

Marsh

Marsh

A Post-Self story

Madison Scott-Clary

With contributions from The Lament, Andréa C. Mason, Caela

Argent, J.S. Hawthorne, Krzysztof “Tomash” Drewniak

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Marsh

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少年不識愁滋味	In youth I'd never tasted much of sorrow
愛上層樓。	I liked to climb up high
愛上層樓。	I liked to climb up high
為賦新詞強說愁。	To conjure up a bit of sorrow to sing a brand new song.

而今識盡愁滋味	Now I know too well the taste of sorrow.
欲說還休。	I start to sing then pause
欲說還休。	I start to sing then pause
卻道天涼好個秋。	And sigh instead, "What a cool and lovely autumn day."

— Xin Qiji (1140–1207), after Eileen Cheng-Yin Chao

Reed — 2399

“If you had to boil down this year into a sales pitch, what would it be?”

I laughed and bumped my shoulder against Hanne’s. “A sales pitch?”

“Yeah,” she said, leaning briefly against me as we walked. “I’m in the market for a new year. Sell me the 2399 model. I’ve got a wide variety to choose from, so tell me why you decided to live through this one.”

“You’re a nerd. You realize that, right?”

“Tell me why I should be a nerd in the year 275. Next year we can decide on systime 276.”

I scuffed my heel against the pavement of the street. New Year’s Eve, and everyone was still inside. Bars: full. Restaurants: packed. There were a few scattered couples or groups around, but they were all walking with purpose. Champagne called. Canapes. Crudités.

And there we were, Reed and Hanne, arm in arm, strolling leisurely down the street, heedless of the passersby, to celebrate the last day of 2399, systime 275+365. Many, still lingering on the calendar still used phys-side, were doubtlessly partying extra-hard to celebrate the turn of a century.

“If you’re looking for the utmost in luxury, then it’s really hard to go wrong with 2399. The ride was just about as smooth as could be.”

“How about comfort?”

“Oh, very comfortable. Cushy, even,” I said, poking her gently in the belly.

Hanne laughed, covering her stomach with her hand. “Cute. How about the exterior?”

“No clue. It’s been a long, long time since I’ve had any reason to pay attention to the world outside. I imagine it looks just as confusing as it always has.”

“Well, okay, fair enough. You’ve been here longer than I have.”

“I keep forgetting you’re younger than me.”

She nodded. “Robbing the cradle, you are.”

“You’re 83.”

“Barely legal.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Whatever.”

“How about, uh... Features? Amenities?”

“Well, it’s got us in it, doesn’t it?”

She snorted and shoved me away from her. “Now who’s the nerd? Gross.”

I stumbled to the side, laughing. Our own champagne from earlier added a pleasant freedom of movement I only ever notice at two drinks. Any more and I become too loose and have a hard time staying upright. Any less and I don’t notice that any freedom had been lacking.

“Is that so bad?” I asked. “Alternatively: am I not allowed to be a bit maudlin? It’s fucking New Year’s, Hanne.”

“‘Maudlin’? Is that even the right word?”

“What? Uh...” I hunted down a dictionary on the exchange, prowled through it. “Oh. Mawkish, that’s the one. Or saccharine, maybe? I don’t know. Maudlin still kind of works, doesn’t it?”

She tilted her head at me.

“‘Extremely sentimental’, it says. Pretty sure that fits.”

Hanne rolled her eyes, grinning. “Okay, yeah, that fits you to a tee.”

We walked in silence for a few minutes. I tallied the occupants of the various restaurants along the way, making note

of the busiest to check out on some less-busy night. Good date spots, perhaps.

“What was it like when you uploaded?”

“You mean phys-side?”

Hanne nodded. “What was Earth like? What was your life like?”

I shrugged. “Fine, I guess. The Western Fed was swinging conservative again, it was hot as hell all the time, some places were arguing about upload subsidies leading to a rising birthratesome. I guess that makes it sound terrible, and maybe it would have gotten worse, but I wasn’t around to see it. We were doing alright, so maybe I was kind of sheltered.”

“I hear you on the hot as hell part. We couldn’t afford moving south when it got too bad, so we moved up into the mountains. It helped a little bit, at least.”

“When was that?”

“2320 something. I don’t remember. I think I was under ten, at least.”

I nodded. “I guess that’s what I mean by sheltered. We were already up in Newfoundland. Summers sucked, winters sucked, but it was alright between them. It was worse when I lived in New York.”

“Autumn or spring?”

“Huh?”

“Pick one, dummy,” she said, laughing.

“Oh, autumn, for sure. Autumn bitch all the way.”

“I knew it.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m nothing if not myself.”

“So why’d you upload?”

“You know that already.”

Hanne shook her head. “You said to transition, sure, but didn’t you already do that back phys-side?”

I stayed silent, picking apart my thoughts on the matter. “I-Marsh got sick of being trans. They wanted to just be a man, not a trans man.”

Marsh

“You’re a trans man, though.”

“Sure, but that’s not what they wanted at the time. They started to miss it by the time they forked.”

“Why?”

I laughed. “So many questions tonight.”

She grinned, shrugged.

“Well, I think half of it was that there was just too much pressure at the time. Like I said, the WF was swinging conservative, so there was this push to assimilate, and we internalized that pretty hard. We felt pushed to just shut up and be a man, just disappear — that or become a woman, have kids, let the first up-load for the payout — and always felt that we fell short despite all we did to try, but on Lagrange, we could do that right off the bat.”

