

## PALISADE 56: Some New Thing Found in the Light, Or: A Year in Nine Parts

Transcriber: Iris (sacredwhim)

<b>Opening Narration</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Part One: A Year, A Shore</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Part Two: A Year, A Symmetry</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Part Three: A Year, A Drift</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Part Four: A Year, A Wake</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Part Five: A Year, A Bloom</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Part Six: A Year, A Moral</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Part Seven: A Year, A Vow</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Part Eight: A Year, A Theist</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>Part Nine: A Year, A Bridge</b>	<b>87</b>

### **Opening Narration**

**Austin:** It happened without much fanfare.

[music intro - "[Scattered](#)" by Jack de Quidt begins]

**Austin:** They'd scattered—like the so-called shards of Divinity itself—all across the Milky Way. Searching. Fleeing. Exploring. Building. Fighting. A year apart. Not *their* year apart, because there was no "them" anymore; not by affinity or proximity, not through collaboration or communication, not in duty. Not even in friendship.

And around them, the Divine Principality seemed to be slowly splintering, too. Worlds detached from one another. Families separated not by war, but by silence. New claimants to old thrones. Civil wars at small scales, intimate scales.

A year apart. A year in nine parts.

[music intro - "[Scattered](#)" by Jack de Quidt ends]

## Part One: A Year, A Shore

[00:01:11]

**Austin:** Part One: A Year, A Shore.

-

**Austin:** Who wants to give me the life update first? I mean, we already did a lot of set-up here in the sense that I don't know that we need to do a 30-minute conversation about where the characters all are. We already established a lot of kind of here's where we are with each person during the epilogue phase of Questlandia. I don't want to undo any of that. I kind of want that to be the baseline for where we all are, so. But I would love, you know, kind of, again, a day in the life style where are you the day that Levi comes and knocks on your door? And I'm curious who wants to go first. Who has an idea for something to kind of show off about their personal new normal that they've been living with?

**Keith:** I have an easy one, because we already sort of covered it.

**Austin:** Sure.

**Keith:** If people need more time to think, that's fine.

**Austin:** Yeah, Keith. Tell me what's up with Leap. Because we left Leap at a weird-ish place.

**Keith:** Yeah.

**Austin:** And it's been a minute since we recorded the Questlandia game. Stopped being a pirate for some amount of time, had been considered a sell-out for a little bit.

**Keith:** Yeah, that was—that—I think, you know, the media. You know, people online. That's—you know, memes.

[someone scoffs] **Ali** and **Sylvi** laugh]

**Janine:** Wow. Wow.

**Keith:** Sometimes—you know when a whole culture gets an idea and they just like, think they believe it, even though it's insane?

**Austin:** Evil Keith strikes again!

[Ali laughs]

**Keith:** I—you know, I didn't do—Leap didn't do anything.

**Ali:** Wait, can I just get, like, an example of one of the TikToks about Leap? [laughs]

**Austin:** Oh, please.

**Sylvi:** Oh my god.

**Austin:** What do they say about...

**Keith:** Yeah, I think, like, you know, Leap brings, like, a pile of money somewhere.

**Austin:** Ohh...

**Keith:** And you get like, two different kind of splinters. Like, it's like funding something.

**Austin:** Right.

**Keith:** Or three different splinters. You get one splinter of people being like, "Leap is a terrorist funding, like, you know, covert military extrajudicial operations."

**Austin:** Which is true.

**Keith:** And it's like, okay—which is true, okay, fair, if you don't like that, then fine.

**Austin:** Right, uh-huh. Right, uh-huh.

[Ali laughs]

**Keith:** And it—[laughs]

**Austin:** That's camp number one.

**Keith:** Camp number one. Then you have camp number two, of people that are like, this is an ostentatious display of wealth. This is...

**Austin:** Right, this is the, like—

**Keith:** Which is also true.

**Austin:** Right.

**Keith:** But again, [chuckles] whenever, you know, I'm there, I'm covered in gold, I have...

**Austin:** This is the, like, you're wearing a 20,000 dollar suit to the Met Gala, and everyone's being like, "How can Leap say that..."

**Keith:** Well, I think it's more like wearing a 20,000 dollar suit to the orphanage.

[group laughter]

**Sylvi:** Fuck them kids!

**Keith:** [laughs] Well, I'm giving them a bucket of gold!

**Austin:** Right.

**Sylvi:** Uh-huh.

**Austin:** Sure. So what's the third camp?

**Keith:** I forgot the third camp, because I got so angry.

**Austin:** Okay.

**Keith:** Okay, hold on. Hold on, hold on, hold on. I can get it, I can get it. Third—okay, there's a...

**Austin:** Camp number one, you're a terrorist. You're doing extrajudicial killings and robbings and et cetera. We know this.

**Sylvi:** And number two is that you're doing the God's Plan music video. [chuckles]

[Ali laughs]

**Austin:** God.

**Sylvi:** [laughing] Sorry. Not a comparison—

**Austin:** Yeah, Leap is not Drake.

**Keith:** I think—yeah, I mean, I don't know what the—I don't know how that's Drake, but I believe it.

**Austin:** Okay.

**Keith:** Is that a song?

**Sylvi:** Yeah.

**Austin:** Yeah, Drake has a song called God's Plan where he goes around and [laughing] gives money to poor people.

**Keith:** That's very funny.

**Sylvi:** It's so fuckin' dumb. [laughs]

**Keith:** And then the third group—you know, like, Leap is in books. You know, it's all the action, the pirate stuff, you know, like, the real things that Leap is doing, but when he's on camera being filmed, if he's giving a speech—like, there's none of the stuff that's in the book.

**Austin:** Right.

**Keith:** That's showing up on the news.

**Austin:** Right.

**Keith:** And so there's people being like, Leap sold out, you know, he's got the fancy clothes, and he's throwing his money around, and he's giving speeches. It's like, that's like day off stuff. But you can't—you don't see—you know, MSNBC's not filming the pirate stuff.

**Austin:** Sure.

**Keith:** Because they're not there.

**Austin:** Because they're not there, right. It's in the books. Alise is writing those books about you. But people are starting to say, well, those books are fiction, basically. We don't ever see footage of Leap doing the piracy. We don't see the action, so to speak.

**Keith:** Right. "Where's the killing and burning that we wanted? Sell-out."

**Austin:** Right. This is very funny, because of the way that it echoes a mid-season conversation we had. We were trying to figure out who you were gonna play after Phrygian. Eventually we got to Eclectic for a while, but one of the ideas was vlogger Leap. Was like, pop icon Leap. But would still be a pirate.

**Keith:** Yeah, this was like—yeah, there was three things in contention. There was like, soldier Leap with a squad.

**Austin:** Yes.

**Keith:** But I was like, Ali's already got a squad, so I don't want to do a second squad. And then the other two were, yeah, like, the pop icon Leap, and then also the moneybags Leap. I can't remember the name of the playbook.

**Austin:** The Alimoner, I want to say. Or something like that.

**Keith:** The Alimoner, yeah, the Alimoner.

**Austin:** Moneybags Leap, which, yeah. Which would have also led to this same split, I think. People would have been like...

**Keith:** Right, I've brought him in spirit to this.

**Austin:** I see, yes. You really have.

**Keith:** Because I really liked the idea.

**Austin:** So, what's the day—what type of day in the life is it that you're having at this point?

**Keith:** I should say, that's passed. The sell-out stuff, that's over.

**Austin:** Oh.

**Keith:** I got—we did end—because I have—that was a negative that was given to me.

**Austin:** That was a misfortune, yeah. Uh-huh.

**Keith:** It was misfortune, but then I had so many fortunes from doing so well [chuckles] that that was no longer the case. I think that the...

**Austin:** We ended on a misfortune for you, but a fortune for the kingdom.

**Keith:** It's true. But I did—the sell-out stuff was like, either the first or second misfortune.

**Austin:** Sure.

**Keith:** So I did—I counteracted that with being like, I can't remember—maybe it was more Levi stuff where I was like, I was giving money to a lot of these sort of...

**Austin:** Mhm. New organizations, yeah. Right, right, right.

**Keith:** Sort of revolutionary organizations like Levi's group, et cetera.

**Austin:** Saying "Levi's group" now just makes it sound like that's the name of the nonprofit. "Levi's Group."

**Keith:** [laughs] “Levi’s Kids.”

**Austin:** Yeah, Levi’s Kids, a 501(c).

**Keith:** And, yeah, I actually don’t remember what the final misfortune was, if anybody does remember.

**Austin:** It’s been a minute. Ali, do you remember?

**Ali:** The first one was mutiny via fame.

**Austin:** Uh-huh.

**Keith:** Mhm.

**Ali:** And then, um... the other one was money doesn’t buy you happiness.

**Austin:** Money doesn’t buy you happiness.

**Ali:** Was that what we ended on? No.

**Austin:** I do kind of remember sad Leap.

**Keith:** Yeah.

**Austin:** Like, fixed the media picture...

**Keith:** Oh, yeah, right, because I think the idea was like that being kind of an administrator was miserable, [**Austin:** Oh, yes.] and I had all of this, like, red tape to deal with, instead of being a swashbuckler who took a sword to that red tape.

**Austin:** Oh, that really repaints some of the stuff from the end of the last episode with Levi where you’re, like, calling to talk about different piracy plays you can do, [**Keith:** Yeah.] because now you’re the like, the sad, you know, you’ve retired to the office. But you’re like, you still want to talk about the good old days.

[**Dre** laughs]



**Keith:** Yeah.

**Sylvi:** Uncle Leap.

**Austin:** Yeah, uh-huh.

**Keith:** Well, if we should go back and see what that last misfortune—that fortune and misfortune was, just so that we can be clear if it contradicts this. But I'll say that the reason why I offered to go first is because part of my daily, you know, day in the life stuff is meeting with people like Levi to be like, [**Austin:** Right.] hey, you know, what's going on? And I figured I'd be one of the first people to be told, because Levi would be coming to me anyway. That's like—or I would be going to him. And we already have, like, a predetermined...

**Austin:** Right, so you have your check-in. You have your monthly, or your twice a year, whatever it is, coming up. That's fun.

**Keith:** Yes, yeah.

**Austin:** Yeah. You're arriving with your big bag of supplies to hand to Levi, who is going to either use them or hand them out further to other people.

**Keith:** Yeah. I'll, you know, dock my huge ship, the—what was my ship called? I can't remember what the ship was that I hoisted the flag over.

**Austin:** Oh, you took Lander One.

**Keith:** Lander One, right. I'm flying Lander One around.

**Austin:** Yeah, did you keep—you kept it? You just kept the Kesh flagship? Now it's yours?

**Dre:** Fuck yeah.

**Keith:** Yep.

**Dre:** Did you repaint it?

**Keith:** Hey, I hoisted the flag. That's what happens when you hoist a flag.

**Dre:** Yeah, that's true.

**Sylvi:** Did you make any mods to it? Like, any personalizations?

**Dre:** It's got spinners?

**Keith:** [chuckles] It does not have spinners.

**Dre:** Okay. Alright.

**Keith:** I don't know where you'd put a spinner. I have added wheels. It's now Grounder One, it's got wheels. [laughs] What does Lander One look like? Is it a big cube? Did we say it's a big cube?

**Austin:** I think we did say it was squared, squared off. We should have had Jack on this recording. Because Jack was the Lander One.

**Sylvi:** Yeah. Ol' wacky Jack.

[**Austin** and **Keith** laugh] [**Dre** chuckles]

**Keith:** I want, like, space fins. Like, you know, not wings, [**Austin:** Mhm.] but like, the kind of wings that a spaceship has. I want to add, like, make it sort of look fast. That's what I've done. I've added a bunch of stuff to make it look fast.

**Austin:** Right, the wings help you cut through the air resistance.

**Sylvi:** Okay.

**Keith:** Yes, yeah. Totally.

**Austin:** Yeah. I gotcha. They make it look that way, at least. So then yeah, you're meeting—where does the meeting like this sort of happen? Is this like, an abandoned base somewhere? Is this just like, a Millennium Break held facility? A neutral ground that's like, separated from the rest of the Principality at this point? Like, where is it?

**Keith:** I think we should have it, like, in—not in public, but in like an official—this is not—we don't have to like, hide, right? We're, you know.

**Austin:** I mean...

**Keith:** I think we ended—we ended 3 to 2 fortune to misfortune, didn't we?

**Austin:** In Palisade. In the Twilight Mirage, yeah.

**Keith:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Austin:** But if this is happening in the rest of the galaxy, then no. So that's my question. I guess that's my question. Levi, do you return back to the Twilight Mirage to get a resupply a few times a year and that's where you're meeting Leap, or is this out in the rest of the galaxy where the work you're doing is done?

**Dre:** Uh... hm.

**Austin:** I guess either of you can answer this, or both of you should answer—both of you can collaborate on this one.

**Dre:** Yeah. I mean, I guess I'm seeing this more of—unless it's just like, it just lined up that this is our meeting, I feel like this is a thing where I would go meet Leap wherever they are.

**Austin:** Sure. Which sounds like the—you're still basically operating out of the Mirage.

**Keith:** Out of Palisade, yeah.

**Austin:** Out of Palisade, okay.

**Dre:** Okay, cool.

**Keith:** Sorry, Ali has my last misfortune. What was it?

**Ali:** It was that you were constantly wasting time chasing a treasure that you couldn't find.

**Austin:** Oh my god.

**Keith:** Oh, I totally forgot about that.

**Ali:** Yeah, Jack introduces it. Just...

**Austin:** Your misfortune situation was so rapidfire, or your epilogue was so rapidfire and confusing.

**Keith:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Austin:** That's funnier. Because then now—

**Keith:** It definitely was rapidfire. Qualification side, if it was confusing or not, we'll have to see.

**Dre:** Who could say?

**Austin:** Yeah. I love it. That's very funny, then, because then it's not you meeting for a scheduled meeting. What's the treasure you're looking for, and where are you? What weird place has searching for it brought you to?

**Keith:** Um, I think that I'm in like a huge, sort of like, crash-landed ship.

**Austin:** Bigger than Lander One. Like, so big that this already gigantic ship is actually small.

**Keith:** Can fly into it, yes.

**Austin:** Right, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Dre:** Ooh.

**Keith:** Yes, that's true, and I think—let's put it National Treasure style at one of the poles where it is frozen into the ice of one of the poles of Palisade.

**Austin:** Southern pole. Because the north pole we know is the, um...

**Keith:** Right, sure, yeah.

**Austin:** Is the big—I mean, there is ice up there. North, I guess, of the Caldera Stretch, but yeah. Let's go southern pole, because we've never been down there.

**Keith:** Yeah, so we're, like, in the snow. I've got a big fluffy coat on with, you know, like the fur hood. And I've got a row of people digging out the door to get into, like, the bridge of this ship. Because I have a clue that led me to here.

**Austin:** Right, right.

**Keith:** I think that there's...

**Austin:** So it's while that's happening, Levi, that you arrive.

**Keith:** Yeah, I set up a table and chairs, and we're just sort of sitting with a portable table fire. We have a fire on the table here.

**Dre:** Uh... Hey, did you—do I—okay, out of character, Levi knows that Eclectic was like, from Leap's pirate group, right?

**Austin:** Yes.

**Dre:** That's, like, common enough knowledge, right?

**Austin:** I think that that's common knowledge, yeah.

**Keith:** Yeah, that's common knowledge.

**Dre:** Okay.

Dre (as **Levi**): Well, I saw a ghost, and I think you might be interested in it.

Keith (as **Leap**): Oh yeah?

Dre (as **Levi**): [sighs] One of yours. Eclectic Opposition, right? That was his name?

Keith (as **Leap**): [surprised] Ghost?

Dre (as **Levi**): Well, um...

[**Austin** and **Sylvi** laugh]

Dre (as **Levi**): See, okay. I wish you were there, because I tried asking a lot of clarifying questions that went unanswered, and maybe he would have answered them for you.

Keith (as **Leap**): What?

Dre (as **Levi**): Yeah.

Keith (as **Leap**): Yeah, what the hell?

Dre (as **Levi**): I know. Uh... the brass tacks of the situation is that he came to warn me that Motion is making a move towards Perennial.

Keith (as **Leap**): Hm. If anybody was gonna die and keep investigating, it would be Eclectic.

Dre (as **Levi**): I—sure. That makes sense. He said he's with Wakeful now. Did you know that?

Keith (as **Leap**): I mean, I heard that he went there and he died. So I guess I half-heard it.

Dre (as **Levi**): Yeah, I'm still not quite sure on the, like, living death situation. And it looked like he kinda wasn't either, but I guess that's—we can figure that out later.

Keith (as **Leap**): [shouting] Eclectic! If you're a ghost and you're here...

[**Sylvi** laughs]

Dre (as **Levi**): I don't... I don't think he's—

Keith (as **Leap**): [shouting] I have your back pay I have to pay, but if you're a ghost...

Dre (as **Levi**): I mean, I'll take it.

Keith (as **Leap**): No. you didn't investigate anything.

Dre (as **Levi**): No, I didn't mean like, for me. Like, you know, I'd put it to use out there.

Keith (as **Leap**): I have your—

**Keith:** I kick a trunk full of gold.

[Dre laughs]

Keith (as **Leap**): This is for you. You already have yours.

Dre (as **Levi**): Okay, okay, okay, okay. Listen, you have to ask.

Keith (as **Leap**): Unbelievable. Alright, that's—yeah. I don't have to ask. That's part of the job.

Dre (as **Levi**): Yeah, no, fair. [exhales] I need to get a crew together.

Keith (as **Leap**): Okay.

Dre (as **Levi**): Just—just like that, huh?

Keith (as **Leap**): Yeah. What? Wait, just like what?

Dre (as **Levi**): You're in?

