

Getting Lost

Madison Scott-Clary

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Contents

Contents	2
I	4
Chapter One	5
Chapter Two	9
Chapter Three	14
Chapter Four	17
Chapter Five	20
II	28
Chapter One	29
Chapter Two	33
Chapter Three	38
Chapter Four	43
Chapter Five	47
Chapter Six	51
Chapter Seven	54
Chapter Eight	58

Chapter Nine **62**

III **64**

Part I

Chapter One

“Alright, everyone, it’s midnight, time to start packing up,” Johansson called. “Ross, we’re short one, can you start pulling together all of the mics? RJ will help you get them sorted.”

“Mmm,” RJ offered through the sound system. Ey was busy putting the theater to bed, and couldn’t spare more than a meager few syllables to the rest of the cast and crew, though ey knew that ey’d need to help Ross out. “Get a headset, Ross, so I don’t have to talk through the speakers.”

The theater purred quietly to em, relaxing and unwinding around em after the tenseness of running rehearsal. RJ and the room let out a soft, long-held breath together, feeling muscles and wires relax, nerves and current disentangle themselves from the task at hand. Speakers signed off and went to bed one by one through RJ’s gentle attentions, as the virtual board set about the task of returning to neutral, all of the gain knobs orienting themselves, then all of the monitor knobs, the sliders, the whole system ticking as it cooled down, minus the channel ey’d need to keep open to Ross.

“Hey boss, got a headset. Where do you want me to start?”

“Grab the lead, first,” RJ murmured through the open channel. “Then Sarah and Catherine, they’ve got the nice mics. They should have a tiny number painted on the costume side that matches up with their box. All of the boxes are stacked in the pit, by the front wall, you should be able to get them out in one load, though be careful taking them back.”

“Got it, heading down to the pit now.”

RJ left the channel on just in case, though the soft sounds of breathing and the occasional curse as Ross bumped his head on the pit cover were distracting, while ey set about going through eir notes with the sleepy theater for the next night’s rehearsal, the last one before they went live. Ey knew the show better than most of the cast, since ey had to learn everyone’s lines, plus a few cues when ey’d have to take care not to pick up any of the sound effects. Gun-shots and the like.

The theater’s job was to simply work with RJ and the lighting crew, responding to their knowledge of what was going on in the play, while RJ and Caitlin’s job, as sound and lights, was to respond to the stage manager’s near encyclopedic knowledge of the play as well as of the house. All sound was under RJ’s jurisdiction, including managing communication between the hands, the manager, and emself and Caitlin.

They were all as ghosts in this, even the theater. Their job was one that should be totally invisible to the audience, because it would only become visible if they fucked up. No one wanted to fuck up. Even the theater seemed to feel a sense of pride in doing its job and doing it well.

RJ soothed the room with a gentle cooing and reluctantly started the process of pulling back, closing the channel with Ross and putting all of the headsets to bed last of all, before ey slipped back from the interface, blinking as ey adjusted to seeing the cavernous hall with eir own eyes once more as eir fingers slipped from the contact points and ey leaned back from the headrest.

Ey shook eir head to clear it and stood up, stretching, before ambling from the tech booth down the stairs towards the stage, letting gravity carry eir lanky form down two steps at a time.

Ross was down there standing still and staring at the floor, muttering agitated questions into the headset.

“Hey bud, I’m here. The house is sleeping now. I’ll help get the rest of the mics and the headsets.”

Ross jumped, then looked embarrassed as ey tugged the headset off his head, “Sorry, was wondering where you’d gone. I just heard a beep.”

“Yep, signing off from above. Did you get all the mics gathered up?”

“Oh! Yeah, that’s what I was trying to tell you. I wasn’t sure what to do next.”

It only took about ten minutes for RJ and Ross to get the last of the sound gear settled, gathering the headsets from all of the hands and socketing them into numbered chargers against the wall. Everything would sleep tight until the next night on sound’s end.

Caitlin and Sarai, the stage manager, joined them and the rest of the hands, sitting on the edge of the pit cover as they unwound from the tenseness of rehearsal. The actors slowly getting out of their dress to clump together on the stage, unwilling to leave their beloved platform just yet.

“Gather ‘round, children”, a voice boomed from out in the darkened audience, lights still hovering around one quarter until the troupe left for the night.

“Yes, Mister Johansson”, one of the actors recited back, getting a tired laugh out of everyone.

“Good job, I think we’re nearly there. Still, we need a bit more polish. No flubbed lines, and mostly relaxed, but Sarah, you gotta loosen up. It’s not Shakespeare, it’s a modern play, you can chill out. Crew, you guys got a little sluggish toward the end. I know it’s late, but so are our shows. Don’t work yourselves too hard, but keep on top of things, okay?”

RJ, Sarai, and Caitlin murmured their assent while the rest of the hands nodded, one or two looking sheepish.

“Tomorrow night, back here at five.”

“Aw, come on, that early?” RJ asked,

“Yep, five.” Johansson grinned wryly. “There’s a school production that winds up around then and I want you all back here to make sure we still have a theater around then, okay?”

There was a bit more grumbling, but RJ knew they'd be there on time – it wasn't too much of a stretch.

“Back to base, then. Go get some rest tonight, and I'll catch you all tomorrow. Remember, you can drink tonight, but tomorrow night, *Das is streng verboten*.”

The company laughed and started to disperse, the tech leads lingering on the pit cover for a little while longer as they worked on reorienting themselves to the real world, limited by two eyes, two ears, two hands.

Eventually, RJ made eir way out onto the chill of the street, pulling eir thin water proof gloves on to keep the contacts on the middle joints of eir fingers dry and clean.

At midnight on a week day, there wasn't too much going on outside of those visiting the pubs to catch up with their friends after work, though by the time that midnight had rolled around, those who were left were the harder drinkers. The idea of a warm pub and one quick pint before heading home tugged at em, but the pull of home was much stronger tonight than that of beer.

He trudged instead up to the northwest corner of Soho to Oxford Circus, where ey could catch the Central line up to Benthall Green, and walk the few blocks from there to eir flat, stopping only to pick up a take-away carton of curry and rice from one of the more trustworthy shops along the way.

Once home, ey slipped out of eir jacket and welcomed the warmth of eir little flat after the damp chill of London outside. Eir cat trotted up to em eagerly, twining around eir feet. A little ginger thing of a few years that ey had rescued from a friend who was moving deeper into the city, she was the only one to share eir space with em after eir last flatmate had left for somewhere cheaper.

“Hey Prisca, let me set my shit down before I get you food.”

An eager meow followed em to the kitchen, where ey set down eir take-away and scooped a cup of dry food into a fresh dish, setting it down for the delicate cat.

He thumbed eir phone with the contacts on the thumb-pads of eir glove to start music playing, some of the stuff that reminded em of eir dad, to go along with the curry that reminded em of eir mom.

Dinner was no more or less exciting than usual, RJ eating alone at the kitchen table with the carton spread out before em to reveal the orange curry and soggy samosa that had come with it. Ey left eir gloves on just to be sure – no sense in having to clean eir contacts more than ey'd already need to after a long day's rehearsal.

The draw of eir workstation was a lingering presence in a corner of eir mind, tugging at em, inviting em on toward where ey knew ey could finally relax for the day, but ey knew that ey probably ought to finish all of eir routine before ey delved back in.

He scooped the last of the curry into a little plastic container for the next day's lunch, promising

emself that ey'd cook an additional pot of rice before heading out in the afternoon so ey'd have more calories to keep emself running. Clean up was as easy as tossing the container into the compost bin along with all of the others. Cooking much more than rice was for times other than crunch time.

He finally allowed emelf to sit down at eir workstation, relaxing into the familiar curves of the chair, peeling eir gloves off one by one. Even with the draw so close to em, ey took eir time. First, ey picked up Priscilla and stroked her smoothly from ears to tail a few times until she started purring up a storm, informing her that, in fact, she was the prettiest kitty.

Once the cat had settled into eir lap and curled into a small crescent, ey set about cleaning the contacts on eir hands with lint-free paper and rubbing alcohol. Those done, ey wiped down the headset as well, removing the negligible residue of sweat and skin oils that had collected on the soft, padded headrest where eir forehead would lay, held inches away from the miniscule cameras that would track eir face.

Eir gear was more elaborate than the stuff in the tech booth at work that ey shared with Sarai and Caitlin, and ey had paid dearly for it, as well as for the contacts on eir fingers, and the countless other tiny gizmos placed throughout eir body – the small interferites that took over eir optic and auditory nerves when ey was connected, the NFC connections implanted just under eir hairline and their ramifying tendrils that tied em into eir work, all of the painful work down eir spine that helped em more fully experience the connection.

With all of eir connections and gear cleaned, RJ finally felt at ease enough to pop open the lid on eir workstation. The screen, nearly vestigial when ey was inside, served as an interface to boot or, if needed, to troubleshoot problems with the rig. ey quickly keyed in eir passphrase and then rested eir right hand on the curved pad, feeling eir fingers find the subtle grooves that would hold eir hand in place, the connection from eir contacts was the other half of eir two factors of authentication, and the system signed em on, displaying the spinning earth surrounded by a jauntily tilted ring that was the omnipresent logo of the 'net.

"Gonna head in, Prisca," ey spoke to eir cat, stroking the fingers of eir left hand over her ears, fingering the soft, velveteen folds for a moment. "I'll be back in a bit."

With that, ey brought eir left hand up and set it into the cradle of the pad designed especially for it. Tilting eir head against the headrest, feeling the comforting touch of cool plastic against eir forehead and the little twinge of recognition from the NFC controllers, ey nudged the button beneath eir right thumb. The workstation went into immersive mode as RJ delved in, a soft hum of a cooling fan picking up to handle the waste heat of eir rig.

Ey could no longer hear it.

Chapter Two

AwDae sat up from bed and moved to the edge of the mattress, stretching languidly and letting eir fur bristle from tip to tail, the latter bottle-brushing out in the process. Ey shook emself to settle eir fur back down and yawned widely, slender pink tongue curling and just shy of sharp incisors.

Brushing eir fur down, ey stood languidly and ambled over to the dresser in the corner of the room, pulling out a thin white cotton shirt with laces up the front and a simple navy sarong, which ey tied around eir waist. Ey'd spent countless hours examining some of the highest fashions out there on the net and come to the conclusion that, in these times, understated clothing was actually best. It interfered with the fur least, it worked well with a tail – a simple slit cut down the length of the sarong let that slip free, and anyone who might want to peek at a fox's backside would find only soft white fur there – and it was cheap. There was no shortage of ways to spend money, here, and AwDae had better things to do than worry about that.

Ey set eir paw down on the dresser and swiped it from left to right, revealing a dimly glowing arsenal of personal belongings. Ey wound up equipping only the simple things: set of vcards, a limited credit chip (no worries about overspending that way, though ey doubted ey'd shop any), and a simple canvas pouch attached to a belt, more an affectation than anything, which ey equipped rather than putting on by hand because ey hadn't bothered to make it anything other than an accessory.

Ey made eir way to the eye-rollingly named tport pad in the alcove just off of the main room. It was considered fairly gauche to appear or disappear in the middle of some room, so most homes or venues had them sequestered off to the side, a sort of digital foyer. Ey faced the black screen on the far wall in the alcove and brushed eir paw from left to right once more, bringing up a list of recently used commands. There were a few that stood out, but right at the top of the list was the one ey wanted. If ey left fingerprints online, there'd be a clear smudge over the entry: ey rarely did anything else.

'tport: The Crown Pub'

A tap and an obligatory click that went along with the change of scenery brought em to an alcove paneled in oak, lit by green-shaded lights hanging pendulously from a cord directly above the pad. Ey blinked to adjust to the comparatively dim light. The pub, which largely followed the

circadian rhythm of the British isles, was just as dark as it was for RJ, back in London-as-it-was.

Ey turned and stepped away from the pad, narrowly avoiding a weasel stumbling towards the alcove.

“See ya, Debarre,” AwDae offered, though it came out more like ‘Çeeya, Demaw’ coming from the fox’s narrow muzzle. Ey got a curt wave from the slender weasel done up in all black.

The fox shrugged and headed into the pub proper, eir nose twitching about at the scents of the room which told em more of those present than simply scanning the crowd. One or two gawking entities with no scent property set – some tourists – and the usual crowd of scents. Their ears perked at the distinct whiff of dandelions, something leftover from eir youth, and ey made a beeline towards one of the window tables, where the scent seemed to originate, skirting around one or two bodies of diverse shape.

“Çaxa.”

“Come on, AwDae, loosen your filters, won’t you?” Sasha laughed, scooting her chair back so that she could stand up and fling her arms around AwDae’s shoulders, giving the fox a tight hug. Ey slipped eir arms around the skunk’s waist in turn and gave a squeeze, tail flicking about excitedly.

“Lame,” ey drawled, but dialed back the output filters on eir speech, letting something more closely resembling English pass. “How you been, skunk?”

“Oh, you know, same old crap.” Sasha settling back down into her chair and fiddling with a stack of vcards on the table and gave an outsized shrug. “Been kind of boring in here over the last few days, so it’s good to see you, even if it’s getting super late for you.”

The fox nodded, tugging eir shirt straight and moving over to the chair opposite the skunk, sliding into it easily and resting against the back. “Not too late. One something. Made good time home at least. Rehearsal ran late.”

Sasha laughed, “You know, every time you talk about rehearsal and such, I keep thinking back to high school and school productions. It’s hard for me to picture you as having grown up and taken that up as a job.”

AwDae adopted a look of mock despair, “And went to school for it and everything. But hey, London ain’t bad, I can’t complain any.”

The skunk rolled her eyes and leaned forward onto her elbows bringing her paws up to rest her muzzle on them. “Tell me about it. You’re missing out big time here in the burbs, dear. You could be teaching high school theater in any town along the central corridor, doing the same plays once every five years so no students repeat them. Truly a life of glamor.”

The fox groaned and buried eir face in eir paws, Sasha laughing at the reaction. She continued, “Seriously though, you just remind me a lot of school. Maybe it’s ‘cause of all of the ways you haven’t quite grown up.”

AwDae stuck eir tongue out at eir friend briefly and crossed eir arms. “You’re not going to bring up dating again, are you?”

