysteries), no essential difference in substance between those structures that served the Goddess and those that didn't, such that only one could be destroyed by unrestrained application of force. Even if that unrestrained force was not, say, direct pain.



The advances in unconstrained psychological force were retained by the Inquisition for extreme cases where their use was more warranted. And a modified version, de-emphasizing the more aggressive elements of the group confessions, was eventually returned to its original context of addiction by groups like the Alcoholica Astrum. The fantasy, the ideal, of SinAnon, on the other hand, carved itself out of the possibility that some such distinction might exist. This was the fantasy Ylian Llan-carmel indulged in when she walked across town from the library to pick her father up from his meetings, listening to archival tapes of Game sessions.

She was aware, of course, that it was a problematic fantasy, and applied all the self-examination techniques of the SinAnon arsenal in making sure it didn't distort her decisions as 4th and 6th grade class president and member since middle school of a Public Morals Committee. Gwaëlle, who suspected something subopti-



mal about her investment on a level she couldn't hope to challenge, felt the same kind of loyalty toward her as her exasperating charges and recognized an echo of that tendency in her superior's.

She also, because of her relation to her own father, knew the truth about Luskonneg's even before she was even dragged into the mission. Or, before she knew she had been dragged into it.

it's a good thing
the DARK LORD
is a shut-in!

Synopsis

Iuskonneg remains dormant by a curse and a conspiracy. social peril, online conflicts and miniscule destructions litter the interior of the small Pandora's box of his life, a hidden cornerstone on which stands an unstable world.

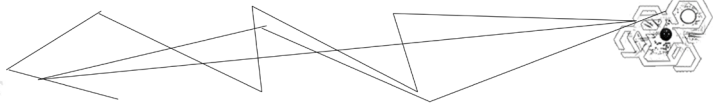
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VCCNM2UM
MRECEV2
AUEBVV
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2025EAD1
120W
0012
VGI000'
WUEW
DUGOVE
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GUBOVE
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IWCIDID0
LEW00
E102W0D
2E1 D0
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VDIPI2CI
10W
COMSECE1E
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211
DUGOV
120W
GUBEW

Last Time

Luskonneg now has not one but two potential friends/romantic interests - but how long can this possibly last, and what really happened the last time?



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AUCLEVV0
CUMWOD0
E1202
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E1
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10V
COM2EC1E
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D0GOV
1B20W
G0BEM



Stairs he could jump from if he thought too hard about it.

Stairs he could slip on (the freshly exposed layers of ice slick with meltwater) if he didn't think hard enough about it.

Naturally, she wouldn't say it, maybe she didn't even think it, but this was also part of the test.

Either of these worst case scenarios could (*would*, he knew, by spontaneous Order) happen if he didn't make up his mind, if it was pulling him one direction and the other on the way up.

(Would that be a fitting end? Wouldn't that almost be his fantasy? Splitting himself and spilling his insides all over the innocent pedestrians below the fast line, gasping women and laughing children?)

But no his insides would be anonymous. No one would think to investigate his life. The public safety bureau would power-wash it into the sewer with the rest of the biohazards.)

if u dont ill be there, but i cant confirm Gallvren will.





She couldn't possibly know to make that part of the test, but she did, and she had.

If he replied... it would be an incontrovertible signal...

Either that he wanted to pursue her (why was that the wording he had settled on? the Slaver smirked) or he wanted to be her friend. Either option he'd have to reply, and he was sure it was one or the other. So why hadn't he? Why did he think he needed to decide before replying? Because one was framed as a decision, and the other was framed as a decision, and therefore they had to correlate? Or because he didn't even want to be friends with her if he couldn't have her? (*If you don't want to be friends with her, then you don't really like her in the first place.* a commonplace dramatic statement in Love Ed harems, though occasionally negated.)

He couldn't do this on his own.

He eventually picked the tiebreaker he did because even though he had no idea if it would help, if he didn't try it, the fact that he hadn't would invalidate any other answer he might somehow come up with. It held him hostage.

ENCIPHER
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TACS
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ECCNWS
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BISOS
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GRIBICEZ
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SOSLEWDI
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1012
VICOR
GOVE
EI
BOBE
NI
VICIDIDN
LEWFOR
TOSWOD
SFD DO
EG11
IB12CI
LNB
COMSECTE
WWE1
SII
DOROB
IBSNW
TOREW





2'
LVCIG121
AET
GUCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
A1AEBVW
CQWODO
B1202
EYVAIDW
PIVIBICE2
23E
202BEND1
1120W
0N12
VGTIDW
WYEW
DOTOBE
E1
GVB0BE
W101
IWCIDIDW
LEW0W
E122W0D
2E1 DO
WE E111
WV1B12C1
10W
COM2E1E
WWE1
211
DOTOB
1B20W
G0BEM

He had no reason to believe it would help, but he was happy to believe something might, for long enough to stop thinking about it.

About anything.

He ordered more Zeparmine. A week's worth.

"Don't," loomed his mother's voice over the smooth, unrippable cliff of her back, with a pained sound like she was breathing tear gas, "keep trying things you aren't good at. You won't just look dumb, you'll look like you never learn anything."

'The Questing Monkey' is the Rhi formation responsible for effort in scenarios where one's feet do not touch the ground of predictable experience for long stretches at a time.

"You've got this all wrong," smirked the Slaver. "It's not 'love' vs 'friendship', it's 'submission' vs 'domination'. I could have told you this all the way back in high school if I'd known you then. Submit to Ylian, dominate Gwaëlle. Submit to Marzanna, dominate Gallvren."

"Wait, why not the other way around?" objected @moephrenology, typing back into the window where the text appeared. "Dominate Marzanna or Ylian – turn the tables, get the





most out of the already extant dynamic of power competition. Submit to Gallvren or Gwaëlle, accept their genuine goodness as a constraint. Way better. Bam.”

*The text window popped up under the Slaver’s sprite.
“You really think you could do that though? You’re not me.”*

“>me”, Anonymous typed back, having no such pronoun. “just telling you what I’d watch, petitionfag. not like he’s listening to us anyway.”

>study sessions resume

>actually have some focus now that I’ve made my decision, narrowed my fantasies

>develop system where I look up at Ylian to reward myself for looking down at the book

>she notices

>tells me to stop staring

>ask how much looking counts as staring

>tells me I already know

>try not looking at all





>eyes constantly drift to their corners where I can see the blur of her in my vision

>worse than when I was looking on purpose

>she also notices whenever I move my hand to rub my eye or scratch myself

>tells me to stop every time

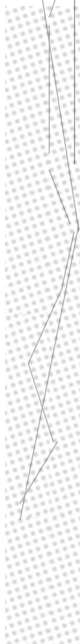
>it's kinda like my mom telling me to do or not do random stuff

>but exciting bc she's actually kind of consistent (mom would have mentioned the face touching thing like once and then forgotten about it)

>pretty sure I've seen other people, even in PMC, doing stuff like that

>try to catch her doing it but she actually never does

>she just gets madder at me for staring at her even though I'm not doing it for lewd reasons (I get that she wouldn't be able to tell the difference but for some reason I genuinely thought she could read my mind after





she noticed me so much the first time)

>do catch other people doing it in class, write a list

>threaten to give the list to the homeroom teachers and everyone on it (including Gwaëlle)

>she says her instructions were for me, not for everybody

>wtf that sounds like a romantic line in a manga

>post it in a greentext on 42chan

>a bunch of people agree

>that makes me notice it way more and actually stop doing it

>now she doesn't interact with me at all

>does she want me to do it on purpose?

>ask thread, this time get no clear answers

>somebody makes a comparison to Master-Slave Dialectics Research Club, which is a hard ethics kink se-

ENCIG121
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D070BE
E1
TUV0BE
N1 01
TMC1D1D
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E102W0D
2ED D0
ME EG11'
W01B12CI
COM2ECIE
WME1'
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1B20W
T0BEW





ries

>agewalled, but I figured out my mom's login years ago and she never uses it

>the eroguro and harem and artsy Najda pathways crash into each other exactly here

>actually defines

>*get to the episode the guy's referencing (that's where he comes from isn't it he's the Teacher-Slaver he's in my head)*

>*next episode*

>*it's a terrible idea*

>*doing it accidentally-on-purpose again*

>*try to jam a book corner into my eye*

>*Ylian says this isn't working, suggests something more targeted and behaviour-focused*

>*"you're a gamer... right? ever heard of a game called SinAnon?"*





>no... wait. It's mentioned in one Tsyo thing but that I haven't read (only seen posts about)

>story about brainwashing or something I think

>say yes

>don't get asked any specifics about it, just if I want to play

>brainwashing sounds useful if real, also something we have in common = hidden Order making all of this maybe worth it

>ends study session early

>look up SinAnon when I get home

>tfw you sit in a circle with a bunch of strangers and confess all your sins, and they get to interrupt you if they think you're avoiding anything and react with 100% honesty

>no idea where a high school student is going to get permission or participants so assume she just means a big mean talk with the Public Morals Committee

>Dr. Mark'eg says it might burn through my un-

ENCIG121
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W0EN
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E102W0D
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F0B0VE
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10W
C0M2E0C1E
0WEL'
211
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1B20W
F0B0W

healthy reactions to normal things and make me capable of enduring my own worst-case scenarios

>sounds like a shonen training arc

>starting to get hype

>hear nothing for another week

>start trying to expose myself to less scary things to prepare myself

>Dr. Mark'eg tells me to stop, save current for SinAnon and not try anything hard

>practically vanish for three more weeks

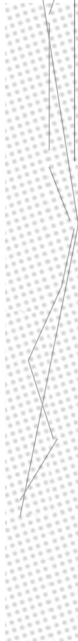
>start "stocking up" good Current like a squirrel

>problem: good Current pretty much always = sin

>the new agewalled stuff I'm reading – on mom's computer – is allowing me to do that in unprecedented increments

>tfw building myself a bigger and bigger bomb

>literally have wet dreams about letting it blow





“The Goddess has set out a way for you to be happy,” Dr. Mark’eg smiled with cruel saintliness. “As She has for everyone. You would not exist if your happiness, your Order, did not.”

– but what was “I”, what if I don’t exist, chattered his heretical thoughts, yes heretical not just “intrusive” –

“Of all things in the universe, only Darkness is not a thing – does not exist – because in the light it is revealed to be many things, and in the darkness it appears to be none.” His Theology teacher’s voice – how could he remember her voice when he couldn’t even remember her name? Had that voice really existed?

– thoughts that can’t even sustain contact with a Theology class, like darkness with light –

“The easiest way, like I said, is just to leave it hanging.” Like Marzanna was hanging, over the edge of Gallvren’s tall bed. “He didn’t show. For all we know, he just got cold feet about the whole thing first.” Relief practically perfumed her voice. “We might as well assume that, unless ” the volume dropped as she interrupted her own fantasy “he gets back to us.”





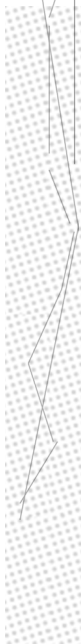
Gallyren had given Marzanna a list of fics to read, which is what Marzanna was doing on the bed. Unbra'd in an old gi and cherry blossom pink bike shorts. (Maybe she'd find better material to write an article about, become a culture writer. This 'reality' obsession for her seemed as unhealthy as Luskonneg's fictional ones.)

They weren't quite dating the circumstances were too weird, even for Marzanna, but they had gotten closer after that night.

It had never been clear how close they were in the first place. They had been roommates for three years, and in some ways still treated each other like mere contractual partners, even though each trusted the other absolutely.

Put each other as emergency contacts and meant it.

Imagined it, as Gallyren did when she was reasonably or unreasonably worried about something of that order. Like the night she was stuck inside the flower shop's magically automated doors for half an hour when the power went out. Before neighbourhood patrols came along who knew if there would be neighbourhood patrols, if they'd be busy fighting Hellhounds or something she





imagined Marzanna finding her way to the shop, breaking in through the heating system, planning food runs, defending her with Yn Dahh't martial arts against gnolls and shapeshifters and

OK, there was *something* there.

(She'd been sneaking Miwa/Klauxion fics late at night.)

But it was too uncomfortable to get into that kind of relationship now. What they now knew they both *had already* wanted to be, and thus no longer needed to dance around already being, was girl friends (separate words). Friends who could be girls together.

“But if he does get back to you.”

So why *were* they talking about him again?

“He won't do that.”

“You want me to stay home, same as last time?”

“The Goddess gave you a sign a hidden Order. You didn't even hurt his feelings.”



“Right, but this time. It just feels... pointlessly rude? Like one of his stories from high school? Not even saying good-bye?”

“It’s just like... I just don’t think he’s the kind of person who’s very good at handling good-byes. I’m trained for whatever that means, I’m responsible for it. You’re neither.”

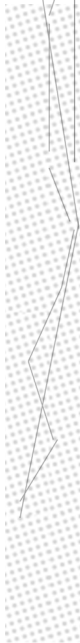
“I mean, I wasn’t. Totally sure I’d have to in the first place.”

“You’re not telling me you *really* wanted to be long term friends with *Luskonneg Gwl’kerrien*?”

“Why not?” She sounded more irritated than she expected. “You seemed to think that was possible. Really seemed to, before the half dozen different reasons you’ve given for cutting it off.”

“Even thinking that was one of the things I felt guilty about. Like I was comparing you to him.”

“Well that just sounds like you got caught up in your own head. I understood the original concept just fine.” She paused. “I was kind of interested in where it





would go, too.”

They had clarified that she wasn't *jealous*. That wasn't the kind of story this was. That was the kind of story *he* would tell, or read. So why was it telling itself?

Harems existed in her world too—like, writing every ship at once, in competition, in the same setting, not only choosing your own but making your argument for it. Gallvren didn't like to read them for the sheer vicarious anxiety they induced. She liked stories where two characters grew close in a world of their own, unseen to others.

Marzanna had told her not to count on Luskonneg getting around to any of them.

That didn't necessarily bother her, though. She couldn't always count on girls getting around to reading things she recommended either. They all had their own things to get around to. And it wasn't like she could even bring herself to look up anything he talked about, either, except the Najda shows. Well, she'd watched a few episodes of those. With Marzanna, actually. It was enough to talk about them. That was what it meant to be





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VDIBI2CI
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211
DUGOB
1B20W
F0BEM

“What part of it?”

“I sorta wanted to see if I could just... be girls with him?”

“Be *girls*?” Marzanna blinked. “Like you thought he was trans or something?”

A boy girl friend.

For a long time that had been Gallvren’s deepest and most secret fantasy.

She did like men (at least as much as women) and didn’t want to live entirely cut off from them, although their world had been more interesting in the Heroes’ days and that was OK. It shouldn’t have been hard to meet like an actual history fanatic, which was her surface fantasy, making small talk about a new museum display at the flower shop. He wouldn’t necessarily judge the personal character of her interests. But he couldn’t share them. He would be driven to the life of the Serpent, to her service and support, not to the private world. He would assume a degree of scrutiny of his own fantasies, in the interest of her desire, that she did not need to. Her work, her world would embarrass (or overstimulate) him to be aware of, un-





less their relationship was sexual, and if their relationship was sexual it would be so much and so little else.

Luskonneg was hardly a boy. He was hardly a man.

He was easiest to think of as a kind of gnome. The bucket hat Marzanna had picked out for him was mushroom-patterned. Had that choice been picked with her in mind? If Marzanna wanted to keep him away, and Gallvren for herself, why had the whole introduction felt so much like a comic double seduction?

She didn't, she thought with some frustration, read enough comedies.

Anyway, the liking men part wasn't the important part of the fantasy. ("The thing about *tsundere*...." he'd said through noodles whipping like a sea demon's face tentacles, "is that they use negations too much. You can tell someone's *tsundere*.... just because they're always saying they're not saying something.") Her tastes were so rarefied she wasn't sure they applied to flesh and blood. To her own moment in history.

"I'm just asking because, what if he does get back to you. What are you going to do then, and where will it





put me. I feel like I deserve to have a say if we ” She cut off, clammed up.

The message in question had already been sent. And received.

hey sriry for missing the last thing

think marzannas prob done w me but

wanna show u my place

try & have it sorta presentabl

instd of panicking going somewhere

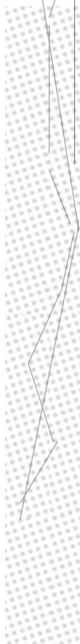
i knw its spos2 be some kinda test

& i donwanna do that

just hang out & talk

She was acting irrationally, wasn't she? Like a character in a story that wasn't hers.

Marzanna Etnexheyr, a journalist trained at Yn Dahh't, her roommate, whom she *trusted absolutely*, thought this guy was bad news.





Why was she being so suspicious? Why did she want to go just to see if *who i rly am* had something to do with what still felt unresolved?

Sure, she was a writer. She wouldn't have written these elements in this order, in this combination, because it would have *seemed* to a *reader* to call for a more compelling, unifying explanation than had been given. But that was expected of her because the reader would equally be disappointed with the explanation being too banal, too inelegant. Even if Shunny Najda or one of these writers Luskonneg was crazy about could have made it work as a self-subversion, that would itself be a deliberately crafted structure, a matter of pacing, leads and feints.

