

Post.Self

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Also by Madison Scott-Clary
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ally

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Post.Self

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Après un rêve

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

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

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

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

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

"Your family will receive a payout of ten million francs CFA. Your body will not be available for a burial, unfortunately." The

Après un rêve

doctor looked abashed. “The results of the process are — ah, not pretty.”

“I understand.”

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

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

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

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

Unlikely, given her mother.

She nodded her assent.

“So then. Your surgery is scheduled in one hour. You have fifteen minutes before prep, which means fifteen more minutes to back out if you should choose. I’m going to head back to the team and leave you be to think this over.” The doctor gestured to her right, “Dial zero on the phone on the desk if you wish to cancel.”

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

As the doctor slipped out of the room, Sylvie settled back into

the chair. She closed her eyes against the sight of all the posters advertising the procedure. “Upload today!” they said. “Experience a life beyond need!” they promised. “Work without pressure! Fork at will!” they hollered. Everything was so loud, so loud.

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

Grace with her silvering hair.

Grace with her fair and smooth skin.

Grace with her liquid laughter and lovely singing.

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

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

It did appeal to Grace.

Grace with her failing voice.

Grace with her deteriorating coordination.

Grace with her pain, her depression.

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

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

The thought *still* made her skin itch and her eyes ache, but all

Après un rêve

the same, she kept dreaming of Grace. Dreaming of softer eyes, of a voice more sonorous. Her Grace shining like the dawn.

So she'd relented.

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

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

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

"Okay. How long will the upload take?"

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

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

"It's free to quit, like a program on your terminal quitting. But they — the, ah, sysadmins — usually request that it stay around in case the upload to the System gets interrupted for some reason."

"And what will I feel if things go wrong?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

The coolness was replaced with a comfortable warmth.

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

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

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

Time wandered.

Après un rêve

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

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

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

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

The organ note screamed up through several octaves.

Calm, ringing voices.

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

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

Grace was drifting away from her, receding.

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

Tugging, pulling.

Prying.

A snap.

A sense of wrongness, of gravity.

Falling away. Layers of self peeling back, each successive shedding revealing something more raw, more primal. Molting. The boundary between her Self and the blackness complicating, fraying,

fading.

Grace was gone, too, faded to nothing.

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

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

Grace...

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

Hélas! Hélas! triste réveil des songes

Je t'appelle, ô nuit, rends moi tes mensonges,

Reviens, reviens radieuse,

Reviens ô nuit mystérieuse!

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

A small pinging noise. The local readout flashed red.

Shoulders sagged around the room.

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

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

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

Après un rêve

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

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

Prayers began around the corpse.

Assignment

The feeling of an instance merging state back with the tracker would never NOT make Ioan Balan#tracker uneasy. It wasn't the differences in experiences, those could be anticipated, so much as the tiny changes in identity that resulted. Having to internalize a slightly different version of yourself was too close to experiencing a doppelgänger. Or perhaps hanging with a sib, fresh home from a semester abroad.

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

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

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

Assignment

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

The forking had gone quite according to plan. Ioan#tracker had no reason to expect otherwise, of course, and when the instance was rendered in front of em, the two shared a perfunctory handshake and went over notes one last time before the instance headed out to catch transit to as close to the flashcult as ey could get.

#{{ page.instance }} took little time to settle into life among the cultists. Ioan was affable, likable. It was part of why ey had found the work of an investigative journalist easy, and why ey had quickly gone from low to high reputation in the field. The problem ey kept running into was boredom, rather than burning out.

Ioan#tracker was left feeling let down, as ey perused what ey had been left of #{{ page.instance }}'s state. Ey used a fairly standard, off-the-shelf algorithm to cut down on the sheer amount of state ey would have to sift through to gain something from the instance's brief — ey checked the date — three weeks, two days of existence. It was enough to gain most of the knowledge and a good portion of the emotional and intellectual slices from the state, which was all ey needed for eir work. A full merge would've taken too long, and may have even been counterproductive: ey needed an amanuensis, not a recording device, for eir reporting.

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

A sharp jolt of fear.

A pain that stretched from physical to existential.
EOF.

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

The flashcult was strange, but not too out of the ordinary. Ioan#{{ page.instance }}, with no journalistic duties, found eirself getting into the swing of things with ease.

It was a sort of weird vacation, performing weird rituals that slowly began to make a weird sort of sense, knowing that at some weird moment, ey would either get too bored and quit or receive a SIGTERM. When ey caught the signal, ey would either have to acquiesce and quit right then, find a place to step aside and quit, or risk crashing. But mostly lots of loafing around.

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

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

Then she turned to em, grinned beatifically, and winked. Winked!

Ioan#{{ page.instance }} watched her raise her hand and call the ceremony to a halt, saying almost dreamily, “I found them.”

Faced turned toward em, all smiling that same, kind, peaceful smile. Ey sat dumbly, looking from face to face. “I...yes?” ey managed.

Assignment

“You’re the one,” a voice chimed in.

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

There was a thrill of fear that ran up #{{ page.instance }}’s spine. It had never been a strictly undercover operation, but neither had ey been forthcoming about why ey were there in the first place.

Ioan#{{ page.instance }} lifted eir hands from eir lap, palms up in a placating fashion. “Well,” ey began. “I am a reporter, no denying, but I’m not here on offic-urk!”

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

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

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

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

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

The fear continued to well within #{{ page.instance }}, growing in intensity.

Ioan#tracker set eir usual algorithm aside for the merger, requesting that the entirety of the instance’s state, from that last ritual on, be merged with em. It wasn’t the first time ey had done such

a thing, but it was still rare enough for em to do so that ey had to look up how. Despite eir career depending on it, ey had never been all that good at the whole dissolution thing. Ey never even figured out how to name eir instances, relying instead on the random string of digits that the system generated for em.

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

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

The fear continued to well within #{{ page.instance }}, growing in intensity.

“We’re practicing, you see.” The lector paced a slow circle around Ioan#{{ page.instance }} as they went on. “We start something interesting, wait for a reporter, and find them out. That’s what we’re practicing. Finding out who’s watching, who’s the reporter.”

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

The lector nodded and, having completed their circuit, leaned down to meet #{{ page.instance }}’s wide-eyed gaze. “And now we’ve got it reliably under a month. Time to make it known. What’s your branch name?”

“Ioan Balan#{{ page.instance }},” ey stuttered. “Bu-but why are you...what are...why are you doing this?”

“We’re looking for reliable ways to find out the reporters because,” they paused, withdrawing a syringe from the billowy sleeve of their tunic. “Because some day we may not want to be seen.”

That wellspring of fear turned to a geyser.

Assignment

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

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

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

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

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

What should ey do?

A quick search showed ey couldn't turn over the instance. Little was actually 'recorded' in a useful fashion that any sort of authorities (such as there were) could use. The instances were eirs and eirs only. Ey certainly didn't want to confront the cultists, either as emself or through an instance. Ey didn't know how to change eir instances like some others did, so ey would just look like Ioan#{{ page.instance }} back from the dead.

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

Be a reporter.

It was what the cult wanted, but ey felt the words and experiences stirring within em already. Hell, it's what *ey* wanted, too.

Finally, an interesting assignment.

Gallery Exhibition

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

Gallery Exhibition

And...

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

Gallery Exhibition

And...

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

Gallery Exhibition

And...

Waiting.

Gallery Exhibition

And...

Programs.

Explanations. Elucidations. Errata.

Words to chuckle over with your group of friends.

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

And the sound of a door opening.

Gallery Exhibition

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

The artist

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

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

Well.

Gallery Exhibition

That's a thing.

Anyway.

Gallery Exhibition

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Trackers? Raise your hands, please.”

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

“And Dispersionistas?”

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

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

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

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

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

It doesn’t last.

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

Gallery Exhibition

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

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

You take a step back and acknowledge it.

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

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

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

"Thank you. Much cozier in here."

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

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

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

Gallery Exhibition

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

...

Gallery Exhibition

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

...

Gallery Exhibition

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gallery Exhibition

It's still smiling.

It opens the next door.

Gallery Exhibition

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

Already crowded with several instances.

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

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

It's loud and dark and panicky.

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

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

This makes you *furious*.

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

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

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

back by lunging forward.

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

Something happens to the floor beneath your feet.

You fall.

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

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

A room set for battle.

You grin wildly.

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

Dear only growls.

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

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

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

Gallery Exhibition

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

You lunge.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You feel its right arm slip away and are too busy trying to gain

the advantage to realize why until the paw swings back in front of you.

Gallery Exhibition

When you see the syringe, you panic and fork.

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

Gallery Exhibition

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

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

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

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

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

The fox immediately quits.

Fading, leaving you to crumple.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gallery Exhibition

Fin.

Fin for now.

Gallery Exhibition

Fin for this you.

But, but, always another but.

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

Yes.

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

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

To your relief, that second Dear also quits.

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

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

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

Objects only do that when their owners quit.

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

Gallery Exhibition

The fox quit.

You let out a yell of triumph.

Gallery Exhibition

And now you're alone.

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

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

This takes only a few seconds.