Keith (as **Leap**): I didn't say—oh, yeah. I'm in. Okay, yeah, I'm in.

[Sylvi and Austin laugh]

Keith (as **Leap**): No, I was saying for, like, the second half where you explain about the crew—but yeah, I'm in. So not just like that, but almost like that.

[**Dre** laughs]

**Sylvi**: I love Leap so much.

**Austin**: You know? Leap—no, Leap did not fight Motion that first time. That was Phrygian, huh? No, Leap was there for the first fight against Motion.

**Keith**: I was there for the first fight. Yeah, yeah, yeah. The first fight.

**Austin**: The first fight, but not the—not the... not the place I always forget the name of and say Aubade, but that's a Hieron thing. The other one.

[**Dre** laughs]

**Keith**: Got it.

**Austin**: Happens to all of us.

**Keith**: Yeah.

**Sylvi**: We make a lot of stuff.

**Dre**: We do.

**Austin**: We make a lot of stuff.

**Dre**: And they all have names that you have to remember.

**Sylvi**: It's kind of fucked up how we keep doing that.

**Austin**: We gotta stop. We gotta calm down on this shit.

**Dre**: Mhm.

**Keith**: Let's start naming things easy to remember stuff, like Birch Street.



**Austin:** Yeah. Now we're talking.

**Dre:** Yeah.

**Austin:** Auspice, the name of the island was Auspice, where—

**Keith:** Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Austin:** There was that big fight with Motion the first time. The second time.

**Keith:** Yeah, I climbed up a mech and I blew up a mech from up top—on top of it. I remember that.

**Austin:** It was a whole thing, yeah.

**Dre:** Oh.

**Austin:** Alright. Is that it? You're in? Leap's in. Leap doesn't ask for anything, Leap doesn't need anything else. Who are you gonna leave your—who's in charge of this? Who's gonna search for this treasure? Are you gonna put the treasure hunt on hold?

**Keith:** No, not on hold. We're 89, 90% of the way there.

[**Sylvi** chuckles]

**Dre:** [laughs] Captain Ahab three quarters of the way through Moby Dick. "We're like, 90% of the way there!"

[**Austin** laughs]

**Keith:** Faniels. Faniels is in charge. It's like Daniels, but with an F.

Austin (as **Faniels**): Aye, sir. Keep diggin'.

Keith (as **Leap**): Yeah, keep diggin'.

Austin (as **Faniels**): Aye.

Keith (as **Leap**): Yeah, you.

Austin (as **Faniels**): Aye? Me?

Keith (as **Leap**): Yeah, you. Keep diggin'.

Austin (as **Faniels**): Aye, aye, sir.

**Austin:** Alright, you know, I don't—we'll have to think about what this treasure is. If you want to take a treasure-related move with one of your levels, you let me know.

**Keith:** Sure.

**Austin:** You can take something that's like, "Oh yeah, I got this cool ancient treasure, and now it's good." I think that you've opened up that opportunity.

**Keith:** Mhm.

**Austin:** Any final shots here? Any—Levi, did this go about as easily as you'd hoped?

**Dre:** Easier, I would say. I didn't think it would be this easy to pull the greatest pirate that the galaxy has ever known away from a treasure hunt, but I'll take it.

**Sylvi:** You didn't even need to say that to his face.

**Dre:** I know.

**Keith:** Yeah.

[musical interlude]

## **Part Two: A Year, A Symmetry**

[00:20:14]

**Austin:** Part Two: A Year, A Symmetry.

When the job offer came across her desk, Jorrie Bluebrick was confused.

Even in Stel Orion, Elects didn't have secretaries. Lieutenants, sometimes; hallowed soldiers, often; and an aide-de-camp now and then; but those were temporary military roles lasting the length of a campaign at the front, not salaried civil service careers with benefits. But then again, Rye—Elect of the Divine Space, First of the Nine Coronet of Stel Orion, Chief Signatory of the Pact of Necessary Venture, and Provedore of all Divinity—was not a normal elect.

He had a strategic mind, but he wasn't a famed general. He had a storied career, but none of those stories were epic sagas. And he and his Divine were instrumental to the operation of the Principality, but he was no crusader of Asterism. Many people did not even know that the Divine Space was the Portcullis system, connecting one end of all Divinity to the other. Indeed, many people simply thought "Rye" was a mononym. This was, Jorrie came to learn, just as he liked it.

"If I do my job right," he told her, a few weeks into her employ, "then no one knows that I did anything at all."

This was strange, Jorrie thought, because Rye had been famous for longer than she had been alive. Every few years, he'd negotiated some major trade agreement or another, steadily earning his way into the Nine Coronet that ruled Stel Orion, and then climbing his way up to the top of the group. But after a few months managing his appointments, copyediting birthday wishes and business messages, and giving him the sort of informal, straight-ahead advice that makes assistants like her invaluable, she came to understand what he meant. For each official treaty signed, there had been dozens, even hundreds, of private conversations where Rye had managed to secure assurances from the skeptical, oaths from the disloyal, and material exchange from those whose vaults were supposedly empty.

"Make yourself like the road," he told her, "and people will simply pay the toll. Maybe now and then you have to remind people that without you, things would be a lot bumpier. But generally speaking, they just want things to move smoothly. No issues, no turbulence."

Easy to say when you, and you alone, have the keys to the great interstellar highway. Not that Rye had held too tightly to those keys. Week in, week out, the Divine Space gave way to travel. Portcullis gates opened, shuddering blood-red at the edge of systems across the Milky Way. Ships emerged like submarines surfacing from the depths, wetness beading up and then burning away. A little appreciated fact: briefly, on heavy travel days, Portcullis gates gained a fleeting but humid atmosphere.

Jorrie Bluebrick did not have the leverage that Rye had, but she took his lessons seriously. Be invaluable, but never reduce yourself to a simple tool. Be the bridge instead of the destination. Be so ubiquitous that you start to disappear—and once you disappear, be absolutely everywhere. They were good lessons to learn, especially for a spy.

This is, of course, the other reason why Jorrie Bluebrick was so surprised when the assignment came across her desk. Surely the Stel, maybe even Rye and Space themselves, had vetted her background, seen the gaps in her story, found some dangling, forgotten connection between her and the revolutionary organization Millennium Break.

She had joined them as part of what had come to be called the Broken Wave—the first cohort of new recruits, which signed on after Millennium Break’s dramatic debut on the intergalactic stage above the moon of Partizan. A small generation of recruits who’d managed to see through the propaganda calling the group criminals and frauds and bandits. People who understood the truth: sometimes, proper insurrection begins with a few basic felonies.

When Jorrie made contact, she was given simple instructions: stay the course, and stay in touch. She had recently gotten her certifs with superlative ratings in psychology and administration, plus satisfactories in economics and history, and she’d snuck in an ongoing study evaluation for her work in the ever-broadening “emerging fields” discipline.

“Shouldn’t I move to one of your bases? I’m ready to do the real work.”

Her Millennium Break contact, who simply went by the code name Barnacle, disagreed.

“Get a little job somewhere,” they’d said. “Sales, administration, mid-level management, something like that. We’ll find a use for you there, I promise.”

A week later, she was the office assistant at a three-star incubation fund, specializing in med tech start-ups. Within six months, she’d begun quietly rerouting shipments of experimental painkillers just into the range of Millennium Break pirate vessels. Within two years, she was the deputy administrator, and her clandestine support had become key to the resilience of the biggest Millennium Break cell in Stel Orion. From there, she was poached by a mil-sec corp, and then a fin-tech interest, and then by a broad-comm firm. Ironically, that one was trying to crack Millennium Break’s infamous Strand communications technology. Jorrie was the reason they never did.

Barnacle had been right. She’d found a way to be useful from the safety of a plush office chair.

But that never sat right for Jorrie. Her comrades, who she didn’t even get to know by name, were out there taking real risks. She’d sent them bandages for their wounds, provided ammunition for their rifles, and secured them the airwaves needed for regular propaganda broadcasts. But she wasn’t getting bloody. She wasn’t pulling triggers. Her name wasn’t being dragged through the mud. And so, risks and all, when she’d been tapped to replace Rye’s previous assistant, she took the job.

Instantly, she knew it had been worth it. She was more isolated than ever, but she felt closer than ever to the rest of Millennium Break. Here she was, day in and day out, holding her breath—and her tongue—face-to-face with the enemy. This man, who symbolized the seemingly shatter-proof empire that was the Divine Principality. She sat in transports across from him. She had meals with him. She stared into the black eyes of the demon, a demon whose job was to pump the blood through the body of a monster even bigger than he was.

She had learned so much—so much about how the Principality really worked; so much about what the Pact was trying to build. They wanted the Principle to be a figurehead, and for each of the Stels to return to what they had once been long ago: five rival states in direct competition with one another. Sharpening each other, and themselves, extending further into their unique identities, no longer held back by the need to fit together like puzzle pieces. And the world that Rye and Gallica, Elect of Present and co-leader of the Pact, imagined: humanist Kesh and utilitarian Orion would no longer need to humor the religiosity of Nideo. And Nideo could lean even further into ritual and righteousness.

*People*, wrote Jorrie in her first dispatch back to Barnacle, *don't seem to come up in their discussions. It's all Stels and states, corporations and churches and cartels. People only seem to show up when it's time to write a speech.*

Barnacle was impressed. They'd been a little worried, not only that Jorrie would be found out, but that Rye, the famous negotiator, would come to bring her under his influence, convince her to turn on Millennium Break. But here she was, using his own tools against him, becoming invisible, invaluable. Sitting in the same room as two of the most powerful people in the galaxy as they conspired—and being paid to take notes!

When her next communique came through, it was mostly concerned with the psychology of the two famously secretive Pact members.

*They get along great*, she'd written, *which is weird, given how different they are. Rye has such a head for logistics. You know that thing they say about rich people not knowing what milk costs? I think Rye knows what milk costs on a thousand different planets, but I'm not sure he knows what it tastes like. Meanwhile, Gallica is basically a damned food critic. Every time she shows up, she has some new treat for Rye to try. A tart filled with some berry only grown on three worlds, some sort of hot wine made by the Sovereign Immunities near the Ring Nebula, so freshly poured that the glass is still warm. The galaxy is so small to her. How could she have any perspective on real life?*

A week before Elle Evensong and Coriolis Sunset killed Present's Elect, Jorrie reported that Gallica had shown up to Rye's office unannounced and shaken up. She asked Rye if he could see the writing on the wall. He laughed and told her that the two of them had built the damn wall, and that they should be proud that people were writing on it.

Jorrie outlined Gallica's worries, which were new to her, but not to Barnacle. It was called the "Principality Protocol." It started with banking and commerce applications, consumer-to-business. Soon, though, it spread. Business-to-business, consumer-to-consumer. Artist to patron, artist to artist. Guaranteed contracts, user ratings, private tasking, neighborly favors. Community policy-making. Enforcement. All on one easy-to-use platform.

It was apparently prototyped and beta-tested on Palisade, of all places. It was the pet project of the Divine, Arbitrage—which Jorrie wrote with a comma, though she didn't know exactly why. She also wasn't exactly sure why Gallica was so scared of it undermining the Stel's authority, or why Rye saw its rise as inevitable. And she never got the chance to ask. Gallica was killed a week later, and Rye... well.

"You know, Jorrie, you've done a damn good job for me."

Rye's voice was weak. His broad frame seemed reduced in a bed crowded by wires and tubes. He'd caught something while visiting one of the countless Portcullises two months ago. Nothing rare, just a bug that shook something loose in him. And when he was getting it checked out, something else snuck in—something that lingered in the shiny tile and cloudy-clean metal of hospitals. And now he was back among the medical machines in a secure, secret facility. Just the two of them, and the very best robotic aids an Elect could have.

"I've... done my best, sir."

He laughed at this. "You sure tried. Sorry you never got much from me."

Had she been made? Surely not. He was just talking about the lessons, the endless lectures, right?

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that, sir. I—”

He waved her maneuvering away. “Cut it, Jorrie. I know the score. I’ve always known the score. Why do you think you got the job to begin with?”

Her eyes scanned the room. After a beat, she realized she was looking for a shield and not a blade, and wondered how she’d been put so far on the back foot.

“We coulda killed you. But I thought it would be better to just keep you in play somewhere a little less volatile for us. You know how much damage you did to us over the years before you came here? Before we knew your name, we used to call you the Scalpel.”

“I’m not sorry,” Jorrie said, even though she was, at least a little. Not for what she’d done for Millennium Break, but because she’d never killed anybody before, and she didn’t know what to do except to feel a little sorry.

“Here’s how’s it’s gonna work,” Rye started. “I’ve already written a recommendation lett—”

She interrupted him. As if he could have done anything she didn’t know about in the previous few weeks.

“It’s in the blue jacket. The pocket of the blue jacket. I know.”

A nod.

“And you’re not dying, are you? I mean, you and I both know that I’m not leaving this room while you’re still breathing. But it’s too risky to give someone else the keys to the kingdom, control over the gates, right?”

Another nod. A machine breathing easily, softly, for him.



“Those little letters I edited, but you never sent. One out of every twenty. They’ll go out over the next few years. A happy birthday, an apology for the delay, a ‘remember when’—and then, so quietly that no one notices, you’ll finally, totally, disappear. And the gates will, week by week, stay open a little longer, let people move around a little more freely.”

“Oh, just until people find their own way of controlling these things. You don’t need an Elect to lock a door.”

“What if I just walk away?” she said, a little justified cruelty sneaking into her voice. “What if I make you face it yourself, tell the world you’re in here? All that big talk, building the foundations of the new world. But you’re not tough enough to stick around to see it?”

“Well, you go and do that, maybe I change my mind. Maybe a stray thought slips in and I whisper a few words to my old friend Space, and the galaxy’s doors all close up nice and tight. Maybe I make it so we all move around even slower. What do you think?”

She thought for a second.

“So, the Scalpel, huh?”

Rye, Elect of the Divine Space, First of the Nine Coronet of Stel Orion, Chief Signatory of the Pact of Necessary Venture, and Provedore of all Divinity, nodded one more time.

[musical interlude]

## **Part Three: A Year, A Drift**

[00:35:52]

**Austin:** Part Three: A Year, A Drift.

-

**Austin:** Okay, who is next?

**Sylvi:** So I think my—I can talk through some stuff, maybe, here.

**Austin:** Yeah, let's talk through it.

**Sylvi:** My problem with Cori is that she's kinda untethered right now, so it's kinda hard to track her down.

**Austin:** Sure.

**Sylvi:** I do think that she would have, like, if—because, again, I guess given her epilogue stuff, it is a little bit like, would she be able to be communicated with? But...

**Austin:** Let's talk through what that looks like a little bit more and give it some more color, right? Because we—if I'm remembering right, where we left you was lonely without your mech, using kind of—not throwaway mechs, but like, cheap mechs, cheap ships, bouncing from place to place.

**Sylvi:** Kind of whatever I can get.

**Austin:** Right, exactly. Put together from spare parts and patchwork. Trying to outrun Present, the Divine Present, and her forces. I believe Present was also she/her. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe it was not. And you were kind of—in my mind, there was a sort of like, classic “outlaw on the run” vibe, [**Sylvi:** Yeah.] or like, almost like the Hulk or kung fu TV show of like...

**Sylvi:** We kinda ended up having that tone at the end of it, for sure.

**Austin:** Right, yeah. Like, you would theoretically land some—you'd go to a new system, you'd help people out in some way, you'd fight the good fight to the degree that you could, you'd get a place to stay for a little while, and then Present's forces would show up, and it would—and I just double-checked, Present is it/its. Present's forces would show up, and then like, chase you out of that system. You'd have to fight them off and then flee, and then move on to somewhere else.

**Sylvi:** Yeah.

**Austin:** You know, I kind of love the idea that, you know, that makes it hard to find you, actually. Right?

**Sylvi:** Yeah.

**Austin:** We get Levi doing the G Gundam thing, you know? Of like, “have you seen” and then like, holding up a picture of Cori. [chuckles] Have you seen this girl, you know?

**Sylvi:** [laughs] Mouth full of french fries.

[**Dre** and **Austin** laugh]

**Austin:** Oh, god, you know what it could be? It could be that picture from the very beginning of the season.

**Sylvi:** Oh my god.

**Austin:** Which was turned into like, a poster. Remember? And it was like, sent to the family, and da-da-da-da-da.

**Sylvi:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. “Yeah, I have seen that girl. On the posters.”

**Austin:** Yeah, uh-huh. So you know, this could be anywhere. This could be a dingy space station or a bar, this could be a farm, like, in a barn you’ve been allowed to, you know, crash in with your mech kind of parked inside of the barn.

**Sylvi:** Oh, man.

**Austin:** This could be in an asteroid that you kind of, like, you know, like a cave in an asteroid that you’ve set up as like a temporary hiding place. Like, wherever you want it to be. You paint me a picture.

**Sylvi:** I kind of like the farm idea. For some reason the idea of Cori having to, like, sleep in a fuckin’ hay bale or something while on the run from Present really just clicked in my head. I was like, yeah. She would have to do that.

**Austin:** [cross] That's very fun, yeah. Totally.

**Keith:** Do you think sleeping in a hay bale makes you less easy to find than if you had, like, a bed in a farmhouse?

**Sylvi:** No, but I think that it is a better aesthetic image.

**Keith:** Sure.

**Austin:** Right, we're communicating something here. We're communicating that like, [Sylvi: Yeah.] you helped some people and they were like, "Well, we don't have a bed, but there's a hay bale out on the farm you could stay." And you're like...

**Keith:** There's a really awful joke that starts this way.

**Austin:** Okay. Alright.

**Keith:** It's fine. No. I thought that everybody would immediately know the joke.

**Sylvi:** No, I don't.

**Austin:** Apparently not.

**Keith:** Never mind.

**Austin:** Alright.

**Sylvi:** I'm pure.

**Austin:** Well, that's where you are. What was the thing that you helped these people with to gain access of their barn?