“So they went back to being trans—”

I shook my head, cutting her off. “They’ve given up on gender. I became the way they experienced that again.”

“Sorry, Reed.”

“No, it’s okay,” I said, feeling a rush of warmth to my cheeks. “Didn’t mean to get too pushy. It’s still a little tender, I guess.”

The shadow of her shoulders relaxed again in the dark of the night. “Even after so long?”

“Yeah. Like I said, we internalized it pretty hard, even as they tried to diversify later on. I headed back trans, Lily headed back feminine, and Cress embodies the negation.”

“Is that why you forked, too?”

I grinned. “I forked for fun. Even if it’s still a tender spot, I think I’m still way more relaxed than Marsh is, though it’s been a while since we talked. There may be a bit of that in Tule, I guess. He’s still pretty happy being a guy — he’s the only one out of all of us, come to think of it. Rush is as ve is of vis own choice, though.”

Hanne looped her arm through mine. “Well, I still like you as you are.”

“What, trans?”

“No, a huge nerd.”

“Of course.” I bumped my shoulder to hers. “Why’d you upload, then?”

“The weather. The money. All the same stuff the government told us. Same as most people, I think. I internalized that as much as Marsh did the whole gender thing.”

“Was the WF still on its conservative swing?”

“The Republic of Argentina wasn’t part of the Western Federation.”

“Oh, right. I guess I knew that.”

She shrugged. “Sure. But either way, they were somewhere in the middle, maybe. There was this big push from the liberal side on the climate, and this big push by the conservatives on the financial side. They said they could cut costs on services if there were fewer of us. Dad was with them, mom was with the libs. It was one of the few things they could agree on. They said they’d miss me, but they weren’t exactly sad when I went the Ansible.”

“‘Went the Ansible’? Is that what you called it?”

“‘Uploading’ sounds so sterile,” she said, nodding. “‘Went the Ansible’ just made it sound like moving away from home.”

“Well, I’m glad you went the Ansible, then.”

“Sap.”

I laughed. “Got it in one.” Champagne tinted evenings faded, as they do, into brandy-colored nights. Amber nights and fireplaces for the hell of it, me and Hanne settling in for a little bit of warmth for that last hour, not quite decadence and a ways off from opulence, but still a plush couch and a fire and sniffers slightly too full of liquor.

We shared our warmth, sitting side by side on the couch, and we continued to talk, talking of the year past, of years past beyond that, and of however many we decided were ahead. A hundred years? Two hundred? Only five? I made an impassioned argument for five more years of life, then laughed, changed my mind, and said I’d never die. Hanne said she’d live for precisely

two hundred, give up, and disappear from Lagrange. She'd fork at a century and never speak to that version of her again, that exact duplicate, and should that instance decide to live on past two centuries, so be it, but she'd decided her expiration.

I scoffed. "What? And leave me behind?"

"Of course. Can you imagine six score years with someone? Absolutely miserable." She rested her head on my shoulder and shrugged. "We're a ways off from that, I think I still like you now."

"You think?" I draped my arm around her shoulders. "Still not sure?"

"I'm sure that I think I like you."

I laughed. "Yeah? Well, what can I do to cement your opinion of me? What can I do to make you sure that you like me?"

"There's a whole laundry list," she said, sipping her brandy.

"Pop one. I could use a goal for 276."

Hanne held up her glass appraisingly. "Well, we could work on your taste in liquor."

I snorted. "What would you rather I drink?"

"Scotch."

"That always struck me as so manly, though."

"Sounds fake."

"Oh, I'm pretty sure it is, but we're beholden to stereotypes."

She poked me in the side, grinning. "You must be drunk if you're using words like 'mawkish' and 'beholden'. Let's see. You could introduce me to Marsh, maybe."

I shook my head. "That's not on me, you know that. We have a one-way relationship."

"But they're your down-tree instance! You're patterned after them. You talk every year *at least* once, right? You'll talk to them later tonight, right? You have for the last hundred."

"No, probably not. If I hear from them directly, anything more than just a ping, I'll know something's gone horribly wrong." I leaned back — carefully, what with her head resting on my shoulder. "Like I say, it's a one-way relationship. All I do

is live my own life, right? I stay in touch with the rest of the clade to greater or lesser extent, but Marsh has their own life.”

“They have several.”

“Right. We all fork, we all merge back down to whoever our down-tree instance is, and since I was forked from them, I merge down directly. They get all our lives, one year at a time, but we don’t really get anything in return.”

I could hear the frown in her voice. “How miserable.”

“What, our relationship?”

“Just...them. How miserable they have to be, right? They live their life doing whatever, spending their whole year remembering the previous year from, what, five instances?”

“Six. Me, Lily, Cress, Rush, Sedge, and Tule.”

“That’s another thing you could do: be a little less weird.”

I chuckled, kissed atop her head. “Uh huh. Love you too.”

“But I was saying they have to be just miserable. They chill out in their house and spend their days remembering yours, you and your cocladists, and just living vicariously through you all.”

“That’s not all they do. They sing. They have Vos and Pierre, right? They spend time with their partners. They go to Vos’s plays. They have friends over. They sing a lot. They cook—”

“Are they as bad a cook as you?”