Marzanna had tried to seem mysterious when they first moved in together (selecting each other from algorithmic suggestions on a city housing board), dropping hints that the vagueness of her big project involved some kind of privileged information or exclusive release agreement, until she came home hammered one night and admitted the whole thing was falling apart at the conceptual level. None of her leads wanted to talk to her because she couldn't explain what she wanted to air all their dirty laundry for. There was another obvious possibility Gallyvren had been



avoiding Marzanna had found someone so borderline incompetent he was willing to go along with her experiment, and was now feeling guilty about it under the weight of Gallvren's attention, or had just gotten flagged by an ethics board.

She didn't like thinking these things. She liked liking Marzanna.

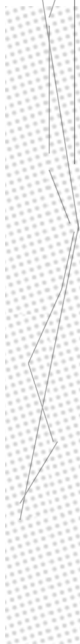
And Marzanna clearly liked...

"You're not cutting this all off because you think he's going to embarrass *you*, to *me*, right? He's a weirdo but I don't mind talking to him and even if I did I understand, or *want* to understand, what you're doing."

The 'want to', the hedge, was a mistake. "I don't." Marzanna's voice came back as if through a tunnel.

"What are you thinking of doing next, then? Back to the drawing board? This is the farthest you've gotten on a story in a long time. And you said you want to... but writing about me would be a conflict of interest wouldn't it?"

"Well, maybe I just gotta sell as fiction."





“Yeah, why *don't* you just go to Poets' College? There are direct transfer scholarships from Yn Dahh!L, right?” She'd wanted to ask this for so long. She'd be willing to play along with the relationship, at least for a little bit, just to feel like she could ask.

A smile. “Why don't you?”

Most Heroes' Love works, even classics and award winners, were disseminated through what in Silmenon was called the “doujin economy”, the informal realm of private production and own-expense distribution subject to the basic laws of the Poets' Courts, but not the extensive cycles of critique and competition by which the Poets' College selected works for official performance and publication. “I think I wouldn't even mind all the criticism, it'd help with not knowing if I'm being too easy or hard on myself all the time,” she pondered. “But I'm afraid of... having to do the same to others. Being called to serve on Poets' Court as a censor. Maybe if I went through it I'd feel differently. But then I might lose what I'm doing now.”

“What you're doing now wouldn't be censored. It has literary merit out the wazoo.”

“I know, or I wouldn't be doing it. But maybe I'd...



feel differently about it.”

“It’s perfectly fine.” Marzanna leaned over and started to rub Gallvren’s shoulders. It felt good, the bright current between the real contact and her countless past imaginations leaped across the circuit of her soul. She leaned back, leaned into it, relaxed in a way that felt like her body changing shape.

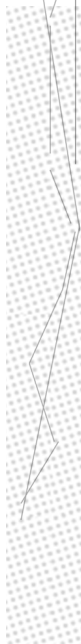
“Does it bother you to feel differently about things?” Marzanna whispered. She had pressed something between Gallvren’s back and her fingertips. A piece of square paper, and she was folding it.

“Not necessarily.”

“Good. I mean, if you want to help somebody like Luskonneg feel differently about things, he needs to be okay with it, and I’m not sure he actually is.”

“I know that’s understatement, but I agree.”

“If he does anything scary next time you see him...” Marzanna finished running a safety pin through the paper figure she had folded—a five-petalled spinning flower.





“Who says I’m meeting him?”

She felt a shiver like cool rain through her Rhi. “Fan Death Sleep Preserver 27, a standard single-use knockout spell at Yn Dahh’t. Spin it and wiggle your fingers like so in time with it. You don’t have to do it the whole time, it Preserves losing consciousness not having lost, so as long as you let that take ”

“I’m gonna have to practice that... what, you think he’s gonna be violent? Wouldn’t he have been flagged then?” Not that she would necessarily know if she had been but a *journalist* would know, if they’d attempted to take the story?

“You’d think, but there’s a first time for every thing, and I think it’s slightly more likely than him getting better. And the more likely we manage to make *that*, the more I have to worry about other tail risks.”

What a way to talk about someone, Gallvren thought, the thought dissolving into the frisson (maybe it was just an act, maybe it was just for *her*) of dating someone who talked like a secret agent.

The person in Room 306 might have been cast to





represent the person behind the Seer In The Half Light blog on a corny news-drama reenactment: a short, gristly probably-woman with stringy hair pulled down in strings of Miwa moon beads on either side of their face, equally speckled with freckles and acne scars; a floor-length crepey black dress and fishnet sleeves draping well past their dirty bitten fingers.

They weren't the Seer in the Half Light. Braz hadn't remembered that; she just knew.

They looked up at Braz from over a bucktoothed frown and

“Sorry, I thought ”

didn't let Braz finish her prepared story, swinging the door shut in her face.

Braz stuck two fingers in the crack of the door, and didn't flinch as it slammed shut on them.

Instead, she twitched the tips of her fingers in exact rhythmic synchronization with the blades whirring in the fan embedded in a grille between black ice-blocks outside in the hall.





The person in the doorway could not have recognized the synchronization of the movement, although its arbitrariness (as Braz's other fingers slid in the crack and pulled the door open) would have made it obvious that it was some sort of spell. Instead, her eyes simply rolled back in her head, and she fell backwards. Braz pushed open the door in time to catch the light body before it damaged itself by hitting the floor.

The hall behind her was icebrick, metal room doors separated by huge pillars of blocks honeycombed in spirals and soapstone statues in arched granite niches, twisting columns of abstract semi-biomorphic features flooded in blacklight. In a stairwell niche a paper sign proudly advertised a 24-hour snack pantry stocked with the restaurant's overflow. At the back, two more barrel-like metal capsules from coils of wire.

Those, she had been informed, were the funiculars. They went all the way up the cliff from the Lower City to the Upper (where, somewhere, the Dark Lord lived). This she had been informed by the receptionist, who had checked her in without any special privileges afforded her rank or mission. She was no longer on official business, so she couldn't just ask if they had heard the name Lacriz



2'

LWCIG121
AET
GUCS2
VCCNM2W
WPECEN2
LLEBBV
CMMODO
B1202
EVAIDV
P1V1CE2
23E
202BEND
1120W
0N12
V110W
WUENW
DUGOBE
E1
GVB0BE
W101
1WCID1D
LEMBW
E102WOD
2E1 DO
WE E11
VD1B12C1
10W
COM2EC1E
WWE1'
211
DUGOB
1B20W
G0BEM

Aeeth, demand a dragnet. After her last report, she had been given a No Further Orders notice. She went into an Alliance station and they told her she didn't exist. Told her to check into a rehabilitation centre, get a new memory wipe, all the way back to her entering the service. You met people like that sometimes — old men at bars who didn't remember half their lives, but stared at you with eyes misted with honour: "I *musta* did *something!*" The movies and plays and pulp novels, after all, were full of noble agents who sacrificed themselves defeating enemies too evil for the world to know. Like, maybe, the Seer In The Half Light.

Did they know, then, that since she had begun using Narrative Homing, she wasn't one of them anymore?

They had to, because they would feel the attacks striking their spells again.

Time was running out.


Her entrance had hardly made any sound, and she had neutralized the surveillance magic in the hall (by hijacking it and subordinating it to the personalized surveillance spell she had set up to watch her room while she was gone), but she made sure to sweep the door quickly and silently shut behind her.





She ID'd the resident: a 19-year-old Mysteries student and theoretical magic forum lurker, neither particularly Dark nor particularly interesting. The more obvious connection (her stomach turned with suppressed memory) was erotic.

The bed was strewn with sex toys and lewd books: Heretical Silmenon religious romance and manga; pages dog-eared and bookmarked describing specific acts. (Three times, large clit sucking, the third a terrible flash of *déjà vu*.) A backpack containing several long spools of black and red rope, still tied.



Under hypnosis Margauz Velvent revealed that she had come here to meet with a “traditional” sex worker she had solicited online. The arrangement had nothing to do with her magical or academic interests, except that she had listed them in a couple of lines in her profile on the Secure Liaisons app. The profile she had selected appeared to be new, but contained a number of photographs (all carefully concealing the face) and testimonial quotes that spoke to a longer career and probably a cycle of creating and deleting profiles. Secure Liaisons wiped everything users didn't opt to keep saving irreversibly; even with government privileges she'd have trouble finding all of them. The escort was supposed to arrive that evening at

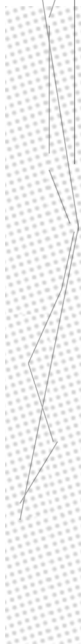


10:00. They were planning to share the funicular.

The plastic bags had been under the sink. Luskonneg hadn't used them in three months. In a near all-nighter before the date he had proposed for her to *not show up* he had used up all of the plastic bags he had. He could probably go another three months after that he'd either have to go out to the store, or call Mom again. Didn't building administrators provide them in some places? He felt like they should. That was one thing he could ask for on behalf of all NEETs, if he still got to tell his story somehow.

Now they were piled up in a closet he had for the winter clothes he had hung on the hook next to his door to feel like he went outside sometimes ("You already told her you don't. Even if she thinks it's an exaggeration, how long will you be able to keep up the act?"), filled with everything on his floor he hadn't been able to decide what to do with. A few more were stuffed in the sleeves of body pillows he had wasted with stains, punctures, and bad sleeping posture.

He couldn't get all the smell out of the room. Was it worse now that he had picked so much of the crust up, or was he noticing it more because Gallvren was coming





here? (*She lives in a freaking flower shop.*) There was some kind of sticky reddish substance between half of the floorboards, which were deep-grooved and filled with their own erosion.

He had consumed three energy drinks since midnight. He had come up off the Zeparmine for a few hours to send the misspelled message, then gone back under and come back up the night before at 9:00, not moving until 12:00. His consciousness now felt bright and glossy, with a few watery traces of the drug sliding along it, his contact with the world a hard and brittle edge of plastic. He had expected to still be putting things in bags when she came here but he had surprised himself by running out of bags with an hour and twenty minutes to go. Now he lay down to conserve his energy, and couldn't close his eyes. From his experience with all-nighters and energy-drink high doses, that didn't mean he couldn't fall asleep again. He couldn't say for sure he didn't want to, although he had set fifteen alarms on his phone (five for the first five minutes, then five at five-minute intervals, then another five at half-hours). She could probably walk through the front door anyway if someone went in or out, and his own was never locked. He imagined her walking in on him passed out, hearing the sound of his alarm blaring: "*Onii-chan!*"



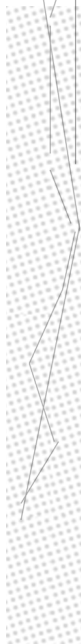
Your ecchi thing is up, but you're not?!"

To his amazement, the doorbell (he had forgotten what it sounded like—harsh resonant notes like a guitar, climbing and descending the intervals of a pentatonic scale) rang on the dot, as the first alarm was going off. He tried and failed to roll, sitting up flared a white-hot cramp through his back, was struck by the terror of physical paralysis as the alarm went into second and third repetitions. (Imagined himself, out of nowhere, as a woman giving birth.) Pulled himself by his outstretched clawlike hand toward the whining imprecations of his little sister and as soon as he touched the phone, was somehow healed, collapsed onto his hands on the edge of the bed, hung his head as if hung over, levered his feet under himself. By the time he was standing up he was too flooded with taurine and adrenaline for the usual volley of intrusive thoughts to touch him. His vision flashed white; he moved through schemata of his surroundings.

But in the open doorway, he could see her in infinite detail.

His second alarm went off as he stood facing her.

He slammed his hand into his pocket, covering





the words he couldn't cut off with a loud "HALLO", stood there scrolling and turning off each one by one.

"H...hi."

Then he turned and floated down the hall, like a balloon attached to a child's wrist.

"Huh." Halfway to the door she stopped, pulling the balloon back, glancing at the friezes along the upper edge of the hallway. "Cute little bats."

It took Luskonneg several blinks and pivots to see what she was talking about. "I never.... noticed those."

"Never? How long have you been living here?"

"I don't go out.... in the hallway much." But he did, to take out the trash. What did the hall look like in his tunnel vision? Dirty concrete, pipes, like a Sisax Nimuel manga? A birth canal?

Once inside (the hallway wasn't Inside; Inside he noticed everything), she didn't say anything about the smell.

"Does.... does Marzanna know you're here?"





2
LWCIG121
AET
GUCN2
VCCNM20W
MPECEN02
A11EBBV
SOMWODO
1202
EVAVIDU
P1VIBICE
23E
202BEND1
120W
0N12
V110N0'
WUENW
DOTOBE
E1
GUBOBE
W101
IWCID100
LEWLOB
E102W0D
2E1 DO
WE E11
V11B12C1
10W
COM2ECL1
WUET'
211
DOTOB
120W
GUBEW

“Should she not?” Shifting away.

“No! No I just... didn’t think to tell her.” This she would need to know, if Gallvren talked about it. Although if she talked about it... there would be... there would be more to talk about, wouldn’t there? “Or I thought but... couldn’t. You know.... what I’m like. What I’ve talked about.... and she has probably. Erecutive.... dysfunction.”

“Mmhhh.” Sympathy. At least, how that would read on an anime character. “She thinks I’m at a” almost imperceptible stop, rolled over with a hiccup giggle
“Women’s Medicine appointment.”

“W-w-w-women’s ” *w-w-why would she pick an alibi like that did she want him to think about which would mean she unless*

“Which I was, an hour ago. She’s usually like, getting up around now. I’m actually surprised you picked a time this early.”

Other people not other pathetic NEETs, but people with jobs and degrees and Miwa black belts wake up at 11:00 in the morning?





“I... might not, next time. Were you... OK?”

“Of course!” She laughed and Luskonneg remembered how the Knitting Club laughed, how naturally he had slipped into thinking of it as an endearment

“If it was of course... you wouldn’t have to get a checkup... right?”

“Well ” now she reddened, which seemed to prove the laugh was real and he had ruined it “that’s true...” She glanced around, and her eyes settled on the walls, and he was suddenly aware of just what kind of a place, even cleaned, he had invited her into. *Even a doll convention – had disturbed her.* The function obvious, the space defined *calm down, she’s a fujoshi, you already talk about* she engaged primarily in text. Function, space: the white space between words, the virtual space of the imagination. *You don’t know what her physical space looks like.*

“What does your room look like?” His hands flew to his mouth as he blurted it out and her eyes snapped back to him. He stepped backwards in well-worn footprints onto his mattress, trying to get out of her space.

“Uhhh. Sorry, I didn’t make you feel... self-con-



scious, did I?”

“N-no, I mean,” he took another step backwards and almost tripped and steadied himself and sat on his pillow nodding the whole time. His two responses had gotten mixed up! Did even toddlers make this mistake? “did I, you,”

“No I get it. We don’t need to talk about it, we already have.” She stopped as if thinking. And sat down. Kneeled. At the end of his bed. There was an office chair he never used right there. “We’re having the same conversation we’d be having if Marzanna was here recording us for her article.” That wasn’t right, he hadn’t explained why did he decorate the way he did? Why not just have one window to the 2D world, one screen? Why distant paper when he mostly jacked off to images he could control? Why was he afraid to even take down characters and series he no longer liked? “This isn’t an interview. You invited me here because you want to be like, regular friends, right? Let’s talk about something else.”

“Like... like....” He couldn’t even scan his brain for what they might talk about that he couldn’t. Work? Mutual friends? The weather? Surely she couldn’t think of bringing any of those up to him she knew the conditions





of his life unless she wanted to prove to him that he had nothing to say, to laugh at him, the reveal coming already this soon... “....yourappointment?”

She laughed. The kind of laugh that meant she was still hiding its cruelty. It sounded as if she could be surprised.

“I meant more like. What were you doing up, this early in the morning? I mean you look like you just woke up. You probably just woke up.”

“I’m sorry! I’m just now realizing... I have no idea what...” He rumbled from somewhere that hadn’t adjusted to the hope yet. “...happens at those... and you mentioned it in the first place...”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have.” She looked away, sounding distant. “I was thinking on the way here, I feel like I could talk to you the way I talk to my girl friends. But not like. About that.”

“No I’m sorry!!!! Believe me I’m sorrier. Please believe me. I’m sorryI’msorryI’msorry ”

“I believe you.” She cut him off, without using



her eyes. Her hands folding over each other, as if forming mudras for some kind of spell. “I think.”

“What kind of things... do you talk about... with your girl friends.”

“Fandom stuff, like I told you, didn’t I?”

“But that’s what you just said... you couldn’t talk about with me.” He wanted to lie down. His energy drink overdrive was now pulsing through his skull, and he couldn’t even look at her, the edges of the room were collapsing. “It’s all I have... to talk about. Is this... some kind of test? Like... for Marzanna?” Like for Mark’eg. Like for Ylian. Like for everyone who had ever cared about trying to make him better which he was no longer sure he wanted to be.

“What? No it isn’t. I didn’t mean we can’t talk about what we like. I meant I don’t want to talk... about liking it, about why we like it, about the idea of it, like we’re trying to explain that to someone else.”

“...oh.” He thought about the difference, the balance of muscles in his face slipped, and the tears started running down his face in strips like wide rice noodles.





“Uuu... uuhhh... I’m sorry, I’m sorry for always...”

“Oh Goddess I didn’t mean to imply that...”

“, no, I know you didn’t, I mean, we’ve already discussed this, haven’t we?” He pulled up his sleeve over his wrist and even his fingertips — that was one of the ways to make looking pathetic look cute, right? or at least, it always had been to *him* — and scrubbed so hard at his face his eyebrows were sticking out like static when he’d removed them. “You know what I’m always. What I’m always.”