**Sylvi:** Is it like too—it's not—I thought of this and was like "Oh, that's Seven Samurai minus six samurai," but like, I helped deal with some bandits or some shit? Yeah.

**Austin:** Totally makes sense, and I think leans into some of the bigger picture stuff that we're talking about right now with the state of the galaxy, which is like, there is a—you

know, awesome that the Pact and the Bilateral Intercession have lost stability, and that things are getting less hegemonic. However, there are lots of power vacuums, suddenly. Lots of people declaring themselves the warlord of a sector, lots of people on planets who previously would have been the planet's military and doing, you know, sort of structured banditry, the kind of classic "this is a state, which itself is stealing from the people." And now instead it's like, competing on the ground bandit camps who are fighting over territory and hurting people very directly, constantly. Which, you know, debate about whether or not that's better or worse than an authoritarian state, but these farmers needed help and you helped them. You know?

**Sylvi:** Yeah. I... can I like, add something to this, maybe?

**Austin:** Always. Please.

**Sylvi:** If it's too hat on a hat—this just reminded me, you talking about this just reminded me of the beginning of a DS game I really like called Infinite Space.

**Austin:** Yeah!

**Dre:** Oh, that was a good game.

**Austin:** Infinite Space lovers, let's go!

**Sylvi:** Yeah, one of my favorite video games. But there's a big thing in the beginning of that game where you can't get out of, like, the starter system, because it's like, controlled by, like, a—like, basically the tutorial fight is you having to deal with this fleet that keeps people from leaving a planet.

**Austin:** Yeah.

**Sylvi:** If I'm remembering right.

**Austin:** Yeah, that feels right. It's been a decade since I played that game, but yeah.

**Sylvi:** Yeah. And I feel like this is one of those situations where it's like, the sort of, like, regional warlord or whatever for this planet that I landed on, or moon that I landed on, is not letting people in or out, and that's also causing a lot of problems.

**Austin:** I love this. Yeah, this is great, too, because it's like, I think one of the things that we see, you know, in just this—it hasn't been that long, right? It's only been a few—it's only been a year since the Questlandia game, but it's been a few years out in space while you were doing the Questlandia game. And in that time, all said, one of the things that I think has happened is that the Portcullis system has become something that is not, like, you know, unilaterally controlled in the way it used to be. Someone can go in and take control of it, and say "I run this whole system now, I'm locking the door from people getting in or out." You know? Or maybe people can try to come in, but then they have to—they're faced with a blockade, they're faced with a toll or whatever, right? So yeah, I love that. The idea that this local warlord has locked the door. Which doesn't stop Present from chasing you, unfortunately, but...

**Sylvi:** No. I don't think it's gonna slow Present down. I mean, I got through to it. It didn't slow Perennial down, either.

**Austin:** Yes. Totally, totally. Yeah, I love it. That's a great—so you have helped these people by theoretically reopening the gate for them.

**Sylvi:** Yeah.

**Austin:** Which is also how Levi can get in. And maybe that's how Levi found you.

**Sylvi:** I think—that's what I was thinking, too. Is like, I feel like it's enough of a thing that would like, show up on the radar for people.

**Austin:** Yeah.

**Sylvi:** Like, oh, there's like, we can travel through this—I was gonna say air space, but it's space space.

**Austin:** Space space.

**Dre:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Space lanes.

**Austin:** Uh-huh, yeah. And enough of those—Levi, yeah, enough of those pop up on the Strand Semaphore network, the forms, the Millennium Break forms, which maybe have gotten wider. Maybe there's like, still secret Millennium Break forms there, but I imagine with this more fractured world, one of the things that Millennium Break, or maybe even your group, Levi's kids, is doing—we have to rename it. It can't be called Levi's Kids. What are the Robin Hood people called again?

**Dre:** The merry men?

**Keith:** The merry men.

**Austin:** Oh, we can't do—that's...

**Dre:** No.

**Austin:** I don't know that that's the way either. We'll figure something out. But...

**Keith:** The awesome guys.

**Austin:** Now we're fuckin' talking. Am I right?

**Dre:** Mhm.

**Austin:** The cool dudes. The lost boys.

[**Keith** and **Dre** chuckle]

**Austin:** Yeah. But like, the movie, you know?

**Dre:** [hums] Mhm.

**Sylvi:** They all have vampire teeth now.

**Austin:** Yeah, uh-huh.

**Dre:** Yeah.

**Austin:** And black leather jackets. Anyway.

**Keith:** How about like the TV show? Get Sawyer in there.

**Austin:** The boys from the TV show Lost is the—okay, yeah.

**Keith:** Yep. [laughs]

**Sylvi:** The Lost boys? Okay.

**Dre:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Sylvi:** Aw man, does that mean Hurley's here?

**Austin:** Fuckin' let him cook, man.

**Keith:** Yeah, Hurley's here.

**Sylvi:** Let's go! Yeah!

**Dre:** Show up, grab Cori, yell in her face, "We gotta go back, Cori!"

**Keith:** Weezer's here by proxy, though.

**Sylvi:** Oh, nevermind. Evil Keith.

[**Keith** laughs]

**Austin:** We gotta go back—I mean, this is kind of a "we gotta go back"... you know.

**Sylvi:** Holy fuck.

**Dre:** It is. [chuckles]

**Austin:** So, anyway. On the boards, on the forums—I keep saying "boards" instead of "forums", which I feel like is like, a betrayal in some way of being a poster. But, on the forums—

**Sylvi:** I kind of like it.



**Austin:** You know, I feel like when I was growing up, we had message boards just as often as we had forums. You know? So.

**Dre:** A hundred percent, yeah.

**Sylvi:** Yeah.

**Austin:** But yeah, maybe people have been posting, like, “Oh yeah, look, this place just got, you know, added back to the network, da-da-da-da-da.”

**Dre:** Mhm.

**Sylvi:** “Check out this depressed ass angel that just saved my town.”

**Austin:** Exactly, yeah.

**Dre:** “I’m here to help, I guess.”

**Sylvi:** “Have any of you seen my wife?”

[**Dre** laughs]

**Austin:** “Can you guys make me mac and cheese?”

[**Sylvi** laughs]

**Austin:** [laughing] “I don’t have any food.” Sorry. I don’t know why this is Cori to me, but it is.

**Sylvi:** [laughing] It kind of is how she’s been living, though.

**Austin:** Yeah. How do you make your entrance, Levi?

**Dre:** [hums] So, at the point I’m showing up, has Cori, like, already taken care of all the bad guys? Or is this still in progress?

**Sylvi:** I think it’s probably—like, if it being taken care of is the thing that signals you to where I’m at, it’s probably like, mostly dealt with.

**Dre:** Okay.

**Austin:** Yeah, maybe it's like, you did the big thing. Maybe there's still remnants of the—

**Sylvi:** Yeah.

**Austin:** You know, the classic, you beat the campaign of the video game, but then an NPC goes “There's still remnants of the occupation forces hanging out in...”

**Sylvi:** “Still gotta go get these, uh, watch towers so you can see the rest of the map.” Yeah. I got you.

**Austin:** [laughing] We gotta—exactly. Exactly, yeah. “There's still some collectibles out there you could go get.”

**Sylvi:** Uh-huh.

**Dre:** [chuckles] “You still got—you only got three of the four pieces of the legendary armor.”

**Austin:** Exactly. Exactly. “You haven't collected all your Pieces of Eden yet.”

[Dre laughs]

**Austin:** Classic Italian guy voice.

**Dre:** Uh-huh.

**Austin:** From Italy Italian. It's different.

**Dre:** [hums] Yeah, I guess, Sylvi, I'll pose this to you. I mean, the two ideas I have are either, like, you know, Levi basically like, drops in in the middle of battle, or it's Levi, like, knocking on the door of the barn.

**Sylvi:** Oh. I feel like the “Levi knocking on the door of the barn” gets us the image of Cori, like, scrambling for a gun or something, because she doesn't know who it is.

**Austin:** Because she thinks it might be Present's crew coming to get her.

**Sylvi:** Yeah.

**Austin:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Dre:** Yeah. Levi knocks, and then while Cori is scrambling, Levi like, doesn't open the door, but kind of like, you know, cracks it open a little bit and says,

Dre (as **Levi**): Hey, hey, hey. I'm just here for movie night.

Sylvi (as **Cori**): Oh my god! You scared the shit out of me!

Dre (as **Levi**): Sorry! You're hard to find!

Sylvi (as **Cori**): Hi. Yeah.

**Sylvi:** Just immediately, like, "Oh shit, someone I recognize." And she like, hugs him.

**Dre:** Aw.

Dre (as **Levi**): How—are you okay?

Sylvi (as **Cori**): I mean, you know. There's a lot going on.

Dre (as **Levi**): Yeah.

Sylvi (as **Cori**): I don't know if you've heard of the Divine Present at all.

Dre (as **Levi**): Um... I have. I'm actually here about another Divine?

Sylvi (as **Cori**): You know, yeah, sure. Cool. What do you need, man?

Dre (as **Levi**): I need your help so we can kill Motion before it kills Perennial.

**Austin:** You see it. She shows it to you. Now that the words have been spoken, she shares the vision that she has had, that she's been afraid of sharing with you, for fear of

making you hopeless. They're coming. They're building their own gate. Once it's operational, they will not stop coming.

**Sylvi** (as **Cori**): We have to go. Now.

**Dre** (as **Levi**): Okay.

**Sylvi**: It's like a split—I picture this as like, a second of Cori just like, staring off into the middle distance while her brain gets, like, an upload. And then just being like—

**Austin**: Uh-huh.

**Dre**: Levi like, waving his hand in front of her eyes for a second. [laughs]

**Austin**: Uh-huh.

**Sylvi**: Like, we need to leave right now immediately.

**Dre** (as **Levi**): Okay. This...

**Sylvi**: [laughing] "My mom just called. I have to go home."

[**Dre** and **Austin** laugh]

**Dre** (as **Levi**): I mean, yeah. We gotta make a few stops on the way, but yeah.

[musical interlude]

## **Part Four: A Year, A Wake**

[00:48:51]

**Austin**: Part Four: A Year, A Wake.

Its skin was like all kinds of wood: knotted and barked and varnished and dusty, dead and alive and filled with smaller life. Hers was like the sky itself: reflective, yet so insistent that it was its own color, host to clouds of doubt and imagination. And yet right now, they seemed more alike than different. Under the light of the nearest star, sickly

green, a color no human eye could notice behind the reds and blues and whites. But they were not human. Could never be. Would never want to be.

Was it coincidence, luck, or something else that had led to this meeting? A Branched researcher lost among the constellations, a deployed Delegate—and the first scout of the being called Wakeful—here, on a broken bridge between two abandoned asteroid bases, among the floating wreckage of a derelict garbage scow in the Skarnoc Debris Fields.

Resolute Welkin had been the first one to breach the Twilight Mirage; the first Delegate to step out of time with Wakeful. It was still present in her, but it came and went on delay—every five pulses of life instead of at the regular *tick, tock, bip, bap, tit, tat* of experience. She had not expected to run into anyone so soon, let alone the person she saw sprouting here, who slipped easily from one form of wood to another—from timber to lumber, from leaf to log, from plank to sawdust, and back.

Five pulses of thought, the first four alone. One, *what is this?* Two, *is it dangerous?* Three, *does it see me?* Four, *it is beautiful.* And then Wakeful, caught up, a fifth pulse:

“It is Branched, like the one called Phrygian, who some of us met before they disappeared into the rings around the star. There are many others like it, far away, at war with the Divine Principality. It is very, very, different than us. It has no internal cohesion. It has no stability. It could be dangerous. Find out more.”

It, who had chosen the name Xylem, had of course noticed her. It was, after all, here to notice things—devoted to and driven by the task. Unlike Wakeful, Xylem had immediately seen in Resolute Welkin someone like itself. And in the only language available to it in this form, it showed its affinity to her. Tilting slowly away from the star’s light, and towards the bright blue sky of her skin.

She stepped across the bridge, pushing aside bits of rock and steel, an emptied and crushed coffee can, a sack of something gone long rotten. And as she neared it, as

she fell under the shade of its branches, she felt something like a match being struck inside of her—and without hesitation, introduced herself.

“Resolute Welkin, scout and Delegate of Wakeful.”

Too many pulses to count. Doubt and interest and concern from both herself and Wakeful, only newly separated. But both seemed content to wait for the Branched to respond.

When it finally did, it did so in a form more like hers; its envoy form, Wakeful had told her. She thought “envoy” and “Delegate” were similar words—even if Wakeful was right, and they were very, very, different.

With its skin still shifting, cork to pith to cheap composite, the Branched spoke, its voice traveling in the air it provided itself.

“My name is Xylem. I am a scientist and investigator of the world, of our galaxy. I research light. What is Wakeful?”

She resisted responding immediately. She was part of Wakeful, but should not answer for it. Not before conferring. Such was their commitment to each other that in matters of direct address, where synchronized communication was possible, even at delay, it should be prioritized. Thus when someone asked a question to or about Wakeful, Wakeful should answer. And in the case that someone asked what she, Resolute Welkin, thought, then she should be produced to answer. Easy, when she had already been placed into a Delegate shell like this one. And so, five pulses later, the gestalt being that Resolute was part of answered for itself.

“I am Wakeful. Newly born. An amalgam of beings once called Divines driven together through outstanding circumstances to become something we had never been before. Resolute Welkin is a part of me who is helping us both come to understand the galaxy we live in. It is remarkable to meet you, Xylem.”

The Branched found a smile, and wondered if Wakeful would understand the gesture, borrowed from a shared middle language. But it wasn’t Wakeful who smiled

back. It was Resolute Welkin, who did not need to wait five pulses to know what she felt about Xylem.

Time, it turns out, is malleable. Relative to perception and process. On the calendars of the Divine Principality, two months had passed. But for Xylem and Resolute Welkin, it was not so simple as that. The Branched, who sometimes still took the shape of a vibrant copse or a stack of cut and dried lumber, could find a year in a day, or see an hour in a second. For the Delegate, time was neatly divided, not by minutes, but by the *one, two, three, four, five; one, two, three, four, five; one, two, three, four, five* rhythm of distance to Wakeful.

And now, months in, that rhythm had in fact shifted. Palisade had begun its orbit to the far side of the dark sun at the center of the Twilight Mirage. And so, an added pulse: *one, two, three, four, five, six; one, two, three, four, five, six; one, two, three, four, five, six*, with Wakeful landing like the final step of a longer dance.

“Is it freeing?” asked Xylem. “To have more time to yourself?”

“No, because I *am* Wakeful. It would be like saying... like saying I feel more like myself when I don’t dream. Do you dream?”

“I have dreams.”

From the verb to the noun. It wasn’t exactly an answer to what she asked, but it was an invitation to curiosity, if ever there was one.

She leaned forward, eyes on the swirls in its skin, the burls prodding along one arm, the small sprouting leaf behind what you might think was an ear.

“Tell me about your dreams, Xylem.”

Sometimes she, in and of Wakeful, thought of pet names for the Branched. But she, Resolute Welkin, did not say them.

“I dream that I will find something out here that helps bring the war to an end. Something that will stop us from needing our war forms. That will stop us from becoming war beings. Something that will save us from slipping back into what we left.”

“Some secret war ending quality, hidden in the light all the way out here?”

“Imagine that there was one. And imagine that we learned of it in a decade, a century, a millennium. Generations, eons more of war. Besides, it is—it is what I *want* to be doing.”

Its arms reached upward, now, though not like boughs—harder, firmer, like the arms of a slingshot, smooth and sanded and confident.

“Oh, that I understand.”

“Do you, Resolute Welkin? Doesn’t... doesn’t being Wakeful mean you can’t do what you want?”

She shook her head. “Being Wakeful *is* what I want. It’s...”

Stepping forward, she found herself easily slipping into proximity, her cool metal fingers running against newly appearing bumps on the Branched’s face.

“How does it feel when I touch you here? Where do you feel it?”

“Everywhere.”

“Mm. Your face, your arms, your leaves, the little worms that are in you, that are you. The roots and the bark; your smile. It’s not the same. It’s not. But...” She reached for a word, but didn’t find one, for it reached for her.

Months passed, filled with light and touch and sky. Conversations that lasted minutes and days, questions about ideas and sensations, and shapes the body can take that the mind cannot, and ways the mind can move that the body cannot keep up with—and all the ways the two can overlap.



And fear. Fear, also.

“What if the war ended, and I didn’t know? What if we won, or what if...”

Resolute Welkin was sitting up in its branches, fingers lightly stroking the long willowy shoots, lit today by an ancient solar-powered spotlight floating by a hundred feet above.

“What if my friends have died, and I don’t even know it?”

“Then your work is even more important.”

It was unconvinced, uncomfortable and showing it. Long stems blowing in tempestuous wind that wasn’t even there, not without it. She found a different tactic.

“Would you... would you tell me about them? Your friends?”

It did. With words, and movement, and form. New loving forms, approximations of those it remembered fondly, and new shapes, one that expressed feelings never yet fully spoken. And so, in what they would call an afternoon in the Skarnoc Debris Fields, a Delegate and a Branched held a quiet wake for distant lives which may or may not have ended.

She felt a pull that afternoon, one she did not expect—one that she did not like. In exploring Xylem’s dreams, she realized she had quieted her own. Where was her determination? Where was her resolution?

A week later, during the pulses of life all her own, Resolute Welkin had made a decision and spoken it with the clarity and candor that made her Resolute Welkin.

“I am reintegrating, giving the shell over to a new scout. I can’t be someone you worry about. I have to commit to my mission. It’s as important to me as yours is to you.”

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

“I’m sorry.”

