

Cowboy

Alexandria Christina Leal

Peace System – 2201

“Be honest with yourself. Ideally always, but especially when it’s the harder road to take.”

-Eleanor Fenix

I: Evi

Therapist’s Note: Evi Pirth is a 38 year old female of Chinese-Irish descent with a complex psychiatric and psychosocial history. She is gainfully employed as a principal researcher at Better Worlds Incorporated, and is seeking therapy in order to “expand my cognitive toolkit, after a marked increase in Apygmaliophobic anxiety.” (patient’s words). In our first session, she detailed to me her background in brief, and gave me both permission and proper paperwork in order to follow up with all providers involved in her mental health care for the past ten years. She also gave me permission to share details of her case with other practitioners undergoing a residency with me prior to accreditation. As such, I have inserted several footnotes for further clarification.

Evi stared at her therapist, an older balding man with spectacles so large on his narrow face that she half wondered if he wore them for show instead of medical necessity.

“You don’t seriously expect me to answer his fucking question, do you?” She asked.

He gave his usual “*You’ve all asked me not to intervene in these things, so as long as nobody stops anyone from speaking to me, do whatever you want — although, I reserve the right to comment as I choose*” shrug.

There was no one else besides the two of them physically present in the room.

TN: Evi listed DID, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Depression, and Specific Anxiety Disorder (eco-anxiety, System-based) under current mental health conditions; though she stated that she is not explicitly seeking therapy for these conditions, it is important to understand how these impact her life. Let’s start with a refresher, as some of you may be unfamiliar with the first one.

She glared at her therapist, sighed, and then addressed the person not physically present in the room.

TN: Dissociative Identity Disorder, as the name of the condition illustrates, and despite its common association for much of the 20th and 21st centuries with multiple personalities (due in no small part to the original name), is a disorder primarily characterized by disassociation.

What is common sense today, that plurality (the existence of multiple personalities within a single brain)

is a naturally occurring neurodivergence, would have been radical to practitioners in the early 21st century. Hindsight as they say, is 20/20. However, even without the modern knowledge of the brain that would have seemed unimaginable two centuries ago, some practitioners at that time were already putting together much of the pieces of our modern knowledge of the condition. Whether this factored into the rename has been sadly lost to time, but the new name is an uncanny prediction of the following two centuries of hard data.

How can DID be so overwhelmingly (but not exclusively or uniformly!) caused by early childhood trauma? How can it be present in both covert and overt forms, or go undiagnosed for decades at a time? How does it manifest in everything from a few years of missing memory around a single traumatic event to persistent, daily blackout? And, of course, how can someone suffering from it be unaware that they have the condition? Because it is not a factor of multiple personalities, but of a failure to form either a single or multiple identities in a non-dissociative fashion.

“No, Eliah¹, my reticence towards uploading is not motivated by what I experienced when I integrated with Felina. Nice theory, cowboy. But you’re wrong about it, just like you’re wrong about uploading.”

¹Eliah. The cowboy. In teletherapy he is an older man with spurs and a cowboy hat to match. His clothing and attitude are what they used to call “salt of the Earth”.

TN: Felina is a common source of contention, and someone I've unfortunately never had the opportunity to meet. Shortly before I met Peace, a large portion of the system integrated², and Felina became a part of Evi³.

“Oh yeah, okay. Sure Evi. I believe that. You're just doing your job, protecting the system⁴. Nothing to do with your and Felina's integration. Well, thank you kindly for your protection, I don't know what any of us would do without you. You're an absolute saint! Hey, speaking of being a saint, have, uh... you told Dr. Woodward here—” Their physical body leaned back in the chair, and Eliah crossed his legs as he gestured lazily at the therapist “—about those prophetic dreams you keep having, the ones that keep predicting my day?”

TN: Eliah has a southern drawl, or seems to. I'm not entirely unconvinced that some of the mannerisms unique to each personality aren't played up in front of me just

²In its original use, this term referred exclusively to all personalities becoming one. Sys-side and phys-side Breakthroughs over the years in both general psychology and treatment of dissociative disorders have led to the suite of techniques used today to treat dissociative disorders, and the re-popularization of this term amongst those who treat DID in order to refer to the breaking down of dissociative barriers and the retraining of the brain to use other adaptation mechanisms as a first line of defense.

³Prior to this, her and Evi had been at odds with each other for most of their lives. Another personality, Zia, speaks quite fondly of her. Which is more than a tad sad given for much of her existence she seemed to occupy the classical archetype of Persecutor.

⁴Although for the past ten years, Evi has filled the role of the “host”, she was originally slotted into the binary of protector personality. In her own words, Evi came into existence to protect Peace from “the internecine conflict that erupted between my father's and mother's sides of the family shortly before her death, as well as the large swaths of time I was left alone in the care of my... unwell... paternal grandmother.”

a bit in order to keep me from confusing folks for each other.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Eliah?” She turned toward Dr. Woodward. “Do you have any idea what he’s talking about?”

Their therapist shook his head.

“Right okay, let me jog your memory, Felina, Evi, whichever you are now. You have large leathery wings, two pointy horns, and you’re *fucking riding my ass every goddamn day!*”

TN: Personal insults between these two are common, as you’ve likely noticed. In this case, it’s a dig at her integration with Felina, who Zia (another personality, who I rarely get the chance to meet) informed me took the form of some sort of bat creature in both their head and in sims on the ‘net. She believes this form stemmed from the system’s origin⁵ as well as Felina’s original role as a persecutor. Both Eliah and Evi have different opinions.

Evi’s face filled with instant offense as she took the front. “Oh *fuck you, cowboy.*”

“I have a name!”

“Yeah, Asshole McWestern.”

“Doctor Jackass!”

Dr. Woodward sighed and set down his tablet. None of what would happen next would be noteworthy. He was used to this.

⁵Zia’s words: “When I was about seven, my mother and I were in a car accident. She died shortly after impact, and I was suspended upside down in the car staring at her body for several hours until the rescue workers located us. That’s where Felina comes from. Also, there’s probably some influence there from the ‘fucking vampire, bleeding us dry’ speech that grandpa always gave dad. Can we just, not talk about that shit today?”

Evi clutched her face in her hands and moaned in frustration. “Why are you doing this on a Friday? Why are you pushing so hard on this? Why do you *always do this*? Why do you always pick some fucking hill to die on every single Friday? Why uploading, why now, why with me?”

“Oh my god, I’ve told you a thousand times why! And you never listen! I don’t understand it one bit. You used to love the System, found uploading romantic. And now you act like you don’t understand why anyone would want to. You’re smart Evi — you’ve got a Ph.D for God’s sake — So why won’t you even listen to anyone about uploading? Is it because you think it’s my idea? You’re going to drive me to drink. I just don’t get it!”

“Oh please. You’ve already driven me to drink and you know it.”

“I know how smashed you’re going to get tonight, yeah, and I’m concerned.”

“It’s a Friday, Eliah.”

“You’re dodging my question!”

Dr. Woodward coughed awkwardly. Evi shot him a look of mild embarrassment and apology. Before they could continue the argument, he cleared his throat and interrupted. “I’d like to hear from Zia.” Their eyes blinked, and he felt like both of them were looking at him as if he had said “*I would like the moon to be made of cheese.*”

“Why?” Evi said, pursing her lips.

“I think Zia would’ve told me, if that was the case.” Eliah followed up, cocking his head slightly to the side.

Dr. Woodward sighed. He could feel the suspicion in the air. It was like being surrounded by a pack of wild dogs. He wasn’t keen on dealing with this today, either. “Then perhaps each of you can summarize your suspicions on the other’s motivations. You’ve both

been doing a lot of talking past each other today, and not a lot of listening. I'm not sure that is the wisest use of your time. Perhaps thinking about how the other views the world might lead to more, productive outcomes?" It was a long shot...

"Alright."

... but somehow, it seemed to be working.

"Yeah, sure."

"I'll start." Evi responded far too quickly, which was when Dr. Woodward suspected that he had in fact, hit on something rather deep. Hopefully, they were finally getting to the root of the issue. He picked his tablet back up. "Elijah, thinking about your motivations from your perspective, I am forced to come to the conclusion that you don't *have* any deeper motivations, which is why none of your actions make sense to me. Sure, you think you have deeper motivations. But at the end of the day, you've never moved past being the good guy in your own story, literally and metaphorically — by the way, you're not even the good guy in your own story.⁶ Opinions of losers on the 'net be damned⁷. You've never moved past being Zia's personal protector. Past the system integrating, past there only being three of us now. You need to move forward, move on past being a cowboy. Your girl's all grown up."

Dr. Woodward beat the cowboy to the draw. "Elijah. Do you need time to—"

⁶Elijah is based off of a fictional character. Isn't DID a fascinating condition. However, his origins are often yet another point of contention.

⁷A woman named Eleanor who had a fairly complicated relationship with Evi. Multiple members of the system credit her with saving their lives. The relationship did not work out, and seems to be a source of guilt for all of them, but particularly for Evi.

“Nah. I’ve had enough time doc. I’ve got this all prepared.” He cleared his throat. “Evi, you need to get our ex^{^7}, and admit that you blame the existence of the rest of us for your breakup. You resent us all for it, but especially me. This is why, since you integrated with Felina and the others, but got broken up with anyway; you lost the plot. You did the work, but you still lost the girl. This makes you feel awful, and is why you have ignored Zia, your job, and your own health. It’s also why when I picked up the slack, you decided to blame me most of all, because I accomplish what you can’t. Please move on, from both your ex and your irrational hatred of me. Yours truly, Eliah.”

Well shoot. That hadn’t gone how he had hoped. But maybe, just maybe.

“Thank you, Eliah. Now, I would like you both to take a few minutes to think about what the other person said before respo—”

“You motherfucker how dare you bring her up—”

“How have you managed to make it feel like you’re on an entirely different continent when we share the same brain? Do enlighten me, Evi”

“I wish you could feel what it was like to be me for even one day.”

“If you’d open up to me for a single fucking minute, then maybe I would—”

“Maybe I would if you were actually a good person instead of just someone who dressed up like one.”

“I don’t need this. Go spend your night getting drunk off your ass.”

“It’s called coping, and it’s the only way I can stand living in the same head as you.”

Dr. Woodward sighed. “I was going to ask if either of you felt that the other accurately understood the other, but I can already tell—”

“Nope.”

“Yeah, no.”

“At least there’s one thing we agree on.” Evi shot back.

Woodward sighed and glanced at the clock. “Well. I believe our time is up. I’ll see you all next week. Oh, and one last thing.” They were already halfway out his office door. “I trust you’ll *both* drink responsibly.”

False affirmations followed.

“Of course we will.”

“Evi prefers self-destructing in her own home, so it’s not like we’re going to ruin anything besides a public sim. The ‘net is where she spends most of her time these days anyways.”

“Elijah stays up until God only knows, and I don’t know what trouble we could even get ourselves into at that time of night. It’s not like anyone is awake.”

Woodward frowned. “Just don’t make any permanent decisions that either of you may regret later. I know the last few months have been hard, but you’ve both come so far, and there are some things in life that are quite irreversible.”

“Oh come on. What do you think I am going to do, get so drunk I don’t notice him walking into an Ansible clinic?”

“You see how paranoid she is about me?”

Woodward’s frown deepened, and he sighed. “I’ll see you both next week. Please do try to treat each other nicely and don’t die of alcohol poisoning.”

TN: The Peace system falls into an odd grey area here that illustrates just how complex this condition can be to treat. Although the Peace system is obviously able to cooperate to an extensive degree and does not suffer working memory blackouts that impede the feat of carrying on a conversation with each other out loud; Peace lacks anything that could be describe as a shared coherency, a shared sense of consciousness or purpose, or an absence of all dissociative barriers. The presence of one or more of these states of existence is regarded as a key treatment milestone.

I worry about them.

★

Elijah grumbled as he walked down the hallway. Another wasted session, more wasted time. Evi had promptly told him to “fuck right off” and squirreled herself up somewhere in their head. *Of course* she was going to force him to make the trip back. He had half a nerve to—
And that’s when he heard Zia’s voice. “Elijah.”

Instantly, he softened, just a bit. “Mmmm?” He grumbled, not quite feeling like responding. He still felt burned after being denied even the semblance of personhood once again.

“Elijah.”

“Yeah. I hear you.” He muttered.

“I have an idea.”

“I’m all... ears, kiddo.” He paused, looking at a picture of a really fucked up cat. Or fox. He couldn’t tell. It was definitely all ears though. Where did these types of paintings even come from anyway? Was there a therapist’s office décor supplier?

“Okay so, please don’t hate me for this.”

“I couldn’t hate you if I tried, you know that.”

“Yeah I do. I just. Okay...” He could hear her taking deep breaths.