“Hey, sorry, just looking out for you, fox.”

“I’m plenty happy not dating, I can promise you that,” ey countered.

“No, I get that,” Sasha admitted, lowering her gaze. “Not all it’s turned out to be, even for someone who wants to date.”

“Oh no, struck out again?”

Sasha nodded and shrugged once more.

AwDae reached eir paws out to take one of her own, cupping black fur in black fur. Both had opted for mostly hand-like paws, but where Sasha’s fur was an even black marked by white stripes that were a little too sharp, a little too exact, AwDae had gone all out and constructed a version of emself as a cross fox to exacting detail, down to the point where eir muzzle couldn’t even form the two letters that made up eir name offline.

“I’m sorry, Sasha. . .”

Sasha shrugged it off once more, giving the fox’s paws a squeeze in her own briefly, “Men are dicks, I promise you. I’d take a neutrois fox over any dickhead guy any day.”

The fox smiled bashfully and returned the squeeze to eir paws, “Sasha, you know it wouldn’t–”

“No, I know, AwDae. I just wish there were more guys out there like you.”

AwDay stiffened in eir seat and looked away towards the window. Sasha caught the movement and splayed her ears, “Sorry fox. I keep putting my foot in it, don’t I?”

The silence stretched out a little longer before AwDae shook emself free of it and gave eir friend a grin, “Sorry, no, you’re fine. I should get a thicker skin about it and stand up for myself, after all. I spend night after night hiding in here, and even here, I can’t really stand up for myself. I appreciate you trying, though.”

Sasha smiled cautiously and nodded, “I think that’s what I meant earlier, that you remind me of school. You haven’t done like all the rest of us and grown up, gotten married, all that crap. You’re still doing what you loved to do in school, from the picture you showed me, you’re as androgynous as ever. You seem kind of frozen, kind of stuck, in a few ways, even though you’re succeeding in others.”

AwDae nodded before a thought occurred to em, “Oh, speaking of frozen.”

“Debarre?”

AwDae nodded once more.

“No news, yet. He’s been trying to get in touch with the center that’s taking care of Cicero, but the family has been getting in the way. They’re fielding everything. They always sort of supported the relationship on the surface, you know, but never actually wholly approved of them being together.”

“What? Really?” The fox shook eir head, poking a claw at the table as though it might dent the wood, though the sim was hardly that immersive, “That’s unfortunately not all that surprising, given what Cice said about his family. They at least confirmed that’s what happened, though?”

Sasha nodded. “That’s what these are,” she said, slipping the stack of vcards over to the fox. “There’s contact info for the family, and a few centers around there that work on contacts, we’re thinking that those types of places might be where he wound up. There’s also a card detailing his laston information.”

AwDae slid the stack of vcards over to sit in front of em, leafing through them slowly and taking in a few of the details that slid through eir fingers. “Mind if I make a copy?”

“Go ahead, it’s a deck Debarre and I have been working on. Not complete, but I’ll give you ACLs.”

“Mm. Debarre looked crushed. Is he doing alright?”

Sasha hesitated for a moment, caught in the middle of a gesture to transfer access to the cards, then shook her head, to which AwDae could only frown. “I’ll take a look, too. I can’t do too much right now, I’ve got a—”

“I know, you’ve got a show coming up,” Sasha said, grinning. “Don’t worry about it, dear. Debarre’s working on it, I’m taking a look when I can, and I’m sure the weasel’s got others helping him out as well. No reason not to, either; we all liked Cicero.”

The two sat in silence once more. AwDae fanned the cards in front of emself before shuffling them back into a stack and swiping above them, instructing eir workstation to make a copy of the deck, which wound up in eir pouch.

Ey lifted eir muzzle away from the silence to scan the scent of the room once more. The tourists had gone, leaving mostly familiar smells, now that it was starting to get on in the evening even in the Americas. Some familiar scents, some unfamiliar, but most of them at least detailed, which told AwDae that the owners had put some thought into them. None, however, really jumped out at em, and ey were more content to keep eir post at the table with Sasha, eir friend from so long ago, now.

Finally, ey slid the deck of vcards back to Sasha, who equipped them on to her person somewhere; ACLs being what they were, there’s no way AwDae could’ve done more than look at the covers. Had ey tried to walk off with them, they would’ve re-equipped to Sasha as soon as they passed into the tport alcove.

“Hey, Sasha, I gotta get going. I know I only got here a little bit ago, but I’m starting to crash hard.”

The skunk nodded and gave a little flick of her tail, “No, it’s alright, AwDae. It’s late there, and I know you’ve been in rehearsals for a while. Go get some sleep.”

Both stood up once more and exchanged another hug, AwDae breathing in that dandelion scent

of his friend once more, brought back to thoughts of high school, when she had explained that the smell always reminded her of muffins.

“I’ll see you later, skunk, yeah?”

Sasha nodded and smiled once more, “Take care of yourself, okay? No working too hard, slaving over a hot rig. . .”

AwDae laughed and shook his head, giving the skunk one last squeeze before making his way back through the crowd toward the alcove, already swiping his command palette into view to head home.

Chapter Three

As RJ slid eir hands from the pads and leaned back from the headrest, ey let out a full-fledged yawn, startling even Priscilla across the room with the sound and the stretch. Ey stumbled up out of eir seat and over toward the still-purring cat, stroking over her ears once more as she butted her head up against eir hand, eir mind whirling with a mix of work, of Cicero's disappearance, and of school with Sasha.

"I'm wiped, Prisca," ey informed the cat, who simply purred louder.

Smiling, ey peeled eir shirt off over eir head and slipped out of eir jeans, knowing that tomorrow's dress rehearsal would mean full dress for everyone and makeup for the actors. Ey'd have to make sure eir suit was clean, or ey'd be in trouble. For now, though, as it neared two, ey focused mostly on making sure the door was locked and the lights were out before stumbling over to bed.

As ey flipped the screen down on eir workstation to signal for it to go to sleep and wandered over to eir bed, ey couldn't get Sasha and all of her talk of high school, gone these last fifteen years now, out of eir head. Even as ey climbed into eir narrow bed and pulled the comforter over em to ward off the chill of the night, ey was replaying scenes from school, back in the US, through eir head, a worn out film, dim and scattershot, but still laced with emotion.

Ey and Sasha had tried dating early on. Later, after a few weeks of it not going anywhere, they had both admitted that they had felt pressured into having a relationship in school. Good boys and girls fell in love with other good boys and girls, pretended they didn't have sex, and went out to the movies together. They had continued the trend of going to movies, and later to live performances, together, but the relationship had petered out, rather than ending in some climactic fashion. Sasha had gone on to have a string of other relationships, some earnest and some not, some more intense than others – a string that remained unbroken, if tonight's conversation was any clue – but RJ had stopped there.

The social pressure to date throughout high school was only equaled in intensity by RJ's apathy toward the whole scene. Ey'd felt the occasional twinge of romantic attraction, and to other students of all genders, but the expectation of sex that went along with the idea of a relationship so put em off that ey had instead buried emself in eir school work. Ey did well in some courses and not as well in others, but on the things that ey enjoyed, ey dumped all of eir effort. Ey had gotten

started early on in working the school's older sound board in their theater, running sound for plays, concerts, and assemblies, quickly earning the trust of the other tech crew and the school staff and faculty, rising to lead sound tech within a year.

Computer class had captivated em as well, and for eir sixteenth birthday, eir parents had surprised em with the implants that would be needed for full interfacing with a workstation. To be honest, it hadn't been too much of a surprise: eir father was an engineer and eir mother a fairly forward-thinking person, and they had promised em the procedure eventually.

It was a simple affair that took place in an outpatient office, involving self-guided implants that had largely installed themselves. The worst part had been the itching. It was bearable on eir hands and along eir spine, where the implants breached the surface of eir skin, because at least ey could scratch (though ey had been cautioned to try not to), but the worst had been the NFC pads in eir forehead and the interferites embedded even deeper, providing an itch that no scratching would ever reach.

Sound and the interface had taken up all of eir energy throughout school, leaving little time to worry about the social stigma that went along with not having a relationship. Ey was simply the nerdy sound kid who knew more about computers than even the teachers.

Training on the interface was a daily task that ey had applied emself to with gusto. It hadn't always been fun, of course, but by the time ey'd reached that age, ey was starting to understand the idea that work put into a craft was a good way to get more out of it. That ey had found furry around then was another thing that kept em going, working and improving at the art of interfacing with eir workstation in a way that felt natural to em and came off as natural to others on the 'net. Ey moved effortlessly through the Crown Pub and a few other choice spaces, slowly crafting the primary persona that ey used when interacting with others, the cross fox known as AwDae.

It was then that ey and Sasha had really started connecting, for it was her that introduced em to the community. They started hanging out more, talking more, and, especially, building a network of friends together. Dating hadn't worked out for them, what with RJ slowly coming into eir identity as asexual and more and more androgynous over the years, while Sasha remained fairly sexual and interested in guys much more masculine than em. All the same friendship had seemed almost natural.

The training had culminated in an offer to go into interactive sound technology at a rather prestigious university out on the east coast. It meant leaving Sasha and a few other close friends behind along with eir family, but it also meant that ey would be at the forefront of a new technology used in production of both films and live work. In fact, the field was so new that eir own studies at the university helped fuel the change in theater tech work, eir dissertation, what was meant to be eir capstone project, being eventually published and spread around the world.

Ey had continued to work at the university for a while, as they were one of the few places

around with both a theater and the technology to back it up in such a way that ey had helped create. Ey had considered continuing eir studies beyond where ey had, but the draw of the theater was what focused em most, rather than strictly academia, or even limiting emself to college theater.

The call from London, had come less than a year after ey graduated. Would ey like to help start a tech-savvy theater group in town? The pay would be slow to start, but the troupe had a loose collection of apartments ey could stay in. Ey would have full run of the sound department. When could ey start?

That conversation had taken some convincing, when it came to eir parents. They were pleased, to be sure, but they also felt that London was fairly far away, even though still in the western bloc. Ey made eir promises that ey'd come and visit every now and then between shows or when an understudy would take a show for em.

Burying emself deeper into the covers and the mattress, leaving enough room for Priscilla to join em later, RJ thought more about what had come up between em and Sasha before. When they'd Lost Cicero, it was a blow to them all. Getting Lost was not something that happened often, only a couple dozen recorded cases to date, but among those who were counted among the Lost, a disproportionate amount of them were those who were heavy users of the integration technology. It was a risk, everyone had assumed, just as was travel. Something could always happen.

All the same, it was an intense sensation to feel it hit so close to home, and it reminded RJ of just how much ey relied on the integration technology, not only for work, but for a large part of eir social life. Ey enjoyed the company of the troupe just fine, and often accompanied them out for drinks and the like, but eir heart truly lay among the friends ey'd made on the 'net. His friends being on the 'net meant more use of eir contacts, and more use of eir contacts meant more risk.

It was risk for all of them.

Chapter Four

Doctor Carter Ramirez rubbed her face into her hands, ground her palms against her eyes until she saw stars, before finally slicking her hair back. She had put it up into a bun earlier that day, but there were plenty of flyaway hairs, as there always were.

She felt out of her league. Everyone did, here on her team, but that didn't stop the fact from wearing on her. It's not that there was no support from on high to help with the Lost, because there was. It's not that there was no one else trying, because there was there, too. It's that no one seemed to take it all that seriously. It was a thing like addiction, or plane crashes, or suicide. Something to look at, to study long enough to say "Ah, *this* is happening now," and then set aside like some work of art which was only good enough to be a conversation piece.

People admitted that the phenomenon of getting Lost was happening, but only in as much as it didn't affect that many people. A simple number to point to.

She wasn't the last one left in the lab, by any stretch, but it had reached that point of the night where collaboration had stopped and everyone was butting their head against their own individual problems, toiling in silence. She put down her tablet and pressed down the display on the workstation that she had been assigned for this project, sending it to sleep. It had also clearly reached the point of the night where she wouldn't be getting anything else done.

It was as though the brains of the Lost were just elsewhere, just dreaming on some level, but there was no sense to it, no rhyme or reason to why such a thing would happen to the patient. Some of her team were working on pulling together all of the facts about the population that they could, from demographics to physical stature, searching for clues. The neuroscientists were digging into what was going on within the brain, and what few scans they had from before someone had gotten Lost. Their two pet lawyers (actually just law students on internship, also versed in stats) were digging into both the legal status of the Lost as well as doing what they could to procure under health information law from patient medical histories.

And Carter was supposed to tie it together.

Or, that was her stated goal. The university medical center had grudgingly provided space and funding for the project in an attempt to win some much-needed kudos, but she was starting to doubt just how much the UMC even wanted her to continue. As manager, she had been met with hurdle

after hurdle in trying to make any progress in the case as soon as she started to venture outwards. Colleagues assured her that all projects worked this way, but it was as though the advisory board had given her all the data that it was willing to give, and any more might put those kudos it was receiving at risk.

Carter patted her associate on the neurchem team on the shoulder and stood up, stretching her back. “Sorry, Sanders. I’m done in. Catch you in the morning?”

“Mm,” Sanders replied, rubbing at his eyes and stretching his hands out, alternating between clenching them into fists and flexing his fingers out wide. “Sounds good, Ramirez. Catch you then.”

Carter gathered up her coat and her messenger bag, taking one last look around the workstation lab, counting heads to see who would be staying later than her. She swiped her way out of the wing so as not to set off any alarms and signed out at the front desk before making her way out into the night, bundling herself up in her coat.

At home, she scoured the fridge for a bite to eat – she had ordered dinner for the lab earlier, but it was getting on midnight and she didn’t want to go to bed on an empty stomach. She settled on a few pieces of salami stacked onto a couple of crackers, enough to keep her empty stomach from complaining through the night and sat herself down on the couch in the shared living room. She left the lights off so that she wouldn’t bother her flatmates, or so she told herself. In truth, the darkness felt good. She could keep her eyes open and not be greeted with a tablet, a screen, a simulation.

She sat long after finishing her snack, listening to her flatmates sleep, thinking in the dark of all the administrivia that surrounded her task and just how she would be able to get what she needed.