Xylem stood still and quiet for a long time after that. But she could not tell if it was longer than normal.

It bent towards her, slowly this time. Hours of leaning nearer to her light.

“I will miss you so badly. Your voice, your glow, your...”

“I’m not dying. You know that. You could always ask for me.”

A sigh that lasted too long. That lasted *one, two, three, four, five, six, seven*.

“I’ll miss you too, Xy.”

And then it posed a question that neither of them knew the answer to.

“Can I come with you?”

One, *it doesn’t work like that*. Two, *I don’t think...* Three, *it—it’s just...* Four, *it’s Divines and Delegates*. Five, *and I won’t be—it’s not a place like that*. Six, *you wouldn’t be with me; you wouldn’t even be with Wakeful*. Seven.

“We can try.”

Under green light—light that humans can’t see, because it is washed out by all the reds and blues and whites—a tree touched the sky. And a scout and a scientist made a new discovery.

[musical interlude]

## Part Five: A Year, A Bloom

[01:03:50]

**Austin:** Part Five: A Year, A Bloom.

-

**Austin:** Alright, who is next?

**Janine:** I can go.

**Austin:** What is your—again, last time we saw you, you were also kind of going from system to system, but not being chased by a Divine.

**Janine:** No. Well...

**Austin:** Well, chased by the Divine internal. Chased by...

**Janine:** Define chased, define Divine.

**Austin:** Yeah, uh-huh.

**Janine:** Yeah. Um... yeah. Thisbe, I think, due to the sort of transient kind of thing that's happening, I think probably where she could be found would be on... like, I think she moves around a lot. I know she moves around a lot. She doesn't even really linger as long as Cori does, to like, fix stuff. Like, she will like, help out if it's needed, but I think as the year progressed... you know, I imagine, like, she started at like, spending a few months somewhere, and then it became one month, and then it became like a few weeks.

**Austin:** Sure.

**Janine:** And now is kind of doing her own thing. So to that end, I think in this moment, she can probably be found on a moon. Like, a zero atmosphere, there's a—I don't know what moon this would be, or where.

**Austin:** Oh, fun. Sure, doesn't matter.

**Janine:** But it is a—it is a zero atmosphere moon, but it has plant life on it. And Thisbe is scoping out that plant life. I think, like...

**Austin:** What's that—is this just—what is the—is this a thing that Thisbe's doing because it is—I guess one of the things we left with with Thisbe was this idea of like, personal freedom, a freedom to be a person without a mission, without a job, without an

immediate superior or an operant, and the joy of that, but also the overwhelming and sometimes lonely nature of being in the world as a person.

**Janine:** Yeah.

**Austin:** Is this you trying—is this Thisbe trying to find some ground? Like, what goes into this decision? Like, why is Thisbe here?

**Janine:** Yeah. Thisbe, you know, in realizing, like, you need to have intrinsic motivation as an individual, started a project. [chuckles] And that project involves a lot of traveling and a lot of research, which is why the project is very complementary to the lifestyle she's sort of found herself in, willingly or otherwise. So, it is a lot of hopping from place to place, doing a lot of, like, scans to be like, is there something novel here? And then if there is something novel, landing to investigate that novelness. I think in the case of this moon, it's that there is a photosynthetic plant that is sort of covering the surface of it, and the fact that there is no atmosphere makes that very strange.

**Austin:** Interesting, yeah. Huh.

**Janine:** It's a plant that's like, would have to be resistant to radiation, wouldn't need oxygen, and could also survive impacts from external stuff. So I think it's prob—[chuckles] I don't know why I've thought about this so much. This plant in particular is not a big, like, feature in this. It's just, I think it would be interesting. I think it's like a gelatinous plant. So if something hits it, it can like, reconnect with other bits of itself, and like, keep going.

**Austin:** Gelatinous plant...

**Janine:** And so this is a thing that's very novel, and that Thisbe is very interested in learning about.

**Austin:** Is this real?

**Janine:** No.

**Austin:** Okay. Well...

**Janine:** A gelatinous moon plant? No. [chuckles] I hope not. Scary.

[**Sylvi** chuckles]

**Austin:** Well, you know. You know, I don't know from plants. There might be a gelatinous plant out there that I don't know about.

[**Sylvi** laughs]

**Janine:** I mean, sure. Like algae, yeah.

**Dre:** [cross] True, true, true.

**Keith:** [cross] Aloes are kind of gelatinous.

**Janine:** Aloe.

**Austin:** "Star jelly: a gelatinous substance sometimes found on grass, and less commonly on the branches of trees. According to folklore, it is deposited on the earth during meteor showers."

**Sylvi:** Oh.

**Austin:** It's not—I can't tell if this is real or—this seems to be a real thing that people believe fake things about. You know?

**Janine:** Mhm.

**Austin:** Anyway. It's not the thing you're talking about. It's what came up when I searched for "plant gelatinous".

**Keith:** Grapes and raspberries become jelly.

**Austin:** Sure.

**Janine:** Thanks, Keith.

**Dre:** Mhm, mhm.

**Janine:** No, this is just like—I just wanted Thisbe to be on a moon doing plant research, and then I had a little thought experiment for myself about what a plant on a moon might be.

**Austin:** I love it. That's fun. Yeah. So yeah, that's what you're do—I guess, Mow is not with you, right? Or is Mow with you?

**Janine:** Mow is.

**Austin:** Mow is. Okay, so you have a ship big enough to keep Mow.

**Janine:** I have a ship that's like, just about big enough for me and Mow.

**Austin:** Okay.

**Janine:** There's not really much in the way of like, living quarters. There's like, a bit of extra space that is employed for research, but you know. It's big enough because Thisbe and Mow are big, but...

**Austin:** Right, right. But it's not big enough for...

**Janine:** It's not like the Blue Channel. It's not.

**Austin:** It's not the Blue Channel big, yeah, yeah, yeah. That makes sense. So then, from this moon, you probably notice—you probably notice Levi approaching, because it's a big barren moon. There's not much else in terms of noise to distract you, or visuals.

**Janine:** Yeah. [chuckles]

**Austin:** Levi, what are you moving around in these days?

**Janine:** Well, it's not barren, it's goopy.

**Austin:** I guess—sorry, it's a goopy moon.

[Ali snickers]

**Janine:** Thank you.

**Dre:** Goop can be barren.

**Janine:** No.

**Austin:** Yeah, I mean it's explicitly—it's a plant, so it's not barren. Right? It's explicitly—yeah, I guess, okay.

**Janine:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's green. It's like, you know. Plant-like.

**Austin:** Yeah.

**Keith:** An arboreal moon.

**Dre:** I've seen those in No Man's Sky.

**Austin:** Yeah, same. Yeah, Thisbe is kind of her No Man's Sky shit right now.

**Janine:** Yeah.

**Dre:** Yeah.

**Austin:** That's kind of fun, yeah. What are you moving around in, Levi? Do you—what's your ship situation like?

**Dre:** Are you saying personal vehicle, or like, the group's vehicle?

**Austin:** Let's start with personal vehicle in the sense of you are arriving here to meet with Thisbe.

**Dre:** Sure. I don't think Levi has, like, a personal spaceship or anything.

**Austin:** Okay.

**Dre:** Levi has propulsion roller blades.

**Sylvi:** Shadow!

**Dre:** Yeah, there it is. Yeah, uh-huh.

**Austin:** Oh, wow. It is. It is Shadow the Hedgehog. Wow. The year of Shadow.

**Sylvi:** Or Caine Wise from Jupiter Ascending.

**Austin:** Wow.

**Dre:** Two great pulls.

**Austin:** You knew the name of the character.

**Sylvi:** Yeah, it's Channing Tatum's character. Yeah. His gun barks when he shoots it.

**Austin:** That's true. We should watch Jupiter Ascending for Media Club Plus.

**Sylvi:** That movie fucking rules.

**Janine:** Isn't he a dog man? Does—his gun also barks?

**Dre:** Pretty sure he's a dog man.

**Sylvi:** Ali, didn't we see that in theaters together?

**Ali:** Yes.

**Sylvi:** When you were visiting here? Yeah. Yeah, that was ages ago.

**Dre:** That rules.

**Sylvi:** Yeah.

**Austin:** Incredible.

**Sylvi:** Yeah, that movie bangs. I've seen that movie in theaters multiple times.

**Ali:** Uh-huh. [laughs]



**Austin:** I've seen it—I saw it in theaters. I saw that and Chappie with a professor I was TA'ing for who I thought was the coolest person in the world. So, you know. Shoutouts.

**Sylvi:** That rules.

**Ali:** They must have been if you went to go see Chappie and the werewolf movie.

**Austin:** Uh-huh. Yeah. I hope he's doing good. He had a kid, he had a baby right before I left, so.

**Ali:** Aw.

**Austin:** Cool family. Anyway. So you've landed somewhere else on this planet with the big ship, and now you're rocket rollerblading over.

**Dre:** Mhm. I have a spacesuit on. I don't know what the atmosphere here is, but yeah.

**Austin:** None, is what—

**Janine:** You are throwing up a trail of plant slime.

**Dre:** Aw. I don't want to ruin your plants you're working on.

**Janine:** It's fine. No, it's fine. They're designed to do that.

**Dre:** Oh, okay, okay, okay.

**Sylvi:** Yeah, it's like blowing dandelion seeds.

**Janine:** Because they throw up the slime, and then they like, re-glom onto whatever else is... whatever other plants are near, yeah. It's just gross.

**Dre:** Oh.

**Sylvi:** Oh.

**Austin:** We need you to also have the "it's gross" card. You already have the spookier card.

[Dre laughs]

**Austin:** I'd like you to have the "it's gross" card.

**Janine:** Yeah, yeah. It's spookier, it's grosser.

**Austin:** Yeah.

Dre (as **Levi**): Thank you for answering my call.

**Janine:** Did I? Wait, this is out of character. Did I?

**Dre:** Well, I guess I assumed that like, Thisbe would be someone that if Levi reached out to her, Thisbe would like, respond.

**Janine:** Sure. Yeah, I feel like—I'm not sure she would have read that message.

[Ali snickers]

**Janine:** I feel like no matter what the thing—I could imagine Thisbe having a program on her ship that's like, if you, you know—

**Austin:** You've got the Zoom AI.

**Janine:** If you get a phone call from these numbers, then you just bounce back with like, your location.

**Austin:** Okay, sure. Right, okay. Okay.

**Dre:** Sure.

**Janine:** It's like if Levi or Brnine or whoever, if these numbers call, then just fire back some coordinates. That's probably what they want anyways. [chuckles] Like...

**Ali:** "Thisbe's in trouble, I have to go!" [laughs]

**Janine:** And they'll sort it out. [laughs] That's you catastrophizing, that's not her problem.

[Ali laughs]

**Dre:** Damn.

**Ali:** Uh-huh.

**Sylvi:** Wow.

**Ali:** That's always been the issue with us.

**Sylvi:** Wow.

[Dre and Janine laugh]

Dre (as **Levi**): I like what you've done with the place.

Janine (as **Thisbe**): I just arrived here. I haven't done anything to it.

Dre (as **Levi**): Oh.

Janine (as **Thisbe**): It is this way. It's why I'm here.

Dre (as **Levi**): Gotcha. What are you—what are you trying to do?

Janine (as **Thisbe**): I'm attempting to understand the mechanism by which this plant lives.

Dre (as **Levi**): Mhm. [pause] Um... I wish I had anything insightful to add about plant life, but that is definitely your area of expertise, not mine.

Janine (as **Thisbe**): Yes.

**Janine:** Holding a big—like, holding a handful of plant goop and looking at you.

**Dre:** [chuckles] Yeah.

**Janine:** I should also say that Thisbe has a little—Thisbe looks more or less the way you remember seeing her. She has a shorter, more practical cloak.

**Austin:** Oh.

**Janine:** But that might—I don't know—I haven't decided if that's just for this trip or not.

**Austin:** Sure.

**Janine:** You don't want to drag it in the goop and then track goop into the ship, and it's a whole thing.

[**Austin** laughs]

**Dre:** Sure.

**Janine:** Also, she has, like, this little, like, woody branchy vine-y thing sort of coiled around one of her horns.

**Austin:** Ooh.

**Dre:** Ooh, that is cool.

**Janine:** And it has like, some—it has some, like, it's like very—it's like, small, it's not like big and ostentatious, it's really easy to miss if she's like, turning her head or something. But it's like this little sort of wooded—wood vine type branchy thing with some little buds on it.

Dre (as **Levi**): Alright, well, I guess I'll get to the point. I need your help on a mission.

Janine (as **Thisbe**): Yes, I would have presumed that.

Dre (as **Levi**): Right. Um...

Janine (as **Thisbe**): What is the mission?

Dre (as **Levi**): Okay, good. You know what? I missed this, Thisbe. It's so easy to talk to you. That's not being sarcastic. [sighs] Motion's making a move on Perennial.

Janine (as **Thisbe**): I see.

Dre (as **Levi**): It's got a big fleet, and I think it's—well, I was told that it's trying to wipe out Perennial.

**Austin**: Motion is she/her, just as a...

**Dre**: Oh, thank you, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Austin**: You know, I—[chuckles] no respect to Motion. However...

**Dre**: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[**Sylvi** laughs]

**Austin**: I did say the bitch was back.

**Sylvi**: Don't misgender your enemies, even if they're...

**Austin**: [laughing] That's right.

**Dre**: Yeah, no, yeah.

**Sylvi**: ...they have an army of the undead.

**Austin**: God, that's the fucked up thing about the—what is the name of the ship? Of Dahlia's ship? That I wrote, but always fuckin' forget?

**Keith**: The ecto...

**Austin**: It's not the ecto. It's the--

**Dre**: Ecto Cooler?

**Austin**: It's the Ecto Cooler. She piloted the Ecto Cooler.

**Keith**: Ekpyrosis.

**Austin:** [cross] She piloted the Ekpyrosis. The Ekpyrosis, remember, was like, filled with dead people because of Commitment going wild and killing them all. They're all just back and part of Motion's cool group now, because that's what Motion does. Anyway.

**Keith:** Is that the official name, by the way?

**Austin:** Yeah, the—

**Keith:** Motion's cool group?

**Austin:** [chuckles] Motion's cool group.

**Dre:** Damn it.

**Austin:** You know, I've been thinking about it, and it used to be—

**Dre:** Stole Levi's name for his group.

[**Keith** chuckles]

**Austin:** [laughs] It used to be the Black Century, right? Which was like, playing on the name of the—one of the ways in which mercenary groups used to be named, or like, military groups in the middle ages, because PARTIZAN had a lot of like, Hundred Years' War, Holy Roman Empire stuff, so I was playing in that aesthetic pond. And part of me wants her to rename them the Black Millennium as like a fuck you to Millennium Break, but the Black Millennium actually just sounds like a really sick, like, you know, Black power movement, and I don't want to give that to Motion.

**Sylvi:** Yeah.

**Janine:** Also, we do literally have a character called Millennium Black.

**Sylvi:** I was gonna say that one.

**Austin:** Oh, that's true. We do have Millennium Black. So we're already in there.

**Sylvi:** It sounds like the way you'd have his name on paper.

[**Keith** laughs]

**Austin:** Black, comma, Millennium. Yeah.

**Sylvi:** Black, comma, Millennium.

**Austin:** Uh-huh, yeah, so, still just the Black Century. I mean, really, it's just the Pact of Free States, it's the Pact. Right? So, anyway, regardless, sorry. I interrupted and now I've distracted us from the point you were trying to make.

**Dre:** No, it's fine.

Dre (as **Levi**): I've got it on good authority that she's trying to make a move on Perennial. AKA... kill? I don't really know how that works, but....

Janine (as **Thisbe**): You can kill a Divine. It just is a matter of what happens afterwards.

Dre (as **Levi**): Well, that's good, because I think we have to kill Motion.

Janine (as **Thisbe**): Is there more depth to the plan than that at this stage? Or no?

Dre (as **Levi**): No, we are currently in the "getting the crew together" stage.

Janine (as **Thisbe**): I see.

Dre (as **Levi**): And there's somebody else I'm trying to get a hold of, but they're not really taking my calls, but I think they might take yours.

**Janine:** [chuckles] I'm trying to find a way for Thisbe to authentically be like, "Who could that possibly be?"

**Keith:** You could guess incorrectly.

**Janine:** I don't even know who she'd guess. Um...

**Dre:** It would be funny if you just went through all of the people that, like, [laughing] that Levi has already gotten in the ship. “Oh, why isn’t Cori answering your calls?” “Oh no, she’s fine. She’s already in the ship. I got her already.”

**Sylvi:** “Oh, you need to find Midnite?” “No, we’re god.”

**Janine:** Yeah, who would Thisbe even...

**Keith:** Get through everyone and then be like, who’s even left?

[**Sylvi** and **Keith** laugh]

**Dre:** Aw.

**Sylvi:** Oh my god.

**Janine:** I think Thisbe might actually say something like,

Janine (as **Thisbe**): Typically, I do not call others.

**Janine:** So like, she doesn’t know who would pick up her call, because she doesn’t call.  
[chuckles]

Dre (as **Levi**): Fair. But we need the Captain.

Janine (as **Thisbe**): Oh. Operant Brnine.

[**Sylvi** laughs]

Janine (as **Thisbe**): Of course.

Dre (as **Levi**): Do you know where they are?

Janine (as **Thisbe**): No.

Dre (as **Levi**): Do you think you can help us find out?

Janine (as **Thisbe**): Yes.



Dre (as **Levi**): Okay.

Janine (as **Thisbe**): Come inside.

Dre (as **Levi**): Sure.

**Janine:** And Thisbe gestures to her very small ship where inside, you will probably find a space that is about the size of, like, maybe it's like a dorm room, like a high-ceiling dorm room kind of size. Or like, just a single "no bathroom, no kitchen" type apartment.