“Oh, worse, according to Tule’s girlfriend. Truly terrible.”

She laughed.

“They have a full and fulfilling life, is what I’m saying. They’re happy, it’s just that their happiness doesn’t include communication with their up-tree instances.”

“Why not?”

I yawned, slouched down further on the couch along with her. “They very specifically want us to live our own lives. They don’t want us to just be other versions of them. They can make all of those they want for their little tasks. They specifically want us to be something other than what they are so that they can experience that on their own terms.”

“Don’t see how that’s any different,” she mumbled. Sleep

threatened, even with some time left before midnight. “You all merging down like that is just doing the same thing in reverse, You’re making them a version of you all, even if you’re not just a version of them.”

I turned that thought over in my head, held it at arms length, let the light of the fire shine through the fog of champagne and brandy onto it to admire just how strangely it was shaped. “Well, huh.”

“See? You’re so weird.”

“I guess we are,” I said, smiling and nudging Hanne upright once more. “No dozing off, now. Not yet.”

She grumbled and rubbed at her face. “Sorry if that came off as rude. I guess it’s just outside my understanding.”

I scooted up onto the couch, myself, sitting cross-legged to face her. “It’s okay. It’s not wrong, even, I just don’t think it’s wholly right, either. It’s a matter of intent. Our intent is to live our own lives to the fullest, and it’s their intent to let us do so and yet still be able to experience that at one layer of remove. We’ve been doing it for a century, and it’s worked out well enough since then. If all this—” I waved around the room, feeling the gentle spin of drunkenness follow the movement, “—is just a dream, if we’re all doing our best to dream in unison with each other, then I think intent may be all that we have, right? However many billion or trillion people have uploaded are all trying to dream the same dream together, all mixed up and poured into the same System, we have to form what meanings we may on our own.”

“I think we broke two trillion instances a while back. I don’t know how may uploads, but I don’t think it’s hit a trillion yet. Probably only forty billion or so.”

“Right. Sorry, guess I’m kinda rambly when I’m drunk.”

Leaning forward, she gave me a light kiss. “It’s okay, I like it when you ramble. Just don’t lose track of the time.”

23:46.

I started to nod, then stiffened as I felt first one, then another set of memories crash down onto me. “*Fuck*. One

of these...days I'll convince...them to give me some warning...sec..."

Hanne laughed and shook her head, standing from the couch to go get herself a glass of water.

With a rush of intent, I forked, bringing into being beside me a new instance of myself. Exactly the same. *Precisely*. Had such a thing any meaning to an upload, we would be the same down to the atomic level, to the subatomic. All of the memories, all of the personality, all of the history.

For a fraction of a second, at least. From that point on, we began to diverge, each remembering things differently. The Reed that still sat on the couch heard Hanne in the kitchen from *this* angle, yet the one that stood beside the couch heard her from that. The one that sat on the couch felt the fire on his cheek, the one standing felt it on his back. I watched this other Reed — a new instance of me without these demanding memories, one who would not have the shared memories of my up-tree co-cladists — wander off to the bedroom to presumably stay out of the way while I processed.

I closed my eyes to turn down one of my senses, setting the sweet-smelling glass of brandy aside to rid myself of another as best I could. I sat and spent a moment processing, savoring the memories. Rush had merged down first; ve had split off a new copy of verself, and then the original had quit. On doing so, all the memories ve'd formed over the last however long fell down onto me, ready to be remembered like some forgotten word on the tip of my tongue: all I needed to do is actually remember. Clearly, Tule had already forked and merged back down into Sedge, as their combined memories piled yet more weight on me. Three sets of memories — two from my direct up-tree instances and one from a second-degree up-tree instance — rested on my mind, ready for integration.

There'd be time for Marsh to do their full perusal and remembering later. It was rapidly approaching midnight, and I needed to get the memories sorted into my own, interleaved and

zippered together into as cohesive a whole as best I could manage, all conflicts addressed — though with as separate as their lives had been until then, there was thankfully quite little in the way of conflicting memories — so that, shortly before midnight, I could quit and let all those memories — those of Rush, Sedge, Tule, and myself — fall to Marsh to process, savor, and treasure for herself, while that new copy of me, off making the bed or simply taking some quiet, lived out the next year with Hanne, with all their joys and sorrows.

After so many New Years Eves, this had all become routine. Some years, I kept the memories, some not. It had been a nearly a decade since I'd bothered, and there didn't seem to be any reason to do different this year.

I heard Hanne return, heard her climb back onto the couch beside me, felt her press a cold glass of water into my hand.

Five minutes left.

Three.

23:58, and I opened my eyes and smiled. “Well, seems like it's been a pleasant enough year for everyone involved, though Marsh will deal with all the rest of that later.”

“It continues to amaze just how good you are at that.”

“What, merging?”

She nodded.

“It feels pretty straight forward for me,” I said. “I just...remember it all, and when memories or outlooks on life don't line up, I choose mine.”

She laughed. “Still, far better than I am at it.”

23:59.

“Practice, maybe,” I said. “But hey, happy New Year.”

“Is it time, then?” she asked.

I nodded, willed away the drunkenness, took a sip of water. “Alright. I love you, Hanne Marie. I'll miss you.”

She rolled her eyes. “Tell Marsh I said...”