Eventually, finding herself at just as much of a dead end as she had at work, Carter stood and ambled into her room. It was small, but clean, and it served her well. She changed from her work clothes into a comfortable pair of lounge pants and a night shirt before crawling into bed.

#

The morning’s alarm startled her awake. She had thought that the end of grad school had meant the end of six-hour nights of sleep, but apparently, that had not been the case.

Blearily, she pawed at her phone until she managed to swipe in the right direction to turn the alarm off. It was tempting to go back to bed – after all, the Lost weren’t going anywhere, she mused – but she managed to at least kick her feet out from under the covers and sit up. in bed, letting her frizzed hair hang down around her face and shield her from the world for just a little bit longer.

It was her phone, as always, that brought her back to reality. It’s mere presence, even silent as it was, was enough to draw her back into the problem at hand.

Ramirez

Another, this time with scans from before the incident. Another furry, you don't think that's got to do with it, do you :p

S

The brief message from her colleague left her puzzled until she'd put it together that he was talking about one of the other subjects' past records, indicating him as a member of a fandom. Sanders didn't honestly believe that people who pretended to be animals on the 'net were more predisposed to get Lost than anyone else. And, to be honest, neither did Carter, even after giving it the token consideration.

All the same, the thought stuck with her through her two cups of coffee that morning, the first in the kitchen and the second out of a travel mug on the L as she headed out towards the UIC campus. *Another furry, you don't think that's got to do with it.*

She felt sluggish, and craved another cup of coffee even after she'd reached the bottom of the mug she had with her. The thought nagged at her, caught like some spinning shape against the threads of her thought in a way that the rattle and screech of the train couldn't displace. It tugged those threads free, stitch by stitch, until it reached... what?

Until it reached the hem, and then the same thing over again.

"Holy... holy shit. Holy shit." Carter said, startling the elderly lady next to her. She murmured an apology and fished her phone out, thumbing in a quick message to the team.

Chapter Five

RJ allowed emself to sleep in until nearing eleven that morning, given that tonight was the last night of dress rehearsals. Many other members of the troupe held part time jobs during the day, and ey had been known to offer their services as consultant during times like these. Even so, with all that ey did, ey made enough to not have to worry about holding down more than the one job

As it was, on days when they had nighttime rehearsals, ey felt no compunctions about sleeping in. There was nothing to be up for, and with only the ‘net to keep them occupied in the mornings, ey felt little need to get moving.

It was Priscilla who has woken em up, butting her head against their cheek and purring loudly to them. The more insistent the cat got, the less ey was able to ignore her intrusions on their admittedly banal dreams.

Ey finally trudged out of bed and refilled their cat’s water and food dishes, giving her the requisite morning pets to keep her happy. That done, ey scooped her litter box and made emself a pot of tea. Ey sat at the tiny kitchen table, sipping from their oversized mug and watching the late morning traffic from their window, primarily composed of business traffic, with the occasional mother with child in tow.

By the time ey had finished eir first mug of tea, RJ had woken up a little more and had started to putter around. As with the night before, he made sure that everything was in order before touching eir workstation. Ey’d taken care of the cat, but ey still needed to eat, emself, so, remembering eir promise, ey set about making a small pot of rice. The fifteen minutes that it would take to cook would give em enough time to finish another mug of tea.

With most of the rice setting in the pot and small bowl of rice and leftover curry on eir lap, RJ ate slowly and thoughtfully. In the process of swiping eir hand over the controls of the stove, ey was reminded of the deck that Sasha had shared with em last night. There was no reason to think that some random person in London would have too much to offer in the case of another person ey had never met getting Lost, but there was no reason not to try and figure things out. Maybe there was something, some small insight that ey had that, when pooled with those of others, which would help in some way.

Pouring the third and last cup of tea into the thick-walled mug, ey set the empty bowl into the

sink and made eir way over to the workstation. As before, ey keyed in the password and rested eir hand onto the cradle for the two-factor. Instead of delving in as ey had last night, though, ey flipped up the monitor and pulled the keyboard closer, moving the hand rests to the side and the headrest up and out of the way. For work like this, there was no need to go immersive. Ey could just as easily work as a fox, of course, but it was so easy to lose track of time in there, and the night's rehearsal hadn't been forgotten.

"Let's see," ey murmured, taking a quick sip of tea before setting the mug down and calling up the deck that Sasha had given em.

Cicero Lost Nov 2108 Priv eyes only See Debarre for ACLs	Dr. Carter Ramirez specialist in lost so. London	Mr/Mrs. Jackson parents, can't get much more dad in govt, mother stays home
--	--	---

And on it went, for nearly a dozen cards. Each had its own cover embossed with a few lines of type, and each contained upwards of a gig of information, culled from various sources and of various quality. RJ flipped through each, gaining what he could from a quick scan through of the data, before collapsing the deck once more and sitting back to think.

Even though ey had only received the deck the night previously, there was nothing in there that seemed new or out of place. Ey had heard of the Lost before, and the name Ramirez was commonly tied with the hundred or so cases that had cropped up over the years. The family... no, there was nothing to be gained there, at least not that had already been tried by Debarre; again with the problem of being a random person in the UK, rather than someone known or with power. None of the rest of the cards carried any real significance to RJ.

If there was anything RJ was going to add to the conversation over Cicero, it would be through eir connection to the cat. Something ey knew, something the two had shared.

A small notification slid down from the top of his monitor to cover the upper right corner of the screen.

D - D - R

Voting begins in 5 minutes on *referendum 238ac9b8*:

Summary: *Tariffs on importation of goods from the Russian Bloc...*

Cost: 1,000

Bounty: 280,000

RJ moved to swipe the notification away – ey had very little at stake in the arguments between the Western Federation and the Russian Bloc, and could honestly care less about taxes on things that ey wouldn't end up buying – however, something clicked within em and ey halted eir motion just short of dismissing the notification.

Cicero.

Ey hastily shuffled back through the Cicero Lost deck until ey came up with the ‘recent net activity’ card and pulled up the contents. It took a few moments to remember how to sort tabular data, since RJ couldn’t remember how to query for the life of em, but eventually, ey got the table sorted around the activity type and scrolled rapidly through the list until ey got to the list of Direct Democracy Representative entries for votes.

The one thing that RJ and Cicero had argued about most of all was politics, and not just politics, but the worthiness of the current political system in all of its facets. RJ was a left-leaning democrat – ey felt the representative democracy combined with the DDR was a pretty good solution, and certainly one of the better of the factions out there – whereas Cicero seemed to waver between loose communism or anarchy, depending on factors such as how much he had had to drink and how angry he was at the most recent vote.

“I certainly can’t see broad shifts going my way,” he had said. “But the least I can do is make my voice heard on every DDR that comes my way.”

Ey made sure syncing was on across all copies of the deck before copying those rows out of the activity table into a card of their own:

DDR votes todo: process by record 1 month, 2835 votes (!)

The icon in the upper left of the screen showing the deck flashed briefly to show the sync, and then RJ really got down to work.

As it turned out, Cicero had voted just how he had talked. On the surface, he was no different than any other leftist socialist out there voting on the DDR. One thing that came with the ability to vote on issues directly was the general election was the ability to comment for a price. DDR votes didn’t cost money, at least not real money, but they did cost credit, up to 1,000 per, which you gained by voting on cheaper issues, beginning with a few free ones in the form of a tutorial.

What Cicero’s records showed was that he was wealthy. Incredibly wealthy. RJ had a few million DDR credits banked away for no real reason other than in the case of a high value issue that he felt strongly about so that he could make a comment, because commenting could cost upwards of five million credits, and one could buy their way to influence by flooding issues with comments.

Cicero’s wealth surpassed RJ’s at least a hundred times over, if not more. For someone to be that active in commenting and still have that much wealth in credits stored up showed a dedication to following politics that was only just barely hinted at by the cat’s tippy rantings in the Crown Pub. Cicero was well connected, well read, and, most importantly, a key political figure on the DDR comment sections to an extent that none of the Crown regulars had ever expected.

RJ sat back in silence for a few moments before uttering, “Well, shit. Prisca, you don’t sup-

pose...”

Rather than finishing the thought out loud, ey typed up eir conclusions in the contents of the card, in the notes section.

AwDae here. Looks like there’s a lot going on in activity (where’d you get this, Debarre?) on DDR. Cicero was into a lot, and I’m not trying to go all conspiracy nut on you, but do you think that maybe he got in too deep or something, and maybe that led to him getting Lost? Not saying someone tried to do it too him or anything, just that maybe the more one uses the ‘net, the more likely it is to happen to them? I mean seriously, look at all of his votes, and his stash of credits! I’ll keep poking at this after rehearsal.

Eir tea had gone cold long ago, but ey chugged it anyway. Ey had spent longer than planned plowing through the data the hard way, and it was getting to be about time to head back over to the theater.

#

By the time ey left eir flat, it was about four in the afternoon. Ey had spent a few minutes getting their suit brushed out and clean as best as ey could before putting it on, along with eir nice pair of gloves. Thankfully, the suit jacket as already spotless, and the dress shirt would go through the laundry without problems. It had been a stressful thought, that they might have to get the thing professionally cleaned, and at great cost for same- or next-day service.

On the way back to the tube station, ey stopped by a Thai counter and picked up a take-away container of phat si-io to eat on the short walk. Ey managed to make it about halfway through the container before having to close it back up again and put it back in its bag with the chopsticks before getting tagging eir way into the station’s depths.

Throughout the ride from Benthall Green to Oxford Circus, RJ’s mind was flooded with the information they had gained by prowling through Sasha and Debarre’s deck. Ey kept mulling over that incredibly large number of credits, just how much social currency was bound up within the ‘fake’ currency of the DDR credit system. Cicero had built himself up into a political player.

RJ arrived at the theater five minutes early or so, having spent the last few meters of eir walk hastily finishing the carton of Thai so that ey could dump it into the trash bin just outside. Once ey swiped eir way into the theater, ey jogged quickly to the loo to wash eir face and straighten eir hair, some of the small things that ey had sacrificed to dig into Cicero’s case.

“Sorry, Johansson, I’m here,” ey offered to the hulking director.

“You’re here five minutes early, RJ,” he laughed. “What on earth are you sorry about?”

“What? I- Oh,” RJ pulled eir cell out to confirm the time.

“Lot on your mind, kid?”

“Nah, I’m fine. I mean,” RJ stammered, working to get emself in the work mindset. “Yeah, sorry. I woke up early and spent a bunch of time researching before work, I guess my head’s still elsewhere, boss.”

“Hah, well, alright,” Johansson rumbled. “So long as you get your head around work, I guess that’s okay. Hey, here comes more crew.”

RJ bustled into the theater and made eir way down toward the pit where the mics had been stored. Ey set a tech to work handing them out to the actors who would be wearing them, making sure the tech had his cheat-sheet to align proper mic number to actor.

Ey bounded back up the steps two at a time toward the tech booth to set about waking the theater up again. Caitlin was already in place, so it would be shaking its sleepy head already, ey just had to help it wake up the rest of the way.

Shrugging out of eir jacket and draping it over the back of the sound booth chair, RJ exchanged cheery greetings with the lights lead as ey slipped eir hands carefully out of eir gloves, contacts all freshly polished and clean.

The theater purred in recognition and brushed up against em as RJ settled into eir chair and delved in, eir hands rest lightly on the contacts in the cradles, forehead against the headrest. Safety had always been a concern of the engineers, what with the lawyers breathing down their necks, and so all it would take to pull RJ back out would be for him (or someone else, for that matter) to lift eir hands from the contacts and move eir head away from the curved plastic headrest. To that end, it was considered good form to find a comfortable position that allowed one to rest lightly against the contacts without gripping at the hand rests – the slight magnetic attraction between the contacts in eir fingers and the ones in the cradles would keep everything positioned nicely.

The first half of the evening’s rehearsal went by without much trouble at all. Johansson had apparently highlighted a few areas of concern that he wanted to work through, and the cast has followed his lead, adjusting as needed at their dear leader’s suggestions, while RJ and Caitlin kept a script running so that they could keep up with the director and Sarai, the manager.

Finally, when the clock hit eight thirty, Johansson called for a break, and informed everyone that they would be running through the play top to bottom afterwards, before prepping for opening tomorrow.

RJ backed out of the connection with the theater and reveled in the feeling of pulling eir fingers away from that slight magnetic grasp that the cradles offered, wiping eir hands dry and flexing fingers to keep limber. Ey spent the break walking around the theater and stage in one big, looping arc, simply listening to the way that the ambient sound moved through the room and reflected off of walls and ceiling. It would all be different with people in the seats, to be sure, but ey was used to that by now.

It was around the end of the first act that RJ started having problems. When one was delved in, one could always focus hard enough to feel the way their head felt against the head rest, or sense the way that their hands rested within the cradles of the grips. By the time ey had brought down house sound in time for the curtain to fall, RJ could feel a numbness creeping over emself from the base of eir neck outwards, stretching out along eir scalp and down eir arms and torso.

Initially, ey had been willing to chalk it up to nerves or exhaustion – it had been a long enough week, after all – but by the time ey couldn't feel the plastic of the headrest or the cradles beneath eir hands, ey began to worry. All the same, it was final dress and ey would be able to head home and catch up on sleep or whatever ey needed before too long, so ey decided to simply power through it, ignoring the lack of sensation.

By the second curtain, RJ knew something was desperately wrong.

Ey hadn't missed any cues yet, but ey couldn't seem to figure out how to work eir 'voice', such as it was, to communicate with Caitlin, Sarai, or Johansson, leaving em feeling more and more cut off from the rest of the theater as time went on

It was the muzzle that was the kicker, though. The muzzle and the tail, which ey felt – any feeling was a beacon in the storm of numbness that had long since enveloped eir body – with a piercing intensity, bordering on and then diving straight into pain. Ey tried to pull back and wound up lifting eir paws in a sudden jerking motion which, combined with the act of pulling eir head back from the contacts, led to them falling over. There was no chair to catch em.

And that was when ey missed eir cue.

#

The curtain went down the lights dimmed, and then, clear as a bell, a thin giggle filled the auditorium: the lead had laughed at a misstep right before the curtain.

