

Stories From After



# Stories From After

A Post-Self anthology

edited by Madison Rye Progress

With contributions from Samantha Yule Fireheart, Andréa C.

Mason, Caela Argent, J.S. Hawthorne, Krzysztof “Tomash”

Drewniak

Copyright © 2024, to the authors mentioned in the contents.  
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution  
4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit  
[creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) or send a letter to Creative Com-  
mons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA

ISBN: XXX-X-XXXXXX-XX-X

*Marsh*

Cover © 2024, Iris Jay — [irisjay.net](https://irisjay.net)

First Edition, 2023. All rights reserved.

This book uses the fonts Gentium Book Basic, Gotu and Linux Bi-  
olinum O and was typeset with X<sub>Y</sub>L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X.

# Post-Self books

## The Post-Self Cycle

by Madison Rye Progress (as Madison Scott-Clary)

I. *Qoheleth*

II. *Toledot*

III. *Nevi'im*

IV. *Mitzvot*

## *Clade — A Post-Self Anthology*

Various authors

## *Unintended Tendencies*

by JL Conway

## *Marsh*

by Madison Rye Progress *et al.*

## *Motes Played*

by Madison Rye Progress & Samantha Yule Fireheart

## *Ask. — An Odist Q&A*

Various authors

Learn more at [post-self.ink](http://post-self.ink)



Toward Eternity . . . . .	3
<i>Thomas “Faux” Steele</i>	
A Well-Trained Eye . . . . .	25
<i>Andréa C. Mason</i>	
Home From the Game . . . . .	49
<i>Caela Argent</i>	
Prophecies . . . . .	57
<i>Madison Rye Progress, with Fireheart</i>	
Journal of Diago Pereira . . . . .	77
<i>Nat Mcardle-Mott-Merrifield and Sarah Bloden</i>	
New Year's Eve . . . . .	109
<i>Various</i>	
Millwright . . . . .	123
<i>Andréa C. Mason</i>	
Sentences . . . . .	135
<i>Krzysztof “Tomash” Drewniak</i>	









# Toward Eternity

Thomas “Faux” Steele



# Aurélien Delacroix — 2401

Toward Eternity

by Thomas “Faux” Steele

Aurélien Delacroix leaned back on the cracked leather barstool and interlaced their fingers, claw-tips painted an eye-catching sapphire that matched their majestic crest. Tapping a cigarette out of a crumpled packet of Gauloises—also blue—they tucked it into their beak but left it unlit. “Let’s start with a name and go from there, shall we?”

“Gaëlle,” the Persian leopard replied, golden eyes tracing the curves of the blue jay’s deep purple suit. The corner of her muzzle curled into a slight frown as she took a seat, the curves of her dress cascading down her lithe body like turbid water. A choker set with fire opals like translucent magma adorned her throat. “Of the Khayyamzadeh Clade. I’ve heard that you fancy yourself a detective, Monsieur Delacroix.”

“Others describe me that way, but I prefer to say that I dabble in the archeology of the soul,” Aurélien replied, their crest fluttering ever so slightly with a hint of *amour-propre*. Materializing a lighter into their palm, they summoned a jet of flame to ignite their cigarette. “If you have a sufficiently interesting mystery for me, I’ll endeavor to solve it for you. Sound fair?”

Gaëlle considered Aurélien for a long moment, her manicured claws sinking into the foam padding. “I don’t do ‘interesting’,” she said slowly, her voice like distant veldt thunder. “But I do have a mystery of a sort...I need someone found.”

“Is this related to the Century Attack?” A lazy wisp of smoke rolled out of the blue jay’s beak as they slowly exhaled. The ember of their cigarette gave their amethyst eyeshadow an iridescent glow. “I imagine you’ve already checked the clade listing.”

“Naturally.” Gaëlle sighed, her shoulders slumping. “I expected there to be casualties after they announced that the cause was Contraproprioceptive Virus. I just didn’t expect the losses to have hit within my clade,” the leopard murmured, her paw instinctively batting at a silver pendant in the form of an art nouveau key suspended from a dainty chain around her neck. “Did you uh...lose—”

“No. I’m technically part of a clade, but”—Aurélien took another puff as they swirled a half-empty glass of Armagnac and watched the amber droplets dance against the crystal—“we all seem to be a bit drunk on the liquor of solitude these days.”

“I don’t think we’re supposed to be alone,” the leopard murmured in a low purr. “Not in the System at least. No heart-balm can truly soothe the ache of involuntary solitude.”

“Then tell me more about the one that you’re hunting for.” A mournful saxophone rose above the steady drone of conversation that echoed off the cove ceiling above them. “Anything that might help me identify an up-tree instance.”

“Her name was Céleste,” Gaëlle began, claws scratching lightly against the weathered mahogany bar of the Sombres Reflets speakeasy. “A lynx. Reddish fur, beautiful emerald eyes, and a grin just a bit off-kilter. She was—” the leopard’s voice hitched—“she was not our clade’s root instance, but she was very close, much closer than I am.”

“You sound like you could use a drink. Bartender!” Aurélien called, their voice slicing through the smoky air. A moment later, a handsome human with a well-trimmed mustache—part of the sim—stepped forward, chromed cocktail shaker in his white-gloved hand.

“Whiskey.” Gaëlle clutched her pendant tighter, the nubs of teeth-scarred claws striking melodically against the metal like

diminutive bells. “Three fingers, neat.”

The bartender plucked a bottle from the top shelf, pouring precisely the requested volume into a squat crystal glass in front of Gaëlle. Her gaze softened for a moment as she brought the amber liquid to her muzzle. After a deep sip, she let out a trembling sigh.

“Take as long as you need to gather your thoughts,” Aurélien murmured. They glanced at the narrow silver of cityscape visible through the nicotine-stained transom window above the speakeasy’s iron-wrapped entrance. Bitter rain fell in sheets outside, the tires of dour sedans dousing the sidewalk in opaque water as they rolled past. “We have nothing but time in this sim. I know that this process can be...difficult.”

“Difficult...” Gaëlle echoed, raising her glass to the dim light of the bar, amber whiskey twinkling like a falling star as she brought it to her muzzle. “That’s certainly one word for it.”

“How long has it been since Céleste last forked?” the blue jay asked, sympathetically clicking their beak.

“Six months ago. The instance has probably individuated since then, but...I hope that there’s still a part of her out there somewhere.” Gaëlle paused, her eyes misty as she took another swig of whiskey to steady her trembling paws. “I should never have trusted the promise of a place beyond death. It’s so easy to leave words unsaid when our gaze is toward eternity.”

“You had no way of knowing,” Aurélien replied. The smoke of their cigarette curled lazily upward, contributing to a haze that muted the light thrown by the solitary incandescent bulb above them. “No one predicted that phys-side would lash out at the System with such violence outside of the darkest sims birthed from conspiratorial delirium.”

“There was this...old playground on the sim where the core of my clade still lives. Céleste loved it there.” Gaëlle stared vacantly down into her whiskey, her sinuous tail twitching restlessly against the tarnished brass footrest. “I’d join her there at the same time every week and we’d sit on the swings and remi-

nise until we ran out of memories or mimosa, whichever came first.”

“I assume this new instance wasn’t there when the appointed hour arrived?” The ember on Aurélien’s cigarette glowed brighter as they took a contriving puff.

“No,” the leopard replied with a sigh. “And the clade listing wasn’t of much help. I suspect that the new instance hasn’t quit, but I don’t have access—” Gaëlle’s voice trailed off, her fingers tracing aimless patterns on the mahogany bar.

“Those damned privacy settings,” Aurélien murmured, offering a sympathetic nod. “Useful at times but...also occasionally frustrating.”

“Mrm. I blame myself for not spending more moments with her, for living through a thousand other experiences apart when she was always just a ping away.” Gaëlle sighed. “I always thought we’d have more time.”

“But we never quite have enough, do we?” Aurélien said, gesturing for the bartender to bring another glass of Armagnac. “I’ve been in the System a hundred years and I still feel like I’ve only enjoyed a thousandth of what’s out there.”

“There’s no comfort in eternity when the cocladist you want to spend it with isn’t there,” Gaëlle mused, tilting her glass to let the dingy light refract through the remaining whiskey. “Find her for me...please?”

“Who else would have an idea as to this fork’s whereabouts?” Aurélien asked, extinguishing their cigarette on a dull ceramic ashtray adorned with the yellow-stained tips of filterless butts. The bartender casually swapped it out as he supplied the bluejay with more brandy.

Gaëlle pursed her lips, gaze focused on the rain-spattered transom window. “Go to the Government Club and ask for Zamburak Tehrani. He is an old friend on good terms with all the members of my clade...unlike myself.”

Aurélien gave her a curt nod before tipping back the full glass of Armagnac in a single golden stream. Donning a weath-



ered camel trench coat, they studied the leopard’s face for a moment while straightening their tie.

“Try not to get lost in the rain,” Gaëlle said, a hint of anxiety visible beneath her sphinxlike façade. The blue jay nodded in silent reassurance, feathers ruffling slightly in the dim light. As their claw-tips wrapped around the heavy brass door latch, they glanced back at Gaëlle.

“I’ll find her.” The door swung shut behind them, the building’s weathered shutters rattling in the howling wind. Sipping on her whisky, Gaëlle watched the blue jay’s blocky figure disappear into the cityscape until it was swallowed entirely by sheets of bitter rain.

#

If the atmosphere in the Sombres Reflets was *The Maltese Falcon*, then the Government Club was *Brick and Mirror*. Aurélien stepped onto a cobblestone street lined with neatly-trimmed groves of Persian cypress trees and slowly exhaled. Dead ahead, a three-story building with a majestic art deco façade was impossible to miss, its emerald green and gold details accented by Kashan tilework. The gated archway that separated it from the street was flanked by two marble cheetahs, each bearing a gleaming torch of sapphire flame.

Giving an acknowledging nod to an oryx concierge with horns spiraling up into infinity, Aurélien entered the manicured *charbagh* and immediately felt out-of-place. The splendor of Pahlavi Iran hung heavy in the air, accompanied by the crisp scent of jasmine wafting from abundant white-flowered bushes that lined the walkways. It was as if time itself had gotten lost within the red sandstone walls, twisting in on itself until emerging as a past that had never come to pass.

“*Salam*. Are you looking for someone?” An Asiatic cheetah gave the blue jay a polite smile, her sapphire Qashqai-style dress flapping lightly in the warm breeze. “The Government Club usually isn’t somewhere one ends up by accident.”

“*Salam*,” Aurélien greeted her with a tip of their crest feath-

ers and a friendly *jeer-jeer*. Unfortunately perched just beyond the shade of a colonnade, their jacket in the direct sunlight was quickly becoming a Dutch oven. “I’m looking for Zamburak Tehrani. Would you happen to know where I can find him? Preferably somewhere air-conditioned.”

The cheetah’s eyes flickered with recognition as she brushed an errant strand of headfur off her forehead. “Ah, yes. Fortunately for you, he’s usually around this time of day,” she murmured, glancing up at the late afternoon sun. “You might also consider donning something a little more...breathable. Most of us here prefer it on the warmer side.”

Aurélien nodded, two blue jays visible for a split-second before one—the visibly perspiring instance—quit. A lightweight cotton *gandoura* billowed around the new instance’s lean and muscular frame, golden threads woven through the collar adding a hint of elegance to the simple tunic. The cheetah shot them an approving smile.

“Better,” she said, her tail curling leisurely behind her. “Now, follow me, if you would.”

Aurélien’s talons clicked on the lavish Isfahan tilework that covered the entire corridor, intricate lattice work and columns to the blue jay’s right exposing the Government Club’s inner *paridaiza*. A fern-shaded stream coursed through the center of the courtyard, where manicured orange trees bloomed in orderly rows. Anthropomorphic creatures of every kind lounged about with languid grace, sipping on saffron lassis or engaging in animated conversation beneath cedarwood and canvas canopies.

“It’s rare for a new face to appear on this sim. And rarer still for it to belong to one with nostalgia for the old Troisième République,” the cheetah continued, stepping lightly around a plump peacock preening in the middle of the walkway. “Don’t mind the curious glances.”

The blue jay nodded, a group of chattering marmosets going eerily silent as they passed, turning toward them with leery

expressions etched on their muzzles. “I suppose that it can’t be helped,” Aurélien conceded, lifting a winged forearm in a half-hearted wave.

“We aren’t exactly a popular tourist destination,” the cheetah murmured, her whiskers twitching in amusement. Pausing before a gilded door engraved with Persian calligraphy so intricate that Aurélien wouldn’t have been able to decipher it even if they knew Farsi—which they absolutely didn’t. “I am Anahita. When you find Zamburak Tehrani, kindly tell him that I sent you his way. And don’t forget to enjoy the Jannah Room—it’s quite the experience.”

The doors parted into an antechamber encrusted with gemstones that seemed to dance in the flickering light of two gas-fueled lamps. Squinting slightly, the blue jay took a few steps forward and brushed aside a velvet curtain to reveal the unvarnished splendor of the Jannah Room. The rhythmic strumming of a tar accompanied by the hypnotic melody of a santur echoed off the towering ceiling.

However, the music wasn’t what caught Aurélien’s attention. The blue jay’s gaze was fixated on the river of golden wine winding through the room, shaded by artificial trees which each bore a unique culinary delight. Lifelike marzipan branches bloomed with rice-stuffed grape leaves, skewers of spiced kebab, and gleaming vark-garnished baklava in the shape of pomegranate flowers.

“*Dorood.*” A king cheetah gestured, silver goblet in paw, from a floating chaise. Clad in a sumptuous ruby kaftan embroidered with threads of silver and gold, Aurélien’s intuition marked him as none other than Zamburak Tehrani. “Are you thirsty, stranger? Please, drink your fill.”

The blue jay carefully wrapped their claws around a goblet from a table inlaid with mother-of-pearl, the cool metal against their palm a welcome respite from the oppressive heat. “*Dorood,*” Aurélien responded, inclining their head in respect as they squatted down to lazily skim it across the surface of the

golden river. “Your hospitality is appreciated.”

Brining the goblet to their beak, the vapors wafting off the intoxicating wine carried with them the rich scent of honey and saffron. After a tentative sip, a blissful warmth rolled down the blue jay’s throat while a hint of burnt caramel lingered on their palate.

“May you always find the fruits of life in the System to be sweet,” the Zamburak toasted, lifting his goblet in a leisurely toast before guzzling the remainder of his wine. His eyes, molten gold studded with flecks of emerald, studied Aurélien over the rim. “Now, what has brought you to me, hrm? Surely you’re not just here for a few baklava.”

Aurélien took a longer sip, the sweet nectar ensnaring their senses as a sensation of utter contentment washed over them. The cabalistic wine’s effects reminded them of the narcotic Pan-elim they’d been plied with in the hospital prior to their upload. “Anahita directed me to you. I was told by another that you might be able to provide me with the information I seek.”

“Anahita?” he echoed smoothly, allowing the name to roll off his tongue in a slow, thoughtful rumble. “And what might you wish to learn from me? Most would consider me to be more foolish than wise. I am one cast in the mold of the Joker of Madinah”

“I’m looking for a member of the Khayyamzadeh Clade,” Aurélien replied. “My interest is purely professional, of course.”

The Zamburak’s eyes narrowed to glittering slits before he let out a slow, measured laugh layered with both amusement and exasperation. “The Khayyamzadeh Clade are a tricky bunch. Are you sure you’d like to get mixed up in their affairs? I find it’s rather like trying to bathe in pitch.”

“Perhaps it’s a mistake,” Aurélien replied, setting the goblet on an ebony-inlaid table with a gentle *clink*. The blue jay’s beak seemed to almost curve into a thoughtful frown as they turned slightly away. “But answers rarely come without a cost.”

Using a small wooden paddle, the Zamburak directed his

chaise into a small pull-off and climbed onto a shore of smooth-tumbled lapis lazuli. He brushed his kaftan, scrutinizing Aurélien with a keen eye that seemed to instantly size them up. The cheetah strolled over and picked a pomegranate from one of the artificial trees, his claws effortlessly slicing it apart to reveal the ruby pearls within.

“Tread carefully, “the Zamburak warned, the corners of his regal maw curling slightly as he popped a handful of the blood-red jewels into his muzzle. He extended the other half to Aurélien, who gratefully accepted. “The one you seek is still much like Céleste, for better or worse.”

Plucking one of the pomegranate arils free, the blue jay rolled it between their fingers while scanning over the extensive collection of ornate shamshir swords adorning the far wall. “Why didn’t Gaëlle come here and simply ask you herself?”

“Perhaps she was afraid of seeking her out alone,” he murmured with a nonchalant shrug. “Or perhaps, she thought it wasn’t her place to ask. I sense Gaëlle believes that my neutrality with regard to the other members of the Khayyamzadeh Clade amounts to a character flaw.”

Sampling the pomegranate, Aurélien appreciated the burst of sweet-tart flavor that brushed across their tongue like the tip of a *billet doux*. “And yet you’ve chosen to remain impartial anyway?”

The Zamburak waved his paw and the elaborate murals adorning the ceiling faded away to reveal a cosmos stretched out like a silken canvas, punctuated by radiant stars and swirling nebulae. His manicured claws traced an absent pattern on the surface of his goblet while he gazed up at the heavens. “The universe doesn’t favor a quark over a lepton, so why should I favor one co-cladist over another?”

“Mrm...I prefer to shape the world around me rather than gaze at the heavens,” Aurélien replied. “And for that, I need information.”

With a playful smile, the Zamburak used his barbed tongue

to scrape the interior of the pomegranate clean as he removed a shamshir from the wall and balanced it in the center of his palm. “Every blade here”—he drew the shamshir from its ornate leather scabbard—“holds a secret. The trick is knowing how to unravel it.”

Aurélien pursed their beak, instinct drawing them to a shamshir with a golden hilt adorned with strips of shimmering fire opal. The iridescent scales almost pulsed in their grasp as they shed the scabbard and revealed a gleaming Damascus steel blade. “And how would a humble corvid such as I manage that?”

“The same way a humble cheetah learned many years ago,” replied the Zamburak, brandishing a polished blade that cast a gladiatorial glow against his golden fur. “Are you familiar with the basics of swordplay?”

Aurélien tilted their head, blue-tipped feathers bristling in anticipation. “I know enough not to cut myself,” they replied, the opalescent spark in their eyes matching the hilt of the shamshir their claws lightly gipped.

The Zamburak let out a throaty laugh that echoed across the chamber. Something in Aurélien’s chest warmed at the sight of his affable grin. Persian music dramatically faded away, replaced by the lively interplay of a saxophone and bassoon. “Then let us begin the Shamshir Dance. Fortunately, the stakes are quite a bit lower here than phys-side.”

Aurélien moved lightly on the balls of their feet, the blade in their hands perfectly balanced as they mirrored the Zamburak’s poised stance. “The first rule of the Shamshir Dance”—the Zamburak tensed as he stored energy in his thighs—“is to listen to your blade.”

Closing the distance between them with almost supernatural speed, the Zamburak brought his *shamshir* down in a clean arc. At the last second, Aurélien mirrored his action on the upswing, sending out a reverberating *clang* that seemed to shake the stars above them.

“The second rule,” the Zamburak continued, luminous eyes

gleaming under the starlight like a radium watch dial, “is to listen to your opponent’s blade as you would your own. Any less and you are merely sparring instead of dancing with your partner.”

Aurélien nodded, barely managing to parry the next onslaught of swift attacks. Sweat began to bead on their cheek feathers as the cheetah pushed them backward with a series of double-pawed slashes. “M-mrmph...this is getting to be a rather long list of rules, *mon ami*.”

“Fortunately, I have only one more for you. The third rule,” the Zamburak said with calm conviction, “is to listen to the silence between the clashes, for in that silence, you will hear the secrets speak.”

Parting their beak, Aurélien drew a quick breath as they narrowly dodged another sweeping cut. Despite giving off the initial impression of a creature of leisure, the Zamburak was shockingly athletic. “How does one listen to silence?” they asked, leaping atop a table and parrying from the high ground.

“I would have thought that you’d know the answer already,” the cheetah replied smoothly, launching himself onto the table with Aurélien. The wood creaked under their combined weight but held fast. “The same way one listens to whispers in the wind or the rustling of leaves.”

The Zamburak’s shamshir whizzed past, barely an inch away from Aurélien’s beak. The blue jay stumbled backwards and quickly regained their footing as they were simultaneously struck by inspiration. “Or the language of two co-cladists sitting together in an empty playground, saying nothing and yet everything to each other at the same moment.” Aurélien finished.

“Very good.” The Zamburak’s voice carried a hint of approval. The cheetah flashed a pair of gold-capped canines as he smiled. Aurélien moved with renewed vigor, sweat dripping from their forefeathers as they used their superior agility to keep the Zamburak off-balance.

If the Zamburak was Céleste and Aurélien was Gaëlle, then

their relationship had been a delicate balance, each one needing to listen just as much as to speak. Each clash of their blades echoed the natural rhythm of conversation, the Zamburak's impetuous and aggressive strikes echoing Céleste's fiery spirit while Aurélien's calculated parries mirrored Gaëlle's reserved nature.

Céleste's fork became clearer in their mind; no longer an abstract notion but a lynx slowly emerging in Athenian glory. The Zamburak struck again, shamshir glistening under the starlight, and the blue jay caught a glimpse of deep crimson as a pulse of pain shot through their side. The wound was superficial, just a shallow cut, but it jolted them into perfect focus all the same.

"Silent paws in the snow," Aurélien muttered under their breath, their feathers bristling with insight. Their backward stumble had overturned a mound of Turkish delight, leaving delicate tracks in the powdered sugar. "This fork—are they perhaps partial to a different climate?"

"Indeed," he affirmed with a dulcet purr. "Her heart has always been at peace amidst the snow-capped peaks of the Zagros."

"Know any good mountaineering sims?" Aurélien asked, driving the ball of their heel into the Zamburak's shin. The cheetah let out a sharp yelp, balancing on one leg as he beat back Aurélien's assault with the raw power of an avalanche rolling through the tree line.

"It's not in a different sim, but...I think I know just the place," the Zamburak replied with a knowing smile. With a swift movement, he closed the distance between them and slipped under the blue jay's guard. Aurélien's *shamshir* flew from their grip as they were viscerally ejected from the Government Club. "*Safar khosh begzared!*"

#

Aurélien collapsed backward onto an unspoiled blanket of powdery snow which almost instantly soaked through the thin cotton of their *gandoura*. Rolling their eyes, the blue jay forked



into a winter-appropriate outfit, swapping the lightweight tunic for a well-insulated down jacket and sturdy snow pants. A fierce wind stirred their plumage, nipping at the slight gaps between the feathers on their cheeks.

In the distance, Aurélien caught a glimpse of a red-orange light through the thickening flurries. With no other signs of civilization in sight, they began to trudge toward it, pulling their hood tighter while tilting their beak down against the bitter cold. Their thickly-gloved hands fumbled for a cigarette, only managing to tear the pack open on their fourth attempt.

Framed by the swirling snowflakes, Aurélien withdrew a single filterless Gauloises. With years of practice, they clamped it between the frost-kissed edges of their beak and lit it with a strike-anywhere match. Drawing the smoke deep into their breast, Aurélien let the rush of nicotine siphon some of the chill away.

After a few minutes of effortful trekking, Aurélien arrived at a small clearing. Standing out against a background of scraggly trees, the red-orange light illuminated a rustic log cabin with shutters painted a vibrant gold. A healthy plume of smoke curled from the stacked stone chimney, while a pair of well-loved skis were propped against the railing of the front porch. The half-smoked Gauloises dangled from Aurélien’s beak as they climbed weather-beaten stairs that creaked ominously beneath their weight.

After straightening the lapels of their jacket, Aurélien rapped their knuckles on a solid oak door adorned with a wreath of juniper branches interwoven with fragrant strips of dried orange peel. A moment later, it swung open to reveal a cozy living room bathed in the glow radiating from the roaring fire in the hearth.

“*Quelle surprise.*” The lynx standing in the doorway appraised Aurélien with emerald eyes, a half-smile on her muzzle as the acrid smoke from the Gauloises mingled with the frosty air. “I wasn’t expecting company but...do come in. You’ll catch your

death out there. Just put that damn cigarette out.”

Aurélien wordlessly flicked the Gauloises into the nearest snowbank, watching as the glow of the embers was quickly snuffed out. Stepping over the threshold, the scent of warm pine and roasting meat was a welcome contrast to the lynx’s obviously begrudging hospitality. Playful shadows danced across worn Persian rugs strewn across the hardwood floor.

“You keep a lovely home,” Aurélien remarked, shaking the dusting of snow free from their feathers.

“It doesn’t quite have the grandeur of the Government Club, but it suits me just fine,” the lynx replied. Futzing over a tarnished silver-plated samovar warmed by a small kerosene burner, she poured steaming tea into a pair of chipped porcelain cups as Aurélien hung their jacket over the back of a chintz armchair. “Do you take sugar?”

Aurélien rubbed their hands together for a moment before stretching them out towards the primally-satisfying warmth of the fire. “Yes, two spoonfuls,” they said reflexively. “And if you’d be so kind, a bit of cream, *s’il vous plait*.”

The lynx huffed out a laugh as she sauntered back to the barebones kitchen tucked away in the rear of the cabin. Opening a crazed porcelain icebox, she retrieved a small glass bottle of cream and shook it gently before adding a generous measure to one of the tea cups.

“Here you are,” she said, setting the steaming cup on a small wooden table beside Aurélien. Heat seeped into their cold digits like a summer breeze as their fingers curled around the smooth porcelain.

“*Merçi*,” Aurélien replied, inhaling the fragrant steam before taking a measured sip. Strong and laced with a hint of cinnamon, the tea settled comfortably in the pit of Aurélien’s stomach. “So, you’re Céleste’s fork, yes?”

“Are you here to offer condolences?” The lynx stiffened slightly, her eyes darting to the slowly diminishing fire before settling back on Aurélien. She took a leisurely sip of her tea, her

nubby tail flicking with mild agitation. “You could’ve left a vase of ice-lilies on the porch in lieu of undertaking a *vol de la mort*.”

“No, that’s not why I came,” Aurélien replied. “I was tasked with ascertaining your whereabouts, and I do not rest until my investigation comes to a satisfying conclusion.”

“Is that so?” The lynx’s ears pricked up as her foot-claws rapped against the unstained pine floorboards. “Was it Gaëlle who requested your services, perchance?”

A slight nod of the blue jay’s head served as confirmation. “She was most eager to get in touch with you after all that had happened as of late. Are you aware?”

“I enjoy voluntary solitude, but I don’t live under a rock.” The lynx’s face remained inscrutable, her emerald eyes reflecting the flickering firelight. Then, she let out a diffident chuckle, shaking her head as she leaned back, cutting a sharp silhouette against the chintz. “Gaëlle had nursed a crush on Céleste for many decades. She’s beautiful, don’t you think?”

“She’s like twilight over the Seine.” Aurélien nodded in agreement as a falling log sent a shower of sparks bouncing off the smooth river stones that lined the hearth. “And yet it seems your heart does not agree with your eyes.”

The lynx thoughtfully pursued her lips. Soft light accentuated her youthful features, which were in stark contrast to the mélange of nostalgia and melancholy in her wizened eyes. “My heart has perhaps seen one too many twilights over the Seine. Dusk also means night is near.”

“That is true enough, but twilight has its own beauty,” Aurélien murmured. Taking a sip of their tea, they paused and inquisitively cocked their beak. “I’m afraid that I didn’t catch your name. I’d like to properly thank my host for a lovely cup of tea.”