**Dre:** Keeping Mow in your lofted tiny house.

[**Austin** laughs]

**Janine:** [chuckles] Yes. But you can really only move around the edge of the room, because in the center of the room, there is a raised flower bed that has a big weird shrub on it. And it's like, a big weird shrub that has a bunch of different stuff graft—like, different—it looks like different types of shrub, or different varieties of it, have been grafted on. So it's kind of—it has a bit of a mish-mashy quality to it. Like, the wood is sort of modeled in different places, different branches, or different colors. And there are flowers, and the flowers are very small, not—they haven't bloomed, but they are also all kind of like, mish-mashy colors. It's a weird plant. And Thisbe, I guess, goes for her space phone? [laughs] Her communications panel.

**Austin:** And sends out a message to Brnine?

**Janine:** Yeah, yeah.

Janine (as **Thisbe**): Should I say that you are looking for them? Or should I say something else?

Dre (as **Levi**): Do you... hm. Do you... mm. What is more likely to get them to answer?

Janine (as **Thisbe**): That is something I was hoping you would know, but judging by your distressed buzzing, I will simply send a message to them requesting a meeting.

Dre (as **Levi**): Yeah, that works. Am I really buzzing?

**Janine**: It was all that “hm, mm.” [chuckles]

**Austin**: [chuckles] Oh, that’s good. Alright.

**Janine**: Yeah, Thisbe sends a message to Brnine that says, like...

**Dre**: [chuckles] “You up? Wanna hang out?”

**Sylvi**: “What up, big dog?”

**Janine**: No. I had that thought too, and I was like, no, that’s weird.

**Austin**: It’s not the vibe, yeah.

**Janine**: That’s even a weird joke to make for Thisbe.

**Dre**: Yeah, that’s not the vibe. Yeah.

**Janine**: I think the message is just like, “I would like to meet with you.” Or, no, maybe it’s like, “We should meet.” Like, it’s something that’s very, like, straightforward. But it wouldn’t be like “I would like.” It would be like, “we should,” or like, yeah.

**Austin**: Is there an immediate response, or is there a wait?

**Ali**: An hour later, you get coordinates back. The Thisbe special.

**Janine**: Cornets?

**Ali**: Coordinates.

**Janine**: Oh.

**Ali:** Co-ordinates.

**Dre:** I realize that's what you said, but at first I thought you said corn nuts.

[**Ali** and **Janine** laugh]

**Janine:** I also thought corn nuts, and I was like, no, no, it can't be corn nuts. It's probably cornets. Like, an emoji of little trumpets being like, let's go.

[**Ali** laughs]

**Austin:** Oh, cornets, right, sure. [imitates trumpet sound] Brnine's here!

**Janine:** [chuckling] Because that could be true. That could have been what you meant.

**Austin:** That's very funny.

[musical interlude]

## **Part Six: A Year, A Moral**

[01:23:54]

**Austin:** Part Six: A Year, A Moral.

-

**Austin:** Hi, Jack.

**Jack:** Hi, Austin.

**Austin:** This is different than the other ones.

**Jack:** It sure is. Would you like to hear about the new advances on the protocol?

[chuckles]

**Austin:** I would love to. It's funny you say that, because, you know, literally earlier today, I wrote about the protocol very briefly in the story, "A Year, A Symmetry," or at

least what is currently called A Year, A Symmetry. Or A Year, Asymmetry. The Rye story, the Rye-related story. Rye, and of course, Jorrie Bluebrick, his personal assistant, his secretary slash Millennium Break spy who overhears Rye and Gallica getting very scared about something called the Principality Protocol.

**Jack:** Yeah, but I mean, you know, okay, here's the thing. There is stuff inside the protocol to be afraid of.

**Austin:** Sure.

**Jack:** You know, we know about how Arbitrage's contracts work.

**Austin:** Oh, yeah. That's very scary.

**Jack:** We know about the bizarre, almost physiological effect they have on people under them. We know how badly it went for Present. But, you know, a lot of the time, I think that what we're talking about is we're talking about currency, and we're talking about—

**Austin:** Oh, okay.

**Jack:** You know how you can, when there are things like shares that are so phenomenally expensive that you can buy fractions of them?

**Austin:** Oh, yeah.

**Jack:** And you can do the same with bitcoin and things? I mean, I'm wondering if a place to start is with a sort of reframing—not reframing, a sort of new way of thinking about a contract. Where, you know, what if you could sign a contract, what if you could enact a contract, between maybe me and my neighbor. You know, people are always talking about neighbors nowadays.

**Austin:** Mhm. Yeah, neighbors, it's really big in the discourse these days, yeah.

**Jack:** And, you know, there's been a lot of talk about these kinds of contracts, but wouldn't it be nice if you could just ensure that something as small as, oh, you come

over and water my plants. And you know, I care about you, and I know that you want to water my plants—

**Austin:** Of course, of course.

**Jack:** But at the same time, there was that time two years ago...

**Austin:** There was that time.

**Jack:** Before the protocol, [**Austin:** Yeah.] when you failed to water my plants and—look, I'm not...

**Austin:** Well, I just forgot. It was just, you know, it was one of those days. I was very busy, I just didn't have anything to really make me understand how important it was that I get over there and water those plants, you know?

**Jack:** Now, would you sign a contract? Absolutely not. And I'm not asking you to sign a contract. But I am saying, would you do me a favor?

**Austin:** You know, is there a way to track this favor? Is there a system, a protocol to maybe make sure that it's clear to other people that I've succeeded at this favor and that I'm a good favor-doer?

**Jack:** Yes, but you know, I don't know that we need to consider that bit particularly important between you and me. What's important is that, you know, you water my plants, and then there's a bit of a quid pro quo, you know? I could do a favor for you later, or maybe I could exchange some glint for you to do a favor.

**Austin:** I think the more abstract we get, the better. I think the more it becomes a flexible platform for doing things for our neighbors, the better the platform, the protocol, will function.

**Jack:** What are some things you could do for your neighbors? Because, of course, you know, I can feed your cat. But it's sort of neighborly...

**Austin:** You could make a delivery for me.

**Jack:** I was gonna say.

**Austin:** Maybe I—maybe my wonderful partner has forgotten their lunch at home, and I need you to—can you just run this little lunch over to the office for me? I can't do it, so you could do it.

**Jack:** Maybe it is so hot outside, and I don't want to get groceries.

**Austin:** Sure.

**Jack:** But I know that you've been wanting to do me a favor for a while.

**Austin:** It's true. I want to become—I want to go back to being even with you, you know? I want to pay you back for the favor that you gave me.

**Jack:** And here's the thing. People have been doing this forever.

**Austin:** There's no new advancement here. There's nothing to be afraid of.

**Jack:** No. You know, and in fact, this is a lot of what really strong communities have been based on since time immemorial, you know? I'm sure that there are people out there that would say, wouldn't it be great if we could, you know, get rid of cash exchange or something? You know, and of course, that's unreasonable to think. But a society based on doing favors for those around you is something that I think, you know, we have good models for seeing working in communities.

**Austin:** Well, and I think here's the thing. And this is a thing that Arbitrage and Connadine I think have noticed as they set this protocol up. It's a time of chaos out there, isn't it?

**Jack:** Oh, yeah.

**Austin:** And you mentioned cash, and it's like, I don't know, this time next year, is Kesh cash good at Apostolos? Is Stel Orion cash good in the midst of Nideo space? I don't know. But I do know that if someone, say, on the Principality Protocol says they're willing to do a favor in exchange for another favor, or in exchange for three glint, or in

exchange for a good—a thumbs up on their profile page, or whatever they decide, whatever two neighbors decide is—maybe for free. It's fine to use the Principality Protocol to do something for free out of the kindness of your heart. It just helps you track it, and it makes sure that local municipalities don't get in the way of people helping each other.

**Jack:** There's something wild happening here, right? Which is that like, on the one hand, they are saying that a contract is too big-sounding for a lot of people. And make no mistake, the technology, the sort of metaphysics, the metaphysical technology underpinning this is just contracts. You know, I think it is—you know.

**Austin:** Yes. Well, it's Divine contracts, and it's—it is a distributed system.

**Jack:** Oh yeah, but—

**Austin:** That somehow stays connected throughout the entire galaxy.

**Jack:** What I mean to say is that favors is a framing rather than a...

**Austin:** Right, yes.

**Jack:** Rather than a, you know. So they're saying contracts are too big. And, you know, too dangerous. Contracts are for things like CEOs. Contracts are for things like making sure that you don't speak ill of a company after you're dismissed from them. You know, things like that. And I can understand how those are frightening or disconcerting to the normal people that are trying to find some stability in, you know, this time of change. But then what they're also saying is, but isn't it good that they work? You know? They're like, trying to have their cake and eat it in terms of like, you don't need to worry about contracts, but we can assure you that this thing underpinning it is going to work. Your plants are going to get watered.

**Austin:** Mhm. And if they don't, there will be consequences.

**Jack:** This is a question, actually. Can you—once you've accepted a favor, can you not do it? Because the way we've talked about contracts, it's not even like there will be—

**Austin:** Well, yeah, we've been kind of vague about this, right? And I guess we should—again, I just want to slow down for a second, because I re-introduced the idea of the Principality Protocol to the listener earlier in this episode.

[**Jack** laughs]

**Austin:** We're talking about the thing that Arbitrage has hinted at throughout this season. Connadine has left to go train a bunch of agents for Arbitrage. You may recall that towards the middle of the season, after the Stellar Combustor arc. Got the hell out of dodge, and you know, kind of betrayed some of the Bilateral Intercession folks on the way. And it seems like part of what is being built is something we first, actually, got a look at all the way back in the—I mean, in some ways, it's just an extension of what Arbitrage is, right? We saw Arbitrage talk to Thisbe back in PARTIZAN, and give Thisbe some information about—

**Jack:** We saw this spreading on the Brink.

**Austin:** And then we saw it on the Brink, especially with Mustard Red and the magazine that kills people. And doing the sort of like, “Oh yeah, I can be the—I can connect to people to do things for each other. I can be the middle man.” And now it seems, is extending that into a sort of network that connects the entire galaxy, or at least the Principality part, the current Principality parts of it, that allows for its, you know, “what if your whole life was DoorDash, I think, Jack, is how I talked to you about it the other day.

**Jack:** Yeah.

**Austin:** What if everybody was a DoorDasher? What if everybody was on Taskrabbitt? And what if as much as possible could be done through that system to the point that it became the sort of default medium for exchange, for business exchange, you know, for consumer to store exchange, for consumer to consumer exchange, for—I think in the previous story, I say like, artist to patron exchange, and for artist to artist exchange. Right? What if you used the Principality Protocol to get you a keyboardist to help finish out the album you're making? That's the protocol. And so I think the question you're asking is, well, what if someone says “Yeah, I'll come on and do a sick keyboard solo for



your album,” we know that if you—if an Arbitrage contract, if you sign an Arbitrage contract, or agree to an Arbitrage contract saying “I’ll do that,” you do it.

**Jack:** Yeah, it’s like—

**Austin:** It physically happens. We’ve seen—it’s inescapable, or at least, it seems like there would be drastic, maybe even fatal, consequences if you did manage to resist once you signed the contract. “What happens if you do that on the Protocol” is the question it seems like you’re asking.

**Jack:** Yeah. And I could go both ways here in terms of like, there is something very sinister about it having consequences that start spinning out into your life. At the same time, you know, that is to say, you know, you talked about getting a thumbs up earlier. There’s the thing of like, they reneged on one of these favors. I nearly called it a contract. Not so. But at the same time, there is something wild about, like, “I have to go and water your plants. That is—it is just going to happen.” And I am curious about where you fall on like—and you know, we can keep this as abstract as we want, but I do think it’s notable seeing—gosh, who was the pilot of Present? RIP.

**Austin:** Gallica. Yeah, RIP to Gallica. Gallica now dead.

**Jack:** Gallica was this phenomenally powerful figure who was just moving, you know, whose body was on a rail.

**Austin:** Mhm. I have an answer for this. And I think it is flexible. I think that this is, you know, I think a thing that I—you and I were talking about this a couple of weeks ago now, or maybe a week or so ago now. And the kind of pitch that I made you was that like, you know, quote, “There’s a way here into the promise of the Protocol too. The way people sometimes talk about the gig economy as being flexible. Make your own hours, do only the tasks you want to, make as much as you want. Supplement your other income. In a moment of crisis, it’s stable. In a moment of decentralizing authority, it’s distributed. In the moment where the galaxy is crying out for freedom, it’s saying you can be exactly as you free as you want. And here are the terms for how you can trade that freedom in in crystal clear details, minus whatever clarity you’ve also traded away.”

And to me, that's the way it works. Which is the Protocol has the ability to enact the sort of hard pressure that the Arbitrage contract offers. Doesn't do that every time, I don't think, necessarily. You have to opt into it. This is the promise that the Protocol makes. The Principality Protocol says if you are willing to sign that—to agree to that favor, ahem, not sign any contracts, we are willing to agree—

[**Jack** chuckles]

**Austin:** I think that probably one of the first things Connadine did, was like, "You've got to get rid of this contract terminology." Right? "I'm not signing a contract and other people won't either, but they may agree to do a favor." Right?

**Jack:** Yeah, but also, like, make a kind of a vague "us and them" thing. Contracts are real, they're out there, but they're for like, serious business.

**Austin:** Mhm. Right. Totally. And well, I think you can do contracts on Principality Protocol.

**Jack:** Oh, yeah.

**Austin:** It's just not what you or I would use it for. You or I would use it for groceries. You or I would use it to find a gift for your special someone. You know? The—it's the everything app. Right? Like, that's what it is. And it is the everything platform. It is the terrible dream of all of the titans of tech in our own time. And what I think is, I think, in a way, what you end up having is you say, "Hey, will you come over and water my plants?" And as part of that favor, there is a drop-down menu. And in that drop-down menu, we can pick what the consequences will be if I don't do it. And I think that there's probably a culture of what standardized repercussions are. And most of the time, it's a thumbs down. It's a lower rating. Sometimes it's financial restitution. Sometimes it's you can't do it. And the thing that I keep thinking about is like, there's a secret menu. You know? Like you're at the In-N-Out Burger [**Jack** chuckles] and you're like, "Oh yeah, I know how to access the secret menu on the Principality Protocol that lets us get into 'there's a physical pressure at the back of your neck that makes you want to go water the plants.'"

**Jack:** And because it's the same technology—I mean, you know—

**Austin:** And I want to be clear, and then you say that in the favor form, and I go, “Oh yeah, sure, hit me with the back of the neck pressure.”

**Jack:** Because you're, like—

**Austin:** And that, of course, makes it okay, because we've both agreed—we're both free actors on the free market, [chuckles] and whatever external contexts exist have vanished in this beautiful open space of exchange between two perfect individuals.

**Jack:** Neighborliness.

**Austin:** Yes. Neighborliness. Exactly.

**Jack:** God.

**Austin:** It comes for everything, you know?

**Jack:** It comes for everything, and it's also, you know...

**Austin:** What was the—what's that Kafka from today?

**Jack:** Oh. [chuckles]

**Austin:** Joseph Fasano on Twitter says “When Kafka was diagnosed with the illness that would kill him, he wrote little aphorisms that are just perfect.” And the last one on this page is: “Leopards break into the temple and drink all the sacrificial vessels dry; it keeps happening; in the end, it can be calculated in advance, and is incorporated into the ritual.”

**Jack:** [exhaling] Yeah.

**Austin:** Whew.

**Jack:** And this is here. You know? On Earth, in 2024. To greater or lesser extents, you know?

**Austin:** Mhm.

**Jack:** I mean, it is worth saying that there are things like—why do I—centipede-like Divines? Arbitrage is this sort of horrible bug?

**Austin:** You're thinking of Independence.

**Jack:** What is Arbitrage? I always make this mistake.

**Austin:** A little console in the side of the wall somewhere.

**Jack:** Right, yes, someone brings it over on, like, a tray to chat with Connadine.

**Austin:** Mhm. Or that's what it was last time that we saw it, you know? I think that was just a phone call with Connadine.

**Jack:** Oh, yeah, they brought over a telephone.

**Austin:** We don't—yeah. Arbitrage has effectively, as far as we know... You know, Thisbe talked to Arbitrage at a place on PARTIZAN. It's not necessarily clear if that was where Arbitrage itself was. I don't know. It is not—I don't think that it—it doesn't seem to be as simple as a thing in a room. Doubly so now that simply operating the core functions of it as an Arbitrage agent include a bunch of people trained by Connadine to be Arbitrage.

**Jack:** Well, you say trained.

**Austin:** Well, yes.

**Jack:** I think it's worth saying that like, the technology that Arbitrage brought Connadine on for—or like, with—was this sort of like, flickering metallic ray of lights, or ring of lights, that was part of the technology that Kesh spies used to create substitute realities for their own spies. You know, sort of the quote unquote primary use of this is like, make a spy believe something about the world is true so that they can't crack under certain kinds of interrogation.

**Austin:** Right, right.

**Jack:** And of course, you know, as soon as this gets into the hands of people like Connadine, who is by all accounts a relatively even-handed Kesh spymaster—you know, under someone like Crysanth, you know that these devices are being used to like, “Oh, we can get civilians to believe things.”

**Austin:** Right. Sure.

**Jack:** Which isn’t to say that Connadine has also not used it for that. He absolutely has.

**Austin:** Mhm.

**Jack:** But like, he’s out there being like, “I’m training my own spies and occasionally I’ll use it to, you know, swing a compass,” and Crysanth is like “Alright, okay, assassins in the crowd composed of civilians.” But it’s that technology that has been brought on, and that is sort of rumbling away under all of this as well, right?