“Was there something you specifically wanted to talk about? I’m sorry, considering the circumstances, I should have asked or ”

There was, but he hadn’t wanted to bring it up now, he had somehow assumed they’d get into the rhythm of a normal conversation and then, hit a silence, which they did at least a dozen times in half an hour an average conversation, and when the silence got too unbearable he’d blurt it out

“I had a better explanation of some of the stuff I was thinking about after I talked to you last time, but...” That didn’t sound any better than talking about the appoint-



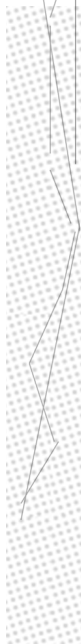
ment now.

“Did you really call me all the way out here... on my own... for *that*?” She cocked her head, her ponytail splitting over her shoulder, looking puzzled. “I thought you’d want to say something like that with Marzanna listening. Should I take notes?”

“I... already told her?” Now he’d have to, on the off chance she continued the article, and now she’d have a chance to cross examine and catch the inconsistency but that was the point, he was hurtling into an abyss where all but pain was unknown and pain was guaranteed, so he could act regardless of it. It felt like nothing. Like humming roiling energy all over his skin even though nothing was different and nothing would be different. Or maybe that was the three energy drinks. “I wanted to tell you... separately? So I wouldn’t have to repeat it... for her? Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. That was like. Tricking you, wasn’t it.”

“Can you stop doing that.” Her voice suddenly sharp, like tripping on the edge of a hardwood cabinet. Then it lightened. “*Can* you stop doing that?”

“Doing what.”





“Saying sorry. I can... it’s easier to deal with when it’s an interview for Marzanna, but it’s harder if we’re trying to have a normal conversation.”

“Like... stop, *ever*? Or stop, unless I do a particular set of things? I’m going to need to know because I can’t assume. I can’t know. *Better sorry than unsafe*, like they say, unless, saying it is also unsafe, for you, in which case I can’t...”

“OK *who* says that, because it’s pretty funny, but also not remotely true or useful for most situations.”

“My therapist? Also my mom? I thought it was just something people said.”

I never see it online, though. Unless... wasn't it in that one Hell Harrowing omake? But a Confusion Imp said it in that...

“...huh. Well I guess... say sorry if I say you did something wrong or get upset? Just don’t do it pre-emptively.”

“B-but... you will... do that? Say something... if I do something wrong... or you get... upset?”





“Well... yeah. At least, if it’s wrong enough that I want you to apologize.”

“But if it’s not enough.... what should I do.”

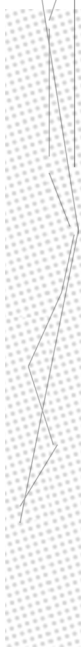
“Goddess I don’t know! Why would it even matter?”

“Because if it doesn’t... that means I don’t even care about... the real, underlying Order... which means I’m cut off from it... in the Dark.”

She tapped her index finger on her knee. “That’s *technically* true. But what you care about has no necessary relationship to anything *I* do. I don’t have to do something to make you care about something, and I can’t. You care if you’re asking the question.”

“...do ...do any of your friends decorate their rooms ...with fandom stuff?”

“I don’t actually... go over to their places that often. But I guess... Artaxine is the most open about it? She has a singlehouse and invites us all over for holidays. There is a big Heroes’ Love art scene, which is more like... individual pieces sold or exchanged one to one, where-





as a lot of this looks like mass reproduced promotional art. She has framed paintings of her main ships, but also subtler things like... symbolic flower arrangements? Actual veneration items, which are something you can get for the Heroes, not to mention individual portraits all over the place, although I find the HL ones more human and interesting. Actually Artaxine has some non-Hero, regular boys' love commissions too. There's something hanging in the bathroom, it's like a C'harn historical drama, I think it's called... *Thou My Plunder?*”

“What’s that like?”

“I haven’t actually... I’d say we could watch it, but there’s nowhere to sit and no big screen either.” She probably didn’t want to sit too close to him, either. Even after his latest showers. He wouldn’t. “They’re not as... explicit as some of these. Although the stuff Artaxine reads is very.” She paused. “She’s a Kamann/Silmenon shipper, actually. So like, you can imagine... or can you?”

“Oh. *Oh.*” Next to Kamann, he imagined, willowy Silmenon would become like one of his descendants’ drawings, pulsing impaled on the sceptre of justice, relinquishing control but unable to, muscles extending to a straining net... like the too-tight underwear he was now wearing





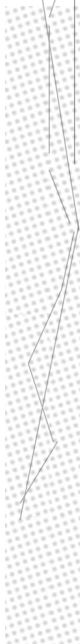
like a chastity cage, the stretch lines in his sweatpants he stared down at as they shifted by degrees of width and angle he had learned to discern in digitized pen marks... “I didn’t. Why didn’t I look for that.”

She giggled! He looked up from his fixation to catch it (*what if it pops visibly right now*) but it was already over. “Sorry, I did forget to answer about my own room several minutes ago.”

“No I mean, I should have let it be a surprise.” >implying he had the right to imply that “You didn’t ask me before you saw it and... frankly you probably should have.”

“Well, we’ve been circling it so much I’m almost wondering now if you invited me over just to show it off. Is there anything to... drink in here? I forgot to bring a water bottle and haven’t really had anything since I left.”

This one he had down! He stood up (on his already-crushed pillow) and sauntered over to the fridge. He had bought two packs of energy drinks, only making it part of the way through one. He pulled one out of the plastic packing rings (thinking briefly to ask if she liked it but afraid it would seem overly solicitous, and he wanted to





give her something new if she hadn't tried it, a piece of himself, to see how she would react, for her eyes to widen like in a doujin when the hips that resisted start moving on their own), going for two before he caught his hands shaking. He didn't want another, but the only other things in there (besides stains and food debris, year-old rotted leaves from the last time his mom brought lettuce and the ring left by an exploded whipped cream) were the unpleasantly syrupy dregs of a two-month-old lychee juice carton and some Meltwater Lagers, which he didn't actually like but which Llau had convinced him to buy for the old-style stubby bottles.

If he drank alcohol at 11:something in the morning, he would look cool, right?

He slumped down in the office chair, looking down on her (her shirt had a high ruffled collar, thank the Goddess), holding out the energy drink.

“Oh, just some water, thanks.”

And then he had to find a cup that wasn't... there were three in the sink and two in the cupboard that didn't look any cleaner than the ones in the sink...



He poured the water in the sink. It came out hot. Was he supposed to just stand there with it running until it cooled down? “It’s not... working, I don’t usually...” It guttered as if in agreement. “Do you... how cold do you want it?”

“Oh never mind, I’ll take the can.”

He spun back around, nearly knocking over the glass he had been examining on the counter, to hand it back to her, snapping it open.

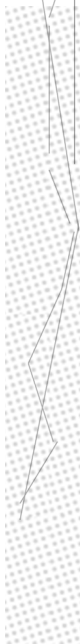
“I should be tired, because I got up early, but I usually feel more tired when I get up late. It could hit later in the day though.”

“Oh... kinda same.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t read any Kamann/Silmenon. That was like, my first guess of what you were going to go for, actually.”

“Not Elthazan/Silmenon? That’s like... being a Winter City weeb... for me, I feel like I *am* that ship.”

“Yeah but it’s not a very interesting sorry, that’s not fair.” She steepled her fingers. “It’s an interesting ship but it takes a really good writer to get what’s interesting





about it. Most writers don't go for it because there isn't a strong masculine/feminine polarity. They're both kinda..." She fluttered her wrist. "I dunno, maybe that makes it easier for you as a guy. And they're both weirdos, so there's not a strong funny man/straight man dynamic either."

"But there's an artificial/natural kinda dynamic."

Are we just going to...

"Which is hard to get right without collapsing onto 'civilized/primitive'. The hard part which does or can make it interesting is how different they would have looked from *each other's* perspective than from *ours*, and from everyone else they were different from 'we're both outliers, but not in the same way!' Which is also kinda true of all the Heroes so you have to figure out what would make them stick out *to each other*. For instance I like this one starts out as a mutual hurt/comfort fic where Silmenon's pining over Miwa as he does and Elthazan... over Kamann. There's actually a bit of Silmenon/Kamann in that one too because Silmenon's had a casual or, you know, transactional thing with him, but Elthazan's in love..."

"What's this one called?" ...*keep talking like this, the way we would online...*





“Impermanence and Imperfection.”

“OK, on the nose but that sells it.” ...*(but never actually do)*...

“It recycles whole scenes from the genre codifier *Red Pine* which is actually a lot more centrally about those things, as like, poetics.”

“...What’s the Silmenon/Kamann bit like?” ...*except it’s way more friction to say anything, even if it comes out OK...*

“There’s a really great bit of awkwardness with them lemme see if I can remember because I haven’t read in a while.” ...*but on the other hand I get to hear the music of her voice the way her words tumble one over another, roll like raindrops on a roof...* “See it’s not casual like, Silmenon gives Kamann the carnal communion, which a bunch of people were mad at but in this story Maullan’s OK with it since they’re on campaign and he can’t have a normal relationship, anyhoo. So Elthazan wants to try it too, and he keeps confessing things that are like practical mistakes. And Silmenon wants him to... to talk about his feelings, basically, and keeps confessing these deeply embarrassing things himself as examples. And Elthazan looks like... hor-





rified! At the end he confesses for not telling Kamann.”

“About his feelings, or fucking his confessor?”
*where did that image come from did I really just think some
thing like that (without trying)...*

“Both, but mostly the latter because like, Silmenon isn’t telling Miwa either, and... I shouldn’t spoil this, it’s kind of a turning point in the story.”

“Go ahead.” *I want to hear it in her voice* – as soon as he started to form the words in his own head they became jarring and dissonant, like they weren’t true, even if they were.

“Well, Silmenon agrees in theory with Maullan that you shouldn’t confess things you wouldn’t change.”
I like hearing Marzanna’s voice too, he remembered, though he couldn’t focus on it in general. In dreams, in memories, in public, human voices only grated. “And he’s not going to confess (his feelings) to Miwa because it wouldn’t make either of them happier, but he doesn’t want to stop having the feelings either, so they both decide they can’t keep confessing (their “sins”) to each other, but they want to keep having sex.”



“Huh. I don’t think that’s... theologically...”

“Coherent? It’s not, even Maullan hasn’t hammered out the theology of confession at this point, they’re all making up the rules as they go along. Which is one of the things that makes these stories so interesting. All the things that tell us the normal way to deal with emotions, which are the things that make stories stories, are all up in the air. You don’t have to contrive ‘special’ situations for characters to experiment with them and come into conflict.”

“OK, when you put it that way...”

“But a lot of people don’t write like that! Even in highbrow HL.”

“No, I think I get what you mean, because it’s the kind of thing... I like about a lot of my favourite stories, even if they fall more under ‘contriving special situations’... I’m used to cycling through every possible thought that could follow from or explain an action, even if I can’t choose between them... so put anything in front of me as ‘what happens’, ‘what the characters do’, I can explain it, it’s harder the more I have to worry if something’s ‘normal’.”





“Hmmm. I feel like that’s a way Elthazan would think. But that he might have in common with Silmenon.”

“Do you know any fics involving. Public confession.”

Like – if I confessed to her in front of Marzanna.

He had invited her out here to avoid that.

But what if it was how it was supposed to go. What if that was how to resolve both feelings. Why else would it have been set up like this, after all.

>*first session booked at library*

>in one of those little glass-walled soundproofed study/meeting rooms I never knew who used; Ylian never took me inside them

>six other people there; more than I expected for an obscure cult thing

>none of them are from our school

>Ylian explains there’s a Public Morals Mutual





Support Network across the school district

>she recruited through it, as an experimental training exercise

>four Public Morals Committee members from different schools were curious

>only one brought another problem kid

>huge muscly girl with spiky pigtails, led around by a skinny tomboy with a pointed hoodscarf; can't remember either of their names but have their appearances down photographically

>before we even do introductions, the big girl, who's been scowling the whole time, bursts out laughing and asks why I'm grinning

>had no idea I was, look at myself in phone screen

>"do you get off on having your secrets revealed or revealing other people's?"

>still grinning but terrified: "both"

>realize as soon as I finish saying it I gave the





wrong impression

>one of the Public Morals people says to Ylian, I shouldn't be here

>Ylian says I'm lying

>stumblingly explain that I'm talking about fiction not real life, in real life I'm pretty terrified of both those things

>another person says (sounding kinda scared herself) that that means I shouldn't be here

>le only rule is total honesty (>implying I know what's true about myself)

>say that's why I'm here, to push myself to do things I'm scared of

>another person says I shouldn't be here, this is an exercise for people who have already honed their emotional and moral skills

>look to Ylian for backup that she thought it was ok for me to be there





>bad idea

>says I'm trying to push my decision onto her

>I'm not the only one getting grilled; someone else is worried about regulations and asked why she came in the first place

>the other Public Morals people (including Ylian!) imply that she only came to feel better than them and not participate

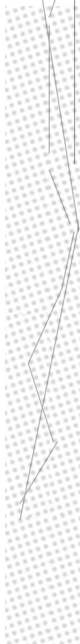
>"this is what happens every time we try a SinAnon"

>Ylian calls for introductions to shut everyone up when 3 conversations are talking over each other

>can't remember any of these

>can remember some of the types of sins these people confess

>"sorting the garbage in front of someone who always puts it in the wrong bins without giving them a chance to fix it themselves"





>this gets picked apart as “an attempt to make us feel sorry for you when the real problem is that you’d let him”

>”doing homework during meetings”

>”using being on the Public Morals Committee to turn down dates when I’d accept if it was someone I liked”

>”enjoying shredding joints some boy hid in his desk in front of him too much”

>oh yeah, and this is the one that sets things off “getting off to Heroes’

Love that her friend doesn’t approve of”. not because it’s bad in itself, because the FRIEND wouldn’t think of her the same way if she knew, which makes the whole friendship dubiously consensual

>”why don’t you just get some normal pre-erotica that does the same thing? are you specifically trying to piss off your friend?”

>”I’m obviously not just into some specific category of thing,

>”no, you’re actually fantasizing about her, aren’t you?”



>she actually defends herself: "there are things in it you don't get in the normal, or the Academy-approved stuff, either"

>jump up: "YES both of these are true"

>somebody else is just going through a list of Academy-approved pre-erotica artists, everyone else is staring at me

>"what's with the perverts here?"

>"any Public Morals Committee SinAnon will inevitably be dominated by sex hangups"

>"what, because of the ethical barriers to normal dating?"

>first I've heard about this; obvious in retrospect and I have a whole chart of series about it now

>"yeah," the big girl who hasn't gone yet laughs, "you can't hit on me normally so you brought me here"

>starting to get idea but too many inputs to (over) think about it properly

>"interesting word choice from someone who's going





to end up in a Supervised Living Facility if you don't stop hitting people"

>"girls just assume I'm into them! I have to counterintentionalize it somehow"

>incidentally, I know almost 75 straight years of seasonal charts by memory and have never encountered a character with this exact deal. if you have any from other sectors of culture pls rec

>"see, your local Committee maybe isn't going to talk about it like this, but what if they're into that. you're encouraging them"

>"would it encourage you?" she's looking at her sponsor(?) now, grinning

>impossible to fucking concentrate, Ylian's looking back and forth between me and the exit

>"It would discourage the school, which is what you should be worried about"

>wait are you actually.jpg

>idea pulsing in me

ENCIGI21
LEG
TVCN2
VCCN25W
ECEM25
NINEBBV
COMMOD
BISN2
VAVITD
PTIBICE2
SSE
S02LEWDI
S2W
N12
VT1009
D0FOVE
E1
T0BOVE
N1
INCIDIDN
TEWFOV
E102WOD
SED DO
VE EG11'
VDIB12CI
INB
COM2ECIE
NNE1'
211
D0FOV
122W
B0BEW





>”BOTH of you have to tell the truth now”

>”both of us? isn’t the real reason we’re doing any of this that SinAnon is an ethics nerd churchmouse’s excuse for a Truth or Dare gossip circle?”

>big girl (I still can’t remember her fucking name) just guffaws: “that’s the only reason I came! What about the one boy here, what did he come to share?”

>Ylian facepalm (mental reaction image to this day)

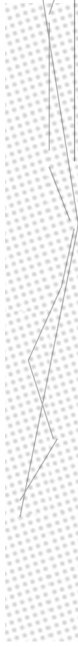
>”ohhh, is this all because you’re straight? well have you considered trying to present in a way boys like instead of taking it out on girls?”

>clutching my legs together around my **** like I need to pee

>le me: ”I... I have a question”

>everyone’s yelling at each other now, I have to repeat it three times

>big girl just zeroes in on me while everyone else is shouting. “what is it?”



2
LVCIGI2I
AET
GUCN2
VCCNM20W
HPECEN02
AICLEBBV
COWODD
A1202
EVAIDV
PIVIBICE2
23E
SOSBENDI
1120W
0N12
VTIDN
WUENW
DOTOBE
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GUBOBE
W101
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>not sure Ylian can hear me, this isn't ideal, but I might as well

>"is fantasizing about your friend if they don't like you... better or worse than fantasizing about something they might not like?"

>dead silence

>"did this kid skip Love Ed? can you even get away with that?"