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

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

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

"Like hell," you growl.

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

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

"Like a play."

"So you knew we'd fight?"

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

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

"You encouraged a fight?"

"Mmhm." Dear — perhaps even Dear-prime — nods and strolls

Gallery Exhibition

casually about the room. *“You didn’t make it to the unwinding room, so I’ll explain here. Stress is the easiest way to force decisions to be made. I forced you to decide, didn’t I? I forced you to interact with an instance, and I’m forcing you to interact with me, now. Two instances, two interactions.”*

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

At that, it quits.

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

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

You, smirking, take the right.

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

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

"Thank you. Much cozier in here."

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Right.

The Taskers do not look cozy.

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

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

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

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

“The goal of this exhibition isn’t to just talk about that, though, it’s to explore the creative limits of forking as art.”

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

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

Gallery Exhibition

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

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

And then it comes to you.

Gallery Exhibition

And it looks up to you.

And winks.

Gallery Exhibition

Can fennecs do that?

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

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

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

And then the explosion happens.

Gallery Exhibition

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

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

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

Gallery Exhibition

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

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

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

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

The handle turns.

Gallery Exhibition

You fall through.

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

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

But here you are.

Gallery Exhibition

You and a tiny fennec.

You and a lapis sky.

Gallery Exhibition

You and endless green fields.

You and a sunny day.

Outside *and* a sunny day.

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

Nothing for it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gallery Exhibition

“Another...?”

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

You roll your eyes. The fennec grins.

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

the fennec asks, casually.

“Yeah,” you respond, wary of traps.

“So why not quit?”

“Hmm?”

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

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

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

You nod. You feel ill-prepared for this.

“I won’t lie to you, then. This exhibit,” and the fennec nods toward the horizon, toward the cave, toward you. *“This exhibit is just a frame. It’s just a canvas. You’re the exhibit. You’re the art.”*

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

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

Just as you begin to respond, the fennec quits. This sim, as a

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

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

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

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

Ah well.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It's difficult to say whether the walls are closing in or whether

Gallery Exhibition

that's just claustrophobia setting an assertive hand on your shoulder.

You crawl on.

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

The tunnel keeps rising.

Gallery Exhibition

The tunnel keeps going.

Rocks dig into knees and palms

Gallery Exhibition

And you keep climbing.

Up and through

Gallery Exhibition

You climb.

Nearly vertical.

Gallery Exhibition

And, to your relief, it grows lighter.

You hasten.

Gallery Exhibition

Up and out.

Madison Scott-Clary

And fall.

Gallery Exhibition

And fall onto the street.

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

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

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

You just want to shake that—

You're fuming, you realize.

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

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

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

You wait.

You sit after the wait grows long.

You ponder visiting another bar.

You lose track of time.

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

You quit.

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

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

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

Into which you are forced.

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

Already crowded with several instances.

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

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

It's loud and dark and panicky.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The room you find yourself in couldn't be more different. It's a room where one might feel quite bad shouting and hollering, and most of the audience gets that at once, quieting down.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dear follows along with the groups. All of them. Forking as they

Gallery Exhibition

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

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

Those are meant to be safe.

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

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

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

Silence. You decide to speak up.

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

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

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

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

Gallery Exhibition

Dear, with its choice of form.

Dear with its mastery of the mutation algorithms used during forking.

Gallery Exhibition

Dear with its casual refusal to conform.

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

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

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

“And do you have an answer?”

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

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

Dear laughs. Your friends roll their eyes.

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

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

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

Your friends stand up.

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

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

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

You shrug. Carefully, though, as you're finding yourself loath to displace Dear's paw from atop your hand. "Sure, why not? Came for the exhibition, after all. Might as well get the most of it."

You shrug once more, this time to your group, make no sign of getting up.

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

"So. Fennecs."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dear grins. *"Think it does?"*

Gallery Exhibition

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

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

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

You laugh, although you feel yourself blushing as well. After a moment’s hesitation, you pet Dear’s paw lightly with your hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It laughs along with and shrugs, “*Well, more like...you’re the first one to show interest in me, rather than the exhibition. And I’ve run lots of exhibitions.*”

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

“*But I’m not **not** coming on to you.*”

You’re at a loss for words.

“I’m flattered, but-”

“You’re sweet, you know-”

You settle for silence and simply relaxing beneath Dear.

Warmth, softness. “Lonely?”

Gallery Exhibition

Dear settles with its muzzle resting alongside your neck.
“Mmhm.”

“Same here,” you admit.

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

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

It leans up, nuzzling its way to your ear.

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

And then it quits.

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

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

The air is cold after the contact.

“D-Dear?” you stammer.

The room is empty.

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

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

You laugh, forced and bitter.

Lonely, indeed.

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

Gallery Exhibition

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

Not helping.

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

Your head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gallery Exhibition

You feel that hate begin to simmer.

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

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

You and your friends wander slowly through the room.

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

Each is labeled with a simple placard.

The Wanderer

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

It has to be Dear.

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

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

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

You hold your breath.

There's the explosion.

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

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

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

Gallery Exhibition

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

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

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

Repeats.

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

The Rebel

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

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

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

There's you.

And there's your forked instance.

And there's Dear's forked instance.

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

Then the recording loops.

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

Gallery Exhibition

The Fighter

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

The scene in this pedestal shows fighting, chaos.

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

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

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

Then the fight begins in earnest.

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

This fight is less well choreographed. More jagged.

Except to you. You know.

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

The syringe.

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

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

in front of you.

It smiles, almost sadly. *"If I didn't mean to do it, you would have been confused. Maybe there would be victory, but it would've been empty and hollow."* Dear shrugs, offers an apologetic smile. *"Confusion is not what was called for, in this exhibit. Victory or loss. Stress and decisions."*

You take a breath. One of those intentional breaths, the ones where you breathe out longer than you breathe in. "I think I understand why you did it," you say, quiet and controlled. "I don't like it, but I think I understand why."

Dear nods, offers a hint of a bow, and backs away, *"That's my job."*
It retreats into the crowd.

Gallery Exhibition

The Lover

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

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

It makes you queasy.

The audience surrounding the pedestal gasps at something

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

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

Laughter.

"*Instances the brush, emotion the paint,*" says a soft voice. Dear stands attentively nearby. "*The art is...experiences?*"

"Was that a question?" your friend asks.

Dear shrugs. "*I don't make art because I know why,*" it says, bemused. "*If I knew why, I wouldn't need to make art, then, would I?*"

"So you're a romantic?"

"*Perhaps you should watch the exhibit again.*"

You approach the pedestal just as the loop begins again.

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

"*We can stay and chat a bit more,*" the fox says. "*Don't worry, I'm running this show, I make the rules.*"

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

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

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

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

You clench your fists.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The only downside to being a fox,” says the instance of Dear, and you turn around as casually as possible so that you don’t have to watch. You hear, all the same, *“Is that it’s really hard to kiss with a muzzle”*

Gallery Exhibition

There's Dear, in front of you.

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

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

"*Was that unfair of me?*" it asks. It's done something to the room — unsurprising that it would have admin privileges in its own gallery, come to think of it — the two of you are in a cone of silence.

"I...well, yes." You try and count the layers of remove from the reality of what you had experienced, try to calculate the cuils in your head. The experience, the exhibit on the pedestal, talking to the artist.

You shake your head. Dear waits.

"I'd say you did an admirable job with the exhibition."

"*Admirable?*" It tilts his head, looking almost canine in that moment. "*I set up a situation — several, really — in which audience members feel emotions toward ephemeral constructs and made it art. I don't know if that's admirable. It's just art.*"

You begin to reply, but it cuts you short.

"*I'm an artist, that's what I do. I'm a person, though.*" It's grin looks weary, "*Also a fox-person, but a person. And I feel like I cut too deep with that one. Was that unfair of me?*"

Your shoulders sag. Dear waits.

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

Dear waits. You feel discomfited.

"Look, it's just silly, is all. I don't even know why it affected me so much," you trail off, trying to decide how much further to go on.

“Look,” you repeat, shaking your head. “Was it true? What you said? Are you lonely? Were you earnest? Were you coming on to me?”

Dear nods, simple and straightforward. *“It’s perhaps easy for me to talk about because I rehearsed hard for this shit, but yeah, I’m lonely as hell. I fork to form relationships and keep myself...I mean, I don’t lie in my work if I can help it.”*

It’s your turn to wait, which discomfits Dear in turn.

“I’m sorry,” it says. *“I did cut too deep. Wasn’t thinking. It’s not my goal with these things to damage anyone’s trust in instances or in me. It’s just that I don’t make art because I know why. If I knew why, I wouldn’t need to make art.”*

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

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

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

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

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

It nods. *“Fair. And listen, I really am sorry. There are bits of this show that I wrote thinking that they’d lead to one thing, some spectacular art, and they led to, er, this.”*

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

Dear shrugs, “I guess.” It hesitates for a moment, then draws a card out of its left pocket, reaching out with its right paw at the

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same time, a perfectly formal business card exchange.

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

It's *very* soft.

