

DRAFT

Post-Self

DRAFT

Post·Self

Madison Scott-Clary

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Qoheleth and other stories

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Assignment

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Ioan Bălan — 2303

The sensation of an instance merging state back with em would never *not* make Ioan Bălan#tracker uneasy. It wasn't the differences in experiences, those were to be anticipated, so much as the tiny changes in identity that resulted. Having to internalize a slightly different version of yourself was too close to experiencing a doppelgänger, something so alike and yet with subtle shifts in worldview.

Or perhaps hanging with a sib, fresh home from a semester abroad.

Ioan#tracker had never been abroad, had no siblings. Just new memories.

And yet there was the merge request, waiting. Ey set aside eir work — a simple bit of nothing for a news organization that really didn't matter but nonetheless offered some reputation — and sat back to deal with the squirming, greasy feeling of the merger.

Ioan Bălan#5f39bd7 was forked on suggestion of one of Ioan#tracker's friends as a way to inspect and experience life among a flashcult. Although the lifespan of the group was likely to be measured in months, or even weeks, Ioan figured it was a worthwhile

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project. Ey had an investigative journalism gig that could use a story like this.

The forking was as simple as it always was. Ioan#tracker had no reason to expect otherwise, of course, and when the instance was rendered in front of em, the two shared a perfunctory handshake and went over notes one last time before the instance headed outside to hop to as close to the flashcult as ey could get.

#5f39bd7 took little time to settle into life among the cultists. Ioan was affable, likable. It was part of why ey had found the work of investigative journalism, of being a modern historian, easy. And why ey had quickly gained reputation in the field. Enough for a comfortable existence. It was fun work, too, when it came. The problem ey kept running into was boredom, rather than burning out.

Ioan#tracker was left feeling let down, as ey perused what ey had been left of #5f39bd7's state.

Ey used a fairly standard, off-the-shelf algorithm to cut down on the sheer amount of memory and sensation that ey would have to sift through to gain something from the instance's brief — ey checked the date — three weeks, two days of existence. It was enough to gain most of the knowledge and a good portion of the emotional and intellectual slices from the state, which was all ey needed for eir work. A full merge would've taken too long, and may have even been counterproductive.

Ey needed an experiencer, an amanuensis. Someone to live through the project, let it mix around in their head, and come out the other side changed. Ey emphatically did not need a recording device for eir reporting. That is all the forks were.

The assignment, such as it was, had been straightforward, and Ioan#tracker had expected little of interest from the state dump. The flashcult was strange, but not too out of the ordinary, so ey sped up eir perusal, skimming.

A sharp jolt of fear.

A pain that stretched from physical to existential.

EOF.

Ioan#tracker sat up straighter, brow furrowed. Ey skipped back through a few chunks of state to where ey had started to get bored.

The flashcult was strange, but not too out of the ordinary. Ioan#5f39bd7, with no journalistic duties, found emself getting into the swing of things with ease.

It was a strange sort of vacation, in a way. Performing weird rituals that slowly began to make a weird sort of sense, knowing that at some weird moment, ey would either get too bored and quit or receive a request to do so from #tracker. Until then, rituals it was.

Rituals, yes, but mostly lots of loafing around.

As work, being an amanuensis was, ey decided, inoffensive. Not super interesting, kind of relaxing, and maybe something interesting would happen that eir tracker could turn into a story.

It was during one of the rituals — a call-and-response prayer wherein the members seemed to be working on memorizing progressively longer digits of numbers — when the co-cultist beside em let out a soft sigh that turned into a quiet giggle.

Then she turned to em, smiled beatifically, and winked.

Winked!

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Ioan#5f39bd7 watched her raise her hand and call the ceremony to a halt, speaking almost dreamily. “I found them.”

Faces turned toward em, all smiling that same kind, peaceful smile. Ey sat dumbly, looking from face to face.

“I...yes?” ey managed.

“You’re the one,” a voice chimed in.

Another added, “The reporter. You’re the reporter.”

A thrill of fear ran up #5f39bd7’s spine. It had never been a strictly undercover operation, but neither had ey been forthcoming about why ey was there in the first place.

Ioan#5f39bd7 lifted eir hands from eir lap, palms up in a placating fashion. “Well,” ey began. “I suppose I am a reporter of sorts, no denying, but I’m not here on offic-*urk!*”

There was a sharp blow to the back of eir neck that knocked em flat to the ground, then a weight settled solidly onto eir back. One of the other members had sat on em.

“Congrats, Ana,” said the cultist on eir back.

“Three weeks and a day, getting better,” another grinned, and others soon chimed in, reaching in to shake hands with the young woman who had originally pointed em out.

Ioan#5f39bd7 picked out the face of the lector in the crowd, an older person of indeterminate sex who had struck em as being rather vacuous. It was a difficult task, from eir viewpoint on the ground, and since all the adherents wore identical clothing, there were few clues.

“This is the tenth iteration. As we discussed before you arrived, we’ll tell you, now.”

The fear continued to well within #5f39bd7, growing in intensity.

Ioan#tracker set eir usual algorithm aside for the merger, requesting that the entirety of the instance's state, from that last ritual on, be merged with em. Merged blithely. Ey wanted the whole thing.

While it wasn't the first time ey had done such a thing, it was still rare enough for em to do so that ey had to look up how. Despite a career depending on it, ey had never been all that good at the whole dissolution thing. Ey never bothered to figure out how to name eir instances, relying instead on the random string of digits that the system generated for em. Mere signifiers

Once that had been organized, ey moved out onto the deck and settled into one of the Adirondack chairs out there. Such things, ey suspected, were built primarily for thinking.

Ey closed eir eyes, and let memories wash over em.

The fear continued to well within #5f39bd7, growing in intensity.

"We're practicing, you see." The lector paced a slow circle around Ioan#5f39bd7 as they went on. Any sign of vacuousness was gone. "We start something interesting, wait for a reporter, and find them out. That's what we're practicing. Finding out who's watching, who's the reporter."

Ana giggled once more. "It's a class, get it? An experiment, a dissection. You're the subject."

The lector nodded and, having completed their circuit, leaned down to meet #5f39bd7's wide-eyed gaze. "And now we've got it re-

liably under a month. Time to make it known. What's your signifier?"

"Ioan Bălan," ey stammered. "Bu-but why are you...what are...why are you doing this?"

"We're looking for reliable ways to find out the reporters, the ones that don't belong, because—" They paused, withdrawing a syringe from the billowy sleeve of their tunic. "Because some day we may not want to be seen."

That wellspring of fear turned to a geyser.

In-system, there was no real need for an actual syringe, so they had taken on a new, codified meaning. A symbol of something that would modify an instance in some core fashion. Intent was thick in the air, so Ioan had no doubt that this was some sort of symbol of destruction. A virus, perhaps.

"Wait," ey gasped, finding eir breath coming in ragged, erratic bursts.

There was no time to continue in any coherent fashion. No words, only a hoarse shout. Eir fear spiked beyond what it felt ey was capable of containing as ey watched the hand bearing the syringe slide calmly toward them to efficiently slip the needle behind eir ear.

Ey came apart. Seams ey did not know ey had began to tear. The fabric of eir being ripped, shredded.

Eir final thought before eir instance crashed was surprise at just how much it hurt to die. It was a pain that spread from eir head through eir body, from the physical reality of the sim to some existential plane.

Ioan#tracker found emself clutching at the arms of the deck chair, eir own breathing shallow and fast. Ey felt the same fear that eir fork had felt.

What should ey do?

A quick search showed there was no way to turn over the instance to what little the system had in the way of authorities. What data was actually 'recorded' was not done so in a useful fashion. The instances were eirs and eirs alone.

Ey certainly didn't want to confront the cultists, either as emself or through a fork. Ey didn't know how to change eir forks like some others did, so ey would just look like Ioan#5f39bd7 back from the dead.

Ey realized that all ey could really do was what ey knew how to do best.

Be a reporter.

It was what the cult wanted, but ey felt the words and experiences stirring within em already.

Hell, it's what ey wanted, too. Finally, an interesting assignment.

Après un rêve

DRAFT

Sylvie Esi — 2178

*Dans un sommeil que charmaient ton image
Je rêvais le bonheur, ardent mirage,
Tes yeux étaient plus doux, ta voix pure et sonore,
Tu rayonnais comme un ciel éclairé par l'aurore;*

Echoes of Grace singing, memories and emotions, clashed with the doctor's words. "I know you've signed the waivers, but I need a verbal confirmation. Do you understand the procedure?"

Sylvie nodded. It was strange not to feel her hair, always so frizzy and buoyant, not following the motion a scant second too late.

"The uploading process will be fatal and irreversible. There is some risk, about one and a half percent, that it won't work." The doctor paused and picked up a pen. She added, "Won't work after the point where your body will have died, that is. Do you understand?"

A swallow, dry, and another nod. "What will happen in that case?"

"Your family will receive a payout of ten million francs CFA. Your body will not be available for a burial, unfortunately." The doctor looked strangely abashed. "The results of the process are...ah, not pretty."

“I understand.”

“One last thing, then. After the uploading process, successful or not, your blood, organs and tissue will be donated — or, well, sold — to a tissue bank in central Africa. Your family will receive ten percent of this, and the Centre the other ninety. This is to help defray the cost of the process.”

Sylvie thought for a moment, rubbed her hand over her smooth-shaven head. “About how much will that be?”

“The cut to your family?” The doctor fiddled with her pen, twirling it across delicate dark fingers. “Lately, we’ve been getting about a hundred million francs, so again, about ten million. Not a bad payout, hmm?”

Not bad indeed. Sylvie had little love for her family, minus her brother, so the payout wasn’t a huge incentive, as it was for others. She just hoped Moussa wound up with a chunk of it.

Unlikely, given her mother.

She nodded her assent.

“So then. Your surgery is scheduled in one hour. You have fifteen minutes before prep, which means fifteen more minutes to back out if you should choose. I’m going to head back to the team and leave you be to think this over.” The doctor gestured to her right, “Dial zero on the phone on the desk if you wish to cancel. There will be no repercussions if you do.”

The doctor stood and leaned forward, offering her hand. Sylvie lifted herself out of her chair and accepted the handshake, feeling as though she needed to be careful of those delicate fingers. The grip was firm, though.

As the doctor stepped out of the room, Sylvie settled back into the chair. She closed her eyes against the sight of all the posters

advertising the procedure.

“Upload today!” they said.

“Experience a life beyond need!” they promised.

“Work without pressure!” they hollered.

Everything was so loud, so loud.

She had them all memorized, anyway. Right now, she just wanted quiet. She just wanted to think of Grace.

Grace with her silvering hair.

Grace with her fair and smooth skin.

Grace with her liquid laughter and lovely voice.

They’d fallen in love within months, shared only a scant few years together, before being separated again. An impenetrable boundary of distance, of emulated sensorium and embodied flesh.

Grace’s decision hadn’t been Sylvie’s. Uploading, the thought of uploading, made her skin itch and eyes ache. To be removed from this world and sent to another, to the system, didn’t appeal to her.

It did appeal to Grace.

Grace with her failing voice.

Grace with her deteriorating coordination.

Grace with her pain, her depression.

For Grace, it was a way to escape her body. That body that Sylvie loved so much, and was such a prison to Grace. A voluntary procedure — “Help combat overpopulation!” the posters howled — but also a way to neatly sidestep the MS slowly claiming her body and mind.