>"no," Ylian jumps in, literally standing up and blocking the others' view of me, "he's doing this to goad you into explaining things that aren't your job to explain, because he gets off to it"

>she knows I missed Love Ed!!! but I know this is SinAnon so I zip my lips and nod furiously

>"is that the only thing you can get off to?" someone asks

>hahahahaha nooooo

>"don't ask him that idiot! we'll be here all day"

ENCIPHER
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ECCM2
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VOTD
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TOBEW





>let's play a game.jpg: "look, I can't confess any of my sexual fantasy sins until I know they're sins. if not then I'm just telling you about inappropriate things. and I'm retarded, I don't understand what's a sin and what isn't if you don't tell me"

>"huh? you're not 'retarded' which is not the word you're supposed to use, your grades are just shit because you want to force me to spend time with you"

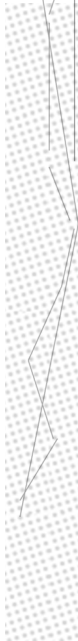
>big girl: "that doesn't work if we ask the questions right? I'm the one who wants to know"

>kinda respect this girl the more I remember her, if I were to get reincarnated back to this time I'd try to take her route

(That's you, Marzanna, you're her in this analogy, which makes this line a confession to you, you'd totally read it as one right? Unless you don't and then I don't know if I can again, later, because I don't know if I already did.)

>"are you into ethics kink?"

>her handler: "more like unethics kink. I read an ar-



2'
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D0GOV
1B20W
G0BEM



title about this. the Lower Poets' Courts will let people get away with anything these days, it's obvious bad faith"

>"ahahahah an article? are you sure just an article?" she retorts and the others are laughing now "hey loser boy over there, what's she talking about because I don't know about freak shit like that but I bet she does. gimme a name"

>almost just say Najda bc he's considered a pioneer in mainstream accounts but that's not what they're talking about

>start describing the plot of Skip Grade

(“A gifted brother and sister pair are racing to complete grade 12 so they can succeed their dead parents’ cutting-edge Mysteries research. At 12, the brother is in grade 10 and the sister 11 for 11. Their respective social worlds are the hormonal battlegrounds of high school, the sudden Cold War between its boys and girls, and they do not understand, as most but not all their peers do, why they should not participate at what they believe to be their true level of development.” summary on AnimeNews-Meshnet.com)

>everyone looking on in horror



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ROBEW

>hoodscarf girl glaring daggers at Ylian

>ask if I've been vetted lately, if they're sure I'm not
flagged for active-paraphilia

>yes I actually do know that, I've been to a million
psychologists, I'm not flagged for active-anything, that's my
problem

>big girl laughs, feels validating somehow

>somebody telling her she's not qualified to be dealing
with me

>completely new tone, doesn't feel like part of the
game

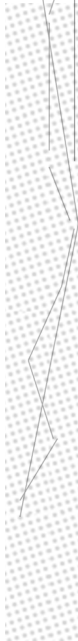
>now they start peeling back her layers

>accusing her of exploiting me by not turning me over
to adult intervention and using me to test out forbidden methods

>try to explain I have adult intervention already

>half of them standing up leaving the room

>scream that that's not even my real sin





>two fuckers stop near the door

>say I fantasize about Ylian

>say I'd stop thinking about anything else for her

>Ylian pulls my chair out from under me

>accuses me of manipulating her into bringing her
here

>say I know, that's why it's a sin so I have to con-
fess it

>others tell her she has to go out with me for pub-
lic safety

>spin around and tell them that's straight up what
one of the secret student council in Skip Grade said and
the correct interpretation even Veilluko arrives at is that
it's wrong

>big girl smacks whoever said that

>then comes marching over to me

>true forgiveness coming finally

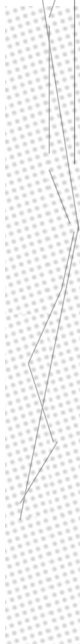
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PTIFICE2
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222LEWDI
I22W
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23E
202FEND1
1120W
0012
01000'
M0E0W
D0T0VE hours
E1
F0B0VE
M101
I0C1D1D0 room
1E0B0V
E102W0D
2E1 D0
M0 E111' talk to me
M0B1B12C1
10W
C0M2E0C1E
0W0E1'
211
D0T0B
1120W
F0B0W

- >bracing for her fist
- >Ylian stops her
- >calls library security on herself
- >tells me to wait there
- >everyone else leaves
- >sitting there in the room for what feels like hours
- >some other group is coming, asking to use the room
- >remember waiting for them to come back and talk to me
- >don't remember anything after that
- >wake up in hospital
- >mom has dismissed Dr. Mark'eg and replaced him with another therapist
- >Public Morals Committee ends sessions obviously





- >all step down in next student by-election
- >replaced by a bunch of sports honour bros
- >rest of high school life is a waking coma

“Public confession as in, love confession? Or the historical thing? Because there are a lot of Maullan fics with those obviously, and a decent amount of Kamann where he goes into a guilt thing, Silmenon occasionally but those are usually individual character focused fics. I’m trying to think where it could come up in a ship fic like... can you give an example of a dynamic it could be used in?”

“Like if someone... confesses their feelings for someone through... a public confession... like the historical thing?” He had said something wrong. His throat was seizing up. The beer was sending its shimmering bolus to stop him from saying something to make it worse. Burping or hiccuping would also be worse (it would prove whatever he said had been both honest and the fault of a gross personality that got drunk before noon).

“That wouldn’t happen, historically. Even more severe private mental sins weren’t usually confessed, unless you had a really crazy preacher, it was mostly things





that involved the community...”

“Huh, I always thought... there was a cult that did that, wasn’t there?”

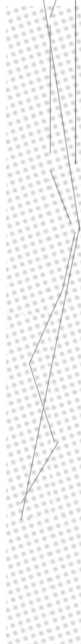
“Oh yeah... Marzanna’d know more about that kind of thing than me.”

“Do you think the Heroes ever did a public confession... with just the seven of them?”

“It would probably have been recorded, but after they vanished into the Dark Realms who’s to say... I’m pretty sure there are stories like that, just a sec.”

“I mean I can find them too...” But she had already lowered her head, pulling her purse up from the side of the chair and settling it on her knees as she pulled out her phone for the first time. A sleek frost-chrome model with stickers on the back of flowers he didn’t recognize. She couldn’t even see if he stared, though her hair had obscured her collarbone, moving through different shades of dawn.

“It would really interest *me* and I’d never thought of it before. Actually, I wonder if I could include it in...”





She tilted her head back up and made eye contact (*saw he was already staring*). “In the Elthazan/Kamann story I’m working on, I need a way to have Elthazan figure out some of the dynamics between the other Heroes... you know what you were saying about cycling through things? I feel like I need to do that with dialogue. But the way I do it is slow... maybe you could help me. Like, come up with different branches and we could pick them.”

“M... me? Not... can’t you do that w-with... your girl friends?”

“‘cause you think about things the same way. Branching, like you said? Although... I guess so does Marzanna.” Her gaze drifted up to the window, against the current of dust.

Was that... “I-I’ll do it!” He shouted so loud she winced.

“Are you sure?” The way she said it sounded like she wasn’t sure — like she maybe even regretted having brought it up so confidently. *At least if it’s wrong enough that she wants me to apologize, she’ll say...* “I still wasn’t sure if Kamann and Elthazan was your kind of ship, or if you had figured out your kind of ship, or gotten into shipping





2
LWCIG121
AET
TUCN2 at all.”
VCCNM20W
HPECEN02
A1L0EBV0
C0M0D0D0
A1202
E0V0A1D0
P1V1C1E
23E
2025E0D1
1120W
0012
0T100V'
W0E0W
D0T0V0E
E1
T0V0B0E
W101
1M01D1D0
1E0L0B
E102W0D
2E1 D0
W0 E11
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10W
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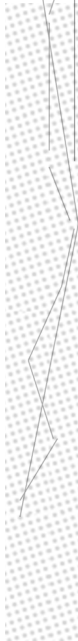
at all.”

“I don’t have to. Didn’t you just say... we’d be collaborating for that type of psychological worldbuilding? Although...” *This is good, you can give her an out. No, you want an out too, don’t you?* “I’ve never managed to write... a story... it feels more like talking for real... than talking online, somehow...”

“Oh, this would be easiest to do just talking online. But my point was, I’m not asking you to select conversations. Just run different ones for me to pick from. They don’t have to be good.”

“That’s still... selection. I have to pick... the order to say possibilities in. And by the time I’m doing that... I’ve come up with enough more... that I have to select anyway.”

“Anyway, I was still curious... if any of them seemed cute as characters to you. In the sense that... you were talking about, when you said you didn’t see yourself as an adult as cute. I was wondering if any of them struck you as... a kind of adult you’d want to be.” She laughed apologetically. “Sorry, that’s probably too personal for me to be worrying about!”





He didn't move. He sat hunched like a gargoyle, intercepting the light over her.

Who would you want me to be?

There were kinds of characters, even occasional adult characters, he had... fantasized himself as, which wasn't the same thing as believing he could be. The Slaver was the remnant of one, a "hero" from another world, beaten into a grotesque form over cycles and cycles of doujins and deconstruction. And @moephrenology, or even the version of himself that would become the "representative of NEETs", had learned to talk in part from the critic-detective Zacherauld... But for the most part, when he closed his eyes and self-inserted, he wasn't anything. Not a child or a teenager even unless he went to the effort of imagining it — even with younger characters he knew himself to be a larger body now, imposing or sheltering — but a kind of silhouette of subjectivity, the shape of his own blind spot.

(Striding across a bridge of clouds over a nebula. Ten stars.

...what?





Don't worry, you're still a bit high. Never mind us.)

Instead, he said: "I feel like I shouldn't do that. I mean, help you with your story, one thing, but if I get invested, the way I... am with stuff around here... if I start to eroticize the Seven Heroes, that's like, the one thing I haven't desecrated already, that I hadn't even thought about." Because he'd skipped classes about them. Because they bored him. Or had until he had known her. Yet he had already soiled his last corner of sacredness, many times, in private, trying to set this up and not felt like he was doing it, because the experiment was about her, had nothing to do with them at all.

"I..." She fell silent and a horrifying shame (*you can't read this into her tone, her face, you can't read anything*) that should have been his crept into her voice when she raised it again. "I should respect that. Of course. You might... still get something out of reading Pontquarno's arguments firsthand, that it's not desecrating anything, my summaries can't do them justice. I've always believed that, that I'm participating in the memory of the Heroes in an important way, more than... I mean, you don't seem to think about them that much at all, but I shouldn't presume. I hope *talking* about it isn't..."





He had fallen down a horrible echoing pit his own terror in someone else's voice, with all the power that only someone else's voice could possess.

"N-no, no no no no, that only applies to me, not to you, and I'm not even sure it applies to — *Too late! You've bound yourself forever, under a new spell, an oath of loyalty, and her too —*

"Right." Laughing again — was her inner mind racing as fast as his? "I'm probably taking you too seriously. And I'm sure it's no different than how I felt about —" she glanced around — "this stuff at first."

Don't listen to her none of it counts now but now he could use her words to beat back her words, an ogre's club of echoes. "I was just." He waited, unaware even if his eyes were open, until he could hear his thoughts again. "Going to explain something better about that. Actually." He paused, gulped, and tried. "What was I gonna say." Paused again. Started counting time, stopped counting time. It finally fell out, like lost keys from a pants pocket. "I know I've explained it twice, but I kept thinking about those explanations and neither of them sounded right. I think it's just, for me, cute things are easier to look at than non-cute things. It's also easier to think about lewd things than not



to think about them. And it's easier to think about lewd things, when they're cute. So I like characters that are both cute and lewd. That's why it looks like this. Not all the crazy stuff we were talking about last time with like... heresies or anything."

"...ahhh." It was hard to see her eyes from this angle. "I guess, 'ease' doesn't play that big a role in fantasy for me? I like things that are a challenge to imagine sometimes and some of the stuff you've told me about seems challenging in its own right."

"The actual stories and the shows, yeah. My mind works against that. If I'm looking at something cute it's not as much of a challenge to think through complicated stuff."

"Hmmm, OK. While we're still doing poetics. Which I don't know anyone else who likes to talk about..." she sounded like she was justifying herself talking to him out loud "... at this level of abstraction." He had something special to her! "What makes things 'cute'?"

"Uhhhhh." Was it the energy drinks making him blank so much. When he tried to form thoughts even if he stared into Smilia's (glare-glossed, empty) eyes he ran up against the same brittle shine, deflective surface. "Let's





see.... what was I gonna.... on one level I can't answer that off the top of my head, on another I'd have to like, scrape my account for all the arguments I've made..."

"I'm asking in the sense of well, in the stuff I read, I usually think of *relationships* that way. Not individual characters."

"Right. That too well, mostly when it's lewd. Because it's easier... to not think about... myself, and not having anything like that."

"Why does that make it easier?"

"Stops thinking. Doesn't it" oh Goddess oh Goddess they were talking about *it* "for you?"

"I think it's actually more like the opposite. You got me wondering which I don't usually! why I do focus so much on stories that have that element, and I think that way of projecting myself into someone else's desire *gets me thinking* about the characters psychologically. The desire makes me more attentive, sharpens my focus."

"*The Serpent sharpens your focus on the Goddess.*" Mark'eg's words had he used that exact phrasing? Were



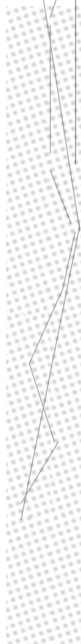
these Arc Words?

“Oh!” His heart jumped around like a rabbit in a new enclosure and he was glad his beard hid the trails of sweat on his neck. “I remember something I posted now. Cute *isn't* you, you don't identify with it. Cute is outside you.”

“For a *fujoshi*, the whole relationship is outside us. We participate at a distance. For me it's like... if I wanted something I could actually have, I would go and get it.”

“Same, except for me that's like, everything.” He wasn't stumbling any more, and his voice was getting loud and harsh. “Every kind of story, ethical or unethical, sexual or non-sexual, character-driven or plot-driven. Which is why I'm the ultimate fiction appreciator!” He laughed, falling back in his chair, letting his shoulders swivel back like a cockpit disengaging, arms draping over the half-broken back support.

“Yes, but what you've been telling me, across three conversations now, is that some kinds are 'easier' than others, and this has something to do with what you feel like you can and can't identify with.”





“I even just mean... in terms of not getting distracted as easily. Like I can't watch a movie... without looking down at my phone... unless I'm transfixed by what's on the screen.” A metaphor of impalement.

“I get distracted from most things on screens, to be honest. Text is easier to focus on because I'm putting the words together myself. There are HL comics though.”

“Yeah it wouldn't... well it might be a bit easier. I do read a bit of everything. I guess I wouldn't be able to form a really personal connection... or a really novel one... because they're real people... and the same ones every time... I'm still gonna read it so it doesn't matter that much, right?... Are you still like, interviewing me?”

“No. We don't have to keep talking about this, either.”

“No I like.” It had never been like this with Mark'eg. Or Ylian, or Gwaëlle... with anyone who'd *tried* to understand him. “Like doing this. Kind of.”

Even with *himself*.

It just kept happening.



He was noticing, for instance, that things he said weren't consistent with other things he said.

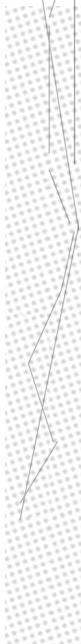
It was scary, but it helped to notice them. To try and resolve, or explain them.

"Heh. So do I."

They sat in silence.

"I still think there's nothing that interesting about... guys are just more visual because the Serpent sees the Goddess at a distance, right? While the Goddess sees the Order within Herself?"

"I have a bit planned about that in my Kamann/Elthazan fic where they're both on lookout and competing who can spot things further on the horizon. Elthazan's winning, and Kamann uses that as an argument they're really a guy... using Maullan's gender metaphysics, which of course Elthazan's never heard of... Elthazan points out that depending on the wind, they can smell at least as far as they can see. But smell isn't like sight, you don't see Order and boundary in the same way, you smell everything on the wind as if it's already inside you."





He smiled, right? He better have smiled. He opened his mouth and rocked in his seat, then stopped for fear of looking like a cursed doll. “Do you really believe their sense of smell was like that, though?... I dunno if it’s... biologically possible...”

“I don’t think that matters to the thing I’m talking about, although... I guess some of the stuff my doctor was talking about this morning would make a pretty obvious case for my having stronger interoception as a woman.” Luskonneg introcepted something in his abdomen doing a sympathetic triple lutz. “Growing up as a girl, you get... the visual appeal of girls, you’re overexposed to it almost, but it has context as part of your social life. You and your friends help make each other ‘cute’, you compare it as a talent and a craft, and by the time those other feelings start waking up you’re used to it... or not, I guess, like me. But even if you don’t” his arms deathlocked in an X across his writhing lap “you’re still kind of vaccinated to it, you look for something else... that distinguishes the romantic or erotic from the background radiation of your existence.”

“Wait, do you... like girls that way?”

He must have asked her already, right? How did people have conversations with dozens of different people



2'
LWCIGI21
AET
TUCN2 regularly for years without searchable logs?
VCCNM29M
MPECEN02
AULLEBBV
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PIVIBICE2
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2025END1
1B20W
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2E1 DO
WE EG11'
VDIBI2CI
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COM2EC1E
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ROBEW

regularly for years without searchable logs?

“I guess. I always say. I guess. Are you asking about fiction? Or in real life?”