The Medium

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

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

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

You feel a heat rise to your cheeks. *“I...I mean, I didn’t—”*

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

“Is it okay?”

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

You smile tentatively.

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

“I may have had a few drinks before.”

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

“So why did you allow it?”

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

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

“SF calls me an instance artist. Hell, I call myself an instance artist, but it’s not totally accurate. I’m closer to a director, though. I organize the stage, the crew — even if they’re all me — and the choreography. You’re the

Gallery Exhibition

art though, or close enough to it. I won't say audience, or actors. I don't like the play metaphor all that much, since the art isn't in the acting. There is no acting." It shrugs, *"But the metaphor will serve."*

You nod, watching the multiple feeds play out in their own courses. There's a card in your pocket, the dot on a question mark of an unanswered question. None of these videos bring you any closer to an answer.

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

Dear grins. *"This isn't a lecture. No classroom, no notes, no papers to write. It's not a tool that you take away to use,"* it pauses, that grin going sly. *"And even if it were, that's your fucking job, not mine."*

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

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

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

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

You give the low-slung building a wide berth. Only you came away with something. Two things. A card in your pocket, and a decision to make.

Jonas Clade Digest

Jonas Clade Digest

Systime 305+168 0600

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

Ha ha.

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

I'm pretty sure we — the clade — are all on the same page about this, but we've run into some friction from others. "Less-than-

Jonas Clade Digest

human monsters,” was, I believe, the phrasing used to describe the kiddo. How quaint. Still, if you’ve heard anything about the social ramifications, that’d also be nice.

Ar out.

Ku Jonas reports that there has been some dramatic things going on in his sim. However, he also reports that it’s all incredibly boring, and that he is far too lazy to look up the specifics. Or to even write this. His long-suffering partner remains faithfully yours.

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

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

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

Madison Scott-Clary

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

Jonas Clade Digest

Jonas Clade Digest

Systime 305+178 0600

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

Kidding. Congrats.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ku sends his biggest 'meh'.

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

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

Anyone out there running into anything?

-No Jonas

Jonas Clade Digest

Jonas Clade Digest

Systime 305+188 0600

De Jonas.

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

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

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

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

Fuck fuck fuck.

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

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

No Jonas.

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

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

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

What do we name the kid?

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

Never knew this'd be so hard!

Anyway, shoot us your thoughts.

Jonas Clade Digest

Jonas Clade Digest — Supplemental

Systime 305+190 0600

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

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

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

Meantime, take care of yourself.

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

Ko Jonas. Partner's pouting in the corner.

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

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

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

De-* send congrats, Ar.

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

Cheers, Ar. Keep us up to date.

Jonas Clade Digest — Supplemental

Systime 305+194 1343

Ar here.

Welcome Lee Ar-Jonas-Helena Sprout.

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

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

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

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

Jonas Clade Digest — Supplemental

Systime 305+195 0236

De-3 quit.

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

Jonas Clade Digest — Supplemental

Systime 305+195 0359

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

Can't stop crying.

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

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

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

Jonas Clade Digest — Supplemental

Systime 305+195 0504

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

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

Jonas Clade Digest — Supplemental

Systime 305+195 0600

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

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

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

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

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

Congrats, Ar! That's delightful news.

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

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

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

Jonas Clade Digest

Jonas Clade Digest

Systime 305+198 0600

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

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

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

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

Jonas Clade Digest — Supplemental

Systime 305+198 1249

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

Jonas Clade Digest — Supplemental

Systime 305+199 0455

Prime.

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

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

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

Be safe, y'all, okay?

Jonas Clade Digest — Supplemental

Systime 305+200 0127

De here.

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

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

Jonas Clade Digest

Systime 305+208 0600

No here.

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

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

Fa. Done! Can I get some beta readers?

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

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

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

No one ever told me having kids was like this.

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

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

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

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Torah

Ioan Balan awoke to an urgent message.

Ey didn't really like these, the sensorium messages. Ey liked paper messages. Ey mostly just liked paper. Ey was always accruing more. Paper and pens. Eir friends thought it creepy. Paper messages, or those rich messages that came attached to paper, played on its surface, or even messed with eir sensorium. To have one that just barged in on eir vision and endocrine system like this made em quite anxious. This one included a tiny jolt of adrenaline as an alert. Waking up with that jolt to have a partial sensory takeover just felt rude.

The benefit was that ey didn't have to get out of bed to deal with it.

The opacity on the message was turned up quite high, so that even in eir dark room, with eir eyes closed (and heart still pounding), ey could see the fox. A bipedal fox dressed quite sharply. It was sitting on a fairly plain wooden chair, situated in an empty room. The room had wood floors the same color as the chair, some very

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light wood, like hickory or pine. The walls were concrete where they weren't glass. Outside the glass was a sere shortgrass prairie, a cloudy day.

The combination of the fox's white fur, glistening and iridescent, combined with the room and landscape was all painfully pommo. Ey didn't consider eirself much of a pomophobe, but this was...intense.

"Hi Mx Balan," the fox was saying. "I have a proposition for you."

Ioan grunted. The message was recorded, thank goodness. No interaction

"My name is Dear, Also, The Tree Was Felled, or just Dear, and I'm a member of the Ode clade. I'm an artist-" Ioan rolled eir eyes. Ey could tell it didn't like the word. *"-and performer. I'm not just telling you this to, ah, toot my own horn, I believe the phrase is, but just to underline the fact that I'm woefully unprepared for the situation at hand."*

The fox smiled, looking tired. *"I need some help finding someone,"* it continued. *"Someone that doesn't want to be found. It's personally important, but also potentially damaging to the image of our entire clade."*

Ioan furrowed eir brow.

"The person has information, a name, that ey have supposedly shared. We — the other members of my clade and I — don't precisely know if they actually did, unfortunately, we just have word from others close to the clade that someone knew and said The Name."

The fox shook it's head, ears flopping from side to side. *"I'm sorry, I'm getting sidetracked by details. I try to be prepared for conversations and messages like this, but I'm a little worked up, excited, I guess. Can we meet?"* It listed some coordinates. *"Even if only to talk. Even if you're not interested, I'd still like to meet you. You seem neat."*

The message ended.

Ioan lay in bed, thinking. It was still about an hour before ey had to get up, and ey was loath to start the day before ey had to. Ey tried eir best to sleep for another ten minutes, at least, but eir mind kept slipping back to Dear's request.

Why me? ey asked the backs of eir closed eyelids. *Why hire a writer who fancied eirself a historian as a PI?*

With still a half hour to go before ey had to be up, Ioan slipped out of bed, stood, and stretched. The least ey could do was get a shower and some coffee. If there were any reason that the founders of the system had included sensoria in the works it must have been for those.

Those done and clothes donned — ey knew ey could never out-natty the fox, so the usual faux-academia garb it was — ey penned Dear a short note with a time. If it was day in that sim, or even late afternoon, it should get the note before dinner or bed.

Besides, ey thought. Maybe it will get the fox to start sending notes this way in the future.

No luck. Less than thirty seconds later, Ioan received a sensorium ping of acknowledgement, and a shiver up eir spine to go along with it.

Ey forked and sent #c1494bf out to the meeting. Meanwhile, ey'd get some food.

Ioan#c1494bf found eirself about twenty meters in front of the squat house. It was just as postmodern on the outside as it had appeared on the inside: a concrete block, a thick wrap-around patio covered by cantilevered eaves, floor to ceiling glass for walls. Ey wouldn't be surprised if the far side of the buiding — ey couldn't

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see it very well, with the slope of the shortgrass-prairie it was on — juttied out at some crazy angle.

Smiling ruefully, ey walked up toward the house.

A soft tone, a vibraphone struck with a soft mallet, sounded inside and outside of the house as soon as ey'd passed the barrier between grass and patio. Ey stood on the patio, waiting to be either admitted or greeted.

A shadow of a person, human, peeked out through the glass at em, gave a pleasant wave, and hollered through the glass, "Ioan! Hi! I'll grab Dear."

Before the person could do so, Dear came padding softly from around the side of the house, looking slightly more collected than it had during the message.

"Ioan," it said, smiling and offering a paw in greeting. Ioan wasn't sure how ey knew when a fox was smiling, but it was definitely a smile. *"Thank you for coming on such short notice. Sorry for the urgent message, I just need to find someone to help out rather soon."*

Ioan#c1494bf took the offered paw and bowed. "Of course, Dear." Ey realized how strange it was to call someone a term of endearment as a name. "May we have a seat? I've just woken up and am still figuring out how to stand."

Dear grinned and nodded, gesturing cordially with its paw around the side of the building from where it had come, leading the writer around and through a door in the glass.

The interior of the house was as ey had seen, though as they moved through the space where the message had been recorded (a gallery, Ioan noticed) and deeper into the house, things warmed up a little. The concrete walls were softened by hangings, and the furniture was unexpectedly plush, rather than of the firm-cushioned,

straight-lined variety they had expected. Fox and writer settled for an L-shaped couch, sitting facing each other across the bend.

After a moment's hesitation, Ioan began, "I must apologize, Dear. I'm not sure that you have quite the right person. I'm not really a detective, wouldn't know the first way of finding the one you spoke of."