“Spit it out.”

“Hypothetically, like, in a video game hypothetically. What if, when Evi got really drunk... We just walked into an Ansible clinic and uploaded anyway?”

He stopped in his tracks. “Well *shit*. Zia. That’s...”

He paused, adrenaline racing up his spine. “That’s not half a bad idea...”

II: Eliah

Like most things in his life lately, Eliah’s memories of the most important decision in any of their lives was clouded by alcohol. Had they been arguing about Eleanor? He’d definitely been drinking, he knew that. But the other details he didn’t remember in whole. It was like a shard of fractured glass. The main thing that pierced through was Zia’s voice.

“Eliah. Think about what you’re doing. Please. Like, I’m as shocked as you are that this is working but...”

“I know what I’m doing,” he slurred under his breath; his voice unsteady. He was half panting in exhaustion from hauling himself up the steps to the clinic. He leaned against a rail. “I’m doing what you want, right?”

She sighed. “Yeah. But... I wish it didn’t have to fucking be like this.”

“I do too, but it is what it is. It’s now or never.”

“Yeah. I know.”

He stumbled up to the door, paused, turned around, and looked around at the dirty grey and black of the city, the ugly concrete and black sleet of the numerous office buildings flecked at every point by red dust. Overhead, the moon hung low in the sky. He wished that he had a hat, so he could tip it goodbye. They stood there silently, for a few seconds, taking it all in, before turning around, walking up to the automated doors of the clinic, and entering.

“Rest. I’ll take care of it.”

“Thank you.”

He gave the mental equivalent of a nod, then realized he had said both parts of the conversation out loud. His heartrate spiked as he looked around. He would have rather assumed no one had noticed, but long dulled instinct prompted him to glance at the front desk clerk out of the corner of his eyes. His heart rate slowed. Just as he suspected, either no one noticed, or no one cared. Why was no wonder. They were hooked up to a rig. Eliah shook his head. *What was even the point of having a flesh and blood person in this place if they were going to be hooked up to the net anyway?*

“*Are you of sound mind to undergo this procedure?*” a voice buzzed in his ear.

Turning his attention back to his goal, he placed his hand back onto the panel.

“Yes.”

There was a brief pause as every inch of his vitals were measured up to some baseline.

Somehow, he very much doubted that being within that baseline actually mattered.

“*Are you undergoing this procedure consensually?*”

“Yes.”

Another brief pause, another scan. More nonsense.

"...based on these criteria and your CIN, your family may qualify for Uploading Benefits as per-", he chuckled. If there was one thing that they could all agree on, it was fuck those people.

"Next question."

"Are you sure that you don't wish to-"

He let it finish, just in case it took hastily answering into account. But mentally, he had already checked out.

"Next Question."

"Would you like to Upload?"

"Yes."

"Do you understand that this is an irreversible procedure, carrying with it a risk of mortality?"

"Yes."

"Would you still like to Upload?"

"Yes."

"Understanding that this is an irreversible procedure that carries with it a risk of mortality, do you want to upload?"

"Yes."

He could "see" Zia next to him. Her lip was curled, she was looking away. He wanted to put his hand on her shoulders, reassure her, but there wasn't a way to do so without being noticed, the clerk was disconnecting from their rig, blinking as their eyes readjusted to the "real" world. Outside, the city's emergency sirens roared as a dust storm tumbled over buildings. The clinic doors automatically closed in response; the filtration system went from a slight din to a howl.

"Alright, Miss... Pirth? Right this way, please."

Mentally, he checked in again with Zia.

"This is what you want, right kid?"

The mental equivalent of a nod.

“Good, let’s get out of this shithole.”

He turned to the clerk, doing his best imitation of Evi’s sickeningly sweet smile. “After you, please.”

The clerk chuckled and shook their head, evidently their mind was elsewhere. “Yeah, one of these days.”

The sirens grew louder, and the protective metal screens unfolded slowly from the building, creaking as they extended to cover the windows. Elish and the attendant watched as they locked into place just in time; a loud *thunk* echoing throughout the building as bits and pieces of rock and concrete crashed into the side of it.

The clerk shook their head, looking on with eyes dulled with false hope and endless determination “First chance I get, I’m getting out of here too.”

III: Evi

An irreversible decision, in an instant.

Later, she would mull over everything that led to this point.

On some level, she should have seen this coming. On some level she wondered if she *had* seen this coming.

After all, it wasn’t like during the lowest points in their dying relationship, she hadn’t leveraged the omnipresent threat of uploading over Eleanor...

Control over the system – the DID system – wasn’t a perfect thing, especially not when it came to Elish. But, as she was fond of reminding herself, she did – or at least *should* – have control. And usually, when it came down to the really important things, she *was* in control. Elish might be able to wrestle it away for a short time to

make an impromptu decision, but he could only grab it for longer time periods or more important decisions if she was either particularly triggered or particularly inebriated. When it came down to brass tacks, she had spent *years*, not to mention the better part of a half a decade long failed relationship, perfecting her control over the others who lived in her brain into an iron fist.

So why had she failed? Why, at the most pivotal moment, with the rest of the system depending on her. With Zia depending on her. With all of her preparation, and her power, and every tool at her disposal. Why had she failed?

A part of her worried very much that the reason she failed was simple: because she never really wanted to succeed.

At first, it felt like she was waking up. She had the half-formed memory of a distant trauma in her mouth. But it was blurred, like something viewed through a film grain. She tried to remember what had happened before, and bumped into a couple of realizations that demanded greater attention.

1. She was naked.
2. She was not in her bedroom.
3. *Something felt wrong in her brain.*

I'm dead. She thought. *I'm dead. I've died. That's the only possible explanation for what is happening.*

“We will now go through some assorted questions that you might be asking yourself:

- ‘Am I dead?’ No, you are not dead. You are inside of the System.

- ‘What happened to my body?’ As you did not specify post upload handling of your physical form prior to your upload; your ashes will be—”

Evi blinked. She did not know how much time had passed. The twin snakes of disassociation and derealization were overwhelming, but this time their poison tasted subtly different.

Something was so, so wrong.

She did not know how long it lasted, but she let out a scream. Non-descript faces, indistinct jump suited figures turned to stare at her.

At the front of the non-room, a very nonplussed anthropomorphic, suit wearing... *skunk* — certainly a furry of some sort — with her longer headfur tied back in a conservative fashion paused, frowning, pulling her gaze away from a gold pocket watch to glance down at her. The very face of efficient bureaucracy, upset at the inefficiency of being interrupted.

She stared down at her skin, so unfamiliar after years of seeing another person’s form, another person’s skin. Every mole, every freckle. Every blemish and imperfection was there. Just like she remembered it to be.

She cried out into the night, gone, gone, it was all *gone*—
“*Miss Pirth.*”

She blinked. She was sitting in a grey room, across from the skunk. She was still naked.

The skunk sighed. She was looking away. “*Miss Pirth, please clothe yourself.*”

She could barely speak, she tried to take in the room, and found she couldn’t.

“The room is nondescript on purpose, to get you to focus on the here and now,” the skunk said, as if reading her thoughts. “Now please, picture yourself wearing the clothes that you wish, and want it. You *do* want to be clothed, yes?” The skunk peered over the rim of what could only be described as librarian glasses.

She thought of how she had been dressed all those years ago, her comfortable orange athleisure shirt, her cargo jeans, sports bra, undergarments, the combat boots she had gotten so used to wearing, her hair in its usual bun. She added the more recent addition, the lab coat, for some extra flair.

She opened her eyes; and saw that it was so.

The skunk nodded her head. Pleased was the wrong word, but she at least looked significantly more *neutral* than she had before. “Very good. Now, are you ready to rejoin the rest of the class?” She tapped on her pocket watch, as if to emphasize the invisible schedule that Evi had interrupted.

She tilted her head. “Where– how... *I don’t belong here.*” She whined. “Please, please, please tell me this is a dream please oh god no I can’t– I can’t be here I shouldn’t be here I–”

The skunk waited while Evi talked herself down from hyperventilating. Sat there, patiently as Evi went through three or five panic attacks. As she came up from the last one, the *ashes* of her hopes and dreams fading into *nothingness* around her, the skunk cleared her throat. She looked up.

The skunk’s frown returned, deeper this time. Followed by a loud sigh. Her clipboard was gently shaking. Presumably, she was resisting the urge to snap her pen in half. And then the neutral expression returned, and an identical skunk appeared next to her; clipboard and all.

“What- I don’t... Huh?” Evi was dumbstruck. The skunk in the chair nodded to her counterpart, who promptly vanished. “Fuck! What was that?!”

The remaining skunk frowned deeper. “Well, this illustrates how much you were paying attention. Unfortunately for you, you *need* to have been paying attention; because *this*, though miracle it may be-” she gestured to the space around them, “-will not pay attention for you. Nor will it prevent you from becoming so panicked that you cannot act on knowledge that you have. However, on the low probability that you were listening to what I said, you should be able to remember everything I carefully enunciated prior to your...” the skunk waved a paw dismissively and lowered her glasses, doing air quotes that seemed to take on a life of their own, “little freakout...s.”

Somehow, the *pluralization* took up accusatory space.

Evi blinked. The skunk stared at her. This went on for a few minutes. The pocket watch ticked the time by, omnipresent.

“If you are going to just sit there and do nothing, then it logically follows that this will take all day. And unfortunately for us both, we *have* all day. Luckily, we have all of eternity, though I do rather doubt this will take that long.” The skunk lowered her glasses again, and Evi unintentionally scooted her chair back. Prompting a rather unfortunate screeching sound and a wince from both of them.

The uncomfortable silence went on for a few moments longer.

“Eternity?”

The skunk sighed. “You are in the System now, surely you have *some* idea of how it works. There is-”

This too, continued.

After a while, Evi shook her head and the skunk sighed.

“Well—” Evi opened her mouth, interrupting. “There, were two of you.”

The skunk frowned. “One: do not interrupt me. Two: correct. There were two of me. And that is called...?”

“Forking,” she answered instantly, and with a start, everything she had gathered about forking before the skunk had pulled her away from class into this private room flooded her mind.

“Correct.” The skunk nodded, but Evi wasn’t listening.

She had turned away and clasped her hands over her mouth, as if to block some invisible knowledge from exiting, but to no avail. While some of the memories around what the skunk dismissively called her “little freakout” were rather hazy, everything — including the panic attack itself — was in pitch-perfect detail. “Oh, no. Oh no no no no.” She stammered. “Oh no— This can’t be happening. This *cannot* be happening.” She could feel herself starting to hyperventilate again.

The skunk huffed, and a cup of tea on a saucer appeared out of thin air. She stirred it twice, then tapped the spoon on the rim of the cup. “It is normally considered rude to hand to someone you have only recently met tea laced with pharmacologically calming substances, even if you inform them of it beforehand.” The skunk continued to mutter to herself with such speed that Evi didn’t catch a bit of what was said. “And even if, unlike your down-tree, you actually have studied dispensing neurologically altering substances *in virtu*, not to mention actually doing coursework in therapy and psychiatry instead of just *larping...*” She trailed off into grumbling for a few seconds before catching herself. She cleared her throat and peered over her glasses at Evi.

“But, in light of the circumstances of how much of my time you have taken up, I feel that I have earned a *bit* of rudeness.” She thrust the tea into Evi’s hands. “Drink up.”

Evi blinked. “I don’t understand.”

The skunk furrowed her brow and lowered her glasses. She stretched back her muzzle (lips? Did skunks have lips?) in what Evi guessed was an attempt at restraining a growl — or perhaps she was getting ready to growl. One of the two.

“Drink. This. And. Take. Deep. Breaths. Now.”

She couldn’t tell skunk emotions well, but *fucking pissed off* was universal, and one she knew too well. So, she drank the tea, and under the skunk’s watchful eye breathed in and out. It was hard, but with the skunk’s encouragement/chastisement (“Acknowledge it, set it aside for later, focus on your breathing...”) she managed to get to the point where she could calmly open her mouth and—

“No.” The skunk held up a finger to her halfway open mouth. “No, no, no. No, *no*.” The skunk pointed a claw at herself. “I am talking. You are listening.”

She blinked, and the skunk clutched at her clipboard all the tighter. “I am not...” There was a pause that felt about five seconds longer than it should. “... unsympathetic to what you have described yourself as going through. But it is critical that you learn how to safely navigate the System, and—” She frowned at her timepiece. “—that we do it before you have another panic attack. I am not chasing a bunch of panicked, half naked forks through most of the public sims on the server. I do not pay myself enough for that.”