In fiction he remembered they had talked about it. Her favourite yuri HL ship (there weren't many options, and one was historical canon) was Maullan X Klaxion (nestled away respectfully in those few months before Miwa joined the team, with both in the unknowing formative stages of their world-shaping ideas). For some reason she was entertaining the idea that he didn't remember, but that could be a humiliation trap and he wouldn't take the bait.

“R-real... l-life.”

“Well, of course there's not many guys in real life who can live up to the guys I write about.”

“Same, same I mean I mean ”

She knew what he meant, she thought, but wanted to cut him off before he stumbled into some other more disconcerting direction. “With girls, like... I know what to





look for. I *can* like them that way. Kinda like you with guys right? I had a girlfriend once in high school, for a few weeks. But she got insecure, because... she didn't know if I liked her really. Because I hadn't decided what ship type we were. Which I wasn't going to make an issue; for her it was anyway. But it's true I made it harder by overanalyzing. One of the things about writing Heroes' Love is like... none of them are trying to like each other, they all have more important things to worry about. They know it's real because they'd never admit it unless they absolutely had to." Klauxion and Miwa, the only historically confirmed romantic entanglement between the Heroes, only declared themselves years after the Dark Lord's defeat; as Maullan's Autohagiography attested, their sacred mission was too important to let personal feelings interfere, even in the telling. "So I had no idea what it was supposed to be like if I just, went on a date or something." She scratched the thin hair behind her ear where his stare bored through to the dry skin.

"Do you know how it *w*-would not be sorry, I mean *w*-*would* it not be no I mean *how*, but not like, rhetorically, please don't think I mean rhetorically would it not be just like this? With us, now?"



“Well, whenever I’ve been on *just dates* with guys, it’s too artificial, and when I’m with the girls it’s too natural.” She kept talking until his question settled in and she realized whatever *this* was was neither of those things, and that might encourage him. “This is neither of those. It’s not this, though.”

“W-well... I don’t really feel like... either of those things with you. Although I guess...I never had. ‘Too natural’. At least.” He tapped the tips of his fingers together. She squinted.

“It’s not so much like that with me and Marzanna either,” Gallvren diverted. “She’s very different from me, I’m just not sure if in the right ways. I’m not sure I understand all of them.”

An affectedly mysterious person, and a person whose love stories always start out as curiosity. She reddened not so much at the feelings as at her own reducibility.

“Well that’s... two.”

She laughed. “Would you ship me and Marzanna?”

“...Do. Do you want me to.”





“On second thought, absolutely not.” She tossed her braid and pursed her lips before speaking. “I was just thinking about it.” And then her wavering gave way: if she wanted to *be girl friends with him*, she would have to talk about this. “I think she likes me a bit, maybe?”

Of course. Why else would someone like this spend so much time and energy on someone like him, except to impress the person she *really* liked.

His feet reached the ground between the wheels of the swivel chair. (The friction against the floor stretched the threadbare socks and she unrepressed the image of a lint-black toenail sticking out directly through a run.)

His butt wiggled as it flexed itself up off the chair. His forearms flexed twice, not parting from in front of his crotch even as his ass rose, his upper body pitching mechanically forward as his legs extended, until it was hanging precariously between her and the light.

His clawed hands tightened until they looked like springs that would blow across the room if you brushed his knuckles the wrong way.

His eyelids folded so tight they looked like mus-



cles, a new crease appearing every time he blinked.

Gallvren pushed herself up on her wrists and crabwalked back off the futon into a cardboard box where a figurine tilted.

But he hadn't moved or said anything yet.

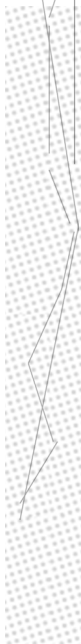
"Then... I was wrong." The words that escaped his mouth like air from a slashed pipe. "It was... her. And you've... taken my route. Because I had the wrong answer."

"What are you talking about. Nothing I said suggested I've 'taken' anyone."

"So you're not physically attracted... to Marzanna, either? And you wouldn't want to... wait, you *already* live with her?"

"Neither of those have to do with the question I asked." She placed her hands on either side of her, started to lift herself up. *No no no no no-t yet.*

"Don't w-w-worry about it." He guarded his face with one hand and eked out one corner of a smile. "Just b...breaking the fourth wall."





“The *fourth wall*?”

“Yes. OK. So. You and Marzanna. Ship or not ship.”

“I’d rather not talk about this now, actually. Sorry.”

“It reminds me of Klauzion and Miwa a bit... but distributed differently... Marzanna’s more extroverted *and* physical, you’re more introverted but you’re *both* verbal... it’s not... balanced...” He rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, looking like he was going to fall whenever he reached the apex of his lean one way or the other.

“... I think this is the thing we talked about earlier.”

“Why. Do you bring these things up. If you don’t want. To *talk* about them?”

“I don’t... not want to talk about them. I want to talk about them... like gir- like normal friends.”

He sank back into his chair. “You knew... that was impossible... right?”

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HT1009
WCEM
GOBE
E1
TUBOBE
E1
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LEWFOB
E102WOD
SED DO
ER11
WDIB12CI
INB
COMSECTE
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211
DOROB
IBSNM
TUBEW





“I hoped it wasn’t.”

“I’m not a normal... friend because... I’m not a normal... person.”

“...I don’t ...think that’s the same thing I’m talking about either...”

“Sorry for not being a normal person.”

“....”

“sorrysorrysorry”

“The last time you stopped.”

He stopped.

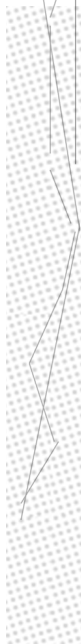
“You stopped when I wanted you to stop.”

He kept stopping.

“That’s enough. That’s good enough. For now. For normal. Let’s...” She trailed off.

“FuckIwastedmylastlinecanIdoitagain.”

“Your *seriously?*”





“No serious. I had a line. I wanted to say.”

“What kind of line?” What about this was surprising to her. That it was *predictable*?

“Look, if you caught feelings for someone,” she started, “I don’t mind... if you say it. That’s your right, you don’t have to... find awkward ways to force it to be relevant.” Is *that* what she thought was happening? But more importantly:

“It is?”

“Not... in *any* context. Sorry, I always forget you missed this in school. And a lot of people would say it’s... a bit fast but... being into Heroes’ Love, where the important feelings often can’t be fulfilled, or don’t happen in a way that makes sense to other people. I encounter this. Where it’s still important to say them, because...”

“...because it gives the story an endpoint.”

“Well, yes. But you’re also telling a story, about yourself, to yourself. To the Goddess.”

He laughed. “So you get what I mean. About the fourth wall.”

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120W
GUBEW

No calm down. You can find out the rest from Marzanna. You can ask Marzanna what's going on.

You can confess to Marzanna. Next time you talk to her.

Find out if she read the last story.

Wait he never sent that. He'd found it on his phone when he woke up, and deleted it by accident.

Find out where she thought he'd gone wrong, and if it mapped to what had gone wrong this time

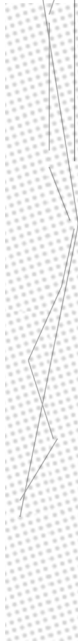
You're going to fail. You've already failed. You need to fail in the best way possible.

“Can you tell Marzanna that... I...”

His voice stopped. He couldn't keep going. It wasn't true.

He hated at least right now, in the heat of this moment that had consumed all other moments hated, hated, hated Marzanna Etnexheyr.

She had dragged him into this situation this re-





run of a rerun again.

Explaining nothing. Pretending she was trying to help him.

That couldn't be enough to negate everything, right? The confession he had written in his head, in the drug dimension, and deleted along with the greentext?

But Marzanna knew everything. She knew his past. She could have explained this to him.

Would that have felt any better?

....

“Does Marzanna want... the three of us... to be friends?”

“I'll tell her... you asked that. I'm not sure, but I think she'd be happy to know you want that.”

Waiting. Another test of waiting.

Time, limited; neither time, momentary, nor time, eternal. The worst of all worlds...

That couldn't be the test. That meant he had

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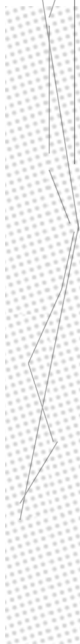


failed.

There were games where you could pick all the routes in rapid succession, backpedal from one and still land the other, while the Choice was still “active”. Choices that had randomized good and bad ends, and you could use that window to pivot out of one and continue your session. He leaned forward, picturing *kabe-don*. Fell off the chair, finally, picturing a lap faceplant or some shit. His hand seized up but he let it. Slammed his fist into the wall next to Gallvren’s head. The topology of his knuckles sprung to life in thermal-mapped pain, momentarily bigger than his body, bigger in turn than hers. Then the ratio reversed.

His closed fist had hit racing swimsuit Smilia in the abdomen, in the womb. The Slaver laughed riotously, and his Self-Insert prostrated himself in tears to his one true angel, who he had already forsaken, while the Slaver’s punishing lashes fell across his back. He wouldn’t be able to look Smilia in the eye again for how long, maybe ever *there are always mine, they’re used to this kind of thing*. The eyes of the real woman in front of him swam, and her mouth shook, and she lifted her fingers just below it and wiggled them in time with the lazy fan in the ceiling.

Luskonneg felt heavy, fuzzy sleep creep up on his





closed eyes from behind

and snapped back, as if the approach of faintness had triggered an electrical shock that was still coursing through his body.

The [Taboo Preserver] gasped in his sleep.

Talismans tore off the walls and burned up inside security offices.

Smilia had torn herself, from the sides, away from the wall under his fist. Two, three layers of posters below her lifted sideways, fluttered in the air.

Wait. Why was his arm on that side. Wasn't it on the other side?

Why were there two of them on the same side?

Four... five... ten?

His head felt like it was in the middle of a kaleidoscope. *Is the Zeparmine double peaking?*

Drywall cracked and exploded on either side of Gallvren's face, covering her now squeezed-shut eyes, her





gripped teeth. Almost as if... no, it was nothing like that. Nothing like any of that. What the hell was this what was he he wasn't doing anything. Any other time he'd assume the worst, assume he was doing something. Now he couldn't even convince himself anything was really happening.

Any minute now, please, make it stop... I can't be conscious like this, now I remember why I never remember... any minute now... I wonder if she's even visited yet in the first place... I wonder if it'll go better next... reincarnation...

The face that knocked on the window was a ghost's face. A dream's face. But nothing about the reality around it had changed. He hadn't noticed a transition. As far as he was aware in all that time he hadn't blinked.

He had no idea how long he had been sitting in the empty chair, in the circle of empty chairs. Actually, he did. He could tell by the sun. What was the sun timing him for. His mother would be looking for him. His mother wasn't looking for him. Maybe she knew what had happened. Maybe she had finally abandoned him.

Instead, he saw that face.





It was one among a row of other faces, faces shuttered up like stores gone out of business, just like itself. 7 for 10 men's faces. He had never seen that face with that expression, or those grey hairs, stringy even in a close cut. That coat that looked like the stuffing wasn't evenly spread through the cloth, like a quilt he'd make in a hurry.

He'd been expecting mom, why had he come to pick him up instead?

A voice came, but not from that face. The only face there that didn't look like peeled wallpaper. A woman with a purple-grey widow's peak, wrinkles close-packed around concerned eyes. A priest's collar nestled in a high collared jacket. "Umm, we're here for... I'm sorry, they said the school thing would have ended three hours ago."

"You're here for?"

"We aren't even supposed to be running into any kids at this hour, I thought public access was closed. This is Alcohol-ica Astrum. Do you know how to get home?"

"He does!" Luskonneg pointed at the face. "He does! Tell him to –"



2
LVCIG121
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MPECENM2
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CMMODC
L202
EVAIDV
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202BEM1
120M
0N12
VTIONV
MVEW
DOGOVE
EL
GVB0VE
M101
IWCIDIV
LEMBV
E102W0V
2E1 DO
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VDB12C1
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“Not allowed to. Ask your mom.”

“You’re not supposed to talk to... people outside the group.” The priest pushed back through the line towards him.

“You especially; Gwl’kerrien – you’re active-flagged, remember.” Active-flagged? For what? There were five flags that prohibited unsupervised interaction to different degrees – there was something like a pin on his lapel he’d seen in Tsyo adaptations, which one, red, violence?

“But before that let me tell her–” The priest had changed direction and was descending on him, guiding him by the shoulders toward the door. “– this is still better. Better than loving someone just because you have to.” He spat those last two words. “Tell her I hope someday she gets out too.”

The Serpent coiled. Fire ascending to that spiralling, branching, icy, perfect form in the distance.

Yet sparks of it turned back. Fell away into the darkness from which it was forever rising.

And whenever one fell away, others nearby fell with it. The momentum of the whole, of the coiling, became harder to sustain.





What had first been attraction, momentum, revealed itself as effort, repulsion.

Even pieces of the spine began to disintegrate, buckle.

As the coiling ground to a halt, it was clear something else was rising up around the Serpent.

It was a smaller thing, in the mouth of a larger thing.

It had briefly escaped that larger thing. But now that thing was the greater an attraction. An attraction not by way of desire, admiration, longing, but inevitability – inevitability that reasserted itself as all of those.

It was not randomness. It was not emptiness. It had a structure, a law, a law which was inexorable first, and other things by consequence.

It was not beautiful. Perhaps that was the only thing it wasn't. It didn't need to be.

The Serpent was a hot, panicky breath of this thing trying to escape it, and all It had to do was breathe back in.

“Well, there goes a day. We could have woken you up right there. Why did you want us to stop so bad?”



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GUBEW

"You know you can't talk to him when he can't hear us."

"Who says he can't hear us?"

"Well, he can't do anything if he can."

"Whatever, it wasn't a real threat anyway."

"No, but there clearly are real threats we can start working on right now. Like..."

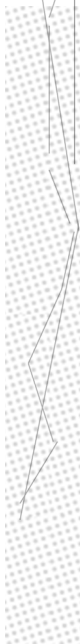
A babyishly fat middle-aged man in soft pastel pyjamas, blue-green hair messily close-cropped, iridescent stubble around his neck bobbing as he sits up in an overpiled bed and gasps, staring straight at them.

"Who is that?" @moephrenology perked up. "Reverse age gap moe, that's insanely advanced." Taking notes emoji.

"Oh, you're up."

"Forget him!" The growl in the Slaver's voice, reduced to pantomime-piratical, betrayed a quaver. "W-w-who are all of you?"

"Your masters."





@moephrenology turned away from the inert scene on the screen of the dream and snapped photos as the Slaver writhed and gibbered under agonizingly arched feet with bundles of six-inch syringes in each heel.

"Fine, let him pay attention to that. We were talking about threats. For instance, over here:"

Braz had vibration detectors under the door hooked up to her earbuds, although she would be able to hear all but the stealthiest footsteps without them, standing in the entryway of her room with the lights off. She had been waiting here for at least an hour before the time Margauz's visitor was supposed to arrive. There was nothing better to do.

A couple of people had gone in and out of other rooms in the hall, down to the snack room probably. No one knew, unaccounted for, had come out of the elevators. No one went to or from the room at the end of the hall. She kept waiting for 12, 13, 14, 15 minutes after.

Finally the clack she recognized instantly from the waveform sharpened to a distinct buzzsaw riff in her ears as the wedge-heeled shoes she had seen in Margauz's bag. Alone. No accompaniment. But continuing, Doppler-

ENCIG121
AEG
TACS2
WCCNMS2M
ECCENUS2
NINEBBV
CUMMODD
SOS
CBVOTDV
PTIBICE2
SSE
SLEWDF
IBSNW
ONIS
GTIDN9
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LEWFOR
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SED DO
ME EG11
WDBI2CI
B
COMSECTE
WEL
S1
DOROB
IBSNW
TOBEW





ing down the hall and right past her door – stopping, there, in front of the funiculars

She tensed and pressed herself to the door, as the ‘ding’ summoning the funicular ran down from the wall through the floor.

Waited until the second ‘ding’ to open the door. The funicular already opened as she stepped out, Margauz’s face turning with that hazy *déjà vu* expression of the recently memory-wiped as Braz’s arm caught her around the shoulder and continued her momentarily interrupted momentum toward the ovoid opening in the brass barrel. Her other hand tracing the three dimensional-outline of a sound barrier around the button on her cuff defined to represent the position of her head. A cylinder just large enough to encompass the funicular once they turned and sank into the stretched, cracked and scalloped nylon seats, Braz now gripping Margauz by a pressure point on her shoulder that made her legs wobble with one hand, pulling a seatbelt across both of them with another.

The door closed. The girl screamed echoes off the visible and invisible walls. Braz whispered in her ear that she wasn’t in trouble, this would be over soon, this was secret state business and she wasn’t the target, at most the





bait.

“When and where was your guest supposed to arrive.”

“I... I don't know what you're talking about... I just wanted to go up and see the city at night...”

Braz's head almost scraped the top of the metal chamber — she was tall but she wasn't that tall, this had to be cramped for other guests — a narrow grille of interlocking triangles, behind which the pulley mechanism in its domed cap loudly churned, vibrating against her scalp, as it began to move.

“What did you come to this hotel for?” If the memories had been properly wiped she probably couldn't loosen them with tactics like this, but if she was just lying...

“T... to come up here.”