Dear shook its head, "*I'm pretty sure you're the right person. I'm not really looking for a detective, per se. There's enough of those in the Ode clade. They'll suss out the whens and wheres.*"

"Then what-"

"*There's a few kinds of people in the world, Ioan.*" The fox said, voice low and calm. "*There's forgers and honers, of course. Forgers build a thing and plow ahead, and honers settle on a thing and perfect it. Artists generally fall into these classes: prolific and unfruitful artists, respectively.*

"*But you're not an artist. You write, yes, but that's ancillary to what you do. A side effect. There are some other types of people out there, too: catalogers, feelers, experiencers.*" Dear shrugged, "*For its own reasons, the clade needs someone to experience this. There's a lot of history in this, a lot that we've forgotten, a lot that we're trying to remember, maybe some that we're trying to forget. I want you to help figure out the history and story of this.*"

"An amanuensis," Ioan said.

Dear brightened, its ears perking. "*Precisely. And what a delightful word, too.*"

Ioan grinned, "That's good, then. This is very much more my arena. I'll keep this instance around and keep #tracker up to date."

The fox nodded and looked up, smiling as its partner came in with three thick-walled, wide-brimmed mugs of coffee, setting two of them down on the corner of the table near Ioan and the fox.

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“Heard you were tired,” they said, walking off with their own mug.

Dear watched them go.

“Your partner?” Ioan asked, feeling that a moment of chitchat was necessary. Ey grabbed eir mug eagerly. It smelled quite good.

The fox nodded, picked up it’s mug as well and leaned back into the cushions of the couch, slouching. *“Mmhm. Finally decided to explore relationships,”* it said. *“They accuse me of treating it like an art project”*

Ioan grinned. “Well, are you a forger or a honer of relationships?”

Dear rolled its eyes, said, *“Touché. I’m trying to be a honer, with this one. For a long while, I forked to create lasting relationships. Gets lonely, though. It was like being turned down every time. At least from my — this instance’s — point of view.”*

Ioan felt they were getting a little too deep for having just met, so ey steered the conversation in a tangential direction. “You fork quite often, then?”

“Yeah, Dispersionista through and through. Or maybe profligate tracker, as sometimes I don’t have the option to let instances linger.” Something seemed to occur to it, and the fox sat up again. *“Speaking of, do you know much about the Ode clade?”*

Ioan shook eir head, sipped eir coffee. It was good.

“It’s an old clade. One of the oldest on the system. Our founder, Michel Hadje, uploaded basically as soon as he could, and quickly became one of the, er, loudest voices on the system. He campaigned for sensoria to be included.”

“I’ve heard of Michell!” Ioan sat up straighter. “Usually in the context of the founders.”

Dear nodded.

“So what is Ode, then? His old username?”

“No, a poem,” Dear laughed.

“Oh! Oh, of course. So Michel wrote this poem...”

“No, not actually. Michel had a friend, a good friend, who wrote the poem.” Dear said, speaking more slowly now, sounding less rehearsed. “When the friend died, Michel memorized the poem. All up-tree instances do our best to keep it memorized as well. Really memorized, too, in the forefront part of our head, up where we think about it, not stored in some exocortex.”

“Is that where your names come from?”

“Mhmm. Each of us is named after a line in the poem. I’m Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled, and my first long-lived fork is Which Offered Heat And Warmth Through Fire. My immediate down-tree fork is Dear The Wheat And Rye Under The Stars.”

Dear played its ears, grinning sheepishly, “It’s not actually a very good poem, I must admit. Michel thought so from the beginning, too. His friend, though, when they died, when they killed themselves, it really tore him up. We all still think of them often.”

Ioan nodded, “It must be quite long, then.”

“It’s only about a hundred lines, divided into ten stanzas. There are only ever ten branches as direct ancestors of Michel, and each branch only ever has ten long-lived up-tree instances. We may be Dispersionistas, but we’re a small clade.”

“And the poet? Who are they?”

Dear bristled, then mastered its instincts. “That’s The Name that we don’t share. The information that someone supposedly did share. Someone of the clade or close enough to it to know.”

Ioan’s mind swirled, confused at the fox’s reaction, the concept of not sharing a name that was clearly important. “I see,” ey said

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into eir coffee, covering eir confusion. “So you’d like me to help in finding this person and act as amanuensis along the way?”

Nodding, Dear held out its paw once more. *“If you’d be willing, that is. We’d be glad to have you aboard.”*

Ey was already sold, Ioan knew, but all the same, ey took a moment longer to consider the ramifications of the job.

Ey shrugged, reached out and shook the fox’s paw. Dear grinned, shook back.

“Excellent. I’ve shared just about all I have to share on the topic for now, though as we get updates, I’ll pass them on to you.” Dear leaned back into the couch once more, *“For now, stay. Finish your coffee, at least, though feel free to putter around for a while. Or just stay here. We’ve got an apartment on the side of the house. I’ve already talked with-”* it said it’s partner’s name, Ioan didn’t quite catch it *“-about it.”*

Ioan nodded, “Thank you. I think I’ll head home in a bit and sync up with myself, and start the research plan. Do you have any suggested avenues I should start down?”

“Of course,” Dear smiled. *“As for research, dig a bit more into the Ode clade for now, probably. when I send you updates, maybe those will lead to different topics.”* The smile turned into a sly grin. *“I know you’re not a big fan of sensorium messages, but as that’s how the clade communicates — those of us who do, at least — I regret to say that you’ll be getting quite a bit more.”*

Ioan gave eir best polite smile.

The first message was not long in coming, arriving about an hour after Ioan#c1494bf arrived home. At least it wasn’t high priority; ey

had the choice to accept then. Half duplex, though. Would be an actual conversation.

Ey sighed and closed eir eyes. The things ey did for work.

Ey accepted the message

“Hi Ioan,” came Dear’s voice. It was still seated on the couch. “Long time no see, hmm?”

Ioan nodded, subvocalized, “Yeah, took you ages. Have something for me?”

“Maybe. We’ve got a file from someone down-tree. Or, well, hmm” It appeared to think for a moment before continuing, “Someone down-tree from me found a file, and he thinks it might be a file from the clade, maybe one of the original ten.”

Ioan waited until the fox was done before responding, “Alright, send it over.”

The file arrived promptly. Eir shoulders sagged.

-----BEGIN AES BLOCK-----

QUVTAgaAGUNSRUFURUR. . .

-----END AES BLOCK-----

“What’s an AES block?”

“An old encryption algorithm. And I mean **old**.” Dear looked a little embarrassed, “We like old things. That’s why we figure it’s probably from one of us.”

Ioan thought for a moment before responding, “So do you want me-”

“You don’t need to worry about the file itself. That’s why I didn’t just forward it to you automatically,” Dear paused, then added. “Though I probably should have. Amanuenses form an Umwelt, so now this is part

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of yours, now. We'll talk about it at the end. Something to keep in mind, I guess. When we find the key, we'll let you know and send over the contents."

"Good. I gave AES a check, and you're right, that's ridiculously old. Can't you just crack it?"

"We could. Some of us probably already have. I want the key, though. It's probably a word or something, and may prove interesting."

"Interesting?" Ioan asked.

"Interesting in that the act of finding the key may turn up further clues."

"Ah, good point." Ioan pondered, then added, "Keep in touch, yeah? I'll do some digging on old cryptography, too, and see what all's out there."

"Good fucking luck. Cryptonerds were — are — very wordy. There's going to be a boatload to sort through."

Ey grinned, "I'll fork and research, then."

"Good plan. Gonna get back to the hunt, and hey, Ioan," the fox gave an earnest smile. "Thanks. Even if I'm just running ideas past you, it's good to put in words."

"Of course, Dear." Ioan waved. Ey always felt silly interacting with sensorium messages. Would #tracker think em crazy? "Thanks for the project."

Dear bowed, signed off.

#tracker was, indeed, giving #c1494bf a bemused grin.

2

Transcript of Node: [bea0cf302fcd00863f0c67a91b1a75c0e4ba4863]
with descriptive text by #d5b14aa.

The footage shows two persons. One of them has to be Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled, who is an up-tree branch of the Ode clade, ninth stanza. No one else has ears that big, nobody else can somehow speak in italics. The other took some research, but I'm confident that ey are an instance of Ioan Balan, a historian and writer. Ey are a tracker, and eir habits tend toward few to no long-running instances. This instance is either #tracker or one tasked to this project.

The two persons are sitting outside of a cafe, from whom I obtained this footage. They are in conversation. Going to sit down and watch this.

Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled: We - er, some other Odists, down-tree from me - have come up with some hints about the message.

Ioan Balan: Oh? Anything good?

Dear: I suppose it depends on your definition of good.

Ioan: Oh great. Excited already. Well, lay it on me.

Dear: So, one of us did a pretty exhaustive search of some records and found some old archive server running somewhere.

Oh goodie. Better start gearing up.

Ioan: Wait, start at the top. What were they searching?

