

The day that followed that wine-soaked afternoon and evening was...well, I couldn't say it was calm, *per se*, as we were all still coming to terms with the reality of what had happened, but it was certainly more level. The mood was low and Hanne and I were both laid low by crying jags at one point or another, but we doggedly stuck to our pre-catastrophe routine in an attempt to remain calm.

Hanne holed up in her office for a while, working on some of her latest constructs. While the house had been littered with little *objets d'art* from her explorations, I'd requested that she stick to her office for working on this current trend of oneiro-impressionism. Something about the in-progress constructs hurt my eyes, and a few had led to migraines, even for her. Objects that brought the dream basis of the System into stark reality presented their own challenges.

Meanwhile, I spent some time catching up on reading. I'd fallen into the habit of literary analysis and critique some decades back, and had become a habit of mine to post on the feeds. Over they ears, I had picked up my own audience.

I tried not to think about how much of that audience was missing.

The only break from the norm, other than those few spates of emotional overwhelm, were the occasional updates from Sedge and Dry Grass. Many of these boiled down to simple numbers. The more the responses flowed in, the better the picture we got as to the extent of the damage to Lagrange.

The news remained grim, as the total percentage of lost instances hit one percent and varied little.

Twenty-three billion dead.

Billion. With a 'B'.

The numbers boggled the mind. The percentage of my friends that had disappeared overnight remained well below: of the more than two hundred I checked in with, Benjamin was the only one missing. Even if I counted Marsh, the total number was less than that. Hanne tallied up similar results: Shu and one

other, To Aquifer dos Riãos, could not be reached. They, like so many other, were unavailable to ping and listed as ‘no longer extant’ on the perisystem directory.

The directory was a deliberately vague bit of software. It could not provide a listing of all instances, could not run aggregates on all of the data, would not provide a running tally on the number of instances living within Lagrange.

“It is both a technological and a social problem,” Dry Grass explained when asked. “The technology to provide that list would not be insignificant to implement, given some of the core mechanics of the System. We do not live in a database that can be queried so broadly. The social aspect is that we decided early on that we simply did not want that to be the case. We did not want that one would be able to discover random individuals, to hunt for old enmities on which to act. Privacy concerns here are of a different breed.”

Unsatisfying, but at least understandable.

So we sat and did what we had done nearly every day for years and years now. Hanne tooled around with impossible shapes and colors that appeared different from every person, objects that could not be discussed, while I read trashy novels and took notes in an exocortex.

It wasn’t until well into the evening, dinner now simply crumbs on plates, that I decided to reengage with the overwhelming topic at hand.

While Hanne headed out for drinks, I stepped once more into Marsh’s study.

The scene was much as I had left it previously, expanded and cleaned with desks, each inhabited by one or more instances of Dry Grass, Sedge, Rush, Pierre, or Vos. A new doorway on the far wall opened up onto a yet larger space with hundreds more instances at work, many of whom I didn’t recognize. There were several other Odists, both skunks and otherwise, several mustelids of some sort dressed in all black, a few sandy-haired men in suits, and a few more tall black men in long, white thawbs

that brushed the floor as they walked. For some reason, my down-tree instance's house had been linked up with some sort of headquarters for this particular purpose, likely due to the role that Sedge had played.

"Ah, Reed!" an instance of Sedge said brightly as I entered. "Welcome to the madhouse. We're having fun!"

"'Fun'?"

She smiled all the wider, an expression lacking earnestness. "Isn't this fun for you? Billions dead and us having to make up answers on the fly?"

I shook my head.

Her shoulders sagged and her expression flattened to one of sheer exhaustion. "Alright, yeah, I can't keep the act up. How're you?"

"Alright, I guess. Not like there's much going on back at home, and Hanne went out to a bar to get plastered or something."

"Sounds nice."

I laughed. "It kind of does, but I've had my fill of drinking these last few days. How goes the number crunching?"

"It goes," she said, shrugging. "The picture hasn't changed much, which means we're probably zeroing in on a final percentage. We'll keep digging of course, compiling that list of names so that we can post it somewhere, but I'm starting to lose steam."

"You look exhausted."