Before she could ask about... well, any of that, the skunk tapped the teacup into the ether, and then gently grasped Evi’s empty hands and pulled her into a standing position before quickly letting go. The

skunk paused to flatten some creases on her dress, clear her throat, and center herself. It was the quickest ‘I am ready’ that Evi had ever seen. If she blinked, she would have missed it. That was, assuming she even still blin-

“We have gone over articles of clothing, so let us go over everything else. Starting with, our location. Where are we?”

Evi paused, unsure if she was supposed to answer.

The skunk began to speak, and as she did, something... *happened* out of Evi’s mouth. “Aetherbox#00000053” Evi said, *knowing* instantly that that was where they were. It was as though her mouth was on autocomplete.

The skunk smiled, nodding. “The System does not witness things for you, but it *does* remember things for you, and for anything stored in the perisystem architecture, it does so on demand.”

Before she could ask questions, the skunk continued. “Aetherbox#00000052 is currently empty, let us try heading there.”

Once again, the skunk *split*, and then there were two. One of the skunks curtsied and vanished, but at this point Evi knew what was expected of her. If there was one thing that she was good at it, it was reading other people. She closed her eyes; and was immediately reprimanded. “You do not need to do that.”

Ignoring the skunk, she thought “*I want to go to Aetherbox#00000052.*” There was a moment of *something and nothing*, and then she was there. It was identical to the first location, and the skunk gave a little golf clap as she arrived, followed by a slight chuckle and a bit of a frown.

“You really do not need to close your eyes. It is not necessary.”

Evi smirked, “Well it worke-”

“The last lesson is forking.” The skunk interrupted, as if Evi’s response was simply unimportant in the grand scheme of things. Irrelevant. It made her feel like shit. For every bit of praise the skunk doled out, there was a corresponding something that she had done wrong.

She knew this pattern well. And if she wasn’t going to take it in the physical world–

So, she said nothing. She sat there, staring the skunk down.

“Well, I am waiting. Do you require a hint?” The skunk said, tapping a foot.

“I don’t want to fork,” Evi stated.

“Perhaps not, but you want the reputation bonus that comes with completing this, though, as well as the lack of a very distinguishing ‘Refused to complete orientation’ box next to your profile.”

The skunk clicked open her timepiece again.

Evi had just about had it. “I’m not going to fork.”

The skunk slammed the timepiece closed. “This is ridiculous, and you are being very rude. What is your objection? Name it. Teleporter paradox? Worried about losing the coin flip? Read some scary ‘net story about the System? Name your objection, we will settle it right here, right now, rather than having you unable to enter the majority of public sims. Surely this is the better outcome–”

“No. I am not going to fork, and I’m not going to explain why. I don’t owe this place–” She gestured around. “–jack shit.” In a rather uncharacteristic gesture, she held up both middle fingers to the anthropomorphic skunk, whose frown was rapidly deepening into a snarl.

Before she could figure out what part of her speech was the most offensive, the skunk fucking *lost it*. She whipped off her glasses. “*Fuck*

it. I have devoted far more individual time to you than any other struggling upload today and you do not show a single care in the world for my efforts. I have tried being nice. I have tried being kind. I have tried being considerate and you have deliberately delayed and interrupted me, and now you dare disrespect the sanctity of this 'place', as you so brazenly call it." She made jazz hands — or jazz paws. " 'This place'? You do not owe this 'place' anything, you claim? You selfish child." The skunk advanced on her, teeth bared. "You have no idea of the sacrifices that were made for this 'place' to harbor you, to hold you, to protect you. You are like a dying lamp, scorning the one who refills your oil, thankless and ignorant of the cold darkness that would subsume you if they were but for a moment to falter."

The skunk stopped, and for a brief second, Evi could swear that she saw her form flicker. But in that second, the skunk regained her composure, and just stood there, looking at her. Something about it was terrifying, like she was having her entire soul peered into like some specimen under a powerful microscope. It felt like a violation, an observation she had explicitly not wanted. A demonstration of the power of the person in front of her to see her at every level. "Or perhaps," the skunk said, putting her glasses back on and staring Evi down as she began tearing up. "You desire to be an outcast *here* too. Well, I for one am happy to oblige that utterly nihilistic—"

IV: Zia

At first, Zia assumed that she had simply switched into the front. She assumed that things still worked the same way they did phys-side, and that she was now in control of Evi's body. Although frustrating

to her, the lack of her own physical form worked hella well as an ambush tactic when she could lead someone to the conclusion that they were no longer talking to the same individual without openly stating it.

“What the *fuck* is wrong with you?!” she roared. “Like what the fuck is your problem? You’re, what, an orientation instructor? Aren’t you supposed to be, I don’t know, anything but actively hostile? She kept giving you chance after chance, and you kept doing this passive aggressive bullshit. What the actual fuck is your deal? Leave us the fuck *alone*.”

The skunk was shaking, but Zia was so furious she didn’t notice it immediately, attributing it to her sudden swap into the front and the subsequent change in the body’s mannerisms.

She was ticked. Seeing red. It was bad enough when she had to put up with this from seemingly almost everyone else in her life, but to have it thrust on her by this... stranger? “Like, holy fuck! How can you be so... so- Did you really expect her to, what, fall in love with this place given the reception you’re giving her?”

Evi’s voice was shaky and soft. “Zia.”

Again, there was something off, but Zia assumed that whatever mechanism was allowing them to still have internal dialogue was responsible for the offness.

“It’s okay. I’m putting this bitch in her place,” she said out loud, thinking that she was speaking internally.

“Zia-” A little louder.

The skunk was backing away from her — or, in Zia’s stale perception, away from Evi — arms trembling. Gesticulating wildly at Zia, at something else.

“Yeah, you thought you were picking on one person, right? You saw this,” she gestured to herself, “and figured, ‘Oh, she’s not going to fight back.’ Figured you could just, what, be a fucking asshole with no consequences?” She advanced towards the skunk, whose hackles were raised in alarm, her teeth chattering.

“Zia—” Evi whined, even louder.

“Not now.”

“Well guess what, motherfucker.” She did her best Eliah impression, “Actions have consequences.”

The skunk was flickering now. She could see it. Ghostly apparitions of a human form eerily matched in many an aspect faded in and out, layering the skunk like a hologram. With her shaking hands/paws, she dropped the timepiece.

“Zia!” Evi yelled.

“Shut up, Evi!” She yelled back. “I’m in front! Let me do this! Let me do *something* for once.”

The skunk was making strange, half-garbled noises, switching her gaze rapidly between the timepiece and Zia.

“Zia *listen to me!*” Evi yelled, grabbing her arm.

Zia stopped in her tracks, and the skunk seized the opportunity to grab the timepiece between her shifting paws/hands and scuttled backwards. Blinking, Zia tried to comprehend what was happening to her. She could *feel* Evi’s hands on her. Her stomach dropped, and she looked down.

Instead of their physical body — their *shared* physical body — she saw her *own* body, her *own* arms with every detail exactly how she recalled, and Evi’s hand, Evi’s actual physical hand, gripping onto her arm. She swallowed and looked over to where the skunk had been

pointing only to see Evi — actual, real, *embodied* Evi — standing next to her.

They both had their own body. She hadn't switched in front. There was no more front, as far as she could feel. She was alone in her own head, in her own body. Her mouth dropped open, "Holy shit..."

The look on Evi's face cut her off. She was holding a single finger up to her mouth, in a gesture universally understood. When she was sure that Zia would stay still, she took her arm off of hers. Zia marveled at the weight of it. She could *feel* the weight of Evi's hold releasing. She could actually feel it.

As she watched, Evi retracted her now free arm, and held her hand up to her ear in a cupped gesture, still making the *shh* gesture with her free hand. She nodded silently in the direction of the skunk, and that's when Zia realized that the expression on Evi's face was one of horror.

In the corner, the skunk had stopped flickering. She was instead, curled up, clutching the timepiece to her chest and reciting vaguely familiar scripture that made Zia's heart sink and Evi's hands tremble.

Tick!

"Eili, Eili, lamah azavtani..."

Zia realized that she had, in fact, fucked up. And, looking over at Evi, the fact that they were *separate* and all its ramifications hitting home, she felt her own panic start to rise. Although the skunk's creepy, pitiful behavior elicited some sympathy from her, she was also an asshole and a potential threat. She would analyze whether

she had gone too far later. (Or, she would hear about it from Eliah). But what, exactly, *had* she just done? And where, she wondered, was Eliah? If she couldn't feel him, and she couldn't, then that would mean that. She stared at Evi, who was frozen in place, staring at the skunk. Oh fuck no. Oh *fuck* no. And so of course, that was when she noticed the timepiece started ticking louder.

Tock!

My God, my God,
why have You abandoned me;
why so far from delivering me
and from my anguished roaring?

And in the meanwhile...

Tick!

two skunks forked into being, reciting the same poem.

My God,
I cry by day—You answer not;
by night, and have no respite.

Tock!

four additional skunks. Evi began to walk forward.

But You are the Holy One,
enthroned,
the Praise of Israel.

Tick!

there were *sixteen* skunks.

“Fascinating.” Evi said, pausing to look at the row of chanting, curled up skunks, before moving towards them. Zia had never been the best at math, but she *knew* what was happening here. And with a start, she realized she knew the name for it too: exponential growth.

In You our fathers trusted;
they trusted, and You rescued them.

Tock!

The chanting was deafening. The skunks were *piling on top of each other*. She could no longer even see the original one. Evi held up her hands protectively, as if the sudden instantiation of tens of who knows how many skunks had suddenly displaced the air (did this place even *have* air?) previously occupying the now fluff covered space.

“Evi, wait! I just want to talk!”

The newly straight-laced protector paused with military precision, further tightened the bun she had pulled her black hair into, then turned and shot a glance full of daggers at Zia.

It was if a fire had been lit under Evi’s ass, although quite why the change was this dramatic, Zia couldn’t begin to comprehend. Was this simply what it looked like from the outside when the other members of the system jumped into action to protect her? She didn’t have time to think about it further, because three identical Evis forked into being, rushing towards Zia. She tried to dodge, but one

of the them circled right and grabbed her. Together with the other two, they held her against the non-wall.

“Hello Zia”, one of them said. “I’m listening.” The System helpfully informed her that the Evi talking to her had two tags, Evi#1 (canonically Evi#00000001), and that the other two were Evi#2 and Evi#3.

Zia struggled. “Not to you, to her!”

To You they cried out
and they escaped;
in You they trusted
and were not disappointed

Tick

!

The skunks extended a third of a way across the room. Like a great black-and-white-furred jungle. Evi stood tall before it, looking up and down as if sizing up a tree to cut down. Zia tried her best to yell, but the chanting of the increasingly numerous skunks was starting to drown her out.

“Evi! We can’t do this alone! You know we can’t do this alone.”

The Evis holding her down frowned in near unison.

“Oh?” one of them asked.

“And who would you suggest?” Another finished.

“Eliah?” the third sneered with disdain and sarcasm.

Zia struggled with all her might, biting and thrashing against the combined hold of the Evis, but to no avail. “I don’t know! Maybe! Do you have a better idea?”

But I am a worm, less than human;
scorned by men, despised by people.

Tock!

She could see the skunks in the background, looming larger and louder. Evi#3 turned to glance back at the skunks, though she and Evi#2 still held onto her.

Evi#1 laughed bitterly. Her face was a portrait of anger, though it was hard to take seriously with the ever-looming sea of skunks in the background. “Do you understand at all what is going on here?”

All who see me mock me;
they curl their lips,
they shake their heads.

Tick!

The skunks had passed the midpoint of the room, they towered overhead, devouring the table. Zia realized that she had been yelling.

Evi#3 let go and looked around. “Holy mother of—” She turned back around to her compatriots. “We need to move! They’ll crush us!”

They both nodded, and together, Evi#1 and Evi#2 painfully twisted her arms behind her back and hastily started to march her towards the far wall. Evi#3 fell in behind them all, walking backwards and staring at the skunks.

“Yes! I get what’s going on here! We’re going to be crushed by fucking skunks! Evi please! We need him! I need him!” Zia pleaded.

Evi#1 snorted and shook her head, Evi#2 frowned, and Evi#3 muttered, “If I could frown backwards, my hair bun would be frowning at you. I want you to know that. I also want you to stop wasting my precious time.”

The other Evis nodded in agreement.

Let him commit himself to the LORD;
let Him rescue him,
let Him save him,
for He is pleased with him.

Tock!

“Wrong, the skunks aren’t fucking. Try again, Miss Williams,” Evi#1 calmly stated.

Zia burst out a rephrased version in panic, “We’re going to be *fucking* crushed by exponentially increasing skunks!”

Evi#3 turned around from her skunkwatch. “Since when did you know the word exponential?”

Evi#1 waved dismissively at her. “Technically accurate, but also wrong. No, let me tell you what’s happened. Let me tell you what’s *going* to happen.”