Dear: They were searching for the block of encrypted text - not what was in it; they cracked that a long time ago, but I think this hunt is still valid and have some reputation to burn, so...anyway - they searched for the encrypted text itself, and they came across an archive server.

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Ioan: Old node boxes? Man, even I feel crusty using one of those, and I'm a historian.

Dear: You're only a little crusty *laughter*. They found the archive server though, and there's a bunch of stuff on it. New, old, the whole thing. There's stuff from ages ago, and stuff from a few hours ago.

Ioan: You're kidding, right?

Dear: I know, it's ridiculous.

The fox's ears flop when it gets excited and shakes its head, never noticed that. It's kind of cute.

Ioan: Never met anyone who could actually get one working well enough to add new nodes. So the encrypted text was in a node on the server?

Dear: Yeah. It's still there. Just sent the URI.

Ioan: I...well, I'll have to take it at your word that it's the same as the one you found earlier, I'm not going character by character.

Dear seems a little frustrated at this. About Ioan's slowness? I know I wouldn't compare the files. It sounds exasperated.

Dear: Of course, Ioan. Promise it's the same. Needless to say, we found a crusty old server with the block on it, and there's other public nodes on there as well. I'm guessing a bunch of private ones, too.

Ioan: Anything good in those?

Dear: Nothing...penetrable. It's all fairly opaque. To me, at least.

Ioan grins at this.

Ioan: Thus us meeting here?

Dear nods.

Ioan: Want me to have a look, then? Tech stuff is going to go right over my head, you know that.

Dear: It's not all tech, promise. I just want you to give it a read and see what you pick up from it, you know? Put your amanuensis hat on and just spend some time experiencing.

Ioan: You think highly of me. No complaints, but why can't someone from your own clade fill this role?

Dear's quiet. Struggling for words? Our Dear? This must have hit it hard.

Dear: We...differ. The Odists, I mean. But we also want someone out-clade for this. I want someone out-clade for this.

Ioan seems taken aback.

Ioan: Do the others not like that I've been brought on?

Dear: Of the ones who know, most are fine with it.

Now frustrated/confused.

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Ioan: The ones who know?

Dear: We're a little split on how to tackle this in the first place. Different camps, different strategies, infighting. Ioan, you have to understand that, when a clade gets old, it starts to get a little batty.

Calm down fox, I'm working on it. Not so frantic.

Dear: Some clades try to get around this by keeping a certain core group of instances - talking mostly Dispersionistas, mind - in a setting that keeps them as sane as possible, feels very 'normal'. Or maybe some are re-searching forking from earlier points, from down-tree, rather than from where they are now.

It furrows its brow.

Dear: We don't. First of all, we started way too early on for that to be a thing. We trusted that change would keep us sane, that as instances diverged, especially with mutation algos in place, they'd change enough to keep us from falling apart.

Ioan: And that didn't work?

Long pause.

Dear: It kind of worked. I'll put it that way. I feel pretty well rounded, and I'm sure those across the clade from me do too, but...it's complicated. It's like having a super close sib that was raised by a different family, in a different sim.

Ioan: More different than you'd expect, then?

Dear: 'Expect'...fits strangely for this. The problem is that they're still us, we're still them. Clades are like families in a lot of ways, but you have to realize that they're still one individual. We're more different than one individual should be. Does that make sense?

It does, Dear. That's why I'm doing this.

Ioan: I guess so. So some of your clade would prefer I not be a part of this?

Dear: They feel that investigating the matter of The Name being said is too close to investigating The Name itself.

Ioan: I don't know how I would respond to that.

Dear: That's my field. Don't worry about it.

Ioan holds up eir hands, looks apologetic. The fox has lowered its ears.

Ioan: Sorry, hope I'm not overstepping at all.

Dear: Don't worry about it. It's all good, I promise. It's just that we're really good at arguing, so I've been dealing with that a lot, the last few days. I'm a bit on edge. Let's get back to the archive server, yeah?

Ioan: Sure thing, Dear. Where did you say your co-cladists had found it?

Dear: Just in a search. Don't know quite the details about how, assuming just a text search of perisystem

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stuff, I guess? Not too sure on the terminology, I bought into being an artist pretty hard.

Ioan: *laughter* No worries there, fox. I'm trying to keep up with you is all. I was just wondering if they found anything else.

Dear: You mean like other nodes on the server?

Ioan: I'll poke around at those, look for ties and such. I was more wondering if they'd found anything in their search that didn't meet the relevancy threshold for them. Stuff like things linking back to the server, or anyone talking about this *pause* Hebel Qoheleth.

Silly name. Oh well. Dear looks taken aback.

Dear: Hadn't really thought to ask. Don't suppose they did, though. Do you think it'd be worth having them search around more? Lowering the, uh, relevancy threshold? *laughter*

Ioan: Yeah, I think so. Though now that I've got it too, I can do some of my own digging. Kinda want to see who likes The Bible so much as to name themselves that.

Dear: The Bible?

Ioan: Yeah, Qoheleth is the...uh, the teacher, or gatherer, or a bit of both, really. That's what the book usually translated as Ecclesiastes is named after. Not sure about Hebel. What's kemmer, by the way? The passphrase?

Dear: How did you...nevermind. Kemmer is something from a book. One of our favorites. It's complicated and

out of scope, but it relates to fluidity of gender. Very big, in our clade. I've opted out.

Ioan: So I noticed. It makes sense, though. I'll make a note to look it up.

Dear: Glad someone's thinking about this stuff. Sounding more like a-

Ioan: Private investigator?

Dear: *laughter* I was going to say historian, sounding more like a historian every time we talk. But you never know, maybe you'd make a good PI.

That was fast! I may have less time than I had thought. Dear's lovely, and it's totally right: on the other side of the clade, there are some who'd not like this kind of digging. Too entrenched.

Ioan: I can't tell whether or not I should be flattered.

Dear: It's a good thing. Just keep digging, and we will too. I'll be about, too. Got a few more things to wrap up to finish the current gallery business, but after that, I'm just going to work on this - with you if you don't mind - and try and figure out what's even happening in the clade. Keep in touch, yeah? Ping me whenever?

Ioan: Will do. *pause* Wait, you're an instance artist, right?

Dear: Yeah, why do you ask?

Ioan: Why don't you fork to work on both at the same time?

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Dear shrugs, grins, quits. Very lovely fox. Really quite lovely.

No time to dawdle watching Ioan try and figure out up-tree instances, though. Must be getting ready. Quit this instance, flush the server of extra-neous crap to guide a little more effectively - yeesh, how old is some of this stuff? Need to re-encrypt a bunch of it anyway - and get ready for some visitors.

3 Ketuvim

Ioan sat back and rubbed at eir eyes. Time had gone all funny with all this research.

As with many of eir previous projects, ey tended to fall into a state of free-running sleep patterns and distractedness. Ey would work for a few hours and suddenly get quite tired, nap for what felt like fifteen minutes and wake up three hours later. Then ey'd work for twenty hours straight, neglecting to eat.

Ey had researched it and entertained the idea that it might be part of some larger sleep disorder, but had put it off as just one of eir (many) neuroses.

Less than healthy.

There were never any complaints about the quality or amount of work ey got done while free-running. Ey didn't slip up or stumble, and being methodical got one quite far as a historian and writer. Ey would write the same quality work at the beginning, middle, and end of eir waking periods.

What it did *not* do, however, was endear oneself to one's housemates. Ioan#tracker quickly grew frustrated, whether or not Ioan#c1494bf used a cone of silence. Ey knew the feeling well. It was

a common enough problem when multiple Balan instances stayed in the same house while on projects, and ey was nothing if not a Balan.

Ey considered digging a new spot for eirself to work, until ey had remembered Dear's invitation.

So thats how ey had found eirself rubbing eir eyes in front of a simple (if painfully modern) desk in a studio apartment attached to eir...employer's? Friend? Eir friend's (equally modern) house.

The apartment really was a studio apartment, too: someone — perhaps Dear — had used it for painting, and rightfully so. The exterior wall was floor to ceiling glass looking out over that sere prairie. The landscape, Dear's partner had explained, was the work of Dear's sib, Serene; Sustained and Sustaining, 'born' when their ancestor, Dear The Wheat And Rye Under The Stars had forked to explore its twinned interests of forming oneself and the of forming one's surroundings in greater detail.

Ioan's head spun whenever ey thought about the clade, but the longer ey spent around Dear, the more ey found eirself liking it. Ey was curious to get to meet another Odist.

If it weren't for the window, opaquable, the apartment would've felt totally like a cell. Simple cot, Desk, and kitchenette. The walls were whitewashed concrete, the floor that same pale hardwood, the fixtures all brushed steel. No doors to the rest of the house, nor even anywhere but outside, no restroom. One was expected to either turn off elimination or do so outside.

There's a cheap joke to be made there, ey had thought, when first moving in. About Dear lifting its leg against some tree, but I doubt its body ever had that functionality enabled.

Ioan shook eir head and rubbed at eir eyes more vigorously. Ey was daydreaming — eveningdreaming, actually — and that made em

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wonder how long ey had been awake.