After the upload, Grace had communicated with Sylvie through text, through mails sent to her terminal which she’d pore over at work. She begged Sylvie. *Come join me, come upload*, she said. *The posters, they’re all true, they’re all right.*

The thought *still* made her skin itch and her eyes ache, but all the same, she kept dreaming of Grace. Dreaming of softer eyes, of a voice more sonorous. Her Grace shining like the dawn.

So she'd relented.

*Tu m'appelais et je quittais la terre
Pour m'enfuir avec toi vers la lumière,
Les cieux pour nous entr'ouvraient leurs nues,
Splendeurs inconnues, lueurs divines entrevues,*

Sylvie's mind was filled with Fauré, with that rolling, lilting theme. With Grace's voice at the piano.

"We're going to keep you awake, okay? We need to, in order to tell when the upload is complete, but you'll be under local anesthesia. It'll make you feel a little dreamy, may have visual disturbances." The doctor's smile was kind. "Some report it to be enjoyable."

"Okay. How long will the upload take?"

"The procedure will be about forty five minutes to prep you for upload, and then the upload will happen in two stages," the doctor said. "You'll be uploaded to a local node at our center, which will give you access to a waiting room of sorts for the system proper. The upload to the system will take several hours via Ansible — it's a lot of data going a long way, you understand — so the waiting room will usually have you fork and the copy will be uploaded."

"Create a copy of myself and let that be uploaded while I watch," she murmured. Sylvie thought for a moment, "What about the copy that remains?"

"It's free to quit, like a program on your terminal quitting. But they — the...ah, sysadmins — usually request that it stay around in

case the upload to the system gets interrupted for some reason. Cosmic rays or whatever technobabble fits that day.”

“And what will I feel if things go wrong?”

The doctor hesitated, looked to her team. It was another team member, a man with a thick French accent, who responded. “We don’t really know. The local node will pick up on it and alert us. Death just looks like death to us.”

Sylvie nodded. Tried to nod, at least. She was firmly strapped down. “Alright.”

There was a pinprick at the crook of her elbow. A feeling of coolness spread up her arm, into her chest. A tightness, there, and then a tightness along her neck. A brief moment of panic as she tried to flex her fingers.

“We are starting the neuromuscular blocker. This will paralyze your voluntary muscles, so don’t panic about the feeling,” the anesthesiologist mumbled, distracted. He tapped her forearm, sending a pins-and-needles flash through the right half of her body. “But it doesn’t numb you. That will be the next one, the anesthetic.”

Sylvie attempted to speak, but only managed a grunt of assent.

The anesthesiologist nodded, “Good. Here it comes, then.”

The chill ache was replaced with a comfortable warmth.

Not warmth, she realized. Nothingness. Floatingness. Leaving-the-earth-ness. Gone-ness.

“Sylvie, can you hear me? You won’t be able to speak or blink or nod, but can you try and take two quick breaths? It may be difficult. We’ll intubate if necessary.”

Sylvie obeyed. Or thought she did, at least. She couldn’t tell if the breaths were actually happening. It seemed to be enough for the anesthesiologist, whose shadow across her vision bowed and

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stepped out of sight.

Time wandered.

Voices rang with the timbre of bells, though she could still understand them. Surgeons talking to technicians.

A dull, basso organ note of something grinding, her vision vibrating, blurring the sight of the light above the bed.

The light took the form of Grace, and Sylvie more readily gave in to the effects of the drug.

Grace with her angelic smile. Grace lifting her up, away from the earth. Grace running, running into the ring of that surgeon's lamp. Clouds, clouds parting.

The organ note screamed up through several octaves.

Calm, ringing voices.

That yearning song tinkling through her mind. She was unable to tell whether it came from herself or from one of the techs. Or maybe from Grace. *Dans un sommeil que charmait ton image...* Tinkling and flowing. Rocking. Drunken. Drunken on dreams.

Minutes fled by. Hours. Days, perhaps. Always, in front of her, her angel. Pure white skin that contrasted beautifully against her own, cream spilled in coffee. Always lifting her up. How far did they have to go?

Grace was drifting away from her, receding.

The light flared in intensity. Somehow became black. A shining, blinding blackness amid a field of more blackness.

Tugging, pulling.

Prying.

A snap.

A sense of wrongness, of gravity.

Falling away. Layers of self peeling back, each successive shed-

ding revealing something more raw, more primal. Molting. The boundary between her Self and the blackness complicating, fraying, fading.

Grace was gone, too, faded to nothing.

Come back! Sylvie shouted into the nothingness. Her fists, raw and exposed to their very core, to the concept of Fist sans physical representation, pounded at the blackness. Pounded at herself.

Come back! Come back! Grace! She wailed. Screamed. Sobbed.

Grace...

A whisper against building chords, Grace's sweet voice.

And then the wave receded.

*Hélas! Hélas! triste réveil des songes
Je t'appelle, ô nuit, rends moi tes mensonges,
Reviens, reviens radieuse,
Reviens ô nuit mystérieuse!*

The team stood still. There was no written protocol as to what one should do while the local node processed the upload, but they always remained silent. The doctor held her breath every time.

A small pinging noise. The local readout flashed red.

Shoulders sagged around the room.

“Error in processing upload.” The tinny speaker sounded impersonal. Perhaps it was designed that way to play down the loss. “Irrecoverable data corruption. Please check all contacts before continuing or contact a system support technician for a full rig inspection.”

“Well.” The anesthesiologist's voice, so human, contrasted with the words from the speaker. “That's that, then.”

“That’s that,” the doctor echoed. She sighed and backed away from Sylvie’s body. It was empty, now. A husk. “I’ll start the paperwork and call her family and the insurance company. Get the payout processed as soon as possible.”

The other team members nodded. None of them looked happy.

“Go on, get her cleaned up and sent to the handlers.” She trudged out of the room slowly, her feet dragging. Pulling off her gloves, one by one, she added, “At least someone will get something out of this. Alas.”

Prayers began around the corpse.

DRAFT

Gallery Exhibition

DRAFT

You — 2302

A night on the town. A bar for an aperitif. A light dinner at a modern restaurant, one of those places with default sensoria settings that turn up the taste inputs and turn down the visual inputs, so that you eat intensely delicious food amidst a thick, purple fog. Another bar, livelier and less painfully modern, for a digestif.

And...

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Crowds. Crowds upon crowds. Your own crowd a cell within a super-crowd. Instances drifting, or perhaps forced by momentum — theirs or others' — along the thoroughfares of a nexus.

And...

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A low slung building, a crowded foyer, fumbling for tickets.

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And...

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Waiting.

DRAFT

And...

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Programs.

Explanations. Elucidations. Errata.

Words to chuckle over with your group of friends.

Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled, of the Ode clade is pleased to welcome you to its gallery opening. Tonight, it has prepared for you a modest exhibition of its works within the realm of instance artistry. This is presented at the culmination of its tenure as Fellow, though the name rankles, of Instance Art in the Simien Fang School of Art and Design.

And the sound of a door opening.

A short, slight...thing, steps from the next room through one of the two doors on the far wall and calls for attention. To call it a person seems almost misleading. It's a dog. A well-dressed dog? A glance further on in the program offers a glib explanation:

The artist

This gallery exhibition serves as the capstone for Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled, of the Ode clade in its role as fellow. The fellowship in instance art was created specifically for Dear in recognition of the excellence it brings to the field.

Dear's instance is modeled after that of a now-extinct animal known as a fennec fox, a member of the vulpine family adapted to desert living. Dear has modified the original form to be more akin to that of humans. The iridescent white fur appears to have been a happy mistake.

Well.

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That's a thing.

DRAFT

Anyway.

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Gallery Exhibition

“If I may have your attention, folks.” You’re not sure how or why, but it speaks in italics. It’s...but that...nevermind. “My signifier, or...ah, name is Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled, or just Dear. I come from the Ode clade of Dispersionistas, and am a Fellow of Instance Art at the Simien Fang School of Art and Design.

“An artist is, one might say, one who works with structured experience. A play is art, as is music, as both are means of structuring experience in a certain way.

“So, also, is instance art. It is a way of using dissolution and merging in such a fashion that the experience of forking — or of witnessing forking,” it gives a polite nod to the room. “Becomes structured, becomes art.”

“Before we begin, I would like to take a small census of those present. This is for your own sakes as well as for that of the artworks, such as they are. We will let them know. Could you please raise your hand if you consider yourself a Tasker?”

A scant few hands go up in the air, all huddled in one corner of the room. Perhaps a group? A group of their own?

Uncomfortable titters waft through the...the audience? The ticket holders, at least. Talking about dispersion strategies is not something one usually does.

Dear holds its face composed in a calm, polite expression.

“Trackers? Raise your hands, please.”

Of those who remained minus the Taskers, perhaps a third raise their hands. Several individuals, a few distinct groups including your own. That leaves well more than half belonging to —

“And Dispersionistas?”

Sure enough, large numbers of hands lift into the air. The Dispersionistas are a vast majority, and surround most everyone else in the room, minus the Taskers, who remain off to their own side.

The audience seems to be mostly fans of the work.”

Dear gives a brief blink, likely saving a tally of represented dissolution strategies to some exocortex for other instances to access. It smiles kindly at the audience, *“Thank you. Now, if you would be so kind as to follow me, I will be happy to walk through the gallery with you.”*

Dear turns adroitly on its heel and without a moment’s hesitation, forks. A second, identical instance appears to its left and finishes that turn in perfect synchrony.

A small wave of applause begins. To fork so casually and continue to move in lockstep bespeaks no small amount of practice with the procedure.

It doesn’t last.

One instance of Dear (the original? maybe?) heads through the left-hand door and the other (the fork? it’s so hard to keep track with all these people) steps through the right door.

And here perhaps we must take a step back and acknowledge the fact that this is all very strange, because it certainly is. Because it's confusing. Because it's opaque. Because perhaps you aren't even sure what these terms mean, even now. Because, like all love stories, it's so very easy to get lost. Like all love stories it's told from multiple angles. Like all love stories, despite time's true arrow, it nevertheless is at its very core, nonlinear.

How do you remember it, these many years later? How do you take the fact that so much happened simultaneously that night and you merged so incautiously after that even your very own memories argue with you? How do you square "love story" with "corrupted memories" and still love the one you do?

You take a step back and acknowledge it.

You acknowledge it because you forked. You followed both Dears, damn the consequences.

The room you wind up in is smaller even than the foyer, and the ticket-holders have to press even closer together. The audience that winds up here is the least diverse, containing none of the Taskers and very few of the Trackers who wound up at this (apparently primarily Dispersionista) event. As such, the press is met with uncomfortable silence: one doesn't normally talk about dissolution strategies with strangers, but Dear has deftly forced it to be an issue.

There's no sign on the fox's face that it knows what it has done. Just that calm, polite smile. Curious. How can one know that a fox is smiling rather than snarling or something, much less that the smile is polite. Perhaps styled after those old cartoons of anthropomorphic animals, or simply just an impression.

"Thank you. Much cozier in here."

Many of the proclaimed Dispersionistas are grinning at the trick, and even several of the Trackers are smiling.

"My only request is to not fork during the duration of the exhibition," Dear continues, giving a knowing glance to some of the Dispersionistas. *"Exigencies aside, of course."*

A thought crosses your mind. Perhaps it's the drinks, those hip and strong aperitifs and too-sweet digestifs.