Zia gulped. Evi had been angry at her before, but never like this. She could read every crease of stress in the woman’s face, see her lips settling into a sort of upside down snake of a frown. The anger in her oak-colored eyes was like a fire. For just a moment, the skunks faded into the background.

You drew me from the womb,
made me secure at my mother’s breast.

Tick!

“Elijah *uploaded* us. Do you know what that means? What that entails? Remember our friends, like Mateus? We’ll never see him again, any of them. Period. Any chance of reconciling with the family? Dead. Gone. Zilch. We might as well not exist. We’re in the digital world now, and it means jack shit. You remember, right? The place where people go when they fucking abandon us? Paradise in a bramble of thorns. Limbo is more like it. That’s where we are. *That* System. *That* is what that opportunistic, ruthless, double-crossing son of a bitch did for—”

“How can you fucking talk about him like that?!” She bit Evi#1, *hard*.

“You little shit! I’m trying to protect you!” Evi#1 yelled back, stepping away from Zia and clutching her wrist in pain.

I became Your charge at birth;
from my mother’s womb You have been my God

Tock!

“Hey, no, we don’t talk about each other like that!” Evi#2 glared at her compatriot. “You’re better than him.”

Evi#1 screwed up her face in disgust, “You’re really gonna try to defend him *and* her? Really? She just bit me! And *he* got us uploaded! I don’t need this from myself a few minutes before I die or get deleted or whatever.”

Internally, Zia winced. What would Evi say if she knew who had *actually* gotten them uploaded? The thought made her even angrier at Evi's presumption of Eliah's guilt. She didn't regret biting her.

Evi#2 let go of Zia and turned to face Evi#1. Meanwhile, Evi#3 was off somewhere in the distance, trying to... well, she had no idea what she was trying to do, but it certainly wasn't holding back the tide of skunks. It looked like she was trying to duplicate the tables, form some sort of barricade against the living wall of skunks. It wasn't working.

Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near,
and there is none to help.

Tick!

"I'm not defending, anybody. So you can take your rhetoric and shove it up your ass. Also, how did you take that personally? I *am* you. I'm *checking* you. Think logically. What does what we do, what does protecting this system matter—" Evi#2 began.

"—If we fail." Evi#1 spat at her counterpart.

Evi #2's face twisted into loathing. "Wow. I can't believe I'm saying this to myself. Alright, big guns then. Did you really learn so little from Eleanor? 'If we fail?' And to think I thought I knew myself. I guess the only thing you learned from our therapy sessions was how to gaslight yourself. Seriously what is going on in your head? How am I— ugh, how are you coming to these conclusions?"

Many bulls surround me,
mighty ones of Bashan encircle me.

Tock!

Evi#1 made a disgusted sound, it looked like the two instances were a second from going head-to-head.

“It’s never been about failure, it’s been about doing what’s right for *her*. Right for the system,” Evi#2 said. “That’s what matters.”

“Oh, don’t give me that self-righteous—” Evi#1 began.

Zia looked up. The multiplying skunks were looming over them like a living tide. There was no sun in Aetherbox#00000052, but if there had been, they would have blotted it out. The Evis continued their war of words, oblivious to it.

This is how I die, Zia thought. Drowned in a sea of fur. Sunken underneath countless skunks. Suffocating in black and white tails.

The two Evis were still shouting back and forth at each other, though how much of it was in anger and how much of it was to be heard over the increasing chanting of the skunks; she was unsure of. Evi#2 appeared to be winning.

“That’s what separates us, from him!” Evi#2 hollered at Evi#1. “We do what’s *right for her*. Even when it costs us. Even when it results in us not getting our way. Even when we go through a break up with someone we wanted to *marry*, even when we suffer that much, we’re not tyrants, we’re not our predecessor, we’re not Eliah, we’re not our father. We do right by her, by the system, by ourselves, even when it would be so much easier to just subsume the whole damn system and her in the process. We are honest with ourselves; we don’t cut out pieces of our heart and bury them six feet under. That’s what you spent years teaching me, Evi#1! What you learned from

Eleanor! How to fucking love ourselves!” Evi#2 shouted at her counterpart.”

Evi#1 and Zia shared a glance, they were both equally confused. Evi#2 *also* looked confused.

She froze, her mouth half open, then forked. The person who came out looked *very* different to Evi’s ‘why yes, I *do* have a Ph.D, thank you very much for noticing!’ aesthetic. Her short hair was a greyish brown, her eyes blue and yellow, a long pair of black wings grew from her back, and her skin was a shade or two darker than Evi’s. Black ears and a tail the same color as her hair (headfur?) completed the look.

Her original instance quit.

Zia recognized her instantly. “The fuck?”

By the look on Evi’s face, she recognized her too.

They open their mouths at me
like tearing, roaring lions.

Tick!

Evi#1’s jaw dropped. “Felina?” she asked unbelievably. “But you dissolved! You were gone! You became a part of me!”

“In the fur.” Felina said, crossing her arms impatiently. Her tail flit back and forth and she was tapping her claws on her left elbow impatiently. “If you don’t believe me, check.”

And true to what she said, the perisystem architecture indeed identified her as Felina. Not for the first time, Zia wondered if the System really was that intuitive, or if the members of Peace had a leg

up. If, as she'd heard it described, the System was closer to a dream or hallucination, the shared mental space that Peace constructed and inhabited may not be that far off.

If Felina was surprised at who she ended up being, she didn't show it. "By the way, about that 'becoming a part of you'?" She walked over to Evi#1 and tapped her on the nose.

"Don't!"

"Yeah, that was a mistake. Honestly, an even bigger one than that time you tried the carrot with Eliah, and the stick with me. You obviously didn't learn from that, because it looks like the first thing you did after we integrated was ignore everything I brought to the table, and when you couldn't ignore it, you just took a q-tip and shoved it in between your ears!"

Evi#1 was livid, face red with anger, "How fucking *dare* you, comparing all the shit I had to deal with after you and I integrated to Eliah *fucking uploading* us. Do you not have any shame?"

"Oh, I have plenty of shame, guilt too, but unlike you; I can deal with it." Felina looked down, examining her nails for a few seconds, before resuming her pacing around Evi — who looked like she was about to explode. "Evi, I call it like I see it. You know this! It takes a pretty big fuckup to outrank one of the biggest ones we ever made. I regret it. Somehow, me plus you equals your bad side." She snapped some finger-guns Eviwards. "And that's weird, because I used to be the persecutor alter in the system, so I figured newly minted Paladin plus Defender equals Good. But nah. Don't get me wrong, Eliah fucking uploaded us. That shit is *evil*. But you are better than that. So, what's your excuse?"

And there it was again; he was always the villain in their eyes. In *everyone's* eyes but hers.

She couldn't fucking stand it.

My life ebbs away:
all my bones are disjointed;
my heart is like wax,
melting within me;

Tock!

Skunkmageddon. While Evi#1 and Felina kept bickering, the room exploded into Skunkmageddon. Any minute, it would all be over in a sea of black and white fluff. The skunks would rain down from the aether, and all life in Aetherbox#52 not part of the Mephitidae family would end.

And Zia seemed to be the only one who cared. Evi#1 and Felina were too busy glaring at each other and trading insults to pay attention to the end of the world. *And*, she realized. *To me*. It hit her like a lightbulb. She rushed the two of them, and shoved them forward, then she jumped in front of them and pointed at the avalanche of skunks.

“Goddammit look at them!” Zia shouted. “Just fucking bring Eliah out! Fucking let the whole ‘Eliah is the worst person in the system’ thing go. You both think you’re so much better than him, but if I’m going to drown in skunks, I’d rather do it with him than you two!”

Felina looked like she had been slapped. Evi#1 looked on the verge of tears. They both stared at her as the furry end of the world loomed in the background.

“Yeah, Felina, that means you too!” she emphasized before she could falter. Felina looked genuinely hurt. But she had to keep going, she had to get through to both of them. “At least *he* doesn’t pretend to be a selfless protector! If I call him on hurting me, he owns up to it! He tries to make up for it! And he expects me to do the same when I hurt him. He makes me feel like a person. That’s more than I can say for either of you! You both still act like I’m some fucking traumatized kid!” Zia screamed.

Evi#1 looked absolutely devastated. Like her world had ended. Between the sparring with Felina, skunkmaggodon, and the angry tears yelling up in Zia’s eyes, she seemed to be crumbling to pieces. All the fight had gone out of her. She collapsed onto the floor, muttering something about ‘what have I done’.

“Zia.” Felina said gently, but firmly. “Elijah is a dangerous person. I know. I used to be one. I don’t know what he’s told, but he went behind everyone’s backs, and he uploa—”

“I got us uploaded!” Zia shouted. “I can’t believe you’re still blaming him when I’m the one who got us uploaded and *you two know that!*”

There. It was out. She had said it. She hastily looked between the two of them, searching for signs that they hated her. They didn’t look as surprised as she thought they would, though Felina looked like she was desperately trying to refuse reality. The lack of anger concerned her.

“Right? You two know that. You’re just denying it. Because I can remember *everything*. I can remember being you, and you, I can remember being him. And now that I have it all in perspective, you two are still wrong about him. So wrong. Yeah, sometimes he’s selfish, sometimes he’s an asshole, and sure, he’s made a lot of mistakes,

but you know what? Whatever the reason, when it comes down to it, he *tries* to put me first. He cares about me as more than just a responsibility, even if he fucks up more often than you two do. I *know* that. I can admit that. He can admit it. So, why the fuck can't you two? Why can't you admit that I was the one who fucked up this time? Why does it need to be him?"

The pair exchanged a glance. Evi sighed. "It's not the same. He has a power differential over you—"

"Bullshit. I'm an adult." She spat back.

"Your history means that he—"

"Goddamnit, Evi, you are *choosing* to believe that."

Felina spoke up, having finally resolved whatever internal conflict was gnawing at her. "She's choosing to believe it because if she doesn't, she'll hate you."

Zia shot Felina a quick, grateful look. She had to focus on making Evi understand.

"I'm choosing to care about you." Evi added, very much looking past Zia, not even acknowledging Felina.

"You do, but if you both actually care about me, then you have to at least take a chance to care about him, because that's what I am asking you to do."

Evi reached out a hand, "Zia, I do care about you, you know that—"

Zia closed her eyes, tried to hold back more angry tears, and lashed out; batting away Felina's hand. "No, I don't, because you're not showing it right now. You're not listening to me. I'm asking you to show that by giving him a chance." She met Evi's tear-soaked gaze, there was so much *guilt* in that look. She had never seen Evi like this before.

Felina's gently maneuvered herself next to Evi, ready to envelop her in a hug.

Zia continued. "You haven't been showing it since you broke up with Eleanor, Evi. I get that you resent everyone in here for that. I get it. Okay. I loved her too. I miss her. But that doesn't give you the right to treat someone who is making just as much a genuine effort to care about me as you used to — I say used to because you stopped trying after the breakup — like *shit*. I'm not asking you to forgive him. I'm not asking you not to hate him. But is it too much to ask for you to treat him like a *person*?"

She looked over at the black hole of black fur. "God, we're fucked." She turned back to them and lowered her voice, pleading "Can we just. Can we die together in a sea of skunks in Peace? Like, you know, the thing we named the system after? Can we at least do that?"

Evi was just full-on crying. Felina extended her wings, and Evi fell into them, she put her arms around Evi's shoulders and held her, then turned towards Zia, and patted the spot next to the other side of her. Zia walked over, and Felina embraced her with a squeeze of a winghug. It felt just as safe and warm as Zia remembered, and she shoved back some happy tears as she leaned in and attempted to encompass both Felina and Evi in a hug of her own. They sat there for a minute, crying and being awkward and sniffing, until finally Evi looked up at Zia and spoke. Her eyes were full of tears but she seemed slightly more composed.

"I'm sorry." Evi#1 said.

"I am too. And," Felina added, "If I could fork Eliah for you... "

"... I would," Evi#1 finished her sentence. The conviction in her eyes was genuine.

“...I would too.” Felina nodded.

Zia looked away. She didn’t want to forgive them, and she wasn’t going to. Elish should have been here too, and he wasn’t.

But at least they were willing to try. At least they were willing to give him a chance. And that had to count for something.

my vigor dries up like a shard;
my tongue cleaves to my palate;
You commit me to the dust of death.

Dogs surround me;
a pack of evil ones closes in on me,
like lions [they maul] my hands and feet.

I take the count of all my bones
while they look on and gloat.

They divide my clothes among themselves,
casting lots for my garments.

Tick!

“Thanks,” she said, meeting their gazes.

“She’s telling the truth, I would know,” Felina added, which earned a glare from Evi.

“I know. And I know why neither of you can fork him. Not enough reputation.” She sighed.

Evi#1 began to explain anyway. “Neither of us have enough reputation to fork– Wait. How did you know that?”