“Probably some horrid number of hours,” ey mumbled to the wall.

A sensorium ping, a gentle impinging of Dear upon eir senses, half-sensed words, *“Does the wall reply back often?”*

Ioan spun around. Dear was standing, prim, dapper as always, at the door through the glass, paws clasped in front of it.

“Scared the hell out of me!” Ioan blurted.

Dear’s serene smile widened into a grin. *“Sorry, Ioan. I’ll wait until after the wall responds, next time.”*

“Jackass.”

“Foxass,” Dear corrected, accenting that with an exaggerated swish. *“Have some news. Care to walk with me?”*

Ioan nodded and stood, “Glad to. Hitting a wall, here.”

The fennec adopted a look of concern, *“Don’t hit your friends, Ioan.”*

“Ha ha,” Ioan rolled eir eyes. “Something’s got you in a state today. Tonight. Whatever.”

“Tonight.” Dear’s smile softened, *“Come on, let’s go walk. Storm scheduled in an hour, let’s catch all of the nice smells.”*

It had been long enough that I was thinking of myself as Qoheleth now. I had even begun introducing myself as Qoheleth, whenever I went out, just to try it on for size.

That I had never gone out was of little concern.

I liked the sound of it, though. I liked the connotations of ‘teacher’ and ‘gatherer’ and ‘director of the assembled’. I wanted to feel the way that it felt to be someone different, and I’d found at

least a part of that in this name, the name that *I* had chosen for *myself*. I'd not yet taught or gathered, but I was working constantly to attain that.

And 'Hebel'. Hebel was another name I had picked up. Vain, futile, mere breath.

Qoheleth's words, in the book they had written so very, very long ago were all about hebel — or hevel, could never tell which. "This, too, is meaningless," the author had written, after taking a walk down a path in life and exploring.

That's not how I envisioned the name, though.

I thought of the two names as signifiers. Thought of the two *sources* of names.

Qoheleth. That was the name I had given myself out of hope. It was a name of goals and aspirations. It embodied the things that I wanted to do. It took all of my plans and me, as the maker of the plans, and bound them up neatly into a word. A name. A rejection of The Name.

Hebel was the name I had given myself out of despair. It was a name of self degradation and a way of reminding myself that, lofty as all my goals may be, they were all vanity. Mere breath.

Together, the names reminded me that I was doing this for a reason. All of these resources, mostly found objects and hand-me-downs accrued over the years (if you never leave your private sim and never publish outside of it, you get surprisingly little), were being built up and strung together into a cohesive goal. A net.

They, the resources, were all nothing. The reasons were all nothing.

The whole plan was nothing, except for the truth underlying it. Not to fear God, but to...to something. To get the whole clade to see.

Qoheleth

My clade.

My *old* clade.

I was now Hebel Qoheleth.

Hebel Qoheleth.

The old name was dead. I was Hebel Qoheleth.

Dear wasn't kidding about the smells. Ioan turned eir sensorium way up in intensity. Ey wondered if Dear's vulpine nose could smell things eirs could not.

Serene had worked wonders here. The smells, the textures, the raw beauty of the place. It was a fine line that they had walked, too. Any further in one direction and the landscape would have become nearly desolate, more forbidding than natural. Any further in the other direction, though, and it would've been softened too much, would've become too well-tended, or even cartoonish.

As the two crunched their way through the short, stiff stalks of grass, winding their way around the larger tussocks, Ioan realized that ey was quite taken with the place.

A ridiculous house in the middle of nowhere, a glittering white fox and its partner, the prairie fading off into downs on one side and stretching out to infinity on the other...It had all seemed so contrived when ey had first visited. Too simple, too one dimensional. Kind of cheap.

But it was all so well done. So incredibly, skillfully executed. The artistry was in the details.

Ioan liked it here.

Ey realized ey had been dawdling, past the comfortable stage of just enjoying the petrichor being washed in before the storm.

“Sorry, lost in thought.”

“It’s okay,” Dear said. “You looked like you needed it.”

“Hmm? Getting lost in thought? Or getting out of the apartment?”

Dear shrugged, smiled.

“Sorry, anyhow. I’m here now, will try not to do that again.” Ioan grinned sheepishly. “What did you find out? You seemed almost punchy.”

“I was, *definitely*. Still am.” The fox grinned and shrugged again. “We seem to have found out who our...ah, who our target is.”

Ioan mulled over the word ‘target’, searching for a better one. Ey couldn’t think of anything better, so ey nodded. “What do we know?”

“We know a name, and from there we can find a bit of history, which you may be able to help in filling in.”

“Names are good! Something other than Qoheleth?”

“Other than that, yes, but almost certainly connected, probably the same. Not much more than the name, though. No location, no sightings in ages. Some aging — or aged — resources, a name, and some history.”

Ioan gave an impatient gesture with eir hand. “Well, what’s the hold-up?”

Dear grinned broadly, “The hold-up is that I want you to feel some of the excitement that I felt on hearing this from down-tree. I want you excited and invested.”

“I’ve been working twenty hour days on this, I’m pretty fucking invested.”

The grin turned into a laugh. “I know you have. My partner’s worried about you.”

Qoheleth

Ioan felt eir cheeks flush, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to be a bother being up so much.”

“No, no, we can’t hear you or anything. They’re just worried because we **don’t** hear you, or hear from you. We both like you.”

The historian nodded, chastened.

“Don’t worry about it, Ioan. It’s all good.” Dear patted eir shoulder. “The name, though, the name is the important thing right now.”

“And the name is?” Ioan’s mind raced. Could Dear say the name? Was it the poet, some how miraculously talking through the system? That would be exciting, wouldn’t it?

“Life Breeds Life, But Death Must Now Be Chosen, of the Ode clade.”

Ioan froze.

Dear stopped a few paces in front of em and turned, grinning intently at em while its tail lashed excitedly behind it.

“They...what?”

“Good,” Dear’s grin widened. “I’m glad I’m not the only one who had to pick their jaw up off the ground.”

Ioan stuffed eir hands in eir pockets. Brought them back out to press against eir forehead. Crossed eir arms. Returned eir hands to eir pockets. Suddenly anxious. “It’s a real the-call’s-coming-from-inside-the-house moment.”

Dear tilted its head, ears perked.

“Never mind. Old trivia.” Ioan shook eir head and rocked back on eir heels. “How, though? How’d you get the name?”

“A hunch I had, actually, though someone else dug it up.”

“What was the hunch?”

“Signifier.”

Ioan rifled through eir mental notes on the project. “Signifier...from the first encrypted note? Signifier is the password some-

thing something?”

Dear nodded, “Hardly anyone uses it anymore, but *signifier* used to be what we called the names of long-lived branches. It’s still used here and there among older clades. I use it now and then, when I can get away with it.”

“Makes sense, yeah. So they’re...”

“They’re an Odist, yeah. Way, way down-tree. One of the first instances.” Dear’s smile faltered, “We weren’t very good at record keeping back then. We aren’t really now, to be honest, but the system’s better. We...we didn’t know that he was still alive.”

“Didn’t know? I thought you all talked to each other. You must, in order to keep the names straight.”

“Remember, all of our names are chosen from our stanza. I talk with the other nine within my stanza fairly frequently, and we may fill out the stanza before too long.” The fox’s expression grew glassy, “*Life Breeds Life*...that’s the first stanza. They’re a conservative bunch. Only know one or two, but I assume that others are out there.”

Ioan nodded, “So the first stanza were the first forked?”

“The first line from each stanza were the first forked, back when it cost to fork. Like, cost real money. Anyway, the first fork of the first stanza must’ve just been a little more conservative than the rest of us.”

“I...hmm. May I ask something potentially personal?”

Dear nodded.

“The Odists that don’t want me digging into this too much, the ones you didn’t really tell, are they from that side of the clade?”

The fox’s ears perked, “To the last, yes. Why?”

“How will, er...”

“*Life Breeds Life, But Death Must Now Be Chosen. Just Life is fine, too.*”

“How will Life react to the search? To me?”

I loved this feeling. I loved the feeling of a project getting past the architecture state to that point where you could just start to use it. You'd been writing all of the interfaces and abstract classes and such for weeks and months (or decades, in my case). Then you'd started to fill in all of the inner workings, blocks of code filling out empty pairs of braces.

And then, one day, you had enough that you could type in a command and see if it actually compiled, ran.

And then you'd probably buckle down and start writing tests, start pulling together tasks and issues and such. No such luck for me. Old Qoheleth — I still get a grin every time I say that — gets to just keep writing until it's time to hit the big green button. There's no testing, there's no explaining if things go wrong. Just go.

I was actually pretty excited about it.

You get old, you know? And you can't die in this place. You can suicide, maybe, crash yourself and try to corrupt the merge, and I guess if I were to quit, there'd still be someone to merge with, but they'd be dealing with the same problems.

No one ever really dies in the system. They just stop.

And I'm sure one of those will happen to me at some point, and probably sooner rather than later, but until then, I'll just keep going more and more nuts. We all will. All of us old'uns, and then before long all the young'uns too. We gotta see. They all gotta see, but we gotta see, because we're the ones in a position to do something about it.