Well, hell. It's hard to take a fox standing on two legs seriously when it gives you instructions

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This all seems rather ridiculous, when you take a look at it. Instances as art?

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You're not as smooth as Dear, but you manage to step a little further away from one of your friends, leaving enough room for you to bring into existence your own second instance.

For a moment, you aren't sure quite what happens. After a second, things start to click into place, though.

A mere fraction of a second after you forked, Dear also forked, instructing its instance to come into existence in a space overlapping the space that your instance already occupied. This sort of thing is very much frowned upon and, in most public areas, impossible to even pull off.

As it is, collision detection algorithms whine in protest and force the two instances apart with some force, causing a cascading ripple of collisions, spreading complaints of personal space. The room has safe settings, at least, and the collision detection algos register a bump at least a centimeter before one body touches another.

The Dear at the front of the room is smiling beatifically, but the one confronting your instance has undergone strange transformations. Its eyes are bloodshot, almost to the point of glowing red. Its mouth is gaping, lips pulled back in a snarl, muzzle flecked with froth. *Rabid*, you think. It has lost most of its humanity, though it remains on two legs.

You let out a shout, but it's drowned amid a chorus of other yells and screams.

Post-humanity, confronted with humanity regressed feels a special kind of fear, and as the feral Dear herds your instance toward the back of the room, back toward the foyer, the other ticket-holders (*though perhaps 'audience members' is the correct term once more*, you think, as you struggle to send a SIGTERM to your instance amid the distraction, fail) surge forward toward the original instance of Dear.

It's still smiling.

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It opens the next door.

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Gallery Exhibition

The crush is far more intense than expected, as you find both halves of the audience rejoined and dumped back into a dark and already crowded room.

Already crowded with several instances.

Dear has forked itself several times and each of those instances are forking again, until there's easily twice as many instances of Dear as there are audience members.

The noise doubles and then doubles again as the instances start charging at and pinning audience members against each other and the walls, herding and shouting, all with bloodshot eyes, bared fangs, inhuman snarls.

It's loud and dark and panicky.

Some try forking. And the new instances are ganged up upon, charged at, with twice the intensity as the parent instances. Most quit.

You realize that these instances of Dear are not actually attacking to harm the audience. There are no syringes, no coercion to quit. Just exercising, violently, the collision detection algorithms in the room, which are still set safe.

This makes you *furious*.

Without even thinking, you reach out a hand and grab one of the instances of Dear by the scruff of the neck and drag it to you, giving it a good shake as you do so.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?!" you shout into its face?

The fennec snarls at you and, with surprising force, grabs your forearm and, using itself as a pivot, swings you around through about a quarter-circle's arc. It keeps its paws on your arm, one on your elbow to keep it straight and one on your wrist, and shoves you

back by lunging forward.

It lets you go and, in one complex motion, aims a swipe at your face with one paw while the other slams, palm flat, against its jacket pocket.

Something happens to the floor beneath your feet.

You fall.

The room into which you and this feral Dear fall is cylindrical. Walls of concrete, floor of packed dirt. the part of your mind still working on an intellectual level finds this funny, cliché.

That's also the part of your mind that notices the default settings for sensoria and collision in this room are much, much different than the previous room. Full sensation, with collision detection algorithms turned way down.

A room set for battle.

You grin wildly.

Good, you think. Let it hurt. This 'exhibition' goes way beyond what it should.

Dear only growls.

There's no circling, not yet. You two simply collide and have at each other. You with punching fists and knees attempting to find a groin (the fox is genderless, you guess, but perhaps that still hurts). Dear with blunt, scratching claws and not-so-blunt teeth.

You have the advantage of size, and Dear has the advantage of speed. And teeth and claws worth wielding.

It leads to an even draw in the first match, until you fall back from each other and do the circling. Dear has lost all sense of humanity, to your eyes: hunched over like some werewolf out of a movie, fancy shirt torn, tail frizzed and lashing about, claws and teeth bared, slavering.

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For your part, you fall back on what little you know of martial arts (mostly knowledge gleaned from fiction media, if you're honest). You keep your back away from the fox, keep your fists up to guard your face, keep slightly turned to minimize your profile.

You lunge.

Dear lunges a heartbeat later, and you press your advantage with a kick. Your foot impacts the fox in the side, just above the pelvis.

Dear lets out a satisfying – and satisfyingly inhuman – yelp of pain, collapsing on the dirt of the floor and whining for a moment.

You move to kick it again, but it rolls to the side and staggers back to its feet, landing a good swipe of its claws along your cheek and up over your ear, tearing flesh.

Shaking your head to try and dislodge the spinning sensation of jarred senses, you stumble back to press your back against the wall and gain yourself a moment.

Dear does not permit this. The fox scrambles after you, deceptively quick, and leaps toward you, aiming to land with both its feet (or footpaws?) and paws against you, mouth open wide to bite.

You try to roll to the left but don't quite make it all the way away. Dear's right paw catches on your shoulder while it's left softens its landing against the concrete of the wall before latching up around your neck.

It's an inopportune angle, but you feel it bite at you anyway, getting most of your shoulder at the base of your neck.

The pain of it's teeth lodging in your skin is enough to make you cry out. Its got enough of your soft tissue in its muzzle that the contact is solid and, despite your attempts, you can't swing it free.

You feel its right arm slip away and are too busy trying to gain the advantage to realize why until the paw swings back in front of you.

DRAFT

When you see the syringe, you panic and fork.

DRAFT

As does Dear, and now there are two of you, two fights, two dances.

DRAFT

You scramble frantically to get away from the fennec, but its grip around your neck with its arm and its teeth is too strong.

You raise both hands to block the syringe as it darts inward, hoping to either knock it out of Dear's paws or at least buy yourself some room to squirm away from the fox.

You're too sluggish, too clumsy. After all, it doesn't matter where the syringe lands. It's only a sigil, an item holding a bunch of code.

A bunch of code that will attempt to crash your instance.

The syringe strikes you square in the sternum just as you force Dear's arms away.

The fox immediately quits.

Fading, leaving you to crumple.

The world around you dissolves into voxels, each of which steadily gets larger and larger

The voxels step down in intensity until they fade to a dull grey.

Dying is no quiet affair. It's loud, painful. Surprisingly so.

Your instance, this body, is crashing in spectacular fashion. Every last bit of your sensorium is lit up like a Christmas tree, but the pain goes beyond that. It's a pain of existence, of the need to continue existing.

Those expanding rings of colored black speed up. The black somehow increases in brightness. You cry out into it.

Perhaps this is why you were instructed to send a forked instance.

Fin.

DRAFT

Fin for now.

DRAFT

Fin for this you.

DRAFT

But, but, always another but.

But there is more than that you. You forked, after all, yes?

Yes.

Yes, and your heart falls as you see that you crumple.

There is more than that one Dear, too. You see, this is the danger of love stories. This is the danger these days. Time is funny. Space is funny. Nonlinearity was always the warp and woof of the world, but now your face is rubbed in it, the multitudinous aspects of post-humanity ground up against your nose in some strange punishment.

To your relief, that second Dear also quits.

Moving faster than you thought you could, as though some latent instinct had kicked in, you swing your arm up across your front and strike Dear's forearm square on with the bony ridge of your own.

The syringe goes clattering. You tear away from Dear and leap after it.

Scrabbling on the ground, you catch sight of the syringe as it dematerializes.

Objects only do that when their owners quit.

You whirl around just in time to see the hazy, ephemeral shadow of Dear fading away.

The fox quit.

DRAFT

You let out a yell of triumph.

DRAFT

And now you're alone.

DRAFT

You stumble back to the wall and sag against it, breathing heavily and assessing the damage. A few minor scratches here and there, and then the two major wounds: the scratch up along your cheek and across your ear and the bite on your neck with its several small puncture wounds.

You set to work patching yourself. You fork from a point just before the fight, explain to the instance that you need to fix, that you'd like it to merge and retain all of your memories and experiences.

This takes only a few seconds.

Once you're finished, another instance of Dear appears. On closer inspection, it appears to be the original version of Dear. A less ferocious instance. Dear-prime, or something.

You've calmed down enough that you don't immediately leap at it, though you do drop into a defensive stance.

It smiles kindly, saying, "*You may calm down, now.*"

"Like hell," you growl.

"No, seriously. Remember where you are. This is an exhibition. This is an exhibit." It gestures to the room. "You are an audience member, yes? Even audience members have roles to play."

You furrow your brow. So wrong-footed are you, the rolling boil of your anger drops almost immediately to a simmer. "Like a play..."

"Like a play."

"So you knew we'd fight?"

"I knew a fight **might** happen. I encouraged a fight to **actually** happen."

You raise your fists again, but you feel the changes in the room. Collision algorithms back on conservative, sensoria turned down.

"You encouraged a fight?"

"Yes." Dear — perhaps even Dear-prime — nods and strolls casu-

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ally about the room. *“You did not make it to the unwinding room, so I will explain here. Stress is the easiest way to force decisions to be made. I forced you to decide, did I not? I forced you to interact with an instance, and I am forcing you to interact with me, now. Two instances, two interactions.”*

It walks over to a wall and gives it a push. A panel of concrete swings aside to reveal a set of stairs. It gestures. *“There is more to it, but a good artist never explains. Artistry lies in the perception, and someone’s watching.”*

At that, it quits.

You drop your arms and sigh, thinking for a moment before heading for the stairs.

DRAFT

DRAFT

DRAFT

But now, we're back at the beginning, aren't we? We're back to that first fork, when it all seemed so simple. We're back to the choice of the two doors, and the other instance of yours, that one follows the other Dear through the door to the left.

You, smirking, take the right.

The room you wind up in is smaller even than the foyer, and the ticket-holders have to press even closer together. The audience that winds up here is the most diverse, containing the entire group of Taskers who wound up at this (apparently primarily Dispersion-ista) event. As such, the press is met with uncomfortable silence: one doesn't normally talk about dissolution strategies with strangers, but Dear has deftly forced it to be an issue.

There's no sign on the fox's face that it knows what it has done. Just that calm, polite smile. Curious. How can one know that a fox is smiling rather than snarling or something, much less that the smile is polite. Perhaps styled after those old cartoons of anthropomorphic animals, or simply just an impression.

"Thank you. Much cozier in here."

Right.

DRAFT

The Taskers do not look cozy.

You suppose it makes sense. There are bits of this that appeal to all: forking for a specific purpose, instances accomplishing goals. This was flagrant abuse of that in their eyes, however, given that these instances will likely move on and live their own lives. Independent, individual instances.

“I would like to elaborate on my previous point,” Dear says. “This exhibition is about the idea of instance creation as art, and in that sense, it is the easiest job I have ever had. Instance creation is art.”

It holds up one paw as though to forestall further conversation. *“All instance creation. This show is about utilizing that consciously, but all instance creation is art. It is structured experience. The Taskers, and I believe you are all here?”* Dear smiles indulgently. *“The Taskers are the tightest adherents to structure. The most baroque.”*

Still holding its paw up, Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled forks once more, an identical copy of itself appearing standing just next to the original. The instance quickly quits and dissipates. An example, perhaps.

“The goal of this exhibition is not to just talk about that, though, it is to explore the creative limits of forking as art.”

Dear forks once more, but this time into two additional instances. One short, lithe human, holding up her hand just as the original instance still holds up its paw. And on the other side of Dear, a small animal — smaller than you expected, the size of a small cat — that you suppose is the fennec mentioned in the program, colored in creamy tan fur. It becomes clear that the primary Dear is a synthesis between the two.