“Because I pay attention to things.” Zia said, nonplussed.

“It’s one of your strong suits,” Evi responded, smiling slightly. It was the first time she had complimented her since the breakup with Eleanor. Felina clapped Zia on the back and gave her a thumbs up and a grin. Zia grinned back.

“But where did it all go anyway? Did you not give yourself any?” Zia asked.

“No, I’m not that stingy. I got a big chunk of it from Evi, but I gave it all to Evi#3 to try to build... well something that obviously failed.” Evi#1 stated.

“Yeah, no shit.” Zia responded. It was like they were in the eye of the storm. If the storm was made of skunks. She sighed. “It’s okay. You both tried. You listened to me. That’s enough.” She didn’t feel like it was, but...

“We both know it’s not. And, I’m sorry. To both of you.” Evi#1 said, “I should have done better by you two. I just, I miss her. I miss Eleanor.”

Felina wrapped her even tighter in the winged hug, and Ziareturned the squeeze. They stayed there for a few moments as Evi#1 cried, and they comforted her.

Wiping the tears off her face, Evi#1 turned to both of them with a sad smile, “Right then. Let’s go down with the ship.”

Felina dropped her wings, and the chanting was once again overwhelming. The skunks were overwhelming. They had to shout to hear each other.

Together, they all looked up at the skunkpocalypse.

“Last words?” someone shouted

“I can’t fucking believe this is how I’m going to die!” Felina yelled.

“For the record, if I had to choose between being crushed by skunks or dying with my bio family, *I would choose the skunks every day of the week and twice on Tuesday!*” Evi#1 said, which got a chuckle out of everyone.

Zia thought about hers for what she felt was way too long, but she was having a hard time coming up with something. It had to be a quote from one of those old movies Eliah loved so much, but *which quote?* There were so many good ones! She couldn't choose. She habitually scratched at her arm, and marveled when she realized she was scratching at the scar she had remembered growing up with, the one that was decidedly absent from their shared physical body. Ughhhh. So many quotes. How could she pick betwe- *lightbulb moment.*

“Fuck! I have a stupid question!”

“*That's your quote?*” Felina asked, tilting her head.

“There are no stupid questions. You've never asked a one, but you better ask it quick because we're all about to die,” Evi#1 said.

“If you don't have the reputation, why not just merge back into Evi? Why not have her fork off Eliah, she's closer to the source of this than we are? Oh, wait shit, did she choke to death on fur? When a fork dies can you feel it?”

Evi#1 and Felina exchanged wide-eyed glances at each other.

“I can still merge in,” Evi#1 said. “I can still merge down! She's alive! Evi- Uh, Evi Prime is alive!”

“Holy shit, go already!” Felina yelled. Evi#1 gave her and Zia a hug and then vanished. At that moment, a massive wave of skunks rose up, ready to bury them both. “Get behind me!”

Felina attempted to shove her back. Zia shook herself free, a maniac grin on her face. “You don't get to treat me like a kid either no

matter how good your hugs are, and this is just way too ridiculous a death to pass up seeing firsthand,” she shouted, grabbing Felina’s hand tightly in hers.

Felina squeezed back, holding her hand even tighter, then grinned back at her, a wild glint in her eyes.

“Alright then, bring it!” she shouted at the wave of skunks.

“*Fucking bring it!*” Zia hollered.

The skunks continued to chant, as the wave of black and white fur reached higher, higher, and higher.

But You, O LORD , be not far off;
my strength, hasten to my aid.

Tock!

Save my life from the sword,
my precious life from the clutches of a dog.

VI: Evi Prime

So, this was how she died.

Uploaded against her will by Eliah, getting triggered as fuck, and then triggering the fuck out of the orientation Mustelid.

Dr. Woodward was going to have a *field day* with that.

Evi felt that she was, all things considered, pretty low on the nightmare reaction scale when she got triggered — with some exceptions. Even considering those exceptions, the rare nine or ten, she could never imagine somehow getting anyone but herself killed. And while she knew some folks’ nines and tens were way worse than

hers, this was something else. As she struggled to move out from under the pile of fluffy, chanting skunks, she decided that exponentially splitting off equally panicked copies of oneself until either the panic ended or the room had no more space for skunks took the fucking cake.

The only bright light to this whole thing is that she could not have been reasonably expected to have predicted and guarded against such a ridiculous circumstance, and thus; she was content.

Did she want to go out another way? For sure. Dying peacefully in her sleep at a ripe old age would most definitely be preferable. But, all in all, since she couldn't change things her only wish was that the skunk would spare her dignity and cover up the accidental manslaughter.

She could imagine it easily. The skunk coming out of her panic attack several hours later to find herself in a room full of herself. She would merge her forks, clean up her appearance, and realize there were several bodies lying on the floor. Perhaps they would have 'X's in their eyes, like in some sort of comic strip. "Oh dear," she would say, frowning slightly. Perhaps she would click and drag them to a trash can. Maybe she would simply delete the sim. Whoever was in charge of these things would poke her about it later, and she would pretend to look it up, before going, "Oh, transfer #812453? A failure. Irrecoverable. I know. So sad. The technicians are already looking into it. I will forward you the details." On the technician's side, the ticket would already be closed. Or perhaps simply never generated.

Really, having her death covered up would be far preferable. Anything besides "Here lies Evi Pirth, crushed to death by panicked forks of a deranged skunk."

Honestly though, she couldn't really blame her. When she really thought about it, the whole chain of causality linked back to Eliah anyway, and he could go fuck himself.

And then the merge happened.

Instinctively, she accepted it. She might have been able to figure out how not to, but she wanted to know what had happened, after all. Why was one of the copies of her that she had sent to protect Zia and keep her out of her way requesting to merge back in? Why was it coming with a feeling Evi could only describe as 'uncomfortably high priority'? It made no sense. The only data point she could go off of was the urgency. And that? *That* made her worried.

So, she accepted, then let out a gasp, gritted her teeth, and gradually softened her expression as she reconciled what she had just thought was true with the conclusions that Evi#1 had reached. None of their experiences were conflicting *per se*, the inherent strangeness of being one person — then two people — then one person but also two people aside, of course. She hadn't expected to tear up, and quickly choked it back, but this was one hard pill to swallow. She suspected that the primary reason she was able to was because that was all she had to do. There were a few new revelations, but deep down she had known most it all along.

She would need to tackle all those feelings later, because as she had accepted the new/familiar data, she had come to a conclusion about the logical course of action that needed to be taken.

And while she was happy from the respite from her own feelings the necessary course of action offered her, she was also gritting her teeth. Because *goddammit* she was salty as fuck about what she needed to do next. She was also surprised, proud, sad, and about twenty other emotions all at once. But as the merge finished and she

set things aside, everything devolved into the emotion she'd always known as 'eating crow'.

“

Fuck,” she spat out loud, involuntarily smacking her fist against the ground with leverage she hadn't known she had. She would have been pissed, but as the skunk that had been on top of her shoulder toppled onto her hand and ended its moment of freedom she was once again forced to confront that she was not getting out from under the pile of panicked Mustelids on her own.

She sighed loudly and deeply, and took advantage of the very brief moment in time before the skunk horde recoalesced. Some of the copies had scattered, just a few feet in front of her. Maybe it was the sudden swearing, the fist, or the pile shifting when she moved her arm. Maybe it was luck. But it was a chance. She fucking despised the idea that forking Eliah off would quite possibly be the last thing she ever did, but it was a way to move forward, a way to not give up.

And, it was the right thing to do for Zia.

She focused on the gap a few feet away, concentrated on forking, and *prayed* that Eliah would end up instantiated flat on his ass, and that it would *hurt*.

And just maybe, if for no reason other than not being crushed by the System's most densely packed pile of skunks, she prayed for him to succeed where she had failed.

VII: Eliah#Fennec

Eliah#Fennec landed flat on his tail, prompting three reactions.

1. Ow! Son of a bitch!

2. Thank you, Evi (He turned around to thank her, but only an outstretched hand giving a thumbs up was visible. The rest of her was buried under skunks. What a way to go.)

3. Wait, tail? And fennec? Why fennec?

He scrunched his face together and rubbed his sore backside. His brain felt like a hornet's nest. Everything was happening everywhere, all at once. His back hurt, his butt hurt, his tail hurt, and his pride hurt. Was this what it felt like to be born? If so, no wonder babies came out crying.

But he would deal with all of that later. He could *only* deal with all of that later, because right now, he had a mission to accomplish; something to do.

He shoved the entire hornet's nest to the side, did his best imitation of a linebacker, sent a prayer out for Zia's safety, took a few steps back, and roared like an animal as he charged the pile of skunk copies between him, aiming for the original, catatonic skunk in the corner.

For a fennec, he packed a punch. Fur went flying, inway was made, but not enough. He resorted to grabbing individual skunks, maneuvering them as much as he could to create openings he could crawl through. The world was a mountain of skunks he was climbing over, under, and through. System be damned, he felt he would be finding black and white furs in his hat for years even if he instantiated a new one. (Where *had* his hat come from anyway? He didn't know, but he was glad for it.)

He had no idea how much time had passed or how much ground he had covered, but at some point, the desire to give up began to

grow. He was so tired. Every muscle in his body ached. His aching tail was the least of his worries.

But he couldn't. He was right near the summit. She was *right there*. He couldn't quit now. He was so close and had gone through so *many skunks*. A pang of fear and determination struck him through the heart.

Zia.

He had to do it.

He mustered everything he could, gave another yell, and, before he blindly pressed on noticed a small gap in front of him, closing quickly; impossibly small.

He was too late. He was too large, he would never—

A lightbulb lit up in his head. *He* didn't need to make it.

Closing his eyes, he used the last of his reputation and forked himself, but smaller. Fennec sized. Still anthropomorphic, still clothed, but far smaller. At least this new instance also had his own, smaller hat. Actually, come to think of it, that made sense. He couldn't blame himself for that, his hat was far too big, after all, and covered in skunk fur besides.

As the skunks fell on top of him, black and white fur blotted out his entire vision; the end of the world.

The last thing he saw was exactly what he needed to see. His fennec sized doppelganger, flying through the rapidly closing gap in the pile. It was almost like a scene out of one of his favorite old movies, complete with a slow-motion camera pan, and one final thumbs-up and silent nod between the pair as Eliah#It'sNotImpossible made it through the gap. Mission accomplished. What a thing to go out to.

And then, there were only skunks.

VIII: Eliah#It'sNotImpossible

He blinked and took in his surroundings. Then he chuckled as he recognized the quote his tag referenced. Photon torpedo indeed. You couldn't beat Star Wars. Absolute classic. *Focus, Zia needs you.*

Right. Focus. He took stock of his surroundings. Getting used to being this short was going to be... a process. He looked down at his paws, and then around at the position he found himself in. He hoped he had at least gotten the hat the right size; it still felt too large.

The wall of skunks was to his rear, and the opening he had barreled through had already closed. He quickly doffed his hat in respect to his predecessor. Buried alive by skunks. What a way to go. Surprisingly though, in *front* of him was a rather large amount of empty space. If Eliah#Fennec — he started to make a mental note to remind his down-tree to change that tag later, only to discover such a note already existed. Not being capable of forgetting continued to be the strangest thing — had been able to make it here, he could have stood up comfortably.

The eye of the storm, he thought.

And at the center: the storm in question, personified in the form of a very, *very* distressed skunk.

She was shaking, chanting those words, and clinging to her time-piece. *Is she having a panic attack?* he wondered. If so, it would definitely take the cake for the weirdest panic attack he had ever seen, even without the innumerable forking. But he knew from experience that when folks got hurt, their hurt shone through the cracks in different ways. Maybe this was just her way.

But what hurt her? What did *this*?

He walked cautiously over to her, taking his time to observe. Her clothes were disheveled, her hair mussed up. She was curled up against the wall, clutching the timepiece. And there were those words again... He recognized the Psalm, but not the other ones. One thing was clear, unlike the praying, none of the aspects of her disheveled appearance suited her typical formal look.

Another thing: he had no idea what he could do. But he had to try. Zia was depending on him, and he was the only one in a position to do something. Not for the first time, it all came down to him.

He padded carefully over to the skunk, shoving down how strange it felt to be this small. She was lying on her side now, which meant he was a little taller than her head at its widest. He was *not* even entertaining going on four legs.

This also meant that he was dead on with her face, and this close, he could see every expression of distress in it. At first, her eyes were screwed shut. Then, with no external cue he could sense, she opened them. She looked past him, not at him, then she screwed them shut again. He paused for as long as he could to study her gaze.

It was like she was looking into some great horrific beyond that existed even when her eyes were closed.

Was that why she was panic forking? To outrun that horrific eternity? An eternity of what?