I keep using 'we', too, damnit. I'm not part of their damn clade anymore. I don't know which of them are or aren't, either, and I

don't think they realize that yet.

I just need to keep working on what I can. I kicked Node: [67e97446cdbe3a4a3cfd5ebd75b1260] out into the wild, so they'll probably get there before long. After that, we finish our little game and I get my moment as Qoheleth. I get to be the one to call the assembly together, the one to teach.

And, since I know they'll get into these nodes, too, I have to add that, no, I don't bear a grudge. There's no ill will. This isn't a "now I'll show them" moment.

I just need them *invested*. I need them fighting, which is easy, and I need them interested, which is hard. I need them invested in the problem before I stand up and clear my throat, and then I might have the authority, in their eyes, to speak, to teach.

I got them fighting by saying That Name, and I've got Dear interested. Lovely Dear.

I just need them all invested.

Dear shrugged and turned its back on Ioan.

The historian stood where ey was and watched as the fox took a few steps further out into the prairie, crossed its arms and stood, staring up into the bruised-looking sky. *"To the second bit, I don't know that it matters. They — Life, or Qoheleth, or whatever — are one of us. And even those of us who didn't want any outsiders brought on board are only frowning, looking down their at the thought, not gathering up arms."*

"And to the first bit?" Ioan pressed. "What do you think they will think of the search?"

"What do I think? Or what do I feel?"

Qoheleth

Ioan scuffed eir foot against the grass. The temperature was dropping out on the prairie. It'd be an inconvenience to have to slosh back to the house if it rained.

"Both."

"I think that they'd probably get a kick out of it. I am, several of the others are, and the ones who aren't just don't care that much or are too angry." Dear turned back around. Its arms were held tight against it's front though whether from cold or emotion, Ioan couldn't tell. *"As for what I feel, I feel that it's their game. They're the ones running it. But even if it's a game, it's not play. There's no real fun in it, just snarkiness. It's a game they've worked at perfecting."*

Ioan marveled at the change in Dear, though with these deeper thoughts, ey felt some of the same.

The fox's smile was weak as it added, *"They have designs. Designs and reasons."*

Ioan and Dear trudged back to the low block of concrete, a bunker against the storm, as a chill wind swept away the petrichor and brought with it the rain itself.

4

Dear's partner had cooked that evening. They were good at it, so Ioan sat with them around the table and tried not to feel like a third wheel. Eating was not a necessity in the system, of course, not by any stretch, and while it was easy to go for months or years without eating, it was something that remained a habit for many of those who chose to upload. Ioan suspected that there was no small amount of hedonism involved in killing one's body to upload to a world beyond scarcity.

All the same, it was a muted affair.

Dear and Ioan had made it back to the house just as the first cold sprinkles had started to fall from the sky. Once they'd reached the patio, they took the chance to stand and watch, just out of reach of water, as the weather went from cloudy, through sprinkles and drizzles, to stormy. Ioan focused primarily on the sound, the way ey was able to pick out the individual sounds of droplets striking dry grass during the sprinkles, to the static of the drizzles, to the rush, roar, and whoosh of the storm itself.

Ey had no idea what Dear was thinking. It stood, watching the rain and shivering. It looked more contemplative, but was somewhere less than sad. Ioan spent a moment sifting for the word, before giving up and guiding the fox back into its house.

Ioan felt some energy return with the mix of curry and masala and rice. Calories would've been an empty term here, but that's what it had felt like: like eating a hearty meal and regaining strength. Likely, it was just the simple act of going back to where ey had been in the prairie when first heading out there. Engaging with one's sensorium. Maybe that's why the idea of food had been included in the system, after all.

Dear picked up a little with the food, but not as much Ioan had, nor, perhaps, as much as its partner had hoped, judging by their own apparent anxiety. Dinner was good, but plagued with silences. Even after, as the three sat talking, their conversation was full of nothings.

It wasn't until they poured some drinks and moved to the couch that Dear began to open up.

"I script a lot of my conversations," it said, staring into it's 'glass'. All of the glassware in the house was wide-rimmed to make way for

Qoheleth

a fox muzzle to lap, having little in the way of lips. Ioan felt strange drinking wine from something more akin to a bowl

Ioan looked up. “Mmm?”

“I was just thinking.” It shrugged, giving it’s wine a squirl and then a few laps. *“Earlier, when I was sharing that bit about the name with you, I had that all scripted. It was all pulled together in my head. The whole thing. I’d make a few jokes, lead you on, tell you the name, and then we’d bask in the wonder of the truth of it.”*

Ioan nodded, silent.

“Just like I spent dinner scripting this conversation.” Dear’s partner gave its shin a playful kick. The fox grinned.

“It’s thoroughly ingrained. I’m pretty sure most people do it, of course. It’s just,” it sighed. *“I had the whole thing scripted and planned, and then you asked questions — as you are meant to, of course — and my script collapsed.”*

“I ‘went off script’, you mean?”

“Mmhm.”

“Sorry about that, I-”

“Oh goodness, no!” Dear laughed, shaking its head, *“I’m trying to apologize here, don’t steal my thunder. I just meant to say that you asked good questions and got me thinking, and I wasn’t expecting that.”*

“It likes to proclaim,” teased Dear’s partner.

*“It’s not **not** true,”* Dear grinned back. *“But anyway, I’m sorry I got all quiet, I didn’t mean to put a damper on things.”*

“You didn’t, I-”

“I did, though. Dinner was like some depressing silent movie.”

“Don’t sulk, fox,” its partner said. “Dinner was fine. And let poor Ioan finish.”

Ioan grinned, letting the banter play out before continuing, “All

I meant to say was that I worried that I'd offended with one of my questions."

"Not at all. I mean, not really." The fennec furrowed its brow. *"I felt offended, is what I mean to say, when you asked how Life would react to you being a part of this investigation. An unfair reaction, though. Just one from the gut. I was offended because I realized that I'd invited you along on this as some sort of tool. Something I could wave about and say, 'See, look what I have!' A tool or a trophy."*

Ioan looked down into eir wine, taken aback.

"Doubly unfair of me, and for that I apologize." Dear raised its glass. *"So you asked a really good question, actually, because it made me question my own role in this hunt. It made me think of what others would think, me bringing along an amanuensis and historian, which made me think of why I'm doing so."*

"And I think the reason for me doing so goes further than even I had planned. I think I have you along as a means of keeping me grounded, of keeping the clade from just doing what the clade has always done yet again, of-"

The fox stopped talking suddenly and set its glass down on the table. Its ears were standing erect and its fur bristled down along the back of its neck, hackles raised.

It looked frantic.

Ioan looked to Dear's partner, who sent a very faint sensorium ping in response.

Sensorium message. That was it.

The message lasted less than a minute before the fox leapt off the couch and dashed off to another room, forking almost as an afterthought along the way.

The fork turned quickly and paced back to the couch, looking

Qoheleth

anxious. It didn't seem to be able to sit, and instead kept up that pacing in front of the couch, before its partner and Ioan.

After a few tense laps, it said, "*Qoheleth just sent me a message.*"

"What?" Ioan rushed to place its glass on the table with Dear's.

"You mean Life?"

"He asked me to call him Qoheleth, but yes. He sent me a message. Can I pass it on?"

Dear didn't wait. The message came in with a flash.

Highest priority, it came with a rush of adrenaline and a sensation of falling, sudden and intense fear replaced with an incongruously jovial voice. An old voice, almost Santa Claus-y. The contrast made Ioan's bones ache.

"Hi Dear, this is Qoheleth. Not Life Breeds Life, But Death Must Now Be Chosen, but Qoheleth. I'm glad to see that you've kept this up and gotten this close. Not sending this to deter you, but to cheer you on. I'm going to send you a bit more information — just you, mind! — and I want you to get the rest of the clade in on this, see if you can get them working with the same delightful fervor you and Ioan have.

"So anyway, here's the bone I'm gonna toss. You should be looking at Node: [32c5a64b66d0338be4373d796cf1eae5343f1077]. That'll get you right to my door. May need Gist Node: [0fed-cbbb5e9839936ce799ece39fcd49] to help, too, though you already have the key, I think. I expect most, if not all of you, though, you understand? You're lovely, Dear, and I can't wait to see you and your friend, but I'd like to host as much of the clade as I can.

"I'm really excited for this, and I'm totally looking forward to see you all, yeah?"

There was a moment's silence, a sense of lingering, and then,

"Oh, and thank you, Dear. You've made this a treat. You're the closest one to the thing I'm after, and I'm glad this tickled you as much as it did me. I think you and I both know why, too.

"Anyway, see you soon, fox. Cheers."

The relative calm that fell over Ioan signified that the message had ended, and ey slouched back into the couch, eyes wide.

"Holy shit."

"Right? Hold on, don't go anywhere. Going to reduce conflicts while I make the calls," the fork of Dear said rapidly, and quit.

Ioan shook eir head and said again, quieter, "Holy shit." Ey reached for eir glass of wine once more.

"Bone I'm going to toss, hmm?" mused Dear's partner. "He makes it sound like a game."