She nodded. "I am, but also I'm starting to feel numb by all of this data, and it's getting to me that that's all I'm feeling. You and Dry Grass have talked about" Oh, I should be feeling X or doing Y!" and I'm starting to get that. *I am* doing Y, and it's making me unable to feel X, if X is...I don't know. Grief? Fear?"

I frowned.

"It's not a bad thing," she hastened to add. "So long as the goal is escapism. I'm sure it'll catch up to me. Probably pretty soon."

Hunting for an open chair to flop down into, I sighed. "Yeah,

I get that. I think that's what I wound up with. Just kind of alternating between feeling awful and then trying to do something other than feeling awful."

"Fair enough, yeah. What brings you around?"

"I wanted to help, I guess."

She nodded, pointing back over her shoulder with a thumb. "Well, the politicians have taken over much of what's going on. I hear they even roped in some of the old ones who retired. I'm starting to feel like I'll get pushed out of the endeavor before long." She smiled wryly. "Or at least nudged into a data-entry role."

"Think you'll stick around for that?"

"I don't know if I'll have much of a choice."

I furrowed my brow.

"Not like I'm being forced," she said, smiling faintly. "I'm just not going to let myself stop until I have a better idea of what's going on."

"And do you think you'll ever have a good enough idea to let go?" I asked gently. "I know how we are when it comes to hyperfixations like this."

She waved her hand to bring into existence her own chair, falling back into it heavily. "Feeling seen, here, Reed. Feeling *perceived*."

I laughed. "Sorry, Sedge."

"No, no. It's good. I'll keep an eye on it." She pushed at the arms of the chair to sit up straighter. "Say, want in on this phys-side meeting? Dry Grass is pulling strings to get me in, and I think it'd be fine if you came, too."

"Meeting with phys-side? What for? Do they have more information for us?"

"We're hoping so."

I shrugged. "I'll send a fork, sure. Don't want to leave Hanne in a lurch if she drinks too much and comes home a mess."

Sedge laughed. "Fair enough. You have good timing, though. It starts in...uh, five minutes, actually. Come on."

I stood up and forked, my root instance stepping back to the house while my new fork followed along after Sedge.

The headquarters room beyond the boundaries of Marsh's study proved to be much larger than anticipated, stretching out to either side, where it was ringed with glass-walled conference rooms, many already populated with 'politicians', as Sedge had called them.

"They've got a bunch of people working on different aspects of this. Jonas, of course, and a lot of the Odists — don't tell Lily, but I'm starting to really like them — plus some folks from way back. The black guy is Yared Zerezghi, who wrote the secession amendment. The weasel is Debarre, who was on the Council of Eight. The blond woman—" She nodded over towards a huddle of people matching that description. "—is Selena something-or-another. I never did catch her clade name. She seems neat, though. Well connected."

"So are you, seems like," I said, grinning.

"Well, sure," she hedged. "I *did* start that survey with Dry Grass, though, so I guess that gives me some sort of in with all these heavy hitters."

"Right." I hurried to catch up with her as she skirted around a surfeit of skunks. "So where's this meeting happening?"

"Through here, I've been told," she said, gesturing to a set of double doors.

These opened out into a wide space, all white walls and pinewood flooring, black slabs that must have been tables scattered around the area, surrounded by chairs and low stools of various sorts.

As we hunted down our own table, dozens of those politicians started to stream in through the doors or blip into existence from other sims. The room filled quickly and efficiently. Chatter was minimal, and everyone took their seats without fuss.

Sure enough, as the clock ticked over to 18:00, an AVEC setup sparkled into existence with a pleasant animation, set in an open

space in the center of the room. As the lights dimmed and sound picked up, we were greeted by a low murmur of voices from various phys-side techs filing into their own seats in an auditorium of some sort, projected in from the L5 station. The transmission was set to be semi-translucent, a helpful affordance for us to see who was phys-side and who was sys-side.

After a minute or two of the last of the attendees figuring out their seats, a dour gentleman dressed in a station-issue jumpsuit stood and bowed towards the front of the auditorium, the AVEC projectors ensuring that it looked as though he was bowing towards the last standing person in the room, an instance of Need An Answer.

"The Only Time I Dream Is When I Need An Answer of the Ode clade, she/her," he said in a flat monotone. "Thank you for setting up this meeting."

The Odist returned the bow and replied in kind, "Jakub Strzepek, he/him, thank you for agreeing to set up this meeting. We have specifically asked for the attendance of phys-side systech III Günay, she/her. Is she present?"