"RJ," Sarai whispered into the silence of the theater's sim. "Stay on cue, bud."

There was no answer, no apology or signal that a note had been made.

"RJ?"

"What's going on up there?" came Johansson's subvocalization through the director's channel in the sim.

"Something's wrong, boss, lemme back out and check up on RJ."

"Temporary cut, hold places," Johansson said aloud to the theater. The open channels from the actors mics carried a few quiet whispers in response. "Hold on, quiet please."

Moving with a quickness which belied his bulk, Johansson ran up to the tech booth and slipped in as quickly as possible to keep sound from leaking out. Sarai was trying to rouse RJ.

#

Like a flame burning through celluloid film, the third curtain had signified a drastic change, slow enough to be observed and yet faster than ey could possibly hope to avoid. The few tenuous touches on reality that held RJ into eir seat in the tech booth scorched and peeled away, and the pain spiked.

RJ lay on a tile floor, dirty and yellow.

The tiles were completely regular, one foot on a side, and obviously made of some synthetic material. They were simply glued to a concrete foundation with no grout, each tile butting up against the others to form a grid of thin, black lines, showing where the dirt of hundreds of feet had been ground into the remaining seams.

Ey couldn't move yet, but ey could still see that the world was bounded. There was a thin plastic strip of molding around the edge of a wall, and then regular rectangles of blue, a wall.

#

"Something's not right, boss, he's totally unresponsive!"

"Pull him, pull him! Hit the panic!"

Caitlin, who had backed out moments before, and Sarai both lept to RJ's sides and pulled eir hands up from the cradles in the way that they had been trained, rocking em back from the headrest to lean back against the back of the chair. Eir body flopped lifelessly against the cheap plastic mesh.

Caitlin slapped the small red button on the side of the monitor. Her fingers came away dusty: rarely were panics used in a theater. Below the desk, drives sparked to life and dumped the last thirty minutes of both sim and brain activity from the user.

"The hell?" Johansson said, reaching in a thick pair of fingers to press against the side of the sound lead's neck. "Pulse is fine. Check his eyes, Sarai. Caitlin, call. Now."

Shaking, Caitlin pulled her phone from her bag and started to hastily struggle to unlock it to get to emergency services.

"They're rolled back, boss. Bloodshot, too." Sarai moved over to tug back the collar of RJ's shirt, checking eir spinal implant's simple color-coded readout. "Blue. What the hell..."

"He's not jacked in, though," Johansson said, eyes boring into Sarai.

"I think-" Sarai trailed off hoarsely, cleared her throat, and tried again. "I mean, do you think he's Lost?"

"Caitlin, what's our status, girl?" Johansson growled before throwing the door to the tech booth wide and shouting out toward the stage, "Cut! Manually shut off your mics and take a seat where you are. Do not move. Emergency services will be here soon, and will record what they can."

#

Lockers.

The blue rectangles were lockers. The first hint were the vent slots a few inches from the bottom of each narrow rectangle, but, as ey lifted eir muzzle from where it lay on the tile floor, ey could clearly see the locks halfway up each door.

Tall, narrow lockers. Blue. The yellow tile floors. The very scent, the very feel of the place.

AwDae tried to make all of this information fit in with the fact that ey was currently halfway between human and cross fox. A cross fox dressed in a suit, laying on the floor of the central corridor of eir old high school.

“The hell?”

Part II

Chapter One

“Listen, Ramirez, I’m just not sure if you-”

“No. Come on, Sanders, just hear me out.” Carter sighed and settled her weight against the edge of her desk, taking a slow breath to buy herself some time and organize her thoughts. “I’m just saying that we ought to look into social connections between the patients so that we can see if there’s some factor that’s tying these occurrences together. With that under our belt, we may be able to formulate a better theory of what’s going on here, even neurologically.”

Sanders hung his head and then shrugged, “It’s just that you’re talking about a social vector here, Carter. Not only do we have very little data to go on, but there’s no indication that this is something passed from one person to another. All of the data suggests random-”

“Sanders,” Carter said sternly. “I know how the project works. I know the data. There’s a lot of questions still left in the air. I’m not suggesting that getting Lost is something that is transferred from one person to another like some sort of virus. I’m merely suggesting that we might find shared factors within a social realm as well as the physiological.”

Sanders glared at Carter, who stood her ground. As the lead of the research team, she could tell Sanders to do whatever she wanted him to. There was no reason for her not to, as well, since she was plugged into all of the teams that he was distanced from. He may be lead of the neurochem side, but Carter was lead of basically everyone except the grantors.

Eventually, Sanders caved with a shrug, turning his back on Carter and bowing his head towards his own team.

“Look, Sanders,” Carter said, following after him. “You’re a fantastic doctor, and I really respect that, I really do. I’m not pulling labor away from the neurochem team, I’m merely suggesting that we add a social angle to our attack here.”

Sanders held up his hand, gave another noncommittal shrug, and walked over to his workstation.

Carter rolled her eyes and turned back to the remaining team. “We’ve got a hunch on the social front: there’s a few patients who are involved in the furry subculture, and there’s distinct ties between them. They’re loose ties, sure, not everyone knows everyone else, but they *are* there. Let’s timebox half a day to chase down these ties and see just where they lead. If they lead nowhere, fine.

If we can find a way to tie them together, then we find out all of the ways that the web ramifies. Worst case, half a day is spent tracing along the web, but best case, we find a way to tie these cases together that lets us predict – and then interrupt – future cases. Got it? Catch you at lunch.”

Carter sighed after her speech and wandered over to her desk. Rather than sequester herself in an office, she had taken a desk among the team, four foot cube walls separating each, even if they were made of glass. There wasn't much room for an office in the repurposed classroom, all the same, but the deliberate attitude with which she had chosen to join everyone in equal conditions had endeared her to some of the more stubborn of the crew. On the other hand, the lawyers were badly out of their element. Ah well, nothing to be done.

All the same she wished for an office at times if only for the door. A nice, thick, hardwood door with a solid core so that she could voice her ideas aloud to herself without bothering her coworkers. Sometimes she just needed the ability to put things into words, and no matter how often she tried to set things down in the notes on her phone, she always felt hampered by the relatively small screen and her clumsy thumbs. She hadn't gone full immersive on the go yet, either – something about that glassy-eyed stare, the silly headband, and the controllers gripped like walking weights in the hand, packed full of electronics, set her teeth on edge.

Shaking her head, she set in to work, deciding to delve in rather than work on a tablet or screen, just so that she could organize the data her team was collating in a visual fashion.

Carter's chosen workspace, her desk, was totally black. It wasn't the complete blackness of unseeing, but a sort of vaguely luminescent darkness, as though wherever she looked, she saw a faint light shining on a black matte surface, such as a sheet of fine paper. It was black enough to be easy on the eyes, such as they were in the sim, without being unnerving.

Scattered throughout the space were decks. Decks upon decks.

Each deck was a point of light, a white rectangle with enough depth to give the impression of there being several cards stacked on top of each other, surrounded by a slight halo that dispelled the darkness. If she were to engage with a deck, it would fill her vision nearly to the periphery, and she would be able to explore and expand that portion of the project.

The decks themselves were organized into groups, surrounded by bright lines of white string (literally string; Carter had chosen cotton string as her group delineator in this sim), and these groups of decks were related to one another with further intangible threads.

A gesture from her hand would show the whole setup from the top. The mind was attracted to a two dimensional representation for displaying data like this, no matter how fantastic the sim. Even with perspective in play, the scientists and lawyers working on this project had tended to alternate between the aerial view and the interactive view, with the cards positioned at chest level throughout the sim.

Everyone's view of the sim was different, in its own way, to be sure. Sanders, she knew,

preferred an oak-paneled room with a dark green carpet, a facsimile of luxury, each of the grouping lines drawn out in finest silver, whereas others preferred pencil sketches, harsh angles, or subdued colors on a dim background. Additionally, there were a few different types of cards. Some were visible only to the individual; some were visible to everyone, but only on the surface, with their details invisible to others; and the vast majority were visible to everyone, completely open.

Carter began by creating a publicly visible grouping, knowing that others were delving into the sim along with her, visible as diffuse shapes in her dark desk. She titled the group in her stolid, blocky handwriting: “The Social Connection”.

From there, she started to create sub-groupings, for cases, for leads, and so on. Within the cases, she tapped a few decks to make symbolic links, which she dropped in the cases grouping. Two were positioned at the top of the list:

Jackson, Collin	Brewster, RJ
M – 2086-01-28	X – 2084-05-09
Lost: 2108-11-08	Lost: 2108-12-04

Carter connected these two cards with a fine thread of cotton. Hanging pendant from that, she created a metadata card, smaller than the cards in the decks:

<u>Furries</u>
Known acquaintances (contact attached)

The others, those shadowy figures, caught on to what she was doing, and got down to work, dragging symlinks of decks and expanding this new group of social connections.

#

Carter pulled back out of the sim when her personal timer went off, fifteen minutes before the timebox was up.

Yawning and stretching, she made her way from her workstation to the small counter at the front of the old classroom. She filled the electric kettle from the tap and set it on its base, letting it heat up as she scooped a few heaping spoonfuls of coffee and chicory into the coffee maker. While she was in the sim, she had ensured that everyone else’s workstation would have an alarm for the timebox, and it was only fair that she make everyone a cup of coffee before they pulled back.

The coffee had finished brewing and the mugs were all set out in a row in front of the pot, each waiting with handles out toward the room for ready hands. Carter had poured herself some of the brew, thick and bitter, and topped it off with a dash of sweetened creamer to dull the taste.

One by one, the lab techs pulled back from their workstations and ambled up, still glassy-eyed, to the counter where the coffee lay. Carter suppressed a smile at the sight of what looked like a horde of zombies in various states of disarray moving toward the pot and mugs. The caffeine would be nice, but over the months they had spent on the project, they had grown into a comfortable ritual of holding meetings over coffee. The habit remained unbroken.

“So,” she stated, once everyone was gathered around and coffeed.

There was silence. Sanders wouldn’t meet her gaze.

Finally, she caved and broke down her thoughts, putting on her manager’s hat, “Timebox is over. I think we got a bunch of good stuff done in a few hours. There’s definitely connections there, we’ve found a good number of them among the cases we have at our disposal, but there’s precious little data on why those connections are there. We’ve got a few furries, we’ve got a few ‘net addicts – well, more than a few – and we’ve got a whole lot of DDR junkies. None of those point to anything that would lead people to getting lost.”

“Man, have you *seen* DDR zombies, though?” Everyone laughed.

Another voice piped up, “And the correlation on the neurochem side is extremely loose, almost non-existent.”

Sanders smirked down into his coffee mug before hiding the expression with a sip of the steaming liquid.

“No, there’s no doubt about that, is there?” Carter sighed and shrugged, “So, again, timebox is over. What do you think? Is this line of thought worth pursuing? Plus-one, minus-one, zero. Sanders?”

“Minus-one.” The response was immediate.

Carter slipped her phone from her pocket and started a tally on the vote app she used for that purpose. “Alright,” she continued. “Jacob?”

“Zero.”

Tallying as she went, Carter went around the room, The running tally took a few dings (neither of the lawyers were for the idea, she noticed), but remained net positive until the end of the line.

“We’re left at two, then.”

Sanders set his mug down with exaggerated care, but otherwise stayed silent in the room.

“Hardly universal, so let’s triage. Can I get one from neuro, one from stats and history, and would one of the law team be willing to devote a tenth of a day to helping us out? Just to run stuff by as we come up with stuff.”

Prakash Das from the neurochem team raised his hand, and Avery from statistics and history volunteered as well. One of the lawyers, Sandra, gave a little shrugged and promised some of her time.

“Alright, then. Let’s sync up, you three.” Carter smiled toward the rest of the group, “Not leaving you guys behind. One-on-ones and daily standups will continue at the usual times. We’ll set a timebox of . . . three days, after which we’ll reconvene and vote again.”

Sanders rolled his eyes and strolled back toward his workstation, Ramirez’s eyes on his back.

Chapter Two

AwDae slowly picked emself up off of the floor, staggering to eir feet in the middle of a long row of lockers. Ey hardly felt weak, but the shock to the system of being in the tech booth and theater sim, and then suddenly being back in high school was taking its toll on eir wits.

Ey swiped eir paw from left to right in front of emself to bring up the menu. Only, no menu came up. There was nothing in this sim, wherever it was. Ey had no ACLs, and there was no global menu.

Beginning to panic, AwDae felt behind emself, reaching for that sense of reality outside of the sim that should be at his back. It was there, ey could feel it like a cool breath of air on the back of his neck, but there was something keeping em from being able to get to it. A thin barrier, a membrane, like a sheet of plastic that kept him trapped within the sim.

And then, with a jolt of pain through the back of eir neck and down along eir spine, it was gone.

Throughout all of the practice runs and training on the workstation that had gone into eir education, that feeling had only come up a small handful of times before. It was the feeling of being forcibly disconnected from the workstation through the manual expedient of removing the contacts from the cradles in which they rested. It was the shock of being brought to reality from out of a sim with no disconnection.

And with that, AwDae should've found emself back in the tech booth, trying to figure out what strange loop the theater had gotten itself into to freeze eir workstation. The lockers never wavered, though, and now ey found emself stuck in eir old school with no contact to the world outside of the sim, or whatever this... place was.

The lockers were enough to tip em off, but sims – if that's what this was – could contain any details, so ey started to walk slowly down the halls, memories coming back in a wash as ey made eir way along the hallway, nails clicking against the tile, following the math wing to the student center, a cavernous open area that acted as a terminus for all of the different hallways, each one hosting a different subject. They spread away from the cavernous room like limbs, a giant insect clutching at the earth.

Once inside the student center, AwDae sat down once more and tried to reach towards reality once more, rolling onto eir back in eir increasingly frustrated attempts to pull away from the

contacts, even though that shock of pain suggested those in reality had pulled em back.

Frustration, anger, fear: all simmered within em, working up to a boil as ey tried increasingly harder. Finally, ey gave up and, hastily brushing tears from eir eyes, slipped out of eir jacket, swished eir tail to the side, and lay flat on eir back on the cool terrazzo floor. Ey pulled eir tux jacket up over eir face and buried eir muzzle in the soft lining, paws holding the cloth to eir face as ey deliberately let the tears come, seeking any kind of release from the tension building up inside of em.