The question scratched at the back of his mind, he wanted to know so badly. It was right there.

All of a sudden, he felt the fur on the back of his neck stand up. It was, perhaps, better not to know. The question was an answer to itself.

He could live with that.

And, he realized with a pang of guilt, in the worst-case scenario, knowing wouldn't help with what would he would have to do, it would just make it harder. While her eyes were closed, he patted his side to make sure his knife was still on him and that it hadn't shrunk too much. It was still there, and still usable.

He watched her for a few more minutes, but eventually he just couldn't observe her anymore. It would have felt voyeuristic, with how absolutely miserable she looked, how clearly she wanted to be anywhere else. So, he stepped forward, and cleared his throat.

"Uh, Ma'am..." he began, and then forced himself not to stumble backwards when her eyes snapped open. They were filled with wildness and frenzy. For a few seconds, her stare was everywhere at once, rapidly moving back and forth before finally settling on him.

Then, there was a noise.

A pained wail that made something inside him curl in sympathy and, if he was being honest, fear. He held up his paws "Whoa whoa whoa. I'm not here to hurt you. You just, uh, look like you're in a bit of trouble and I... Well, I wanted to see if I could do anything to help." He kept both of his hands up, resisting the urge to rub his headfur with one, and move the other nearer to his knife.

He did not understand what happened next, but he did his damndest to roll with it anyway.

She laughed. A painful, bitter laugh. Held her paws over her eyes and let out a whimper, and that awful blood curdling cry again. After a while, she took them away.

"Is this what happens when I fail at what I then must? In all ways, earnest? When I am not true to myself, always? Do I drown in dreams and memory?" She started sobbing. Again, that awful howling cry.

For a brief second, he thought he could see the image of a woman flicker over her like some sort of projection; but then it was gone.

She stared at him for a few seconds. Taking him in. And before he could formulate what to say next, with a voice filled with centuries of calm sorrow, she said quite abruptly “I appreciate you showing up in that outfit. But our last Sadie Hawkins dance was a century ago.”

He had no clue what a Sadie Hawkins dance was. But he was 150% sure that he had not taken this girl to any dance at any point, and neither had Evi. It wasn’t in either Evi’s memories or his own, ‘fictional’ though the latter may have been.

But there was something in there that he *did* know.

There was something unmistakable, because whether his memories were real or not, his loss was. Reflection of Evi’s many losses or not, the way he felt it, the way it affected him, all of that mattered.

Sure, he had never experienced the events in the memories. That was important; he could never lose sight of that. But the feelings they produced, the things he felt... Were they not important too? Was that not the whole point? The reason why memories were important in the first place?

The hole in his heart that would never quite close up was one he didn’t *want* to close up.

That was real.

Eleanor had taught him that, had taught the entire system that. Memories, regardless of their ‘realness’, mattered. And how they made one feel, how one felt about them. That mattered too. It made them who they were.

And as the skunk began to speak, the summer conversations on the patio with Eleanor once again came back to him.

The feeling of loss he carried around every single day was real. Not real in the same way as whatever had happened to the skunk, but it was still real. The experiences differed; the feeling remained.

And he had been right. The skunk knew the feeling too.

She knew loss.

But it took an entire musical number to get to that realization and to put it into action. Long after this point, he would reflect on how things might have gone differently had he made the wrong decision.

Sometimes, he still did not know why, in the end, he made the right one. “Oh... I wish– I wish Debarre was here... to see you. I wish– I wish–” The words poured from her mouth like ink overflowing. “*My vigor dries up like a shard.*”

He jumped back a bit. It was like she was speaking in italics. Or rather, like the italics were speaking *through* her.

“*My tongue cleaves to my palate.*”

She jumped forward, and he jumped back. He put thoughts about mutual loss aside as his adrenaline slammed into gear. He considered forking his old self back, he had the reputation and if he didn’t think about the whole ‘quitting’ aspect then it was basically just like restoring from an instant backup.

And who better to have your back than yourself–

He realized that one of his hands was reaching for the empty spot where his holster would be. He cut that shit out, and resisted the urge to reach for the knife. He didn’t know why. She was clearly gone. Off the deep end. Out to a lunch. A picnic on some green grassy hills that would last forever. And Zia was in danger, so why didn’t he pull the knife on her then? It was the safest option. He didn’t know.

Maybe it was a fear of what Zia (and Eleanor) would think. Or, most worryingly, maybe it was that he just couldn't do it.

The skunk was pulled up like a Marionette by her own words. Each of her limbs rose in a haphazard sequence. He felt that if he squinted, he would probably be able to *see* bits of wire sticking out of her joints and trailing up into the ether; held by a creature he very much did not *want* to meet. For a brief moment, their gazes met. Her eyes were on fire. He had no clue what to make of it. Then, she *shook*, becoming hazy and indistinct.

At first, he thought he had gone mad. Because it looked like there actually *was* something overlaid on top of her.

This was where it would happen, then. She would be unsheathed, her appearance flying off of her body to reveal whatever lay underneath, a mannequin stripped of all its human attire or the bare skeleton of an animatronic. His fur stood on end, any second now, he would see the wires.

Instead, for the briefest of moments, he saw the image of a young, black-haired woman. Her eyes wide with the same terror as the skunk, and her face transfixed in utter horror.

He could not look into them.

"You lay me in the dust of death." Her fur was blurred with mascara. (Did skunks wear mascara? Was it stage makeup?)

He looked away, and when he looked back, the electronic distortion of waves of skunk and woman rippling on top of each other. Except much, *much* closer.

"Fucking-!" She still wasn't touching him, but she had somehow glitched across the gap between them. Only, she was standing still. It was like she was frozen. Her mouth was halfway open. It was as if she had been paused, frozen in outlines of data.

Was this what Zia called a ‘jump scare’?

And then she wasn’t.

He flinched involuntarily. The dissonance was overwhelming, he felt that sickening feeling of *wrongness* overwhelm him again. He wanted to pull his hat over his ears and curl up.

And then it was gone, just as quickly as it had happened. No distortions, no glitches. But one very, very inconsolable skunk. Except now, he only needed to take a few steps forward to reach her. His hackles stood up in swaths. His lizard brain (fox brain?) was telling him to *fucking run*.

Fox brain was quickly overwhelmed by the twin emotions of heartbreak and pity. Freaky, glitched out skunk or not, she was crying. And not just crying, she was downright bawling. Fucking drowning in a sea of her own tears. She could barely speak. “I have missed you so much I– I– I miss them all so much. I miss Cicero and I miss Carter and I miss myself.” She collapsed to the ground, weeping, at his feet. She lay there in a heap, looking up at him. “I miss myself so much.”

He had no clue who any of these people were, but that last part...

He winced, as the last part hit him like a fucking bullet. The urge to reach out and console her was so overwhelming — or maybe he just wanted company.

Gently, she hugged her tail close, pulling it over her face and peeking out at nothing and everything from behind it.

Looking past him.

Her brown eyes were an ocean of sadness, a black hole that stretched on and on and on. There was silence for a second too long, and then, the damndest thing started happening. He briefly considered that he might have lost it, too.

She started gently singing. “Walking home, in the early dawn. I found myself, lost in the beyond...”

He watched her turning her tail over in her paws, hugging herself so, so tight. The skunks behind were suddenly omnipresent. He could feel them, somehow. It was like she was trying to wrap the entirety of the System around herself. To bury herself *in* herself.

It struck through his heart like an arrow. Disjointedly, the Psalm continued around them. It was both coming from her, and it was not.

It was coming from everywhere.

I take count of all my bones
while they look on and gloat.

He reached out to touch her. If he understood anything, it was that this woman was in *massive* amounts of pain. Perhaps she just needed the touch of another living person?

Nope, wrong move.

That *definitely* hadn't been the right answer.

He was thrown back by an invisible force that he realized was the start of her forking over and over again.

“Ahh shit”. It took him a second, but as he strategized how best to fight his way through a legion of Yet More Mustelid, he realized that something about these new skunks was different.

They were all dressed in their best, like something out of a Twen-cen silent movie. Top hats and suits and dresses and there were so *many* of them. Maybe he would have to fight his way through after all.

Fuck. He definitely would. She was forking more rapidly than anything he had seen as any of the others in the system.

This was it, he would be crushed. It would take seconds. He had made some mistake he did not understand, and this was his fate.

Well *fuck*.

He hesitated.

This was what he got for not drawing first.

He stood there, staring at the skunks, and they stood staring back. It was eerie, like looking at a formal party full of the same individuals. Like some sort of bizarre masquerade gone wrong.

As he was figuring out how best to dodge around them and get to her, when all at once, the skunks rushed forward like a wave. His hand touched his knife, and then... .

He left it undrawn, again. Though this time he reassured himself that he was simply refusing to fight against superior numbers. Again, he chastised himself for his obvious fate, for not taking action when he had the chance. What had started as a crowd had become a wave of skunk.

Except it wasn't a wave. It was a *chorus*. The forking was slowing down, too. He had time. But was that true about the others? He wasn't sure. *Think Eliah, think!*

They were doing a musical number, minus the music. At least he thought they were. He certainly couldn't hear any music, and he really didn't want to. As far as he was concerned, the whole thing was creepy and more than a little bit pitiful. The original skunk was still on the floor, singing what he presumed to be the lead role, hugging her tail tightly.

All at once, the skunks that had been rushing towards him coalesced back around her, and the chorus rose with them. They made themselves a barrier, and with that gentle encouragements, he was

pressed back. That was fine. She needed space, and she wasn't that bad of a singer.

In fact, she was pretty good. Could anyone blame him for wanting a better view? And if all else failed, it would give him an advantageous spot to fork off a full-sized version of himself to catapult him towards her. There were, he was realizing begrudgingly, advantages to being this small.

He watched. It was painful. The skunks were a barrier of singing and self. Less obviously a method of painful self-isolation than those that than their sisters who belonged to the Order of Perpetually Chanting That Friggin' Hymn, but still ultimately fulfilling the same purpose. It tugged at his heart. He wanted to rush in, wanted to pull her out. Wanted to give her someone. But the clock was ticking even if he was, for the moment, safe. The same couldn't be said about-

Zia...

But didn't Zia want him to try something else sometimes? Wasn't this a chance to do that? Her voice echoed in his head from an argument long past. *"I don't know what I would've done, Okay?! I'm not sorry that you saved my life I just-*"

He hadn't gotten it then. He wasn't sure if he got it now.

He would give her until the end of the song, or until he found a good route to reach her. Whichever came first. So, he sat there and watched, and waited.

"Once I found home..."

"But then it was gone..."

"But then it was gone..."

Those countless instances echoed her. Increasing, but at a stable rate. It felt deeper than that, though, like she was increasing too. It was like she was mourning. It was like she was unraveling, over

flowing...

He doubted his plan. If it got Zia killed. If his hesitation led to her death...

“What will I leave for you?”

The chorus was deafening now, but she held her own, bellowing out loud from her spot on the floor, occasionally briefly raising her head and looking into...

“What will you leave for us?”

“Now that I am gone?”

Into... There was pain in her eyes, in all of their eyes. A spark of madness. An ocean on fire, a star exploding. He had made the wrong choice, his gut told him. He had missed the moment of action. *Fuck*. But if he had made the wrong choice, if he had gotten Zia killed already... Would she want him to add this poor woman’s body to the pile? He knew she wouldn’t.

“O’, my Rivkah, where have you gone?”

The chorus of skunks gathered around her, demanding an answer. It was like every line started at the previous high point, then escalating, crescendoing. A conversation played out loud. Maybe there was a chance? She was talking to him, thinking to herself. Could he get her to listen? He didn’t know. There was too much of it. Too much noise and none at all. It would explode they would all die his heart was pounding his head was screaming he could feel the air ignite–

For a moment, there was silence. Or maybe there was a cacophony.

And then, he could see her. The skunks parted ways like the sea. There she was. A straight path.

She lay there, hugging her tail. He would only have time for one action. He could go in, rapid fork like she did, and–

He could try to pull her out, or he could try to pull her into his knife.

Never make the same mistake twice.

His heart sank. He knew what he had to do.

He never got the chance to do it. Suddenly, she jerked upright with a cry, the chorus reformed, he had lost his chance. This was becoming a frustrating pattern.

The show began again. She was forking across the room frantically, back and forth, side to side. And somehow, she was still singing what he knew were the final lines.

“Oh, I am *gone!*” All the skunks made way for her as she advanced, quitting where they had blocked her path, then rapidly forking back into position. The lines mixed. He lost track of where she was.

“*You are gone! You are gone!*” They were acting as one individual, as one voice.

And then, she was in front of him. He let out a “Fuck!” and grasped for the knife, mostly for self-defense, but stumbled instead, dropping it. It was lost in a sea of skunks. She was towering over him. Her presence was overwhelming. The skunks all stayed behind her. They were singing-shouting as one. Overflowing as one.