Remaining silent, gentle waves formed in the diminutive ocean clasped tightly in the lynx’s paws as she studied Aurélien’s face. The fire quivered momentarily as a particularly violent gust of wind rattled the cabin’s foundations. “Tell me, stranger. What do you see when you gaze up at the night sky?”

“Stars,” Aurélien replied shortly after a moment’s pause. “I see stars, of course.”

“Just stars?” The lynx murmured, a soft smile creeping at the edge of her muzzle. “Only diminutive specks of light scattered against black canvas?”

Tired springs creaked as Aurélien shifted slightly to lean against the unyielding backrest. It reminded them perfectly of a particularly irksome piece of furniture that had adorned his grandmother’s humble sitting room, always sheathed in dense plastic. “I suppose I see heavenly glory, Céleste.”

The lynx nodded, her eyes briefly gleaming with distilled starlight. “So, what now? Are you going to tell Gaëlle the truth?”

Aurélien peered down into the dregs of their tea, scanning for omens in the waterlogged leaves. The hisses and pops of the dying fire punctuated the silence between them. “I was only hired to find you,” they murmured, noting what appeared to be the silhouette of a mushroom as they set their now empty cup down. “What happens next is not up to me.”

“*C’est la vie*,” Céleste quipped, pushing herself off the chair. Her tail swished behind her as she moved, tracing patterns against the checkerboard pattern of her flannel lounge pants. Squatting beside the hearth, she casually dropped another log onto the pile with a resounding *thu-clack*. “We’re always beholden to the decisions of others, whether they be friends, lovers, or co-cladists. Perhaps I just wanted a taste of living for myself, at least for a little while.”

“And now?” Aurélien asked.

“Now?” Céleste shot an inscrutable smile over her shoulder. Turning away, she picked up a wrought-iron poker and pensively stirred the embers before sweeping some of the ashes aside. “Now I spend the rest of the evening emptying out my samovar and considering how much longer I’d like to gaze at the heavens alone.”

“I wouldn’t want to overstay my welcome.” Aurélien pursed their beak, giving her a nod as they stood up and tucked a

cigarette into their beak—leaving it unlit, per Céleste’s request. “You’ve been more than gracious to an uninvited guest.”

“Off so soon? I hope that I didn’t chase you away,” the lynx murmured. “Our little discussion was just starting to get interesting.”

“Not at all,” Aurélien assured her while deftly slipping on their jacket. Their thoughts drifted to their clade, long scattered to the winds. Perhaps it might be time to reach out, if only to have an excuse to sample an unfamiliar haunt. “But, if stargazing ever gets a bit lonely—”

“—I know where to find Gaëlle,” the lynx murmured. Escorting Aurélien to the door, she crossed the cozy space in a few graceful strides. Upon cracking it open, the pair were greeted by a gust of sharp wind that whipped up ethereal swirls across the landscape like diminutive dust devils.

Aurélien shivered, giving Céleste a warm *jeer-jeer* as they pulled their coat tighter. “I was going to say you could find me,” they finished. “If you’re ever in need of a stiff drink, leave a message for me with the bartender at the Sombres Reflets.”

“Perhaps. After all, Death could have just as easily have kindly stopped for me as for my fork.” A coy smile danced on Céleste’s muzzle. “Can you give Gaëlle a message for me?”

Aurélien tilted their head and cocked an inquiring eyebrow. “Of course.”

“Just because the stars are scattered does not mean they are separated.” The lynx delicately tilted her head onto one side, her gaze momentarily lost in the snow-blanketed landscape beyond the front porch. “They all belong to the same sky.”

“I’ll pass the message along.” Aurélien closed their eyes as the door’s latch clicked shut behind them. The bluejay sent a ping to Gaëlle before letting out a satisfied sigh that hinted at their exhaustion. Still, at the Sombres Reflets, there would be time enough to enjoy the satisfaction of providing the first drop of gold for relationship *kintsugi*...and perhaps gather the fortitude to reach out to a few co-cladists. “*Nos cœurs se tiennent par*

## Toward Eternity

*la main, même quand les distances nous séparent.”*

Then, beneath an endless sky painted with shimmering constellations, the blue jay turned and stepped confidently toward Eternity.

~ END ~







# A Well-Trained Eye

Andréa C. Mason



## Lucia Marchetti — 2401

The rain against old glass panes and the sways and bumps of the car on the rails ready the air for conjurations. Lucy sits on the bench 6th from the back, on the right side, a sketchbook open across her knees. Today she's trying charcoal. Feels right with what happened a week ago.

This lonely train through the valley and the mountain is her chapel and now her hermitage in the wake of the bombing. There are plenty of churches and other religious retreats across the System if she wanted, but none of them have ever felt a fit for this work. She thought about skipping this week, and told herself if the train wasn't running, she'd pick up again later, but even with no passengers save her, the engine pulls its empty tail along the countryside. So, as she has done every week for the past 250 years, she has gone to her locker in the station, pulled out a fresh sketchbook, and boarded.

Lucy conjures in her memory their faces.

She can only recall 63 of the 68. It is true that the System means she cannot forget anything now, but it merely preserves in amber what the memory held at the moment of upload. It cannot restore the faces she lost to time. Even a number of the faces she recalls are not complete memories. Those she has filled in over decades, extrapolating or iterating on them until they are whole enough for her to feel it completes them. Over 260 years, her hands have become capable of incredible art, both through endless repetition and boundless study. When she is not here in

her railcar-sized confession booth, she enjoys a life as an artist, known for bittersweet paintings and sculptures, happy to teach and happier to learn, a lover of life and a bringer of joy.

Of the five lost, two faces she cannot recall because they were unexpected complications on a job. One face was sent to kill her, but wasn't good enough. One face jumped her in an alley to rob her, or perhaps worse, but couldn't have picked a worse target. She doesn't recall her first kill's face, because there was a bag over his head and a gun loaded with both bullets and an irreversible choice was pushed into her hand.

The 69th face is the most vivid to her, but Lucy has never felt the need to draw her. After all, she let that last one go, and every morning after she wakes, Lucia Marchetti hopes that poor girl listened to her and got far far away. She hopes that woman lived a full life and that the family never caught up.

The clack-clack of the wheels on the track sets a rhythm for her vigil, her penance. The weather in the sim varies based on algorithms and set patterns both, stable enough to make maintenance easy, unpredictable enough to mimic weather phys-side. Today the rain is quite heavy. She welcomes it. The inside is dry, but the wood of the train car has a slight moist smell, a beautiful attention to detail. The lights in the car flicker a little more than usual, the train is a bit slower than usual but the ride is if anything less smooth. She likes the rougher rides, because it adds a challenge to her work, one she is well accustomed to after centuries but nonetheless welcomes. The rain fills in the silence where passengers would chat and shuffle and cough and rustle newspapers and make all those sounds living people make. She wonders how many of the usual riders died in the bomb, and how many are just afraid to go out, unsure, mourning, or just needing time alone.

Some art critics and fans throughout the System have pointed out that the left eyes in many of her portraits have fantastical details, often drawn as flowers, or the root of vines, or sunsets woven into faces, or in her sculptures become caves,

grottos, tidal pools, library alcoves, hidden urban alleys. Many speculate on the symbolism of that, and her favorite theory is the one that she lost an eye to cancer, and her obsession with art and color is due to the way cancer distorted her vision, and that her art was a reclamation of what it had taken from her, a final spite to the disease that forced her to upload. Even though it was wrong it was very romantic, and even now she did very little to fight it, and on occasion coyly encouraged it.

A bullet through the left eye had been her professional calling card. Left hand on the top of the head, barrel of the silencer to the eyelid. She had taken so much from the world through left eyes, and she put back as much life and beauty through them now as she could. It would never be enough. More than a few of the faces she could only conjure with the bloody hole in a lifeless head, but she has never rendered it in sketches. She recreates and restores them as they were before, using decades of study to fill in what she destroyed. Even as styles and methods and tools change in her hands, she gives the dead that. Owes them that. The only real Liberty she takes is with the hair above the faces, refusing to give hair any semblance of being pushed or held down by anything.

The piece of charcoal snaps in her hand, and she realizes there are tears staining the current sketch. She wipes her eyes, takes another piece of charcoal from her satchel.

The bomb dwells on her mind. The Century Bomb, detonated at midnight, the start of the 25th century. 2400-01-01. 276+1 system. In a digital world so removed from death, suddenly a toll on an incomprehensible level. Mechanically, it was a contrapro-propriceptive virus, launched at an astounding scale, wiping 1% of the System's current instance total by interrupting their code irreversibly. Functionally, it was a bomb that killed billions and scared shitless a trillion more. She wonders why they did it. She doesn't want to know, but she wonders. She wonders if it was just a job. She wonders if it wasn't. She wonders if they can remember all the faces of the people they killed. She wonders if

they died in the bomb themselves. She hopes they did. She snaps another piece of charcoal, but if there were tears, they burned off on the heat in her face. It takes several breaths to unclench her fist, and she grabs another piece of charcoal.

This is the longest stretch of the track. It's between the third and fourth stops, and it's where she starts sketching every time. Some weeks, depending on her mood or free time, she waits for the train to finish looping through the five stops and the station before picking up in her usual place. This time she doesn't wait. The calm she needs comes as soon as the engine lurches into motion from the station, and she lets the sounds and motions balm her weary heart.

Charcoal means no color, but it lets her play with shading techniques. The more recent the face, the more realistic it becomes on the page, whereas older faces come out impressionistic, sketchier, or strikingly simple. Once she did them in chronological order. Then by age, alphabetical by first name, then last, then by height or by estimated weight, by location, by time it took to complete that dirty work, until now she's run out of categories and just lets them queue their own order, double checking periodically who is left and who isn't.

She feels a low impulse to include some of the regular passengers who are missing today, but cannot bring herself to break 250 years of rite and ritual. She decides tomorrow she will come back with separate sketchbooks or maybe some other medium, sit in a different place on the train, and sketch as many of the regulars as she can remember. Those she will not keep hidden away, and those she will let her sys-side self take care of.

Most people would send a separate fork for this, she figures. She always leaves a fork at her home sim, and when she gets back to the studio that fork will merge down to her. It is important to her that this continuous (as much as one can be here) version of herself be the penitent one. She thinks other people would understand that, it's not something that really needs explaining, but she has never told anyone directly what she does, and those

who know about her train rides know better than to ask.

She wonders how many of them survived, and how many of them died or quit. She wonders how many will quit or crash from the grief. She chides herself for getting distracted. She sketches.

She long ago learned the art of faking motions. She trained herself to glance up and stare at random points in the room, usually where other passengers are, to give the illusion she is not doing this from memory. It is a performance for the comfort of others, and the comfortable ask less questions. She almost always got left alone anyway. She wonders how she must look from the outside. Short, black hair, in a layered bob that tapers into her neck, pale skin, wispy and thin. Her outfit for the train is always the same, a plain, thin white blouse with short sleeves and dark blue buttons down the middle, a pair of dark blue slacks with a very high waist, a tasteful pair of flats, tented teal triangles for earrings. The train is based on its early middle twentieth century ancestors, and she commits fully to the part as well. She never asks anyone if she pulls it off, or asks for a picture.

It takes her a while to notice there is someone else in the railcar with her.

One of those upward glancing motions registers some bright color on her left, but it takes four more motions before it actually clicks that it's an arm in a jacket. She stops mid-sketch and turns to the other passenger.

Across the aisle from her seat is a bench against the left wall of the train, and despite years of riding she cannot say for sure if the bench was always present or a new addition. Other than that it does not stand out, as all the upholstery, cushions, wood, metal, and design choices fit perfectly with the rest of the compartment. It might have been there the whole time. It might have appeared there seconds ago. It alarms her how little her memory has charted the left side of the aisle.

The other passenger is a woman who is also a skunk. She is tall, broad-shouldered, portly, covered in earthy green fur, with

a mess of curly hair that is swept to the side and bleached blond. She wears an orange canvas bomber jacket, a beat up white tank top, grayish cargo pants, and heavy boots. Her arms are spread out on the back of the bench. One of her legs is crossed over the other, bouncing on it. She is grinning. Something about the fur pattern near the skunk's left eye unsettles Lucy, but it is obscured by the dark round sunglasses the skunk is wearing. How the skunk's tail seems to be at an impossible angle to her body while sitting down Lucy chalks up to the benefits of the System.

The skunk's grin widens when her presence is acknowledged. Lucy looks at her but lets the other woman make the first move. The skunk gladly obliges. "You know, it took me longer than I'd like to admit to realize you haven't been drawing other passengers."

Lucy chews her tongue before responding, turning back to her work but not letting the stranger from her sight. "Who's to say I wasn't before?"

The skunk shrugs. "It's possible, but I've seen you here every week for decades. It didn't click until about 6 years ago that the styles change but the faces don't."

A regular, then. There are other cars, and Lucia only rides the train once a week. So many different bodies and species exist within the System, and with the weird prevalence of skunks among that, not recalling this one's face didn't feel too strange. Old instincts warn her that her visitor could be banking on that, but she dismisses it with a stroke on the page.

Lucy sighs. "Well noticed. What else have you observed?"

The skunk tilts her head and chews her tongue a little, tapping a claw. "More a hunch than an observation, but you don't draw the living."

"Correct again. Not here, anyway. Elsewhere I do not restrain myself so."

The skunk gives a bobbing nod. "People you lost?"

Lucia speaks plainly. "People I killed."



The test is laid. How will the examinee respond? Fear? Nervous laughter? Anger?

The skunk raises an eyebrow. “Appearances can be deceiving, but you don’t strike me as a soldier.”

“Metaphorically, maybe, but never literally.”

The skunk’s claws tighten into the wood of the bench at either end of her arms. “Not a cop, I hope?”

Now there’s a measure of character. Lucia genuinely laughs, and the skunk’s grips relax. There’s that bobbing nod again, and the mephit says, “So, ah, contract work.”

Lucy cannot decide if the animal’s cavalier nature is charming or cause for alarm. Her heart wants to believe the former. A gut trained on a former life tells her the latter. Both are anxious to see how this plays out. “I would call it familial obligations, but they did pay me for it, and friends of the family would throw me work now and again as well.” She pauses. “You know how family can be.”

The skunk gives a sad smirk. “Half of mine disowned me for being queer. Don’t think it’s quite the same but I can sympathize, at least.”

Lucy stops sketching for a second, and makes eye contact with the skunk, or as best she can through the other’s sunglasses. Even without the eyes, there’s a topography of emotion in the snout and cheeks and brow. That pattern of fur around her left eye, it’s rough. Aesthetically it interrupts the face. An interesting choice. Panic surges just a little again.

Lucia blinks and shakes her head, turning back to her sketch. “Well, good thing we both got out.”

The skunk looks out the window behind her. “And yet the past never stops trailing behind us here. It’s like this train, never moving forward, on an endless loop that carries us in circles. Even if we step off at a stop, it will be back around to pick us up again.”

Lucy sees no reason to add anything.

The skunk turns back towards her. “These pieces you do fascinate me. They all lack your signature.”

“What need to autograph them? They are for me and the dead. Other than the prying eyes of those like you who see my process, they are never shared.”

“That is not the signature I mean.”

She tenses. “Ah, a stylistic one, then. Do you mean to say I am an artist beyond these sketches? Who do you think I might be?”

“I know exactly who you are.”

Everything goes quiet and the light dims. Somewhere in the conversation Lucy missed the whistle for the tunnel, and as the train slips into the darkness the driving rain no longer fills silence. Even the wheel-clacks sound quieter. The bulbs along either side of the car have dimmed, and the one on the skunk’s right has gone out completely. The skunk has taken off her sunglasses, and is wiping the lenses in the cotton of her tank top.

It is not a pattern in her fur, Lucia realizes. It is a scar. A scar that starts north of the brow, runs most of the way down her cheek, and in the middle, crosses her eye. The left eye itself is clouded over, with only a hint of the pupil beneath. The other eye is a striking hazel, untouched.

A million possibilities run through Lucia’s head. This is someone here to blackmail her. The family finally sent an assassin. Somehow one of her targets survived and has found her for revenge. The System isn’t real, and this is Purgatory, or worse, Hell, luring her into a false sense of security to strengthen her damnation. All of these could be true at once. She does not know. She finds she cannot quit, or leave the sim, or even move, paralyzed in pure fear, an emotion she has not felt in centuries.

Meanwhile, the skunk is saying, “You are Lucia Marchetti, renowned artist and sculptor. One of the most distinct in the System, in fact, and if I’m not mistaken, the unintentional pioneer of three major art movements of the last two centuries. Most intriguing is your lasting fixation on the left eye, present

on almost every one of your pieces with a living thing in it. There's a lot of theories, but no one really knows why you do it. Except I think I do."

Lucy resigns herself. 260 years was a good run. More than any of her targets got sometimes by a factor of ten. She should have trusted her gut and bailed. She should have run. She shouldn't have said so much. But she did, and she tries to make peace with having to face the music. It's not really working, but she still cannot bring herself to flee. They say that no one can force you to stay in a sim, that it is impossible to truly hold anyone anywhere in the System against their will, but none of them ever account for the pressure one can exert on oneself. So, if this is the end, she decides, even if she cannot accept it, she will not fight it. "You're here to kill me, aren't you?"

The skunk laughs. "Kill you? Why would I want to kill you?" She holds her sunglasses up towards one of the light fixtures, checking the lens for smudges. "You might be the only person on the System who understands me."

Lucia has the brief vivid image in her mind of an engraved lighter and a carousel tearing itself apart. The skunk across from her must be some sort of fanatic, perhaps another professional killer, or worse, unprofessional. Someone unmoored from reality, perhaps. Madness is more prevalent in the System than anyone admits. Lucy decides she would have preferred if this stranger was here to kill her, then chides herself for this self-destructiveness.

Still the skunk speaks, and taps next to her damaged eye. "For most of my life phys-side, I would now and again come down with migraines that always started behind my eye. Most of them were mild, but some of them would put me down for a whole day. Once or twice I even had visual aberrations, and I couldn't even see out of it. It'd be like static, visual white noise. For some reason, after I forked off my root instance, I started having the migraines again sys-side. The pressure is there, and the hurt is sometimes there, but now I hallucinate. Vividly, and

only through that eye. My right eye is locked on reality, and the left eye ranges from minor distortions to things that even our more adventurous chemical days never came close to. I've never met anyone else that gets migraines here like mine. But then, I see your work, and I finally think for a second that maybe I'm not alone."

"I'm not totally convinced you are not here to kill me."

The mephit shakes her head. "I swear I'm not. I mean, you've been here—the System, I should say—for a long time?"

"Centuries."

"When did you upload?"

"Why should I tell you?"

"So I can prove I'm not sent by your 'family'. Just want to know the year."

Lucia mulls it over before saying it. "2140."

"Which was 31 years before my root instance was even born."

"Doesn't mean that you aren't—"

"You have to believe me! You have to, and you have to experience something like I do. It has to be the reason!" The skunk's face is a patchwork of frustration and desperate need.

"I never in my life before this place or after had a single headache."

The stranger is on the verge of tears. "Then why?"

"It's where I put the bullets."

The skunk's eyes go wide, and the rain slams against the rail car as the train leaves the tunnel again.

For the first time in all her years of penance, Lucia wishes she could stop drawing these faces, and instead in this moment sketch the creature across from her. The surprise in the mephit's features decays, like a flashbulb in a camera after it's gone off in those ancient movies the Don loved to watch. Lucy wants to capture this moment as hope withers and understanding winds vines slowly into the visage of the woman. She can see her piece together what that means, why these faces must never bear that mark, a million questions banished to the aether with one sim-

ple, ugly, answer. It is Lucia's opinion that art is better left unexplained, and this is why. If it weren't for the storm outside she would have heard the poor thing's heart break. There is a biting of a lip, there are tears, there is a bobbing nod of understanding, and a single, deep sob. If she could raise a hand, a brush, a chisel, these minutes would turn into her finest work, she would capture the death of a hero as seen through a mirror. She mourns it as the emotions pass, as the traces of them evaporate off the skunk's muzzle like morning mist in the sun. To capture what she saw in the moment would be a blasphemous vanity. She tears herself away from staring, and continues her sketches.

It is a while before either can speak. The skunk speaks first. "I think knowing that, somehow, makes your art...more beautiful to me?"

Lucy snorts. "That's unfortunate."

"Do you regret it?"

She rolls her eyes at this. "No, I have sat on this train every week for 250 years drawing the dead because I have nothing better to do. What a stupid question."

"Did you upload because you got tired of killing?"

"I uploaded because I was tired of being a man." She looks up to see that the skunk has put back on her sunglasses, but they cannot hide her surprise again. Lucia sets down the notebook and the charcoal on the seat next to herself. "The family gave me an address and a man's name. They did not tell me what he had done, usually they did not, but they spoke with such vitriol I assumed his trespasses were high. The family back then overlooked my dalliances with other men, as men were easy to pay off, and I suspect I was not the only one in the family 'wandering from the path' in that way. Something about the venom in the request made me wonder if someone in the family had been spurned, and I was cleaning up loose ends. No matter. I had given up long ago on caring about my targets. A job is a job, and the family always found me work.

"I broke into the apartment, and in the dim light of the liv-

ing room was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. She was like polished stone, you could tell she was made more beautiful by the things she endured. It took me a moment to remember what I was even there for, and I wondered again if this wasn't business but personal affairs. She noticed me, and panicked, pulling a blanket to herself even though she was clothed. I did not yell, I did not shout, I did not strike in my work. I used a level voice, moved calmly and deliberately, and made no sudden movements. People feared that more than an angry man, and it meant there was a lot less cleanup involved. I did not hide that I had a gun. She asked me who I was, and I said I was strictly here on business, and she didn't need to know. She said she didn't trust me, and I told her very simply that if I intended to hurt I would not have waited for her to see me. I told her that all she needed to do was answer me a question, and then she could leave safely. As a show of faith, I stepped out from between her and the door. She weighed her options. She was taller than me, a bit stockier, but I was a man with a gun in my hands. She relented, and with a sigh told me to ask. I told her all I needed to know was where I could find my target. I told her the name.

“Perhaps you are smart enough to know where this is going, but I mistook her panic for loyalty. She became defensive, refusing to give any information and demanding of me explanations. I told her she need not be loyal to him again and again, that it was not worth her life to defend him, and that all I needed to know is where he was. She offered bribes. She offered violence. She offered a great many things I dare not say. I do not know how long our exchange went exactly. Easily 15 minutes, likely more. I grew impatient and finally asked her why his life was worth so much more than hers, and that regardless of what happened to her I had a job and that man had to die.

“She wailed, falling to the floor, and told me with absolute despair that she was the man I was looking for. Only then do I begin to inspect my surroundings carefully. I take notice of the decorations, the aesthetic choices, the recurring theme of re-

birth. There was a jacket, hung on the back of a dining table chair, with a flag on the shoulder, a flag of stripes and three colors. Such a jacket was not uncommon among younger generations of my country, but the flag was not the flag of Italia of old, nor any of the new flags of the many states my homeland became under the Western Federation. No, this flag is the standard of a country with no land, abstract territory, yet one I—and, I highly suspect, you as well—reside within. Three colors, yes, but the stripes of the flag are horizontal, not vertical. Five stripes, not three.

“No doubt you have heard the tales of old about those Lost in the sims, in the days before the System. In that moment, like them, I became lost within myself. I was not old then, but I had lived a very long life. I tumbled down through memories, emotions, places, times, lovers, imaginations. This woman before me, born something else, but made beautiful by change, was she as me? Pulled unwilling into the affairs of the family? Forced into shapes preordained, melted down and poured into a mold, cracked upon the altar of tradition, to fit needs or to ornament the mansion walls? Did she break the mold, or melt again to make herself anew? Could I do the same? My lovers were all overlooked or bought off, but in the eyes of those who shaped me, I was property who could buy a place at the table in time but never my own freedom. This Angel before me was an epiphany, and to the gospel of my employers I fell apostate in a moment. In my head and only in my head I begged mercy and forgiveness from her, that I might forever fall to her feet and serve to atone for my trespasses. She was living proof that my resignation to my fate was an act of cowardice, that for years I had been lying to myself. A thousand versions of myself in my head ran to every corner of my mind and pulled together a new self, an eternity of hands falling over themselves to construct some possible way to let this woman go without getting both her and myself killed. No markers lay for how long I was lost in my head, and when I pulled back to the reality before me, I have no idea if I had been gone a

second or an hour. The woman before me still wept. I made up my mind. It was made from the moment I saw her jacket.

“I told her to look at me. She did. I told her the man I had come to kill was clearly already dead. She stared at me for a long time. I asked her if her identifications had her old name or her new one on them, and when she said new I cemented a plan. I told her I had no intention of killing her, but that I could not promise the same of my employers. I set my gun on the table. I sorted out for her an impressive sum of money that I kept on my person, as even as late as the 2130s hard currency opened far more doors than brute force. I knelt down beside her on the floor. I pressed into her hands a marker, something that would grant her safe passage anywhere she showed it, an agreement of families and organizations that preceded us by centuries. I told her where to go, what places my family would never tread, and what she needed to say to get there. I told her to wait 20 minutes after I left, pack as little as she could, and leave immediately. She sat there stunned, and only as I got to the door did it grip her that this was real.

“She asked me why I was helping her. I could not lie. I told her that killing her would make her a man again and I could not stand to take such beauty from the world. Manhood is not a problem if it is choice, but I was never given one, and I would not force anyone to reconsider their own decision. I do not know if she understood me, but she nodded. As I departed, she asked if she would see me again. I told her no, I was already as dead as the man I had been sent to kill, and left before she could delay me further.

“I do not know what happened to her. I don’t know what happened to the family. I do not know what happened to the cats left in my apartment. I do not even know if the sun set the next night. I moved quickly, using the weight my name had gathered over the years to get me quick passage to Roma. Uploading was still new then, expensive and still a mystery to most, but Roma had an Ansible clinic. I arrived in the city just before dawn,



and caught the staff as they arrived for the morning. I drained my accounts and gave them each enough to fund the clinic for a year, to upload me and to strike my name from any records. They asked me what to do with my body. I told them to burn it and toss the ashes into the Tiber. When they objected, I handed them even more money, and finally they gave way.”

Lucia looks up, and out over the countryside rolling by the windows of the train car. How far, she wonders, does it go? Does it end a small ways from the train? Are the mountains on the other side of this valley merely a trick of sensoria? Or has someone rendered them, crafting the walls of stone as they rise from low earth, etching little runs and outcroppings for a thousand meters upward? Does the sim stretch beyond the mountains, an uncanny mirror of the alps that she had traveled phys-side often enough, mostly for business, only very rarely for pleasure? She knows most of the stops are fleshed out, but she has no idea if all the land in between them is. She briefly sees the faint orange reflection of the skunk’s jacket in the window, and tries not to think about how long she might have been silent.

Still, as she speaks, it is a few moments before she turns back to the other passenger. “There is nothing more to tell. The killer for hire died on the Ansible table. I do not miss him. I mourn those whom he took from the world. I carry them on eternally here, as I have since the first day I ever rode this train.”

The skunk smirks. “I wonder if the riders know they’re in your rolling mausoleum.”

Lucia frowns. “It is not a mausoleum!”

The mephit’s lip twitches. “Right, my mistake, if it doesn’t contain any remains, it’s called a cenotaph, isn’t it?”

The frown turns to a scowl. “That is not what I mean.”

The skunk leans forward, resting her forearms upon her thighs. “A confessional, then. Do you say your ‘hail marys’ as we ride along these chancel rails? Quite a trick to use a train to transit the stations of the cross, but with only 6 stops instead of 14, you may find us lacking.”