The human Dear reaches out to shake one of the audience members hands while the fox dashes toward the crowd, weaving its way

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between legs in a good simulacrum of an animal attempting to escape.

Something about the fennec catches your eye as it zips through the crowd. It doesn't seem to be following any pattern, but its motions remain purposeful. It seems to be...perhaps, making eye contact with each person in the room?

DRAFT

And then it comes to you.

DRAFT

And it looks up to you.

DRAFT

And winks.

DRAFT

DRAFT

(Can fennecs do that?)

The strange critter holds your gaze for longer than some wild animal should, or so it feels, but the moment is broken by the soft sound of Dear clearing its throat at the front of the room.

“The next room is just through here. If you will follow me, please.”

It’s difficult to deny the tiny critter before you, to tear your eyes away from it. Easy enough to forget that its an instance of Dear as it leads the tour onwards. Perhaps if you could just dally a little and get a closer look before moving on.

And then the explosion happens.

A shuddering bang and sudden flood of smoke behind and to your right makes up your mind for you.

Turning, you find that the fennec has skittered away to the left. As the shouts of those nearest the banging noise and cloud of smoke rise up, you find yourself doing the same, following out of a sense of instinct rather than anything resembling logic.

Cliché as it is, the lights go out. Perfect.

DRAFT

You, daring, intrigued, perhaps a bit upset, fork. You follow. You keep heading left, where the fennec was going, pushing past scrambling attendees to get to the wall. The left wall, you reason, is a shared wall with the other room, the one which the other Dear had led the other half of the group through. There's probably a door between the two, though you hadn't had the chance to get a look, or perhaps you could break through.

The smoke thickens. It has a lemony, sulfurous smell that, although it's never something you've smelled before, makes you think of bullets, grenades, gunpowder.

In the dim light and confusion, you find the wall by abruptly slamming into it. Indeed, there's a door a few hand-spans away, and a tiny critter with big ears scratching frantically at it.

You shuffle quickly over to the door, barely able to see for the smoke and dimness, and grab at the handle, praying that it's unlocked.

The handle turns.

DRAFT

You fall through.

DRAFT

It's a strange sensation to step from a cramped, crowded, loud, dark, and smoky room into such a space as this.

The fall you took couldn't have been more than a few feet, but even now, your senses still feel knocked slightly out of place. To have a space like this, one that's bigger on the inside than on the outside, or outside when it should be indoors, underground, is certainly possible. It's easy. It's just also incredibly rude. In most sims, it's even illegal. In this one, you vaguely remember hearing that it requires a permit.

But here you are.

You and a tiny fennec.
and a lapis sky.
endless green fields.

DRAFT

You and a sunny day.

Outside *and* a sunny day.

The fennec, which had been grooming itself after the flight from the explosion, gives you what can only be a smirk and another wink, and starts heading off away from where the door ought to have been but is no longer.

Nothing for it.

You follow along after the tan beast, the fox looking minuscule amid the endless grass, nothing but its ears sticking up above the stalks. It looks out of place amid the green of the grass.

The ground had looked flat at first, but that seems to have just been the grass all growing to about the same height. Beneath the grass, you keep rolling your ankle over tussocks and failures in the earth, stumbling over the fact that the ground the grass is growing on is annoyingly uneven.

The fennec winds its way amid these tufts, having an easier time of things with dainty paws.

Your mind fills with stories, of magical animals, of sleeping for years and waking up to see the world vastly change. You start to think of the fennec as its own entity, something completely separate from Dear, from the exhibition you just left.

“You’re one tenacious fuck, you know that?”

You look around, some part of you unwilling to believe that the voice came from the fennec. You had forgotten, lost in your fantasies, that the fennec was still Dear.

“Yeah, me.” The fennec continued its dainty walk. *“I say ‘tenacious fuck’ lovingly, of course. I like you. You have pluck. Gumption. Another you forked in another place, another time. We fought. We kind of fell for each other. It was fun.”*

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“Another...?”

“Not much in the way of brains, though.”

You roll your eyes. The fennec grins.

“You know you were told to send an instance to the exhibition, right?”

the fennec asks, casually.

“Yeah,” you respond, wary of traps.

“So why not quit?”

“Hmm?”

“Why not quit? Why not merge back with your...” The fennec pauses and gives you an appraising glance, *“With your #tracker instance?”*

You shrug helplessly, realizing the two of you have come to a halt at the base of a hillock, a rough cave dug into its side. The fennec sits primly. “This is...this is an exhibition about instances as art, isn’t it?”

The fennec gives a short bark of laughter, looking perhaps most feral at that moment. *“It is, is it not? Just thought you would see it through, hmm? This exhibit?”*

You nod. You feel ill-prepared for this.

“I will not lie to you, then. This exhibit,” and the fennec nods toward the horizon, toward the cave, toward you. *“This exhibit is just a frame. It is just a canvas. You are the exhibit. You are the art.”*

You catch yourself nodding once again and attempt a more graceful response. “There’s a lot of shows where the audience becomes the cast.”

“I suppose.” The fennec settles down onto its belly, stretching out. *“That is one way to think of it, yes. I am not fond of the play metaphor. Exhibit works better for me and the way I think, since I know who is watching.”*

Just as you begin to respond, begin to ask the obvious *who?*, the

fennec quits. This sim, as a whole, provides a courtesy feature of a faint outline existing and then fading after a quit, crash, or failure. That just means you get to fume in the direction of a slowly fading outline of a fennec, standing at the mouth of the cave.

The fennec's right, though, you could just quit.

But you're right, too, you think. You want to see how instances become art.

"Cave it is, then," you say, as though this is some sort of choose-your-own-adventure book or roleplaying game and you have to follow the available exits.

Ah well.

DRAFT

As far as caves go, this one is rather unremarkable.

You laugh at yourself for having such a thought. The life you've chosen for yourself does not include many caves.

You drop to your knees, brushing a hand through the last vestiges of the faint outline of that shitty fox, and crawl past the entrance of the cave.

It is unremarkable in that it is almost cartoonish in construction. A low hillock with a rough hole bored in the side, rocks protruding here and there, worms and roots dangling from the ceiling. Always large enough to crawl through on all fours, but never enough to stand up in.

The construction is actually quite well thought out, you muse. At least, as far as cramped spaces go.

As soon as the cave turns a corner and the light of day behind you is lost to view, it all seems rather less inviting than it did before. The air was still before, but now it's stale; cool and moist has become humid and sticky.

It's difficult to say whether the walls are closing in or whether that's just claustrophobia setting an assertive hand on your shoulder.

You crawl on.

The ground starts to rise, and at last you think you may be nearing the other side of the hillock. Perhaps, given the non-Euclidean layout of the exhibit, an entry back in, or at least back out.

DRAFT

The tunnel keeps rising.

DRAFT

The tunnel keeps going.

Rocks dig into knees and palms.

And you keep climbing.

DRAFT

Up and through

DRAFT

You climb.

DRAFT

Nearly vertical.

DRAFT

And, to your relief, it grows lighter.

DRAFT

You hasten.

DRAFT

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Up and out.

DRAFT

DRAFT

And fall.

Gallery Exhibition

And fall onto the street.

Looking around, you see the building housing the exhibition just behind you. you hunt for the front door. An instance of Dear putters around just past the glass doors, picking up programs and generally tidying up the place.

You go to give the doors a try, but they're locked.

That's why you looped back around, isn't it? To confront that shitty fox once more and ask it what it meant by "*who is watching*".

You just want to shake that—

You're fuming, you realize.

You sit down on the curb, indulging in a moment to relish the anger, the self-righteous feeling of bolstered confidence. Then you work on calming down.

There won't be a fox to confront, and it's as Dear had said: this space wasn't the exhibit, but the frame. That means you were the exhibit.

Dear ignores you. Your evaluation of 'shitty fox' is reinforced.

You wait.

You sit after the wait grows long.

You ponder visiting another bar.

You lose track of time.

Eventually, you hear voices from the side of the building. Familiar voices. Your friends. Yourself. Still dirty from the cave, you despair.

You quit.

DRAFT

DRAFT

But, ah, there was more than one choice made that night, wasn't there? You forked again, didn't you? You, rascal that you are, followed that fennec, but you also did not.

The fennec skitters off toward the explosion, toward the shared wall between the split rooms, and you have already sent a version of you after it. You want to follow, but you also don't want to deal with explosions.

Neither does anyone else, apparently, as the tight quarters in the room quickly leads to a crush and stampede toward the door that Dear has opened.

Into which you are forced.

The crush is far more intense than expected, as you find both halves of the audience rejoined and dumped back into a dark and already crowded room.

Already crowded with several instances.

Dear has forked itself several times and each of those instances are forking again, until there's easily twice as many Dears as there are audience members.

The noise doubles and then doubles again as the instances start charging at and pinning audience members against each other and the walls, herding and shouting, all with bloodshot eyes, bared fangs, inhuman snarls.

It's loud and dark and panicky.

Some try forking. And the new instances are ganged up upon, charged at with double the intensity as the parent instances. There is another you, another fork, eyes filled with fury as it struggles against the fox.

You realize that these instances of Dear are not actually attacking to harm the audience. There are no syringes, no coercion to quit.

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Just exercising, violently, the collision detection algorithms in the room, which are still set safe.

The intensity within this room is overwhelming, and you find yourself shrinking toward the walls, if only to escape from the noise and motion on one side.

A few others seem to have the same idea, shifting their ways toward the walls of the room. They're met with little resistance.

In fact, the instances of Dear seem to be encouraging it, growling and barking and yelling as they herd the audience to the outsides of the room.

You make it to the wall with relatively little trouble, only to be jabbed in the back with a doorknob.

Keeping an eye on the action and the aggressive instances of the artist, you slip a hand back behind you to turn the knob.

The room you find yourself in could be more different. It's a room where one might feel quite bad shouting and hollering, and most of the audience gets that at once, quieting down.

It helps, of course, that the combative instances of Dear remain behind in the previous room, only herding the remaining audience members toward the door. It's a curious dichotomy of violence in one room and in the other, well...

Opulence isn't quite the right word. Softness, perhaps? Gentle, relaxed, soothing.

The room has muted lights — brighter than the previous room but still decidedly dim — and soft, amorphous furniture, none meant to be occupied individually. The light is cool, the color scheme a soothing set of blues without being annoying about it.

Dear — Dear-prime, perhaps, as it doesn't have any of the frothy bloodlust look about it — smiles disarmingly and urges the audience into the room.

Another difference: there's plenty of space to spread out here, rather than the previous overcrowded rooms.

"Please, please, take a seat," it offers politely. *"Please sit. The stressful portion of the exhibition is over, and now it is time that we had a talk."*

There's some grumbling, stress indeed. Some still look warily at the artist. But folks do as they're told, splitting off into their little subgroups. Couples and threesomes wind up on couches and love-seats (if the blobby furniture could be called such) while larger groups wind up on melty-looking beanbags. You and your group, all single, find a cluster of such furniture and scatter to the component pieces. You wind up with a love-seat to yourself and make yourself comfortable.

Dear follows along with the groups. All of them. Forking and

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splitting off towards the clusters of furniture so that each group winds up with its own instance of the fox. You notice that each instance is fluffier, softer, a touch heavier than the original. As a scheme to make the artist seem friendlier, it works pretty well. The new instances nearly exude kindness.