It was a few minutes before ey peeled the coat from eir face and managed to stand back up once more. Ey tiredly slipped eir arms back into the sleeves of the coat, letting it rest on eir shoulders once more and drape, unbuttoned, around eir slim frame. Before continuing, ey bent down to roll up the cuffs of eir slacks to keep them from bothering eir feet.

It was in the middle of the second cuff that ey realized the absurdity of the motion. In the theater sim, ey didn't have a body, and when ey 'woke' in eir normal sim, ey was dressed only in the clothes ey had put on when ey went to bed, though usually ey remembered to disrobe before disconnecting, more out of habit than anything.

Why was ey still in eir tux, then?

AwDae puzzled over this for a moment longer before completing the act, setting it aside as something to look into later. For now, ey needed to find eir way out. Find eir way back out.

#

The sim was startlingly complete.

In fact, the only thing that seemed to have changed was AwDae emself.

AwDae's curiosity had wone out, and ey had made eir way back to the school's auditorium, exactly as ey had left it all those years ago. Trudging up the few steps toward the entrance, ey feared that it would be locked, but the door swung easily beneath eir paw, and eir nails clicked against the lower portion of the sound guard in the doorway, leading em into a dimly lit auditorium.

The house lights were at a quarter, and the stage was lit only by utility lights from the back. All the same, it was enough for em to find eir way to the small sound booth, a counter with a light, off, and a bank of sliders and knobs, all zeroed out.

AwDae brushed eir fingers along the lower lip of the soundboard, swishing eir tail out of the way to take a seat on the stool in front of it. Ey reached a paw up past the master sliders, just around to the back of the board, where ey found the power switch. Click.

Nothing happened, so ey reached a little further back, finding the power strip for the booth itself, and toggled the power on that. The board let out a satisfying pop of recognition as it came to life, the brief surge of power echoing throughout the hall as the speakers woke up. The theater was purring to em, just as the one back in London had done earlier that night.

Ey fumbled with the light to get it on, washing the unlit portions of the booth in red – red being the least obtrusive from the visible spectrum in a dark room – and exposing a thin layer of dust covering the board and booth in a thin, matte coating. The only breaks in it were where eir fingers had brushed the dust away, leaving black slicks amid the gray. Ey slowly brought the master volume up to the spot ey still remembered from so long ago, turned the gain to mid on mic one, and brought the slider up slowly.

A soft hiss filled the hall. The channel was open.

That didn't mean anything, AwDae told emself. There could be anything plugged into the snakehead in the pit. A line with a powered mic, a receiver, or hell, a fault in the system.

All the same, it was something. Something in this seemingly abandoned hulk of memory was turned on, something else besides emself was making noise.

Ey was about to head down to the pit to check on the snakehead, the terminus for all of the microphone cables or wireless receivers that stretched up to the board, when ey caught sight of a sheet of paper, folded in quarters, tucked between the side of the board and the wall of the booth.

AwDae plucked the paper free and unfolded it, then held it under the red light of the booth lamp to get a closer look at it.

There, in tiny print, was a good chunk of the content of the card ey had created earlier that morning to add to the deck. Cicero's DDR ledger, containing transactions that comprised votes made, bounties collected, and comments posted.

Frowning, AwDae refolded the note and stuck it into eir trousers' pocket, mulling over the small scrap of the outside world stuck in this elaborate fantasy.

#

The pit revealed little. There were twenty boxes set on a table in front of the snakehead. Twenty receivers for wireless mics. Twenty cables neatly velcroed together into a bundle, contracting from the boxes and expanding once more toward the dull grey plug box. From there, the cables were reduced to a simple five-per-row organization, arching up from the snakehead before bowing under their own weight, each a graceful arc.

All of the boxes on the table were dull, mute LEDs simple bumps on their surface. All but one, the first one. A piece of masking tape on its box marked with a simple '1'. That box had a single red light on the front, marking that it was powered on, and a single green light, marking that its corresponding mic was transmitting.

"Great," AwDae murmured. "That lowers the position down to only half of the school."

If it had been a wired mic, the search would have been over right as it started. The cable would've been plugged into the snakehead, and by following it until ey reached its end. There would be the mic.

And what?

There would be the mike, and ey would still be stuck in some stereotype of a nightmare, all dressed up for the high school performance and the auditorium completely empty. The fox barked a soft laugh at just how cliché the whole situation was, turning away from the receivers and resting eir weight against the edge of the table on which they were placed. Ey rested a moment there before hiking eir weight up onto the familiar surface, hearing the slight squeak of stressed metal from eir sudden burden.

AwDae swung eir legs back and forth, hearing the table creak and groan in time with the slow movements, the sound quiet, but in the dread silence of the auditorium, more than enough to fill the hall.

Ey stopped. The hall was pleasantly wet: not damp or anything, but in terms of echo, it had just the right amount (or, at least, as much as a high school auditorium was willing to muster). Had it been dry, the sound would've died away completely. The dryer a room, the closer it got to approaching an anechoic chamber, a room lined with material such that it would reflect zero sound.

Neither did the sound bounce back endlessly like an echo chamber.

AwDae knew this hall, even still. Ey knew the ways in which there would be pockets of good sound and bad sound throughout the seating. Ey knew the dead spots on stage where one's voice would fall flat if it weren't amplified. Ey knew how the stage was built rather like a horn, with the performers at the small end, so that their sounds were projected out toward the audience.

And yet, that slight echo of the squeaking of the table fading out had given em an idea. It was crazy, sure, but by this point, though ey hadn't admitted it in such terms to emself, if ey had gotten Lost, a crazy idea was better than none.

And, a bitter portion of em reasoned, if getting Lost is permanent like people say, I've got nothing to lose.

The idea was this.

The squeal of feedback in an audio system is known to most everyone, and even those who have not heard it before know immediately that something is wrong when it crops up. It starts as a quiet hum in the background, but it doesn't take long before it can be understood as something originating in the system, rather than coming from the speaker or performer. From there, it builds on itself, feeding back into itself, until it quickly overwhelms all sound coming into it.

The idea is similar to the echo that AwDae had produced by making the table squeak beneath eir weight. Sound was picked up by the microphone, transmitted through the sound board, and then out into the room, amplified, through the speakers. However, the microphone was in the same room as the speakers.

If the microphone started to pick up sound from the speakers – or, more commonly, the monitors: speakers placed at the front of the stage and pointed back toward the performers so that they

could hear themselves on the otherwise acoustically dead stage – then that sound would come out of the speakers and be picked back up by the microphone once more.

This was the feedback loop that was referred to. That would continue to build through further and further iterations, until the auditorium was filled with a roar of the one pitch the microphone had locked onto.

Obviously, microphones were still in use. They hadn't been abandoned because of this roar, as there were many different ways around feedback. One could angle speakers toward the audience, rather than the stage, for instance. Bodies were notoriously bad reflectors of sound, which is part of what made the stage so dead, acoustically. One could also not provide monitors, but that was cruel to one's performers. One could turn down amplification, but that defeated the purpose.

The solution, then, was gain.

Gain was the sensitivity of a mic. The simple adjustment was given a knob at the very top of the sound board, befitting its importance in the world of sound engineering. Turn the gain all the way down, and the mic was a dumb lump of metal. Turn it all the way up, and the mic picked up everything from the movement of the air to the slight hiss of the live sound system, leading to almost instant feedback.

If AwDae were to turn up the gain almost to the point of feedback, ey could try and make noise in various points throughout the auditorium. The more feedback ey generated, the more sound the mic was picking up. The more sound it was picking up, the closer ey was to it.

Eir possible locations for the mic hadn't been reduced from half the school, but eir chances would go up. If the mic was not in the auditorium, ey could turn the main system up and start venturing further afield with a door left open, allowing em to hear the theater hum like an alarm.

Chapter Three

TODO this should be a conversation between Carter and Avery, who is also neutrois

Carter had come up against a unique hurdle.

One of the problems with the genderqueer patient, RJ, was that, although it was notionally feasible for em to have an X in their gender records and all the pronouns ey chose, not everyone had recognized that. Various pronouns flourished and died, styles of dress had come and gone, but the arcane triad of institutions – banking, health care, and government – remained stodgy and stuck in their ways.

As a result, RJ existed in a unique limbo in some cases. Although eir passport specified X under the gender marker, although ey went by eir own pronouns (which, Carter was informed, were a truncated version of singular-they known as Spivak pronouns or Elverson pronouns, depending on the source), and although ey functionally lived life as a genderqueer person, without close ties to anyone, ey still had records that marked em as male in the arcane triad.

This, by itself, was not an interesting fact. Even though folks had been doing similar for going on centuries now, there were still articles and posts about the perceived barriers to entry when interacting with the world as a genderqueer person. Person after person had complained about the difficulties in changing one's gender marker – a letter from so-and-so, such-and-such documentation – and person after person was turned down by clerks of the court for various reasons; take your pick of: “we don't do that here,” “you have to do that at the federation level,” or “you'll also need this [unrelated document]”, among countless others.

Everyone had imagined, as medical technology had advanced around the subject of gender, that such changes would become easier as the world moved on past gender. Some held decidedly more dire predictions in their heads than others, of course. It hadn't quite worked that way, though. The fractious nature of identity combined with regime shifts had left quite a large gap for people to fall into. Nearly a hundred years after transgender rights had been codified, there still existed only the M, the F, and the X.

What Carter was learning was that the X came with a whole bouquet of baggage.

Before one grew up and settled on an identity, one was burdened with either an M or an F on official paperwork; this despite years and decades of campaigning. The result was, as far as

she could tell, a duplication of records. One wound up with an M or F record that was linked permanently to one's X record.

Carter had only the faintest idea of why it would be so difficult to change records unilaterally. Having worked for her fair share of time in academia, she had become inured to the committee culture of university life. Government, she supposed, was like university, only hundreds or thousands of times the size. Rather than one single database storing individuals embedded within a system – citizens, that is – there were likely countless such databases. Updating one's gender record caused a ripple that propagated through databases in a way that was understood by the makers at the time, but 'at the time' often referred to a time when legislation was passed.

The result was that Carter was coming across two records. There was RJ (X) and RJ (M).

Oh, rather, Avery Croft, her subordinate in the stats and history department, had come across this problem and eventually kicked it up to Sandra, their lawyer. Finding no clear path forward that could be found under a ten percent time bargain, Sandra had kicked it further up the ladder, and now Carter was dealing with the multiplication of records.

That's okay, she thought to herself. This is my job. I'm the one who ties things together, and this is just another one of those.

She was parked before three decks, delved into her workstation. She had a deck for RJ (X) of pretty substantial size, a deck for RJ (M) of much smaller size (some of which was, doubtless, duplicated in the first deck), and a deck that she was working on, titled simply 'research'.

To her right were two additional decks. One for Collin (M) and 'research'. Collin (M) was an enormous deck. Even among the countless decks of cards scattered through the shared system that the team was using, it was among the largest. Collin had more than just a little bit of past behind him, documented through various channels.

Were Carter to zoom in on Collin's deck, she knew she would find thousands, perhaps even tens or hundreds of thousands of cards detailing interactions with the DDR. These were 'paperclipped' together, a shorthand to say stuffed in a folder without being separated from the rest of the deck, such that, by leafing through the deck, she simply came across one large entry encompassing all its component entries: a grouping within a grouping.

From what she could tell, however, skimming through the 'research' deck, was that the two had encountered very different sorts of interactions on the 'net, even taking into account their varied interests.

Collin was almost a parody of DDR addict, whereas RJ was a quiet, introverted person online, choosing to interact, when ey interacted in public, on a one-on-one scale. However, they were both solid participants in the furry subculture.

Aside from that similarity, the two were decidedly different. While Collin had acquired no small amount of notoriety and wealth in his actions in the DDR comments, his votes, and his

accumulated social credit when it came to politics, RJ had seemed to slip, unnoticed through countless filters, despite eir interests. For instance, it seemed that banks, governments, and health care institutions weren't the only ones to expect a binary.

RJ had been tagged by few advertisers, or at least purchased few things through referrals. They were all required to accommodate eir gender, but the corporations didn't exactly know what to do with someone in that position. In fact, it was one of the clearest aspects of RJ's case. It seemed as though the corporate algorithms, when encountering something like that, had largely chosen to cut their losses and move on. The only corporate purchases and advertisements that had made it through were often ones that focused specifically on that segment of the population.

In addition, Collin was in a devoted relationship with another furry, whereas RJ seemed to have given the whole relationship game a miss; in fact, ey were somewhat active among a small community of asexual and aromantic individuals on the 'net. Many advertisers had picked up at this, though there were still quite a few online dating organizations who were doggedly attempting to keep offering countless men and/or women to em.

All of these were perhaps ancillary. However, Avery's job in the stats and history portion of this little project of Carter's was to dig into the social aspect of what had gone on in the lives of the Lost leading up to their disappearance. There wasn't too much that was available aside from 'net activities, to be fair, and then only the ones that had been provided to the team by their board. All the same, it was Avery's task to sift through these countless records to pull out bits and pieces of the story leading up to the patients getting lost.

What Avery had found so far, though it had only been a day since ey had started working on the task, was that, in the period leading up to the disappearances, there had been an increased issue in politics and political issues. Nothing seemed to match exactly between the cases they had before them, but there was enough of a correlation for Carter to go off of, so she set Avery to digging even further.

The situation, as they had discovered, boiled down to two separate cases. In the case of Collin, and about two thirds of the other patients, there had been an uptick in political discussion prior to them getting lost. Interesting, perhaps, but the discussion had been all over the place. There hadn't been much interaction on similar issues outside of what was to be expected by a fairly diverse, if somewhat affluent crowd.

In the remaining third of the cases, including that of RJ, there had been some uptick in political interest, but not to the same extent. Rather, the social factor had increased in terms of networking surrounding the concept of the Lost themselves. For RJ, it had been eir receipt of a deck consisting of information concerning a friend (while nothing was definite, it almost had to be Collin). If the deck Carter had on Collin was anything to go by, then there was no doubt that ey would be staring at much of the same numbers.