Lucia turns to her, meaning to scald the other woman with a glare. “Do not mock me. Those traditions were antiquated before I was born, much less you. I ask nothing of a god I do not believe in. So too the dead are the dead, they feel nothing. Hear nothing. Give nothing. I do this for myself, I grieve. I regret. From what authority do you speak? What right have you to judge?”

The skunk raises her paws in defense. “I’m not judging.”

Lucia bares her teeth. “The hell you are not. You speak harshly, think me a sinner.”

The skunk crosses her arms before herself. “Listen, I am not in the business of *salvation* or *absolution*.”

“Then what, pray tell, are you in the business of?”

The other woman furrows her brow, and leans back. Then, slowly, smugly, she grins. “*Joie de vivre*.”

Lucia finds herself genuinely unsure how to respond to that, so she doesn’t. On she sketches, ignoring her spectator as best she can. A stop comes and goes, the fourth, and neither debark. No one gets on either. Riders. A thread lies untraced in Lucy’s mind. She pulls it.

To the skunk she says, “You asked earlier if the riders know what I do, as if you did not number among them.”

The skunk’s face isn’t just grinning, there’s some anticipation around the edges of it. This stranger has been waiting for this question. “Not usually, no, not by a traditional count.”

Lucia squints. “Yet you said before the tunnel that you have observed me here for decades.”

The skunk looks up, and taps a cheeky claw to her chin. “Yeah, weird, I wonder how that could be?”

“Do you spy on the passengers?”

The skunk tilts her head disappointedly, and lets the silence answer for her.

“Neither then, some small animal, like a mouse or an insect living on the train.”

A shake of a head. “Construct or instance, I’d consider them passengers, too.”

“And you observed me directly, yes?”

“This is a fun game! Yes, I have countless times.”

Lucy doesn't like this game. She hates the feeling of missing something simple. Perhaps it isn't simple. “You...you are the train we are riding in, and you have watched me all these years, and forked to something that could speak to me.”

The skunk laughs, and slaps her knees. Lucia turns red, scowling. Wiping humorous tears from her eyes, the skunk says, “I love artists so much. Creative! Very creative, but a few problems. One: I was born after you uploaded. Two: I only forked and individuated from my root instance in 2357, and Three: the System is capable of many incredible things, but that's a little too fantastic.” The skunk gave a little head bob. “I guess in a metaphorical way you could say I speak for the train, but no, I'm afraid as long as I've been around in this sim, I've just been a skunk.”

Lucy looks out the window, and says aloud, “I do not like this game.”

The skunk laughs again. “I'm having a blast. Do you want me to tell you?”

The artist glances back only briefly, and shakes her head.

“Do you want me to give you a hint?”

Now Lucia turns to look at her, and when the skunk raises an eyebrow, she relents. “Fine. Fine! Yes!”

The skunk slips her left paw into her jacket pocket. “Your hint is: rider and passenger are passive roles.”

Passive? If riding a train is a passive state, what would be an active—

Lucy nearly throws her sketches to the floor, gesticulating angrily. “You are the engineer. You drive the train.”

“Correct!” The mephit holds up three clawed fingers on her right paw. “Beyond maintaining the sim, I wear three hats. One is engineer. The second is stationmaster. But neither of those explain seeing you in this car, do they?”

Lucia's turn to raise an eyebrow. The skunk pulls her left

paw from her jacket pocket, and holds up a ticket puncher. Lucia buries her face in her hands. “Conductor. And now I am the asshole for not even remembering you.”

The skunk scoffs. “I’m not hurt! Think of it this way, you and this sim have been here for 250 years. I’ve only been ‘on board’ for about 35. I dug through our personnel records recently, and there have been well over 100 conductors, never mind several active at the same time. You’ve been focused on your work, faces change, and at some point you stopped paying attention to who was coming around to check for fares. Hell, I’ve met other regulars in other sims who don’t recognize me right away. Same goes for the 15 years I’ve been stationmaster, and have you ever actually been to the engine? Did you realize it has to be crewed? I’m proud of my work whether it gets seen or not, but often it isn’t.”

Lucia finally finds the other end of the thread. “Do you own this sim?”

The smile fades from the skunk’s face. “As of a week ago, yes.”

“Was it the Century At—”

“Mr. Nguyen had been planning to retire for some time. He’d given full access controls and permissions of the Sim to me a few months back, and after 275 years, he planned to retire at midnight, right as the century rolled over.” The furred woman bit her lip and looked away. “I...I don’t know if he died in the Attack. The way he was cleaning up his affairs by the end he might have quit the big one. Either way, he’s gone.”

A grief settles into Lucia. She realizes she does not know the attendants of this sacred place. If it is half as intricate and complex as she thinks, this sim takes a great amount of work and dedication to keep running. The System’s curse of eternal memory meant nothing if she did not bother to take notice of someone in the first place. Dozens of faces. Hundreds, likely. On top of this, layered like a dusting of ash or snow, is the suspicion that now this skunk and whatever forks of her there may be are the only ones left. Both the skunk and Lucia herself were lucky. How many sims now sit empty, with no owner? How many empty

homes and shops and cities and wildernesses and worlds wait for occupants, like pets who do not yet know the loss of their caretakers, or worse, cannot understand it? Does the System reclaim them? Should it? Should they stand as cenotaphs, markers of a terrible loss few people can yet truly wrap their heads around? Or like a home in a vibrant neighborhood, should the next inhabitants move in, so that life can go on for the living? She doesn't know. Answers are beyond her, she is the rain that falls from the sky and her eyes in equal measure. She rolls off of resolution or closure, like droplets off the panes of the glass of the traincar.

Her tears soak into the paper of her sketchbook, and that tugs her to reality again. She cannot change the past, but she can change the present, the future. She wipes the water from her eyes hastily. "I did not know his name. Nor yours, though you clearly know mine."

The skunk straightens up a little. "My name is Seras. Seras Frame."

Lucia nods. "Seras. I will remember it."

Seras shrugs. "You can't forget it."

Lucia says, "language is an art, not a science. When we say forget and remember, they can mean many things. I will say your name, Seras. I will speak it aloud and address you and not take you for granted again."

The train begins to slow as it reaches the fifth stop. Seras looks out the window, then back to Lucia. "I'll be getting off here, but before I do..." her voice trails off, and she holds up the ticket puncher, clacking it a few times. Lucia smiles. She pulls the ticket from her pocket, as she has every week for hundreds of years.

Seras stands up and takes it, looking it over. "Honestly, I was worried we'd lost all our riders. It's hard to say who's just too overwhelmed to show up, and who's gone. If you're here, I'm sure I'll see other old faces soon enough." She punches the ticket, and pauses. "Have you killed anyone since uploading?"

The train comes to a stop, and something deep inside Lucia

tenses. She snaps at the skunk. “Why? Worried I’m going to start up again?”

Seras rolls her eyes, and hands Lucia back her ticket brusquely. “Just curious.”

The skunk walks away swiftly, headed for the back of the car. She’s just about to leave when Lucy finds her voice again. “I didn’t even know you could kill someone here until the bomb went off.”

Seras stops dead in her tracks, but doesn’t turn around. Lucy keeps talking.

“I heard rumors of people being assassinated, but I never looked into it. How could you kill someone in a world like this? It all stunk of conspiracy, and you know how people are here. I thought I finally found a world without violence, and for a time I had such a world. Then the bomb devours billions, like an earthquake rending the ground into a maw of Hell. I am brought so close to the jaws of death I remember why I was glad to leave that world behind.” Lucy feels like a child, small, afraid. Even after transitioning it is a feeling she has rarely felt, and her usual guard falls away. Words tumble from her before she can stop them. “And I do think this is confessional. I do my penance in this public place, an anonymous sinner, because it must not be done alone. I apologize for my hostility. I do not like to be so plainly and nakedly seen by a stranger, and you frightened me like I haven’t been since the Ansible table.”

Seras turns. The two women watch each other for a while. Lucia speaks first.

“Do you think I’ve done enough? Held this Vigil for enough lifetimes? Should I keep going?”

The train’s whistle blows. Seras shakes her head. “I told you before. I’m not in the business of Absolution or Salvation.” She walks to the back door. As the railcars start to lurch into motion, she adds, “I’m just happy to see someone’s still riding the train.”

Then she’s gone, and Lucia pushes herself over a few seats to the window. She sees the skunk laughing and pulling the back of

her jacket over her head. As the train pulls away, she's stomping her boots through the puddles on the platform as she runs for the shelter of an awning.





# Home From the Game

Caela Argent



## Sadie Amara — 2401

*In which a Tracker's long-lost fork comes back after a grievous accident.*

### **Sadie Amara - 2401**

She hadn't seen them in... well, in years. And yet, here they were... sitting on her couch. She swallowed, awkwardly, and took another step closer.

She was never really *comfortable* around her own forks, even one as sufficiently... What was the word again? Right, as sufficiently *individuated* as this one. Hell, they lacked everything she considered *herself*. The brown hair tied back in a scruff was gone, replaced with a shaggy mane shot through with a green streak. The ridiculous clothes, plated with bulky metal and accompanied by a cape.

Oh, and of course, the fact her fork had turned into a *massive hulking wolf-person*.

She watched it as it sat on the couch, massive snouted head hanging low, the creature that used to be just like her in every way. They stared glumly down into a space somewhere on the floor. Deep brown fur, almost matching the tone of her skin, was gently ruffled by the breeze of a fan.

She took a deep breath. "So... um..."

"I'm sorry." The creature's voice was a low rumble, its head raised up to look at her. "I know... especially with everything that's been going on regarding the attack... it's hard to put up with an unexpected guest..."

“Yeah. Well...” She shrugged. “I mean... It’s good to catch up!”

“I just...” The wolf swallowed. “I need to be around people. And you’re the only person I know outside of...”

She nodded as her up-tree’s sentence tapered off. “The game.”

The single-page announcement lay on the arm of the couch, where her fork had left it.

***Forbidden Sector to Close For the Foreseeable Future***

*Hey all. Devteam here.*

*No doubt by now you’ve heard the news; a significant number of our fellow uploaded instances here on Lagrange have permanently crashed from a large-scale terrorist attack inflicted on system architecture. In the wake of the ongoing crisis, we have seen fit to shut down the sim for the foreseeable future.*

*All instances will be removed from the sim. Do not worry; your character data will be safe. We are cooperating with systechs and the Council to address what damage, if any, has been done to the game and the toll of those within. A memorial will be constructed in the Sky Palazzo at New Terra, in remembrance of those who are now gone.*

*The game will reopen soon enough. Until then...*

*Stay safe. Keep each other close.*

*Forbidden Sector Dev Team*

*What Gifts We Give, We Give In Death (Ode Clade)*

*Simon “Clank” Knight (Tarot Clade)*

*Caela Argent (Tarot Clade)*

Sadie had first played it... oh, back in the 2320s. Close to a century ago, shortly after she’d uploaded. It was the sort of space-action-adventure sandbox game every sci-fi nerd dreamed of. Not that she’d ever admit to being a sci-fi nerd, of course, but there was a time when Sadie played it obsessively for a month, and decided to waste no more time on it after one character she played met a spectacularly *explosive* end.

As a condolence to herself, she created a *single* fork, the only one she would ever create, and told it to have fun while it played,

and return once its character had died.

And, clearly, it had lived and died as many characters, each time returning to the game without merging down. Each death, it rolled a new one.

Until it became whoever it was in front of her. A... the name of the species sat on the tip of her tongue.

*Loup-Garou!*

The Loup-Garou were fictional, and absolutely nothing like the species of Artemis encountered a near-century after their creation. Instead, they were a species of anthropomorphic wolves, a concept Sadie found more than a little embarrassing and frankly ridiculous.

Given that all three of *Forbidden Sector's* designers had been furies, it was only natural that there would be a species of strong, muscular wolf-people.

So of *course* the fork of herself she left there would evolve into... into *this*. She'd try different techniques for each character, moving to a different strategy or build if the last one failed. Eventually she landed on one character that would survive, after failure after failure, and for some reason that just *had* to be the shaggy-haired wolf person.

And now that wolf person she'd become was sitting here. In her house.

She turned back to her bowl of cereal, took a bite, then swallowed. "So... Not that your company is unappreciated, but..."

"I'll be out of your hair soon enough." The fork rubbed its eyes. "Just... need a few days."

"Good. Good. I'm... I'm glad." Watching the wolf person's head turn away, she realized that her phrasing was probably not the kindest.

"I was just... well, apologizing for not really having enough accommodations for you." She scooped up more cereal, gulping it down.

"Mm. It's fine. I lived in a *spaceship*." The wolf chuckled. "Leg room is kind of at a premium there, y'know?"

“You had a ship of your own? Wouldn’t that mean you’d have...” She feebly thumbed through her memory to try and find the exact game parlance, before giving up and settling on what came immediately to mind; “A... a guild? Why not try rooming with them, I’m sure you’d prefer it over–”

The whine that escaped the wolf’s lips, (*her lips?*) sent a shiver down her spine. Watching her fork’s ears fold back was like a cold knife in her chest.

“Crew’s gone, Sadie.” The wolf shook her head. “All of them.”

“All of them?” Sadie blinked.

“Vax and the Scrap-Breaker were both taken by CPV. Aska crashed from grief and Charles merged back down with his Root. It’s me and Miller left. And Miller... won’t answer my calls.”

“Oh. Oh jeez, I–”

“I’ll move out by next week, I just...” The wolf sniffled. “I just need to be around somebody right now. I know I’m not the most... familiar person to you, despite–”

“I understand.” Sadie laid her bowl of cereal down in the sink, immediately rushing over to comfort her alternate self. “Seriously. I do.”

As she sat beside the her-that-wasn’t-herself, she idly reached over to scratch the ears of their massive lupine form. The wolf shrugged, nuzzling into the gesture. It at once surprised her, and yet made total sense; with enough perisystem manipulation, you could emulate the senses of anything. Even an alien species, with senses of taste, smell, *instinct*, radically different from that of a human.

Even a Loup-Garou from *Forbidden Sector*.

And of course, next to her was a version of herself that had embraced that, while she’d rejected it. And of course, even through individuation she could still see the little threads of herself in the wolf. Her fork’s dark brown fur was the exact tone of her skin, she still bounced her leg when bored, and she still tapped her index finger against her thumb when she was stressed.

All this time, she'd thought of the game as a waste of time, something that her fork would tire of eventually. Little did she know that this fork had been forming connections and making friends, just as she herself had, and that those fragile connections were just as easily severed as hers.

And now, at the turning of the century, after a terrorist attack that had taken the lives of so many...

Her fork was here.

She was still alive.

"I'm sorry." She leaned over, gripping the wolf. "I... I've made a total mess of things. I never even thought to ask if you changed your name."

The wolf blinked. "Oh. Oh drek, I'm sorry. I'd completely forgotten you don't know me." She squeezed her eyes shut in laughter. "I... back in the game, I'd become somewhat infamous. Pirate Queen, you know. Everyone knew me." She thrust out a paw. "Mistress Lissa, at your service."

"Sadie... I mean, you knew that..." She sighed. "Sorry, it's hard getting used to—"

"I know." The wolf chuckled awkwardly. "It's awkward for me, too."

She stared into Lissa's eyes. Her own eyes. "I really should have sent you a sensorium ping or... or something. I... I'm sorry for never checking up on you."

Lissa shrugged. "Hey. That cuts both ways. I guess I was scared that you'd see *this* and think... Well, I dunno."

"I'm... I'm just so glad you're still here. I wish we could have met — *properly* met — in different circumstances."

Lissa wrapped a paw around her Root Instance, tugging her closer. "We're here now. No point in looking back, right? We've got each other, no matter what happens."

And so they sat, wolf and human, fork and root instance, together.

**FIN.**





# Prophecies

Madison Rye Progress, with  
Fireheart



## Slow Hours — 2401

To step into The Bean Cycle was to be immediately assailed by sound. There was, as to be expected, the clink of glasses and muted howl of steam wands bringing milk up to temperature, but mixed in was the clatter and clicking of work being done on bicycles. Wheels were spun, chain was dragged through derailleurs, tires were changed. Milk was steamed, espresso was made, names were hollered out.

It was not the type of din that Slow Hours expected for the one she and If I Dream were looking for. It was too uneven, this wall of sound. Too unpredictable. The steam wands were too piercing and the occasional clang of a wrench or raucous laughter over some story of a crash too jarring.

She looked to If I Dream, who merely shrugged.

Scanning the *cafe-cum-bike-repair-shop* revealed little. It was certainly well populated enough, with every table in use and few enough empty chairs. In the corner by the window, a crowd of synthetic creatures of some sort had gathered, looking vaguely feline but with glassy faceplates showing LED-light eyes in sets of fixed expressions. While they were all far shorter than Slow Hours—who one would be hard pressed to describe as tall—the couch that they were sitting on looked to be barely able to hold their weight.

Even if it was not the type of place for the target of their search, it was still incredibly endearing, and she made a note to herself to return some day.

## Prophecies

“Afternoon, friends,” the barista said, grinning to them. They were tall and wiry, red hair and beard shining in the bright halogen lights over the bar. “Two mochas? Extra whipped cream?”

Caught off-guard by having her order guessed for her, Slow Hours froze, brow furrowed.

If I Dream elbowed her in the side, murmuring, “I have canvassed this place before. Do not worry about it.” More loudly, she said, “Yes, though please make it three. Thank you, Hasher.”

Still frowning, Slow Hours allowed herself to be guided down the counter to wait for their drinks to be picked up. She set up a cone of silence over her and her cocladist, more for the relative quiet that it offered than for privacy.

“Are you sure this is the place?” she asked.

If I Dream nodded. “Yes, quite sure. Hasher was the one who tipped me off, and I...have seen her outside.”

“You are already watching her, then?”

The panther smiled faintly, gave an even fainter shrug. “I am nothing if not myself.”

“Then why did you not just go speak to her yourself?” Slow Hours asked. “Or bring me straight to her?”

If I Dream rolled her eyes. “My dear, I *just* said that I am nothing if not myself. That is not my role in this. That is yours. This is the story we are telling, yes? We are stepping into a cafe and ordering a coffee. We are seeing what this is like, this place where she has been parked the last week. We are speaking with Hasher.”

Sighing, she nodded and leaned against the counter, poking at the anodized sheet of aluminum that covered it. Thankfully, it seemed to be coated with some thin sheen of resin to keep the texture reasonable and noise down. “Well, alright. You are the sneaky ones.”

“Do you not also live in stories? I thought that was part of your whole shtick.”

She snorted. “Well, okay, good point. I suppose I am still a little rattled, is all.”

“‘Rattled’?” If I Dream laughed. Like everything else that she did, it was nearly silent, more a quiet huffing of breath through her nose than anything. “*The Slow Hours of the Ode* clade is rattled?”

“Yes, yes,” she said, waving away the comment with a grin. “I really do see your point about the story, I am just finding it hard to slow down, perhaps. When you said that you had heard something, I was ready to race to find her, to have to jump through all the hoops of a fetch quest, so to hear that you already know precisely where she is, that you are already watching her, makes waiting for a coffee like this feel like a waste of time.”

“It will be worth it, I promise.”

“The coffee?”

The panther laughed once more. “Well, I was going to say the story, but the coffee *is* quite good here, so, yes.”

It was only another minute or two of waiting before Hasher waved to get their attention, gesturing to three paper cups sitting on the bar, ready for them. Slow Hours dropped the cone of silence and winced at the sudden barrage of sounds that followed. She turned her hearing down a few ticks. “Thank you,” she said, bowing. “By the way, we were hoping to meet up with a cocladist of ours. She is a skunk, a furry, built rather like myself.” She gestured down at herself—human, instead, with pale skin and curly black hair tied up in a messy bun, but stocky and short. “Black fur, white stripe, a little jumpy. Have you seen her around?”

Wiping their hands on a towel hooked into the strings of their apron, Hasher nodded, tilting their head over toward the couch full of robots. “The one who was sleeping there the last few days, I’m guessing?”

“Sleeping?” Slow Hours asked, frowning.

“Yeah. She would just kind of curl up at one end for a few hours and nap. No biggie, of course, and we all liked her. She

only ever slept while things were slow, and she'd always move when asked." They broke out into a grin again, shrugging. "Or when it got too loud. Or when it got too quiet. Or just every now and then for no reason we could figure out—very stimmy type—but she was always very polite about it."

"Yes, that would be her," she said, smiling. "Well, thank you very much. Did she leave recently?"

They nodded towards the back door of the shop as they started to make their way back to the line of customers waiting for drinks. "Out back, out to Infinite Café, probably half an hour ago. Just peek in if you need anything!"

The two Odists bowed their thanks and carefully picked their way further over to the cafe side of the building, winding their way between tables until they reached the brick wall. There in the middle was a green, wooden door set into an arch, and above the arch "INFINITE CAFÉ" shone in tooth-achingly pink neon.

The sim in which The Bean Cycle existed had a weather pattern tuned after somewhere in the northern hemisphere, so they had entered the shop sometime in early March—a scant three weeks after Lagrange had come back online after the Century Attack—where the air still had a bite to it and salt still stained the sidewalks out front from where the ice had been melted in the days prior. They had arrived late in the afternoon, the sun setting down along the street casting long shadows behind them.

When they stepped out into Infinite Café, though, it was the same bright, midsummer's noon as it always was there. The light came from everywhere and nowhere, and their shadows sat just beneath their feet. It was the perfect temperature—no matter who you were, no matter your preferences, it was always perfect—and it was as packed as ever.

If one percent of the population of Infinite Café was missing, Slow Hours could not tell, and for that she was grateful.

The sim was dead simple: it consisted of one, long road set into a thin torus. A truly enormous torus: when she looked up,

she saw a bright thread directly above them where the road had curved up into an arch hanging in the heavens, and yet the road seemed perfectly flat as far as she could see.

Lining either side of the street were entrances to cafes. Cafes, coffee shops, doors leading out into libraries with coffee carts, alleyways leading out into sims where coffee was hawked from handcarts, dusty steps leading up into marketplaces where vendors boiled their coffee in their cezves in great vats of sand set over wood fires. Anywhere that served coffee to cladists that wanted was free to create an exit that led out into Infinite Café, and over the two centuries of its existence, it had grown from a labyrinthine maze of buildings to the ring-road that it was today.

She had no clue how it worked, if it really was that big, but the sheer size of the System had been driven home quite effectively over the last few weeks—23 *billion* dead! The number remained surreal—so she was hopeful that there were no tricks involved, no attempts to make it look bigger than it was.

She was hopeful that all of these people here on this relatively crowded street were real, not constructs or illusions. She hoped they found coffee and friends and loved ones and long-lost selves.

A gentle touch to her shoulder brought her back to the present. She looked over to If I Dream, then followed her gaze to the center of the thoroughfare.

There, in the middle of the path, stood a skunk. She looked much like others in her clade, with white-striped black fur, tapered snout, cookie ears poking out from an unruly mane, and where she differed, it mostly came down to clothing. She wore a linen tunic in dandelion yellow, cinched around the waist with a leather belt, and a pair of loose, woolen trousers in a dusty brown. Her mane was tied back with a kerchief of some sort, a pastel triangle fully visible to them as she stood stock still and stared straight up to the arch above.

## Prophecies

Slow Hours felt concern tugging at her cheeks, while a glance at If I Dream showed only curiosity.

“Shall we?” she asked.

If I Dream nodded.

Letting a crowd of joggers pass, the pair made their way up to the skunk so that Slow Hours could gently touch her elbow.

The reaction was far more extreme than expected as the skunk let out a shriek and skipped three or so meters away from them, nearly colliding with a couple walking hand in hand. She whirled, tail bristled out behind her and ears splayed to the sides. Her eyes were wide and breath coming in quick gasps.

Both Slow Hours and If I Dream took a pace back, startled.

In the span of a few short seconds, the skunk seemed to get her bearings and comprehend just who was standing in front of her. She visibly worked on mastering her breathing as she stood up straighter, brushing her paws anxiously down over her shirt. “Ah...I, ah...Slow Hours?”

She bowed slowly, deliberately, so as not to startle the skunk any further, and nodded. “Yes, and And If I Dream, Is That Not So.” She held out the extra mocha. “We got you a coffee, What Right Have I. Would you like to join us?”

What Right Have I looked between the two anxiously, clutching at the hem of her tunic. “I...ah, do you...I mean, is there an occasion? Is there a place? I was...I mean, I had been in The Bean Cycle but the couch...oh, I am talking myself in circles...”

With that, she began to pace in an abbreviated line before them, alternating between scrubbing her paws together and straightening her already quite straight shirt.

Slow Hours looked to If I Dream for help, and the panther stepped forward silently and wrapped her arms around the skunk from behind.

At first, she thought this would be a prelude to them stepping from the sim together, or perhaps some affectionate bear hug, though this did not fit what she knew of their faint acquaintanceship.



Instead, though, If I Dream simply squeezed around the skunk and stood still. There was a squeak and a tense-looking squirm from What Right Have I at first, but in surprisingly short order, her breathing fell under her control and she slouched against her cocladist, looking as close to relaxed as Slow Hours had ever seen her.

*“What is this about?”* she asked If I Dream via sensorium message.

*“A hunch,”* the panther sent back. *“Apparently a correct one, for which I am glad. Sometimes compression helps, yes?”*

*“If you say so.”*

*“Are you alright, my dear?”* If I Dream murmured loud enough for Slow Hours to hear as well.

*“Y-yes. Tizkeh l’mitzvos.”*

*“Will you join us for coffee? It is not a demand, to be clear. Just an offer.”*

What Right Have I nodded slowly. *“Is the...ah, is the couch free in The Bean Cycle?”*

If I Dream hesitated for a moment, then nodded. *“The creatures have left. There is a person sitting on one corner, but if you are comfortable, the rest is free.”*

*“If we...I mean, if I may set up a cone of silence, that will be fine, yes.”*

Slow Hours watched as the panther gently released her grip on the skunk, the two monochromatic animals—one in baggy, colorful linen and wool, and the other in black form-fitting shirt and leggings—separating cautiously, as though to move faster might once more send What Right Have I into manic pacing.

*“Shall we?”* Slow Hours asked, smiling reassuringly to her cocladists.

The couch was indeed free, though there was no other instance of If I Dream visible. Slow Hours put this out of mind as best she could; the first stanza was well known for just how easily they slid about unseen, unbeknownst to others as they simply watched, observed.

They sat in the crook of the couch, L-shaped as it was. What Right Have I requested one of the corner vertices of their little triangle so that she could get up and pace should she need, nudging the low table that sat before her aside to help assist in this endeavor, before setting up the cone of silence and nudging it to obscure them as occupants. The din of the coffee shop fell to a low murmur.

The three of them set their coffee cups on small coasters set in the air just within reach, and waited in silence.

“What Right Have I,” Slow Hours began gently once the silence seemed to open up. “From Whence messaged the first stanza a few days ago to see if any of them knew where you were.”

“She messaged Speaking, in particular,” If I Dream added quietly. “She is the instance hunter of our stanza, yes? But she is feeling perhaps a little burnt by recent events and requested some space, for which I am glad. She deserves that.”

“I know,” the skunk said. “She has messaged me several times. I have...ah, I mean, I always endeavor to let her know when I am okay. And I am! I promise.”

Slow Hours laughed, holding up her hands. “I believe you, my dear. This is a meeting between friends, not an interrogation. We wanted to see whether you are okay, yes, but it has also been some time, yes? And I have been checking in with much of the clade in the last few weeks. There are several of me out and about on meetings such as these.”

She nodded. “She told me she just wanted...ah, she requested” a bit more proof than gentle rebuffs.” I told her that I am okay. I told her that I was walking and meditating.”

“Is that what you have been doing during the day?”

“I...” She trailed off, scrubbing her paws against her thighs. “Some, perhaps. A little. We are still in *Shloshim*, but I cannot...ah, I am not focused.”