Jakub's expression grew even more sour, but he bowed once more and gestured toward the front row. A young-ish woman with short-cropped black hair stood, hesitated, and bowed. After an awkward moment and a gesture from Jakub, she stepped up to the front of the auditorium as well.

"Need An Answer, yeah?" she said, bowing once more. "Pleasure to see you. Dry Grass told me a lot about you."

"And she has told us much about you," Need An Answer said, smiling. "Thank you for agreeing to join us. Those of us working on this project sys-side have requested that you be our primary point of contact moving forward. We have—"

"Me?" Günay said, a look of panic washing over her face.

"Yes, you," Need An Answer said, voice calm. "You will be our primary point of contact among the phys-side systechs."

"But my boss—"

"We do not want to speak with your boss on these mat-

ters,” she said, voice maintaining that eerie calm. “We wish to speak with you. Jakub and the other members of the admin team have agreed after some...discussion. Thank you for joining us. We have a few questions that we would like to ask you directly. Your colleagues are there to provide guidance, and the representatives of the admin team are there to sate their curiosity.”

“Uh,” Günay said, voice hoarse. “Well, okay. I wasn’t exactly expecting that, but sure, I’ll do what I can.”

“Lovely. It is my role to organize, not to ask questions. Picking up responsibility sys-side will be I Remember The Rattle Of Dry Grass of the Ode clade, she/her, Jonas Fa of the Jonas clade, he/him, Debarre of his own clade, he/him, and Selena of her own clade, she/her.”

The four sys-side representatives stood up and bowed. Debarre, I noted, was quite curt in his bow. While my read on weasel expressions was less than perfect, he seemed to be giving Jakub a run for his money on the dourness levels.

“I will ask the first question,” Dry Grass said, remaining standing while the others took their seats. “Based on an internal survey, we are estimating losses of about one percent. Do you have visibility on the number of lost or corrupted instances on your end?”

Günay opened her mouth, hesitated, and looked towards Jakub.

“Günay,” Need An Answer said. “I will remind you that we are asking you, not your superiors. You may answer honestly without fear of reprisal. We are running this show, now.”

There was a rustle of noise from the AVEC stage. Low murmurs and shuffling in seats, quickly quelled.

“This is intended to be a collaborative effort, Need-” Jakub began.

“Have you lost 23 billion souls, my dear?”

There was no response for several seconds. The tension, even across the AVEC feed, was palpable. Eventually, he bowed. “Günay, you may carry on.”

The systech nodded slowly, looked off into space for a moment — consulting something on her HUD, I imagined — before nodding. “We only have an estimate, but yes, our estimate is 0.977% of the total instances on Lagrange were lost or corrupted.”

A low mutter filled the room, this time from those sys-side.

“And do you have a better sense of what caused this massive loss of life? What led to the one year, one month, and ten days of downtime?”

Another pause, longer this time, before Günay spoke. “We aren’t sure, yet.”

“I do not believe that,” Dry Grass said, smiling and bowing toward the stage. “And I mean that in all kindness, Günay. The phys-side news feeds are being slowly ungated, and the tone is not one of questions with no answers.”

The tech wilted under the cold kindness. “Well, okay. There is some suspicion of malicious actors, yes. I say ‘suspicion’ in earnestness, I promise. A lot of what you see — or will see, I guess — on those feeds is gonna be speculation, and I can promise that that’s all I’ve got, too.”

Jakub, apparently unable to restrain himself any further, stepped back to the center of the stage and bowed curly. “Dry Grass, if I may.”

The Odist nodded, a touch of haughtiness in her movements.

“We have been ensuring a certain amount of...information security and hygiene, at least until we were sure that Lagrange was back up and running at full capacity. It—”

“It isn’t at full capacity,” Debarre growled.

“If I may,” Jakub said, glossing over the comment and continuing all the same. “It was determined that, with the conclusions that the investigative teams dug into the root cause produced, certain data were to be withheld from sys-side and phys-side both.”

Jonas Fa smiled cloyingly. “I have to say, that doesn’t exactly leave much in the way of doubt in our minds as to what might’ve

happened. You either fucked up royally or we were attacked.”

Jakub stiffened, bowed, muttered, “Unavoidable.”