Unfortunately, that's all they had to go by, so far. There would be lots more digging to come.

There was a soft *ding* within the sim, and a similar reaction from all of the shadowy avatars lurking about. Everyone looked up. Directly above them in the middle of the 'ceiling' in place of a light or fan, was the current time in faintly luminescent letters. Again, for each member, they would look a little different, but for Carter, traced out in fine cotton string was the '12:00' that indicated lunch.

Carter's workstation began to fade, so she ensured that auto-save was turned on – it was – and backed out. The university, like many modern companies, had a policy that employees working in a sim not work longer than five hours in a row without fully backing out, so when Carter pulled back from her workstation, she saw everyone's head doing the same thing simultaneously, leaning back from headrests.

Most of the members headed towards the fridge and microwave over by the coffee station to collect their lunches, but Carter, waking up late from a restless night, hadn't had the chance to make lunch before heading out for work.

She was hardly alone, of course. There was a regular coterie of folks, if two or three could be counted as such, who made their way across the street from the building to the shops, hunting falafel or curry. She put on her best chummy face and tagged along with them, making her way from the repurposed classroom on the second floor down and out through the building's lobby. The group chatted, inevitably but amiably, about work, comparing notes on the cases they were focusing on.

The group – three of them, with Carter – decided on a small vietnamese place nearby. It would be a little slow, with the wait and all, but she was promised that the food was amazing, so she went along with. Even the boss can enjoy a lunch every now and then.

They found themselves standing outside as they waited on a table, an obvious target for the tabloid seller. They were wandering a little further than usual from the tube station entrance. Even so, the restaurant wasn't that far away, and the owner hadn't noticed them yet to shoo them off.

Carter rolled her eyes as one of the stats and history folks bought a tabloid on a whim.

"I promise I read it for the laughs," she said, in defense.

Carter shrugged, "It's less about you reading it, and more about you giving money to those... those..."

The other two stood in silence, eyes on Carter. They exchanged glances before the one holding the tabloid finally broke in, "Hey boss, you doing okay?"

"Can I see that?" She didn't wait for an answer before she snatched the tabloid from her coworker's hands.

Soho Theatre Mourns Lost Tech

RJ Brewser was the pride of the Soho Theatre Troupe's tech department.

The brainy American who blessed them with boosted bass was admitted to the University College Hospital after apparently getting Lost during a rehearsal on Thursday. Ey was discovered during an intermission completely unresponsive. Medical crews declared em Lost on the spot after analysing eir implants.

The genderqueer young man was described as “bright, but obsessed.” Ey was a member of the furry cult and spent most of eir time on the ‘net, which friends blame for em getting Lost.

The Soho Troupe promises that productions will go on as planned, with their back-up techs running the sound board.

Brewster represents the 135th case of the Lost marked in the world. Ey will be cared for by doctors at the UCH. Members of the University College London studying the Lost were unavailable for contact.

Carter slowly let the paper droop from her hands. Her colleague retrieved it before it was closed completely, opening to the page where she had been reading.

“Oh, hey! Stuff about a Lost person!” She read down further, then looked up at Carter, asking, “Did you get an interview request from them?”

Carter shook her head. “Nor did we even hear about that today. I bet it’s that GQ person that cropped up the other day, got us on the hunt.”

The two subordinates, sharing the tabloid now, read in grater depth. “They call em a ‘young man’, do you know about that?”

“Yep. Born male.”

The other young coworker chewed on his lip briefly before offering up, “Do you think we could go see hi-er, em? We’re with UCL.”

Carter shook her head once more and shrugged, “We can’t have any contact with the patients we are studying for a whole bunch of really arcane rules. It’s against the rules, in short.”

“But what about the theater troupe?”

Carter caught herself in the act of shaking her head again and turned toward the shop, tilting her head back and examining the sharp contrast between the gutters of the building and the steel-grey sky. Her mind was churning, but she was distracted, thankfully, by the host inviting them in to eat.

Chapter Four

It took AwDae just under two hours to find the microphone.

The first hour was spent searching the auditorium thoroughly. Ey searched by walking around clapping and humming, then singing songs half-remembered from productions ey had helped with in the past. Ey would've whistled if it wasn't for the structure of a canid muzzle. There was no way eir lips would manage to pull that off.

Silence.

After an hour, venturing even into the overhead areas where sound wouldn't reach, ey gave up and took a break.

Taking the slip of paper with Cicero's transactions from eir pocket once more, ey scanned over the titles of the initiatives voted on. There was very little there to latch onto. Or, rather, there was way too much. AwDae couldn't manage to even boil down the table into any single sentence, much less something useful. The cat had apparently voted on just about everything, without taking any breaks.

Eventually, when the rows started to blur into one another, ey levered emself up from the auditorium seat ey had chosen. Ey refolded the paper and slipped it back into the pocket before checking on the board once more. Everything remained set as it was before the break.

Venturing outside the auditorium, AwDae had imagined ey would work in concentric circle away from the auditorium. This turned out not to be the best idea. The theater was nestled between two arms of the school which did not meet. That made their routine fairly artuous. Ey'd walk down one hallway, poke into classrooms, and make noise before moving on. When ey reached the end of eir circle, ey had to jog around the auditorium through the student center to go down the other hallway and do the same

Eventually ey gave up on the concentric circle plan and started working from north to south. Ey worked through the entirety of one hallway, clapping and hollering, without hearing anything, before moving on to the area of the student center near the auditorium.

It was there that ey heard the first, faint hum.

At first, it had skimmed beneath eir attention, sounding rather like an echo from eir own voice in the cavernous space of the student center. When the open doors to the aduditorium caught

eir eyes, ey tried once more, getting another faint hum that slowly died out as the space and air dissipated the tone.

It took another few minutes to find the microphone itself: a small bit of hardware resting delicately atop the door handle leading into the principal's office just to the northeast of the auditorium doors. It was surprising, in a way, that ey hadn't managed to trigger any feedback earlier, until ey realized eir mistake: ey would have to shout loud enough to be heard in the auditorium; without the speakers producing noise loud enough to make it back through the walls and reach the mic, there would be no feedback.

The door was labeled 'Admin.', which was ominous. Although there was a head office at the front of the school, administration was where the principal and vice principals' offices were. It was one of those places that lingered in the mind of every student who had passed through the doors of the school. Getting called to the front office was usually bad enough – a call from a parent!? – but getting called to the admin office was worse still.

AwDae delicately picked up the microphone through mounting feedback before shutting it off, eir ears laid flat in an attempt to shut off the growing hum from the auditorium. The sound stopped a scant few moments after the mic was shut off, bouncing around the auditorium and the student center.

Ey pocketed the mic in eir trouser pockets and straightened back up, cautiously lifting eir ears once more. The school was once again silent. There was no hearing the hiss from out here in the student center. Remembering the position of the mic, AwDae wandered back over to the auditorium, turning the gain back down on the board and lowering the house volume. Ey even turned the mic back on and gave it a quick "one-two" to ensure that none of the speakers had been damaged.

This is a sim, and not even mine, ey thought, ears tinted pink with a blush. *What does it matter if a speaker blew?*

Ey shrugged it off after a moment. Habits were habits and there was no reason to break them now.

Wandering back to the admin office, tail swishing behind em, AwDae couldn't help but feel as though ey was trapped within a game, one of those first-person puzzle solvers that seemed to be forever popular. The fact that ey seemed to be receiving what amounted to clues while in an complex abandoned building only added to that.

Shaking eir head, ey turned the knob on the admin office and peeked carefully inside.

There were no traps, no jump-scares, just the six-sided room with its three doors on the opposite walls. One for the principal, and two for the vice principals. Taking the game metaphor to heart, ey started poking around the office where ey could, flipping through a datebook on the secretary's desk (empty) and rummaging through the drawers (office supplies). The waste baskets were empty.

Steeling emself for something shocking, with the game mentality still holding onto eir mind, ey tried each of the doors in turn.

It surprised AwDae that it wasn't the principal's office that opened, but one of the vice principals, though the name escaped em. The office was dark, but the lights responded to a touch on the pad, which ey sent to a comfortable level without being intimidating. Ey remembered being hauled into the room, all those years ago, with the lights all the way up, a gesture of power.

Rummaging through the desk revealed little of note. Rather than a planner on the desk, however, was a workstation; simple and, to eir eyes, ancient. It didn't respond to any of AwDae's interactions, though. Although how it would work, ey didn't know, ey had hoped that a connection like that might lead to a way back out of this mess.

The only other item on the desk was a scratch pad, and a pencil. They never seemed to go out of style. The pad contained a simple breakdown of costs, divided into departments, for the coming year. A simple three-column setup tallying subject, expense, and deductions from some number at the top which must be the classroom budgets. At the bottom of the page, was a final number, circled. Apparently, the administrator hadn't quite liked the result, for it was circled in dark, angry strokes.

AwDae flumped down in the chair at a bit of an angle, letting eir tail flop down between the arm rest and the chair's back so as to keep from crimping up uncomfortably. Tired, so very tired.

Ey rubbed eir eyes tiredly, brushing away the sandy grit of tears already shed. Ey was moving in this search with determination, occupying eir mind, specifically so that ey wouldn't collapse into a depression borne of hopelessness and despair. It occurred to em that getting Lost was the perfect prison: complete freedom, or nearly so (ey had already fantasized about jimmying open the other doors), with nothing to do. Nothing to dream, nowhere to go, nothing to know.

Ey would go mad without a task. Ey could create, but why create in these empty halls? What would ey even begin to create that would matter the worth of a damn? Ey would never be able to share it. Ey would only be able to spiral inwards. Endlessly.

All AwDae wanted to do was curl up in the chair. It was comfortable enough, ey could probably manage to get some sleep in.

Instead, ey rubbed eir eyes once more and leaned forward toward the desk, letting eir eyes focus on the columns of scratched digits and marks on the sheet of scrap before em. Mindlessly working through the sums in eir head simply for lack of anything else to do.

"Hmm, that's weird," ey murmured sleepily out of the corner of eir muzzle.

The numbers didn't add up. In fact, everything added up within its own row, it was simply as though a row were missing.

Ey yawned and stretched before holding the sheet of scrap up to the light. There were no erasures, whiteouts, or anything like that. There was just simply not enough information.

Finally, the fact that ey was holding onto a ledger, such as it was, dawned on AwDae. If ey was meant to be looking for clues, then. . .

Ey hastily fished the previous clue out of eir pocket. The ledger of Cicero's DDR interactions.

It wasn't nearly so simple as the scratch paper. For instance, each referendum had three different types of interaction: a cost, a bounty (if that referendum was referred back to the house), and any number of comments made on the issue, and they were often out of order on the sheet, given Cicero's habit of voting on everything.

Ey wished for eir workstation more than anything, as this would make the task almost trivial. Having to do without, ey snagged the half-used pencil and the rest of the scrap and worked it out. Each cost and comment would be a debit, and each bounty would be a credit. One could also buy DDR credits through a mechanism that basically acted as an additional withholding on one's taxes, and there were two of those in there, ensuring that Cicero would have enough DDR credit to make what AwDae assumed was some scathing political rant on an upcoming high-stakes referendum.

Even so, with all that work, it was clear that even the section of numbers on the paper didn't add up. Once more, there was a missing interaction. Three missing interactions, rather: one vote's cost, one vote's comment, and one vote's bounty, at AwDae's best guess.

The problem was that one's DDR records were public – they had to be, for the system to work – and, unless it had been tampered with (something AwDae had to take into account), eir was a combination of 1,252,000 credits unaccounted for in terms of transactions. One million debit to the comment, a quarter of a million credit for bounty, and two thousand to the vote cost.

AwDae tore off the top sheet of scrap and, working faster this time, ran the numbers once more, only to receive the same result.

“Well, huh.” Ey sat, stunned, for a little while longer before gathering eir notes and folding them together with the original clue and stuffing them into eir pocket. Ey couldn't create a deck here, but ey could sure take items with emself.

If this all had something to do with what was going on outside, where ey was counted among the Lost, that was all well and good. But, how would ey get that information back out.

It was probably too early to be thinking of such things. Ey wasn't going anywhere for the time being. Sleep was taking too strong a hold on em. Ey gave token consideration to where ey would be able to sleep before deciding on the auditorium. The fold-down seats were cushioned, but not very well. All the same, the place had a sense of home about it. Perhaps the day to come would help em learn more.

Chapter Five

Carter hadn't meant to dodge her subordinate's question. They truly did need to go in to eat.

The food was, as promised, delightful, and Carter made a mental note to come here more often for more good Vietnamese food. That note, however, was filed by her mind and set aside so that she could work through the implications of what had been spilled to her by the tabloid.

She couldn't visit this RJ any more than she could fly out of the second story window here and back to her lab. There were several factors keeping her from doing so.

First, and foremost, it was useless. Her team didn't *need* access to the Lost to do all of their work, because much of their vitals was provided as a real-time stream of data into the work group. Besides, it had been proven that physical contact registered little, if at all, to the Lost.

Secondly, there would be people between her and RJ. Not just doctors and nurses, but her own administration. She would have to go through any number of people just to get access to some variables that likely wouldn't help her investigation at all, such as eye color or hair color.

Finally, there was the law. Carter understood the purpose of WFPHIPA: the Western Federation Personal Health Information Protection Act. Hell, she had voted on it, herself. It was something she felt strongly about. The tabloid had technically breached that (though there was no culpability) by informing her that there was a good chance that one of the group they were studying was this RJ.

There was, however, nothing to stop her from going to a show in the next day or two.

Feeling very much the sleuth, she stuffed a small egg roll into her mouth with delight, savoring the taste of it.

Yes, she'd go to a show up in Soho.

#

With her resolution planted firmly within her, she found it much harder to make it through the rest of the day. Rather than wrangle the two competing strands of the work group into some cohesive goal, she spent much of her time distracted. She was thinking about all of the ways in which she could possibly approach the cast or crew. Would she be able to even get in contact with any of them? Supposing she would, what would she even say? "Tell me about your sound tech"?

Eventually, though, the rush had worn off. Toward the end of lunch, she had purchased tickets (at no small cost) and been hyped up about visiting the theater. When the afternoon started to wear on, she found herself once more tied up in work.