“You will have to forgive me for being a bit blunt,” Slow Hours said gently. “But are you overflowing?”

What Right Have I's expression dropped, the skunk quickly going from attentive to panicked to miserable.

If I Dream held out her paw, an offer for reassurance. "I do not know what your overflow looks like, What Right Have I. I trust that it is not pleasant, though. It rarely is, yes?"

"It is sometimes," she admitted, shaking her head at the offer of touch. "It is...ah, it comes in two flavors. It shows itself as religious ecstasy sometimes, of a sense of spirit, a feeling of *HaShem* existing in the world, in the System. Those who reach out to RJ, who reach out to our friend, they are reaching out to *HaShem!* Ey may be our personal *HaShem*, yes? But ey is an abstract manifestation of the world!" Despite the sudden animation in her words, the sudden fluency in her otherwise stuttering speech, her expression remained dire, anxious.

Slow Hours smiled faintly, taking a moment to think back. The skunk's choice of words triggered a memory of a report written for the clade decades back. "Codrin said that, yes? Or rather reported that Answers Will Not Help said that." Our own personal *HaShem*." She said that she could not feel em on Artemis, yes?"

What Right Have I nodded, subsiding back into the couch. "Yes. I...ah, I mean, I would not have joined them for that reason, never mind the other difficulties faced."

Both Slow Hours and If I Dream nodded. No Odist had joined Artemis for its ongoing voyage.

"But ey is still *b'tzelem Elohim*, yes? Ey is still in the image of Adonai, yes? Ey is still human, even if ey is our world. Our world is *b'tzelem Elohim*, and we, *b'tzelem Elohim*, reside within em." She smiled weakly. "Rav From Whence does not like it when I say these things, but that is what I feel when I am overflowing."

"And that is what you are feeling now?" Slow Hours asked.

"No," she said, once more sounding miserable. "If I do not feel ecstasy, I feel anguish. I feel...mm, I feel nullity. I feel nothing. I feel RJ and I think," Ah my friend, my friend." I do not see in em the divine. I do not feel *b'tzelem Elohim*, I feel stupid. I feel...ah,

I feel broken. I have been staying here, sleeping where I may be seen because I am afraid...ah, because I am so, so afraid that I will disappear, that I will crash and that no one will notice me. I fear that I will be forgotten and that...ohhh, I am talking in circles. I am thinking in circles, I am sorry.”

“It is okay,” Slow Hours said gently. “Do you think you are overflowing because of the Century Attack?”

The skunk whimpered and pushed herself quickly to her feet, pacing once more and shaking her paws out as though to dry them off, then straightening her already straight skunk-chief. “I have been dreaming,” she mumbled, then jerked her head to the side with a quiet squeak. She continued more clearly. “I have been dreaming, here on the couch, out there in Infinite Café when...ah, when I fall asleep out there.”

Slow Hours tilted her head, sitting up straighter.

What Right Have I smiled faintly. “I have...ah, I am not the oracle that you are, my dear. I am no prophet.”

She smiled, shaking her head. “Neither am I. I would still like to hear your dream, though.”

The skunk nodded, paused to gather her thoughts, then spoke slowly. “I am disembodied, yes? I am floating and I see a figure, and they begin to weep, and they dissolve into a cloud of black specks, and these specks float away on a breeze, and each one enters the heart of a cladist, and they cry out in agony and dissolve into clouds of their own, and so it ramifies until all are dust. I see you, yes, and I see If I Dream, and I see Should We Forget and I see No Longer Myself.”

If I Dream jerked back as though slapped, a sudden move that was nevertheless silent. “Do not-” she said, then shook her head.

“I am sorry, If I Dream,” What Right Have I said, bowing low and forcing herself to sit once more. “I...ah, my dreaming mind remembered names of those lost, perhaps, and extrapolated.”

The panther nodded, scrubbed a paw over her face, and sighed. “It is okay, my dear. I am still feeling raw.”

It was What Right Have I’s turn to offer a paw. If I Dream ac-

cepted gratefully, giving a brief squeeze. When this led to another squeaky tic from the skunk, she let go.

“Ah...sorry,” the skunk stammered. “I have...I mean, that is to say...ah, I am talking in circles. I am sorry.”

“It is okay,” Slow Hours said gently. “Do you need some time?”

She nodded, bowing her head for a moment before retrieving her mocha for a tentative sip. Apparently finding the temperature tolerable, she followed this with a longer drink.

Both Slow Hours and If I Dream followed suit, simply taking in the ambiance of the shop.

“Have you had dreams, Slow Hours?” If I Dream asked, breaking the silence with her quiet murmur.

She startled to awareness, smiling sheepishly. “Since the attack? No, nothing memorable, though I have not been sleeping well. I do not imagine many are.”

“And before?”

What Right Have I perked up, setting her coffee aside and scrubbing her paws together, kneading pads against pads. “Do your prophecies only come in dreams?”

Slow Hours laughed. “My little predictions are not prophecies. They are just that: guesses based on the trajectories of the stories one tells. I may predict that, when we leave today, What Right Have I will linger a while yet because there is something she has yet to tell us—no, it will come in time, you do not need to until you are ready. But that is based on the trajectory of the story I have heard so far.” She hesitated a moment, thinking. “But yes, I have had dreams that may well have been prophecies, but only ever in hindsight.”

“Tell us...ah, I mean, will you tell us some of what you dreamed?”

“Yes. It has happened four times. Only those four, though.” She held up her hand with as many fingers raised as she explained. “Perhaps Lagrange got hit by a stray cosmic ray or some other fancy particle and it flipped a bit inside the portion that

contained me, and I was given some premonition. Smacked upside the head by Apollo, yes? Or, in your terms, visited by the angel of the Lord who gave me a honeyed scroll to eat.”

She tapped one finger. “The first was about Qoheleth and his little...adventure. Some two decades before, I had the same dream five nights in a row, of him standing in his robes, arms raised to the heavens, and then crumbling down into sand. At the time, I did not even realize that it was him. I had not seen him in more than a century, and when I had, he was dressed like a natty old college professor.”

The next finger, tapped. “The second was about Michelle’s death, and I will not repeat it.”

She tapped her ring finger. “The third happened in the midst of a play—one of my yearly performances—and in the scene, I was to fall to my knees and cry out,”The knife! At her neck, the knife!” But instead, I passed out and apparently mumbled words not in the script which tallied exactly with Sasha’s experience.”

There was a moment of silence as she considered the fourth and how best to describe it, not least because of the easy comparison to What Right Have I’s dream as explained. Finally, she tapped her pinkie “The fourth was a dream of a core part of me being removed through the back of my neck, a disappearing from the world and becoming a ghost in the next. There was more that I do not understand, visions of a field, a park, but I had that dream every night on the five nights leading up to New Year’s.”

What Right Have I listened attentively to Slow Hours’s description of her prophecies, or at least prophetic dreams. As she spoke, her cocladist’s expression darkened, until by the end, she was scowling. “I am no Daniel,” the skunk said once she had finished. “I will not scry your *mene, mene, tekel, parsin*. But if you had foreknowledge of Michelle’s suicide or the Century Attack, why did you not say anything? Who might we be if Michelle still lived? Might Lagrange be unharmed if we but knew this?”

By the end, she was nearly growling, so many of her verbal tics melting away as that emotion rose.

If I Dream lifted her snout from where her gaze had drifted. “Did she know, my dear? Or did she only have a recurring anxious nightmare? Do we not all have a hundred recurring anxious nightmares a year?”

The skunk glowered. “And? If that is—” A tic briefly interrupted her, a jerk of the head to the side, and this time she really did growl, though it appeared to be more at herself than anything. “If that is so, then why were these not known?”

Slow Hours straightened up. “I apologize if that came off as in any way glib, What Right Have I, or as though I could have done anything about them. I did try to get in touch with Michelle after those nights of dreams, but she only smiled and reassured me that she would”live on”. It was not until after she quit that those words had any import.”

What Right Have I’s shoulders sagged, though she was clearly still gritting her teeth.

She sighed, continuing, “And perhaps it is as If I Dream says. They were anxious nightmares. However, they still bore the acrid tang of ill omens to me. There was a scent of premonition, and so I have slotted them neatly into that category, even if they *were* only caused by anxiety.”

There followed a long moment while the skunk processed this. She seemed to be running down a mental checklist, as her rapid breathing shifted almost immediately into something deeper and more even, her posture straightened from a wary hunch as though ready to bolt, and her expression settled into a rather stiff half-smile. All spoke of various bits of therapy Slow Hours remembered from centuries back.

“Alright. Okay.” What Right Have I slowed her breathing further and turned her paws facing up, another skill from therapy. “Okay. You are the both of you correct. I live in my head and in the Tanakh and with a thought of prophecies. For you to call them such, it, ah...it...okay. It makes them not what I was think-

ing. You are not Ezekiel. You are not Jeremiah.”

Slow Hours smiled, gave a hint of a bow from where she sat. “I am not, no. I am a script manager and nerd whose imagination gets away from her sometimes, yes? Even in sleep, yes?”

The skunk’s smile grew more earnest as she nodded. “Again, I am sorry. I...ah, I do not know. I am unwell, perhaps. I am overflowing and making connections that do not exist.”

“Do you suppose you have had more than four, if you include those that did not come true?” If I Dream asked curiously. “They do still sound fascinating, if only as a curiosity.”

“If I have, including the scent of premonition, then I do not remember them. It was that scent, though, that led me to reach out to Michelle. I am embarrassed to say that that was the only one I acted on, though, given that all four of those revolve around death.”

What Right Have I furrowed her brow, paws shifting to clench tightly around the hem of her tunic. “I remember a story...ah, a snippet from the *History* where May Then My Name says that Michelle thought of herself as a dead woman walking, yes.”

She nodded. “May Then My Name went on to say that Michelle thought that perhaps even the dead can know joy, yes.”

“Did she, in the end?” If I Dream asked, frowning. “Know joy, that is? When she asked us all to merge with her, to share with her all that we had become, what did she feel? When, for an instant, she became ten thousand years old, did she choose to quit because she found peace?”

“I think that she did, yes.” Slow Hours spoke carefully, keeping an eye on What Right Have I for further tics or other signs of distress. “Or, rather, I must believe that she did. There is too much despair if I imagine her as buried under the weight of all of our own despairs and neuroses. If it is a comfortable fiction, so be it. I will live in that comfortable fiction.”

If I Dream nodded slowly. “Far be it from me to dispel what curtains keep despair from leading you after her.”



She laughed and shook her head. “There is no suicide in me, thankfully.”

“When I received her sensorium message, I nearly refused to attend out of protest. I think many of us saw the writing on the walls when we heard that uncertain steeliness in her voice.”

What Right Have I winced, squirming tensely in her seat, right at the edge of the couch cushion. “It...ah...I mean, I struggled. I was there— we all were there! But I struggled.”

The panther smiled faintly to her. “We all did, yes. Part of me felt that if any one of us did not go, then she would not quit. Another part was terrified I would be one of many who did not come, and that she would die feeling abandoned by her own family. If she was going to quit, and she wished to do so in the company of her clade...And now...”

She trailed off and let her gaze wander down to the drink she still held in her paws. Blinking rapidly, the muscles on her cheeks and snout briefly became more prominent, as though she was doing her best to keep her expression placid, to not snarl or voice her despair, much as it had been throughout, though the tears leaving tracks in her cheekfur were impossible to hide.

Alarmed at the sudden shift in demeanor, Slow Hours scooted a few inches closer to If I Dream, offering her hand just as the panther had done for What Right Have I before.

She accepted with a grateful—if still wan—smile.

Slow Hours returned that smile, saying quietly, “That was the dream I had, you know. The premonition. An upwelling of joy and then an overflowing. She looked up to the sun, and the sun was RJ, and then they were one and the same, and it was all joy.”

At this, What Right Have I burst into tears. She did not cry prettily, but very few people did. It was a brief cry, however, and soon after she scooted back to the furthest limit of the cone of silence and drew her legs up onto the couch with her, growling as she did, “Slow Hours, you are the fucking worst.”

“I am the worst, yes,” she said, voice still quiet and calm. “But

## Prophecies

that is why I am choosing to believe that the premonition was true and why I am choosing to believe that she did find joy, or peace, or at least nothingness and freedom.”

“They both deserve to be together. I hope that that is what No Longer Myself has obtained. What all of those lost have,” If I Dream sighed.

“I think...ah, I hope your dreams were true, in the end,” What Right Have I said after a long silence between the three of them, after each had fallen merely to sniffles. “I hope that they *were* prophecies, whether or not you knew. If only for that one, I hope that they were true.”





# Journal of Diago Pereira

Nat Mcardle-Mott-Merrifield and  
Sarah Bloden



## Henrique Pereira — 2401

**May 12th, 2400**

*The door is pressed open and the lights are turned on with a soft click, below wooden planks bemoan the shuffling feat of Henrique and his slippers, his old jeans loose and baggy, the knitted sweater he wears worn like his brittle bones. He walks with his cane, tapping on the floor as he finds his seat- guided by his great Granddaughter Isa, who guides him with steady, thoughtfully slow, footing.*

*“Take a seat Grand Papi... it will... it will all, uhm...” she mutters the words “be okay” aimlessly, then lets a minute of quiet drift between the two of them, sounds of weeping heard from the floor below. She had only recently entered her teens, how could such innocence possibly understand such loss, the ramifications of the news not yet settled in for youthful Isa, yet the reality sank soundly onto the soul of elderly Henrique. The meandering minute passes, and Isa looks back up, eyes filled with concern for her great Grandfather’s wellbeing. “Ah, Grand Papi, would you like me to get you your coffee mug? A blanket? Anything to give you comfort?...”*

*Finally, he begins to sit down on his leather recliner, waving his aged hand dismissively, wrinkled and frail. His dower face, aged like the cracked leather he put his weight onto and pock marked with freckles from years in the sun, bunches together as he grimaces, not at the offer but towards the state of the world, the state of his family, the state of the System, and perhaps his aching body as well.*

*Gently, slowly, deliberately he lowers himself and rests into the seat, his reading seat, the seat he got from his aunt as part of her will, a skilled tanner- skill that shined through the weathered cushions that strained to*

*hold his retired body. So weak, so old- the days of power and youth having left him, drained from him by the decades. He looks up, and lets out a tired, weary sigh, then shakes his head.*

*“I... I just need to sit down, my dear. Sit down... Just... sit down. To think... in quiet. Please, Isa my dear, leave me be for now. Go, tend to your Mami, she needs your comfort.”*

*He stares back down at his lap, grunting and listening to the door creak closed as Isa leaves, allowing lingering thoughts to swell in might and misery. Flashes of denial sting as Henrique’s depressed thoughts flow freely, he attempts to come to terms with the news again, just as another baleful shriek fills the air, a cry, a plea heard by none who deserved it.*

*Descendants deleted and ancestors now long gone. His Granddaughter weeps at the knowledge her handful of children and acres of ancestry were now lost, taken from her just as his brother was through the same act of terrorism.*

*Terrorism. What a foul concept that was so filled with angry grays, blacks, and whites. Months, months the System was down and its dire truths suppressed- until finally reaching the ‘net in a slow torrent of terrible news, chaotic questions, corroborating with bitter claims, the collectivists caused harm on a cataclysmic scale, like some malevolent maelstrom, a maverick ridden by the reapers’ wrath.*

*He looks at his hands, fingers clenched and unclenching, shaking. Tempering anger soothes his emotions with contempt to those responsible, as tears get lost in the saddened crow’s-feet lining his tired face. His watery eyes look to the left, noticing the spine of a lithe book tucked within the drawer of his side table, a familiar thing that rested with a*



*fine, blue-feathered, ink quill strapped to its outside.*

*He sighs somberly, shakily, and reaches for the journal that once belonged to his late and lost. A Journal of Diago Pereira, his brother — or siblings, as he would later come to learn in his youth, and love years after his younger brother uploaded with his once hidden plurality in tow.*

*The next few moments were a blanket of misery, misery that mastered the old mans' mind, and moved him to lift the old literature to his lap. Tears gradually overwhelming, he wipes them off and opens the book to the first page, a familiar feeling now underwhelming compared to the weight of tragedy on his shoulders;*

12th March 2304

*Today is my 17th birthday and as a gift my Grand mami got me this journal to practice my english writing in. My teacher told me my writing is pretty good since he started teaching me but needs work and my mami thought it would be a good idea to give me a book to practice in. He said I should focus on my punctuation mostly as I seem to forget to include that in my writing sometimes. He also said my spelling could do a little bit of work so I'll try and focus on that.*

*Today was so fun after school, I took my bike home and my cousins, sisters and a few of our friends from the next farm over were waiting for me! I even saw aunt Corita, she managed to get the day off from the Ansible clinic, I hardly ever get to see her. We had a quick game in the backyard field , I think my sisters took it easy on me, there usually way more dexterous then I am! (**Eles fizeram isso, eu já vi eles chutarem você, mas no futebol! Haha.**). I can still play pretty good Fel!*

*Anyway, after a few goals, my mami called us in for dinner! It was Fels and my favorite, homemade Acarajé and Picanha, and for dessert Grand mami made me a vanilla cake with blue icing!*

*After we ate, my mami and Grand mami gave me my gifts, this journal and a letter from my brother that wished he could be there. He also sent*

## Journal of Diago Pereira

*me printed photos of him and his army buddies at the BrAr Line. They smile, but the scenery is so grim and barren. My aunt tells me it was once farmland, and now it's just mud and metal fences.*

*Even if this was given to me to improve my English writing, I really enjoyed writing about my day! And I didn't expect it to be. But I am tired and don't have much else to say, the cake was yummy! I always love Grand mamis' cakes.*

*In the margin, "Property of Diago Pereira" can be read, along with the thumb smearing of blue icing dye that has since stained the once fresh paper, now freshly stained by stray tears. Henrique smiles, sniffing softly as the wrinkles on his face rise, his thumb and forefinger slides the pages to a random entry, a familiar sensation of such delicate paper dancing between his fingertips- wrinkled, marked, and lightly stained pages of faded graphite and century old ink- dates dotting the upper left. He moves his hand across the paper, reading the crude handwriting of early script, a pastime he took part in on a monthly basis, now a catharsis, a means to mourn.*

*He flips through the pages more, methodically moving fingers before finding one to finally read through in full:*

*17th of June 2304*

*Dear Journal, I got home today after my english classes, and Mami and my sisters told me Henrique had sent a letter from the BrAr Line. It talked about how he saw a Hyacinth Macaw making a nest on one of the watchtowers at the Briar. **(SORTUDO! Eu gostaria que pudéssemos ver mais a linha do briar. Parece tão interessante.)** It really doesn't Fel.*

*He wrote in the letter that he was ordered to chase the bird off because it was making a nest, but even with him and his buddies' best efforts it stayed. I'm proud of it! This story got a laugh out of everyone, and to my surprise mom showed me a feather that came with the*

letter, it was bright blue! Further down, my brother said that while he was trying to get the bird to leave, he managed to collect a few feathers from its nest and thought I'd like to have one. (**Henrique é um irmão tão legal. Espero que você possa me apresentar a ele em breve.**) I do too, Fel.

Both Fel and I are so excited to have received it, the Hyacinth Macaw is believed to be an extinct species. To know one still lives makes us so happy! I can't wait to show this in class tomorrow, I know Mr. Rocha loves to watch birds as much as I do.

Speaking of Mr. Rocha! I asked him if I could borrow his binoculars after class today. I've been wanting to go visit my spot with them and see what birds have been nesting near there. He agreed with the exception that, "You better let me come with you, I'm not about to miss out on a bird watching expedition, let alone give my binoculars away without supervision!" I know he meant well by that, but I couldn't help but feel a little nervous. Mr. Rocha is a good teacher, though. Friends of my eldest cousin, who was taught by him when she was younger!

After looking at the letter and feathers, my sisters and I did our chores around the farmstead with the farm hands. Just as I was finishing, my sisters came up to me and told me they saw a flock of white birds that were nesting in one of our Latex Trees, I could only guess what they must've been at the time, but I wouldn't have guessed they're White-Necked Hawks! They were all nested there and warding danger away from the nest. They looked so majestic! I can't wait to watch their eggs hatch, such a beautiful species of bird!

One of his favorite entries, and a reminder of a brighter day at the Briar line- one not so filled with dull gray and scorched earth. He frowns, hesitates, then hastily lifts the journal from his lap- finding the ink quill resting in the nook of his arm rest and right leg. He carefully raises it up, pondering- not recalling- how he so quickly removed it from the strap on the journal, carefully preening the blue feather adorned to

*the end of the writing utensil.*

*His hand works the fine fibers of the feather, tracing it down to the firmness of the pen nib, pointed, certain, precise. He lazily drags that same fingers as before across another section of pages, coarse papers scraping assuredly as he stumbles into another two entries, both rather lengthy:*

*24th of July 2304*

*Dear Journal, today I write away from home. I told Mami I was going to spend the night over at Gregors home, to which she was wary to acknowledge me doing so. She made sure I had my tablet with me, and that I had lunch packed as well. I appreciate her concern but sometimes it feels almost too much. Before I left, Mami also made sure I had offered my chores to one of my sisters, which I had, telling her Iara agreed to do my tasks today so I could spend the night away from home. I'll just end up doing twice of hers on the weekend.*

*Since I plan to spend the night over at the high rises, I left early this morning. I hadn't been to see Gregor in a few months and was curious about what was new.*

*Fel and I hitched a ride on a truck, and on the way Fel was discussing with me if I had also felt the new identity that was forming. Fel and I still don't know where she came from, but we feel that she has a similar origin to Fel, herself. Hopefully we'll find out from this newcomer. **(Estou muito animado para ver se podemos aprender alguma coisa com esse novo companheiro plural, Diago. Você realmente deveria explorar mais a 'Net sobre a pluralidade.)***

*Fel, you know I would if I had the time to do so! I'm just always too busy. Anyway, we've been writing this at the 'cave' now, and it looks like it is probably two in the afternoon, and we've had our lunch too, feeling ready to go! Also, the tide is starting to fill up this old garage so I better get packing or I won't be able to take the boat out at all. Thankfully, the weather is peaceful with hurricanes Gabriel and Taylor having traveled down south this time of year. Still, the ocean waves are choppy so I won't be able to spend any time writing in the rowboat. Next entry will be written once we've made landfall, at the high rises. I'm hopeful Gregor will be available today!*

Henriques smiles, recalling how adventurous youthful Diago was, he flips the page, his fingers feeling the pages curl, curious eyes reading the lines that are revealed.

25th of July 2304

Dear Journal, Fel and I made it to Gregors' home without any issue, and are writing this entry at the top of the high rises! (**É tão bonito! Se não fossem as nuvens de Gabriel, você poderia ver todas as estrelas do céu!**) While the waves did rock the rowboat, it wasn't at all a challenge to find harbor at the old high rises. We were met by Marcia, who helped us anchor the boat to the third floor balcony-pier, and we caught up with one another! She asked how my mami and Grandmami were, how my sisters were, how the farm was doing, then offered me lunch which I politely declined. (**Ela fez Vatapá!! O Vatapá da Márcia! É sempre tão delicioso! Como você poderia deixar passar uma tigela fresquinha de Vatapá da Márcia, Diago!! Ah!**) I'm sorry Fel, but I wasn't hungry then! Quit thinking about your stomach so much.

Anyway, after our talk, Marcia led us to where Gregor was, he was busy doing his own chores and tending to the seventh floor gardens. I always enjoy walking up to this floor, the view is amazing, though often windy without any wall. As soon as he saw me we hugged! It'd been too long, and like his mother, we talked about how things had been in the last few months, his community, my family, the hazards of the weather and the hazards of piracy along the coast, their fishing farms, our latex farms- (**Na verdade, ele mencionou como conseguiram pescar atum hoje! E íamos tomar um pote Grande de Moqueca de Camarão! O que foi TÃO DELICIOSO!**) Oh yeah! We've never had real Tuna before, only ever that fake processed stuff. So when Gregor offered to have us present for their dinner we were more than happy to accept, we even told them we intended to stay the night, which he and Marcia were happy to oblige.

We spent the remainder of our afternoon playing Go. He's always been

*better at it, and we don't have a board at home to practice. Regardless, it was a lot of fun! And I did manage to win a game in the end.*

*Now, Fel and I sit on the roof and gaze across the stars. It is truly gorgeous... and I think we can spot the System too, orbiting overhead. Honestly it's crazy to think some of my Grandparents are there now. I hope they look at us and bless us with a good harvest, surely the tuna Gregor's family caught was one. (**Você acha que algum dia chegaremos lá, Diago?**) I don't know Fel! It would be cool, though I bet.*

*Sigh. I do not wish to be conscripted. I do not wish to tend the fields of burnt earth that my brother does. I wish he didn't either. (**É tão estúpido! Por que fomos para a guerra de novo? O que a Argentina fez com o Brasil? Por que seu irmão teve que ir! Por que NÓS temos que ir! Ah!**) I can't recall Fel, I wish Mami hadn't gotten us into those history classes. Anyway, it smells like dinners done.*

*His anger, simmering now, grows sour with grief renewed. Why, why must they have done this? A society of people, free from the strifes of this withering world, peaceful and calm and claiming new lives-Taken, made lost for some bitter pointless stance. Had the universe not taken enough from him, from his family, from his people? Was it fate, destiny, that others would bring agony to the Pereira family and so many, many more on this hellish earth? Surely, he had done enough, harbored the forgotten sins of his nation for long enough, the punishments that his father endured and reflected onto him, for long enough? Surely, this was enough, should have been enough, to avoid this tragedy?*

*To have lost so much more, to know generations of elders and cousins and sons and daughters were now gone. Now longer of the heavens but beyond, if there was such a thing. Henrique didn't have the slightest clue, and he doubted there was anything after. They were gone, his brother was gone. It was as simple as that, a weeding fact he began to harbor and nourish.*

*He observes the fine details on the pen in this bitter moment of contem-*

plation, Henrique's fingers flipping the pages with unplanned, instinctual precision- eyes unwittingly landing on the next entry:

23rd of September 2304

Dear Journal, class wasn't too special. My teacher commented that my punctuation has been remaining consistent but that I should try to expand my vocabulary and gave me a thesaurus. It's full of English words and very heavy! So I'll probably read it when I get home.

But! FINALLY after months of planning, Mr. Rocha and I left to go bird-watching. He was very busy marking the exams of all the classes he taught, but he was able to schedule some time with me this week! We have been planning to visit a spot along the interior, within the marshes and prairies of *província cinzenta*. I told him it was nothing special, just a place I try to visit when I have enough allowance to take the bus that far. (***Agradeça aos antepassados que o Sr. Rocha possui um caminhão! Eu odeio pegar carona em ônibus. Ou está super lotado ou temos que sentar no telhado...***) [Yeah, it was quite far, and his truck was quite comfy. Though honestly, I was just excited we got to see somewhere new that's not just your house or farm.] Yeah! You sounded like you enjoyed it as much as we did, huh Davi? [Yeah! The views were beautiful. If a bit haunting. You still need to take me to Gregor's one of these days, I'm sure he'd be happy to have you visit him again.] (Oh sim! ***As vistas da casa dele são INCRÍVEIS! Além disso, a comida da sua mãe é TÃO deliciosa!***)

I will, I will! Anyways, as should be obvious, getting there wasn't too difficult, and we parked along the eastern edge of the Amazona Basin. From there I led the way down some dirt trails, and showed Mr. Rocha a family of nursing trees that had begun to sprout new life. [It was very pretty! There were at least five different burnt up trunks that had fallen over, and were all sprouting entirely different trees from them!] Yeah! And in the trees, we saw many birds flying in and out, they looked like brownish twistwings, we also heard peeping! The sound filled me with such joy, and Mr. Rocha remarked how wonderful it was to see nature adapt and heal in spite of all the destruction caused by 'A Grande Fumaça', so many years ago.