**Austin:** Right, right.

**Jack:** Where like, in addition to being able to... Let’s say—these are all sort of the same thing, but let’s say at the lowest end of the spectrum you have these little favors, these sort of like, fractional shares of a contract.

**Austin:** Mhm.

**Jack:** And then you have the contracts, which can compel you to do a certain thing even if you might believe that it is immoral, or against your best interests, or stupid. It has to be done. And then at the top, there are these machines that can cause you to believe completely different realities than the ones that you are operating in. And that’s a real sort of basis for the Protocol to start functioning, I think.

**Austin:** Yeah, well, and is—I think the thing that’s fun is like, and in between those two things are people.

**Jack:** Oh, yeah. Yeah.

**Austin:** And people will always surprise you, and will—which again, like, you know, we’re not really doing a proper scene here, necessarily. We want to kind of like, just talk about this thing as it spreads through the chaos of the years that happened in the kind of over the course of the finale, right? As the finale of the Questlandia game. You know, as that stuff was happening on Palisade, this begins spreading through the reaches of what was—or is still, at this point, I guess—the Principality, right? In a way, it’s becoming the Principality, because it’s becoming the thing that it’s all happening on. But I am curious from the characterological sense what’s up with Connadine over these years, you know? Connadine had the short run comparatively on Palisade, and now has had a much more stable number of years working with Arbitrage.

**Jack:** Yeah.

**Austin:** What is that—what’s the vibe?

**Jack:** He’s an older man, time has been moving differently. You know, Connadine has grown older. He is in a well-appointed but studiously shabby top-floor apartment in a place like Vienna or Prague or something. Some world where the fracturing has probably happened there, or has begun to happen, but a city state, or a planet state, is solidifying pretty comfortably. He’s working under an assumed name. He’s well-liked in the community that he’s in. He drinks, you know, two espressos and one decaf espresso at the coffee shop in the plaza in the morning, and then goes back up to, you know, read a collection of letters from a war general, or like, a tactician that died two hundred years ago. And then just, you know, sit down, take his shirt off, maybe—take his shirt off. Take his jacket off, untuck his shirt. Connadine takes his shirt off. You know.

**Austin:** Woo!

**Jack:** Nude from the waist up. This is how I’m getting into business. But yeah, you know. Perhaps he is talking to Arbitrage on the phone, perhaps, you know, he has a special line that is built in.

**Austin:** Is Arbitrage calling to be like, here is a thing I want your perspective on.

**Jack:** God.

**Austin:** Or is it more mundane day-to-day check in? Like what is the... what do we think the sort of division of labor is here?

**Jack:** I think it's really scary if the initial proposal of like, "we're coming into this as partners" has stuck somehow. Whether that is through Connadine's, like, venal cunning, or Arbitrage's interest in the sort of spycraft that he's bringing to the table. I think that the scariest version of this is like, we went into it as business partners, or as tactical partners, and the collaboration is going well.

**Austin:** Mhm.

**Jack:** You know, it's Arbitrage calling Connadine for perspective, but it's also Connadine calling Arbitrage and saying, you know, "This kept me awake last night and I couldn't sleep."

**Austin:** "I've been turning this over," yeah.

**Jack:** And Arbitrage, who never sleeps, says, you know, "I've been thinking of this too." And they bicker about things, you know. I think that Arbitrage has a machine instinct, you know.

**Austin:** Right.

**Jack:** Which is funny because Connadine is the constructor and operator of a machine that causes you to believe different things. But Arbitrage never sleeps, you know. Arbitrage never drinks the espressos, Arbitrage never makes eye contact with the person at the flower stall, or whatever. And then at the same time, I think Connadine values the breadth, the distribution, the sense of time and space that Arbitrage is able to offer perspective on. You know, "I can be on a world out there, I can understand how this thing—because I know how fast this is going to move from here to there." And also, I wonder if there's a sort of plausible deniability, you know? "We can act ruthlessly because *you* were thinking with machine intelligence." You know, "It wasn't us making

that decision.” It was, you know. On some extent, it’s like, “My hands were off the wheel for that one.” But they both know that their hands were on the wheel, you know?

**Austin:** Totally. And there’s no, like, you don’t think that there’s any sort of like, plausible deniability in the sense of like, “Well, that was your fault.” Like, “I didn’t make this mistake.”

**Jack:** Possibly, but I think in the sense of like...

**Austin:** I’m not arguing for that. I’m just trying to paint that picture.

**Jack:** No, no, I’m trying to think about it, because I also don’t—you ever see those Nick and Nora detective, you know, like the third man, you know? And there are those great scenes when they’re at parties, and William Powell and Myrna Loy are like, in different rooms of the party, and are talking to other guests, and will occasionally just turn and look and make eye contact with each other. And they will have these like, little digs at the other person, or there’ll be these little barbs.

**Austin:** Yes, yes.

**Jack:** And you can never quite tell whether or not the barbs are meant, or whether they are intended to be heard by other party guests [**Austin:** Right.] to lull them into this sense of like, “Oh, Nick and Nora are just like us. Even they have their little moments of bickering.”

**Austin:** Right. Their little spats, their little—right, right. Absolutely. This makes sense to me. And I guess that’s another thing that we have to talk about a little bit is like, and why haven’t they been killed? What is it that keeps them safe? What is it that has prevented the Pact, or the Bilats, or Millennium Break, or the newly emerged squad from—you know, the crew of Leap, or the people that—not Leap, jeez—Levi or the stuff that people that Levi has inspired, from simply knocking on the door one day? You know?

**Jack:** I have three answers for you for this. Three sort of small wings. The first is that on some level, that is what they’ve always done. Arbitrage has always been the stealthy fish moving in the dark ocean.



**Austin:** Sure.

**Jack:** And Connadine has always been the person forgettable when you look at them. You know, sort of built into their professional existence is this. I think the second thing is that they've been looking out for each other. You know, they have been—one has been watching the other's place. And there have been close calls. You know? There has been, you know, a cell goes down, but they can swing it this way or that. And the third, and I think this is a big one, is nobody is better at using the Protocol right now than the people who developed it.

**Austin:** Sure. Right.

**Jack:** You know, and it's not just that they're using the contracts and that they're using—with Arbitrage's help, Connadine—

[**Austin** starts]

**Jack:** Sorry?

**Austin:** No, go ahead. Go ahead.

**Jack:** Connadine has managed to make one of these little reality-altering devices in something about the size of, like, a kaleidoscope that just can be shone in someone's face. And, you know—

**Austin:** Full Men in Black “look right here into the light for a second, please.”

**Jack:** Yes, it's, you know, It's on a key ring. It's just, you know.

**Austin:** Yeah, yeah.

**Jack:** But you know, it's not just the contracts, it's the favors that they are working with as well.

**Austin:** This is the thing that I think we have maybe not fully, you know, outlined is regular people use these favors all the time for daily life stuff. Groceries, messages,

tutoring, all sorts of stuff. Arbitrage and Connadine and their agents use them to produce sort of Rube Goldberg machine—the way I was thinking about this the other day was it's the butterfly effect, except you control the butterfly and the wind and everything from the butterfly to the earthquake, right? You align those things such.

**Jack:** They are able to do truly bizarre stuff with this. You know, the stuff that Austin and I were talking about is like, you are compelled to rent an apartment for three days and you don't know why. And then on the second day, a package arrives and it contains a mirror.

**Austin:** You know—sorry, you know why in the lowercase why sense which is because you are being paid six hundred glint to do it. Or because—

**Jack:** And that's real money.

**Austin:** And that's real money. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Glint is at this point the emerging galactic—the post-Principality, post-unified Principality, you know, as the civil war continues, as local warlords emerge, glint seems to be accepted more and more places all the time. You know? And in some ways is like, the dramatic opposite of the literal thing that Levi was pursuing, which is favors are a thing you can just give to your neighbor. Here we have an abstract tracking of that stuff by way of emerging currency. But, yes. The thing of this person is doing it for some pay or for some exchange but they don't know to what end, right?

**Jack:** Yeah.

**Austin:** They've rented this apartment for three days.

**Jack:** Someone shows up and hangs a mirror on the wall in the upstairs bedroom that faces out onto the street below. And you don't know why. It's in the same way that—well, you know why. Because a mirror was set to arrive, [**Austin:** Right.] and the person who hosted the apartment said, you know, “A mirror's going to be arriving today.” It's like, in the same way that, like, distributed manufacturing means that, like, laborers and people working on factory lines have no idea what it is that they're constructing, you

know, they're constructing a part of a part of a part of something. This is happening in terms of like, chains of cause and effect now.

**Austin:** Because that mirror reflects something, or shows someone an apartment across the way something inside the room on a television. And when—and they've been told, "When you look out the window, and in the mirror you see a red ball appear, do this. Pick up the phone and dial this number."

**Jack:** "Play this song on the radio."

**Austin:** Right.

**Jack:** "Throw a ball for a dog, you know."

**Austin:** Right. And bit by bit, this ends in someone putting the pedal down on the accelerator. Or puts the, you know, eventually someone who is actually in very deep but only on a very particular strange trigger, their contract fires, right? For—we saw, for instance, Gallica have to respond to that button being pressed. That was a very literal thing, right? There was a button pressed on Palisade that sent some sort of signal that Gallica responded to. Sometimes you sign a contract with very ridiculous—and I say "contract" here on purpose, right? Sometimes Arbitrage says "Okay, you can sign this contract, I'll get you the thing you need." And this is a direct Arbitrage style hard contract. And the exchange is "when pigs fly, blank." Right?

[Jack laughs]

**Austin:** You know, "When the Dodgers win the world series, I'll do blank." Right? And normally, that's a bad bet if you're the contract writer. But when you're Arbitrage, you go "Alright, well, we just need the Dodgers to win the world series. No big deal." Right? And so you start doing the manipulation.

**Jack:** Yeah. And it's, you know, Arbitrage and Connadine are running these kind of low-scale favors and large-scale contracts themselves regularly, but it's also worth saying they have thousands of agents out there who believe radically different things

about how the world works. That are also running these webs. It's bad. [chuckling] It's bad out there.

**Austin:** It's bad out there.

[musical interlude]

## **Part Seven: A Year, A Vow**

[01:54:02]

**Austin:** Part Seven: A Year, A Vow.

-

**Austin:** Levi, before you can arrive at the coordinates that Brnine sent, your ship receives a message. It receives, like, an immediate local communique. Right? Like, you're going from one Portcullis gate to another. You know, you have like kind of a network through which you can safely travel because, you know, your loosely banded together group of people you've helped, plus Millennium Break, plus maybe some of your own people have captured certain Portcullis gates that are connected. So you're going to that set of coordinates. And then you get a ping. And the message on your screen, like, when it comes across, it has, like, the royal seal of the Apokine, leader of Apostolos on it, you know, like before the—like as the Discord call rings, it does the special "I am the Apokine, ruler of Apostolos" ring. I don't know what that sounds like.

**Sylvi:** It's the Halloween Discord ringtone.

**Austin:** It's the Halloween Discord ringtone. Yeah, that plays. And it is a—I actually think this is like a text message, and I'm kind of picturing the sort of like, like a royal crest, you know? What I'm really truly picturing, because I'm Elden Ring pilled right now, is—because I've been playing to try to get ready for the DLC. Is the way that, like, spells—you know when you cast like, a Carian magic spell, the seal shows up in the air with that, like, bright blue, you know, the bright blue magic color before the spell is cast, and there's like all the different sub-schools? You know what I'm talking about?

**Dre:** Mhm.

**Austin:** It's like, it looks like that, but it's on your like, biggest display, and then when it opens, it says "The Apokine requests a meeting immediately." That might be too intense. It's not a—it doesn't—whatever it is does not come across as a hard demand.

**Dre:** Okay. It's not a threat.

**Austin:** It's not a threat. It is, in fact, you know, as—all of the details are there, right? It says, you know, "We do not mean to alarm you, we've been looking for you for some time. The Apokine wishes to speak with you. We are in the same system as you. We don't want to appear as a threat, and so we are communicating with you before we approach. Or before we reveal ourselves. Would you be..." What is the word I'm looking for that is, like, fancy for "up for a meeting"?

**Dre:** Amenable?

**Austin:** Amenable, yes. To a conversation.

**Dre:** Yeah.

**Austin:** And in front of you decloaks the Stolen Cameo, which is an Apostolosian ship that we saw around the middle of this season when, very briefly, Brnine was taken aboard it after the Stellar Combustor arc. It was the ship that Misericorde and Cor'rina Corrine worked out of. It is the ship that Brnine was interviewed on television on. And now it seems to have become the secret stealth frigate of the exiled on the run Apokine, Cas'alear Rizah. The ship docks with you, and we can kind of jump forward here. You know, I imagine there's a sort of like, air lock situation and a bridge between the two ships. And Cas'alear is not waiting in some throne room. Cas'alear is not waiting to, you know have you led in. Cas'alear is on the other side of that air lock standing with the cane that cas uses. Wearing, you know, what passes as a sort of like, the military uniform for an emperor, you know? Flanked by the three names—or two of the names I just said, Misericorde and Cor'rina Corrine, and also Routine—or not Routine, sorry. Oh my god, who is the former Blue Channel person who hooked up with them?

**Ali:** That's Routine. That's Routine Rennari.

**Dre:** Yeah, that sounds right.

**Sylvi:** Yeah.

**Austin:** That was Routine? That was Routine. Yeah, right, right, right. Sorry. I was confusing Routine Rennari and Midnite Matinee for a second. Yes, Routine Rennari. All three of them standing behind Cas'alear, who I don't know that you met any of those people ever. Right? So, but we have, and the camera is welcoming to them, and they—I guess Cas'alear says,

Austin (as **Cas'alear Rizah**): Would you like to come aboard our ship, or should we come to yours?

Dre (as **Levi**): Um... I guess I will come aboard yours.

**Austin:** And cas nods, and takes a step back, allowing, you know, space for you to come aboard. The Stolen Cameo is a very fancy ship historically. It is a little more dilapidated now, right? It is a little bit like a really expensive yacht that has been used as a—like a blockade runner, or like a smuggler ship for the last few years, right? The last year at least. Since they also left, this crew left Palisade after coming to it. We never really wrapped back around to them during the outro. Or during the final, like, episodes of Questlandia after they showed up. And I think that that kind of represents—not that their request fell on deaf ears. We kind of said, like, okay, they will also get access to the fish teleporter. They will also get, you know, they made connections with Millennium Break, et cetera. And I think that they kept their promise. They came out here and said, “We are going to end the Perfect Millennium.” And no one listened. Because they are not in charge of the Pact of Free States, formerly the Pact of Necessary Venture. They can say they are the Apokine all they want, but they don't control the means of communication. And they're kind of laying this all out to you, right? In whatever room you've met in. Is there some sort of meeting room on your ship?

**Dre:** Oh, no, I went in their ship.

**Austin:** Oh, sorry, you went on their ship. Then yes, there is like a war room. You know, let's make it the—[chuckles] I actually think it is the interview room that Brnine was interviewed on TV in, except it's been, like, refurnished. You know, there's like a big table in there now and stuff. But careful viewers of the TV show Palisade will be like, "Wait a second, this is the room that that asshole interviewed Brnine in!"

[Dre chuckles]

[music - "[Declare An End](#)" by Jack de Quidt begins]

**Austin:** And I think Cas'alear says,

Austin (as **Cas'alear Rizah**): We've heard about your mission. We want to help, but we also need your help.

Dre (as **Levi**): Point of order really quick. How did you hear about it?

Austin (as **Cas'alear Rizah**): We maintain diplomatic contacts with all sorts of people.

Dre (as **Levi**): Okay, so I don't need to, like—I don't have, like, a bug on my ship or something?

Austin (as **Cas'alear Rizah**): No.

Dre (as **Levi**): Okay.

Austin (as **Cas'alear Rizah**): But once we saw movement of Millennium Break forces on Palisade, once we talked to our friends among Wakeful, we began to piece things together. The Pact is not directly under my control anymore. But if you let me be part of this mission, I believe I can turn many of them against Motion.

Dre (as **Levi**): Okay. So... we turn them against Motion. I guess that increases our forces and our odds of success, and then what happens after we win?

Austin (as **Cas'alear Rizah**): Well, during the fight, I need you to introduce me to Perennial.

Dre (as **Levi**): Um... I don't... I don't know if I have that kind of pull, but I know people who do.

**Austin:** Cas nods.

Dre (as **Levi**): To what end?

Austin (as **Cas'alear Rizah**): I'm not certain of much anymore. I, it is fair to say, have had many ideas of my youth challenged in time. I am, however, skeptical of Perennial's good will for us, and so what I say here is hard. Because in the back of my mind, I still feel like I will be selling my soul. I am not so sure that she isn't the adversary. That this all hasn't been some master puppet show. But I have met many people who say otherwise. And I know you and your friends have some among you who do worship her. Or work with her, or—it isn't—this isn't a—I don't know much about—about it all.

Dre (as **Levi**): Sure.

Austin (as **Cas'alear Rizah**): But I do know that we're surrounded by little bits of her. I do know that last year, before we arrived on Palisade, all through the galaxy, the world shook and shuttered because of her. And I think that if she can do that, then maybe she can amplify my voice. And maybe I can make everyone hear me all at once when I say the Perfect Millennium is over, and that the Divine Principality as it stands is done. And whether the Stels remain after that is up to them. But not me. And not anyone named Princept ever again. I can't do that from this little ship. But I do need you to trust me that that's what I'll do.

Dre (as **Levi**): Why is that what you want to do?

Austin (as **Cas'alear Rizah**): Because I've lost too much. Because I think, and have thought for some time, that Millennium Break is right, at least, about... about this millennium, about this version of the world. I do not have my sibling's



vision. And... [sighs] I can't back a Principality led by cowards and deceivers like the Pact. Nor like sycophantic bureaucrats like Cynosure. Better to end it. I hope that whatever you and yours build next is better.