Avery and Prakash had both settled into the routine of investigating what had gone on before the incidences of the Lost. Avery was collating what data they had from each case on the social front before the subject had gotten lost and searching for social connections between each of the cases. Prakash, meanwhile, was digging through biochemical data that had been collected from each of the patients and searching for similarities for them, based specifically on the time before they had gotten lost, rather than during or after.

Carter had supposed that this would be innocuous enough, but it seemed that Sanders had taken the opportunity of the boss dining out for lunch to chat with a few of the other members of the workgroup. Not once, but twice while she was working, she had fielded private messages from some of her teammates. Both had concerns around the direction of the project, and questions about the wisdom of separating the work group into smaller groups.

In both cases, she reiterated that this would be another temporary investigation. If it turned up any useful information, then they would have that conversation again in the near future. If it didn't, then everyone would cohere once again afterwards. There was comfort in the worlds, but all the same, Carter wasn't sure how much effect they were having.

She had an idea, one she thought worth investigating. Sanders, however, had an ideal.

Or so Carter was assuming. When assessing the team's standing on the issue, she had used a simple three point scale: for, neutral, or against. What she hadn't asked was, in the common usage, how many fucks each of them gave. There were, after all, two parts to making a decision. Which way you'd vote, and how much you cared about that.

Carter could easily estimate Sanders giving ten out of ten fucks against this current plan of dividing the team for exploratory purposes. In fact, until this afternoon, she would only likely have given seven or eight fucks.

That question hadn't been asked, though.

This afternoon, it was the combination of determination to see if she could learn more for the project and the sense that she was on the right path that had bumped her up on the number of fucks she gave. And, if she was honest to herself, the hope of proving Sanders wrong. There was no small amount of competition within academia, after all.

#

The play was a contemporary piece called *The Short Trip*. According to the season, it chronicled an indecisive youth taking a small trip away from his family on false pretenses to visit a bunch of friends for three days. The goal of the trip was to visit his long-distance partner, but in

the setting of a party, with guests, both known and unknown, weaving their way through the scene over the three heady days.

This much she had learned as she made her way southwest. Carter had needed to duck out of work earlier than usual to make it over to the theater on time. She had actually to travel past RJ in the UCH, riding along the yowling Victoria line, to get to Soho where the theater was. Traffic at that time was notorious for keeping the Tube cluttered and, at times, inaccessible. She had needed to wait for three trains to pass before she found one with room.

The train vomited her out into Oxford Circus and left her spinning, looking for the right exit to the tube station, each helpfully lit up with a thin, translucent display that overlaid the older signage in painted tile. Both bore the unerring curves of Helvetica, perpetual winner of the font wars.

It was easy enough to find the theater by following the crowds, and her identity – and thus her ticket – was proved by a taking her glove off and giving touch from her contacts, a grip around a simple bar in front of the theater. Once she had done so, the bar flipped around to provide its other end to the next customer, the end she had touched getting a quick sanitization so that everyone touched a sanitary surface. It was all rather like getting on the Tube, only much slower.

Carter was surprised by just how much she enjoyed the play. She had decided not to approach cast or crew beforehand. This had initially worried her, as she suspected she would spend the entirety of the play thinking about what to say. She wound up getting engrossed in the play, watching as the lead made his way through the party and met up with his partner.

The cast did a magnificent job of portraying the awkwardness of meeting up for the first time. She had had her own long-distance fling while an undergrad, and she knew that feeling well. Her mother had even cautioned her to meet up at a public space where you know people, like a party, just in case.

It was well into the third act of three that she realized she hadn't given attention to the sound of the play. A passing thought informed her that this was probably a good thing, that this was the sign of a job well done.

She applauded as heartily as the rest of her fellow audience members, clapping in that way that prevented any knocking of her contacts against each other. All the same, her mission, such as it was, was not lost on her. She was perhaps a little rude in her haste in making her way out into the lobby of the theater where some of the cast and the director were greeting the audience. It was opening night, after all.

“Mr. Johansson. Mr. Johansson!”

The bulky man turned toward her with a pleasant look despite the obvious worry lining his face. “Ma’am. I trust you enjoyed the show?”

“I did. Not bad at all! I did want to ask you something, though, if I might.”

“Mm.” The sound was assent, but with the rest of the audience starting to stream out of the theater, she could tell his mind was elsewhere.

“I was. . . It’s just, about RJ-”

That focused Johansson’s attention in a way that startled Carter out of speech.

“I-I mean, if it’s not too forward to ask,” she trailed off, leaving a hint of a question.

“It is forward,” he confirmed, eyes boring into her. “But I’d like to know how you know of em?”

“I’m a researcher at UCL, working on the Lost.”

Johansson took her elbow gently in his grip and led her off to the side, out of hearing of the rest of the audience, as well as the other curious cast.

“That doesn’t tell me how you know of em. Aren’t you. . . isn’t that privileged information?”

“The tabloids had a-”

He growled and grit his teeth, “They told me I couldn’t contact anyone but doctors, but said you guys had declined contact. I saw that.”

Carter straightened and shook her head, “We did not, nor would we have. Although, I must admit, the interview process would be far more formal with this. I only put the pieces together based on location and pronouns.”

“So what do you want from us?” Johansson’s shoulders sagged, “We miss RJ. It’s been a real mess without em. Please, Doctor-”

“Ramirez. Dr. Carter Ramirez.” She hesitated for a moment before continuing. “We’re looking for. . . well, a few of us are looking for social connections between the Lost, rather than just simple personality correlations. What can you tell us about RJ in that sense?”

Johansson looked up toward his cast, then leaned a little closer to murmur, “O’Niell’s, once we’re done, then we can talk. I have more to do here, so it may be a while. Please wait up, though.”

Chapter Six

Sleep did not come easily.

Auditorium seats, although padded, were not made for laying down on, and AwDae found that ey had to face toward the backs of the seats, or else eir tail would get crimped against them. At first, the faint dusty smell of the seat fabric had inspired nostalgia, but it didn't last long. Eventually, ey got up blearily and began pacing around the auditorium, looking for some way to get some rest that did not involve the seats.

Ey pondered pulling down one of the curtains and making a bed out of that, but, as ey did not know how to do so without ripping the curtain, ey was loath to do so. They carried some of that same smell, as well. Ey figured they would make a good last resort, if nothing else, and started exploring beyond the stage and auditorium.

The back door of the stage led out into the hall where all of the music classrooms were, and ey started cataloging additional places where ey could get rest. The black fabric orchestra seats were a little promising, but ey hit paydirt in the theater classroom.

In the back of the room was the wardrobe area, which also housed rack upon rack of tuxes and identical dresses for the choir singers. Nestled back behind all of these rows of clothing was an old sagging sofa. There was zero reason for the room to contain a sofa, but as inexplicable as it was, AwDae wouldn't have been surprised if such a thing had existed in the school ey had attended.

Thanking the gods, or at least whoever had created this sim, ey flopped down onto the sofa. Slightly musty smell aside, ey was asleep within minutes.

Sleep, while restful, brought intense dreams. Dreams of twisting passages, corridors lined with lockers that looped back around on themselves, leading always into the same dim light of the student center. And in the middle sat a menu, like the kind ey could get by swiping eir paw from left to right in any sane and sensible sim. Every time ey got close to try and read the menu, though, it would slide closed once more, leaving only its shadow behind, an unexpected rendering mistake.

AwDae awoke feeling as though ey had drastically overslept. Ey hadn't paid attention to when ey had gone to bed in the first place, but all the same, ey felt late.

The day before, with the shock of the transition and the need to explore the auditorium and school for the microphone, ey had never managed to make it outside of the school. Ey felt silly for

that now, and so after ey woke, ey started to plan a way out of the school to see how extensive the sim was.

It was customary to lock the doors of a building that did not lead anywhere in a sim. For instance, although the Crown Pub did have bathrooms and fire escapes, all things to make it look authentic, the doors were simply locked. Beyond them would have been nothing at all. That was simply the extent of the sim. There were much larger sims than the school itself, and much more intricate, as well. AwDae couldn't be sure of the boundaries of the sim without exploring.

As ey walked toward the front doors of the school, figuring that those would be the most likely to lead anywhere, ey wondered about what was happening to emself back in reality. Ey didn't feel hungry, and such things were usually translated in-sim – after all, ey had still felt the need to sleep – so something had obviously been done with eir body.

That train of thought led to the question of just how exactly ey had gotten Lost in a sim without being connected. Obviously, plenty of time had passed, and certainly the crew hadn't left em just sitting on eir workstation after ey had finally lost touch. Even so, ey should've been pulled back when eir hands had been lifted from the cradles and eir head pulled away from the NFC headrest. And yet here ey was. Where was eir body, then? Some hospital somewhere, insensate and tied to life support?

And if ey was in a hospital, where did this sim live? A sim this size couldn't simply live in eir gear, with all of the mechanics ey had encountered so far: the fully functioning sound booth and mic, all of the papers in the office, the clothing ey had brushed eir hand across on the way to the couch.

No answers were forthcoming. All ey had to go on was what was in front of him.

Ey stopped at the front door, staring at the panic bar. Resigning emself to whatever happened when ey pushed it, ey leaned forward and rested eir paws against the smooth metal, claws clicking against the door itself, and gave a firm shove.

The door swung open and ey laid eir ears back and squinted into the bright sunlight beyond, holding the door open with one paw while the other shaded eir eyes.

Ey saw the cul-de-sac used by parents to drop their children off. Ey saw the street beyond, and the set of townhouses that lined the street opposite the school. Ey saw... grey. Ey saw fog. Despite the very sunny day (ey had indeed slept in almost until noon), ey saw fog.

Fog, usually referred to fog of war or render distance, represented the furthest that the system was willing to render the sim away from the character. It was occasionally also used as an invisible boundary, so AwDae could not be sure which it was. That it was there in the first place, closing off the street in either direction about a hundred yards into the distance, though, confirmed that this was indeed a sim, and not just some artifact of eir subconscious.

Ey stepped out onto the sidewalk by the flagpole and stared, shoulders sagging and tail droop-

ing. There were no answers. There was nothing for it but to keep looking.

Chapter Seven

Johansson's hands dwarfed the pint of ale. Once they had managed to find each other in the post-theater rush of the pub, they'd managed to stake out a small two-top table, crammed against one end of the bar itself, leading the larger man to lean slightly to the side away from the noise coming from above it.

He'd hardly touched the beer, but it seemed to take on an almost talismanic significance to him. Carter drank her own cider slowly, careful not to press her luck too hard. Johansson seemed slow to open up.

"Alright, so, RJ." It seemed to take no time at all for his impressive vocal cords to unlimber and release what sounded like a well-rehearsed baritone.

"Ey was your sound guy?" Carter winced at her slip-up, then added, "Sound tech?"

There was a small smile tickling at the corner of Johansson's mouth, but he nodded and took a large swallow of the thin ale. "Yep, lead sound tech. Best I've ever worked with, by a long shot. And don't worry, we still fuck up eir pronouns every now and then. I know we did on the night ey... the night ey... well, early last night."

Carter nodded, "And then you tried to pull em back out?"

He nodded and gave a small shrug. "Nothing. It's like ey was still delved in even after eir contacts had been displaced. We hit the panic button and called the docs. Some ambulance-chaser seems to have caught up with them, which I guess is how you found out about us."

"Yeah. I'm not really in the habit of checking the tabloids myself, but I'd gone out for lunch with a few coworkers and we got one pushed on us. The bit about you not being able to contact us got my attention, so I figured I'd make for the show tonight."

"How'd you even manage that, on opening night, anyway?"

Carter laughed and sipped her cider before replying, "Oh, don't worry, it cost me plenty. Christ, this is so far out of the realm of what I'd do, too. Truth is, I just feel like we're at an impasse."

"An impasse?" Johansson asked quietly.

"Yeah. We weren't getting anywhere." Carter leaned back in her chair to gather her thoughts once more before leaning over the table again. "I've only ever been on a few projects, I'll be honest, but all the same, this feels like a weird amount of interference. It feels like we're being

made to trudge through mud. They won't give us access to the patients? Fine. WPHIPA is what it is. We just need the data that they collect from them. This has never been a problem on any other project I've worked on.

"All the same, we're stuck with just little tidbits. We'll get a few hours of monitor scans, or a few bits of logs from before the event – er, that's what we call it, at least – and that's it. I don't mean to creep on you or anything, but with RJ, we've come across something we hadn't had before. We found out ey was... well, you know..."

XXX"

Johansson canted his head to the side, "Ey was genderqueer? Asexual? A furry?"

Carter laughed. "A furry, though those other two are certainly interesting data points to keep in mind. We didn't know ey was asexual."

Johansson laughed in turn and took another swallow of his beer. "Oh? How did em being a furry help you out at all?"

"Ey's the second furry we've had come across our desks." Carter averted her gaze toward her cider, then about the room, "In fact, it's caused a bit of a schism. Some of us are looking into possible transmission vectors, while others are focused on the cases individually. How could something like getting Lost be transmitted from one person to another? It sounds like something out of an old anime."

"I assume you're among those who doubt the transmission story?"

"Oh, no, I'm the head of it." She grinned wryly, shrugging again, "But there are still convincing arguments against it. The leader of the opposition, such as it is, Sanders is his name, is dead-set against it. He thinks that we're wasting resources chasing up this transmission tree. We've got an agreement, though."

"What's that?"

"Well, we'll keep poking at this lead and if it dries up, we'll agree to drop it."

Johansson harrumphed and nodded, hunching his shoulders. "Not much of a lead, I'll grant you that, but all the same, anything to try and get RJ back. Ey was more than just a tech, we all liked em. The tech crew, especially. We went through our share of fuck-ups tonight just getting by without em."

"Oh? I didn't notice any."

"You weren't on the headset, Carter. We had lights and sound arguing cues while stage desperately tried to keep them on track. It's a total mess."

"All the same," Carter countered. "I thought it was delightful."

"Mmm."

They both stared off into the pub. The room had that distinctly British dichotomy of being crowded and convivial, while also intensely conscious of personal space. The latter suffered as the

night went on.