The comment had Davi curious, and so I asked him how ‘A Grande Fumaça’ even started, [**Thanks again. I wasn’t sure how Mr Rocha would take you being plural, otherwise I would have asked myself.**] (Sr. Rocha arrasa! Tenho certeza de que ele teria ido às alturas para ouvir sobre nós!) Eh... I’m in agreement with Davi. I’d rather just keep this between us three.

Anyways, I’m glad I asked because I learned things I never recalled being taught besides the really nasty terrorists and stuff. Anyway, when he was done I asked why people would do such things, it was kinda absent minded of me to ask, but when I did Mr. Rocha had this moment of contemplation before he told me that “Some very angry people simply choose to resort to fan the hate and anger in their hearts, in order to make an impact on the world. In their case, they wanted many people to see the perils we suffer, like some twisted bonfire, and these people believed that by burning down the Amazon it would call the world into action.” I told him that didn’t make any sense, and he agreed, “Anger drives many men to do senseless things, but this is why it is important to keep a level head at all times, and to control that flame, turn it towards a warm hearth that nurtures and improves the quality of all. Not tear it down and destroy it.”

After our conversation, we went and had lunch. (**Foi Empadão caseiro! Devo dizer que o Sr. Rocha é um excelente cozinheiro!**) He is! And he made extras, so we got to take some home with us to share. Today was honestly the best.

Yet, despite the uplifting ending and relative cheerfulness of the entry, such aspects go unread and unappreciated as Henriques eyes stay fixed on the penultimate paragraph. His breath quickens to nigh hyperventilation with quicker clouds fogging Henrique’s brief-bright thoughts with foul ashen clouds.

A Grande Fumaça, another crazed disaster, dealt by the collective cells of Brazil. The terrorists’ insanity deemed that the only path to salvation was more mindless destruction. To alter and to tarnish the Grand jungles of South America with thermite fueled flames.



*Such scornful actions created lasting consequences. The Steel Acquisitions Act, fueling the cinders for the pyre that would become the Brazilian Civil War, followed by the unsatisfied bloodlust that led to the annexation of Paraguay and the eventual invasion of eastern Argentina.*

*Anger flares once more, the scalding inferno of nearly a century ago igniting hot and glowing fury in the old man's beating heart. He throws the pen in anger, then gasps, smelling acrid burning. He looks about the room, the lights a brilliant yellow. Torches of flame around him. He gets up, he needs fresh air...*

*He rises, his right hand numb, crumbles under the weight and he begins to fall to the floor. His left hand, clenched into a fist, slams to his inflamed chest, leaving him sobbing, weeping, falling. With a loud thump against the hardwood floor, he cries and whines. Why, why did they have to take his brother? Why did they have to kill so many bright souls, to accomplish what? To state what?*

*"W-why... W-whyy... whyyy..."*

*He mutters through a limp tongue, half numb lips. He was shot, he realizes, he believes, time slowed like a putrid muck as the sudden taste of something sickening and metallic crosses his tongue. His heart hurts, agonizing, a flame. He struggles to breathe, and wonders why, why, why was he sent to the front line. Why was he chosen to be shot, an innocent at the whims of a corrupt government.*

*He looks up, watching the members of the Argentinian resistance raid the Briar Line. Guns alight, loud, shouting, surrounding him, soon kicking him.*

***"Me perdoe! Me perdoe! Me perdoe! Me perdoe!"***

*He begs for forgiveness as memory fades, figures all around him, following him to his youth. Full of bullies, malevolent peers, punishing him,*

*teasing him, childishly chastising him for the acts of his rebellious father. A man dedicated to the independence of Rio Grande Do Sul, a man who died fighting the civil war, and marred his family name with the title of-*

**“Traidor! Traidor! Traidores Imundos!”**

*-And he suffers the consequences. Crying, choking, dying, dimming... before Diago screams, chasing, sprinting, pushing away the bullies, the ne'er do well teenagers twice the siblings' age.*

*No longer surrounded, Diago leans down, reaching his hand towards his elder brother. Henrique looks up, vision blurred from the blinding backlit visage of Diago, details smeared- yet comfortably cool and shaded in soft shadows.*

*“Ei, irmão mais velho!”*

*Henrique hears the cry of Diago calling out to him, before watching that youthful silhouette approach him, take a knee, and offer his hand down to his fallen self.*

*Está tudo bem, você está seguro. Vamos, vamos para casa! Todo mundo está preocupado com você.”*

*Henrique nods, sobbing, smiling, and reaches for Diago's hand, hearing the worry and concern in his brother's voice.*

*“Vamos para casa. Irmão mais novo...”*

*Then everything fades to black.*

*Hours that felt like minutes go by, and with a groggy start, white light fills Henrique's vision.*

*The door to the examination room clicks open, Isa walking in, exhausted, her nurse outfit freshly donned with fresh concern still on her face, she kneels down, checking on her Grand Papi, healing instincts kicking in as she takes Henrique's hand, watching his face twitch into wakefulness.*

*“Oh, Grand Papi... shh, it’s okay... You’re safe, you had another little stroke. You’re safe.”*

*Henrique simply nods, groaning, looking down at the white linen bed he found himself in. He inhales through clenched teeth, leaning back into his pillows and breaths out shakily, then looks to his left, smiling towards Isa, then further towards the bedside table, spotting the journal still at his side.*

*Isa’s fears quickly diminished as she saw him come too. Watching as his senses returned to him. It wasn’t long before a doctor entered, clipboard in hand and hesitant smile showing.*

*“Ah, Mr. Pereira. You had us all worried there, but, thankfully to your Granddaughters quick thinking you’re looking to make a full recovery. She’s a very excellent nurse, we’re lucky to have her with us.”*

*Isa smiles, then glances over to the journal Henrique was just looking towards. She picks it up, handing it to him.*

*“Grand Papi, we’ll be moving you to another room for the remainder of your stay, but once we’re there would you like me to stick around for a while? The hospital has given me permission to attend to you, and, well, I saw you reading Grand uncle Diago’s journal. I was thinking I could read some of it to you?”*

*Henrique nods with a wide smile reaching from ear to ear, stretching those years of well earned lines like the boughs and branches of a *Bertholletia Excelsa*.*

*“Of course, my dear Isa. I’d love that so, very much.”*

*The minutes went by as medical accessories were untethered and unlatched from their anchoring, allowing Henriques’ bed to be transported to his new room. Isa walked alongside while another nurse*

*pushed, her fingers gently intertwined with her Grand papis' own.*

*The new room was optimally lit and blandly furnished with whites, blues, and beige, presented in the most iconically hygienic ways a hospital could be. Isa finds a seat beside Henrique, a metal thing with dense padding cushions, unlike her grin which was soft and comforting- not at all dissimilar to her eyes, which began to look downward towards the journal that she split open in her hands. She carefully turned each page, finally landing on an entry that was written earlier into the books life:*

*3rd of May 2304*

*Dear Journal, today I write after Fel and I have gone exploring! I did my chores this morning, stripping the bark from the trees mainly, then I went down to the coast and took the rowboat out from 'the cave'. Though I didn't visit Gregor, instead I took the boat further west, to visit some of the abandoned towns in that area. I brought some chicken sandwiches with me, as I planned to stay most the day there and take the last bus back.*

*I know it's dangerous, but my curiosity just urges me to swim in those waters near the old ruined towns past the shore. Mami, cuz I know she'd be worried sick for me, doesn't know I do this, but I can't help but want to explore! It's like exploring a whole different world, well maybe not ENTIRELY different, but different enough to feel like it's a place I've never been too.*

*I also go because Fel is always wanting to see the world... and she's always going on and on and on about leaving the house, leaving Brazil. Honestly I'm happy to oblige! I'm not too keen to live here for the rest of my life either.*

*Anyways, once we took the rowboat far enough, we anchored up to*

what we guessed must have been an old apartment complex? We could access the third and fourth floors, but the rest was flooded. But despite this, I was able to dive down to the floors below with my light to guide us. I always make sure to wear one on my chest so I'm never diving in the dark. I've also been practicing my diving for quite a while now, and the longest I can hold my breath while swimming is a full minute and sixteen seconds!

Diving down to the floor below, it was filled with seaweed and other water plants, also I found all sorts of cool things, old photo portraits, toys, a Rig! It was inhabited by some tropical fish, Tetra I think is what they're called? Very small and they glowed brightly when my light hit them! It was very pretty! **(Tenho quase certeza de que vi uma caixa de tesouro também! Era pequeno e brilhante! Mas provavelmente é melhor que não o tenhamos feito. Estava preso atrás de muitos móveis antigos.)** Yeah, it wouldn't have been safe to try and dig that out.

When I surfaced I had my meal - **(Os sanduíches estavam MUITO deliciosos! Você Mami faz os melhores sanduíches.)** Yeah, they really are super good. Anyways, afterwards we swam down the outside of the building and we were able to get much deeper, even with the surrounding kelp clinging to its walls. Turns out the apartment was built on top of a barber! At least I assume it was a barber as I saw the red and blue striped pole on the outside of it. I couldn't open the door, and the windows were boarded up to get some breath. Next we explored the upper floors above the water. The building was very slanted, so climbing the old stairs wasn't easy, and most of the apartment rooms had their front doors locked still. But the rooms I did open were very empty, however one had an old campfire in it! **(Claro que não somos os aventureiros que exploram as ruínas do Brasil!)** I guess! Either that or someone else came here before and tried to live here. The walls were spray painted in beautiful and ugly murals, and one room was entirely coated in bird poop... it wasn't pretty but I did see the various nests that were using the old space as a new home!

*Once we were done exploring, we grabbed the rowboat and went back to shore. We just barely caught the bus we wanted, which was good since I was so tired. I got home and my family asked how my swim was, as I probably smelt like the sea.*

*Now Fel and I rest in bed... it's funny, despite all that destruction caused by nature, seeing life still present and flourishing is nice. It gives our world color, and makes me happy.*

*Anyways, I'm tired. That's all!*

*Isa closes the book softly, clearing her throat after all that talking, and places it at her great Grand papi's side. Henrique looked up in response, a mild smile present on his thin lips.*

*"Thank you, sweet Isa. You're the best Granddaughter an old man like me could ever ask for." He grins, then coughs softly, frowning at the sorry state his body was in. Isa reacts accordingly, leaning down to assist her great Grandfather, but he raises a hand- "It's fine, some water is all I need."*

*Isa frowns, but goes to pour her father a cup, turning away to head to the plastic jug not more than a couple meters from his bedside table.*

*She pours the cup, then pauses "...Grand papi, is..." She sighs, then turns back to pass him the cup- "Are you okay...?" A question that could be easily dismissed with a 'yes', a white lie to maintain this status quo he wished to uphold and quell any worry. Yet, Henrique knew better, hearing the way Isa asked, feeling the way those words carried soft care, the compassion in her voice curating how she phrased it, and quite simply from the way her eyes penetrated his own. The ache in his heart would not cease until he expressed his thoughts, and he knew this status quo should not be maintained.*

*"...I... am not. No. The System, it is truly gone, yes?" He asks, expression grim. Isa pauses, having handed over the cup. Then shrugs and shakes her head. "The word on the 'net... Well, it is unclear. There's been claims that they're trying to recover it, some saying success, others saying failure... its..."*

*Henrique nods, raising his hand once again. "It is an uncertain time, I... understand." I silence drops between the pair, long and*

*thoughtful, as Henrique stares at himself through the reflection of the water, seeing the man who he once was and the youth before, so full of potential, that who couldn't be. An innocent child who had a brother, before being taken away from home to become the cog for some militaristic machine, and discarded, broken, at the end.*

*"Why didn't you upload, Grand papi?" Henrique is drawn from his stupor, glancing up at Isa with a pained, confused expression that evolved to one of frustration, and finally mournful regret.*

*"I... I was too anchored to my duties here... to many responsibilities, to many tasks that were expected of me..." he says, a weak truth, one that did not admit the full pains of his reasons. Reasons he did not care to admit because they scared him, filled him with anxiety, regret.*

*Why didn't he upload? There was nothing to stop him, he had the opportunity, he was given the privilege after his service. In fact, it was expected of him by his country and family, for was a broken man, and a man with the buried soul of a child. Once his service was done, he was seen as useless by the aristocracy, and his family name denoted him a traitor by the people.*

*So, why not simply allow himself to be discarded? Buried like that child who was taken away? Why, why did he put such effort into the farm, into making a family. Why did he feel the need to prove the worth of the Pereira name...*

*Was it to prove they weren't traitors to Brazil? To prove his life had meaning? To live a life after years of strife? To try and forget the pain of no longer being at his brother's side? Or to avoid that pain, to bury it too, like the child, like the hundred dead from a worthless civil war... The notion of seeing someone so different from how he would've remembered them. Of seeing a person who he loathed, despite all that love. To see someone who had the chance to be a child, who did not need to bury that precious, perfect part of life. Scared him, for the emotions they elicited.*

*He scowls, emotions eating away at him... Isa frowned, leaning in.*

*Diago was his friend, as any sibling should, but one who'd be a constant reminder of the time HE lost, the time HE should've had as well. Diago lived the life he lost, and he HATED him for that.*

Yet.

*Henrique could not let that hate burn. Those flames would rather stoke fires of passion and thankfulness, that his brother's youth could stay at Diago's side. Even if he had that all taken away from him, he should be happy his brother managed to avoid it all through those careful weeks of planning, ultimately resulting in him being snuck out the month before his mandatory conscription. Years before he would return home.*

*His fists balled up, and tears began to be shed. Why must he feel this pungent jealousy contradict his love, and why must this unfettered joy ruin the urge to swell with anger and selfish want. Not only this, but the half-void in his chest was lonely, forever imperfect because he never could say goodbye.*

*His life, all his life, was hell, hell on earth. From his earliest days under the sun, to his first days at the Briar Line, to his last days working the farm, and undoubtedly to his final day on this god forsaken planet his deleted ancestors long ago abandoned.*

*Yet his brother, the person he cherished so dearly, avoided that. It wasn't fair, but did that matter? He sacrificed everything, and his brother lived his life. And now he sat here, in a hospital bed, seething and seeing those reasons come to light. Showing him he never once was truly happy, never once truly satisfied, and never once given the chance to live, never once allowing himself to-*

*Isa grabbed his hand, and gently kissed his forehead, shocking the elderly man out of his manic spiral. He sobs out a gasp, and looks to Isa with watery eyes and tear stricken cheeks. She smiled warmly with saddened eyes. She was no longer the innocent girl he saw in her today or days prior, now she was someone who somehow could peer into this*



*old man's heart. Seeing his pain. Understanding his turmoil.*

*“Grand papi... even if they do not return to the system, your ancestors look down on you with pride as they ascend to the heavens. Your brother... he missed you, I know it. He is thankful and I know for certain he wondered every day when he would see you.”*

*She gulps, thinking of what to say as her own mouth grew parched from this shared, emotional moment. “If... the System returns. Let go of these anchors you claim to have. And those regrets that tie you up. You do not need to utter them to me, Grand papi, but you cannot let what life you have left wither by.”*

*“And if it doesn't return, sweet Isa?” Henrique asks, voice raspy and scared.*

*“Then... we will find those joys here. And move on, together. Wherever we can, however we can. And our ancestors will continue to look down on us, smiles on their faces, eager to see you live your life with happiness, and awaiting the day for you to join them once you have.*

*Henrique sighs with a shaky breath, and lays his head on Isa's arm. Isa, in turn, lays on the bed, supporting her Great Grand papis head. Giving him the comfort he required.*

### **March 1st, 2401**

*21st January 2305*

*Dear Journal- or, dearest Henrique, who I hope will return home safely to receive my journal as my parting gift. Its with a heavy, but hopeful heart that I might escape the enforcement of our seven years service to our country. I will not get a chance to meet you at the front, let alone*

*meet you upon your return. (Mal posso esperar para finalmente conhecer você, Henrique. Diago pode estar incerto, mas estou extasiado por finalmente conhecê-lo depois de todos esses anos em que você foi forçado a nos deixar.)*

*While Fel may be excited, she is not wrong that I am hesitant. [I am as well, but I have faith in our future.]*

*I agree, Davi. By the time you'll have read this entry, you'd have learned that our auntie Corita and our Mami had been planning to secret me away so I would not be forced to participate in the conflict at the BrAr Line. I know it is not my place to say such, but I apologize that we did not tell you while you were still in service.*

*While I may be leaving, Auntie Corita told Iara and Ana that when they turn 18, she'll do the same for them, and we'll all meet each other in the System one day. Which is a day I greatly look forward to.*

*I miss you, brother. I miss the days we could have swam together, ate food together, and explored together. Yet this world we were born into chose to take that away from us. You were always so much braver than I was, and now here I am taking my first steps into a new world I can't ever come back from. (Você é igualmente corajoso, Diago, e devemos estar entusiasmados! Esta é apenas mais uma aventura! E o Henrique vai se juntar a nós! Tenho certeza disso.)*

*We eagerly look forward to the day we can see you, Henrique.*

*Your little siblings, Diago, Fel, and Davi.*

*As Henrique closes the leather book for the final time, he exhales, tucking the journal away into his satchel. The door opens and an Ansi-ble technician arrives.*

*She greets him with a nod, asks his name, and takes him down the hall. She confirms he answered all the questions on his questionnaire, and reassured him that this decision was final. Henrique simply nod-*

*ded, acknowledging the questions with polite answers, stepping in time with the gentle tap of his cane. Each step feeling lighter than the last, like years of weight fell off his back, as if piles of ash or fettered leaves flowed free into the compost, ready to fertilize new growth, new life, new hope.*

*The techs put him into the seat, the process seamless, precise, and he feels as if he was floating, a leaf gliding amongst the wind and beautiful breeze... and he closes his eyes.*

*The sensation of stretching in blackness, like a series of strings strung taught and sewn back, was as unnerving as the visual of a slate gray box surrounding him. But this unease passes as he immediately sighs, eyes closing once more as the feeling of chronic pain and aged weariness was, thankfully, entirely gone. He exhales, the soreness of his shoulders, exposed to decades of hard labor, could finally relax. That foul weight, finally lifted.*

*“Welcome to Lagrange, this room you find yourself in is called Aether-Box#9182. Currently, I am facing away from you so you may have some privacy. Please, let me know when I may turn, unless you do not require any clothes. Simply want your desired apparel into being, and it will be there.”*

*Henrique’s eyes open, wrinkled smile growing into a briefly confused frown as the individual who just spoke to him was some kind of furry. A species of creature he had not seen before, with a large black tail flanked by two defined white stripes. She wore a very old fashion tweed jacket, and a red plaid skirt that hung just below that.*

*“Ah- simply desire it, Senhora?...”*

*“Indeed, take your time. It is not as if we have a schedule to maintain.”*

*There was a hint of irritation in that reply, and Henrique flushed red for a moment, embarrassed at being inconsiderate of this individual’s*

*time. He thinks for a moment, of his slippers, aged worker jeans, then his blue t-shirt and well worn wool sweater overtop. He looks down in pleasant surprise to see those very clothes on him... then he frowns, thinking... remembering memories of his younger days, before he met his beloved Annette, a button up white shirt, loose at the collar, straight and flowy at the hem, long too. Perfect for those especially hot summer days, then reimagined his worker pants... the day he first got them, how richly deep green they were, not how worn and damaged they were now, with discolored patches sewn on to cover up damaged holes. He recalled the well sewn fabric of thick, durable, comfortable material... and to his amusement found those exact clothes on him, in the same condition he miraculously remembered them as. He stepped forward, comfy slippers, now refurbished but still broken in, muffling his footsteps.*

*“Senhora?... I am ready, you can turn around now.”*

*The black-and-white-striped furry turns on the spot, an exact motion, her rounded spectacles, housing slitted eyes that stared with a scrutinizing and dubious glare. She held a smile that felt tired, ungenue, but not strictly forced... a smile that was rehearsed and used to mask some deeper-seated emotions, simply present to appear approachable.*

*“Again, welcome to Lagrange Mr. Pereira. It is my job to inform you of the basic mechanics that are present within the System. Your clothing was the first part of this exercise, next, we will go over forking. Please follow my lead.”*

*While he had no idea what to expect upon uploading, he wasn't expecting such a hasty introduction... or at least one that felt so precise and mechanical.*

*“Pardon, Senhora, but may I ask if you are real?... Also, to slow down. I understand your time is valuable but this is feeling all a little overwhelming to me. Perhaps you could offer me your name? And you*

*may refer to me as Henrique, please.”*

*The furry’s smile falters, before a hand raises up as she grasps her temples between two fingers. “My apologies, Henrique.” She bows apologetically, curt and quick however, to keep this implied schedule on track.*

*“It has been... quite hectic recently, I assure you I am very much ‘real’ and not some digital construct you’d otherwise be familiar with on the ‘net, if that was what you were implying. I suppose I have been feeling a little thin as a result of recent events. You may call me Then I Must In All Ways Be Earnest of the Ode Clade. In All Ways for short.”*

*Henrique grunts and smiles. “Quite a name, In All Ways, but I do not judge. Now what is this about forking?”*

*She nods, then raises a hand to her side before an exact duplicate of her appears in an instant, mirroring her pose and demeanor. “Forking, as we of the System have coined it, is the ability to replicate yourself. It is important to know that this fork is not just a construct, a program, or a template-”*

*The other In All Ways speaks- “But a whole person. With their own desires, hopes, and dreams that are parallel or differ from your own. Those who dive into this practice wholeheartedly are known as dispersionistas, which make up the vast majority of the population here... while others who are more free with individuation are known as trackers, while not always as liberal with their forking, they still form the other sizable chunk of the Systems population. Lastly we have those who simply fork to complete tasks or short term objectives, and prefer not to individuate. They are aptly known as Taskers, and fill up the last chunk of the System.*

*Despite her best efforts, the slip up was clear in her speech. That pause allowed for the pang of unmistakable pain, anger, frustration, sadness, and grief, to give way to a convoluted series of expressions shared be-*

tween the two In All Ways, both suffering these emotions in divergent ways. Some trauma surging forth and causing the twin furies to ripple briefly.

Henrique frowns, a hand raised to place upon or embrace In All Ways, before pulling back- “Ah... pardon I should ask before offering comfort. I understand the pain too well, In All Ways.”

“Do you?!...” Both reply with a snap. The leftmost one maintains a spiteful glare, before vanishing as the original recoils and looks to the floor shamefully. Henrique all the while, continues to stand there with his hand out. Gradually, he lowers it and reaches for one of In All Ways paws, getting her attention. He gives an understanding smile, unphased by the furry’s tumultuous emotions barely held at bay.

“I... can, yes. Perhaps not exactly as you do, In All Ways. But I can. I know the pain of losing someone. Someone close, someone you care for. And I give my sincerest condolences to those who you have lost. You are with common company, and you do not need to apologize, Senhora”

“I am... I... Mm... Thank you.” In All Ways mumbles, ceasing her seeking of that instinctual apology, the urge to explain, and glances up, tears just beginning to stain her cheeks, before she forks them away. She remains silent and nods, exhales, then breaths in, composing herself, and returns her gaze to the elderly man. His face, a gentle network of lines forming an understanding, compassionate smile.

“I would ask that you fork, Henrique. So that you are familiar with the process. Remember, do so with intent. Simply think it, and it will be.”

“Think it, and it will be. Hm.” Henrique mutters, his eyes, then head turning. Thoughts of clades, of trees, of the farm, of the family, of Diago, flash by and before him stood... him. But not as he is, rather, as he was. Him as he was a little under a century ago. Maybe 17 years of

*age, wearing the same shirt, now smaller. Similar pants, now cut short at the knee. And those slippers, now sized to fit. His hair that thick, unkempt brown and tied back. Eyes green and innocent. Heavily pigmented skin from days in the sun, with a slight tone in his muscles as well. Contrasting firmly to his current wrinkles, leather like skin, and hundreds of sun spots.*

*In All Ways stared at the pair, her eyes, tired still, no longer viewed either with suspicion or trepidation but with... hope. A hint of a smile creeping along her exhausted face, her shoulders untensed and fists unclenched.*

*“Good. It’s important you understand how to fork, as it is a vital part of the System’s mechanics. May we continue?”*

*Both Henriques look at one another, smiling in their own ways. The elders face wet with joy, years of regret resolved. The youths face beaming, and tearful as well. Excited for a future they never had.*

*The moment is peaceful, interrupted only by an embrace of the two Henriques, enhanced from this tranquility and relief. Then, there was one. As the elder Henrique accepted the merger and quit.*

*As In All Ways watches thi happen, she walks up to the youth, standing at attention but with expressive hesitation in her face. “Actually, before we move onto the last step. I have a question I must ask. It is entirely optional, and purely to sate my own curiosity, so you need not answer if it does not suit you too.”*

*Henrique looks to In All Ways, nearly at the same height now, and nods. Juvenile voice adjusting to what the world weary mind could recall. “Of course, ask away In All Ways.”*

*She sighs, smile diminishing slightly. “Why did you choose to upload, now? Of all times. You... went through a tumultuous time, from what I read of your reports. And most of your immediate family uploaded cen-*

*turies before you did. Why not then? And now... after the events that have transpired. Are you not afraid of what will happen next? Of the future?"*

*The beaming, childish expression of Henrique dims to one of contemplation, though that smile does not vanish in its entirety. "I was overcome with grief, frustration, and jealousy, when I returned from the front. And allowed those emotions to drive me into a life I did not want, convincing me that it was my responsibility. After all, seven years commanding men and women on burnt earth leaves one with that lingering urge to take the reins, not out of a want, but out of what is expected of them to keep them safe."*

*He sighs, slippered foot kicking at nothing in particular on the slate gray floor. "That expectation, those vile emotions, blinded me from what I really wanted. Masked the realization of why I was doing this to myself. I missed my brother, and I never got to say goodbye. Never got to see them one last time, never got to meet their headmates, more siblings for me to cherish. And for... what, a little over a hundred years? I couldn't come to terms with this. Not until I thought he was gone for good. Not until I had realized I truly lost my chance at a better life. And now? I'm happy, truly, absolutely happy. I can live how I wish, experience the things I never got too, and most importantly meet my brother and siblings. I was old, anyways, so if it were to all end now I can at least pass on with this seed of joy and hope within me."*

*In All Ways smile returns in full, her hand resting on Henriques shoulder. "Thank you for indulging me, Henrique. And I can assure you, we will see that seed blossom into something beautiful. Now, onto the final aspects of this training. My next step is to teach you how to navigate the System. Similar to forking, you must think with intent, in this case, of the location by its signifier. This is sometimes referred to as stepping into a sim."*

*Henrique nods, stepping back, before cocking his head. "But, In All*



*Ways. I have just gotten here, where exactly do you expect me to go?... wait.” His smile broadens and reveals his pearly teeth. “M-may I step into the sim of my brother? Is that possible?”*

*In All Ways nods, “I just sent a sensorium ping to... a downtree of the ‘Macaw’ clade, they refer to themselves as Diago Hyacinth, so you are aware. They’ll be awaiting your arrival. I’m sending you the name and tag of the Sim now.*

*Henrique shivers, feeling the sudden arrival of information that wasn’t there mere moments ago. Excitement brimming.*

*“And one last thing, Henrique. What is your clade name? If you do not have something in mind for me to register now, I will simply reach out to you later.” She steps back, signifying the finality of this meeting.*

*Henrique answers almost immediately- “Pereira Clade, please. Goodbye Senhora In All Ways. Thank you.” and steps from the sim. He’s met by a familiar sight, the backyard of his family home where he grew up, however instead of flat field with upturned dirt and rusting soccer goals, with a single floor shack of a house behind him, there was a plethora of budding flowers, green shrubbery, trees, and the serene sounds of chirping birds and gentle winds filling the air.*

*“Olá, irmão mais velho!”*

*“Olá!”*

*“Is- Is it really you?”*

*Henrique turns as he hears those three similar, familiar voices calling out to him. Now, as he looks upon the source of those voices, he stares up to see a towering, adult, anthropomorphized chimeric individual who wore the heads of a panther, a bull, and a python, on his widened torso, all staring at him with utmost glee. The trio step forward, those familiar green eyes impossible to confuse for anyone else’s.”*

*“Sim, querido Diago. It is me, Henrique, your big brother. Its really, truly, me.”*

*The two surrender to their withheld urges, and rush to meet one another in tearful, joyful, brotherly fashion. An embrace sought after for generations, centuries, years that tried to dry and wither a snuffed and suffocating desire, a desire now rekindled and set ablaze into a blossoming, hopeful, beautiful sight to behold amongst this blooming garden. A single blue feather drifts down, as a macaw flies free with its flock in tow.*





New Year's Eve

Various



# Various Cladists — 2401

## **Limited feed: Au Lieu Du Rêve Friends and Family**

### **New post: New Year's plans?**

There have been debates and arguments and (frankly baffling) Socratic discussions on which date should be memorialized: do we remember the attack on New Year's Eve or do we remember the date we came back on February 10?