Dre (as **Levi**): And so then what happens to you?

Austin (as **Cas'alear Rizah**): I suspect...

[music - "[Declare An End](#)" by Jack de Quidt ends]

Austin (as **Cas'alear Rizah**): ...I am killed six months later.

Dre (as **Levi**): That's dark.

Austin (as **Cas'alear Rizah**): Is it?

Dre (as **Levi**): Um... yeah?

Austin (as **Cas'alear Rizah**): I'm talking to someone who is allied with a person who killed Dahlia at their apex. The knife is always coming. I want to get something done before it comes for me.

Dre (as **Levi**): Okay. What if the knife doesn't come?

Austin (as **Cas'alear Rizah**): I have no interest in leadership. I've always been, at best, a sergeant on the field, never a politician in the state room.

Dre (as **Levi**): Well, I mean, once this is all over, if you're looking for field work, I think I could help you out with that.

Austin (as **Cas'alear Rizah**): I'll consider it. And I'll give you command for this mission of my—the Cameo and its people. I suspect the Pact will turn on each other, and you'll only have to deal with those most loyal, those most tied to Motion. But you'll need all the help you can get.

Dre (as **Levi**): Okay.

**Dre:** Sticks out his hand to shake.

**Austin:** Cas reaches across and shakes yours. Cas'—the grip is good, but the look on cas' face is—does look like cas believes that they've just made a deal with the devil.

**Dre:** That's mean. I'm not the devil.

**Austin:** Well, you're not the devil. Perennial is the devil.

**Dre:** I know. Perennial. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Austin:** Yeah, uh-huh. But you're friends of friends of the devil.

**Dre:** Yeah, fair.

[musical interlude]

## **Part Eight: A Year, A Theist**

[02:07:54]

**Austin:** Part Eight: A Year, A Theist.

The Calculated Vigilance had spent ten years in the dark. For its captain, its only crew member, that meant ten years of isolation. Ten years of quiet prayer and reading, of messages sent, responses awaited. Ten years of reading the world without him in it.

The plan had been concocted well before the operation above Partizan. It was in the back room of the chapel on Fort Icebreaker, days before Millennium Break swept into Cruciat and made their presence truly known to everyone on that holy moon. Gur Sevraq did not know how things would go that day, or in the months and years that followed. They did not know if their allies would find the so-called Exemplar of the True Divine. They did not know if the Curtain and the Pact of Necessary Venture would put aside their differences to crush these emerging revolutionaries. They did not know what would happen in the clouds of Girandole months later. What would happen to Autonomy Itself, the True Divine, the God of the Resin Heart and of Logos Kantel. And they

certainly did not know what would happen to them, standing on top of Fort Icebreaker in the rain, then swept away by the waves below, and then—well, Svir would never know that, either.

And so the plan was sketched. A ship with an Equiaxed pilot whose body was designed for periods of long hibernation and slow metabolism. And whose heart was filled with faith in progression.

Svir nominated himself immediately. Svir, who had grown up in Logos City, who had walked the Prophet's Path, who had felt the True Divine in his life. Svir, who did not have family that was not the church. Svir, who could not bear the sounds of combat. Svir, who hoped Millennium Break would win that day, but who could not kill or steal or lie without it racking him with guilt.

So, at the edge of the combat zone, a stolen, modified Apostolosian ship slipped away. The only sort fast enough to make the journey possible, let alone comprehensible. He would travel through dark space for as long as it took. Decades—centuries, maybe—until he reached the Nobel. He would scoop fuel from the stars as he went, live on a slow body fed on hydroponic vegetables, grains, mushrooms, all of which, including his body, would be partly supported by solar cells he'd learned to repair.

Logos Kantel, it's said, traveled for a millennium. Certainly he could do a fraction of that.

The first two years were, all said, fairly easy. Svir was close enough that the Strand terminal, which had been installed on his new home, gave him regular updates. News from the Reflecting Pool where his church had joined the other so-called heretics under the protection of Perennial's Witch. He read updates about Millennium Break's campaigns, and it wasn't all violence and intimidation and theft. Sometimes it was misdirection and protection. Sometimes it was agriculture. If he'd known or understood that he could have been a farmer, maybe, he thought. Maybe he would have stayed.

Then, just as the first year of his journey came to a close, something that the galaxy was calling miraculous happened: Kalmeria. A new type of fuel for a new type of engine. It was not a miracle in his eyes, but he was impressed by one thing: the fact that he had not been forgotten. An old friend of Gur's, the erstwhile night mayor of Logos City, had pulled some strings. A vessel equipped with, and carrying, one of these new engines, would arrive and perform an in-flight upgrade on the Calculated Vigilance.

The engineers who arrived weren't believers, but they did not need to be. They were company. And Svir felt the True Divine in them anyway. The way they laughed with each other revealed the contours of a deep love. Not romantic love, necessarily, but the sort of love that shapes and reshapes, that pulls and pushes and changes the other.

Gur Sevraq had given many sermons about the nature of progression. It was, for them, about changing the nature of the Principality; or broader, finally moving past the cycle where liberation leads only to imperial regression. Progression was about leaving all of that behind. But Svir was not a revolutionary. Svir did not have the long view of the historian, or the righteous voice of the firebrand, or the exegetical insight of the theologian. Gur seemed to have all three.

It wasn't that Svir disagreed with the prophet of the Church of the Resin Heart. He simply understood it all in terms that made more sense to him. He felt progression first on one of the beaches of the Isle of Logos. He had moved out of his childhood Columnar frame and into a new one—one that his mother, Equiaxed herself, had gently installed tactile and olfactory sense organs into, which the young Svir had been begging for for years.

And so, on the first day of the weekend, he'd experienced the beach as he had all his life—sight and sound. Horizon, and bright sand, and the gentle sound of waves. But on the second, on his birthday, the sea—the holy sea, made by Logos Kantel—came to him before he could lay his eyes on it, before he could even hear it, in the smell of the salty air. And the beach, not just a granular solid which shifts under weight, but a medium carrying heat, a landscape made of tiny particulates, shaped not only by the waves and the wind, but by the feet of others.

He stood still, watching the waves come in, feeling the sand growing colder under his feet. Feeling newly connected not only to the holy moon, but to the others on the beach who left their own marks on the sand, who added to the sounds and the smells, who splashed and swam and played—they were all celebrating his birthday, too. They just didn't know it.

That was progression, too, for Svir. A shift in how you relate to the world. The recognition that other people aren't just on the beach with you; that they *make* the beach with you. That you *are* the beach. That you are always at least the edge of the other. How could we not find a new shape once we understood and accepted that?

But Svir was not on the beach anymore. Yes, the engine, a miracle, would cut his journey in half, at least. It also meant he would grow further, faster. The Calculated Vigilance was in the dark, far from the holy moon's warmth.

The Strand terminal never lost connection, but it did grow slower. Here, with no nearby nodes to rebound off of. And so messages began to come slower. The lives of those he left behind became chaotic.

One day, after months at the edge of something called the Twilight Mirage, they seemed to slip away entirely.

That wasn't the worst day, though. The worst day was when he finally read what had happened below the clouds of Girandole. Generally speaking, the people of the Strand network, the people of Millennium Break, they believed in Gur's political vision. But not in his theology.

And so, what they described happening there, the death of the prophet Logos Kantel, the bright eradication of Autonomy Itself, the True Divine—no, it wasn't eradication that got to Svir. It was the reduction.

They spoke about it like it was just another machine. Like one of the Principality's Divines, or maybe like the Perennial Wave. Not just material, but vulgar. And then he read what had come of it all.

The new miracle engine wasn't an engine at all. The miracle fuel wasn't a fuel, it was a particle. Kalmeria, a blend of the Perennial Wave, the Divine Motion, and—they said its name with no reverence at all—Autonomy Itself.

And here he was, nearly a decade in, in search of something that they believed they'd just put in his gas tank. And maybe they had.

Svir cried quietly until he realized that he wanted to be heard more than he wanted to cry, and so he started crying louder. For a while, loudness was an answer for loneliness. Prayers once whispered became chanted. He would sing while harvesting the little tomatoes he lived on. He would stand at the front of the ship, and with every door open, scream.

Once, only once, he heard an echo return. Now that was a miracle.

But in most climates, including this one, loud precipitates quiet. Stark, cruel, heavy quiet. His plan had always been to put himself into a hibernative state after the first ten or so years of travel. Once he was fully confident that the systems of the ship were working. Once things had changed so much back home that it stopped feeling like home at all. It was time, Svir thought. With this new engine, it had been time.

A slow walk through the ship. Not a final walk, but a farewell for now to the ship that had been his only companion. He typed a message on the terminal, letting anyone who cared know that he'd be going offline for a while. He wrote it in the form of an apology, as if he'd failed, even though here in the empty vacuum, it felt like he was the one who had been failed.

He expected that over the next week or two a few kind wishes would come in from people who did not understand his mission, but who still wanted to support a fellow traveler. He decided that he did not want to wait for them.

The modifications he made to his body meant that he didn't need any sort of cryopod. Not like those old sleep detachment stories. He prayed—prayed that he would wake to find something, anything, that made him feel like what he felt on that beach. A

connection, a love that would shape him, reshape him into something useful, or something whole.

*Progression*, he said to himself, as he laid down on his regular bed. *Progression*, tapping the bedside button that controlled the lights. *Progression*, he said, dropping the room's temperature to something just past cool. *Progression*, he prayed, closing his eyes.

But Svir had never liked the cold. He was a child of the beach, and if that place was still his home in any way, it was this one: he slept better in warm, humid air. In the cold, he was a light sleeper. Easily rustled by sound, by touch, by smell. And so it was not long—weeks, not months, or years—when he found himself roused by the strangest thing.

The shaking of his ship. The sound of voices speaking an unfamiliar language. And the smell of ionized gas in the air.

[musical interlude]

## **Part Nine: A Year, A Bridge**

[02:21:23]

**Austin:** Part Nine: A Year, A Bridge.

-

**Austin:** Finally.

**Ali:** Hello.

**Austin:** What are the coordinates, Brnine? Where are you?

**Ali:** Um... yeah. I, um... It's funny, I was—first I was picturing Brnine on, like, a command ship, but once it was like, Brnine isn't available.

**Austin:** Oh, sure.

**Ali:** Where we left on Brnine was that they had just lost a war, question mark?  
[chuckles]

**Austin:** No, I think you—oh yeah, maybe you're right, it was lost. It was lost, yeah.

**Ali:** It was lost. It was my last misfortune, it was like, you live through Palisade again and it doesn't come together.

**Austin:** Yeah.

**Ali:** So I think that, like, Brnine is like on a camp somewhere, like, handing out soup. Like, this is like, a war-torn place that, **[Austin:** Yeah.] you know, there's tents and a little community gathered around it, but like, it takes a little bit to get out there, and... you know, it's...

**Austin:** Sure does.

**Ali:** You know, tough to get through whatever the, like, lockdown that can be created to like, protect whatever dome of, you know, whatever. Millennium Break, you know, camps or whatever. And yeah, that's how you find—that's how you find Brnine.

**Austin:** What's the—yeah, is there anything—is there anything—are you—are you still in a command role, or are you in a “head down, feeding people soup” role?

**Ali:** It's tough, because they had, like, throughout the epilogue had gotten these two sort of significant promotions.

**Austin:** Right.

**Ali:** But if they are like, unavailable, then I wonder if it's like, a reorganization. [chuckles]

**Austin:** Interesting.

**Ali:** You know, Brnine came to one of the, like—one of the fortunes, I think, was like, Brnine is able to delegate.



**Austin:** Right, right.

**Ali:** And I think that maybe that can be actually a misfortune in terms of like, well, there's only so—you know, you can delegate so efficiently that people notice that you're redundant or whatever. Right?

**Austin:** Oof.

[**Dre** whines]

**Ali:** [laughing] So.

**Austin:** That's what they say at first, and then they'll come around. You know.

**Ali:** Sure.

**Dre:** Yeah.

**Austin:** They'll realize someone else is gonna have to do the delegation, and they're gonna do it worse. You know? Truly, I have seen it happen.

[**Sylvi** laughs]

**Austin:** Let me tell you about when, you know, the new senior management arrived at Vice and hired all of their old friends instead of hiring people who were, like, good. You know?

[**Ali** laughs]

**Austin:** Anyway, let's get back to this scene where Levi [laughing] hires all of his old friends.

[**Ali** laughs]

**Sylvi:** Yeah. Yeah. It's different when we do it.

**Austin:** It is. We do it right. Our friends are cool and good.

**Keith:** It's—right, you have to judge that—

**Dre:** Our friends are qualified.

**Austin:** Yeah.

**Sylvi:** Yeah.

**Keith:** Yeah, you have to judge that decision based on the quality of the friends.

**Austin:** Exactly.

**Sylvi:** Yeah. Just have better friends.

**Keith:** Right. And if it's realistic to have a whole new cast of characters for the finale.

[**Austin** laughs]

**Keith:** It sounds insane to do that.

**Sylvi:** Yeah.

**Austin:** So yeah. That's where you find Brnine. You said—is it domed? You said it was like a domed area?

**Ali:** I think so. I think that's kind of fun. I was talking about it more of like, a, you know, section of the map or whatever, but it would be cool if it was like, this—I don't want to say, like, BluSky-esque, because I don't even know where that technology would exist.

**Austin:** Right, right. Who knows?

**Ali:** Maybe it's like, one of those Star Wars sea planets, you know? [chuckling] Planets that are just one type of biome.

**Austin:** Ooh. Yeah, planets that are just one—listen. You know?

**Sylvi:** Oh, yeah.

**Austin:** I am not a hundred percent sure what we're doing next in this setting, but I do think it might be more Star Wars-y than we've ever been before, so.

**Ali:** Sure.

**Austin:** One biome per planet, so.

**Keith:** Locked in.

**Austin:** Ocean planet, you're in an underwater bubble dome.

**Ali:** Right. It's maybe one of those, like, surface ones.

**Austin:** Okay.

**Ali:** But it's like a city on a dome.

**Sylvi:** You're with the Gungans.

**Austin:** You're with the Gungans.

**Ali:** I'm with the Gungans. [chuckling] And it's not going well.

**Austin:** Nooo!

[Sylvi laughs]

**Dre:** Meesa Calvin Brnine!

**Ali:** Anakin Skywalker wasn't there to shoot the thingy in the thing, and then the...  
[laughs]

**Austin:** Oh my god, right. It's just the end of Phantom Menace, except they lose the war.

**Ali:** Uh-huh.

**Austin:** Miserable. You need an Anakin. That was the problem.

**Sylvi:** Yeah. Clearly. Too many kids. [chuckles]

[Ali chuckles]

**Austin:** Levi, do you have like an underwa—how do you get underwater? Do you have an underwater suit with rocket boots?

**Dre:** Probably. Yeah, that sounds right.

**Keith:** No rebreather?

**Sylvi:** Levi has rocket boots for every occasion.

[Ali chuckles]

**Dre:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Austin:** I love this about him.

**Sylvi:** Me too.

**Austin:** How do you roll up on Brnine? On your rocket boots. I mean, we know that. But like, you get inside the dome. What is your approach here?

**Dre:** [hums] I guess, like, how many people are at this base? Or in this dome thing?

**Ali:** Um... I don't know. What's the population of a city? Does that seem fair? Like...

**Keith:** Depends on the city.

**Austin:** Depends on the city, yeah.

**Ali:** Yeah, see? [chuckling] This is tough.

**Keith:** A million? Five million? Twelve million?

**Janine:** City or town?

**Ali:** Yeah.

**Dre:** Or village?

**Ali:** Well, it's like, I mean, take—okay. [laughs]

**Keith:** Here we go.

**Dre:** Mhm, mhm, mhm.

**Ali:** This is real math here.

**Keith:** Let's roll up our sleeves on this. Let's get into it.

**Ali:** [laughs] Take the population of, like, a sci-fi planet, which is already just a city.

**Keith:** Okay.

**Ali:** And then think about all of the counter-revolutionaries slash refugees that would be a part of that group.

**Austin:** Right.

**Ali:** And take 30% of those people died, I guess.

**Austin:** Oh my god.

**Dre:** Wow.

**Keith:** Okay, so like, five hundred million.

**Sylvi:** Wow.

**Austin:** Well, we don't—okay.

**Ali:** Let's do twenty thou—twenty thousand. Is that too many?

**Janine:** Atlantic City, bigger or smaller?

**Austin:** Oh, I knew you were gonna say this. Janine recently—

**Janine:** [laughing] I only just learned how many people live in Atlantic City.

**Austin:** Alright, let's—okay, pause—alright. Here's a question. Don't say the number. How many people do you all think live in Atlantic City?