Reed --- 2401

“See? You’re so weird.”

“I guess we are,” I said, smiling and nudging Hanne upright once more. A flash of *déjà vu* struck me squarely in the right temple, a headache amid the buzz of alcohol. “Hey now, no falling asleep on me.”

“Right, sorry. Still, uh...still fifteen minutes.” She grumbled and rubbed at her face. “Sorry if that came off as rude. I guess it’s just outside my understanding.”

I scooted up onto the couch, myself, sitting cross-legged to face her. “It’s okay. It’s not wrong, come to think of it, I just don’t think it’s wholly right, either, you know? It’s more a matter of intent. Our intent is to live our own lives doing as we will rather than as they would, and it’s their intent to let us do so — and by not interfering, even with communication, *force* us to do so — and yet still be able to experience that almost like a dream. They forked us off a century ago, me, Lily, and Cress, and we’ve been doing it ever since, and it’s worked out well enough since then. They’re more than just Marsh, now. They’re Marsh and all of us. If all this—” I waved around the room, feeling the gentle spin of drunkenness follow the movement, “—is just a dream, if we’re all doing our best to dream in unison with each other, then I think intent may be all that we have, right? However many billion or trillion people have uploaded are all trying to dream the same dream together, all mixed up and poured into the same System, we have to form what meanings we may on our own.”

“I think we broke two trillion instances a while back. I don’t know how many uploads, but I don’t think it’s hit a trillion yet.”

“Right. Sorry, guess I’m kinda rambling when I’m drunk.”

Leaning forward, she gave me a light kiss. “You know I like it when you ramble. Just don’t lose track of the time.” She stood up straight again and squinted out towards nothing. “Weird. *Déjà vu.*”

23:46.

I started to nod, willed away the drunkenness, then stiffened as I felt first one, then another set of memories crash down onto me. “*Fuck. One of these...days I’ll convince...them to give me some warning...sec...*”

Hanne laughed and shook her head, stepping away from the couch to go get herself a glass of water.

With a press of will, I forked, bringing into being beside the couch a new instance of myself. Exactly the same. *Exactly.* Had such a thing any meaning to the uploaded consciousness, we would have been the same down to the atomic level, to the sub-atomic. All of the memories, all of the personality, all of the love and hate and past that made us us.

For a fraction of a second, at least. From there, we began to diverge, each remembering things differently. The Reed that still sat on the couch heard Hanne rummaging in the kitchen from *this* angle, and yet the one that stood beside the couch heard her from that. The one that sat on the couch felt the fire on his cheek, the one standing felt it on his back.

I closed my eyes to turn down one of my senses, taking one more sip of the sweet-smelling brandy before setting it aside to rid myself of another two as best I could. I sat and spent a moment processing, savoring the memories. Rush had merged down first; we had split off a new copy of ourselves then the original had quit. On doing so, all the memories we’d formed over the last year fell down onto me, ready to be remembered like some forgotten word on the tip of my tongue: all I needed to do was actually remember. Clearly, Tule had already forked and merged

back down into Sedge, as their combined memories piled yet more weight on me. Three sets of memories — two from my direct up-tree instances and one from a second-degree up-tree instance — rested on my mind, ready for integration.

There would be time for full perusal and remembering later. It was rapidly approaching midnight, and I needed to get the memories sorted into my own, interleaved and zipped together into as cohesive a whole as I could manage, all — or, at least, almost all — conflicts addressed (though with as separate as their lives had been until then, there was thankfully quite little in the way of conflicting memories), so that, shortly before midnight, I could quit, myself, letting that new copy of myself live out the next year with Hanne, with all their joys and sorrows, while my original instance quit and let all those memories — those of Rush, Sedge, Tule, and myself — fall to Marsh to process, savor, and treasure for themself.

After so many New Years Eves, it had all become routine. Some years, I kept the memories, some not. It had been a nearly a decade since I'd bothered — I always checked with Rush, Sedge, and Tule before keeping their memories — and there didn't seem to be any reason to do different this year.

I heard Hanne return, heard her climb back onto the couch before me, felt her press a cold glass of water into my hand.

Five minutes left.

Two.

23:59, and I opened my eyes. “Well, seems like it's been a pleasant enough year. Marsh can deal with all the rest of that later.”

“It continues to amaze just how good you are at that.”

“What, merging that much at once?”

She nodded.

“It feels pretty straight forward for me,” I said. “I just...remember, and when memories or outlooks on life don't line up, I choose mine.”

She laughed. “Still, far better than I am at it.”

“We’ve been at this for ages,” my up-tree fork said. “That’s a lot of practice. But hey, happy New Year.”

“Is it time, then?” she asked.

I nodded, took a few long gulps of water.

“Alright. I love you, Miss Hanne Marie. I’ll think of you often.”

She rolled her eyes. “No you won’t. Tell Marsh I said hi.”

I laughed and, as the clock struck midnight, willed myself to quit.

Then frowned.

“Something wrong?”

I held up a finger and closed my eyes. Once more, I thought to myself, *I’m ready to quit*, then then willed that to be reality.

Rather than the sudden nothingness — or sudden oneness for Marsh — that should have followed, I felt the System balk. Resist. I felt an elastic sensation that I’d never felt before. There was a barrier between me and the ability to quit. I felt it, tested it, probed and explored. It was undeniably present, and though I sensed that I could probably have pressed through it if I desired, it was as though Lagrange desperately did not want me to quit. It didn’t want the Reed of now to leave the System.