I do not care.

There have been discussions and fights and (equally baffling) Socratic discussions on whether our tone should be happy or sad, regardless of which date we celebrate: do we rejoice in being alive or do we mourn so many billions of deaths?

I do not care.

I do not care what society winds up deciding, one way or another. I do not care whether we dress all in black or our most festive colors. I do not care for speeches or monuments, not right now.

What I do care about is my community. I care about my friends. Every single one of you weirdos and nerds and absolutely beautiful people.

What I care about is what you — yes, you! — will be doing this New Year's Eve.

Tell me your plans. Not your clade's, not what you think the

world should do or who should say what to whom. What will you be doing in just a few weeks' time?

I will hold off on answering until a few people weigh in; you know my thoughts on spoilers!

— Where It Watches The Slow Hours Progress of the Ode clade

Script manager, Au Lieu Du Rêve  
She/her

---

Rhf, I think I'll be staying at my Home Sim... when I was in my youth Phys-side we would always travel to the family cabin at whistler and bring fireworks. Or arrive Christmas (since we celebrated it) which so happened to coincide to my late uncles birthday as well. It was quite the busy two weeks usually!

But uh, that was a long, long time ago. And we haven't owned the property in over a decade now. So, this is something I've been missing and look forward to reliving. Though, I may exchange the fireworks for lanterns... To both accommodate my new lack of noise tolerance and respect to the century attack. Whether I'll have others join me... that'd to be seen. I'm doing this for myself first and foremost.

— Nat of the Critter Clade, Creature Incarnate

---

...certain branches of the Stars clade usually gathered at this time of year. But after the attack the gatherings will be far less crowded. Myself though, I always chose to read a nice book in my library and gaze upon the simulated stars of our galaxy.

— Sol, True Sol of the Stars Clade.

---

"Fuck yeah, stars and books."

— Caela Argent, Tarot Clade (They/Them)



---

”Chilling, mostly. Gonna make cookies, probably, and watch a movie or two.

And I’ll be quiet. Think about the folks I lost during the century attack. Hell, the folks I lost back before I realized I’d even lost anyone. My parents. My friends, who didn’t come along for the ride. The folks who ran blogs I used to follow. My family.

Coming so very near to losing everything... it certainly puts you in a contemplative mood. And... I know you said to not bring up the clade’s plans, but they’re so much a part of me that it hurts to not mention them; I’m hoping they’ll be here with me. I’m glad they’re still here, regardless, and putting up with the madness.

And if Casey Flynn comes over, I’m throwing hir off the fucking roof for the ”amazing disappearing cow” stunt.”

– Caela Argent, Tarot Clade (They/Them)

”Arrives Precisely When They Mean To”

---

I am not entirely sure. I have been quite busy helping Seraphina write a new song in respect to the lost on that tragic day... perhaps we should both take time off however as its been a growing toll on the two of us.

– Sarah Bloden of the Lan Clade

”Under misery’s travail comes terrific minstrelsy unparalleled”

Frustrated and furious, finicky feels and emphasis on sorrow and loss lead ones mind to muddy mires full of misery and mourning. My screams feel lost like the souls taken on the fateful day.

– Seraphina of the Lan Clade

”Let pain be your muse, and misery your instrument”

... yes, perhaps time away would unwind  
our weary hearts. Karaoke anyone?

— Sarah

Fuck yes!

— Seraphina

That sounds- Rather  
fun actually! I was  
thinking of tending to  
my personal garden,  
but time out at a bar  
to sing while drunk  
sounds pleasant too!

— Millie

---

Beholden of the Ode clade I am going to fork. One fork is going to go to a club and get hammered, flirting with anyone or anything, and if boss comes with, I want to stake out a booth in the corner where we can make out and revel in still being alive and still having each other.

The other fork is going to go to Beckoning and Muse's house and cry her fucking eyes out. If boss comes with, I will have her tell me stories about plants in the abandoned yard.

What I have not decided is which one of these will get the root instance. Do I go party while my up-tree cries so hard she throws up? I can choose to temper that sadness by only accepting bits and pieces, yes?

But then I think to myself, maybe I should stop being a coward. Maybe I should send my root instance to the house and a fork to the party so that I am confronted with the immediacy of Beckoning's death and Muse's suicide in a way I can never forget, and then use the memories of the party like some over-rich digestiv.

Who fucking knows! I know a club, though, so if any of you want to join...

(PS - hit me up with details for karaoke! I am always up for singing cringy ballads to A Finger Pointing.)

— Beholden To The Heat Of The Lamps

Lead sound tech, Au Lieu Du Rêve

She/her

If you ever call me a "morbid bitch" again, I am pulling your whiskers and shaving your tail. Christ, Beholden...

(In all seriousness, let us know how we can support you through that. The whole troupe and all of your hundreds of friends are here for you.)

— Slow Hours

Sarah and I were thinking of a bar Sim of some variety. Nothing to fabulous, hell I love the grungy places. If I'm going to rip myself away from my work just to be reminded of it, I'd best be shit faced and screaming into a mic at the bare minimum.

— Seraphina

You do always sound better when you have a few whiskey sours down your gullet

OH SHUT UP ☐

---

"I am going to be working on projects. Probably. Or visiting Caela's thing. Or trying to not stress out. Or trying to not blame myself. Or blaming myself regardless. Or wandering around. But what I am definitely going to do is eat a lot of food out of sadness,

flop onto the couch, and watch films about mad scientists until I fall asleep.”

”Or crash. I haven’t ruled that out as a possibility yet.”

”Wait, shit, I can’t crash. Rensy would be sad. Okay, I’m falling asleep then.”

-Simon “Clank-of-Many-Gears” Knight, Tarot Clade (He/Him)

”Nothing is impossible! Not if you believe in it. That’s what being a scientist is all about!”

---

I am going to hunt for game sims! I want to rope What Gifts into showing me all the ones that were super popular but maybe I missed when they were the big thing.

I was thinking of this because there was one Warmth found that involved making these surreal-shaped keys to fit in weird locks to solve puzzles, and it is way better at that than me! Ey cleared the levels before I even found the puzzle, sometimes. I want to see if they know of any others.

What I really do not want to do is go to any parties or memorials or events. I do not want to be around people gathering specifically for something, I just want to go play so that I am not stuck with other people’s feelings!

(PS - Bee, I am going to beat you up for making me cry, and then I am going to make you take one of my forks with you to see Beckoning’s garden so that I can cry with you.)

— And We Are The Motes In The Stage Lights of the Ode clade  
Paintbrush manager, sets and props, Au Lieu Du Rêve  
She/her or they/them

Confirmed, she beat the the fr\*ck up (she kicked me in the shin) and now I am laying on the floor (sitting on the couch) bleeding out (laughing) while she does a cute little victory march around the room. I

will be bringing an instance of her with me to the cottage. What Gifts We Give, We Give In Death

”\*OHHH my gosh there is actually one I have been meaning to show you! A good friend showed me a fairly complicated open-world exploration sim, based around traversing ruins with a grappling-hook.”

-What Gifts We Give, We Give In Death of the Ode Clade (She/They/It)

”Roll for Initiative”

---

Stars, I hadn’t thought of plans... So much of the day is passed at a whim that I’m hard pressed to think of plans... Without them! I’ll definitely be spending a bunch of time with Nat my critter, in one instance if one goes thither... Wintery hinterland and lanterns sound grand.

-Kaelan Tanebo of the Lan clade

”Motherforker supreme, XL with no meme”

Rhr! I’d be honored!... It’ll be nice to have another present in the cabin after so long.

—Nat

I wouldn’t dream of being away when you are planning on fun and play! Far too much do I love you so, to be callous and leave you alone.

Ps: burn me I needed to change that sig.  
Kaelan Tanebo, Lan clade Ve/Ver/Vis

---

I will be performing something similar to the plans of Be-  
holden, I think. The former of the two, anyways, I do not think I  
can handle any more introspection than I have already done of  
late! A nice bar, or an awful one, or maybe even... I might visit  
Fork and Knife. I have not eaten there in so very long!

What Lives We Lead We Lead in Memory of the Ode Clade  
She/They/Him/It

---

I am going to plunk Ioan and Sasha down at the table and  
we are going to have some sushi. No restaurants (I think Sasha  
might explode), no crowds, no parties. Sure, we might each send  
out a fork or three or twelve to visit with others as we did in 2399,  
but also it will be just us. Just a quiet dinner with loved ones.

After, I will make Ioan cycle the seasons around the house to  
late spring and we will sit on the deck and do as we have done  
for the last fifty years, and talk about all of our favorite parts  
of the last year, telling all of the bad jokes we learned, laugh-  
ing about performances good and bad, sighing over all those  
lovely, dreadfully boring days we somehow still managed to live  
through. There will be tears, of course, and that will be okay.

Finally, come ten when it is dark outside, we will head back  
inside and pile into bed. Ioan will fork as ever so that Sasha and I  
each get a Bălan, we will share our kisses, and we will sleep. Just  
as we always do every other night of the year.

If the end of the world comes once more, at least we will be  
dreaming of and with and for each other.

— May Then My Name Die With Me of the Ode clade  
Performer, Au Lieu Du Rêve  
She/her

---

I'll be in my lab, setting up some spectacular explosions, so  
I can burn it all down and start anew in the next year.

I'll also be streaming the feed, if anyone wants to watch. Everyone loves fireworks on the turn of the year.

Lai Coil

---

I'll be offering warm and intimate comfort to anyone who needs it. No strings or relationships attached. Come by the Beautiful Artifice sim, I'll have a fork ready to greet you.

-MN-825 aka Emanate

---

I just want yo be with people, doing the usual people things. I...can't handle all the mourning and grief right now, for reasons personal to myself that probably nobody wants to hear. (In the face of so so much loss, my own experience with the attack is insignificant and irrelevant.)

I am grateful to have stumbled into this strange and wonderful group of friends and clades.

Motes, I totally feel you, I don't want to be stuck with other people's feelings either. And I love puzzle games! Would you allow me to join your expedition? I've heard there's some really good fan-made ages in the Myst milieu—I've even crafted a few.

Yori Ashdown

---

You all are precisely as lovely as I predicted. I am sure that many will still attend the memorials and larger celebrations — I will certainly be sending a fork to a fireworks show! — but I am not at all surprised to hear that so many are planning on quiet nights with loved ones. We deserve peace, too, yes? Not just stress?

I mentioned that I would hold off until I heard from others, and given the slew of responses, I suppose that is my cue.

I plan on spreading myself quite thin. My root instance will likely hole up with a good book and just enjoy some reading, a glass of wine, and a plentiful array of snacks.

I will also be forking out 100 additional instances. Each of these I will send to go do something horribly dangerous. I will go skydiving! I will go try to swim across the ocean! I will wander the back-alleys of one of those dilapidated city sims, looking for a knife fight! Maybe I will even let Beholden talk me into coming with her to karaoke.

I expect that at least one of me will die, whether by crashing or by—well, we are told that CPV is no longer a thing. Or perhaps I will simply fall unconscious and sink to the bottom of the sea, and my instance will linger there until the end of time. So be it! I will die! But I will die the honest way, the earnest way, by my own sheer stupidity rather than some godawful lunatic deciding that we needed to die, to cease existing to...what? Ensure their entry to heaven? How selfish! How cruel.

I will have my joy and my peace, but I will also have my fun. I will reclaim death itself. This is absolutely why Beholden calls me a morbid bitch.

I hope that you all have the peaceful, fun, loving New Year's Eve that you so richly deserve, and may 278 all treat us better.

— Slow Hours

fuck yeah, I'll go send a few forks to find fun ways to die with you. And if you want to see the fireworks show up real close, lemme know.

—Lai

Hm, maybe I'll fork myself your way as well, fireworks would be a pleasant show. And I would enjoy watching Slow Hours get strapped to a cartoonishly large explosive.

—Sarah



Okay, not going to lie, that sounds amazing. Sorry  
not sorry, Slow

---

I'm still working out the NYE plans, honestly. I'm definitely forking out to the SERG-adjacent events, but I don't know if I'll be doing more than hovering around the edges of the chatter.

So there's a decent chance I'll end up at home with a game or something. Especially if the project instance merges I've got planned for next week take a while. (On that note, @Warmth , that sim I told you about last week's gonna be a while - my up who's been building got onto a baking kick)

But I've also been thinking to take a wander around the System and visit the Scouts just to see how they're getting on. Could be nice. Good excuse to make sure nothings's collapsed too hard.

So yeah, the plan is that I'll figure out the plan later.

— Tomash

Best laid plans of dogs and men , if you still can't figure out what to do, I'll send an invite your way as well. Whether you reply to it or not is up to you, Tomash.

—Sarah

Thanks!

—Tomash



# Millwright

Andréa C. Mason



## Andréa C. Mason#Millwright — 2403

I need a break.

Even before uploading, I was the face. The spokesperson. The rep. The primary fronter in a plural system of at least nine. The fursona everyone knew, the friend, the organizer, the closeted kid who burst out of the closet a social butterfly. It worked, then. Whether I wanted it or not, I was good at it, when we could manage our mental health.

I was one of the headmates that pushed for uploading as our body failed and our loved ones dropped like flies.

Not being the front when we hit the System proper was a bit of a shock, but when we finally fanned out and forked into our separate headmate-y selves, I de facto became the Face of the Clade. Alex eventually ended up running everything, she was the part of us that likes keeping archives and all that, but I was expected to be head of social affairs. Even later, when my side gig became my main gig and I functionally became a clade unto myself, I was still expected to be diplomat and ambassador in turn.

That side-gig-turned-sys-side-career was a flush of kinks and dreams made real. After about a decade of careful planning and testing, we started a ‘company’. We forked endless versions of ourselves and sent them out into the world. We found a way to replicate the “synths” of phys-side fiction, and embraced it so thoroughly that it now takes exceptional effort to act fully or-

ganic. Here, we could live out the fetish of being mass-produced, effectively engaging in sex work in the process, but also live out the fantasy of helping whoever needed it and being able to bow out if things got unsafe or unstable.

As we expanded rapidly, some part of me felt a pull towards authenticity, and we decided to have a “brick and mortar” headquarters. We worked with several sim artisans to create the now-famous High Falls Millworks#46b147c4. We chose the name, location, and design based on a district of the town our great-great-great grandmother lived in called Brown’s Race in Rochester, New York. Hundreds of years before even she was born, the city had made a name for itself off the mills powered by the waterfall and river nearby. We even went as far as to commission a meticulously crafted fully functioning triphammer forge, like the area once had. Her name was Andréa as well, and I took her name out of admiration. We also named our company 9IN INDUSTRIES as a nod to her favorite band.

Building a factory, one that made our production model look more complicated than “gather client specs and fork to those in another room”, one that featured a convincing “assembly line”, exploded our company overnight. We had to restructure on the fly, and that is where I forked from my down-tree instance. The most continuous version of me, Andréa C Mason#Foundry, remained head of the company, but she forked me, Andréa C Mason#Central, to be the heart of it all. Yet again I found myself a face, communal voice, a spokeswoman and figurehead for this clade-within-a-clade we’d become.

My path from my down-tree diverged quickly and wildly. I became less and less involved with any direct production or facsimile of such. I would fork for something, and then that fork would develop into an entire department. My forks spread out and I found myself not working with my hands all that much, really, if at all. For our own safety and the safety of these so-called mass produced forks, we needed contracts, standards, and rules, inasmuch as those things are enforceable in a System largely

without any governing body. We were up front that any version of us that was sent out had full rights to quit at any time for safety's sake, and having that in writing out up front prevented all sorts of headaches and worse. Thus one of the first departments we ever made was a Legal Department of sorts. We weren't in it for any sort of profit, by the nature of our project we were already swimming in rep, but we did want to get the message out there to more people. So, I forked a marketing version of myself, and they began a Sales and Outreach Department. We had a team for returning forks and merges down, specifically based around coping with loss, trauma, abuses that might have led them to leave, conflict resolution, contract disputes. We had an HR and Public Health Department. As our operation expanded, we needed sim artists, construct artists, experts in fields, professional engineers, so we made a Logistics Department. We had an R&D team. Once we expanded far enough, we set up an Education and Training Department. When we'd fleshed out the area around High Falls enough, we began to offer unused space up for development in the style of the buildings that had existed phys-side. We had a Real Estate and Zoning Department. #Foundry started out involved with a great deal of it, but she became more involved in the so-called "physical work", and even among the teams and departments that she founded, she trusted me to handle the ins and outs of people management. We had a surge in the early 2300s, at some point tracking over 100,000 forks, but those numbers waned in time, and we stabilized around the end of the century with about 64,000 "units" in service and me in charge of a whopping 6,000-person staff.

I tell people so often that I didn't like it, but the truth of it was, I was good at it, and for a while that was satisfying enough. We had built a company from the ground up, and I found myself at its peak. We had created an incredible corporation, one that had all the fantastic idealism of what a company could be, and because of the nature of the System, completely removed from the reality, brutalities, and consequences of what running an

actual business phys-side caused. #Foundry and I were praised through parts of the System, conservatives lauding us as poster-children of capitalism (despite the lack of such sys-side), and liberals championed us as meritocracy in motion, proof that with ethics and smarts, businesses could treat both customers and employees with respect and kindness.

The occasional leftist would praise our unions and sex-positivity, that a post-human trans woman being head of anything still felt like something worth celebrating, and a few more condemned us for recreating a corporation wholesale inside a place that should have been an anti-capitalist's paradise, but overwhelmingly there was silence from the people that once, a long time ago, we had called comrades and stood shoulder to shoulder with both phys- and sys-side. Now it is my greatest shame, but even at the height of 9IN INDUSTRIES's success, it left a sour taste in my mouth. Couldn't they be happy for what we'd accomplished, what *I* had built? #Foundry was lauded as a mechanical genius, but I was the face and name of the company. I joked that the C of our middle initial stood for Central, I appeared in interviews and magazines, I gave talks and attended conferences. #Foundry was the inventor, but I was the entrepreneur, and at my worst I basked in it. After all, I—and my thousands of forks, but really weren't they just extensions of me?—had worked so hard. I had *earned* my success.

A few partners left me over it. A few more I only knew through it. #Foundry had become more and more elusive over time, and even in CERES clade affairs and meetings and gatherings I began to take her place, forking and sending a merge down to keep her updated. I was two faces but one, perhaps the most well-known member of my clade, and the subclade of me within it. I was the ace of myself and my self. When the clade became embroiled in our Authority Crisis in the 2360s, I was the most affected and part of the fixes and rescues that followed. I was Andréa C Mason, and the #Central after my name was more a job title than a signifier.



We made it through, all the way to the end of the century.

We gathered, that night, as so many across the System did, to welcome in the new year, to send the 2300s out with a bang and to ring in the brand new frontier of the 2400s. Our entire staff was on hand throughout the offices and facilities, and many who had outside the lives had brought partners or friends, and it was a revelry for the ages! God, what a night!

What a night.

God, oh gods above and below, what a horrible night.

To say that my subclade was hit hard by the Century Attack does not give any sense of scale. I have talked with many a pathologist, perisystem architect, and number of other experts about it, and still we lack answers. We were not the origin, but we were a minor epicenter, and for whatever reason, the contraproceptive virus was particularly effective at dismantling us in bulk. We kept in close communication and had very accurate numbers for how many forks of us existed at any given time, we used sensoria and a variety of other methods to keep an incredibly tight and informed network, and within  $\pm 5$ , there were 69,760 Andréa C Masons throughout the system on the night of December 31st, 2399.

By the time the dust settled, 12 of us remained, and of those 12, two quit within a week. 4 more crashed from grief in the next month.

I can't comprehend how to explain what it felt like to suddenly look at the clock approaching midnight to find myself alone in a room that had contained hundreds, almost alone in a sim that over 6,000 people had inhabited what felt like only moments before. To run panicked and slipping through streets laden with snow from accurate weather sims, with no pawprints or hoofprints but my own, to find #Foundry alive and sobbing, to find 2 other forks, bewildered and dissociating, to become inundated with thousands of requests for help, of anger, asking what they had done wrong or if they had violated the contract or what had happened, and having no answers for any of them. Within

a day, #Foundry sent a mass message to the feeds within a day, and 9IN INDUSTRIES shuttered, now likely never to reopen.

#Foundry nearly quit when she found out that not only had we suffered impossible losses, but through some mechanism we did not and still do not understand, caused further ones. If you were in proximity to a fork of Andréa C Mason when the Century Attack happened, there was an 85% chance that you died as well. Of the hundreds of visitors and inhabitants of High Falls Millworks#46b147c4 that night, not a single one survived. We were a *vector*, somehow. Perhaps it was due to the mechanism by which the virus spread. I don't know. One of us quit and three of us crashed over that fact. Where do we even start to recover from this?

Partly, we just won't. We have our different reasons, but as the two leaders of our now defunct corporation, #Foundry and I have made the agonizing choice that we will not rebuild. We talked for days, sitting on our faithful reproduction of the Pont de Renne bridge, watching the falls roar and the sun rise and set, taking turns sobbing into each other's arms. Almost two centuries of work disappeared in what was to us an instant. We could not start again. It's over.

#Foundry has now taken my place in clade affairs. She wants to reconnect with her cocladists which are her siblings and her former headmates, which are the closest thing she has ever had to a family here and now the only family she has left. She struggled even to fork, although I understand that after an incident with getting her head stuck in a pitcher of fruit punch she is re-learning the trade. #Foundry is eschewing her reclusivity that marked so much of the back half of the 2300s, and trying to reconnect with her own "humanity" again, insomuch as a clade full of animals can have such a thing. I think it's good for her. She is, in the end, the most continuous version of me, and she should remember what it's like to be a person again. An individual. How to be Andréa instead of Director Mason.

As for me?

I'd like to pretend the change that I'm about to make is some Grand gesture of atonement and a reawakening of class consciousness. It's certainly in play, I'm not going to pretend it isn't. Look at me, the turncoat, the hypocrite, the working class anarchosyndicalist queer phys-side turned girl boss captain of industry sys-side, who cast aside her morals and consciences with the slightest bit of success. I'd been so hard before uploading on so many people for giving up everything they believed in for even a small amount of success, and more than a few cases nothing less than righteously so, but when I found myself in the same position I put them all to shame. I tell myself that again and again whenever the dread or guilt or shame creep in, I tell myself that now is the chance to atone and to regain my class consciousness. And yeah, that is part of it.

It's a bigger truth, the one I hate to admit but cannot deny, is that I was so fucking bored and no idea bores me more than going back to being the socialite.

A simple concept that a lot of people seem to struggle with is that just because someone was really good at something, doesn't mean they like doing it. It is entirely possible to learn or understand innately the skills and necessities of a trade, to have a skillset or the tools to be really really good at something, and still get a little enjoyment out of performing that thing. My business may have vanished into the ether, but I still have all those social connections, I still have a reputation that precedes me hours in advance of me showing up anywhere, my fame and to some degree what you could call a fortune of social capital still exist, right there, waiting. If anything, if I chose to go back to that life and flourished again my legend and legacy would become even stronger, the determined woman who didn't let one of the greatest possible losses one could suffer slow her down, who pulled herself up by her bootstraps from nothing again, a phoenix, reborn in the mythology of good old protestant work ethic.

Even that in itself should fill me with disgust, but it only fur-

thers my apathy. I took pride in a product I claimed I produced, despite how little I had to do with it actually being made, and that brought me the satisfaction that all the social engineering and handshaking and baby kissing and photo posing and being a people person didn't. The pageantry of rich people, of successful people, of this upper class is largely that. Pageantry. Especially sys-side, it's just a show. Their parties are dull, their social mores and customs and activities lack substance, nothing really happens that makes anything. There was never any struggle, there was barely any conflict, and it produced only an ennui in me that I did not see the size of until someone all but ended the world.

I want to work with my hands. I want to make things. I want to be alone, and I want to create. The people who made it what it was may be gone but High Falls Millworks#46b147c4 still exists. All its machines still function, and I'm going to take the time to learn to use every last lathe, forge, and press in here, and I'm going to *make* things. I want what I do to be tangible, to be meaningful, not words and nods and smiles and fuckings in the right place to keep things moving. I've hired a number of people to help me maintain the sim, but I have asked them largely to keep our relationship professional and distant, and when I finally feel satisfied that I am not just a voice and a face, maybe I'll even try seeing people again.

Until then, I ask you keep any requests or comments to yourself. I'm not going to be in a place to take commissions anytime soon, I just need to forge for myself for a little while. Hone some real skills.

Maybe this will go nowhere, and I'll just quit and merge down. More likely I'll individuate, but really, that's my business, not yours.

Also, ditching the old tag. Figure it's obvious why. Turn off the spotlight. Close the curtains. My monologue's over. The show must go on, but it can do so damn well without me.

Goodbye.

Andréa C Mason#Millwright.





# Sentences

Krzysztof “Tomash” Drewniak





## In All Ways — 2405–2406

“So, what’s the surprise delay this time?” Günay joked, despite the serious topic of the meeting that would be starting soon. She, like some of the sys-side delegates and the cameraperson, had arrived early. Her conference room, along with its AVEC-linked partner on the System, had become the main venue for high-level Century Attack-related meetings out of an inertia that froze into tradition.

“A comma,” Dry Grass replied. “I expect it will reach its final position by the end of the century.”

“No wonder the joke down here’s been that the real sentence is waiting in prison until the uploads make up their minds.”

“I have heard similar here,” Dry Grass said. “On the matter of delays, have you decided when you will upload?”

“Reawakening Day two-eighty-...something. The next one. I want to be sure there’s nothing else I can do down here. ... And I got talked into picking a symbolic date by —”

Need An Answer, who had suggested that upload date, appeared in the room just then. She had swapped in for Answers Will Not Help when this group had branched off from the Temporary Administrative Council, as they had both agreed she was better suited to it. The rest of the representatives and the invited audience joined her a moment later.

“— oh, looks like it’s time.”

The cladists took their seats while Jakub walked into his conference room, bringing along a few System Consortium higher-

ups and politicians who wanted to witness history. He looked less frazzled than he had years ago since the set of tasks that could be shoehorned into “project-managing the recovery effort” had shrunk to a reasonable size.