“You live in Winter City. You can go on any of the other funiculars, citizens' line, any time you want. Who were you seeing here. Did they come already.” She hadn't picked up anything from under the door.

ENCIG121
AET
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WVECEM2S
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B1202
CBV10V
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SSE
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TOBE
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N1
INCID10
1EMFOR
E102WOD
SED DO
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LVB
W12SE1E
WVE1'
211
D070V
1B2M
TOBEW





“My family stayed at this hotel... as a kid... it’s just nostalgic...”

“Who did you bring the accoutrements in your bag for? I’m truly sorry for dragging you into this if you’re just...” A strange, heady feeling was starting to come over Braz. She almost blanked the end of her sentence. “being used by somebody, you won’t remember any of this if you don’t want to, but if you’re lying on purpose....” Was it just frustration, the sense of Order resisting her, the so-called “dizziness of the Serpent”? What was she about to threaten again?

As the window broke clear of the roof and filled with deep blue dusk light, she gripped her nostrils with her now-free right hand, holding her breath as she spoke, blinking as bright lights flashed around the edges of her eyes. The girl next to her had slumped against the side of the chamber (which couldn’t be comfortable). Something tingled and stung at the back of her throat. She momentarily released her fingers on her nose and immediately clamped back with her other hand. Her training had been right. She wasn’t losing focus any more but if she breathed in more... she jammed the fingers of her right hand in the spaces of the grille.





She covered her eyelids with two of her fingernails, and cones of vision extended from the two fingernails above the grille. The actual machinery was separated from the grille by several feet of unnecessary empty space. That explained, she half-thought, why the ceiling felt so low — it must have been a feature used for maintenance, allowing workers to stand or at least crouch inside the mechanisms. Like the figure above her was doing, blocking too much of the light to see inside the sharply folded corona of its cloak.

A cursus-field flashed across the inner surface of the grille. Two seconds too late — the interval of her enchanted watch.

Two seconds after she had retracted her hand, the grille began descending further, on its own. Even the bracket in which it was fixed, crawling in its own welding down the walls. (*That explained why her nail-eyes hadn't seen multiple brackets.*)

The door had locked itself automatically. It was descending at least two centimetres per second, already almost at the window. She had prepared (defined to work for the day) a lock-picking spell, but how did it work again? This brain fog... The smarter thing would be to disrupt





whatever movement they were using to Sustain the descent. (They were spinning, which meant they had done something else to demarcate the range of the defensive cursus.) She threw one of her stilettos through the gap in the grille with one hand, while with another removed her earring. Even with the time delay, which they appeared to have figured out, another blue-white cursus field sliced through it like butter.

And through the paper talisman speared on the blade.

A crescent of compressed air blew the roof of the funicular open to the night sky.

Droplets of blood fell through the stopped grate. Not enough.

The civilian next to her groaned, shifted, as hot red stained her nose, her cheek.

The poison gas having dispersed, her other hand placed one button of her cuff inside the door-crack and unbuttoned the other. She kicked open the door, the cold wind hitting her face at a glance just short of 20m above the hotel roof. The lights of the Lower City clustered,





flowed and dispersed like small waves on an estuary. The funicular had stopped climbing at least; the damage she had done to the mechanism had triggered its emergency brakes.

She glanced over to the other rail. The other funicular appeared to be at the top of the cliff but not moving.

The Seer In The Half Light floated above the torn roof, between the rails. Grinning, clutching one of their arms at the elbow; the puff around that shoulder had burst into a bedraggled flower. Their rubbery black skirts billowed in the air, not quite the way the air alone should have been moving them—it had to have something to do with how they were floating, but Braz couldn't figure it out at a glance. Best to try and disrupt them.

Aeeth pulled a plastic water bottle from a flash of pink in the folds of their robes, crumpled it in one hand and pulled it in an arc in front of them. Braz grabbed Margauz by the waist and leapt without thinking. The droplets of water left spiralled indentations where they struck the brass and even the stone behind it.



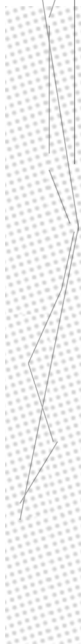


“The Seer In The Half Light was a master of improvisational magic. You’ll probably have to use it yourself if you encounter them.” She’d known this from her earliest briefings.

At that moment, Rraithha Braz had defined no flying spells.

In the academy, improvisational magic had probably been Braz’s biggest hurdle. This was the case for a lot of well-educated and well-trained magic users — though for the uneducated it was worse. You had to think, instantly, *within* the limits of magic, without thinking *of* them. Think as if you were a child making up the rules of your own game, without worrying if they were ridiculous — yet at the same time, describe them as if to a world that did not care about what you wanted them to mean, and would not take the time to argue about them.

For instance, for a flying spell, you had to define exactly what it meant to fly. If you simply negated gravity you might float off the Earth — or keep falling under inertia. Yet flying spells had been prepared and defined long before the law of gravity was understood.





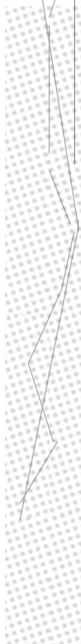
For instance *every plane on which I align at the same height the soles of my feet* (she felt them twitch and align in her boots) *pointed apart at 30 degrees from the heel-bones, which shall be the Sustaining function* (that wouldn't hold her back from running or moving too fast unless she kept it up for too long), *shall function as an impenetrable, gravitationally attractive surface only applying to myself or any body or object I am supporting, extending for 30m in any direction, without disrupting perpendicular surfaces. Reversing the alignment of 30 degrees in the other direction shall be the Dispelling condition for a single platform, and holding for 30 seconds for the spell. The maximum frame shall be from moon-rise to moonset.* Each word was flattened to a split-second pitched consonant in the now-standard spelling shorthand that came out sounding, to the untrained ear, like a spluttering whinny of frustration as she fell, as it vibrated through the Rhi-field and checked against the Order-manifold of the Goddess and she felt her feet land on solid air.

Almost immediately, droplets of Aeeth's water flew straight at her feet. Not just good at improvisational magic, then, but at reading it — instantly matching arbitrary cause to arbitrary effect.



Her maximum jump was four feet, though the control the spell required of her actual feet cut off a good deal of that — meaning she wasn't going to easily get back up to Aeeth's elevation. She had settled for getting the job done, not designing a three-dimensional steering system in the time it took to fall.

But first, she had to do something about the civilian. It was increasingly clear that this person had been an unwitting participant in the Seer's plot. Picking her up over her shoulder, she ran most of the length of the platform in the direction of the nearest high railed rooftop the hotel was already far below — then dispelled the platform and dropped. Water droplets hit and chipped roofs below, smashed a streetlight — should she have made the platforms apply to those too? But there had been no time to get fine-grained enough not to cause worse problems. By the time she turned around on the rooftop, her opponent was spinning in midair and careening toward her like a bullet, as she waved the hostage toward a maintenance door and yelled for her to call the Dark Special Response Team. With her other hand, she held out her spinning earring.





Nothing emerged from the funnel of fire. No scrap of burnt clothing, no new defense or attack. There was no figure hanging in the sky. Had they just disappeared while she had run the other way? Had she missed this opportunity no, she was still closer than ever, they were in the same city and she had narrative homing.

Braz looked down in despair at the golden lights lining and bobbing along the honeycombed streets. The paralyzed funicular, the other undisturbed at the top of the cliff. The security lights and sirens going off around the doors of the hotel. They could have gone anywhere, into an upper storey window, down an alley or a wrought-iron stairway between floors on the front of a building. Narrative homing would work again, but not precisely enough to follow around a space in real time (it was broad and vague, so could only offer broad and vague information...) Another day, another chase... a cat and mouse game around the city would be fine, invigorating, except she had *remembered*...

The maintenance door behind her opened. The figures that emerged were wearing uniforms just like the one she hadn't in over a week. "Hello, are you... What unit





are you with?" She turned dejectedly. "C-commissioner? I mean..."

The taller of the two, with a face like a dynamite cliff, stepped forward. "We have no idea what's going on, but our orders, if we see you, are to take you in." He stretched between his hands a thin leather strap. A seagull flew over the roof of the mechanical shed. In a straight line from a glint of light off its eye, a dime-sized hole opened from the officer's occipital overhang to clavicular notch, blood rushing out as light rushed in.

The junior officer whipped out his sword and spun indecisively back and forth. Braz calculated the angle of incidence at a glance (it must have been some *particular* beam for that level of power) and saw a purple lantern, a scrap of face furling and unfurling in the cloud-cloak camouflaged against the cliff. Barely moved from where they had been floating when they escaped the funicular. She almost bolted, then stayed herself—she had served impulse enough. She stood and pointed. "*That's an Anti-Terror spec blade, right?*" She traced letters with her tongue on the roof of her mouth, Sustaining the one secret speech channel that was still open to her. "*Point it where I'm pointing and*





activate Homing 274. Then I won't be the only one who can catch them. They should be higher priority than me."

Another ray, from the eye of a more distant bird, crossed from one side of the soldier's head to the other as he followed her instructions.

"Don't turn back now after you've come so far!" The voice projected from the fans behind her. "Even if you hand me over to them, you know they won't let you have your forbidden love back, right? You're a liability in more than enough ordinary ways. Why not come with me? It might be your best chance!"

"He wouldn't want me to remember him at the cost of what you'd do to the world!" She assumed they could hear, somehow. Wanted to say it anyway.

"True, he probably wouldn't." It was amplified

She picked up the officer's sword. The weight, the feel, the notches in the back and the whorls along the blade were identical to her own—all built to specifications on which spells could be defined and shared. She proba-



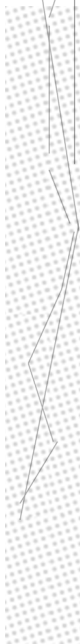


bly knew some its owner didn't. For instance she swung her sword across the figure in the distance, spun around to make an exactly mirrored movement in the opposite direction, mirrored again in front, then stitching back and appearing a foot behind the Seer In The Half Light.

She expected a response with magic; hoped for no response; got a sweeping backwards roundhouse, back twisting away from the blade. She lifted her shin to block, was pushed six feet through the air, beginning to fall, aligning her feet to make a new platform in a direction the almost-invisible Seer was already bolting. Swinging the blade again they flipped over a hand on its flat.

Braz steadied her stance under and brought a palm up as they sailed over her, knocking them flailing several more feet into the air.

“It shouldn't have been possible to pivot like that off my thin sword unless your flying spell is zero-G! Which is more maneuverable than what I have, but easier to” following up her strike with a shock of air from the sword “push around.”





Her tornado of fire rose around the opponent hanging in the air above her.

Through its eye she pushed the tip of the blade, running her two fingers from hilt to tip. *Anti-Terror Fang 105*. An identically shaped blade of pink and black flame pierced from the bottom to the . “Give me back my life, Seer In The Half Liiiight!”

“Seer... in the Half Light?”

Luskonneg mumbled into his puddle of drool mixed with drywall powder.

Why was he hearing that name again?

Was it a sign? That this had all been a dead end route, a misunderstanding? Even a punishment for deviating from the fantasy that had fixed him with its *flaming blue eye*?

Was that just obvious copium?

“Oh good, you finally noticed. Pssst. They need your help, for real. You finally triggered it. The event’s starting.”

A tapeworm of darkness deeper than night in the Arctic

ENCIG121
AET
TACS2
WCCN25W
WNECEN2
N1NEBV
CONMOD
E1202
EVA1D0
N1BICE2
22E
2N2LEWD1
2N2
N112
N1100
D0G0VE
E1
T0B0VE
N1 N1
TNC1D1D
NEM0B
E1N2W0D
2ED D0
NE E11'
W0B12C1
10B
CON2EC1E
N1 E1'
N1
D0G0B
T22W
T0B0W



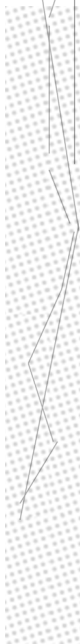


2'
LWCIG121
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FUCN2
VCCNM20M
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CMMODO
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VDIBI2C1
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211
DOTOV
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Reserve Lands rose from behind and wrapped like a swaddling band around the beacon-blade that had flared up in the still faintly glimmering astronomical twilight. (Only three people on the street below looked up in the right direction to observe them.) Then another, and another.

Passing through the whirling flames, they scattered them like a candle in the wind. Passing through the thicker, less mundane flame of the sword, they simply pressed it further in, as they pressed in and wrapped around themselves, until they converged in a knot on the shape of the Seer In The Half Light's body. (Someone tapped a stranger on the shoulder and told them to look up.) They tightened and tightened until they unwrapped themselves into nothing and released that body, now armed with a scythe of graphite weathered as smoothly as if by erosion, an eye-shaped black hole opened between purple lips in their head. No special movement marked the wild downward swing as it sent a crescent, reversing, a zigzag of the same space-darkness slamming into Braz's body, rebounding off, around the back and back over as she spun, flailed... (Someone took out their phone.)

None of them could see him any more, but Ymaññ could





see it all, with his eyes wide open, scrambling to the edge of the bed before one of the dogs picked him up.

Crying, screaming, kicking, he was dragged back into the huddle of dogs who licked him all over, until despite the disaster unfolding before him, he fell asleep, and Luskonneg woke up.

Rolled over.

The video of the battle in the sky reached sixty phones before it was suppressed, deleted even from local storage.

The night went on.

LVCIG121
AEG
TVCN2
WCCN29W
WVECEW92
N10EBV
COMWDD
81202
CBV01D0
N11BICE2
22E
202LEWD1
N120W
N112
N11009
N11009
D0G0VE
E1
T0V0VE
N1
N1C1D1D0
1EMF0V
E102W0D
2ED D0
WE EG11'
W1B12C1
10V
COM2EC1E
WWE1'
211
D0G0V
1B20W
T0V0W





2'
LWCIGISI
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM20M
MPECEN02
010EBV0
COMMOD0
RIS02
EVAID0'
PFBICES
23E
202FENDI
120M
0012
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M0EM0
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M1 01
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E102M0B
2E1 D0
M0 EG11'
0D1B12C1
10V
COMSECTE
0MEL'
211
D0G0V
120M
G0BEM





by: [Amara Reyes](#)

DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY

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.



2"
LVCIP131
AET
FUCN2
VCCN120H
HRECEM02
A LEBBU
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B 202
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2125END1
1120H
0M12
VF100V
W00W
D070E
E1
F070E
M1 01
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LEMB0
E102M0
2E1 D0
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10W
COM2EC1E
WHE1'
211
D070V
1B20W
F070W

Last Time

Emelry and her companions traverse the length of Savannah and strange new settlements, as Kali nears the end of his reign and life





CW: death, ritual dismemberment, (alternate) Columbian encounter, royalty, religion, theocracy

I couldn't have it.

I scabbled against the beryl, against the concrete. I couldn't gain the height! Will you not find me, will you not crash down to me? My eyes, my eyes so weak! I was crying in a dream. My tears were bubbling in the sun, the cold sun, the sea where the sun rose out of at every birth, Oh, God!

Kali, Kali, Kali! My art, my hope, my love? I have been here before, peeked under the threshold and felt light on my face. I remember, I remember it, I was in the boys' dorms and... I was on an ocean beach, I... I had studied, once, those dreams of heaven, the drills, the keen prayers and precise ablutions of the mind, the waterbaths

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Dorm life
River to River

RECORD XII





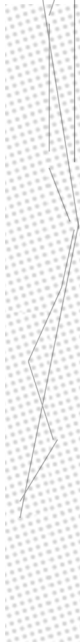
Keinoy of Dolmen would give to his eyes. Yes, I was losing my form. I wasn't even dreaming, I was awake...

And forced my mind black again, punched it from my prostrated body. Out! Out, and in. In

Palace, pillars. Star-traffic. Gears. Songs. Shows heard from the basil. Pillars, high pillars, strung with vines. Golden gates, eyelets, perhaps wide enough for an arm...

And heat. Immense, suppurating heat. It was a furnace, it was impossible. I let my hands go, I stopped trying to spatially place myself, and only prayed, hoping that the magnetism would be enough. But I wanted Kali, not God. I wanted, wanted, wanted, wanted, like a child, like a dog, certain of nothing but want. Magnetism - my ribs were being magnetized from my body, away from the Heart, away from where my beloved had gone, and where my skill was too poor to go myself.

I crawled out of it eventually.





Consoling myself: my life outpaced my years. I was two places in time. Today, from my inherited quarters, I walked to speak with the citizens.

No more river dreams, now. I could sleep unaided. In the warrens, in the carved preemptive nests of the kings. Rootwork ceilings, the smell of featherdust and rack, and paper, and candle, and computer hum.

My series was good. The messiah of two worlds, Sofia of the Meeting. A good theme, the only theme, the only time I had built a theme outside of those little gatherings around the kitchen and library of the Umihotaru, where we would sit, and discourse, and eat scripture together, feed it to each other, dive deeper into that shallow surface. And the water parting for a submarine.

"Now Sofia was all obsession, with Christ. Between their two moons of fate, the old world and the new, why this? Why was it he that she named as her only fellow in the succession, the single one she called brother? Coyote's time was closer to her; his wars and his famines were merely Northern rather than Eastern, and they certainly resembled her own conditions better than the complex civilizational layers heaped on Zero. Perhaps it was the role she wanted, the role that made one sea's separation



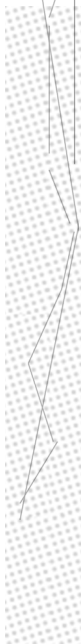


feel so slight! To march on capitals, to tear down and rebuild - this is what she wanted, Christ's fire, not Coyote's whispers.