“I can’t.”

My lingering fork took a step back, looking disconcerted.

“You can’t?” Hanne tilted her head, then leaned forward to take one of my hands in her own. “I mean, it’s okay if you don’t want to. I don’t think Marsh will mind if you’re a few minutes late. Hell, you can even send them a message saying you don’t want to this year. I think they’ll—”

“No, Hanne,” I said, carefully slipping my hand free so that I could stand. I needed to pace. “I mean I can’t. I’m not able to. It’s impossible. Or possible, but— wait, hold on.”

It had been more than a decade since I’d done so, but if ever there was a time, this was it. There were very few reasons that the System would try to stop an instance from quitting and one of them...well, no— It’d been more than a decade since I had bro-

ken the communication embargo we had agreed on, but I sent Marsh a gentle ping.

Or *tried* to, at least.

All the ping was was a gentle nudge against the recipient's sensorium, a sense that someone was looking for them, was seeking them out, was just checking if they were free, if they were even there. From the sender's side, it felt like a gentle touch, a brush of some more metaphorical finger against the symbolic shoulder of the recipient, a reassurance that they were indeed there.

But there was nothing. I felt nothing. No sense of Marsh. Attempting to send a sensorium ping to someone that doesn't exist just felt like daydreaming. It felt like a silly, pointless imagining, as though one was imagining that they could touch God on the shoulder or shake hands with the devil.

I frowned, pinged Hanne.

"What?" she said, her frown deepening.

"Hold on, one more sec." I nodded to my new fork, who quit; I declined the merge. This would just have to be a year where I kept the memories. Something was wrong. I could work it out with my up-trees later.

00:02.

I thought across the clade, thought of one of Marsh's other forks. Pinged Lily, who was almost certainly out camping.

The response was immediate, words flowing into my consciousness through some sense that wasn't quite hearing. "*What's happening? I can't-*"

Pinged Cress, the other fork. Asked, "*Cress? Can you-*"

"*What the fuck is happening?*" came the panicked response.

"*My place,*" I sent back, followed by my address. I repeated the message to Lily and, on a whim, my own up-tree instances, Rush, Sedge, and Tule.

00:04.

Cress arrived almost immediately along with Tule — they shared a partner, so it made sense they'd be together for the

evening — leading Hanne to start back on the couch. “Reed,” she said, voice low. “What is—”

Lily arrived next, dusty and dishevelled from her day in some mountainous sim, already rushing forward to grab my shoulder. “You can’t either?” she said, voice full of panic.

Before I could answer, Sedge and Rush arrived. The living room became quite crowded, all five of the other instances of the Marsh clade clamoring over each other to talk to me, the first long-lived fork from Marsh.

“Reed!” Hanne shouted, standing and stamping her foot. She spoke carefully, and I could hear anger just beneath that tone. “What happened?”

The rest of the clade looked to me as well, and I quailed under so many gazes. “I can’t quit. I can’t merge down. I can’t reach Marsh. They—” my voice gave out and I had to take a shaky sip of water. “They’re not on Lagrange, as far as I can tell.”

00:07.

Silence fell thick across the room. The clade — Marsh’s clade — stared, wide-eyed. Their expressions ranged from unsure to terrified. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what expression showed on my face.

“Okay, no, hold on,” Hanne said, shaking her head and waving her hand. She appeared to have willed drunkenness away, much as I had, as her voice was clear, holding more frustration than the panic I felt. “Did they quit? They couldn’t have, right? You just pinged them earlier today.”

I nodded.

“And they said nothing about quitting?”

“Nothing.”

Hanne glanced around the room, singling out Marsh’s other two immediate up-tree instances, Cress and Lily. Both shook their heads.

“I was just talking to them about an hour ago, actually.” Lily admitted. “They and Vos were wrapping up the first part of the night’s celebration and they were going to—”

“Vos!” I shouted. “Shit, sorry Lily.”

It took a moment for Vos to respond to my ping. *“Reed? It’s been a bit. What’s up?”*

“Is Marsh there?” I sent back.

“I don’t know. I figured they were in the study waiting on you, so I just made us drinks. Is something wrong?”

“Can you ping them?”

There was a short pause, followed by a sensorium glimpse of a familiar room, that study from so long ago, every flat surface that wasn’t the floor covered in stacks of unread books. Empty.

“What’s happening?” Vos sent. There was an edge of caution to her voice, the sound of a thin barrier keeping anxiety at bay.

“Pierre?”

“One second.” Another pause, and then, quickly, *“Wait, can we just come over? What’s your address?”*

I messaged over the address, and a few seconds later, Fenne Vos and Pierre LaFontaine arrived holding hands, leading to another yelp from Hanne.

“You must be Vos! Hi,” she said, preempting any of Marsh’s up-tree instances. “Do you know where Marsh is?”

Some small part of me looked on in admiration. Hanne had kept much of the panic that was coursing through me and my cocladists out of her voice. I could feel a shout building within me and I knew from past experiences with Vos and Pierre that that would only make things worse.

“We didn’t see them around,” Vos answered, that barrier between caution and worry seemed to be giving way. “Why? If you’re all here, I’m guessing something happened.”