You marvel, for a moment, at how easily folks seem to take being shifted from the context of violence to the context of comfort. That there are a majority of Dispersionistas certainly explains part of it. The rest, you suspect, might be due to the fact that, despite those context shifts, this all took place within the overarching setting of an art exhibit.

Those are meant to be safe.

Dear had said that instances were art, and perhaps that really is the case: perhaps it's like those plays where the audience plays a role. Perhaps you and your friends, all of the audience, are the art. Perhaps Dear only hung the frames.

As if summoned by thought alone, an instance of Dear pads up to your group and, by your leave, settles down on the cushions beside you. If it amped up the friendliness of its build, it doubled that with its face. Teeth muted, whiskers full and slicked back, eyes bigger and friendlier, ears gone from large to almost comical.

"Once again, I must apologize for that stress," it murmurs to your group, voice low.

Silence.

You decide to speak up.

"What was the reasoning for that? Were we playing a part, like in a play?" you guess.

The fox smiles, *"You could say that, I suppose. I prefer the term exhibit, though, as it implies that someone is watching, that you are being*

looked at.”

It makes a graceful setting-aside gesture before you can question it on that, continuing, *“Stress is a means of forcing individuals to make decisions. If there had not been real stress, real risk-”* Again, it raises a hand to forestall objections. *“-then there would not have been real art to be made. Your calling it a play is accurate in that sense, in that plays are art made in real time. This is also that. Structured experience happening in real time.”*

It’s easy to feel intrigued: the art itself is intriguing. Beyond that, though, *Dear* is intriguing.

DRAFT

Dear, with its choice of form.
with its mastery of this new art.
its casual refusal to conform.

DRAFT

“So what do you get out of this, then? This art?”

Dear grins and leans back into the couch, its tail flicking out of the way and arm draping along the back — an almost familiar gesture toward. One that you can’t help but notice. One that even your friends can’t help but notice.

“That, my friend, is a very good question.”

“And do you have an answer?”

“Not a good one.” It shrugs, ineloquent. *“Not yet, at least.”*

You grin. “Well? What do you have so far?”

Dear laughs. Your friends roll their eyes.

“Part of it is integral to us. To all of the ‘me’s here, to all of the Ode clade, to so many Dispersionistas, and, to some extent, to all those except perhaps the most conservative of conservatives.” It furrows its brow as if digging for words, *“It is evolving. Identity, I mean. It is moving beyond the romantic concept of self.”*

“Is that why you’re not hu-” You stop yourself short, thinking on its words. “Is that why you’ve taken the shape of a...a fennec, was it?”

Dear turns itself to sit cross-legged on the love-seat facing you. You find yourself doing so as well, almost subconsciously.

Your friends stand up.

Dear-Prime, at the center of the room, calls out in a soft voice, *“The next exhibits are just this way. If you will follow me...”*

Dear reaches out a paw and rests it atop one of your hands, *“We can stay and chat a bit more. Do not worry,”* it grins. *“I am running this show, I make the rules.”*

Your friends are grumbling, already moving to follow Dear-prime to the next room.

You shrug. Carefully, though, as you’re finding yourself loath to

displace Dear's paw from atop your hand. "Sure, why not? Came for the exhibition, after all. Might as well get the most of it."

You repeat the shrug, this time to your group, make no sign of getting up.

They hesitate for a moment, then, frowning, give a dismissive gesture and wander off to the next room.

"So. Fennecs."

"Fennecs," Dear agrees. "*Though one must be careful to specify anthropomorphic. Real fennecs are quite small as you remember.*"

Dear forks and a fennec — hardly a double-handful of fuzzy critter — appears between you, bridging your knees, back paws on Dear's knee and front paws on yours. It's tan, rather than iridescent white, and holds far less humanity about it.

You raise a hand, but it quits before you can touch it.

"*This is intentional. I am not a fennec. I rather like them, of course, but I am not one. I am an amalgam. I am something more. Or rather, we all are, and I am trying to embody it.*"

"So you're greater than the sum of the parts," you hazard. "Fennec and human?"

"*It would be better to say that we are all more than human. We may be post-human, as the old saws would have it, but we are certainly now more than the sum of the parts of our identities.*" It grins, "*Fennec mostly just because I like foxes, though. All the deep words in the world will not hide that fact.*"

You laugh, giving its paw a pat with your free hand, "Well, hey, if it fits, might as well."

Dear grins. "*Think it does?*"

"Well, sure," you admit. "Just got me wondering what you get out of it."

You feel your hand drop as the fennec turns up the sensitivity of its instance and turns down the rather conservative settings of the collision detection algorithms. You hesitate for the moment, then do the same, feeling the concomitant sensations of temperature and touch jump in intensity.

“Well, I get to be soft as hell.” It grins, “Seriously, pet me. I love being a fox sometimes if only for the physical contact.”

You laugh despite the heat rising to your cheeks. After a moment’s hesitation, you pet the back of Dear’s paw lightly with your hand.

It’s soft. Very soft. You keep up those touches. It’s hard to remember the last time you felt fur.

“All of my intellectual bullshit aside, I think it is very important to remember the sensuality of senses.” Its eyes half-close in apparent pleasure. “When the system was built, there was a big debate as to whether advanced sensoria should be included at all, whether we should have sims and rooms and things to look at and touch. Too much work, they said. Nerds, the lot of them, living in a world of text. Some of the more romantic uploads argued loud enough that we overrode most of the objections. Pet my ears, those are softer.”

It’s hard to imagine, a world without sensoria. Why? Too much work how? Too much strain on the system? What life would that be, though? Without touch? Without taste? Without drinks and couches and very soft foxes? Why bother?

You move to comply, then pause, tilting your head. “We’?” you ask, finishing the motion and brushing your fingertips over the back of one of the ears once. Then again and again. Dear wasn’t kidding about the softness. You suspect it was a selfish request on its part, as the fox ducks its chin to tilt its head toward your hands, leaning

in closer.

“We’, yes,” it murmurs, voice muffled. *“The Ode clade is quite old.”*

You think for a moment, then grin. “You describe them as romantic, but talk of moving past romantic ideas of self.”

“Do I contradict myself?” It is mumbling quietly now. *“Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes. Other ear, if you please.”*

You laugh, earnestly and easily. You slip your other hand from under Dear’s paw, and bring it up to stroke the back of the other ear. The touch gets a shiver out of the fennec.

“Fennec fits,” you say. “Or, at least, soft animal does. You seem to act a little like how they say cats acted, though.”

“Meow,” Dear offers, too content to sound sarcastic. *“Seriously. There is room for romanticism and romance itself within post-modernism.”*

You move the hand that was stroking the first ear to ruffle the fur between the ears, laughing again and joking, “Romance, eh? You coming on to me, then?”

“Well, more like...you are the first one to show interest in me, rather than the exhibition.” It laughs, shrugs. *“And I have run lots of exhibitions.”*

Moving gracefully, it leans forward, up onto its knees, and then in against your front, pushing you back against the armrest of the loveseat. Its arms slip up around your shoulders. The move startles you into stillness, but after a moment, you settle your arms around the fox in turn.

“But I am not **not** coming on to you.”

You’re at a loss for words.

“I’m flattered, but-”

“You’re sweet, you know-”

You settle for silence and simply relaxing beneath Dear.

Warmth, softness.

“Lonely?”

Dear settles with its muzzle resting alongside your neck.

“Mmhm.”

“Same here,” you admit.

The fennec nuzzles in against your neck. Whiskers tickle, raise goosebumps.

A moment of shared silence and touch. Your hands brush along the fox’s back, imagining how soft the fur might be beneath the dressy shirt. Dear’s blunt muzzle continues those soft rubs against your neck.

It leans up, nose dotting its way against skin, cheek, to your ear.

“*The only downside to being a fox,*” it murmurs, nose cool against the rim of your ear. “*Is that it is really hard to kiss with a muzzle.*”

And then it quits.

Your arms collapse against your front, through the ephemeral outline of the fox that remains.

With a shout, you scramble off of the love-seat, shock forcing you to stand in a defensive position.

The air is cold after the contact.

“D-Dear?” you stammer.

The room is empty.

It takes a moment for you to remember that you're within a gallery exhibit. That Dear hung the frames in which you're the art.

How cynical of it, though, to build emotional rapport, to tease at the edges of your feelings, questing at loneliness, and to leave, to do this for art. You must admit it hurts.

You laugh, forced and bitter.

Lonely, indeed.

You turn your touch sensoria way down and head to the door.

DRAFT

Numb — or, that's not quite it, more like confused and in pain but unwilling to feel either — you shuffle into the final room. Seeing the pointed ears of Dear over the heads of the crowd fills you with strangely shaped emotions, which you set aside and move to rejoin your friends. All of whom, it seems, are set on laughing at your expense.

Not helping.

A group of audience members next to you gives a shout and jumps away from a spot in the floor as a panel begins to lift up. A...trap door? From it, a ragged and slightly dirty looking head peeks up.

Your head.

Your dirty, scraggly, frowning head. It looks upset, catches your eye, and quits. A set of memories, new and fresh, awaits you, ready for merge.

You try to get a peek of what's down the hole beneath the floor, but, other than dirt and rock, you don't see anything before it slams shut.

“Fuck it,” you mumble, and merge the memories blithely, ignoring any potential conflicts. You're hungry for reasons to hate.

A panel in the side of the room gives way and folds back into a corridor.

No, not a corridor, a staircase. From it steps another audience member, another you, looking pale, shaken. They do not look as though they would like to talk, though. Those around them look sullen at being rebuffed, but that version of you doesn't seem to care.

You send a quick sensorium ping to them, instructing them to quit. They do so.

Gallery Exhibition

You feel that hate begin to simmer.

Once all of the audience is brought back together in this white-washed room, with its exposed ceiling, you hear Dear's kind voice waft above the heads, "*The final room of the exhibition is not participatory. Please feel free to wander and explore. I-*" It pauses, forks a few times, each instance smiling, and continues, "*We will be available for questions and chit-chat. Finally, I would like to thank you all deeply for attending this exhibition, and The Simien Fang School of Art and Design for hosting it. SF welcomes you back to any future exhibitions.*"

There is applause, then, but it's scattered, confused. Dear looks proud at this.

You and your friends wander slowly through the room.

Its a square. Equidistant from the walls and each other are four pedestals, with one more a positioned at the center. Each pedestal is about waist-height and is just as white as the rest of the room. Images float a few inches from the top of the one nearest you, so you and your friends begin the circuit, wandering to inspect each pedestal in turn.

Each is labeled with a simple placard.

The Wanderer

It's a surreal experience, watching your self, your actions, through someone else's eyes. Sure, there are videos and such, but there's something a little different about this. The way the 'camera' moves is...well, it's not a camera. There's no way it could be a camera.

It has to be Dear.

You watch more closely as the recording loops. It starts with a flash, a point of view very close to the ground. Lots of ankles. Shoes.

Then it moves, quickly and jauntily, dashing through that forest of legs, pausing to look up into faces. Most give it only cursory glances, apparently unsure of how to take this tiny animal moving among them. A few refuse to look at it, clearly disconcerted.

Then there's your face. You look more curious than anything, trying to figure out this thing before you. The you here, now, stares back into your eyes through the playback. Those younger eyes, less tainted by memories than your own.

You hold your breath.

There's the explosion.