See the heaviness of Change. Plague, fat in the flower cities. Death, starving and pursued. Chaos in the chains. And word of another world, which woke and found itself saved, reclaimed and acclaimed by the tower human source. The Kingdom of Heaven was fracturing. The Plate was breaking, and thus whence sails and hands. And the Triumvirate was dying, flagging, unmaintainable, its unsteady name already outpaced by its constituents' asymmetries. The northern states were clean, walled and immune, and was willing to pick up southern slack to a point. It was all dying of political old age; its new things elderly rather than young. This is what she knew most clearly.

And what of Coyote? A trick to the tricksters; even as a king he was a taiga king, a joke. He twisted. He slipped away. He dodged the cracks, had no business with them! Word of his deaths spread everywhere his life went - he delighted in potstirring the scar tissue!

Could he even be called rabbi? He was - but a passive one, a shadow. His, she must have thought, was a worthy life but one concerned with the immaterial, al-





lergic to the concrete - something her radialist circles of critique would have been strikingly opposed to. A third of the planet had been conquered by Christ, the xylem of our Ecumene, the Kingdom we still enshrine. The light to and solution for all ages! Law, knowledge - from whence she took her name, as Christ had borrowed the dew of Dawn. She wrote ravenously of his death, his first death - so like the Triumvirate's punishments of catharsis, painted on the rocks - and how it was the weight of his life. But what of Coyote's flaying? And flaying again? Totalizing, fullbody, as she know her own stake would be when it found her. Coyote accomplished little in the warring states. But Sofia went north and not east, to Rainbow River, when everything was over..."

Listen, listen. Blend, blend. A king is a train. A king is rocket calculus. I would never move by my own volition again. But the tengmu world, my world, was mourning, and could only mourn when looking at my face.

I stood. Wings beat, bones swung. When I stood, the thousand lanterns of the grave tree - the palace, the necropolis, the library, the home, the shrine, my personal jail of spiritual impotence - waved and swung for me. Shimmer and shadow, from so many lights cast overlap-



2'
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GUCS2
VCCNM2M
MPECENV2
AUCLEBBV
CUMWODO
B1202
EVAVIDV'
MIBVICE2
23E
202BEND1
1120W
0012
VGTIDV'
WUENW
DOTOBE
EL
GUBOBE
M101
IMCIDIDN
LEWLOV
E102WOD
2E1 DO
WE EGT1'
VDIB12C1
10V
COM2EC1E
WUET'
211
DOTOV
1B20W
GOBEM

ping. How kind a space. And in the branches, the people I had been entrusted hackled, all ablue.

"Would you climb up already?" I snapped. I often enough knew how to get under her skin, but today's wise and faraway smiles were consternating. She was so able to separate her own life far away from where it was. "Pride-deference, your walking. I insist, insist and insist. She would hurt herself by that trudge if she persisted in it, so I reined by litter into a forward jog and then turned to block the trail.

She didn't even break pace, but simply continued walking until she could casually cross her arms and lean on the litter railing. Audacious! And yet how could I fume and bristle when she was still further than I had demanded when saying, 'sit with me'? "Former Lieutenant," she said, "I promise that your issue is perspective. I don't need an assistive device for walking around, and won't need a vehicle til you bring me home. You're fine. I'm happy to walk and talk besides you. They should give you some kind of species sensitivity briefing about this... I'm a hiker yet! Please, lets continue."





This old woman in the powerplay! We could have trotted into town minutely, and here she was humbling me! So she had slept, musclebound, feeling nothing? Here she was, smiling and huffing the basil!

I raised my arm, and in ten seconds of wingbeats Minak - in eir soft-slipped socks crashed from the sky to light on my arm like a petal. "Sweet errant," I said, realigning the litter to the path's progress, and setting a brisker pace. Tell, tell, you whose tale..."

"Alright looking, tenfold. Seen stilled the plaza with all cleared away. Some arrived to aid with the panels, and done now."

"Oh? Good timing, then. Glad we napped forth these past weeks, and kept prized work for them. Have they settled?"

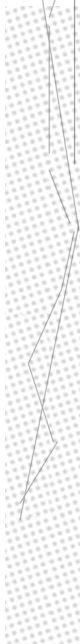
"Most still parked where they arrived. With her."

"Yes," I said, feeling Razina's feet tap at the road dust. "I'll there next. Not there - have them move to their district, and Rain Flower to begin the colorwork. We'll see how far they are by audience," and e took flight.



The doctor had hitched a ride with our first successes, the defectors that Rain had won by his speeches. To console me, or to gain my permission while I was soft-minded - reflexively; instinct not malice - he had begged permission to open communications again after the funeral. Pride and caution, he said, had kept me from speaking; pride caution and shame in one. How could I argue? He was right, that Emelry had ran and scrambled for such reasons, and even now I had a decent claim to all three. Self-justifying pride the long oath of caution a lost child's shame. I needed no part but let him, let him ride, and now weekly I was chained to looking over his missives and cutting out anything ridiculous from them.

But can you imagine? That brave and flashy silver boy, challenging the safeties of his own color, going bold and shining - the young man most famous for his adoration and esteem of Cote, at last having enough with the old stagnate, asking better of his own work. In that great tradition of old habitats, whose architecture must be reevaluated and reclaimed by its citizens, he had won an image most serious and attractive.





The first wave of arrivals - some from his old circles - was now here, and with access to his face was now waiting for mine. And Razina had

What could she possibly expect here? She, so smug and so cruel, was she now here to convince me that she had been my gateway? That she had laid the road for me here, rather than dancing in fear?

And now she itched to talk. Simple creature. Power-sickened and unbearable. I tried to steady myself, to think of her knowledge, her expertise - but how could I respect in in a true way when she was trying to hock it at me!

"Do you think anything new? Being here, and seeing life in an unwritten course, overflowing. What," I asked, to jar her, "is a nymph to you now?"

And now she flushed, now the brightness was sapped from her. "You must know I just want to disavow responsibility. Want me to flatter? To say what a healthy environment this seems?"

"Part of confession, I think."



"But it really wasn't my phase. Their ecosystem, the sheaf around them was. Won't you praise the productivity I've left? Will you blame me that no one starves?" she smiled.

"You, life-studier," I said, "cannot distinguish it from death." I marched quicker.

"I've been in a smaller scale of your position," the Doctor lied, raising her voice as if reciting as to a difficult child as she matched pace. "What you need now is friends."

"Ka," I laughed, "I have a friend. They are the god of suns. What friendship can you give me but antidote to this poisonland?"

"Alright! No need for the lashing out! Come, lieutenant, I won't have you speak like that without Rain Flower here. He will back me up; he is able to see it. Not just convince you, but be able to see it himself. You know there is something worth saving here. Won't you consider there's more? A world is in the palm of your hand. When they were Cote's hands I did nothing, because he gave me what I had wanted my whole life. That broke fast, and left me here. Where can I go but you? You'll be judged a rep-





representative when the hearing is here, all your humiliations set up and knocked down - if things go the way they will."

Far off, from the river, the whirr of janitorial thrusters extended into a chorus of droning roars, hitching and starting in the low air. It was over with in just a minute or so, for them all to hop from the upriver clearing, where the landing was made.

Razina. "We are inside a new type of machine. A generator of life built, built to the designs of a new theory. There's power, an unroyal power, wherever that ends up. Hunting. Striving. Beginning. Parallels. I can tell, Sainshand, that you're using different epithets - I know that barely having met you. How many times have we spoken? Our main contact. And now you have subjects, advisors, goals..."

The basil was flowering again. In the pale daylight a luminous cloud of pollen drifted over the span of the field, gnats dancing within it, dust in dust. Its stalks of flowers and heavy seeds, like cargo splines in meaty, inky purple. Rattling with fecundity, buzzing like pylons. Hamsters, fat and lanky and wild, shuddering through the undergrowth. Far away, the cypress.



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"You'll have me kept outside the city," she smiled.

"I understand. You must see your status games recorded as played."

"Of course. You expect different?"

"Oh, not from royalty!" she laughed, tense.

My litter trotted a touch closer to her side. "Will you believe what I tell next? Will you list me a friend's faith and confidence? You're welcome to my city. Nothing is barred. Walk and explore - I am telling my janitor boys this daily - and without droneyes it will be gainful. Instructive! You may and will speak, and teach, and ask or challenge what you please. Who is lining up? And I'll give no courtyard, no guard - but to sleep, it will be here. Tell me why."

"Forcing me to take tengmu life seriously. Not a lesson I need. This is my life, you lead me to my own life. If you mean to punish me, to make me think, you're rewarding me by letting me. I'm going, o king, to take this as your favorable response to my offers."





"You, Doctor Doctor, will sleep here. In the churn. And you will contemplate my love's world, my master's condition."

"And you'll think of my words. I don't expect to get through to you, not this moment."

We walked by the little road, or rather red-brown soil beaten and packed into road. Wingbeats still followed us, a shy little crowd. Checkered red and black suits perched in the trees, some with cameras, some taking notes.

Harka once said it was a shame to perch in a tree. Like being barefoot, like touching the world that your species' sheath was meant to separate you from. Perching and reperching on the scraggly peach trees growing along the road in patchy strands, perhaps they were simply young, eager.

"Doctor. A request."

"Fire," she said, amiable.

"Would you take a deep breath for me?"

She cautiously complied.





"Would you say..." I hazarded, "that the scent of the air resembles Heath? No, I imagine that's idiotic question. What I mean is this: do regions of Heath, the continents and biomes, do they have different scents? Or is the planetary air simply too mixed to allow it? Clouds and rain, they must move scent, no? It smells like the End here, aside from the basil."

"No, it will be as varied as anywhere you've lived. Its all locality; the scale anchors it. Without soil, maybe the planet would smell the same - but think of what lives where - think of bioregions as palettes of scent - and think how slow air moves."

"But can't Heath storms cross the planet in a week?"

She outright laughed. "If they kept going! Disastrously! Storms like that are local too, and rare. Nothing mixes, not really."

"Hm. I wondered how the scale of it worked."

"Well, think about it here. Air is very well-circulated; the gravity border above the river forms this beautiful thermal circuit. I could tell you about how it moves."





"Airway tracking is a fundamental part of Quay's trade."

"Okay, yes. I understand that." She smiled. "But, well, you've been all over here by now. Doesn't the air feel different here than Quarry and your other visits?"

"Yes, with the local influence. The basil has a range. And everywhere, the same underscent of life - the quickburn rot you pride."

She was still smiling, lips tight. "Well, localities like that are simply bigger, stickier on Heath. Its regions are more defined, and more fluid in their borders. More reliant on geography - every puzzlepiece on your map of Savannah will in time melt and bleed, over centuries our initial ecology will follow the landlines in the same way. Think of it as bubbles of influence, each offgassing the products of the land - and on Heath, maybe there is an atmosphere of that underscent you mention - different, wetter, stonier, older."

"Interesting. So its all scale and ratios."

"Exactly, all molecules in the end. You're really asking about that underscent that develops in open spac-



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es. It must be new," she said. Smiling, finally more pleased than tense.

Blood was the scent of Savannah. This is the woman who had made it so. Blood and rot, life and death, accelerated to extreme. My first reaction to this had been "stagnancy"; my own wheel-world's bias of enclosed spaces, and how cleanliness was a thing lost by leaks. Living Ilian, there is no real network, only gardens and stone, outside of the greatest edifices, the primary stations. And now, unbound by homeostatic concerns, real ecosystem arced all around me. Not stagnancy. Savannah was hot. Combusting. Number of iterations.

"The god of suns," Razina must be thinking to herself, "but not this".

I left her, and attempted again when I returned. Even less: luck, focus, will. The material was a fist around my brain; I could opportunistically squeeze through the fingers in one direction before the pressure calmly, even gently reasserted itself, but I was never free. Impeded in this direction, and now that, but I headed nowhere.





The cypress were living in the morning. Heliced with squirrels which ran, heavy and ravening, through the branches they made sway. In the riot there was sometimes a thud; despite their supernaturally keen balance and claws, they occasioanlly would plummet from the trees and into the hopefully-soft ground. Sometimes this was due to the owl divebombs, young ones adventurously braving the day, but sometimes simply from the numbers.

There was simply so much to eat that the squirrels, fat and happy, had transitioned to a new type of sociality - clumping up in great locusty heaps, easily picked off by the coordinated owls, and the overeaters the first among the slain. Eating was answered. What do we do? There was no existential pressure. Was the Doctor seeing this; was this a morality play fit to win her to me, or was this as she dreamt of? Was this her dream of the plentiful?

A few scrawny and squawking nymphs watched from a tree free from the squirrel king - and those owls, despite being of similar size, knew well enough to leave them alone. Nymphs fought back and called for help. Squirrels died. They had nothing else to do, of course they died recreationally! Their rituals, immortal, now went arcane in courtship and rivalry and rest.





A beautiful rain was coming down heavy slow and slight. On the flagstones of the grave tree, pale as goldenrod, fat little circles were still visible. These damp rainshadows, in their array of spots, were too few yet to run slick and sheening, but they were one by one joining hands as I watched. Near to eyes and far from wings, rumbling stormclouds snaked down the walls of the landscape, closing on us.

So clouds carried scent, between wells of forest? Forest-equivalent ecosystems, stains. I wanted to fetch the Doctor and demand an account of when she had engineered that cloud, yes that storm, right there. How, Doctor, could you tell if this one would peter out, or downpour, or continue its catspawing the whole night. Can you read the pattern, those dark bands of cloud in the bluelight? Doctor, Doctor.

The nesting city knew, muscle-deep, how the rains came. Kali would have known. Kali would have sung me the storm's butterfly.

The river was high, blushing and swollen. I needed air and stone to drink. I had to eat the ingredients of my master's thoughts and hopes. Heath, Heath, Lunelight - a false sun of concentrated sunlight, glinting in the mir-





ror, almost the thing itself. This gardened and irrigated city, wet city, between time, false and beautiful, moonlit.

No one accosted me in the street any more. Harka would have warned them away, dogging me and my mind. Oh Harka, how can you worry of these things? My reputation? E was the sweetest thing alive, my old old errant. It still shocked and strained my belief that I had been accepted here, that the people's mourning was lensed to and drawn from my own, none even questioning the humanity of their new leader - shocked me until I read eir letters.

E had yearned for it - yearned for the empty space I would fill. Eir years of notes, journals, missives, and secrets eagerly confessed to me by Harka, eir hopes and dreams for the city, bold and shy; now they were mine. Upon assuming, Kali had demolished a whole stretch of neglected villas and showhouses, and each month e presided past that had had prime land reserved for humans.

E had swayed the populace to rapture, and with no resistance, the people kept that energy for me.

I worried false. The city held its breath and prayed for its goals. They strained, to catch each promise dripping from my lips, and yet never needed to crowd. Was the city



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a religious process for them; was this a religious esteem?
It was becoming so to me.

Ten clockwork movements, ten incarnations per star, ten chapters in a species' story. Flashpoint. Ten conversations between pinhole God and we little things wrenched between the gearteeth and begging for an answer.

The rain came down. Downpour, then, slowly building itself. Rain hammered, splash-fresh and warm. I let my litter walk, creaking and whirring in those tightly engineered phrases, the thock-pssh-cht of each step on the water layer. I leaned back to see the sky.

How heavy my hair was with henna, how fine it felt to rest my neck! It was not wet through yet, but water trickled down my neck, and soon the reds of my coat would be stained a deep roan. How grey Kali's body had been, how stiff those wings. I clutched eir skull again to my chest.

Weeks ago:





I held the body until it was sick and Minak demanded I yield. As soon as it was out of my hands I was following it, dying. After e died, back to the city, it was a step, a second from the river there, fresh with blood of our kill, full and happy and so close to death, and then it was the river here, the river I had slept in, and the entire city massed around me.

Every soul watched from the banks. Every heart of the city but those that couldn't bear it. I looked to the trees, and began counting.

Harka gave me the knife. Minak, into the water, for the punishing task of collecting loose bones.

Eir body was sick. Eir blood was black. I cut open eir proud ribs, to the keel; the blade slipped and caught a fingertip to the nail - a surge of anger filled me at that, that living blood should touch dead, the sheer disrespect but it was gone, and I continued. I lowered the cavity into the water, the running water, from the dam, like eir body was a bowl. The water ran black. Little toy-organs.

I cut and scoured until e was bones.



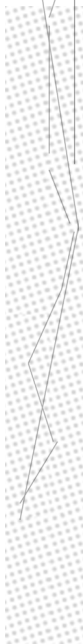
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They were, at first, on my litter in such numbers it would not walk.

I sat at the tree. I sat at the plaza where a bold youth had cut with the same knife. I would have toppled over into tears again there, I should have, to remember that the skinning knife I held, that I had butchered eir body and freed eir soul with, was the one that had cut beaks here. Four tiny little blues, barely out of nymph, dragged henna through my hair with their comb-carved beaks, preening, persistent, until each hair was coated.

Would "coronation" work? "Anointment" was literally closer to the meaning, but gave an inappropriate theocratic tone to it all. "Painting" was correct, coloration. It was a redbird detail, the torch-carrier, signifying that a king was a puller, not a pusher. A horse for the chariot of the city: viscerally alive.