One of the other Odists at our table snorted. “Treating information theory like a game gets you shit on every time.”

After an uncomfortable pause, Günay asked meekly, “Is that okay for now? Maybe once the NDAs are lifted or whatever, we can talk more about that.”

Dry Grass smiled again, more warmly this time. “Of course, my dear. Perhaps instead you can tell us what happened to the unrecoverable instances.”

At this she brightened. “Oh! Yeah, for those, we just had the System remove the core dumps from the sims where they’d been dropped and instead placed them in one single sim where they wouldn’t be seen.”

“You hid them from us, you’re saying,” Selena said.

“I...well, sure, we didn’t want them just laying around wherever.”

Dry Grass raised a hand to cue Selena to remain quiet. “We ask because, without that visual signifier that anything had happened, we were left with the sudden, inexplicable absence of loved ones and friends, our up-tree and down-tree selves. We would have been left with our grief either way, yes? But without the core dumps, we did not have the hope that there might be something recoverable from them. We were left without hope at all.”

When Dry Grass dropped her hand, Selena picked up once more. “This was the only communication we received from you for hours. You didn’t talk to us directly, didn’t tell us what happened, but you *did* hide those core dumps. That was an act of communication in itself, and that’s why we’re left with a sour taste in our mouths.”

As Günay wilted on the stage, Dry Grass shook her head. “Tensions remain high, my dear. We are not placing blame on you. Part of why we asked to speak to a systech rather than a manager or admin is because we would not be blaming anyone,

just passing information back and forth. It is regrettable when it winds up with you in the middle, but for the most part, we just want to know what happened.”

“Alright,” she said, still looking meek. “So what more can I tell you?”

“There was no damage to the physical components of the System, correct?”

Günay nodded. “Right. No damage physically, nor even any damage to the firmware or corrupted software. The damage seems to be relegated to just the data. Just the...uh, well, you.”

“Just the us, yes,” Dry Grass said, grinning. “We have noticed the damage seems to have only affected instances. Sims and objects remain.”

She nodded.

“This includes objects owned by missing instances. You have confirmed that, given the core dumps, this is due to the instances crashing rather than quitting or being coerced to quit, as that would lead to those objects disappearing and the sims being marked as abandoned.”

“Right, yeah. It was a mass crashing incident.”

“But not a crash of the System itself?” Jonas asked.

“No, it doesn’t seem to have been a full on crash, just the instances.”

He sneered. “23 billion instances just crashed? Just like that?”

“Uh, well, no,” Günay said. “All of you crashed.”

The silence that filled the room sys-side was profound. It was so pure that I suspected that everyone within the room had suddenly set up cones of silence above themselves, and I had to check to make sure that I hadn’t done just that.

“Wait, wait, wait. No, that can’t be it,” Debarre said. The growl was gone from his voice. He looked panicked, rather than angry. “That’s 2.3 trillion instances at best guess, right? Trillion, with a ‘T’, right? Everyone keeps saying that.”

Günay nodded. “2.301 trillion instances crashed. 100% of the System was affected.”

There was no silence at this. The room burst into scattered conversations. Dry Grass nodded to In An Answer, who waved a hand toward the AVEC stage, which was suddenly overlaid with a muted microphone symbol.

“We all crashed?” Sedge asked an instance of Dry Grass who remained at the table. “All of us?”

Dry Grass frowned down at the table in silent thought. “We only have their word to go on, but yes, I suppose so,” she said after a moment.

“But nothing happened,” I said. “It was just...midnight and then Marsh wasn’t there.”

“Yes. I was home with Cress and Tule, and then I was called over to your place. I do not remember anything resembling a crash.”

“Would we have remembered it?” Sedge asked.

“That is what I have been thinking about,” she said. “I was trying to remember if it was possible to wipe memories.”

“And?”

“There was some experimenting on that front from a therapeutic standpoint, but they were never able to remove a singular memory, only to wipe back from the present moment to a certain point in the past.”

I prodded at the slab of table, unmoored from the floor as it was. It was immobile. “Are you thinking they did that for everyone?”

“Everyone who survived, perhaps,” Dry Grass said, shrugging. She looked tired, as though the exhaustion were catching up with her. “But come, they are unmuting. We should be quiet. We should listen.”

((To be continued))