The viewpoint skitters off to the side (lots of ankles, here) and toward a wall. It seeks out the molding on the floor at the base of the wall, then the corner where that meets the perpendicular molding of a doorjamb. There's its place. There's where it belongs. It scabbles at the door, waiting for you, knowing you'll come.

And there's your shoes, with less dirt on them than they have now, and then the door swings open. The viewpoint leaps through, into sun and grass, with the shoes (and the rest of you) falling after.

Until now, the playback had been silent, but directed speakers start to project a little bit of audio, muffled.

Gallery Exhibition

“*You’re one tenacious fuck, you know that?*” you hear the fennec’s voice from the speakers. Everyone but you laughs.

You hear your discussion with the fennec, heavily obscured by the crunching of grass and the occasional grunts from yourself as the two of you make your way through the field. Your discussion on the meaning of exhibit, of medium, of art versus frame.

The video slides slowly lower to the ground as the fennec stretches out, then goes dark.

Repeats.

There’s a touch of resentment, you feel. That Dear had somehow managed to record a portion of its sensorium (was that even possible?) and was playing it back to these strangers.

It bodes ill for the other pedestals.

The Rebel

This pedestal contains a fairly short loop, more obviously taken from a conventional security feed.

It's hard to discern what happens at first. It mostly looks like a bunch of people standing still, and then, as if on cue, freaking out.

A closer look, and you feel your cheeks go red. You know what's going to happen.

There's you.

And there's your forked instance.

And there's Dear's forked instance.

And then chaos as Dear deftly moves the room into strife.

Then the recording loops.

You swallow hard, knowing what's going to come next. You avert your gaze from the pedestal as you watch the chaos begin again. Your friends jeer at you, but you don't feel proud at having done what you did.

The Fighter

As you catch a glimpse of the next pedestal on approach you wince, both at remembered pain embarrassment. You had not known this would be the next in line, but you had suspected.

The scene in this pedestal shows fighting, chaos.

Once again, this appears to be a sensorium recording (how had Dear *done* that?), showing a fight that's far more well-choreographed than you remember. Seeing it from Dear's point of view, it looks a lot more like purposeful herding. The safety settings on that room had been so high that that's about all it had been.

Then the instance's point of view gets whipped around to face you, your face squarely in its vision.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?!" You wince at the sound of your voice, hoarse from excitement, profane, coming from those directed speakers.

Then the fight begins in earnest.

You're dragged to the center of the room of the fight and then dropped into the ring, those concrete walls and that dirt floor making your remembered wounds ache.

This fight is less well choreographed. More jagged.

Except to you. You know.

The details play out on the pedestal with a cool, almost clinical precision, holding none of the emotion that you had felt. The blows, the circling, the jumps and scratches.

The syringe.

"*I had to mean to do it,*" says a soft voice next to you.

The fight isn't so far off, that anger not so much less than at a boil that you don't still have a strong urge to deck the fox standing

in front of you.

It smiles, almost sadly. *“If I did not mean to do it, you would have been confused. Maybe there would be victory, but it would have been empty and hollow.”* Dear shrugs apologetically. *“Confusion is not what was called for, in this exhibit. Victory or loss. Stress and decisions.”*

You take a breath. One of those intentional breaths, the ones where you breathe out longer than you breathe in. “I think I understand why you did it,” you say, quiet and controlled. Will yourself to tamp that hate down, if only for the sake of propriety. “I don’t like it, but I think I understand why.”

Dear nods, offers a hint of a bow, and backs away, *“That is my job.”*

It retreats into the crowd.

You feel sick.

You think you know what will come next. You will yourself to walk to the next pedestal but, some part of you perhaps hoping to forestall the inevitable, veers to the center of the room, to the fifth pedestal instead. Vain hope, but one does what one must.

The Medium

The fifth pedestal, the one in the center of the room, is four recordings playing at once.

They all feature you. They all feature the things that you did during your time here in the exhibition. All of those sly forks and subtle mergers.

“Did you think I did not know?” a soft voice says beside you.

You feel a heat rise to your cheeks. A blush? Deeper anger? *“I...I mean, I didn’t–”*

Dear holds up a paw, indicating silence. It seems fond of the gesture. *“I knew.”* It smiles. You find it a touch odd that the smile is simple and kind, not sly and knowing, not triumphant, and you’re not sure why. Not sure why it smiles in that way? Not sure why you find it odd? Perhaps both. *“I knew and expected it.”*

“Is it okay?”

Dear laughs. *“Of course it is! This is a show on instance art. That is why it is expected. That is why there are five small exhibits here, not four.”*

You smile tentatively.

“That was a rather Dispersionista thing to do for a Tracker.”

“I may have had a few drinks before.”

“I suspect a good many of those here did.”

“So why did you allow it?”

Dear spreads its hands in a graceful gesture before clasping them at its front once more. Its tail, you notice, is swaying behind it, steady. *“You and I have talked about this.”*

“I suppose we have,” you mumble, still sorting through the merged memories.

“SF calls me an instance artist. Hell, I call myself an instance artist, but

that is not totally accurate. I am closer to a director, though. I organize the stage, the crew — even if they are all me — and the choreography. You are the art though, or close enough to it. I will not say audience, or actors. I do not like the play metaphor all that much, since the art is not in the acting. There is no acting.” It shrugs, *“But the metaphor will serve.”*

You nod, watching the multiple feeds play out in their own courses. Watch. Guess at the contents of the next pedestal. Let that hate warm you, then sag away once more.

After a few silent moments, you ask Dear, “What are we supposed to do with our experiences here?”

The fox grins. *“This is not a lecture. No classroom, no notes, no papers to write. It is not a tool that you take away to use.”* It pauses, that grin going sly. *“And even if it were, that’s your fucking job, not mine.”*

The Lover

Seeing the cool blue hues of the scene above the final pedestal brings an immediate and uncomfortable reaction. It feels like you swallowed a ball the size of your fists and it has lodged itself behind your rib cage.

Embarrassment. Frustration. Anger. Loneliness. All in equal measure.

It makes you queasy.

The audience surrounding the pedestal gasps at something

“The instances aren’t the art,” one of your friends mumbles, and you turn to them. They shrug. “I don’t think so at least. I don’t actually know what the art is.”

Someone from across the pedestal offers, “Maybe instances are the brush?”

Laughter.

“*Instances the brush, emotion the paint,*” says that familiar voice. Dear stands attentively nearby. “*The art is the story behind it all. The art is...experiences?*”

“Was that a question?” your friend asks.

Dear shrugs. “*I do not make art because I know why,*” it says, bemused. “*If I knew why, I would not need to make art, then, would I?*”

“So you’re a romantic?”

“*Perhaps you should watch the exhibit again.*”

You approach the pedestal just as the feed loops back to the beginning.

Once again, you’re viewing a scene from Dear’s point of view.

“*We can stay and chat a bit more,*” the fox says. “*Do not worry, I am running this show, I make the rules.*”

You watch yourself shrug, say, “Sure, why not? Came for the exhibition, after all. Might as well get the most of it.”

When the instance of Dear looks around, you see that the room is almost empty, the last folks, your friends, drifting out the door.

The conversation that follows is low on intensity and high on subtle, emotional cues. You watch yourself and the fox have a slow and easy conversation about ‘why’s.

The image of Dear looks down, and you see that it’s paw is resting atop yours.

You — the you here, the you now — clench your fists.

You know that that instance was designed specifically to be likable, approachable. The big eyes, the softened gaze, the larger ears. You know that you walked right into that.

But hey, you were lonely and honest. You thought it was lonely and honest.

That feeling in your chest becomes a constriction, frustration and anger winning out. Hate winning out.

You watch the whole interaction again, this time from the other point of view. You watch your own face as it slowly opens up, as you discuss being a fox, sensoria, post-modernism and romanticism. And romance.

You watch as the point of view rises, leans in closer to the you pictured there on the pedestal, watch as it leans in close, into a hug far more intimate than one would expect from someone one had just met, two bars worth of drinks aside.

The viewpoint switches to somewhere above the fox and yourself on the couch, though the audio stays close by.

“*The only downside to being a fox,*” says the recording of Dear, and you turn around as casually as possible so that you don’t have to

Gallery Exhibition

watch. You will yourself not to hear. Will your ears to turn off, your sense of hearing to disappear.

You hear, all the same, *“Is that it is really hard to kiss with a muzzle”*
There’s Dear, in front of you.

Not the softened overly-kind dear from the blue room. Just normal Dear. Well, ‘normal’. Dear-prime.

It’s good because you think that the sight of the kind-Dear in this context would’ve made you quite upset.

“Was that unfair of me?” it asks.

It’s done something to the room — unsurprising that it would have admin privileges in its own gallery, come to think of it — the two of you are in a cone of silence.

“I...well, yes.” You try and count the layers of remove from the reality of what you had experienced, try to calculate the coils in your head. The experience, the exhibit on the pedestal, talking to the artist. Are you talking about the pedestal? The video? The performance? The experience? You shake your head.

Dear waits.

“I’d say you did an admirable job with the exhibition.”

“Admirable?” It tilts his head, looking almost canine in that moment. *“I set up a situation — several, really — in which audience members feel emotions toward ephemeral constructs and made it art. I do not know if that is admirable. It is just art.”*

You begin to reply, but it cuts you short.

“I am an artist, that is what I do. I am a person, though.” It’s smile looks weary. *“Also a fox-person, but a person nonetheless. And I feel like I cut too deep with that one. Was that unfair of me?”*

Your shoulders sag.

Dear waits.

“I don’t know,” you admit. “I had a few drinks, the exhibit was stressful. It was supposed to be stressful like you said. Just...it may have been an act, but I fell for it pretty hard.”

Dear waits. You feel discomfited.

“Look, it’s just silly, is all. I don’t even know why it affected me so much,” you trail off, trying to decide how much further to go on. “Look,” you repeat, shaking your head. “Was it true? What you said? Are you lonely? Were you earnest? Were you coming on to me?”

Dear nods, simple and straightforward. *“It is perhaps easy for me to talk about because I rehearsed hard for this show, but yes, I am lonely as hell. I fork to form relationships and keep myself...I mean, I do not lie in my work if I can help it.”*

It is your turn to wait, which discomfits Dear in turn.

“I am sorry,” it says. *“I did cut too deep. I was not thinking. It is not my goal with these things to damage anyone’s trust in art, in instances. Or in me, for that matter. It is just that I do not make art because I know why. If I knew why, I would not need to make art.”*

The fox hesitates for a moment, then sighs. *“I feel really bad about this. I am sorry. I would like to do what I can to regain your trust.”*

The weight of decision hangs heavy around your neck, heavy enough to bow your head. There’s very little you feel you can say without making that decision right then, so you stay silent for a moment.

Finally: “I feel like you’re trying to ask me out.”

“I am not **not** asking you out,” Dear looks cautious. It smiles faintly. So do you.

“Listen, can you give me a night? Let me put some thought into it.”

It nods. *“Fair. And listen, I really am sorry. There are bits of this show*

that I wrote thinking that they would lead to one thing, some spectacular art, and they led to...er, this."

You nod, saying, "I get it. Kind of like a choose-your-own-adventure story that got a little out of hand."

Dear shrugs. "*I suppose.*" It hesitates for a moment, then draws a card out of its left pocket, reaching out with its right paw at the same time, a perfectly formal business card exchange.

You grin and, on a hunch, turn down your touch sensoria way up to accept the card — a flash of contact information and locations — and shake the fox's paw.