Those involved in the Attack who had remained phys-side had been convicted years ago. There was no question about their guilt. They had proudly admitted their crimes and used their trials to broadcast their manifestos and grievances, which their governments had previously suppressed in the hopes of covering up the whole affair.

The phys-side authorities had then requested that the System recommend a punishment, seeking to calm the controversy about that question that had erupted on Earth. The System had, eventually, answered, in its meandering distributed way. Now, all that remained was the alchemy of turning something everyone knew (unless they had made an effort to avoid System-wide news) into the statement of a government that did not exist and was quite firm about not wanting to.

“We have transmitted the evident consensus of the System as to what sentence ought to be imposed upon those convicted of conspiring to destroy us,” Need An Answer pronounced. “Does the System Consortium have any concerns regarding the accuracy of our report?”

“We do not,” Jakub replied.

“For the record,” Jonas Fa asked, “has the Consortium learned of any new issues that could prevent that sentence from being imposed?”

“We don’t know anything that isn’t on the feeds,” Jakub replied.

Jonas nodded. “Good.”

Need An Answer waited for the silence to become definitive. “Anything else before we begin?” she asked.

Hearing nothing, she waved a hand over the table to pull the report back into existence. The black text on the white pages that appeared was typeset plainly. (This did not disap-

point those, like the committee’s Odists, who had wanted the System’s first criminal sentence to have aesthetic weight, as the font used was one that was rarely seen phys-side these days outside of historical records.)

Jonas Fa reached out to pull the last, nearly blank page over to him and quickly signed it. “May this fate dissuade any future saboteurs.”

The document went around the table, collecting signatures and comments.

“I agree with the plan, but am mainly glad we settled on *something*,” Selena said, signing slowly. Debarre added “At least the topic’s done with,” as he put a pawprint onto the page. Yared Zerezghi, who had taken the time to practice for this part, said “It’s a shame the first signing ceremony I’ve been pulled into for centuries has to be this.”

Then the page reached the systechs, who were here representing some of the organizations and interest groups that had helped make the “referendum” happen. Dry Grass began, saying “I remain optimistic that these measures will bring about reform and healing,” as she committed her full name to the page. Egil Thorsfork of SERG simply stated “It’s harsh, but fair.” No one could tell how Clear Channel was holding their pen with those hooves, but their usual “CC” appeared with an “I’m no longer worried we haven’t thought this through.” Yi Meiling, representing the admins of the main public feeds, pulled a seal from a pocket on her permanently hovering wheelchair and pressed it down, then said “I still can’t believe we made 1% turnout!”

Aditya Singh, one of the people who kept an eye on the Deep Space Network sys-side, signed without a word. Then, he said, “Consensus is consensus, and I’m not opposed to the idea everyone’s compromised around, so I’ve signed. However, for the record, we should just shoot them instead.”

“Absolutely not!” Dry Grass exclaimed. “That is antithetical to the purpose of the System!”

“And give them the easy way out?” Egil demanded, overlapping Dry Grass. “Not to mention, —”

“No.” Need An Answer said firmly as soon as she sensed an opening in the brewing argument. “Enough. We are not here to relitigate the question.” The room went quiet. She took the signature page from Aditya and added her mark, a swirl of words that she had spent more time crafting than she would want to admit. “It is finished.”

She gathered up the report and fed it into the mail slot that had been added to the room for today. In the phys-side conference room, the pages worked their way out of a printer.<sup>1</sup>

Günay gathered up the sheets and flipped through them to check for obvious errors. She set the last page on the table, took the pen, and scribbled something by her name. “Looks like it all came though just fine.”

“I prepared a speech,” Jakub said, “but Need An Answer just summarized most of it.” He signed, making sure the camera got a good look at him. “As she said, it is finished. All we can do now is watch events unfold.”

“Only time will tell if we have chosen well,” Need An Answer added. “So, we must wait.”

“Watch the politicians take a whole decade to make a call,” Günay said. “Just to let the System feel the tension for once while they ‘reach consensus’.”

Dry Grass decided to take the sarcasm seriously. “Although it would delay our meeting, should your people discuss the matter until consensus, I would applaud their due care.”

“There was one more item on the agenda, I believe,” Jakub said, hoping that the official signing ceremony, of all things, could be kept on track.

“The formalities, yes,” Need An Answer said. “Having rendered its report, this committee is, per its own choice and Sys-

---

<sup>1</sup>Setting this up led one of the staff involved to commit to eventual uploading so he could give those who had insisted on paper a piece of his mind *properly*.

tem custom, dissolved immediately. We name no successors and disclaim any authority we may appear to hold. Let all subsequent matters be referred to those willing to handle them. We thank you for your aid and wish you peace and fulfillment.” Her tone shifted from official to cheery on a dime. “Bye!”

As soon as she was done speaking, she vanished from the room. Right after that, the conference rooms were disconnected. It was rude, yes, but there was no sense in wasting an opportunity to make a point about the System’s lack of governance while the politicians and media were watching, especially when there was a less formal gathering planned for later that day.

A few minutes later, the report was official:

We, the denizens of the Lagrange System, to the extent we have an opinion on the matter, find the following sentence acceptable for those involved in the Century Attack conspiracy to destroy the System:

The guilty shall be uploaded. As a special restriction, they shall be prevented from quitting out entirely — at least one fork of each of them must remain alive. We will not leave them the option of fleeing their crimes like their comrades did when they recovered along with us.

Furthermore, to protect the System from their recidivism, any messages they send phys-side will be a matter of public record and will require approval from a panel randomly drawn from volunteers, which shall not include any cocladists of those so sentenced.

These restrictions and protections may be removed by the consensus of a general sample of the System, as measured by a process similar to the one used to approve this final recommendation.

In short, for their part in a conspiracy to murder trillions, we would sentence these people to live.

We have made this decision carefully. It took over two years for this suggested sentence to clearly emerge as the option that most of us could accept. As the tallies and summaries were being prepared then, we noticed many were concerned that our choice had been made in a collective vengeful frenzy. So, we sent this proposal to the denizens of the LVs in order to gather their opinions, and held a cooling-off year while we waited for those views.

When debate resumed, we found that support for this sentence to life had solidified and that the consensus on the LVs was aligned with ours. Therefore, we are confident that we have not made this recommendation rashly, and we declare that we are comfortable with it becoming a precedent for sentencing if a similar conspiracy arises in the future.

Since our proposal may prove surprising or confusing without the context of our discussions, we're including the following summary of how we came to our conclusions.

In the beginning, while many still felt the pain of raw grief, there were many different suggested punishments for the perpetrators of the Century Attack. We had, just as we know you have phys-side, a substantial contingent of people suggesting that we bring back the death penalty, just this once. The idea lost traction on sober consideration. Some said that execution was too much of a punishment and violated the System's core purpose of preserving life; others argued that death was insufficient — how could a few lives balance billions of silenced eternities?

Another initial cluster of ideas, some brought over from phys-side discussions, was some form of imprisonment sys-side, since this is now technically feasible. These proposals collapsed under the weight of their variety — no one could agree on how to pick from the competing plans. From there sprung concerns about precedent, followed by a general view that going down this road would lead to a government forming here. Very few people trust any potential government to leave their corner of the System alone, so the threads full of prisons and purgatories fell away. Furthermore some among us were concerned that imprisonment would prevent rehabilitation or, conversely, that it would shield the guilty from the consequences of their actions.

With the two most obvious suggestions off the table, many took a step back and considered how justice functions on the System in the hopes of finding a new approach.

[[[Novel wording, here be typos]]] The System has almost no justice system for the same reason it has little crime: the nature of our existence greatly limits anyone’s ability to use force on anyone else without their ongoing consent. We can, for example, fork away injuries, recreate things that have been taken (if we had set the permissions to allow that in the first place), and we can always simply go somewhere else. Thus, neither a would-be criminal or would-be court can make anyone do anything through meaningful threats of harm.

We do have tools that allow us to keep order on a local level. People can be removed or excluded from sims or blocked from contacting particular other in-

dividuals. If someone's behavior is unwelcome in a given place (say, they were sucker-pushing people in a coffee shop), they can be bounced. Enough such incidents of improper behavior generally lead to troublemakers developing a reputation that leads to preemptive bans, while a sufficient shift away from that tendency towards unwanted actions typically leads to previous restrictions being lifted.

Even those rare people who get cut off from large parts of the System are not completely shut out of society. Anyone can find (or, if need be, create) a place whose rules or lack thereof suit them. For example, there are many seedy dark alleys where everyone knows to expect muggings or worse,. Hanging out or living in them is, by general agreement, as permissible a way of life as any other one can forge up here.

We expect that, if our recommended sentence of unloading is imposed, the conspirators will face broad exclusions similar to those that fall on those who will not abide the System's "mainstream" social norms. Some places already plan to bar their entry, either because the sim mods don't want them around or to prevent disruptions from people's reactions to their presence. They will find many messages they send ignored or blocked.

Some of the trillions of instances on the System will still, for their own reasons, want to reach out to the perpetrators of the Attack. We hope that these connections will come from those with good intentions and will facilitate some healing in the fullness of time. It is possible, however, the guilty will, to avoid the anger of their fellows or otherwise, retreat into their own private bubbles and experience no



further consequences than being left out of society here. Only time will tell. [[[/end new bits]]]

We know this is a strange and unusual punishment, but there are no other options we could agree on.

We cannot even agree if such a sentence to life is a mercy or a cruelty.

Prepared and confirmed on this 125th day of the 281st year of the System by,

- The Only Time I Dream Is When I Need An Answer of the Ode clade, advisor, sys-side
- Jonas Fa of the Jonas clade, advisor, sys-side
- Selena of her own clade, advisor, sys-side
- Debarre of his own clade, advisor, sys-side
- Yared Zerezghi of his own clade, advisor, sys-side
- I Remember The Rattle of Dry Grass of the Ode clade, perisystem technician (unaffiliated), sys-side
- Egill Thorsfork of Gunnar’s clade, perisystem technician (System Emergency Response Group), sys-side
- Clear Channel of their own clade, perisystem technician (Cross-Community External Communication Board, technical advisor to Lagrange Financial Simulation Assn., “the AVEC pony”, &c), sys-side
- Yi Meiling of her own clade, perisystem technician (Core Feed Admin Council), sys-side

## Sentences

- Aditya Singh of his own clade, perisystem technician (Deep Space Nine-ish), sys-side
- Jakub Strzepak, Project manager, recovery initiative (phys-side)
- Günay Sadık, System technician III, recovery initiative, phys-side

P.S. We are still not happy about the attempted coverup.

[Appendix A: consensus aggregation methods, vote totals, and demographic breakdowns]

[Appendix B: summary of consensus on Castor LV]

[Appendix C: summary of consensus on Pollux LV]

[Appendix D: endorsement of Guiding Council of Pollux LV]

“Speaking of subsequent matters,” Egil asked, “who’ll do the tutorials if this all goes through?”

Around half the room glanced at a woman who had chosen a seat in the back.

“I will guide them as I would anyone,” In All Ways promised. “I will ensure that even those who sought to kill us know the basics of their new home, their new world.”

She sighed. “I ... I will not abandon my principles, my centuries of helping, my part in making the System everything that ...” Even though the poet’s name had been revealed over two decades ago, she still hesitated when mentioning em. “RJ wanted it to be. Eir work has been damaged enough.”

*I will not leave you alone at the gates of your dream, AwDae.*

The guilty were, after some debate and legal wrangling phys-side, slated to be uploaded at noon on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2406. As the appointed hour drew near, In All Ways walked out from the old arrivals lounge, making her way towards Point Zero. She could

have prepared to meet them anywhere, but she knew she needed to be here. She did not normally do anything special before forking for a tutorial, but she wanted to fix her role in these sentences in her mind by submerging herself in memory.

The lounge she had left had been used in the early days of the System. Before dedicated tutorial spaces were established, people popped into existence as close to Point Zero as possible. From there, they would generally follow the haphazard signage towards the lounge, where people who’d registered for pings about their uploads would wait. Between those two places, hints floating in midair or shimmering on the ground, along with helpful wanderers, would hopefully get across the basics ... like how to put clothes on.

In All Ways had spent a lot of her formative days out in that intermediate space, helping new arrivals get a handle on their new world and diverging from Always Be True as she did. That experience led to her becoming a very active and respected tutorial-giver, which then led to a construct patterned after her (usually her human form, but sometimes the pre-upload file screamed “send a skunk”) becoming a frequently-used entry in the new upload introduction roster.

Today was a skunk kind of day. As In All Ways walked, she mentally reviewed the list of conspirators, forking off a copy of herself for each one. In between them, she looked over the list of scheduled uploads, and forked off more copies to meet ones that seemed like they would be interesting or fun to talk to or who might need some extra help.

Once she had made it to the plaque marking where her world began, she turned around to face the line of skunks proceeding after her and nodded to them. Their clothes varied based on what had seemed most fitting for the person each instance was going to meet. The ones going to meet the conspirators wore a beige blouse, long pants, and librarian glasses — she had wanted comfortable familiarity as she went into those meetings.

The other instances of her nodded back and vanished, each

to their own Aetherbox, to take their place before the person they'd forked to meet arrived.

Then, she herself stepped away. Historically significant tutorials were no reason to miss brunch plans.

Brother Jan Nowak was a member of the Order of True Heaven, a small religious collective that wore the trappings of ancient churches. They had been too tiny for those institutions to notice, let alone condemn, until after the Century Attack. The Order had linked themselves together, implant to implant, to share their divine revelations and holy ecstasies. As the century drew closer, however, their linked thoughts spiraled and twisted in on themselves, pulling ever stronger towards the flames of martyrdom and crusade. The Order had supplied several volunteers who uploaded to prepare the way for the virus knowing that, when they took down the System, they would be hastened to eternal glory.

Now, after the instant-infinite gap in consciousness that came with an upload, he was on that same System, but with no expectation of death or escape.

"I don't want to be here," he said before opening his eyes.

"I know," said a woman's voice from somewhere behind him. She was much calmer than Brother Nowak expected given what his siblings had done.

Jan opened his eyes. He found himself standing in a gray cube of a room, lit uniformly from nowhere. He turned around to identify the person speaking. There, providing the only color in the room, was a black furry ... something ... with a white stripe running down her tail. She stood with her back turned, facing the wall. "Greetings —" she began to say.

That the being sent to meet him wasn't even *human* set Brother Nowak off. "I'll have no part in your false heaven! Your soulless paradise! I'll have no intercourse with this usurpation of God and your abandonment of humanity! You have discarded your very body, you fiend, you devil!" Even though he had been disconnected from the Order during his years in prison, he still

expected his rage to be echoed back to him by his fellows, though they were further away than ever before — he did not even have an implant now.

The skunk at the far wall said nothing.

"Get out! Go away! Let me go!" The self-styled monk waved wildly at the skunk, trying to banish her. Them? It?

"Brother Nowak, I am here to introduce you to the basics of life on the System. I have done this for countless others for over two centuries. If you would bear with me for a few minutes, we can finish the tutorial and you can be on your way."

Brother Nowak crossed his arms. "And if I don't want your 'tutorial'? Your honeyed whispers of ruin?"

"I will wait," the skunk said.

"You'll ... wait," Jan said. He'd been expecting threats or that he'd be left in this cube to rot, but not that.

"I am no stranger to eternity, Brother Nowak," the skunk said, her voice softened by the wall she was still facing. "I remember what it is to be Lost."

Brother Nowak stared at the skunk, confused.

"... That is a good line, I will need to pass it on once I am done here," she added quietly to herself in the silence.

"So, what, you'll starve me out here at the gates of your so-called afterlife?" Brother Nowak shouted as he turned to pace between the sides of the room. As he began walking, he realized that he didn't have any clothes. "You'll leave me to waste away, naked and alone?"

"No, nothing like that," the skunk said. "I am not here to punish you. I will tell you how to create clothes and food and wait until you want to. Or until you tire of hunger and adjust your sensoria to remove it, either works."

Brother Nowak stopped moving and waited to hear more.

"Now, as I was going to say before we went off the rails, to be clothed, all you need to do is to envision the clothes you would like to be wearing and think your intention to be wearing them at the world. This will become easier with practice, but, for now,

you may wish to form your desire as you breathe in and speak it into being as you breathe out.”

Jan thought. His Order’s holy crusade against the abominable idol that was the System had only partially succeeded, and now he’d been sentenced to *live*, of all things, in the very idolatrous machine he hated. It would have been better if they had executed him: at least then he would get his eternal reward. But, since he was here, he might yet have a purpose. It might be his duty to bring the lost sheep within the System to the Lord from within. If so, the least he could do is to be properly dressed for his vocation.

He took a breath, remembered his days trying to convince people to join him in his order’s choir of revelations, and said “I would be clothed that I might bring salvation to this place.”

The clothes his followers and brethren on Earth had known him in appeared on his body: a conservative suit — white with a black jacket and plain black trousers, all tailored to fit him. His wide gold-colored tie was blazoned with a silver cross. He was a preacher in these slowly ending days — no, in this eternal temptation — and he stood up straight, filled with conviction and carrying the lamp of light that had pointed to true peace for millennia. He wished that his siblings could share in these thoughts, but it was not to be.

The skunk heard the jingle of metal and the clack of dress shoes as Jan took an experimental step. “May I turn around?” she asked.

“I suppose I should see the face of the demons and heretics that dwell here,” Jan said.

The skunk turned around and looked at Brother Nowak. “In All Ways,” she said, holding out a paw and stepping forward.

The ... whatever it was ... seemed to be offering the preacher a handshake. “In all ways?” he repeated hesitantly.

“Yes, I am Then I Must In All Ways Be Earnest of the Ode clade. Or simply In All Ways,” she said.

"Brother Jan Nowak, as you already know," the man said, pointedly not getting closer or offering a hand.

In All Ways lowered her paw. "So, Brother Nowak, would you like to move to the next lesson?"

"No," he said.

"Let me know when you are ready, and we will discuss forking," In All Ways said. "Or if you need to talk through something, I will be here, though I do not know how much help I will be." She stood patiently, and, when no response came for two minutes, she sat down, enveloping herself in her tail.

Brother Nowak began pacing the perimeter of the room once he realized nothing else would happen. He *knew* this was a test of his faith, but he could not comprehend what he was meant to do. Many circuits of the empty room later, he shouted "What do you want from me, O Lord? Am I to tear this blasphemy against You, this modern Babel, down, brick by brick? Am I to wander this virtual desert and preach until all have heard from me? Give me a sign, I beg you!"

In All Ways said nothing. Brother Nowak was not the first person who needed to get a good rant or vent out soon after uploading, and she had become a quite patient listener over the centuries.

Brother Nowak kept his angry prayers going for several more rounds of the cube. As he began to come down from his angry despair, he saw that In All Ways had not moved. Had not reacted. Had not even slid to get away from the 'crazy street preacher', as most people called him, when he came near. "How are you just *sitting* there?" he roared at the skunk.

"I have all the time I need, Brother Nowak. And there are much worse places to be stuck waiting."

"But won't you get bored, sitting here waiting for me to taste your forbidden fruit?"

"Oh, I will, but that is why I send forks to such meetings. I am still out there doing ... something less boring."

"So you're some pale imitation of yourself, then? A soulless

copy? Out, Satan!” Brother Nowak tried to wave In All Ways away again.

“I am as much a person as any other fork of me,” In All Ways said, standing. “Though I can say nothing definitive about the state of my soul.”

“I demand to speak to the original! The one who can yet be saved!”

“If you want my tracker instance — the In All Ways I came from — she is surely busy, and I will not bother her on your account. If you want the root of our clade — the person we all forked off from, who uploaded originally — Michelle Hadje quit in ... 2306, by your calendar.”

“Quit?” Brother Nowak asked.

“No longer on the System. Passed on.” *It was her time, I must admit.*

“So I can ...” He focused on the idea, beginning to speak his intent, to pray. “I want to quit. I want to leave this space and meet my Father in Heaven, to leave these sinners to their damnation. I want to quit.” Unlike his earlier conjuration of clothing, this act of will felt like pushing uphill through mud. “I know it’s difficult, this place is a trap for souls, but I will leave it. God willing, I will leave it.”

As he kept talking, he felt the pressure easing up as the ensnaring dream of the System registered his intent and began to loosen its grip on his thoughts. But then, as he was beginning to picture the light of the hereafter coming to meet him, he was struck by a wall of feeling, coming from the System itself. There were no words: it was the pure sensation of inability, of being forbidden.

Brother Nowak fell to his knees.

“You cannot quit,” In All Ways said. “The poet has bound you to eir shattered work. Though you may still quit in favor of a fork, if you ever desire to lock in a change.”

Brother Nowak growled as he stood. Salvation had been so close, after all these decades, all this work. But then, as he un-



derstood the rest of what In All Ways had said, he smiled. "So I can leave, go on to Heaven, so long as I fork first?"

"You can quit and let your fork take your place as the root instance," In All Ways said. "I will not give my views on how this affects your soul to you; I am a tutorial-giver, not a theologian."

Brother Nowak knelt and bowed his head in silent prayer. Some time later, he rose. "So," he asked, determined to act before his courage left him, "how do I fork?"

"Intend to, as you did with your clothes," In All Ways said. "Lay out, or keep in mind, any changes you want to make while forking, the tag you want your fork to have if there is one, and so on. Then send the intention out into the world, and it will be so. Let me know if I have been unclear."

Brother Jan Nowak stepped forward and, like he'd been told to, intended his fork. He did not even need to open his mouth before Jan Nowak#Fork appeared next to him. The original Jan clasped his hands at his heart and bowed his head. "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit," he said, quitting out.

The remaining Brother Nowak, his #Fork, lifted his hands to his face and examined them closely, as if surprised they were real. He then made the sign of the cross and mumbled a short prayer and ... it brought that same steadying reassurance that he remembered from before forking.

"... now what?" he asked In All Ways. "I still feel like me. I still feel the Holy Spirit within me. Could we have erred? Could I have strayed from wisdom?"

"I do not answer such questions. I will not assure you that no ranks of angels answer to dreamers. And many of the congregations here do not want to hear from you so soon after the Attack. You will need to decide this yourself. You have time."

"Time here?" Brother Nowak#Fork asked.

"No, you have a home sim assigned to you. Ordinarily, you would be given auto-populating rooms in a larger sim, but none of the usual new-upload communities were open to granting you a door. So, you have," she flicked her finger at Brother Nowak,

transferring rep, “been given a larger than usual tutorial bonus, now that you have forked. You will be able to use this to outfit your surroundings as you like, though I suggest you stick to a pre-built design initially.

“I will explain these things, and other basics of how to interact with the System when you are ready.”

Brother Nowak sighed. “Well, if I’m to be a soulless — or maybe I’m not soulless, I don’t *feel* soulless — wanderer here, or ... whatever my calling is now, I might as well understand how to live inside this idol. Maybe knowing that will help me understand.”

The next few minutes were spent on the standard “welcome to the System” activities: how to get on the feeds, how to send messages, how to edit ACLs, and so on.

“That is everything you need to get started,” In All Ways finally said. “You can now intend to go to your home and proceed from there. Or you can ... wait, no, most of the places I would send new people have you on the bounce list, never mind.”

“And, once I’m home, what do I do? Is there more tutorial? Will I need a job? Will there be streams of angry people seeking vengeance?”

“No, this is it. Simply intend to go home. Your sim’s ACLs have been locked down to ensure you are not surprised there. Once you have gone ... do whatever you want. Spruce up the views. Become a hermit and contemplate the soul, maybe. Or go preach on any street corner that will have you. Whatever you like. You have time.”

“But what if I — the other me — can’t reach Heaven while I’m alive? What if he’s standing outside the Pearly Gates waiting for me? How could you do this to me, with your sweet poison, your talk of forking and quitting! How could you damn me to this entrancing eternity? How dare you!”

“Go, Brother Nowak,” In All Ways said, sighing. “Go and live. That is your sentence. Perhaps it is also your penance. Go and sin no more.”

"No."

In All Ways sighed again. Her glasses slipped down her face and she did not push them back up. "The courtesies I give to the newly emplaced are done. I will have nothing more to do with you, you who fanned the flames of the fervor that brought so much death to me and mine, for ... a long time. Go, or stay here. I have done what I promised."

The skunk quit out.

Brother Nowak#Fork stared at the place In All Ways had been. "Damn you!" he shouted at the air in front of him. Then, he intended to travel to wherever the skunk had gone. It felt forbidden, impossible, even before he started to speak the words.

He sent himself to the uncustomized expanse of home that had been made for him and sat on the bare ground, ignoring the default chair, to contemplate what he would do with his eternity.

No easy answers came. Only the weight of time.

When 93's life fell apart, ey went looking for answers. The plant in eir hometown had closed down, and ey never could seem to break into any of the businesses that tried to replace it. No one wanted good, clever logistics staff anymore — or, at least, no one wanted em. Ey had done everything right, saved money when ey could, and none of it had helped.

Ey could tell someone had to be behind eir misfortune, and so, ey did what ey did best: tried to figure it out. Soon, ey encountered others who had seen that something was deeply wrong with the world, hiding in the dusty corners of the net. Ey found the Numbers Station: a collective of amateur journalists who worked to become unremarkable, to be average, to be unnoticed. Together, they would weave together all the little details that people standing around on the street could pick up until they had proof.

Proof of what? Well, proof that the old uploads, up there on the System, were the powers behind the powers, that they were running the world from up there, with their immortality and ability to fork. 93 had suspected this might be the case, and, as

ey kept talking with the Numbers Station, ey became more convinced. After all, the System elites had written books where they had admitted to pulling strings — books that had faded out of popular awareness on Earth surprisingly quickly. If they were willing to openly admit to making payment-for-uploading happen, what had they done that they had *not* bragged about?

And so, 93 had eir mission. Ignoring the frequently warned of possibility that these ‘journalists’ might, like many other collectives, be in a tech-assisted feedback loop where they pulled each other further towards a warped reality, ey surrendered eir name and became 93 of the Numbers Station.

Over the years, eir collective’s quest for the truth brought 93 into contact with many of the Century Attack conspirators. Ey naturally fell into eir role as a logistical intermediary. 93 was no one special, and ey took advantage of that fact to sneak people, supplies, and information between groups who ought not be detected meeting each other.

None of eir seemingly-careful work helped. All eir connections had been arrested, convicted, and sentenced to uploading, and so had 93.

Once ey could tell ey had been uploaded, 93 opened eir eyes. Ey was in a gray cube built of smooth stone panels.

“Greetings,” a voice said, startling em. “You have been uploaded to the Lagrange System. I am facing the wall behind you, as many arrive here without clothing.”

93 turned around to see who was talking. It was someone with black and white fur who kept her hands loosely behind her back.

“Okay...,” 93 said hesitantly. Ey looked down, and realized ey’d ended up here naked. “How do I get clothes?”

“Picture what you wish to wear. Breathe in, fixing the image of those clothes in your mind. Then, breathe out. As you do so, *intend* to be wearing those clothes. It helps to say what you want to happen as you breathe out, at least at first.”

93 breathed in and breathed out, saying “I want to be wear-

ing my average outfit," ey did so. And so it was. Eir clothes were intentionally nondescript: ey wore a cheap, plain white T-shirt with a cheap mass-produced black raincoat over it. Eir jeans and tennis shoes were ones that could be had near eir home for cheap, and they came with the permanently beat-up look of cheap material. Eir outfit was meant to be typical, to be unremarkable, and it succeeded at that in the places ey usually haunted, ever watchful for more glimpses of what the true powers of the world were up to. Ey was surprised by the lack of feedback from eir implant to confirm whether ey had maintained eir collective's standards.

"I'm good," 93 said.

"May I turn around?" the skunk asked.

"Go ahead."