“Have you been able to ping them?”

Both Vos and Pierre shook their heads.

The sight of Cress and Tule bowing their heads to whisper to each other caught my eye, and a moment later their partner, a stocky woman with curly black hair, appeared between them, looking as though she’d come straight from a party, herself. I felt a muffled pang of affection for her, lingering emotions from my

up-tree instance's memories.

"Stop!" Hanne said, then laughed nervously at the silence that followed. She gestured absentmindedly, pressing the bounds of the sim outward to expand the room. It had started getting actively crowded. "You're doing it again, Reed."

"What?" I tamped down indignation. "Sorry, Hanne, there's a lot going on."

"Right, I get that, but can you start at the beginning for those of us outside your head? What did you mean, you don't think they're on Lagrange?"

At this, both Vos and Pierre took a half-step back, looking startled.

00:11

I spent a moment composing myself. I stood up straighter, brushing my hands down over my shirt, and nodded. "Right. I'm sorry, hon. When midnight hit, I forked and tried to quit as usual. I couldn't, though. The System wouldn't let me."

Cress and Tule's partner, I Remember The Rattle Of Dry Grass of the Ode clade, stood up stock straight, all grogginess — or perhaps drunkenness — from the party fleeing her features.

"That's only supposed to happen when quitting would mean the loss of too much memory, though. The root instance can barely quit at all in the older clades—" Dry Grass winced. I did my best to ignore it and continued. "—because the System really doesn't like losing a life if it won't be merged down into a down-tree instance."

"So, you couldn't quit because..." Hanne said, urging me on.

"Well, I imagine the same is true for anyone with lots of memory inside them. If there's no one to merge down into, it just looks like...like..."

"Like death," Dry Grass said darkly. "It looks like death. You could not quit because, to the System, you and all of your memories would die, and the System is not built for death. That is what it felt like, is it not? It felt like you could not possibly quit without pushing the weight of the world uphill?"

I frowned. “Perhaps not all that, but it certainly felt like I was trying to push against something really hard. It didn’t feel like it was impossible like anything else the System would prohibit, it just felt like I was being forced away from that option.”

“Like death,” she muttered again. Pierre began to cry. “Marsh is not on the System, then, no.”

“So are they...is Marsh dead?” Pierre whispered, his voice clouded by tears. Vos towered over him — over all of us, really — and had always seemed as though she could weather a storm better than any stone, but now, even she looked suddenly frail, fragile in the face of the loss they were all only talking around.

“They are not on the System,” Dry Grass and I echoed in unison.

“How can you be sure, though?” Hanne asked. “You can’t merge down, sure, and you can’t ping, but could they just be in some locked down sim or a privacy cone or something? Can those even block merges?”

Lily shook her head. “Not that I know of, no. I don’t think anything blocks a merge.”

“Nothing blocks merges, correct,” Dry Grass said. “That would leave potentially much in the way of memory lingering with nowhere to go, and the System does not work that way.”

Slowly, all within the room began to face her rather than me, at which I breathed a silent sigh of relief. That I was the oldest fork of Marsh’s didn’t necessarily give me any more of the information that they all so desperately craved. Dry Grass was more than a century older than I was, however, and if anyone might have answers...

“How do you know, love?” Tule asked.

“I worked as a sys-side System technician.”

Cress laughed. It sounded forced. “And you never thought to tell us?”

“This was before you were born, my dear. Before Marsh’s parents were born, even. It was a long time ago, and I have since moved on.”

“Well, is there a way to find out what happened?”

She frowned down to her feet as she thought. “It used to be that there were rotated audit logs for events like forking and quitting. I do not know if those are kept any longer, though, given how large they would get in a very short amount of time. Perhaps?”

“Well, how do we check those?” Rush said, speaking up for the first time since that initial clamor of voices.

Dry Grass spread her hands helplessly. “I do not know. Again, it has been two centuries since I worked as a systech. The technology has changed much. I would need access. I would need time to remember. Time to research.”

“Do we even *have* time?” Lily growled at her, frustration apparently winning out over panic. Cress and Tule both gave her a sharp glance.

00:15

“I do not know. I am sorry,” Dry Grass said, bowing. “I will fork and read up as fast as I can, and contact In The Wind. I may even be able to get my systech bit back. May I remain here?”

“Please,” Cress and Tule said in unison. Sedge, Rush, and I, along with Marsh’s partners, all nodded. Lily did not. Hanne only frowned.

Dry Grass bowed once more, forked, and the fork stepped from the sim to, I suppose, go lose herself in the perisystem architecture, hunting down what information she could. They could only hope that she still had the connections to find what she needed.

“Hey, uh,” Sedge said into the uncomfortable silence that fell once more. “Has anyone checked the time?”

Everyone tilted their heads almost in unison. It was more a habit than anything, hardly a required motion, but the habit that Marsh had formed so many years ago had stuck with all of the Marshans throughout their own lives.

Systime 277+41 00:17.

“Wait, what—”

“277? But—”

“It says 2401, too!”

Everyone talking at once quickly grew overwhelming. I shook my head, covered my ears with my hands, then, remembering that I was standing in the middle of a small crowd, tried to mask the movement by turning it into running my fingers through my hair.

“Okay, one at a time,” I said, having to speak up to drown out further exclamations. “I’m seeing 277+41. Everyone else seeing the same thing?”