**Dre:** Um...

**Janine:** Sylvi has to answer first.

**Sylvi:** Twelve. Twelve. I said twelve.

**Austin:** That's not a real guess. Give me a real guess.

**Janine:** A real guess.

**Sylvi:** Twelve thousand. [chuckles] I don't know.

**Dre:** I would guess two hundred thousand.

**Sylvi:** Oh, I went too low, huh?

**Austin:** So two hundred thousand, Dre, twelve thousand, Sylvi?

**Keith:** I've seen a—okay.

**Austin:** Just give me the number. Don't look it up.

**Keith:** Okay.

**Austin:** Guess.

**Ali:** Twenty thousand is the amount that I think cities are, so I'm just gonna say that.  
[laughs]

**Austin:** So you said twenty thousand.

**Keith:** Okay, that's crazy. That's wild.

**Sylvi:** This is why I said twelve thousand. Because I was like, well, Ali said twenty.

**Keith:** Okay, it's gotta be more than that. Janine, what did you say?

**Austin:** Janine already knows. Janine can't guess.

**Janine:** I know, so I can't guess.

**Keith:** Oh, sorry.

**Sylvi:** See, I don't think that many people actually live there. Maybe I'm wrong.

**Keith:** I've seen a map of it. There's a lot of water there. And it's not—it doesn't look huge.

**Janine:** None of these things you're saying are numbers.

**Keith:** But cities are huge. I'm gonna say eighty thousand.

**Sylvi:** Damn.

**Austin:** Eighty thousand. Closest without going over is Ali. Ali said twenty thousand.

**Ali:** [mimics air horns]

**Janine:** Oh, was it—oh right, it was Ali, yeah.

**Dre:** Oh, wow. It's that small?

**Sylvi:** Damn.

**Austin:** 38,000 people, yes.

**Sylvi:** Ah, man.

**Keith:** Holy shit, that's tiny.

**Austin:** Yes. Yes, and even the whole metro area.

**Ali:** Twenty thousand people is so many.

**Austin:** It's—not for a city.

**Janine:** No. Absolutely not.

**Dre:** No, not for like a city with Atlantic City's profile.

**Austin:** That's exactly it. We don't know the—you don't know the name of most cities that have 38,000 people in them.

**Keith:** Right.

**Austin:** You know? That's really what it is.

**Keith:** How about Rutland, Vermont?

**Austin:** Does that have that many people?

**Keith:** Yeah, something like that.

**Austin:** Yeah. I mean, like, here are some hundred thousand cities. Stop me when you know one of these. Davenport.

**Dre:** Yeah, I know that one.

**Sylvi:** Iowa?

**Ali:** I've heard of Davenport.

**Austin:** Well, tell me a thing about Davenport besides the state it's in.

**Sylvi:** Seth Rollins is from there.

**Austin:** Okay, well, shut the fuck up.

[Ali laughs]

**Keith:** I bet there's five Davenports.

**Dre:** Wow!



[Sylvi laughs]

**Austin:** Hesperia.

**Dre:** No.

**Keith:** No.

**Sylvi:** No.

**Austin:** Suffolk, Virginia.

**Keith:** No.

**Dre:** I've been there, I think.

**Austin:** Oh, okay.

**Sylvi:** There's gotta be a wrestler from there.

**Ali:** Okay, I'm—

**Austin:** I'm gonna keep reading. New Bedford, Yuma—I've heard of Yuma.

**Dre:** I've heard of Yuma.

**Austin:** And Albany—

**Keith:** Yeah, I've heard of Yuma. Because of 3:10 to Yuma.

**Austin:** Right, because of 3:10 to Yuma. Albany is the first one on this list with 101,000 that I, like, know anything about. You know what I mean?

**Dre:** Yeah, that's the capital of New York, right?

**Keith:** Why—

**Austin:** Right. Correct.

**Ali:** Okay, I googled a number that I can contextualize an amount of people in, which is how many people are in Disneyland on one day. [chuckles]

[**Janine** laughs]

**Sylvi:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Ali:** 46,000.

**Dre:** Wow.

**Ali:** Which is like, a lot.

**Dre:** That's a lot.

**Keith:** I just want to—to put this into perspective, Georgia's bigger by a lot than both Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

**Austin:** Yeah.

**Keith:** Pawtucket's population is like, two hundred thousand.

**Austin:** Right.

**Keith:** And Boston's population is multiple million.

**Austin:** Million, yeah. Yes, yes, yes.

**Dre:** Yeah.

**Keith:** Million, yeah. Boston proper is like three quarters of a million, and then like, greater Boston is like, three and a half million.

**Austin:** Right, right. This is—

**Janine:** So, yes or no, this is an underwater Atlantic City bubble? Bubble town full of revolutionaries?

**Ali:** Right. It is—yeah. Twenty thousand was a perfect estimate, I just want to say to myself.

**Austin:** Uh-huh.

**Dre:** Yeah. No, you crushed it.

**Ali:** Because if you imagine, like, a Disneyland size city, for instance... [chuckles]

**Dre:** Ohh.

**Sylvi:** Yeah.

**Ali:** You could like, notice that it is less populated than it should be.

**Austin:** Yes.

**Dre:** Now, would you call this, potentially, a “city of tomorrow”?

[Ali laughs]

**Austin:** Oh.

**Ali:** It might be. It might be.

**Dre:** Okay, okay, okay.

**Austin:** Interesting, interesting.

**Ali:** Perhaps.

**Janine:** And on Saturday nights, would you say it is something of an Animal Kingdom?

[Austin laughs] [Ali and Dre chuckle]

**Keith:** And also, maybe Epcot.

**Dre:** That’s what the “C-O-T” in Epcot stands for, Keith.

**Sylvi:** Mickey Mouse. I wanted to be involved.

**Keith:** Oh, is that true?

**Dre:** I believe so. I forget what the “E-P” is, but yeah, Epcot is an acronym. I’m pretty sure.

**Keith:** I think it’s Epiphone. Like the guitar.

**Sylvi:** [laughs] Just—yeah, sponsored by the guitars. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Austin:** Yeah.

**Dre:** Yes.

**Keith:** It’s Epiphone, City of Tomorrow.

**Dre:** “Experimental prototype community of tomorrow.” Sorry, not city.

**Austin:** Yeah.

**Sylvi:** City City.

**Austin:** City City. Yeah, Epcot is a City City.

**Dre:** Yeah, no, Epcot is totally fuckin’ City City.

**Austin:** A hundred percent.

**Dre:** A hundred percent, yeah.

**Sylvi:** Yeah.

**Austin:** A direct touchstone, yes. The original Epcot design, not really the thing it is now so much. A little bit, but not so much. Anyway.

**Janine:** Anyway, so Brnine is serving Dole Whip under the sea. What’s next?

[Ali chuckles]

**Dre:** Sick. Yeah, so is there like, a whole, like, security thing when I get here? Like, are people like, “Who the fuck are you?”

**Ali:** I feel like you might have clearance based on the text message situation.

**Janine:** The text message did not mention Levi at all.

**Keith:** I think based on the finale, they know who you are.

**Ali:** Right.

**Austin:** This is true. This is true. Good point.

**Dre:** Oh, that’s true. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Austin:** Everyone’s like, “Yo, that’s Levi!”

Dre (as **Levi**): Hey. Um, can anybody help me find Calvin Brnine?

**Keith:** Who? [laughs]

Austin (as **Citizen**): I think they left.

**Dre:** Good question. Does Calvin Brnine still go by Calvin Brnine?

**Austin:** Oh my god.

**Ali:** Yeah.

**Austin:** Yeah? Okay.

**Dre:** Okay.

**Austin:** Someone eventually directs you to some sort of bank that’s been turned into a food distribution center. You know?

**Janine:** Wow, a literal food bank.

**Austin:** True, yes.

**Dre:** Damn.

**Ali:** Woah. [chuckles]

[**Dre** laughs]

**Ali:** [laughing] That took me a minute.

**Austin:** That really—that one really is a delayed reaction.

[**Ali** laughs]

**Austin:** And you get escorted there, and I think that there's definitely, like, some young revolutionaries who are, like, trying—a couple of them are bragging to you, Levi. And they're talking about all—they're like, talking about all the hot shit they've been up to. And then other ones are like, "We keep losing, can you please stay? Can you help us?" You know? "If you were here, this wouldn't have gone this way."

**Dre:** Hoo, boy. Gosh, yeah. I think at this point, Levi has probably gotten decent enough at like, making that kind of smalltalk.

**Austin:** Right, yeah, yeah, yeah. Sure.

**Dre:** It's been a year, right?

**Austin:** Yep.

**Dre:** I don't think they are starry-eyed and like, overwhelmed by this. So, I think they politely and tactfully kind of move past those conversations and just keep it moving for now.

**Austin:** And eventually, you find your way there.

**Dre:** Mhm.

**Austin:** Brnine's serving people soup.

**Dre:** Now, is the play for Levi to get in line?

[Ali laughs]

**Sylvi:** Oh my god.

**Austin:** A classic maneuver.

**Ali:** [laughing] That's insane. That's insane.

**Sylvi:** That is crazy.

**Janine:** That's so funny, because it really presumes that someone can't look beyond the first person in the line. And just be like, "Why is Levi there?" Like, ten people away.

**Ali:** I can step away. Part of finding me can be...

**Sylvi:** "Is that the fucking kid with the rocket shoes?"

**Ali:** Can be that I can step away. [laughs] If that makes the introductory part of this easier.

**Dre:** Well, my other thing was gonna be, you know, Levi could just hop behind the counter with you and help.

**Ali:** Oh, sure, yeah.

**Dre:** To get through the lunch rush or whatever.

**Austin:** There we go.

**Ali:** Yeah.

**Dre:** Remember, Levi started off in a fuckin' catering business.

**Ali:** Mhm.

**Austin:** True. True. And, again, part of the thing that seems like Levi's boys or whatever the name of your crew is, what y'all get up to is the sort of mutual aid type work too, right? So.

**Dre:** Yeah, yeah. God, we're just gonna end up calling them Levi's boys, aren't we?

**Austin:** We gotta get a name. We gotta get a name.

**Sylvi:** The big LB.

**Keith:** [laughs] They're all sick. We can't use them.

[**Austin** laughs]

Dre (as **Levi**): It's nice to see you, captain.

Ali (as **Brnine**): Hey, yeah. What are you doing all the way out here?

Dre (as **Levi**): Finding you.

Ali (as **Brnine**): Oh, uh, cool, hey.

Dre (as **Levi**): Hey. I see you haven't changed much.

Ali (as **Brnine**): Um... yeah. What's up?

Dre (as **Levi**): Do you want the long story or the short story?

Ali (as **Brnine**): Um... how important is this to you?

[**Austin** scoffs] [**Keith** laughs]

**Sylvi:** God damn.

**Janine:** [laughing] What the fuck?

Dre (as **Levi**): Wow. Okay, so short. I get it.

**Ali:** Well, I would hear you out, if it was like an emotional plea, or whatever.



Dre (as **Levi**): Um, it's...

**Sylvi**: But if it's not, fuck off.

**Janine**: [cross] [laughing] But if it's just long, fuck you.

**Dre**: I just wanted to talk to you about my Pokemon cards, but okay...

[group chuckles]

**Sylvi**: "I got a new commander deck that I thought you'd find cool."

[**Dre** and **Ali** laugh]

Dre (as **Levi**): Yeah, it's pretty important. The short story is I'm getting a crew together, and we're gonna go kill Motion before Motion can kill Perennial.

[car engine revs in background]

**Ali**: Damn. Sorry. [chuckles] I'm suffering from the car.

**Austin**: There's someone doing donuts out front of the food bank.

**Ali**: Yeah. [laughs]

**Dre**: "This soup's so good!"

**Janine**: It's just the rocket skates backfiring.

[**Ali** laughs]

Ali (as **Brnine**): Motion, huh?

Dre (as **Levi**): Yeah. Weirdly enough, Eclectic is the one who told me about it.

Ali (as **Brnine**): How is he?

Dre (as **Levi**): That's, uh... he wasn't sure.

Ali (as **Brnine**): [sighing] Yeah. I guess, who is? Um, that sounds serious. Yeah. Do you need to talk through it, or do you need some names, or...

Dre (as **Levi**): No, I need you.

Ali (as **Brnine**): Oh. Uh... I did that one already.

Dre (as **Levi**): Yeah, you don't want to... old time's sake?

Ali (as **Brnine**): Levi, the closer I get to this, the worse it's gonna go.

Dre (as **Levi**): What are you talking about?

Ali (as **Brnine**): I...

[Ali chuckles]

Ali (as **Brnine**): Um, the reality of the situation?

Dre (as **Levi**): What do you mean? What's gonna get worse?

Ali (as **Brnine**): Um... okay. Um, I would love to help you. But, um, I'm kind of tied up, and I—by your example, I think that there are better people that could be there in my place.

Dre (as **Levi**): No, there's not. Do you not—you had a whole ship full of people who believed in you in a way that I don't know if I've ever seen.

Ali (as **Brnine**): Yeah, and it was nice, and those people all were encouraged, and went on to do great things.

Dre (as **Levi**): Yeah, and a lot of them are here back at the ship waiting for me to bring you back.

Ali (as **Brnine**): You came all the way here for this?

Dre (as **Levi**): Yeah, dude. I came here all the way for you.

[Ali chuckles]

**Sylvi:** [tenderly] “Yeah, bro. Come on, man.”

**Ali:** “Stop making it weird, man.”

**Austin:** “My man.”

**Sylvi:** “You’re my number one, dude. Come on.”

**Dre:** I feel comfortable saying Levi says dude.

**Ali:** Yeah.

**Austin:** Yeah. I’m good with it. “It’s us, big dog.”

[Austin, Ali, and Dre laugh]

Ali (as **Brnine**): [sighs] Well, what do you need? Like, actually?

Dre (as **Levi**): [exhales] Fuck if I know. I mean, for the last year, I’ve been doing a lot of pretty cool stuff. Fighting giant space battles and killing a Divine is not on the list. That’s been on your list, though.

Ali (as **Brnine**): Uh... yeah. I... yep. Um... fuck it, sure.

Dre (as **Levi**): Yeah?

Ali (as **Brnine**): Yeah.

Dre (as **Levi**): You need me to help you, like, settle anything before you go?

Ali (as **Brnine**): Um, no, give me until tomorrow afternoon, and we can go, and, uh... yeah.

Dre (as **Levi**): Okay, but, you’re not gonna do the thing where you say “give me until tomorrow afternoon,” and then I like, show up at the meeting place tomorrow

afternoon, and there's a note that says you've like, fucked off to some corner of the galaxy, right? You're not gonna do that?

Ali (as **Brnine**): That would be so fucking funny. [chuckles]

[**Dre** chuckles]

**Austin**: Yeah, I was—yeah. Uh-huh. Calvin Brnine flight risk.

**Ali**: Oh, that was in character. I'm sorry to say.

**Austin**: Oh.

**Ali**: [laughing] That was Brnine saying that.

**Austin**: Sorry. Perfect. Good.

Ali (as **Brnine**): No. no, I'll be there. I—it's—I have that idea now, unfortunately.

Dre (as **Levi**): Shit.

Ali (as **Brnine**): Some lessons you didn't learn, Levi.

[**Sylvi** laughs]

Dre (as **Levi**): Well...

**Sylvi**: "Old dog's still got a few new tricks."

[**Ali** and **Dre** laugh]

Dre (as **Levi**): It'll be nice to learn by example again, captain.

Ali (as **Brnine**): Yeah, um... cool. Okay. Well then, I'll see you then.

Dre (as **Levi**): Okay. Where—where?

Ali (as **Brnine**): On the dock.

Dre (as **Levi**): Oh, okay. Alright. Don't do the note thing.

Ali (as **Brnine**): I promise. I'm a guy of my word.

Dre (as **Levi**): Okay.

[**Sylvi** laughs]

**Janine**: You should do the note thing, but the note is "look behind you," and then you're there.

[group laughter]

**Austin**: You should do the note thing, but it's a series of clues leading to other notes, like an easter egg hunt.

**Janine**: You should do the note thing, but you're on the ship when Levi...

**Austin**: Yeah, you're already there. Yeah.

**Dre**: Storming back in, "Fuckin' Brnine—oh."

**Austin**: You are there the next day.

**Ali**: I am. I am there.

**Dre**: Yeah. I mean, to me, the scene is like, you know, it's Levi, it's Cori, it's Thisbe, like—

**Austin**: [cross] Yeah. It's Cori, yeah.

**Dre**: It's Leap, you know, they're all standing at, like, one end of the dock and...

**Janine**: Do they get there early because there is a worry that Brnine might be there early to put the note, [chuckling] and you want to catch them?

[**Ali** and **Dre** laugh]

**Austin:** Oh my god.

**Dre:** No, I don't think so.

**Austin:** Oh, that's funny.

**Janine:** Okay. It's fully on faith. Alright.

**Dre:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, not to stir it up too bad. What's it like for Brnine and Thisbe to see each other for the first time in, like, a year?

**Janine:** Thisbe brought a glass jar full of slime.

[Ali chuckles]

**Janine:** For Brnine.

[Sylvi laughs]

**Keith:** Like, for Brnine? Like, "this is for you"?

**Janine:** Yeah, it's like—it's kind of—you know when people build those, like, self-sustaining terrariums that are all sealed up?

**Dre:** Mhm.

**Ali:** Uh-huh.

**Austin:** Ohh.

**Keith:** Yeah.

**Janine:** It's one of those, but it's with the moon slime. So it's sealed up, but there's, like, a bit of radioactive fuel inside, because it needs the radiation, and then there's like, a lamp, and then there's like some rocks, and then it's just like, inches and inches of solid slime.

**Dre:** I think it's beautiful that Thisbe's love language is slime.

[**Austin** and **Janine** laugh]

Ali (as **Brnine**): Uh, thank you.

Janine (as **Thisbe**): You don't need to feed it in any way. It will take care of itself.

[music outro - "[Nothing is Stationary](#)" by Jack de Quidt begins]

Keith (as **Leap**): Did you bring enough for everybody?

Janine (as **Thisbe**): No.

[**Ali** chuckles]

Sylvi (as **Cori**): It's pretty gnarly, but it's pretty cool, Captain.

Ali (as **Brnine**): Uh, yeah, I'm gonna have a great time, um... looking at it? You said?

Keith (as **Leap**): What are you gonna name it?

Sylvi (as **Cori**): If you, like, push it into it while it's still in the container, it'll make a fart noise.

Janine (as **Thisbe**): Do not open the container. You will irradiate yourself.

Sylvi (as **Cori**): Oh.

[**Austin** and **Keith** laugh]

Ali (as **Brnine**): Sick.

Sylvi (as **Cori**): I need to go to the doctor.

[group laughter]

**Austin**: The gang's back together.