“Tell you what, though,” Johansson mumbled, the rich baritone bringing Carter’s attention back to the conversation.

“Oh?”

“RJ wasn’t one for relationships, doubt ey would be, asexual and all, but of all the people ey was close to, it was definitely those furies ey was always hanging around. Come to think of it, I do remember em bringing up the Lost with regards to them.”

“Oh? Huh. It seemed like the to cases we have are certainly socially connected.”

“Yeah.” Johansson shrugged, “Not much for relationships romantically, but certainly no shortage of relationships on the friendship level. There was this one girl, Sasha, who ey was close to.”

Carter thumbed her phone on and swiped to a blank notes page.

“She was eir childhood sweetheart,” Johansson laughed. “As much of a sweetheart as ey would confess, at least. She knew ‘em both. RJ and eir friend who got Lost.”

Carter nodded, jotting down quick notes in shorthand. “She’s still out there, then? Not Lost?”

“I assume so, I guess. You’d know better than I.”

She shook her head, looking down at her phone as she completed the note taking. “Mmm, no, no female furies. A lot of ‘net addicts, and I suppose there’s no small crossover, but we’re talking way deep. DDR junkies and layabouts.”

Johansson bristled, “RJ was no layabout.”

She held up her hands and shook her head, “Mostly, is what I’m saying. They don’t have ties, or if they do, they don’t hold them. Recently, though, in the case of these last few folks – the furies – they have lots of contacts. That’s where our two groups disagree most. I think that we’re seeing something novel. ‘I’ being the leader of the group that thinks there’s a transmission vector.”

“And the others?”

“They see it as chance, as too small an ‘n’ – too few cases – to say one way or another. They say that there was bound to be both connected and unconnected folks among the lost. They’d say that it’s a matter of chance, that those who use the ‘net more would be more likely to wind up Lost, regardless of their social or economic situation.”

“Both make sense, I guess,” Johansson offered. “All the same, you know I’ve got a vested interest in RJ; I’m going to wind up seeing it from your point of view, since you’re working with em. Never mind that you invited me out here. What do you need from me?”

Carter thought for a bit, “I guess I need to know more about em. I have all of eir stats, the dump from eir workstation and the time leading up to it. I’m assuming we’re getting all of it, but perhaps that’s generous of me. What I need to know is what’s slipping through the cracks. I need

to know about who RJ was. How ey interacted with the theater, and anything you can tell me about eir friends.”

“Should you...?”

“Should I have all of that information? I don’t know. Is it against the law for you to tell me? No. Is it unethical to further my own agenda with this project by consulting you? I don’t know; maybe. If I were on a bigger, more mature project, we’d probably be interviewing you anyway. Is it because I think that the more we know, the more likely we are to get RJ and the others back?” Carter furrowed her brow. “I’d say yes.”

Johansson looked down into his beer, then, with a decisive motion, drank most of the rest of it in a few smooth gulps, holding up the glass with the last inch or so of amber liquid in it, an obvious toast. “To RJ, then.”

Carter felt a little silly toasting to someone she’d never met, with a man she’d only just met, with a full glass of cider to his mostly empty ale. All the same, she raised her glass and clinked its rim to Johansson’s.

“To RJ.”

Chapter Eight

AwDae stood in the sunlight for a moment, blinking.

Ey felt weak. Not from hunger, nor lack of sleep. Just worn out, exhausted. This was starting to feel like grinding: that drudge that you went through when playing some role-playing game in order to level up. It was always cast in a negative light, but then, you could quit a game. Here ey was, finding clues and all the nonsense that went along with gaming, and for what?

There was even a fog of war.

“So much bullshit,” ey laughed bitterly. No sense in keeping quiet about it.

Ey stripped down to eir underwear and shook eir fur out. There wasn’t much in the sense of comfort in a sim, so much as sensory inputs that the computer decided to send your way. The musty smell of the auditorium seats had been one thing, but ey was starting to feel that, given the way this sim was constructed, there would be rather more than less sensory input. Eir tux was not made for fox-people, and eir fur was decidedly matted.

There was nothing to feel all that self-conscious about – ey was a genderless furry in the middle of an abandoned sim, after all – but ey folded eir clothes up all the same and set them on the sidewalk in front of the school before heading to the grass, the cool blades of the plants a welcome change from the indoor-outdoor carpet or tile of eir old high school and the roughness of the concrete. Still clothed only in eir underwear, a simple garment made more to keep other sim participants at ease should ey disrobe, ey sat roughly down on the patch of grass, tail flicking about behind em.

“Alright. So.” Ey plucked viciously at a few close-mown blades of grass and held them pinched between eir pawpads. “Cicero is Lost. He was voting on a bunch of stuff as usual, leading the comment boards. He voted on something, and it had passed, but that doesn’t show in the records. That’s three things gone.” Ey plucked blades of grass with eir free paw, enumerating the facts. “The vote cost, the bounty, and the comment he made.”

Ey swished eir tail around to the side and hiked eir backside up enough to slip it beneath them, rolling onto eir back to stare upwards. It was too bright, so ey draped eir arm, fingers still clutching at grass, over eir eyes. “And now I’m Lost. I was working, and then I was here. Before working, I was digging into Cicero...”

Ey trailed off and spent a few moments thinking, then a few more just feeling the earth beneath eir fur, the way the grass seemed to find a way through to tickle at em more directly.

“So had Sasha, though. She was the one who got me the deck in the first place.” Ey ran through the acts ey had taken on the deck ey had been given. Eir first write to the deck had been on the note about the voting records. Prior to that, if such things were tracked, there was only the sorting and sharing of records.

Ey lifted eir paw once more and stared at the remaining torn blades of grass before tossing them aside. “Ah, hell. I’m talking to myself. If I’m going to go all cast-away, I might as well pick myself up a real companion, rather than just some blades of grass.”

Laughing, AwDae stood up once more and gathered up eir tux, heading back to the room with the couch and all of the costumes. Ey hoped ey could find something that would fit eir form, taking into account that ey was a fox, now, instead of a human.

#

AwDae wound up in a simple, pleated skirt and a rather plain shirt.

The skirt fit well with a tail, certainly far better than having eir trousers sag beneath the base of the tail awkwardly. It was a nice robin’s egg blue, but otherwise undecorated. After all, most decorations would get lost in the distance between the stage and all but the closest audience members.

The shirt was made for someone with broader shoulders. RJ might have filled it out, but on the fox’s slim form, it was rather baggy, which ey could hardly complain about. Again, it was a plain white, but it didn’t compress eir fur down too much, like the tux shirt with its fake pleats along the front had.

Ey spent a few minutes considering what to do with the tux. On the one paw, it was just an artifact. In theory, everything out here was just bits, even eir own body. By choosing clothes that were ‘more comfortable’, AwDae was simply instructing the sim how best to treat eir body. Clothes that were more comfortable were no different from clothes that weren’t, it was just how the numbers added up.

On the other, though, the tux was the only thing ey had brought with from reality, if such a thing could be said. It might just be a set of bits and bytes, but it was eir set of bits and bytes. Something to tie em back to the world outside this sim.

Ey finally came up with a solution and found a pack that had obviously gone along with some war-themed production. Drab and dusty, made of thick canvas, it would do well to carry along anything that would help, including eir notes ey had made. Ey laid eir tux out on the ratty sofa and rolled it into a tight cylinder; an empty sim would care little if eir tux got wrinkled. Ey stuffed the tux down at the base of the back and folded the notes into a small pocket on the side.

Finally, thus equipped, ey headed back to the auditorium on a whim. Once there, ey made sure that the room was put to sleep, and, without even thinking of it, snagged the one live microphone ey'd found earlier. Ensuring that it was off to conserve batteries, ey added it to the notes: a small token of where ey'd come from.

"Not going to do much without the receiver, much less a sound board to plug into," Ey murmured, then shrug and buttoned down the flap above the pocket.

Ey briefly considered food or rations before dismissing that as an even sillier idea. Ey didn't feel hungry or thirsty, even after so long in the school, so obviously, eir body had been taken care of. There was nothing ey could do about it from within the sim. All that food and water would do would make the sim tell eir body that the pack was heavier.

From their, ey made eir way back toward the front doors of the school, pushing them open against the pressure differential, the breeze outside ruffling eir fur and skirt as ey stepped out into the sun once more.

#

The grey mist turned out to be a render distance.

Render distances were used to reduce the amount of work the computer had to do to render a scene in a sim. If one was in the school, that was pretty simple. Buildings were fairly easy, made up mostly of polygons with textures attached. Of course, if you got close enough, those textures would be mapped to an artificial surface to give them more depth, causing the system to work harder, but that was rarely an issue.

Outside, though, that was difficult. There were trees, curves in the ground, more complex shapes. If, as AwDae suspected, all of this was happening within eir own gear, a render distance made sense. It was as though visibility had been reduced to a hundred or so meters, but in a way that didn't dampen the sunlight at all.

Had it been a barrier, AwDae could have walked up to the fog, but no further. As it was, though, ey was able to follow the street ey would've taken to the home ey grew up in, way back in America, and the fog simply receded before em. Ey could never truly approach it, it was just a small bubble into which ey had been placed: a bubble that moved along with em.

The act of walking away from the school, wearing a backpack and heading towards home, did a lot to dredge up memories of their time in an American highschool in the '90s. Though ey was a fox now, not a whole lot had changed. Ey had carried eir tablet and few books too and from school in a pack not much different than the one ey had been wearing. That was about the time ey had started to get more inventive with dress, and ey had worn several bits of clothing ey had picked up from thrift shops, finding a few different antique fashions to throw together into something ey could call eir own.

Ey prowled through memories of Sasha – of dating, and then of becoming better friends after anything more than that hadn't worked out. Ey thought back to her coming over to stay the night, eir mom checking in on them at one in the morning just to make sure everything was okay (and, bless her heart, to make sure they weren't having sex, though that was hardly RJ's thing).

Ey missed Sasha's company, most of all. Together, the two of them would've been able to keep each others' spirits up. Sasha would've been able to figure out the problem with Cicero's voting record much faster than ey had, and ey would've been less alone, would've felt less hopeless.

Ey trudged on toward home, reaching a paw up to snag a handful of leaves from one of the trees as ey passed, feeling the reluctant snap as they pulled loose from the branches. For all the sim's complexity, school in the spring was pretty far remote from London in the winter.

"School, hmm," AwDae mused aloud fanning the leaves out in eir paws. "Why school, anyway?"

Chapter Nine

Home was unlocked.

AwDae wasn't terribly startled by this fact. Although the front door had always been locked when ey had been growing up there, the fact that this whole sim seemed oriented around clues led em to believe that ey'd be able to gain entry to eir old townhome. On a whim, ey checked the other doors in the complex, and they were all locked, as expected.

Although ey had braced emself for it, there was still a surge of emotion and memory as AwDae stepped through the door and into the entryway of eir old home. Ey could feel immediately that it was deserted, but all the same, ey felt as though eir mom could be just around the corner in the kitchen, prowling through the fridge, or eir mom's boyfriend laid out flat on the couch, snoozing in front of the TV running old science fiction shows.

It was silent, though, as silent as school had been.

AwDae shrugged out of eir backpack and set it down in the entryway, as ey had done countless times growing up, and paced into the common area, toenails clicking against the hardwood floor. Ey kept eir eyes peeled for any sign of a clue like ey had been pointed toward back at the school.

The sensation quickly grew to be too much, and the fox sat down on the rug in front of the coffee table, where ey had sat to eat dinner countless times, watching whatever was on the TV. It was one thing for the house to be so empty, and another thing entirely to be here as eir fox-self, but the two combined were quite overwhelming. Ey felt eir breath coming in short and shallow, and eir sense of vision being slowly reduced to only what was in front of them. Eir pulse felt elevated, no matter how still ey sat, and ey found it hard to concentrate on what ey was even supposed to be doing here.

The only thought that they could manage to pull up was, *Is my pulse elevated offline, wherever that is?*

Ey let out a strangled sort of laugh, trying to picture some doctor's befuddled stare at the sudden signs of anxiety showing in their patient.

The laugh stopped quickly.

AwDae leaned forward onto eir forepaws, stretching eir legs out behind em to lay flat on eir belly on the oh-so-familiar rug, before rolling over onto eir side. Eir tail lay limp against the short

pile of the rug behind em.

How had this happened? ey thought to eirself. How did I wind up here? Why here? What did I do?

Eir mind was awhirl with questions, and ey found that the questions were the only things there. Ey didn't have answers, ey didn't have the brainpower required to do anything other than watch those questions swirl yan-tan-tethera through eir mind. Ey was an observer, nothing more than a set of eyes with no will to drive them as ey watched all of the emotion that had been held at bay with the sense of doing something over the last day and change.

Ey found, in retrospect, that eir actions had been all wrong. Ey had accepted getting Lost with resignation. Ey had leapt at the chance to solve the 'puzzle' of the microphone with something akin to joy. All this when ey should have been experiencing something more like terror, breaking down into sobs at the fact that ey had been struck with some sort of incurable...disease. Ey was Lost.

AwDae was sobbing now, ey found. Eir perspective, that core of emself that spent its time reviewing life around em, watched with no strong emotions as eir body shook with gasps and tears streaked down over eir cheeks and muzzle, leaving tracks in the short fur. It was as though whatever part emself was in charge of releasing pent up emotions had been divorced from the part of emself that actually felt those emotions.

It was the emptiness of the place that had done it, ey thought. This place was home, and the knowledge of being permanently removed from such a thing had led to this. There was no one here, and no one at school, and as much as I longed for the time and space to do my own thing, I never imagined like this. Not like this.

"Not like this," ey repeated between heaving gasps for air, wiping eir tears away in a smooth, slicking motion that flattened eir ears against eir head. "No, not like this."

Struggling to bring those two parts of emself into alignment once more, ey levered emself up heavily, leaning on eir one paw while the other straightened the fur of eir face, brushing the last aftershocks of sadness away in a careful and calculated gesture. If it was not to be like this, then ey would have to carry on. Eir initial reaction has been wrong on the emotional side, but right on the intellectual. Ey would have to at least figure out why.

It was the only thing left here in this null space that had any meaning.

Part III