Nods around.

“Any, uh...” I swallowed drily, looked around, and grabbed the glass of water that still sat, neglected, on the table beside the couch. After a careful sip, I tried again. “Any ideas as to what might have happened?”

Silence.

“Well, has anything like this happened before?”

We all turned to look at Dry Grass, who shrugged helplessly. “Not that I can remember. The closest would be periods of downtime. It has happened several times over the centuries. There was a few weeks of downtime while Lagrange was being set up during Secession, a few hours here and there.”

“But not, what...thirteen months?” Cress asked.

“I have never seen that amount of time lapse, no.”

Sedge piped up, saying, “Nothing on the perisystem about anything like this happening before, but holy shit are the feeds going off.”

“Really?” I asked, then laughed. “Sorry, stupid question. Of course they are.”

“And?” Rush said, impatient. “What are they saying?”

“It’s pretty much this conversation repeated a million times over. I think a lot of people doing the same sort of thing we are. A lot of talking about the jump in time, about missing instances, about trying to quit and...”

Vos frowned. “And what?”

“Well, I mean,” Sedge stammered. “Same thing, I guess. Nothing.”

Dry Grass tilted her head, then nodded. “Another fork is keeping a tally. Missing instances are now numbering in the thousands.”

Vos took another half-step back. “Wait, *thousands?*”

“It is proving difficult to keep up with the feeds,” she said, speaking slowly. Perhaps still receiving updates? “One of me is just reading the feeds and marking a tally every time a missing instance is mentioned.”

“Thousands, Jesus,” Hanne whispered. “I should check in on Jess. And probably—”

She started as Pierre sagged briefly against Vos, then either quit or left the sim. “He...I mean...” Vos began, shook her head, and then followed suit.

“Do you two need anything?” I sent to Vos. “Or just space and quiet?”

“*The latter,*” she replied after a few long seconds. The sensorium message was so clearly sent between sobs that I had to swallow down the same sensation rising in my throat.

“Give them some space,” I mumbled against that awkward pressure in my chest. “So, okay. What’s the whole story again? Midnight hit and suddenly it’s thirteen months—”

“Thirteen months and ten days, almost exactly,” Sedge corrected.

I sighed, nodded. “Right. Midnight hit and the date jumped forward and now there are thousands of—”

“Tens of thousands,” Dry Grass said, then averted her gaze. “Apologies.”

“It’s alright. Tens of thousands of people missing. The feeds are going nuts. What about phys-side? Anything from them?”

“I have not been looking. I am uncomfortable with phys-side. There is a reason I am no longer a tech.”

“I’ll take a look,” Sedge said. She forked quickly, the new instance almost immediately disappearing as she stepped from

the sim. “Though I’m not as fast at it as you are.”

“Anything from Castor or Pollux? Or Artemis? It’s only a few months round trip, definitely less than thirteen. We don’t really talk. I don’t have anything from any of the Marshans on the LVs.”

“Shit,” Dry Grass whispered, expression falling. “Yes, there is.”

When she didn’t continue, Lily stamped her foot, growling, “And? You can’t just leave that hanging there! I don’t fucking get you Odists, you’re always—”

“Lily!” Tule and Cress said as one.

She made a show of regaining her composure, movements overly liquid as she straightened up and brushed a lock of dirty blond hair out of her face. “Sorry.”

An awkward silence lingered, overstaying its welcome. Eventually, Dry Grass’s shoulders slumped. “You do not need to apologize. The messages will only affirm your feelings about my clade. The eighth stanza continues to manage the flow of information in—” She cut herself off and dug her hands into her pockets, an oddly bashful gesture. “I should not be telling you this, understand. I am not even supposed to be in contact with them, Hammered Silver would have my head if she knew, but Need An Answer has been in contact. Please do not share any of this.”

“‘Eighth stanza?’” Hanne asked.

“Yes. One hundred of us, each named after a line in a poem broken into ten stanzas,” she said. “The eighth is—”

“True Name,” Lily said through gritted teeth.

“Sasha,” Dry grass corrected, then shook her head. “Apologies. Yes, that is the stanza focused on...politics and information control.”

Lily pointedly looked away.

“They continue to manage the situation, I mean, and, from the sounds of it, they are describing it as an issue with the Deep Space Network and the Lagrange *station*. There are few mentions of the Lagrange *System* itself. I can read between the lines as well as any of them, though, and I do not think this is true. At least,

not wholly.”

“Wait,” Cress said. “So they’re saying that there’s a problem with the DSN and the station? How do you mean?”

“There are few — surprisingly few — messages from over the last thirteen months, but they are queued up as though they have been held until now. There has been no contact between the LVs or Artemis and Lagrange.” There was a pause as Dry Grass’s gaze drifted, clearly scanning more of those messages. “Most messages have been discarded...only a few from the Guiding Council on Pollux plus a few clades on Castor...have been let through...outgoing messages are ungated...”

“There’s a bit about that in news from phys-side, actually,” Sedge said, looking thoughtful. “Communications failure on the Lagrange station. Something about aging technology. The DSN was also having problems so a few new repeaters were launched. Some from the station, even.”

“But nothing about the System?”

Both Sedge and Dry Grass shook their heads. “There isn’t actually all that much news from phys-side,” Sedge admitted. “Like, less than a week’s worth.”