“We will carry on,”

“You have to move on... *I will not move on!* To die is to move on, *Yishaq, we need you to move on–*”

Something broke, the room fractured. Her image split between skunk and human. Blurred for an instant. He could see forever in her eyes, he could hear eternity in her voice–

Her voice broke.

“Understand, my children, I cannot move on!” Her teeth were bared, she was pleading with him. She was in front of him, begging him. Tears in her eyes, her fur a mess. Her hair the very definition of distraught.

Then all of a sudden, she was speaking.

“I miss you. I miss you so much. I miss everyone so much. But I miss you. I miss you! I miss you and I am surrounded by you and I can touch you but I cannot feel you and my life stretches on and parallel but never touching I miss you *I miss you-*”

He changed his mind. He *knew* what he had to do.

She was shouting. But he had a clear path. She was literally a few steps in front of him. He forked a full-sized — yet still fennec-shaped — version of himself closer to her, and then for a split second he panicked.

The knife hadn’t been something he pulled out of thin air. It had been with him when he forked.

Which meant that that version of himself that he had just forked...

How well did he know his own intentions?

In that moment, among many other things, Eliah#It’sNotImpossible understood the importance of being honest with themselves – ‘themselves’? The fennec blinked. They had never thought of themselves that way before... And yet, something about the pronoun felt like it fit. It felt *right*. — no matter how hard it was. They hoped that the version of themselves they had just forked off was having the same realization about honesty. They closed their eyes in frustration for a few seconds, flattened their ears, and when they opened them, were greeted by the sight of the full-sized version of themself:

Embracing the shocked skunk.

Behind Eliah#It'sNotImpossible, the chanting skunks began to quit.

VII: Eliah#Fennec-Two

Eliah#It'sNotImpossible quickly moved to join their bigger counterpart, scampering over, digging their claws in just enough to get a manageable grip, and then climbing up the clothing of the very surprised skunk like they were summitting a mountain. They didn't stop until they reached the top, and wrapped themselves around her neck in a big squeeze.

Eliah stared into her eyes, brushing her disheveled hair out of her face. He knew what he had to say.

"I'm *not them*," he said, but with his drawl, it came out more like "I'm not *'em*." He held her tight as he hugged her. "I'm sorry. But I'm not. You've got me mistaken. I'm sorry." He knew it had to be done. "They're gone. They're not here. I'm not them." He forced her to look at him. There were tears in his eyes too now, streaming down his fur. He forced her to see the loss, that terrible fucking night he had lost his daughter. Forced her to see that he was there. "We're here. And they're gone. And I'm sorry. I'd bring 'em back in an instant if I could. I know you'd do the same." She had started pulling away, he held her hands firmly.

"No no no no no" She was shaking her head in a panic.

"All we can do is go forward it's what," his own voice broke, "it's what they would have wanted."

"*I know!*" she screamed, forking herself out of his grasp and sending Eliah#It'sNotImpossible flying off of her, flipping them both

the bird with each instance before unceremoniously quitting each. “Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!” There was hurt and anger in her eyes, both him and his fork (actually, which one of them had quit and forked the other? He didn’t remember) took steps back.

Her eyes were switching rapidly between Eliah#It’sNotImpossible and him. Her face was curled in anger that was very obviously masking fear. A terrifying thought hit him. Could digital skunks spray? As if she knew what he was thinking, she let out a growl that could only mean ‘fuck you’ and did something that was decidedly not spraying. She grabbed the knob off of her silver cane and pulled. The hilt of a *rapier* came out, followed by the length of the blade.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” He held up his paws. Eliah#It’sNotImpossible did likewise. “Easy there. Easy there.”

“Do not easy there me you fucking *haunt*.” She noticed Eliah#It’sNotImpossible scampering towards him, halfway there, all fours. He winced at the blow to his pride. She forked herself forward with the rapier in hand and thrust at the spot where Eliah#It’sNotImpossible had just been. He did a feint forward himself in order to give the small fox time to scamper safely behind him. (Well, originally *besides* him until Eliah nudged the tiny creature behind him; much to It’sNotImpossible’s obvious chagrin)

“Ow watch it!” he muttered as Eliah#It’sNotImpossible scampered up his clothes to perch on his shoulder. Another growl, the skunk’s tail was held high. His fears of spraying came back to him “Okay he held up a finger. Now listen there absolutely no need to get-” he paused, unsure of how to quite say it.

“Do not even start with that assumption you damned spector!” She stepped forward, thrusting the rapier to force him back further

towards the slowly shrinking skunk pile. There was quiet and stillness for a few moments as she stood there, forking a more put together version of herself. Her hair back in place her dress creased properly her makeup set back in its place... As she did so, each fork came into being either staring at him, or staring at the fennec sized version of himself. It was eerie.

“How are you doing that?” She demanded, “How the fuck *are you doing that?*” She spat.

“Tell me what it is you want to know, and I’ll answer, I’m an open book-”

“Bullshit. Bullshit bullshit *fucking bullshit*. That. Forking. You are new to the System. I checked your fucking records and you scanned *yesterday*. You have read *nothing*, you have been in contact with *nobody* who actually knows what the *fuck* goes on in here, you go to your work and you go to the bar and you have mental health crises in your apartment and alienate your friends and lie to your therapist; but you have no actual interest in the System.”

The disdain in her eyes was palpable. “This is the greatest fucking *miracle* in the history of the world and you clearly have no more interest than the average person who puts off uploading until they are literally on their death bed. You are not even tangential to it. You are not part of a collective- *you do not know jack shit*- you have not been- have not been.” She struggled with the word, looked away, there was a touch of that eternity in her eyes when she looked back. The fur on the back of both Eliah and Eliah#It’sNotImpossible’s necks stood up. “You have not been to the places I have been to. *I would know.*”

For a brief moment, both Eliahs worried her rapid splitting would start again, which was one of many reasons why he didn’t

bring up that the first part of her claim was absolute bullshit and he knew it. He was too creeped out by that look on her eyes, the way she talked about whatever she was talking about. But that quickly faded when she pointed at them and began demanding, “So how, *how*, do you achieve individuation that quickly? Who fucking sent you? The WF? The Eastern Coalition? *True Name*?” There was particular trepidation with the last name.

He paused, making sure to still hold his paws up. “Well first of all you have got no right to dig into my privacy—”

She laughed and was at his throat with the sword in a second. His hand was on his knife. Her eyes were a tornado. “How. Do. You. Individuate. So. Fast? The odds of somebody completely new to the System being able to do this is— is...” She sputtered in frustration, “It is not fucking possible! How did you upload? Did you try to fucking beam yourself up? Did you rig something up in your garage? Fucking *tell me.*”

“I don’t know what that word means!”

“What word?”

“Individuate.”

“Oh for— Individuate. Like *them.*” She nodded at Eliah#It’sNotImpossible.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, they’re me, just a little smaller. And... Okay they use they/them pronouns.” he admitted.

“Both of those are a self-image change I could buy you making once if you put *everything* into it, but I have fucking seen you, multiple of you, do it not once, not twice, but *multiple fucking times.* And! And! They are still diverging from you—” She glared at the fennec.

“No, they ain’t”

“Would you go down on all fours?”

“No, of course not!” he said firmly. “Also, I want to point out that you are holding a sword up to me right now and that’s really not the best environment to have a conversa-”

They were interrupted. By Eliah#It’sNotImpossible, who was speaking rather calmly. How they could take the time to ponder things at a moment like this Eliah had no goddamn idea-

“We weren’t.... Whatever you’re referring to. It didn’t happen to us. We can individuate like this because we *are* individuals. Sort of. Dissociative Identity Disorder. Evi’s had it since she was a child. I... I uploaded us because I thought it was what my girl wanted, and what would keep us all safe. I didn’t get that there would be any issues with the, personality stuff. I didn’t realize it at first even. It was so subtle... But I don’t think it’s an issue. I think. It’s like... That stuff our therapists kept trying to get us to do like-”

“It was like all the dissociation was gone.” Eliah said.

“Exactly, like putting on glasses,” #It’sNotImpossible agreed.

“But the separation was still there. The desire to be. *Us*,” Eliah explained to the skunk.

“So, that’s kinda what we did. It’s as simple as that. There’s more than one of us. We’re multiple individuals. Kind of. It’s complicated.”

The skunk blinked. Then she blinked again. If Eliah had to guess, she was accessing some sort of private HUD and looking at records or- the sword clattered to the ground. There was shock on her face. “Oh my god. Oh my god I am so sorry.” She backed up slightly. “I am so sorry, I- I- You. Split so fast I thought. I thought. I knew about the DID but. I haven’t seen it. I have never seen this happen before. Even with another system. I thought... I-” She was utterly crestfallen. “I was scared. I am...I am so sorry. I got scared and I got...”

“Triggered. I think that’s the word. You know like, uh, like how Evi panicked earlier in the classroom when she realized what I’d done.” He rubbed the back of his neck.

“Yeah, that was a real dick move,” Eliah#It’sNotImpossible muttered at him.

“Hey!”

He turned to bicker with himself but then he remembered.

“Oh, right shit. Uh. Yeah so speaking of that. I get it happens to everyone, I guess, but you did kind of fill the room up with copies of yourself and I have a daughter back there who is quite possibly still suffocating under a pile of slowly quitting panicked copies of yourself so if you could please take care of that right now...”

All at once, every single skunk except for her vanished.

She looked at him nonplussed. “You cannot. Did you think she could die?”

“I guess, yeah! Isn’t that the point of the sword?”

“The sword is for drama!”

“I just- there’s a lot of skunks in here enough skunks fall on someone and they could get crushed!”

“How heavy do you think I am?!”

“It’s not about how heavy you are it’s about the number of skunks.”

“You cannot die in here!” she repeated firmly. “Not, normally. The System preserves *life*. Also, wait a second, you were the fucker who uploaded her? Then every indignity I’ve put up with for the past few hours is your fault. Oh my god, you piece of-”

They were interrupted by groans and a “Shit, my knee!”. Someone had evidently fallen onto the ground from high enough to hurt like the dickens. He held up his paw to her, “Hold that thought”

and looked around. #It'sNotImpossible, still perched on his shoulder, gave her a jackass smile.

There were multiple copies of some folks, and. He blinked. *Felina?* Right! That's right! He remembered. He hollered at her, "Haven't seen you in a while!"

"Same!" She laughed back. "Also, fuck you, Eliah!"

"I missed you too!"

As he scanned the now skunk free room, he could see that everyone was accounted for. Though one of him didn't seem to be moving. He couldn't exactly blame him. It had been a long day and he had been crushed under skunks for several minutes. Now, where was the person he wanted to see... He let out his breath. There, at the far end of the room. Zia. She was safe.

He exchanged a nod with Evi, with Felina. Then he turned back around to the skunk who had been the source of the problems. She was looking down at the ground, holding her pocket watch. She looked quite distraught, like she had been caught doing something improper.

Personally, he was still having a time reconciling the whole "anthropomorphic skunk" thing. He hadn't even *begun* to process System etiquette. But he figured that having a panic attack and uncontrollably forking was a bit embarrassing.

She looked up at him. God, she was pissed off. And was that, yup, that was the "this is *not* over" face. He blatantly ignored it, might as well just rub it in some. "Well, I suppose all's well that ends well—*Oof!*"

Zia collided with him, knocking him off balance as she hugged him. The skunk laughed in a very 'serves you right' way, she had

evidently seen the girl rushing at him from her vantage point but hadn't said a thing.

Elijah didn't care. He went to scruff Zia's hair and she shook her head. He backed off, and she looked up at him, eyes shining at him in a way they hadn't in a long time. "I knew you could do it. Thank you."

He chuckled, gesturing at the skunk. "All in a day's work. And hey, I made a new friend along the way. Not bad if I do say so myself."

"I am *not* your friend, Elijah." She said through gritted teeth. "Although, I guess that I owe you a..." She realized she was gritting her teeth, and reverted back to her receptionist smile. "A bit of a *thank you*." She spat, her ears splayed to the sides. "I *suppose* that a higher starting reputation boost is in order. Hopefully it can..." She gritted her teeth again. "Mend... things. Pave things over. It might not be possible to forget here but there are some who feel it is definitely possible to move on and to make new memories."

He got her drift.

"Holy fuck Elijah, I think she just bribed us." Zia beamed. "Holy *shit* that'ss a lot! nice!"

"I did not bribe you! I just want to put us on the road to *mending* things between your clade and mine." The skunk practically growled. "And, I have a *reputation* to uphold. Which I am sure you will assist me with, so I wou—"

"Wait hold on a second, what's a clade?" Zia interrupted.