It is *very* soft.

DRAFT

No one seems to have come out of the exhibit unscathed.

A few bear the rumpled look of the recently roughed-up, but with their safety turned up, that's about as far as the physical effects go. Rather, everyone within the group looks emotionally bruised, bitten, scratched. Some look dazed, some hurt, but no one looks blasé.

In that, Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled was successful.

You and your group walk to another bar. Quiet, subdued.

You give the low-slung building a wide berth. Only you came away with something. There's a card in your pocket, the dot on the question mark of an unanswered question.

Two things, then. A card in your pocket, and a decision to make.

Jonas Clade Digest

DRAFT

Jonas Clade Digest

System 305+168 0600

Ar Jonas writing here, would like to give a small update about the family. Things have been going well. Lena#tracker and I are getting by with some impatience as the investigations into a child continue. We've explored many of the options around child templates and found a few that we think will provide a good base for what aspects of our sensoria we can provide. It's got Lena's quick wit and my dashing good looks.

Ha ha.

Anyway. Been wondering if any of you cross-tree/up-tree instances have heard of anything that might help? I know there's a lot of research being done throughout the system that might provide some help, and we're doing a lot of digging ourselves, but you know, a lot of it is just the published stuff. If any of you has even heard anything, we'd love to pick your brains.

I'm pretty sure we — the clade — are all on the same page about this, but we've run into some friction from others. "Less-than-human monsters," was, I believe, the phrasing used to describe the kiddo. How quaint. Still, if you've heard anything about the social ramifications, that'd also be nice.

Ar out.

Ku Jonas reports that there has been some dramatic things going on in his sim. However, he also reports that it's all incredibly boring,

and that he is far too lazy to look up the specifics. Or to even write this. His long-suffering partner remains faithfully yours.

De Jonas here. Just writing to inform you that I have once again decided that the clade was too small. I know that some of you think that I fork too easily, but your perennial complaints fall on perennial deaf ears. Many of you have your families, and I have mine.

De-14 was forked from De-4 recently in order to explore a relationship with a friend from out-sim, a young woman in the form of a cat. We've never had a cat in our little polycule, and it tickled many of us to see how that would work out. Plus, as the friendship grew, as friendships do, it became harder and harder not to keep petting her. She's quite delightful.

Jean and Finn are doing well and send their love, and many of the other De instances and their partners do as well. Sorry for being such crazy romantics, but it is what it is. Hope you're all well, love you all.

Jonas Prime reminding you to keep up on your updates. You're all far too weird to merge with.

Jonas Clade Digest

System 305+178 0600

Di Jonas politely requests that De Jonas chill the fuck out. We're not in the business of running harems. You're polluting the D* subclade.

Kidding. Congrats.

Fa Jonas. Work continues apace. Mysterious Project #382 launches soon.

Just kidding, book's almost ready. I'll send it out for some in-clade beta-reads in a bit.

De Jonas. De-14 and little miss kitty have moved in with De-3 and De-4. A household of seven, three of which are De instances, is a busy place. I stopped by the other day to pet the cat and say hi to the others. 3's partner, Llewellyn, is so wonderful, I really ought to spend more time with them.

Actually, that's kind of why I'm writing. How the hell do you deal with jealousy and unrequited feelings? I like Llew perhaps more than is good for me. 3 made a good choice. We're pretty much the same, so it's kind of obvious that such a choice would also appeal to me, right? Part of the De subclade's rules, though, is that a down-tree instance can't mess with an up-tree instance's partners. Even then, I don't think 3 and Llew would welcome another De.

I don't really want to fool around, or anything, but, you know...we run the mutation algorithms, but they only mess with our

tastes and proclivities so much. It's not surprising that I'm kind of falling for Llew.

I don't want to get hurt, and I don't want De-3 or Llew to get hurt. I'm just trying to figure out how to work this, you know?

Ku's still a lazy bastard. Said I should update you all about the kerfuffle. Some old clade had some shit go down, but it appears to have been fairly well contained. Apparently there'll be a report by a historian/journalist person. Murder makes for good news, I guess.

Ku sends his biggest 'meh'.

No here. News from the frontier is that it's mostly empty and still under construction. A lot of the folks in this sim are pushing boundaries, and getting quite frustrated at the limitations from the sysadmins. We're pushing for a petition. They say it feels like progress on the system itself progressed while progress within the system has accelerated.

Myself, I just want to see what I can do to help. The system is neat, but it's starting to show it's age.

Anyone out there running into anything?

-No Jonas

Jonas Clade Digest

Systime 305+188 0600

De Jonas.

Well that went...poorly. 3 got quite upset at my last update, said we should have talked about it in person before broadcasting in the digest. I get that, and he's right, I apologize. But I don't feel it was quite as far out of line as he's saying.

Anyway, it spun out into a little argument, which turned into a big argument. De-3 is frustrated and upset because he doesn't feel like his boundaries are being respected. I understand, but he took it further. He says he's sick of all the forking, sick of just how many Jonases there are and how many relationships are in place. He says he thinks the whole poly thing that our branch did was a stupid idea and caused more trouble than it was worth.

He moved out with Llewellyn. Switched sims and wound up digging his own place in a rural area. Says he needs some time to himself, and wants to focus on his relationship, says he and Llew are getting married and going exclusive.

So my plan not to hurt anyone basically didn't work at all, and now I feel like shit for alienating both of them, and feel doubly weird that 3 went mono. Makes me worried for the rest of our subclade. Is that something we'll all discover sooner or later? That all these relationships are more trouble that they're worth? Is poly just compensation for not finding someone we really want to be with?

Fuck fuck fuck.

Ugh, anyway. Going to go pet the cat and have a chat with 14. Those two are doing well, at least, and I'm wondering if up-tree in-

stances might have more insight. Meanwhile, down- and cross-tree folks, do you have anything? My fucking heart hurts.

No Jonas.

Petition accepted. About to get extraordinarily busy. Will keep you up to date as best I can.

Ar here. Things are going better. We're working with some techs about how best to do this, and it sounds like it could happen before the next digest. We're both so, so excited! A kid of our own! We're opting for no gender for now. Will discuss with them later. Looks will be a mesh of both of us. Will start at about fourteen years old, appearance wise, and a bit older mentally, based on the template. Again, we'll discuss with them later.

Just one thing. A lot of folks have this when they do the child thing, and it feels like there's as many solutions as there are people dealing with it.

What do we name the kid?

Like, I want to keep Jonas in there somewhere, but I don't want to keep the same scheme, because they'll be out-clade, right? So I'm not going to snag the W* namespace. Neither Lena nor I want their name to be just a Jonas name, either. She wants something of hers in there, and I want something of mine, and we both want something new, to denote a new being.

Never knew this'd be so hard!

Anyway, shoot us your thoughts.

Jonas Clade Digest — Supplemental

Systeme 305+190 0600

Prime here. De, be careful, man. You're exploring some things that I've dreamed of, but don't have the courage to actually tackle. Maybe that's what you got from the algos: all the crazy required to actually run a big, happy, poly family. Or one you'd like to be happy, at least.

Don't have any real answers for you. Not just because I don't have any experience, but also because I don't think anyone has it figured out. Poly works well for a lot of people, and not so well for others. Some folks just don't want it at all and stick with monogamy.

Only real thing I can give you is advice. I think we all know that 3 probably wants some down time. I also know that we'd all be super anxious in your shoes. Leave them alone, though. Let them take some time and figure things out. Always works for us, you know that.

Meantime, take care of yourself.

Ar: keep us up to date. I'm really excited for you.

Ko Jonas. Partner's pouting in the corner.

Ar! Shit, man! That's wonderful news! I'm super happy for you and Lena. Lets hook up some time, celebrate.

De-8 Jonas here. Just a small update to let folks know that the rest of the subclade is doing well, if only because we're scared of what

De and 3 are going through. We're doing what we can to keep all of us safe and take care of Jean and Finn as well while De takes care of this.

De-* send congrats, Ar.

Lu Jonas. Heart goes out to you, De. I know you've dived into this far more than any of the rest of the clade, but it's obviously something that we've all thought about. Just stay safe, yeah? Keep 3 and Llew in a good place as best as you can, even if that means staying away.

Cheers, Ar. Keep us up to date.

DRAFT

Jonas Clade Digest — Supplemental

Systeme 305+194 1343

Ar here.

Welcome Lee Ar-Jonas-Helena Sprout.

Neither Lena nor I had kids prior to uploading, but other than the legal (well, “legal”) and social barriers, this was ridiculously easy, far more so than embodied world birth. We signed some papers, decided on a time for creation, and then just picked Lee up from the sim.

They’re a little confused and disoriented still, as their sensorium starts working properly, but they’re doing well. Attached is a photo.

We decided to only refer to ourselves in Lee’s middle name, the rest being something new.

We’re going to take them out for a meal in a bit here, but I just wanted to update and thank you all for the well-wishes.

Jonas Clade Digest — Supplemental

Systeme 305+195 0236

De-3 quit.

Merged with 2, who forked and is merging down to me. Will update with details.

DRAFT

Jonas Clade Digest — Supplemental

Systime 305+195 0359

I never knew someone could be so depressed. I know we did some experimental forking and mutating when we first uploaded just as Prime to get rid of some of that, and I know that we all occasionally get hit by a big chunk of sadness, but what 3 went through goes far beyond that.

Can't stop crying.

The sheer amount of worthlessness he felt is overwhelming, and pales in comparison only to the emptiness, the void of feeling that ruled his life.

He didn't become mono, he just couldn't handle anything, any relationship, and it's only due to Llew being such a saint that that worked out as well as it did.

3 rarely forked. There were no instances around at the time that he quit. That line has ended.

Jonas Clade Digest — Supplemental

Systime 305+195 0504

I've gathered many of the De-*s and their partners to my place and sent out an invite to Llewelyn to see what we can do for him. He sounds terrible.

I'm sorry, Ar, I'm really happy for you, and I'm glad things went as well as they did. Don't mean to trample your joy.

DRAFT

Jonas Clade Digest — Supplemental

Systime 305+195 0600

Ar here. Don't worry, De, take care of yourself. This stuff's no less important.

Prime. Sorry to hear that, De. If you need more of the clade, we'd be happy to help. Just send us a note and we can fork or visit ourselves. Help Llew as best you can.

From what I gather, the forking I did before really starting the clade only worked so well. It made me less likely to be completely steamrolled like it sounds De-3 was. I think we all use similar mutation algos, so maybe this is something the whole clade would do well to keep an eye on. Maybe those can undo some of the changes I worked for early on.

Congratulations, Ar. We're basically the same, so it's silly of me to think of myself as a happy grandfather, but here I am. Really happy for you and Lena.

Ko Jonas. De, take care of yourself and your subclade, okay? It's really important. Partner sends their love and support, says if you need to talk about depression, they will help how they can.

Congrats, Ar! That's delightful news.

Lu, Li, and Lo here. L*s started to gather for our own thing, but if you need, De, we can head over there.

Na Jonas: Shit, Ar, congrats! I'm so happy for you both. Send more pictures! I want to say 'of the bouncing baby', but they aren't really a baby, are they? There's so much bullshit about created children, all these conversations about whether they're real people or whatever. Always felt like abstract bullshit, though, until now.

Gonna have to talk to the hubby and see if he would be interested in this. Hadn't crossed my mind until you went ahead!