“What did you mean about reading between the lines, though, love?” Tule asked.

“The messages are very stilted. There is panic beneath the surface. That they mention so little about Lagrange is as telling as if they were to say they did not know. They *do* know, they are just refusing to talk about it over messages.” She paused. “Or the messages that are being let through, at least.”

“Why?” Lily asked. While there was still an edge to her voice, genuine concern covered it well.

“‘Information security and hygiene’. At least, that is what they would say were I to ask. Even if the messages were to fall into the wrong hands, sys- or phys-side, they would not show anything else having happened. I am of them, however. I can read some of the words that were not written.”

“But Sedge said that news from phys-side says the same thing,” Rush said.

She shrugged, another sheepish motion, and looked away. “Do you really expect that we are receiving unfiltered information from phys-side?”

I stole a glance at Lily. She looked to be spending every joule of energy on keeping her mouth shut.

There had been an enormous row within the clade when first Cress, then Tule, had gotten in a relationship with a member of the Ode clade. Most of the Marshans had largely written off the stories of the Ode clade’s political meddling as overly fantastic schlock, yet more myths to keep the functionally immortal entertained. Even if they had their basis in truth, they remained only stories.

Lily, however, had had an immediate and dramatic reaction, cutting contact with the rest of the clade — including Marsh — for more than a year. She had even refused to merge down for years until tempers had settled.

Hanne spoke up. “Listen, can we maybe give this a bit to play out? I need to sleep, and if Reed doesn’t take a break, he’s going to explode.”

The others laughed. I felt a twinge of resentment. Shouldn’t they be dumping all of their energy into this? Shouldn’t they all fork several times over and throw themselves at the problem? Still, it was true enough, and if they stood around the living room spinning their wheels any longer, tempers would continue to flare.

“Yeah,” I said. “Give me at least a few hours. I’ll do a little digging and grab some sleep, then maybe we can meet up somewhere else and talk through what we’ve learned.”

“I’ll keep digging at the feeds,” Sedge said. “Want to help, Rush?”

Ve nodded.

Tule and Cress nodded as well. “We’ll help out Dry Grass,” Cress said.

“Lily?”

“I’m just going to get some sleep,” she said stiffly. “Sorry for yelling.”

Cress shook its head, leans over, and hugged her. “Take the time you need.”

“Right. Let’s meet at a park or something in the morning. Hanne will kill me if you all pile in here again,” I said, at which Hanne nodded eagerly. “And I imagine things are going to be really weird out there, so I don’t want to pile into a bar or whatever.”

“Really, really weird,” Sedge muttered.

As one, the other Marshans stepped away from my and Hanne’s sim, leaving just the two of us, the fire crackling, the weight of the evening hanging over, between us. We stood in silence for a few long moments before I stumbled back over to the couch and fell heavily into the cushions. I buried my face in my hands and only then let the grief take me.

Hanne sat beside me, arm around my back. She rested her head on my shoulder as the wave of emotion overtook me. At first, she asked if I was alright, then she whispered a few “I’m sure it’ll work out”s and “it’s going to be okay”s before eventually just sitting with me in silence.

“This is really fucking weird,” I said once I was able to speak again. The sound of speech echoed strangely in my head, muffled in that post-cry mess. “I don’t even know who I’m crying for. It’s not like they’re a parent, I came from them, but they aren’t me, either.”

“A bit of both, maybe?”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Do you really think they’re gone?”

I shrugged again, stayed silent.

Hanne nudged me gently with her shoulder. “Come on, Reed. Let’s get you to bed.”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep. Not after all that.”

“Still,” she said, leaning over to kiss my cheek. It felt too hot,

too intense a sensation, but calmness radiated from that spot all the same. “If nothing else, you can lay down in the dark and give your poor eyes a break. Plus, *I* need to sleep, at least.”

How could I stand, knowing as I did that the clade had become unmoored? How could I think of sleep when there might be some remnant of Marsh somewhere in the wires? Some ghost of them in the machine that was the System? If this System was a dream, as Dry Grass and the rest of her clade had promised the world, then oughtn’t there be some wisp of them, some memory from deeper archives which could be dredged? Even a Marsh from decades ago would still be a Marsh worth bringing back.

I sighed, nodded dully, and let her pull me to my feet.

I swayed for a moment, feeling reality shift unsteadily beneath me. Once I straightened up, I followed Hanne off to our bedroom. We’d spent the previous night, as we often did, sleeping in two separate beds — I always got too warm sleeping next to someone — but any grounding force feels welcome now, so, with a gesture, the two beds slid together, merging seamlessly into one.

A hollow feeling bubbled up within me. The two beds merging into one was an image of something now well beyond the Marsh clade. I was thankful I’d already cried myself dry.

The lights dimmed to near darkness and the temperature dropped a few degrees as Hanne and I stripped and settled beneath the covers, her arms snug around me.

“I love you, Reed,” she mumbled against the back of my neck. “I’m sorry I got so stressed before, but I love you. You know that, right?”

I leaned back against her. “I know. I love you too.”

As expected, sleep did not come. Exhaustion pulled at me, exerting its own gravity, but too many emotions crowded it out. Too many emotions and too many thoughts. I spent a few minutes chiding myself — shouldn’t I sleep, if only to be more refreshed