The skunk sighed. "Let us wait until the rest of your group meanders over here before we go over that."

Elijah took the spare few moments in-between to take stock of his situation. He had never before been able to *feel* what the others in the system felt about him. How his actions affected them. Like-

wise, they had never been able to feel how they made him feel. How their actions affected him. Combined with the dissolution of the dissociative barriers they had all lived with for so long; the moments that they shared together between forking themselves out were indescribable.

None of them could ever imagine going back to the way things had been before — which was a moot point, given it was a technological impossibility.

But that wasn't to say all that ended had ended well. They understood his point, why he had done what he had done and how he felt about it. But he knew the feelings of everyone else well enough now to know on an emotional level what he had known when he answered 'Yes' to the final upload confirmation:

There was no going back. He had made an irrevocable choice for all of them, and he would have to live with the consequences.

Even still, he didn't regret it, though he did wish that things had worked out differently. That they had been able to have this reconciliation outside of the System.

He shook himself out of his thoughts in time to see Felina and Evi walk up and stand besides Zia. He didn't like that, and evidently, she didn't either, as she quickly repositioned herself to his right. This left an awkward gap between him and Evi; who was avoiding looking at him save for a quick headtilt at #It'sNotImpossible. He had a sinking feeling.

Fuck. This was where everything went to shit.

Actions, and consequences.

Best to get it over with.

“Well, now that we are all back together and we have *more than demonstrated* that we understand how *forking* works, I believe that—”

The skunk started through gritted teeth. He didn't let her finish. Evi wasn't closing the gap, and she still wasn't looking at him.

"I'm sorry, give us a second." He interrupted, leaving her with black ears pinned back against her head in anger as he turned to Evi-

Who interrupted him with a physically unpleasant ping and an invitation to something called a "cone of silence".

He accepted, and the rest of the world seemed to grow quieter.

Evi stood there, still not meeting his gaze, looking at the floor. He felt a twinge of sympathy, and wondered if she felt likewise towards him. He opened his mouth, but before he could speak, she started talking. As she did, she slowly lifted her head to meet his gaze, and though she looked like she was in her late twenties, she seemed to hold at least two decades worth of tiredness. He was taken aback.

He had expected anger.

"When things..." She looked back at the ground. "Ended--"

The word dropped to the floor, lying there, lifeless. It didn't even so much as twitch.

"--with Eleanor, I..."

She stood there, still looking at the ground, before finally meeting his gaze full on.

"I figured. 'Why not upload? What's the point? What is left here for me?' In the span of a few months the system had changed irrevocably, and rather than getting *better*, my life had fallen apart." She sighed and shook her head. "I felt that I had saved things from the brink of collapse.. That, if nothing else, at the end of the day we would still have Eleanor. And failing that, that we would still have each other. And--"

She wiped tears away from her eyes, her face was a sorrowful grimace. “And that I would have all that I needed. The reassurance that I had done the right thing. So, congratulations Eliah. You were half right.”

Ouch. That hit hard.

She laughed bitterly. “The merger with Felina... It didn’t go how either of us thought it would. I withdrew, I stopped giving a shit about everything. Zia, work, healing, living. Everything. But it wasn’t...” She sighed. “It was not because I couldn’t get past her. That is where you were wrong.”

Elijah stayed silent. He had no clue what to make of that.

“That was something that I let on. To all of you. And evidently, something that I made myself believe so well that *you still believe it now*,” Evi explained.

Elijah couldn’t help himself. “Look, I’m just kinda surprised you haven’t tried to deck me yet... But uh. At the risk of that... Yeah, I’m not entirely convinced. I’ve been in your- our- whatever... head and you’re not over her.”

“No, that’s just it. I *am* over her,” Evi retorted.

“Then what was it Evi? You loved it down there. That wasn’t something you got from Eleanor, that was something she reignited in you. So, what would make you so distraught that you-”

“Of *course* I loved it down there!” She clenched her fists and raised her voice. #It’sNotImpossible’s ears perked up in surprise. “How could I *not* love a place I had fought for *years* to remain in? For my right to live in, to change, to affect, to be present in? And you cut all that off. I can’t forgive you for that, Eliah. I can never forgive you for that.”

“I know.” He replied softly. He had known it from the second they uploaded.

There was silence. It was his turn to look at the floor. After a while, one or both of them stopped holding their breath and exhaled.

“But... ” she started. He met her gaze. He always met people’s gazes. “But I can’t.” She fidgeted with one of her sleeves, it felt like what she wanted to say would cause her physical pain. “I can’t blame you. Not entirely. Because. I nearly did the same thing. And because, I was wrong about you...”

“I know you did. Why?” he asked softly. “Wait, repeat that last part again. I think I need to hear it again.”

“One at a time. First, why I almost uploaded us. It wasn’t because, I couldn’t let her go. It was because. After I integrated with Felina. I couldn’t... Forgive myself,” she said bitterly. He wasn’t sure where this was going, and then it hit him like a brick. #It’sNotImpossible winced, apparently having the same realization. “Because it wasn’t Felina who had had flashback after flashback, who had threatened Eleanor with the possibility of us uploading one day and then threatened to throw me out a window the next... It was me, Eliah. It was me. Because I was her. And she was me. And I just... I couldn’t forgive myself for that.” Her voice was small, barely a whisper. “I could’ve lived the rest of my life not forgiving myself for that.”

He waited for her to break into tears, but they didn’t come. After a while, she composed herself, and looked at him as though, instead of having a heart-to-heart, they had just gone through a particularly unpleasant doctor’s appointment.

“I know it’s not the same but, I felt. I felt similar when Sarah died.” He offered. “You don’t want to carry that weight. It’s... It’s not really living.”

“I know.” She nodded. “I got that. It helped. And I understand that. I understand you more than I ever did.”

“The feeling is mutual.”

“Please let me finish. Not wanting anything to happen to Zia was, part of why you did this. To protect her. I get that, the path I was on with our life was also why you did this. I get that too. And, ultimately, to some extent. Zia bears culpability. I do too. Felina probably does. You’re just, easier to blame.”

“Maybe that’s what I’m here for,” he offered.

She shook her head. “No. You aren’t. Didn’t you hear a word I said earlier? That’s no way to live. And, I want you to live. I want you to grow, I want you to *change*. I want to *see* you become a different person. Because you have been all along. And I’ve missed it.” She looked down, ashamed. “You are a person, Eliah. You’re more than just, a cowboy.” She chuckled awkwardly. “That, little fella on your shoulder,” she nodded at #It’sNotImpossible, “they’re living proof. You’re changing. You’re growing. I don’t know how I missed it. I’m so sorry.”

“Evi, please don’t crucify yourself again.”

“I know.” She sighed. “I’m not... going to go down the road of crucifying myself on blame again. Or myself, as the case may be. And I can’t forgive you but, I can ask that you don’t crush yourself under the weight of my misplaced projections either.”

“I’ll try not to.” They both lingered in the silence. “I feel like, I feel like I’ve been given a second chance. Thank you, Evi,” he added.

She looked back at him quizzically, her normal emotional cadence restored.

“No, It’s not a second chance. It’s the end of one story and the beginning of another. It’s, a twist in the road. One path taken and another not.”

“The path of honesty.”

“The path of honesty, indeed.” She agreed.

From their perch on his shoulder, #It’sNotImpossible spoke up, “Perhaps it’s a chance to hug it out?”

Evi gave them both the strangest look. Eliah did his best strange look back. He was feeling similarly. He braced to protect the fennec from being strangled, and was surprised when Evi shrugged her shoulders. “Sure. Let’s hug it out. I’m fucking exhausted.”

#It’sNotImpossible made the leap in an instant, wrapping around her neck. As Eliah stood there, dumbfounded, Evi walked over and gave him an actual, genuine hug. He returned it. It felt good. “I should have guessed that all I had to do to make you like me more was get a mite bit fluffier.” She snorted, “In your dreams, Eliah.”

What a day.

★

After a while, they awkwardly disengaged, #It’sNotImpossible moved back to Eliah’s shoulder, and Evi lowered the cone of silence after they had all composed themselves.

“Alright, sorry about the suddenness of that. Just working out private matt-” Evi started, before she noticed the look on everyone’s faces.

Zia and Felina were standing next to each other, evidently worried and mid conversation, wildly speculating about “what the hell is going on in there”. The skunk had been pacing around the two of them, and was the first to react.

“Oh thank goodness. I thought you two were either going to start beating the shit out of each other or develop some of fucking quitting pact or something. It would definitely be in line with how the rest of this day has gone.” The bridge of her muzzle wrinkled in a frown.

Evi and Eliah exchanged glances. Apparently, a cone of silence didn’t extend to the visual spectrum. Whoops.

“Uh. No.”

“No. Nope.”

The skunk looked between them for a few moments, unconvinced, her face lined with worry. They stood there awkwardly for a bit, before she let out a sigh of relief. “Alright. That is very good.”

“Yes. I, agree.” Evi said, exchanging another look with Eliah. “So, what um. Exactly do we do now?” she asked the skunk.

The annoyance rushed back into the black and white fur, replacing the anger. “Well now, we introduce ourselves, it is what people normally do when they meet someone. Instead of panicking for several hours and triggering the fuck out of each other.”

Evi coughed, “Ahh. Yes. I do believe we’ve actually yet to properly introduce ourselves to each other.”

“And yet I know so much more about you than I would like to,” the skunk growled.

“Yes well, um after that can we leave.”

“Yes, after that, your clade can leave. Congratulations. You hold the record for the tenth longest orientation in the System.” She fu-

riously marked something off on a clipboard. “Something nobody is keeping track of but me, apparently.”

“Right, yeah, what’s a clade?” Felina asked.

“A dysfunctional family composed of copies of each other all driving themselves and everyone else nuts. Add in a hundred years and some trauma for extra spice.” The skunk muttered, but only #It’sNotImpossible heard her. They were pretty sure they weren’t supposed to.

“What?” Evi asked.

“I did not say anything.” The skunk snapped, before she straightened up and cleared her throat. “The System Central Library Encyclopedia defines a clade as ‘A group of individuals patterned off a single root consciousness, formed through branching expansion of the forking of its constituent members’. There. Done. Everyone understand?” The skunk was glaring at each of them, her patience very obviously running thin.

Elijah wondered how long *her* clade had been around for.

“Yup.” Evi responded.

“Excellent!” The skunk did another dramatic checking off on her clipboard. “Now, names and clade ID please?”

“Evi Pirth”

“Elijah Robbins”

#It’sNotImpossible paused for a few moments. Seeing a fennec grip its own chin like a miniature furry version of *The Thinker* was a strange sight to see. Finally, they spoke up.

“Ini. Ini Robbins”

Elijah reminded himself that he would need to unpack all of that later, and then promptly scheduled it for never.

“Felina. Just Felina.”

“Zia Williamson.”

“And your Clade ID?” The skunk asked, before glancing at her time piece in alarm “Actually you do not need to come up with it now, we can just use the ha-”

“Peace.” Zia said. “Peace. That’s our clade ID.”

The skunk looked like she was about to break her pen in two. She looked at each of them like a disappointed teacher, and seeing no objections, wrote down the name. “There, now it is official.” She composed herself, clearing her throat and forking for a reason Elish couldn’t quite fathom as her appearance didn’t seem to have changed. The old fork quit. The new skunk closed her eyes and daintily put a paw over her heart. After a few seconds, she opened them again and said, “In All Ways.”

Evi tilted her head, and exchanged a confused glance with Elish, who shrugged. He didn’t have a clue either.

“Then I Must In All Ways Be Earnest, of the Ode clade.”

“Is that a, uh...?” he racked his brain.

“An ode is a type of poem-” Evi started to explain. But before she could continue, Felina spoke up.

“Yeah, I gotta ask...” She was looking over the skunk’s prim and proper uniform, eyeing the pocket watch and the discarded rapier cane with something akin to jealousy, attraction, and intrigue. “You were a theatre kid, weren’t you?”

Elish and his fennec counterpart tried their best to suppress a guffaw, Evi put her face in her hands and moaned. Zia high fived Felina.

In All Ways, much to the group’s surprise broke out into a grin, beaming wildly. “Theatre teacher, actually.” She corrected. And

then, smiling a genuinely warm smile she said, “Welcome to the System,” waved goodbye, and promptly quit.

For a few moments, nobody did anything, half expecting the skunk to pop back into existence.

After a few moments of standing there, they all exchanged various glances with each other.

“Oh yeah, she was *definitely* a theatre kid,” Felina remarked.

The other members of the Peace Clade gave heavy nods and/or responded in various levels of increasingly creative affirmation, relief, and wonder. Eventually, they all collapsed, sat on, or jumped onto the ground, staring up at the endless opaque above and reflecting.

The rest of eternity awaited them.