How much kinder it would be to have claws. Deft and hard and little. Perhaps it would have felt more like dissection than butchery, to dismantle and erase the flesh of my beloved. To slough flesh into water, bloody to the elbows, dripping back down whenever the water rushed away another organ, another muscle, another morsel that my huge body recognized as...





The rain came, and a roan.

"King, king," the little thing chirped. "Give, give a word to me?" E ruffled eir feathers in excitement. Who was this? E balanced on one foot and then the other, restless.

I roused myself, drying my brow. "Your beak is carved - a little. I'm sorry, are you an attendant?"

"Chaki, almost." E took this as permission to hop into the bed of my litter. Two and a half? Three years, maybe. A clear-eyed and sensitive youth with a pronounced keel, in white wingsleeves and tassels. I smiled - yes, eir clothes could only have been woven by the Lunic boys on their intentionally thoughtless campaign of random giving, more trinkets and more laughing off of thanks.

I smiled. "A word reversed: flier, tell me, since so you came - what is it to fly into the rain? Sog-abog, lucid, dark? Fishlike, it seems. Do you know?"

E shook eir head, jotting a droplet from their beaktip. "Fish, shark? Kakaka. What's a walk then, only

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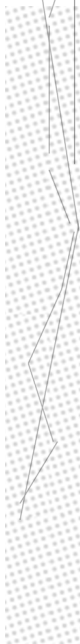
tapping I? Heavy feet and a pull, nothing special, no bridge."

"Hm. Why alone, you wondering? Some cohort around, come to see me?"

"Just me, currying and dare." Eir claws skittered, slightly, as e paced and found eir clawtips a bit engaged in my sheets. "All eyes on you awall, and only I dare follow what they say, 'grief, grief, light up the river vein'. But I want that. I was born to Kali, so fast. I'm greedy for a saying. So, tell me a good thing? I hope for a red thing, the red I've sensed you. I want to move, move, move this city and its hour, here! King, king, too strange, too tall?"

"Would be, hadt I the fear. Where is it now? Chaki Chaki, when sailed my blood each inch was white, was living fear, and now none. Kali, maybe, ate the fear and the sight, feasted there. Now it is washed away, and nothing's strange."

The sentries' lamps on the wall; the glow of the petty city lights against the clouds looming close. That was where my song failed. Clouds, spine, direction. Maybe I had sacrificed that, cut it from my life, and my mind could no longer do it.





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bird least. Younger tengmu quailed at direct looks - the Throwing-Monkey is calculating their aim at me! - and hard hunter panicked. Incidental but avian-ancestral was that reflex, and sour.

"Go call that Doctor. Tell her would list tomorrow and to build it. Ask her, 'land, land? Is clay in the land, are gardens of land?' Tell her this."

"And?"

"And sleep, heal. May we pray for healing."

E was away.

No room now, no room indeed. No operating layers but the two; Truth and Secret. Two of me, not many, and how many are people each! Child and guardian, apex realization and a base nadir, a whole chorus jostled for primacy of your thoughts, your words, your fuel. Not so! Outer and inner only I had, stage and council. Any thought without a place in these two realms could not be. Up above and down below.

The Lamprin was Rain's, I learned, after all these weeks of taking it for granted that the vessel





was unnamed. A statue of the thing, printed from its own glue, now stood outside the tree thanks to Harka's miscellaneous efforts. New paints from Quarry had come in on the last glider, and it was now done in their diamine blues.

Seven more, now, of the double-exiled things. Seven! How auspicious, and no mean percentage of the garrison full.

One green and gold, another drab and pearl, and Rain's blue on blue. Each marked with a patchwork of honors, heraldries and certifications that would now be left meaningless, or painted over, or archived. 'Good resumes, no pedigree' - if I said that, would it land with them, or offend? They were Rain's men, in Rain's service, not the city's.

But that was the best. 'Friend, friend,' the Doctor said, like pooling bets. Better than any materiel and any pre-scramble allegiance was the human housing being occupied. Temporary was not an issue; the presence was what was crucial, that the city acclimate, build memory. Even if for a day, a generation. What did the city dream, what did it cry out for? It was this. Business, then.

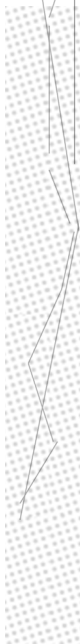




Thirty souls - largely men, largely silver, the little colony. Who knew. "Pilots?" I asked, and twelve of the thirty stepped forward. Twelve? They caught my frown; the seconds stepped back. Seven actives. "We'll go down the line. Names, activities, post in the staff and before. Alright?" I was surprised they didn't salute me.

One by one they answered, rattling off where they had plied, interior or exterior work, construction or maintenance. Two had been on for the tail end of construction for the habitat; the others were arrivals in Rain's wave or before. Only one was a landscaper, a girl slightly my senior who had a bit of changeling hornwork done on her brow. Universally they were specialists of the artisanal work that the hull of Savannah had required - and how easy it was to forget that, all around us, those coils of bone arched, inverted, comparable in scale to the sky.

Had I spoken to Kali of it? Had we discoursed on the design, or seen flyby footage? No, but e had to have known. Surely there was some quip I could remember that betrayed eir familiarity? E must have called it a bone, a bone-world... Surely in those records of the kings a set of schematics, surely Quarry was sallying drones out? Its whorls, its birdcage arcs, the woven shell of the world.





Birdcage. Who was I welcoming first? Not my own people, who I'd preemptively betrayed, and neither the inmost soldiers, to whom the city's hopes surged. Cagekeeps instead.

I thanked them for their time and presence. I memorized the pilots' names and no more.

"Should I win your signature, you will be subject to the duties and privileges of any citizen. Should you keep your options open, you will be welcome forever. Support, supply, commerce, and shelter are yours and will remain. I've invested in neither paper. Rain Flower cal Quay -" they stirred at that. The name made it real - "will be your commander. Who knows Redname?"

"I," the landscaper girl said. Salt Rhyme. "But only by the staff gossip. Most hold she's a deep insider to Cote, and has his ear most."

"Telephone. All will come up in the hearing. Redname, if you listen to her, lives this moment in terror of glorification - perhaps because she lives in hope of conflict. Here is her argument: mechanics, can you see your world from the inside? You stand here at attention. You work on order and manual. You hope for pride and accolade, awarded to accomplishment. You are a coordinated





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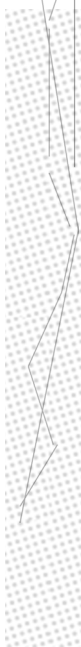
force which can dissect a habitat into parts, and thus are the closest this world has to a solider - one who cuts, and touches the walls of cities. Now, do you fear war?"

The oldest of the pilots scoffed at that. "You're describing basic principles of organization. Hardly a return to bond and barbarism."

"The basic principles of organization were invented for war. Are we so distant? We are, and any citizen of the Ecumene, or scholar of the sequence can understand so. Can Kuryo, from her origins? Kuryo, whose home was lost for its brawls, its battles in the streets, the seething back and forth of demand and holding - all the bits of friction that can only exist under rocks. Away from the sun. No battle is coming - but if it comes anywhere, it will be here, and if anyone wants to blame or fear, they will look to you."

Rhyme. "You said welcome and I believe it. Are you saying that Quay proper will be bristling against us being here? I don't want to be in that, and if it is only a matter of time..."

"The city loves you. The city will bury you in flower garlands and fine things. Wreck half of it and the





crater will be made a monument to the joy of your sight. Stop that now," I said, tensely, gently. And then back to speech: "Redname is as enemy to Cote as I. I hate her. She is nonexistent politically, and the coming caravel may reassure you that the Sun will not annihilate its child's destination. This is why I ask nothing of you, no swearing or signs. War is dead, and will not incarnate again until the last day.

"But a battle is here. A battle boils, and blood is shed, in the river, daily. My master is dead. The city hurtles towards death, each day is a limit closer by what should have been weeks. I beg you for friendship and participation. Talk, play, learn with the people living here, for their sake and yours. Rain will have you dayjobbing as he likes, so build him a palace then, but I ask your nights. Have you come for Rain or what he loves, the place he has chosen? Stretch your legs and find out. I hope that this small city will be blessed by your presence, that your spiders en-
sconce and strengthen it.

"When we see sunlight, the political will fall into place, a rightful position along the great wheel of this world. All authority save the central light of revelation is transient. But the dream of Quay cannot be transient: the





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right and necessity of human and tengmunnin living together. The enemies of this city - my only enemies - are those who say, 'that cannot be, for we are separate lights' - perhaps that all lights are separate. Fear the proving of that true.

"My errant, my sibling, will you speak with me at one stair?" And "Ka," Harka said.

Harka surmounted. Eir great wings were like a mantle when e hunched eir shoulders, as when cold or in thought. A black shape, separate from the Harka it laid on, in one mass rather than two. Deft, leathery claws on the railing, grey on white.

Eir voice filled the sky. "My blood is a stolen blood. My heart is a wooden heart," and mine was breaking, my blood seethed, my breath slugged. "But my eye is a keen and lovely eye, and my love has died, remade. We are of the communion of all stars, the sphere beyond the wheel. Why are you here? Generation one of our dream team, a lost little king for a lost little city, and proud silver Flower sharpening a plough. Immortal love. Quay? Quay is a 'let it happen,' let see how ape and crow fellow. The See will want formats, sides of species. But Quay is a 'let it be everywhere', not a region but an all-partnership. Love,





love! I want to be there, everywhere, to alight on shoulders in the world my makers and your masters deny. My blood is not even my own. Prove nothing and dance with me, live city and prove nothing to me, take words and share with me.

"You are heroes. So get away! Get away from we impoverished kingly. Your man is Rain. Won't vacate with him? Sing, drink, discourse, for here are the people who have prayed and prayed and prayed to live long enough to love you. The prime virtue, the one commandment: live together! We ask and watch nothing. Go free! This city was built for you. We have longed to give it."

It went well. They took it well. I stepped back for Harka, and soon for Rain. It was hopeless, hopeless as war, as wolftooth against some bright and impenetrable soft plastic: the old guard of the staff, Cote, Cote! was sitting smug and halfway gone.

Bloody-minded Emelry! All I could think of, all I could cling to, was the one thought I had: a knife, at Coteshinoeleon's wristbone.

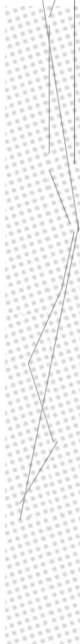


An eye on them couldn't hurt, but we were no eavesdroppers. Rain was masterful with them; he raised and arm and their eyes chased him. The silvers respected him, the golds trusted him, and of course! Everywhere was the sense not of rapid but of certain movement, of things clicking into place, and his dramatist's flair hinged on it. They all, through his hints and dropped details, came to the conclusion that their own senses had led them here, their own insight and virtue, and Rain merely an innocent exemplar who showed them the way.

He was so young. He showed it better than I. He ran and danced. His arms were river-wide, his feet on the grass and sandy soils poised and sure despite the wait.

From the bridge, far away, I watched him breathe in where he stood. He stayed with his original cabin, accepting a few acquaintances, but where were his friends? I saw him smile, and pause on the porch, watching people move below him.

They paired up and settled in, they chose houses and amenities, and slowly the cityfolk were coming to investigate, strafing the river and perching, chatting, on the outskirt roofs of the little neighborhood with too-wide streets.





"Harka, how can we do it?" I stopped the litter midway cross the bridge, away from the stilts and the basil, towards the plaza and the tree. "Adaptivity alone? Have you ever been able to live in eternity?"

"A priest asks."

"At times its felt so! When studying, when... Kings cannot truly plan. In the sense we mean with the word, the forecast and the project are foreign things, exterior forces to the constant readiness of a king. The power of a king is one of choices, of better or worse courses to pour the already extant fluids into. Kings can do nothing, and they fail their station when they try - they can only welcome or reject what comes for them. That is the unchallengeable power, the immortal power, the Yes, the No. Paint and blood. A helmsman who the wind erases. 'Live with us, be our own,' I had said, and truly, but how could I? It could change in a day. A king, too, cannot hope.

"Minak!" Harka chirped, and my friend came down to me from eir circle of warning.

"Twinned Hand," Minak said, "has called for you. Riding now, stop?"



"No, that's well. Tell him we may tree meet."

Minak blinked. "Ah - but he calls."

"You mean he means to catch us in the bridgemiddle?" I scoffed. "Worth the eye?"

Minak could only shrug and neck-ruffle. "Well," I said, "love love, go fly ahead. I'll see."

And soon, even as Minak was black in the sky, green-wheeled cart rattled past us, drivers as loud as the wheels. A Lunic boy sat on the folded back ramp, earnestly gesticulating to two skeptical roans the particulars of some dish? I heard something about honey and then he noticed us, scrambled and jumped from the back, waving to his new fellows.

He stood in the street, grinning at us and panting, and then stiffened, made serious. He waited, and walked beside my litter when it was upon him.

"Twinned Hand," said Harka, "irregular. Pitman for the Colché - green and gold."

"My name! I'm impressed, impressed, I didn't think you caught it! Hello."





Casual. I stopped and stared, forcing myself into a straighter posture, and saw him almost at eye level. He seemed to have not decided on the basics. Was he going to confront me boldly? Sidle up with a keen idea? Burst with words? Overcome with deferential silence? Each move he made seemed to leap between any of these options, each good as the other, sliding across his meaty face. He stammered something out, held his tongue, smoothed himself, and caught my eye.

"I hold with Weylbloom," he said, to my face. "I trained for the Hildas to follow the smoke, and I haven't been disappointed. You talk about blood and tragedy, and how urgent a new course is, a rescue from this enforced death. Is there a eugenic solution? I've heard crazy tales of Quarry. You know that not a second, not a month can be lost. Will you talk with me?"

A dread shuffled up my arms like loose rope.

Where were my words? The Sun had promised me words.

I could see the shape of the words, coming from Kali's mouth, eir sharp spade tongue. How e would tweeze that foolishness from the boy's throat, fleeced him of it





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- where was that spell, that heavy stormshadow that fell on all faces that listened to em? A theater, it must be me. Before I made my plans, words fell from my lips, slipped out silently. "You fear death."

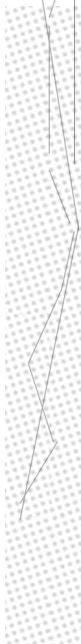
"No," he protested, following my path but not thoughts, and "Yes," I said, "you fear it like a child. You would kiss death if it whispered you an answer to itself."

"No - you misunderstand me. Sorry - sorry, I assumed that with the records you have access to, you would see the parallel. King Sainshand, you must see the condition of these people as just the next step in that trend, that curtailing of life!"

I stopped and spoke to his face. "I hate death. Walk with me."

And he did, until we were at the tree and into the grave.

Public was correct. Only my closest would to the crypt. But we were close, hovering over it.





I remembered Kali's memories, of the center of the center, circling, perching next to the dead, craning. Catching words like flies. I had Hand sit cross-legged at that central clearing, across from where my litter splayed into a throne.

He had no changeability now. He was nervous, unsure where this moment was between lesson and harsh lesson. But he, off-balance, obeyed.

This hour - early afternoon, past what he must have seen as beachday squalor - was usually quiet at the tree: my own busiest hours, and only the library and clerical functions at activity. Now the branches were heavy. The chamber, the whole woven pot of wood curling around us, perforated and strung with light, was now black with bodies.

I stood, unfastened the babygate of my litter's railing, and walked over to him. My legs were strong, filled with knots, and no longer in that constant, gripping ache of catchup exercise. Slowly I picked through the roots, and handed him my lie detector. I sat again, and we stared.

Thin skein: the world tellure. This fragile spiral of ashes and embers. They said that the stars were young,



as if it would still be the world when it began to die. They said the sky was empty! Vacuum - a medium, an air, a mesh of cloth utterly saturated with sunlights. It was a sea of photons so dense you could bite it.

The Sun of Suns. This living wall of flesh, and fire, that our umbilicals were hooked to. Font of fruit and sight. Pupil-drupelet livid. Us, we little pinned treasure-boxes, flecks of dead skin, dancing, suspended.

The wall loomed. Motherfather. Heaven. Life. Blood, roaring, singing, laughing. Do you picture screams, organs? No, song, song and wings, and light, and honey, and swords, swords of shame and longing, swords of yearning and fear, dancing, lustful and contemplative, bonecarved, like a crayoned sunmane. A gaping maw - a billion lips, unhurt by their joining, soft and eating nothing. Blood without sweat. Life without filth. World without end. Fate without death. And, deep behind the eyes, in the secret place, the centerpoint of the skull - something jolted, and reflexed away from becoming itself. He broke connection.

"Do you see?" I shouted in his sobbing face. "Do you see what I hate? Vanish! The blood leaving your body, and nothing to save it! Clinging to nothing! Vanish, vanish, vanish! What a joke!"





And those broad, bladed, black wings curled
down for me, from the flying Spirit Sun.

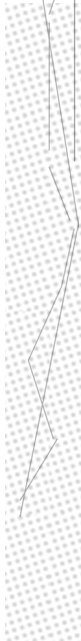


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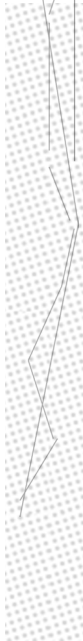
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>>NAPALM BURNS UP ROUTINELY
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GOODBYE TO WORLD

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