Jonas Clade Digest

Systime 305+198 0600

Pe Jonas here. Sorry for not keeping more on top of these. Just been burying myself in work lately. Congrats on the kid, Ar, they're cute. Sorry to hear about all that happened, De. I got the short end of the depression stick, too, and I know how crushing it can be. Stay safe!

llew left the sim. he asked that we not contact him unless he contacts us first. don't blame him. we're all feeling really bad about what happened, but i'm a total mess. i can't believe i sent that update without talking to llew and 3 first. it was so fucking stupid of me, should've just talked about how i felt with them. they're the ones involved, right? it's just all so bleak, it feels like i've got the weight of 3's line ending on my shoulders, along with llew's pain. fucking hell

Ar. De, really hoping things are okay. Wishing you the best. Just as a note, we're settling in well here, getting used to having someone else in the house.

Na, you should! This was one of the most fulfilling things we've ever done together as a family.

Jonas Clade Digest

Jonas Clade Digest — Supplemental

Systeme 305+198 1249

Prime. De, can I come over? Can anyone else join me?

DRAFT

Jonas Clade Digest — Supplemental

Systeme 305+199 0455

Prime.

Things are okay, but rough. For the rest of the clade who couldn't make it, De is having some trouble with the memories involved in the merger with 3. The combination of having weeded out some of that depression with having it reintroduced is causing a lot of conflicts. I don't think De was quite ready for those, and didn't resolve some of them as elegantly as he could've.

One wouldn't expect a sensorium to drift that far in two generations, but here we are.

Llew sent me a message; he's okay, but needs some space from De-* space.

Be safe, y'all, okay?

Jonas Clade Digest — Supplemental

Systime 305+200 0127

De here.

I'm sorry everyone. I wrote down a bunch of notes and then performed a fix from before 3's quit. I just couldn't have all of that in my head. Echoing Prime's statement of being safe. The algos only work so well, you know? And conflicts can make you crazy.

We'll patch this up and move on, though. Just give us some time.

DRAFT

Jonas Clade Digest

Systeme 305+208 0600

No here.

De, man, sorry to hear about all that. I'm glad you're finding ways to work with it.

Petition is going well. Things outside have changed a lot. Maybe we should start reading a newspaper other than our own.

Fa. Done! Can I get some beta readers?

Ko is a lazy fuck. What's new, though?

Ko's partner is a scheming bitch and I love them loads.

Ar here. This is so weird. Lee's like...an instance, but not, you know? Enough of me in them to feel like me, and enough of Lena to feel familiar, but still so different. Feeling all overwhelmed with love.

No one ever told me having kids was like this.

Prime, back home. The De subclade is alright. They'll patch things up. They send their best wishes, and mention that they'll be quiet for a while.

In other news, welcome Ra, first of the R subclade. Got the exploration itch after reading a thing on abandoned sims, so he's going on with that and will merge regularly. Will keep you all up to date.

Ra Jonas saying hi and bye! I'll post updates, probably through Prime.

DRAFT

Appendix

The *Post-Self* universe is far down a timeline from our own. Uploading of conscious entities (sensoria) became a commonly accepted solution to overpopulation, while embodied folks went about business of their own. However, since the first groups of uploaded individuals tended to be programmers, fancying themselves to be very busy, they quickly evolved ways to fork themselves to work in parallel supporting the network in which they dwelled.

As the network grew and uploading became more popular, more and more individuals joined. Not just programmers, either, but folks of all persuasions. The idea of forking evolved and spread, leading to the concepts of dissolution and merging. Embodied life remained embodied life, but within the network, forking and dissolution became a practice of its own.

Politics and economy

The more people forked, the harder it became to run the capitalist society that worked along the same lines as the society leading up to it. Currencies collapsed and social structures became unstable as the post-scarcity economy of the network became a reality. In place

of a currency representing units of labor, reputation became the primary means of trade.

Sims

Sims are where uploaded and generated personalities 'live'. Any instance can create a private sim where they will exist alone, but most cohabitate public sims. Think of MUCKs: a public sims are akin to public, interconnected rooms on the MUCK, while private sims are rooms that you @dig yourself.

Dissolution and merge strategies

In the *PS* universe, it's common for folks to split into separate instances through a process called *forking*. The way in which forking is managed is called *dissolution*. Dissolution strategies are not set in stone, and have no set definitions. Rather they're just general trends that have been named and adopted in *PS* culture.

There are three generally recognized dissolution strategies:

Task-based, 'the Taskers' instances are created only as needed for specific tasks and are tracked by a #core; as tasks are completed, instances are recycled and their state reincorporated with the #core instance. Non-#core instances never fork. This is the most common (and most conservative) as it tends to lead to less dilution of self.

A subset of the Taskers are the Conservatives. Conservatives believe that one should fork as little as possible, if at all.

Tracker-based, ‘the Trackers’ instances are created on a whim, as needed, or by accident, and are tracked by a #tracker instance; when the instances end (through SIGHUP, SIGTERM, SIGQUIT or other such signals), their state is reincorporated with the #tracker instance. Non-#tracker instances never fork. This is the more liberal of the two most common strategies, as instances are considered basically independent personae.

Dispersal, ‘the Dispersionistas’ instances are created on a whim or by accident, but unlike the managed strategies, they are not tracked, or not in a formal way. Instances may receive updates from each other, be friends and meet up with each other, or, rarely, become lovers. Those that stick together in some fashion may refer to themselves as a Clade, with their clade names using a common scheme. Any instance may fork, and reincorporating state is optional. This is the most radical of dissolution strategies, and is often seen as a minority, though actual numbers of personae groups are difficult to count.

When an instance ends, there’s the possibility of its state being merged with another instance’s (common among the Taskers and Trackers, less so among the Dispersionistas). There are several different merge strategies, and many may be discussed. Although there are trends mentioned below, there’s little in the way of direct correlations between dissolution and merge strategies.

There are two generally recognized merge strategies:

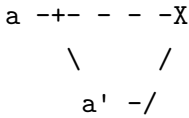
- **cherrypicking** – cherrypicking describes the act of merging only desired portions of the halted instance’s sensorium. It’s broken down into two substrategies:

- *experiential* — common primarily with Trackers, this allows one to pick and choose experiences to merge with one's own instance.
- *knowledge-only* — a handy shortcut and subset of experiential cherry-picking, this strategy immediately discards any feelings and memories, leaving primarily pre-digested knowledge to merge. This is most common with the Taskers, who use it for parallelized studying.
- *blithe* — most common among Dispersionistas, this merge strategy relies on a recursive algorithm which attempts to merge the entirety of instances' sensoria while producing as few conflicts as possible (conflicts, obviously undesirable, tend to lead to neurological sequelae that can cause an instance to crash). There are two primary substrategies which help in automatically resolving conflicts:
 - *theirs* — when encountering a conflict, the conflicting portion of the halted instance's state is kept.
 - *ours* — when encountering a conflict, the conflicting portion of the base instance's state is kept.

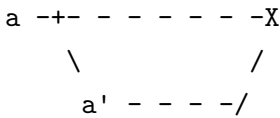
Conflicts

The further away from an instance is from another, whether in time or in forks, the more likely conflicts are, and the harder any merge becomes. Instances of separate individuals are, of course, so different as to be impossible to merge (though some are working on this).

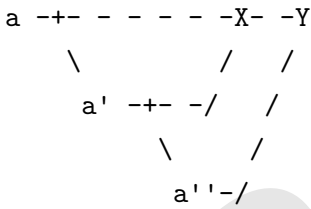
Consider the following:



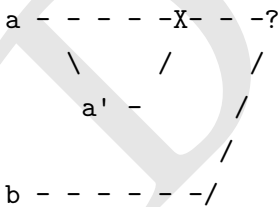
Merge X is simple.



Merge X becomes more difficult with conflicts.



Merge Y gains conflicts due to split experiences and time. Merge X less so, but still more conflicts than merge X in the first example, due to time.



Merge ? is impossible with the current state of technology. The two instances have no shared past instances on which to build a reasonable diff.

Fixes

Fixing is a means of repairing damage to one's instance. Although no amount of damage suffered to the body will cause the instance to die, it might be preferable to not be broken. This is common for those who fight for enjoyment.

Fixing involves forking from a previous moment, known as a checkpoint, instructing the new instance to perform a "fix", which is shorthand for a blithe merge with a theirs substrategy, and then quit. That means that the newly created (and fully intact) instance gains all of the memories, knowledge, experiences, and sensoria of the damaged instance.

The new instance is effectively the old instance, just whole.

Families and clades

Families form just as often in the system as outside, of course. People fall in love, get married, have affairs, get divorced. It's all there. Children are a slightly more difficult question. They could be constructed, with an AI which incorporates aspects of sensoria from both 'parents'. Species-wide aversions (to which posthumans are not immune) leave many feeling wary of these constructed children, though. They do not age - no one does in system, except to project the outward appearance of aging - and they are not, in some minds, even human with their base template of an AI. Many would feel that they would be in some way lacking. All the same, several exist and move, unnoticed, through society.

Clades are the collection of instances forked (at any depth) from a common ancestor, an upload. Clades vary by dissolution strategy:

- Taskers attempt to maintain the smallest clade possible, with Conservatives obviously striving for a clade with one member
- Trackers may have several members in their clades, but their clades rarely expand beyond a certain point
- Dispersionistas have the largest clades, which often go unmeasured in terms of size. They're usually thought of as increasing in an exponential fashion, though this is not quite true, as it's usually assumed that Dispersionistas are loathe to quit, signal, or otherwise merge

Quitting and signals

Instances may end three ways:

- Quitting - an instance may choose to quit at any time.
- Signals - the instance's parent from which it was forked may send a signal to the instance, such as SIGQUIT or SIGTERM. If an instance is unresponsive or out of control, the user may send SIGKILL, though they won't get much back during merging
- Crashing - instance crashes are very rare and are considered an emergency for the system maintainers. A crash may be induced through a virus, as outlined below

Instances may only merge when one of them ends. In git parlance, one may only merge commits, and the only commit available is when an instance ends. To achieve long-running mergeable instances, the long-running instance will fork, and then the new instance will quit and the sensoria will be merged down-tree as far as needed.

Syringes and other symbolic objects

There are ways to modify one's instance in place, of course, and these are usually considered medical. To that end, code that modifies an instance tends to take the form of being bound to an object recognized as something medical: a syringe. It's a symbol, rather than something mechanical, which bears permissions to modify one's state.

Although damage to instance bodies cannot lead to instance death, an instance crash is a good way to achieve the same goal. Effecting a crash is usually done with a bit of code. These are often attached to something well known to affect an instance, such as a syringe. During fighting with the intent to crash an instance, a syringe is the most common weapon.

Exocortices

Exocortices began as ways to store data in an easily accessible fashion for perusal later — basically cellphones accessible through a neuro interface — but the concept later transitioned into memory modules that weren't active until accessed directly. Things you could forget until deciding (or instructed) to remember.

About the author

Madison Scott-Clary is a transgender writer, editor, and software engineer. She focuses on furry fiction and non-fiction, using that as a framework for exploring across genres. She has edited and written for [adjective][species] since 2011, and edited *Arcana: A Tarot Anthology* for Thurston Howl Publications in 2017. She is the editor-in-chief of Hybrid Ink, LLC, a small publisher focused on thoughtful fiction, exploratory poetry, and creative non-fiction. She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her cat and two dogs, as well as her husband, who is also a dog.

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