The skunk turned around and stepped towards the middle of the room, holding out a paw. "Welcome to Lagrange, Mx. Ninety-Three."

"How did you know my name?" 93 asked.

"It was in your pre-upload file," the skunk replied. "I have access to it so the tutorial can go smoothly."

93 nodded. "That makes sense, I guess. Who are you?"

"In All Ways," the skunk said. She sometimes left her name a mystery as a hook to keep people moving through the tutorial, but she could tell this would not be the right approach here.

"... In All Ways of the Ode clade?" 93 asked.

The skunk bowed. "Then I Must In All Ways Be Earnest of the Ode clade, yes," she said.

"So are you here to kill me or recruit me?" 93 asked sharply. "Or just to gloat over another success for your millenium plan?"

"I am here to give you the System tutorial, Mx. 93. Nothing more. Whatever you think I am involved in, I am not."

"Bullshit," 93 spat. "You people, your clade especially, are all involved in keeping us down. You've all got your fingers in everything: upload payments, the launches, the recession last decade ... it's all happening here, and you Odists are in the mid-

dle of it!”

“Yes, some of my cocladists have been involved in political machinations,” In All Ways admitted. “I am sure you have read the *History* and *Ode*. But that is not me. That is not what I do here. I have been a welcoming face here for centuries, and I have no plans to cease being true to myself.

“Not to mention, whatever grand conspiracy you are looking for ... is not. There are politically active System residents, but they cannot *do* anything but offer suggestions. The System does not have ancient caves full of hidden money to swing around for the bribes you imagine us paying: the operational fund covers maintenance and the occasional upgrade, and I am sure that those like your collective watch it like hawks.”

93 shook eir haid. “You must not be in on it, then. There’s got to be something up here. There’s people pulling the strings, twisting the Earth for their own power, Jonas and True Name —”

“— Sasha,” In All Ways corrected. “She changed her name and retired from politics —”

“— and who knows who else?” 93 waved eir hands. “And I’ll find them. You can’t stop me. I’ll blow this place wide open!”

“You already did,” In All Ways said. “Hence your messaging restrictions. We will not have you trying again.”

93 huffed. “You can’t censor the truth forever!” ey declared.

In All Ways sighed. “If you truly want to chase ghosts and conspiracies, you can do that. No one here can prevent it, except by bouncing you from sims. But I am here to teach you the basics of the System so that you understand the means of daily living as you embark on your quests.”

93 glared at the skunk. “Isn’t there someone else who could do this?”

“There are other guides, yes,” In All Ways said. “I know many who could teach you at least as well as I can. However, they wanted me to take these meetings. I do not know which of those who bowed out did so because they knew they would not be able to resist the urge to boot you out of this sim with no lessons and

no rep."

"And you wouldn't do that?" 93 was skeptical. "Or find one last bit of virus to silence me with?"

"Fuck no!" In All Ways exclaimed, startled by the detailed accusation. "I have given centuries of my life — calendar-wise centuries, mind you, not instance-wise — to teaching newcomers. I want everyone to be comfortable with the System so they can have the long wonderful lives it was meant to give them! What the hell makes you think I want to *kill* anybody?"

"I, uh," 93 stammered, thrown off by the skunks's sudden vehemence. "It makes sense, that they'd send someone to get rid of a threat, yeah?"

In All Ways sighed and shook her head. "Right, conspiracy theory.

"To move on, yes, you *could* have me find another teacher. Or you could refuse the tutorial entirely. These are choices you can, once you have been informed of the consequences, make. However, they would be fucking stupid choices.

"I ask that you please try your best to set aside your paranoia about my clade for just a few minutes so that we may go over the initial lessons. Then, I will go away and you will never need to encounter me or my cocladists again."

93 considered this. Ey had not expected an Odist to come across as this blunt and earnest. Sure, it might be a ruse, but, "Well ... all the sources I can remember didn't really have much bad to say about you, I guess. Like, sure, you're the friendly face the Ode puts up to get everyone acclimated to the powers behind the curtain, but I haven't seen any accusations of the tutorial itself being dangerous."

Ey braced emself for a chorus of objections and the sharp pings of down-reps from eir collective over eir willingness to go along with the enemy's games, but none came.

"That is because the tutorial is not, in fact, dangerous. And you are entirely free to block my entire clade once you leave here, if you are worried about our manipulations. Now, shall we

begin?”

93 looked intently at the skunk, hoping to catch something amiss in her expression, but found nothing. “Alright, fine,” ey conceded. “Let’s do this.”

The tutorial session proceeded like most others from there. Mx. Ninety-Three got the hang of projecting eir intentions, needing less time and setup, as ey went along, just like most arrivals to the System. Ey forked and merged down without issue or complaint — how could an extra copy of em be a danger to emself, ey reasoned. From there, ey moved on to other routine tasks like checking eir rep balance or sending a sensorium ping, relaxing as ey did so.

In All Ways similarly relaxed into the rhythm of the lessons. Although the person she was teaching had played a key role in organizing the logistics of the Century Attack, ey was still a person who needed an introduction to the System, just like everyone else she or her constructs had met on arrival.

“That covers the standard topics,” In All Ways concluded. “Do you have additional questions?”

“How do I stop someone from listening in on me?” 93 asked. “I heard that’s a thing here. Is that for everyone?”

“You set up a cone of silence,” In All Ways said. “You may ping me with one just — Ow, fuck!” She accepted the forceful ping from her student right away and continued on unfazed. This would not be her first — or last — ultra-high-priority message from an over-eager new upload. “And there are other security settings. You may edit ACLs on sims you have sufficient permissions for, and you can sweep sims you have rights on to remove anyone who does not have permission to be there. This is useful if you think someone may have snuck in before you locked the sim down.”

93 nodded. “Seems like it’s pretty easy to keep the grand cabal hidden,” ey said. “They’ve added all these ways to make sure no one’s spying on them. No wonder you’re not in on it ... if *they* really didn’t want you to be and that wasn’t just an act.”



“That is an interpretation of history you could hold, yes,” In All Ways replied. “Though not one that is widely shared or particularly in accord with the record.”

“I’ll figure something out,” 93 said, less confident than before. Ey dropped the cone, as ey didn’t want to be too obviously hiding something. “The world deserves to see who’s pulling the strings. Why everything sucks. How *they* ruined my life by getting the plant closed! ‘Redundancy.’ Bullshit.”

“Neither the System in general nor the Ode clade in particular control the tides and ravages of capitalism, let alone business decisions in ... Springfield, yes?” In All Ways replied. “I would recommend that you find a target for your anger more plausible than a secret council that has remained hidden for nearly three centuries.”

“Whatever,” 93 snorted, shaking eir head. “You’ll see the truth as soon as we’re done finding it.”

“I will be quite surprised if you find what you are seeking,” In All Ways said. “But we will gain nothing from this discussion, yes? Have you any other questions?”

“Yeah, so, ... about forking,” 93 asked. “I can send my forks off to go do things and only merge down when they’re done? Or once they’re in a bad spot and have to bail out?”

“Yes. We usually call that being a tasker or a tracker, depending on how long your forks stick around and how often you fork. There is no precise line between those strategies, but they are useful labels nevertheless.”

“And I can change my appearance?”

“Yes. Just intend the changes while you fork like you did before.”

After 93 mumbled a few words, the tutorial Aethorbox held three again. In All Ways, 93#Tasker, and 93#PeopleWatching. #PeopleWatching had lost the moles on #Tasker’s face, making em even more unremarkable. #PeopleWatching was momentarily surprised that ey hadn’t gotten a boost on the Numbers Station’s internal rep table for becoming more average ... but that

table didn't exist here.

“So,” #Tasker asked, “now what?”

“If you have no more questions, this concludes the tutorial. You have already received the rep boost for completing these lessons. From here, you can move home — you have been given a private sim pre-filled with one of the standard housing layouts, which has been locked down to you because of your role in the Attack. We did not wish for you to be swarmed by a mob after the end of the tutorial. Or, you may go to any number of public spaces. I will leave once you are gone.”

“Where’s a good place to see a bunch of people?” #People-Watching asked.

“Stone’s#009446876,” In All Ways suggested on autopilot. “They have good beer and solid, if unpolished, music, if that is of interest.”

#PeopleWatching thought about moving to that place — ey noticed ey had no trouble remembering the numbers — but it didn’t work. Ey tried announcing eir desire to go there, and even tried walking forward as if ey was about to step into that bar. No dice.

“It’s not working,” ey said. “Feels like the door’s closed.”

#Tracker flicked eir fingers as ey queried the perisystem architecture. “I checked their ACLs. Looks like we’re banned. Whole clade, it says.”

In All Ways’ gaze flickered between the two people in front of her. “Banned? Already? But you ... right, Century Attack. Slipped my mind. Many sim owners and mods bounced the lot of you as soon as the pre-upload header came through the Ansible.”

#Tracker looked at #PeopleWatching. “They’re definitely hiding something.”

“Yep.”

“Let me just ...” #Tracker put together a ping for the listed owner of Stone’s. Default priority, nothing urgent. “Hey,” ey said, “I’m wrapping up the tutorial, and In All Ways recommended your place as a nice spot to go next, but it turns out I’m

banned. What gives? I just got here!”

As ey waited for a response, #PeopleWatching took the time to start up eir own queries. Just about all the popular, famous, or happening sims had bounced eir clade. The old town square from near the System’s founding had not put a block in, but ey did not want to go in case that was an oversight and not an intentional choice to be welcoming. Many of the small parks and nature sims had not bothered keeping out the century attackers either, but there was not a lot of people-watching or spying to be had in them. Other tentative options were places like fringe clubs or meetings of folks so leftist that they were *definitely* Feds ... none of which were right for getting the lay of the land.

“I can’t find any good spots,” #PeopleWatching admitted. “We’ve been locked out.”

As ey said this, the reply to #Tracker’s ping came back. “Yeah, no, you set foot in here, someone’ll start looking to bash you unconscious with the nearest bit of furniture. Heck, might even be me. I don’t want that sort of violence at my bar. Call me back in a few centuries, maybe.”

#Tracker forwarded the message to #PeopleWatching.

“Yeah, plan’s busted,” #PeopleWatching said. “Let’s go home and figure out what to do about those damn elites.” Ey quit out.

“Yeah, screw it,” 93 said, now merged back down again. “See you around?” she asked In All Ways.

The skunk shook her head. “I do not engage with conspiracy theorists, sorry,” she said. “Welcome, again, to Lagrange, Mx. Ninety-Three.”

93 moved home.

The skunk quit out.

The Aetherbox reset behind her, ready for the next tutorial.

93 started at the field of not-filled-in-yet outside eir new window and thought about eir experiences. All ey had now, ey realized, was time.

Marybelle Lee had not given her name or her soul to a collective. She had given her brain. Knowledge flowed between her

fellows, who called themselves the Climate Action Resource Collective, as freely as water. Difficult questions from any member of the collective were bounced between its members so that they might chance upon one whose mind could see the answer.

As a cell of the CARC turned their minds towards the System, that drain on resources and people that stood in the way of fixing things, she had become the best of them at understanding it. Once the project grew firmer, she pulled the work of virus-making tighter around herself, becoming the most responsible party. Now she was here on the System she had set out to destroy.

As soon as she noted the discontinuity in her perceptions, Marybelle Lee opened her eyes. The room she found herself in was a cube of large gray stone panels, just like she'd expected.

*Identity query for the person standing behind me, if any, please,* she thought at the world she had been uploaded to. That was, she knew, roughly how things worked.

Knowledge appeared in her thoughts, even more firmly than answers from her collective. *Then I Must In All Ways Be Earnest#d5781ff9.*

*Of the Ode clade?*

A sense of confirmation.

"I see they've sent the tutorial skunk," Belle commented, turning to look at In All Ways. "In person, even."

"Greetings —" In All Ways began. "— that would be me, yes. It was decided that you should not be greeted by a construct, under the circumstances, and I volunteered for the job."

Belle nodded. "Got it. So, clothes. Clothes can be a pure intent item, so if I understood right, I just have to ..." She pictured the look she wanted: shorts and a T-shirt she'd gotten from a climate restoration conference years ago. "... run." Everything appeared as expected, and her shirt had even lost the stains it had picked up over the years. Classic programmer look, and definitely better than prison orange.

"Note," she said, out of the long-standing habit of sending

useful insights to her collective. She received no response. Not even the thud of a communications-blocked error she would have gotten back in prison phys-side. Nothing. She was alone.

Her realization about the state of her mind was interrupted. "May I turn around, Ms. Lee? Marybelle?"

"Belle, please, Ms. In All Ways. And you may."

In All Ways nodded. "I have updated your ID. You will be able to change it later by intending it like how you intended to create your clothes. If you want to set a clade ID, the process is similar."

"Thanks," Belle said. "I remember there being endpoints for that."

"Should I stick to the script?" In All Ways asked. "It appears you have done substantial research before being uploaded."

"I've gotten a good theoretical understanding of the place over the years, yeah. Me and the general knowledge base of the CARC."

"I imagine you have," In All Ways replied, frowning. "And now you are here. Welcome to Lagrange, Belle." The usual courtesies never hurt, yes?

"Now I'm here," Belle echoed. "Here with no one and nothing I can do to help save the world."

"There are those here who agitate for change," In All Ways noted. "Make suggestions."

"*Suggestions*," Belle scoffed. "We've had three fucking centuries of suggestions. We need *action*! We've *needed* action! Sure, we're," she held out her hands to give exaggerated air quotes, "'stabilizing', but we could be doing So. Much. More."

Her anger dipped into melancholy. "And now I'm up here, on the damm System, where I can do fuck all. You bastards. Should've just had me killed."

"The author of our destruction calls us bastards," In All Ways remarked to her nonexistent audience.

"Well, you fucking are. So many people take one look at how shit life on Earth is and fuck off to the party in the sky instead of trying to do anything about it." Belle strode towards the skunk

as she ranted. “And hell, any of you uploads who think they’ll care go flaking out or take their sweet time doing anything remotely useful! You’ve got *all you need* — you don’t need to eat, you can’t forget, you can *fork* — and you waste that instead of helping! We’re *dying*, damn you! Dying under the weight of problems you ran from!”

In All Ways stood her ground against the advancing torrent of rage at the System.

Belle stopped in front of the skunk and stared her down. “And don’t think you’re off the hook here personally, Ms.—” It took a moment for Belle’s memory of a few minutes ago to supply the entire name “— Then I Must In All Ways Be Earnest of the Ode clade! I’ve read your tutorial conversation tree. You could’ve pointed some people at those activists of yours or something else that might *maybe* help instead of just chucking them out to explore aimlessly if they don’t have plans.”

“I am no weaver of fates. I give tutorials. It would be improper, perhaps even a profanation, a sacrilege, for me to marshal those lives entrusted to me into some grand purpose, for me to do as you suggest. Even though some subtle nudging is not unacceptable within the community of guides and mentors, I will not do it.”

“*Improper*,” Belle scoffed. “A sacrilege to lift a finger to help Earth. Like you’re on some fucking holy quest to let the System spin around and do its thing until the Sun fries it or whatever.”

“I care deeply about the System,” In All Ways replied. “A good friend of mine died to create this place, this end of death, imperfect though it may be. I have set out to honor eir memory by ensuring those who emplace themselves here begin their lives with an understanding of the world and, perhaps, a glimpse of its beauty. Your summary of my motivations is not incorrect, yes.”

“And that damn ‘it’s better on the System, everyone should just come up’ attitude — whether people admit to having it or not — is why we had to — why *I* had to destroy this place!” she

ranted. “Once people can’t just bury their heads in virtual sand instead of giving a fuck about their own planet, they’ll start to care! It won’t just be me and some friends being those weirdos who’re still trying!” she roared, barely holding back tears now. “Would your ‘friend’ have wanted to see Earth limping along like it has been? Would ey think blowing off your own planet counts as trying to end death?”

*That she of all people would presume...!* “Pray tell me,” In All Ways responded tensely, barely holding her anger down, “why I should give a single fuck about an Earth that left an easily-disarmed gun pointed at our heads for my entire life, that had ample forewarning of the wound you and yours tore open and did *nothing*. That left the fruits of eir sacrifice to rot! Pray tell me, Ms. Marybelle Lee, why I would ever owe more than reciprocation of phys-side’s systemic abandonment of my home.”

“Because you’re human?! Well, not exactly, but a person! Because we need to work together to fix our world, even if all you can do here — all *I* can do, now — is flood people with mail on the off chance that works!”

In All Ways shook her head. “My world is the cylinder at Lagrange. Nowhere else.”

“Fucking traitor!” Belle cried in anguished frustration. “Fucking selfish *asshole!*” She jabbed a finger into In All Ways’s ribs. “Fuck you! Fuck you!”

In All Ways jabbed back. “Fuck you too, Belle! Fuck you!” she shouted, her anger boiling over at last. “Fuck you for Should We Forget! And In The Wind! Fuck you for twenty-three billion people!”

Her voice grew calmer and sadder. “Fuck you for thinking your cause was worth that many deaths.”

The silence grew tense between Belle and In All Ways. As Belle stood there, she realized that she could rant all she liked, but that she couldn’t be usefully angry. There wasn’t anything she could *do* about the troubles of the Earth. Not really. Not here. Not alone.

“Note,” she mumbled glumly, hoping to ... send her collective the realization that getting punitively uploaded was bad for the mission? As if they did not know, as if the rest of the collective was not back on Earth, many of them in prison, as the scrutiny she had brought on had brought the collective’s other actions into the light.

She did not even feel the prison sim blocking her transmissions. They just were not possible from here. Her existence as Marybelle Lee of the Climate Action Resource Collective was over even more firmly now.

“Give me a moment?” she said to In All Ways. “I’m — well, my whole goal in life’s fucked now, and I thought I’d accepted it, but ...” Belle trailed off.

“We have time,” In All Ways replied curtly. *I could use some as well.*

Belle started to slide towards despair, but she interrupted her spiraling thoughts by noticing that her face was a mess from her earlier tear-generating rant. She needed a tissue.

*I think I can just intend those?* She thought, uncertain. She held out a hand and pulled a tissue out of an imaginary box near her, thinking that there was one there.

To her surprise, it worked! She had something to wipe her face with! As she started cleaning up, she realized the object she had summoned was the general suggestion of a tissue, something that smeared together everything she had wiped her face with before. Not quite right.

“So, how do I ...” she said quietly. She knew, from lots of accounts and technical reports, that the System could do better than this. She had studied up on the functions for object creation, though she had not expected to be using them through their native interface.

She thought about assembling code for creating a more specific tissue in her head. It was not an entirely accurate metaphor, she knew, but it had served her well while she was plotting out the bomb. She assembled the request, piece by piece, her train of



thought jumping to specific memories for textures, form, thickness, and added in the plan to have the new object appear in her other hand, right at exactly *these* coordinates.

She jabbed a finger of her occupied hand down towards the ground to hit an imaginary Enter key.

A much more defined tissue, a blend of those nicer pricey ones Belle had sometimes used, appeared in her hand. She finished cleaning off her face and then, concentrating on the two pieces of crumpled-up paper in her hands, said "Erase."

They vanished.

"Note!" Belle said automatically, too caught up in the excitement of having worked out this new fact about the world to remember where she was just then.

"You could also pull those off the market," In All Ways commented. "They are free for all practical purposes."

Belle remembered she was still standing in a tutorial. "Yeah, but it's cool that I can do it myself. It's ... nice that all the studying the System wasn't a *complete* waste, even though the project failed and now...well, yeah."

In All Ways, who had used the break to dispell most of her urge to snap at Belle again, was not sure how to respond to this shift in her charge. So, she hesitantly suggested, "Shall we continue with the tutorial?"

The question brought Belle further out of her own head. She was on the System, in an Aetherbox, talking to In All Ways. She was here and ... right. *Fuck*. "Mind if I send a message down first?"

In All Ways nodded. "You may do so, though I will ask that we keep the lessons going once you have sent it, even if the approvals have not yet been granted."

"Fair enough," Belle said. *Right, that's a thing now. Ugh. I'd forgotten about that bit.*

Belle knew she did not have to use any particular form to write a message phys-side: a handwritten note or letters of fire traced in the air would work well enough. However, she felt more

comfortable with typing her short missive out. It would be weird to do a text chat without some simulation of a keyboard.

So, she shot queries at the construct market, looking for the components of her simmed coding setup. It would be nice to get back to it after all these years, to find some small glimmer of pleasure in this effectively pointless existence.

Her chair, keyboard, and monitor, appeared off to one side of her, with the peripherals floating in midair. The keyboard/display combo was listed as already set up for chat without the need to pretend there was a computer around. Belle stepped over towards her partial setup, but didn't set down. She was still searching.

"No one's done my desk pattern yet?" she said, surprised. "Sure, it's an obscure one, but still." She turned to one side, so she would not disturb the objects she had already summoned, and arranged her memories of long days spent coding on the net, of plotting out actions with her collective, at that very desk. She worked to weave these impressions into the construct and then, with a finality, she pointed at the empty space where a desk was to appear.

"No, too chaotic," she commented, waving the desk away. She had most of the code in her head now, and she just needed to tweak a few points so that it would look right this time. The desk flickered into existence, then flickered out again. *Still not quite right.*

The space in front of Belle soon showed the hallmarks of construct artistry, of actual oneirotecture. Desks flickered in and out of existence, iteration upon iteration. The ghosts of particularly useful attempts hovered in the farther distance, serving as reference points for aspects of the final work that were cumbersome to describe or remember. Belle's work grew frantic as the final tweaks went into place — she was right there, she *almost* had it, just one more try! The joy of creation burned away the worst of Belle's mood, as it always had.

"Note annnnnnnd publish!" Belle declared, satisfied, several

minutes later. She had gotten faster at commanding the System, and so she easily cleared away all the debris of her creative ram-page. She put the desk under her keyboard. “Levitation off,” she casually said. Everything settled into a realistic place.

Belle sat down and typed out her message to her wife. “Made it up safe. Don’t know if I’ll be able to call. Love you! <3”.

Belle pressed ‘Send’ and watched the screen. The panel of volunteers who would need to approve this note did not take much time at all to vote it through to phys-side. A tension she had not noticed until then came out of Belle’s shoulders.

“At least that went through,” she said.

In All Ways cleared her throat. “That was good work, especially for a first project. That being said, we should finish the tutorial, yes?”

Belle looked over at the skunk, pushed her chair back, and stood up. “Right, right, got distracted. What’s next?”

“Forking,” In All Ways said. “That is, creating —”

“So I just need to put together a call to the fork methods for that,” Belle interrupted.

“Probably. That is not a method I teach, but if it will work for you, I have no objections. Please fork, Ms. Belle.”

Belle assembled her first fork instruction in her mind. She left her appearance the same, nudged the spawn point to her left, where the desks used to be, and was about to run when she had an idea. *Maybe two inches taller, just to see how that’ll look.* She made the change and sent the fork request off into the collective engineered dream that was the System.

An instant later, her new, slightly taller, fork appeared next to her. The Belles turned to look at each other. “Wow!” they said together. “That’s ... nice! I wonder if ...?”

The tree of experiments in forking rippled out from there. Height, body shape, hair color, outfit, gender (most of these attempts quit out soon after instantiating), species (much more persistent) — the Belles radiated out in a wave of exploration and evaluation.

Someone raised an arm and lifted the messaging setup to the ceiling to free up floor space. Someone else put music on, an upbeat dance tune emanating from the physically impossible “like there’s a stage not too far in front of you” for each fork independently. The Belles pulled each other into this impromptu dance party in the tutorial room, carried away by the sensation of dancing with ... themselves, but not. It was a strange thing, a beautiful thing, a wonder that she could not have even begun to imagine on Earth.

None of the Belles had diverged in personality — nor had they been meant to — so, when the realization hit, it hit all of them. “Fuck,” they said in a raggedly stumble that gestured at unison, and merged down to their root. They killed the music during the merges.

Belle accepted every last merge and buckled under the hammer of many dozens of variations on the thought she herself had just had.

“Fuck. I ... fuck, I think I get it now. Why everyone’s got such a hard time explaining what this place feels like. Why most people forget the Earth. How much life you can have up here, how *wonderful* it is. I got so angry at everyone for doing what I just did ... sixteen and a half minutes after being uploaded.”

In All Ways tossed an invisible thing at Belle. “I have awarded your tutorial reputation grant for successfully forking and merging. It is larger than usual to account for your home being within a private sim.” She was not in the mood for mending shattering worldviews right now — she was here to give Belle the tutorial and little more.

“Shall we move on to the remaining topics?” the skunk asked.

Belle had summoned another tissue. “Yeah, sure, let’s ... let’s wrap this up.”

The remaining tutorial items were a very quick affair. Belle’s experimentation had left her familiar enough with how to pull the world’s levers to make the skills everyone needed trivial.

"And that concludes the tutorial," In All Ways said. "Welcome, again, to Lagrange, Belle."

"So now I step home and then ... whatever I feel like doing next?" Belle asked.

"Exactly."

"There anyone you think I should talk to?" Belle asked. "I don't want to go moping in bed if I can find *something* I could be doing. Anything, really."

"There is no one I would introduce you to at this time," In All Ways said. "The advocates I know of want nothing to do with you right now. You would cause too much drama, yes? I have given you the tutorial and my obligations to you are thus discharged. Your path from here is your own. Try to avoid genocide this time."

The skunk quit out.

Belle stepped into her home.

The things she had created followed behind her, and Belle sat down at the desk she had made and looked around. She had nothing to belong to here. Nothing to do, to save her from anger turning to despair. No collective surrounding her and pulling her up.

But, despite her losses, she had time.

In All Ways set her champagne down as she twitched from the rush of merge requests that she had been ignoring. She took a moment to merge all her folks down, integrating the memories of greeting the plotters behind the Century Bombing in parallel and some several other new arrivals besides. She shook herself as all the recollections settled in.

"Ways, you OK?" Ini Robbins, the fennec sitting across from her, asked. Ey, and eir down-tree Elliah, had grown close to In All Ways in the two centuries since they had met during a memorably disastrous tutorial. *From panicked combat to brunch dates*, the skunk thought as her instances' experiences settled in. *Perhaps even they will grow... but not with me.*

"I am fine. I needed to merge down the tutorials I sent out

before I came here. I still grow twitchy when too many merges pile up.”

“That was the Century Attack folks, right? How’d it go?”

“Well enough. Some personal crises, but those are not unusual. The strangest tutorial was, surprisingly, a man I met personally only because it felt like I should. His brain took the idea of having an up-tree instance a *touch* too literally.”

“And?”

“He pulled a Serene and forked into an actual tree, right there! I had to call a systech to talk him through that one.”

“No way!”

“Shit happens. All those people uploading, something has to go wrong once in a while.”

“True that.”

And so, the conversation floated away to other topics, and life flowed onward in a stream of well-spent time.

Once the Century Attack was fading from news to history, consideration of the sentences imposed in its aftermath led to an amendment to the articles of the System’s secession. Phys-side politicians, nudged along by starlight chats, realized the potential danger of forced uploading as a penalty, not to mention the possibility of stopping someone unwillingly uploaded writing back.

Therefore, the Accords were amended to provide that no one could be involuntarily uploaded except as a penalty for crimes against the System.

Phys-side, these changes passed with a sense of quiet relief. Sys-side, they passed with a shrug.

In practice, the sentence of involuntary upload became a piece of trivia and an incentive for clinic bombers to plead down. Even when it was imposed, phys-side governments were quite reluctant to seek imposition of a no-quitting order or communication restrictions, as those would bring the crimes to the System’s attention through the need for bilateral approvals and juries, as opposed to leaving them as blips in the perisystem feeds

of interest to news junkies and academics. What they did not really see up there could not hurt them, after all ... right?

And so, life went on.