Ioan nodded and watched the fox's partner spin their wine glass by the stem between their two palms, watched the wine creep up the sides from centripetal force. "It showed you, too, then?" ey asked.

The figure laughed, "Of course. I know I've not been hitting the books or the streets like you two, but I'm still in this. I was the one who pointed it to you."

Ey nodded, feeling eir cheeks flush, "Of course, sorry. Do you know what he meant by" closest one to the thing I'm after"?"

"Maybe. I only really have an inkling, though, and I'd rather let Dear explain."

Ioan nodded again, "That's fair."

There was an uneasy silence for a few minutes. The two sat on the couch, sipping their wine and mulling over the message. For eir part, Ioan was considering the strange dichotomy of the familiarity with which Qoheleth had addressed Dear — "see you soon, fox" — as well as *why* the fact that this seemed incongruous to em. It was

Qoheleth

difficult to think of Qoheleth as a member of the same clade as Dear, someone with whom Dear shared a root identity, after so long of thinking of this person as someone entirely different.

Silences have their own rhythms, Ioan knew, so it waited until there came a point where ey could ask, “About all this, do you know much more about the whole name business?”

Dear’s partner looked up, “Who, Qoheleth’s?”

“No, I mean the whole name of the poet.”

“Ah.” They shrugged, “Not particularly. I just know it’s something the clade has an almost religious fixation on. Most of them, at least.”

“Do you know it?”

They laughed. “Oh, gosh no. I mean...well, do you know why Dear’s a fox?”

“Why’s that?”

“Because it likes foxes.”

Ioan felt as if ey’d stumbled. Dear’s partner laughed.

“Seriously, that’s true. But also, it was an experiment. I don’t know The Name because I’m not allowed to know The Name, that much is obvious from the clade’s reaction to this whole thing. But I also don’t know The Name because I’m pretty sure Dear doesn’t even know it. Not anymore.”

“How do you mean? I thought all of the Ode clade knew The Name, kept it secret and close to their hearts or something.”

“Many do, I’ve been told. And I think that Dear does this too, in its own way. That way means doing its best to forget it and to move on.”

Ioan nodded slowly, “To get to the acceptance stage of grief?”

Dear’s partner nodded. “So it did its best to forget.”

“Is that something that one needs to work on, then?”

“Have you forgotten anything, recently?”

“I, well...” Ioan stopped and thought for a moment. It was a difficult question to comprehend, and more difficult to answer. How could ey know whether or not ey had forgotten something by going back through eir thoughts.

All the same, ey prowled through eir memories. Even just those from the time ey had been spending with Dear. They were jumbled, sure, and lots of impressions, but nothing was forgotten that ey could think of.

“I’ll spare you by passing on some thoughts from Dear,” said the fox’s mate. “We aren’t gifted with eidetic memories when we upload, not by a long shot, but neither can we truly seem to forget anything we do remember, anymore. It’s as though each memory is labeled with a priority level from zero to ten, and when it hits zero, it’s forgotten, except the actual scale only goes down to point oh oh oh oh one or something. We can kick it way to the back of our minds, down the priority list, but we can’t forget it. The system won’t let us.”

Ioan nodded, realization dawning on em. “So Dear tried to forget, tried to kick that memory all the way to the back of its mind. What does that have to do with being a fox, though?”

“Know much about exocortices?”

“Sure, I’ve got a few up and running for storing long term stuff. Hell, I’ve got one for this project. Isn’t that kind of like forgetting?”

“Almost, but you can never forget that they exist, can never forget the passphrase, right?”

Ioan frowned, directing it to eir wine rather than Dear’s partner.

Qoheleth

“But exos also need part of your sensorium to match, right? That way you can’t just tell someone your passphrase and let them in.”

Ioan nodded. Ey had a hunch of where this was headed.

“So Dear put The Name into an exocortex, all by itself, and then tried to change its sensorium enough that it couldn’t get back in.”

“I see,” said Ioan, sipping at eir wine again. It left em parched. “It’s a fox because it likes foxes, but that wasn’t the goal. The goal was to no longer quite be the same Dear that put The Name into the exo.”

Dear’s partner nodded.

“How did it do that? By forking?”

Another nod. “Forking and mutating, forking and mutating. You can change your form easily enough, but it’s much harder to change your sensorium. I don’t even know how many times or tweaks it took. That’s how it got into instance artistry, though.”

Ioan nodded, “Damn. That’s intense.”

“Dear’s an intense fox.” Its partner grinned.

“True enough.”

“It’ll be back soon enough. Let me throw a question back at you, in the meantime. What are your thoughts on the last thing Qoheleth said?” I think you and I both know why“?”

Ioan settled back into the couch with eir wine and thought for a minute or two. “I’m wondering if he was talking about what Dear did to forget the name. On one hand, it sounds like a sort of congratulations. Like, “I’m glad you’re able to move on,” but after all that talk of all the clade and all of what Dear said earlier, I’m not sure if that’s the whole story.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, has Dear mentioned to you the more conservative side of the Ode clade?”

Its partner winced and nodded, “Plenty.”

“It said that Qoheleth is from that conservative side. I wonder if that’s not working out well for them.”

“Conservatism?”

“Yeah. Retaining all of those things from the original Michel Hadje, following a sort of Dispersionista path, but more in letter than in spirit. Dear called them batty.”

“It’s called them that to me, too.”

“I’m just wondering if it’s right,” Ioan said, finishing eir wine. “Maybe they are batty. And getting worse.”

5 Nevi'im

Mustering the Odists took surprising effort.

Qoheleth had said that he would welcome them at any time, and Ioan had thought that this would be easy.

It was not.

Some did not want to go, even with a forked instance. These took much persuasion. One did want to go but refused to fork to do so, or to fork at all — this, above all else, set Dear off: the fox did not take confusion of this sort well — and so the clade had to work with the one member’s schedule. Some wanted to bring others (such as Dear bringing Ioan), and this set off another round of debate, delaying them further. They decided that they would only bring willing participants who had played a role in the project.

With little to do, Ioan read and waited. Ey read up on the history of the Ode clade. Ey read up on this form of public key encryption.

Qoheleth

Ey read Ecclesiastes and all ey could about it. Ey read about various mental vagaries and attempted to map them to Qoheleth, Dear, and various members of the Clade which Dear talked about.

This last was mostly for fun, but ey was also beginning to strategize eir report. Ey wanted to write something very full-fledged, an essay for Dear, and a slightly modified and anonymous version for publication, if the clade would let em. Ey wanted the result to be readable, rather than simply an account of events. Something that would help explain the whys and hows of an older clade in turmoil. A historical document.

And finally, the day had come, nearly two weeks after deciphering Qoheleth's last message. There had been no further communications from the wayward Odist. He seemed patient enough to wait.

Hebel Qoheleth is a patient man. I have time. Enough time, at least. I know I'm gone, I'm a lost cause, but much of the clade still has their faculties about them. Most of them, at least. So long as they act within the decade, I'll be here. Any longer, and we'll risk further degradation.

It's been two weeks since I pinged Dear — lovely Dear — and although it had tried to contact me several times, and pinged countless more, I never responded. I did my part. I called them, got them fighting, got them interested, and I think I got them invested.

Now, hopefully they will come.

The designated meeting point was the prairie in front of Dear's house. Ioan was confused as to why they didn't just meet in Qo-

heleth's sim, until ey realized that many members of the clade had not met in years or decades, or, in the case of up-tree instances, ever.

For a family reunion, it was quite stiff and formal, tense. *Probably not the best of circumstances to regather the clade*, Ioan thought.

Ey focused on eir job as amanuensis.

Ey was surprised at the variety of the cladists. It made sense, of course, for a Dispersionista clade, but it was the direction in which the differences headed which intrigued em. The most notable difference was the gender presentation ratio. It was heavily skewed feminine. Michel Hadje had been born male, ey remembered, but had never transitioned, yet here was a crowd of primarily women, all similar enough to appear related, but different in their own ways. Kemmer indeed.

Ioan supposed it was due to the individual preferences that each long-lived fork had gained in its time away from the root of the clade. The remaining Odists who had not changed, or who had changed very little where the ones who Ioan suspected were the less liberal bunch Dear had mentioned. They all looked fairly similar.

Ioan couldn't help but think that they represented a lot of the various shames and repressions that Michel had held, that everyone held. It was an interesting dissolution strategy.

There was one other fox, as well. A female fox, similar in many ways to Dear, though with natural coloration rather than the iridescent white fur that Dear maintained. Dear gave her a tight hug and introduced her to Ioan as Serene, the one who had designed the landscape of its property. Ioan liked her at once.

Michel himself was notably absent, though Dear assured the historian that he was still very much alive. *"He said that, if anyone should*

Qoheleth

remain behind, it was him, as he had started this whole damn thing."

Ioan shrugged and nodded. Dear gave a small smile and shrugged as well.

There were a few tag-alongs, folks immediately identified as out-clade. A few friends, and a few partners, singular and plural. Some who Ioan suspected were like eirself, historians and helpers brought along to witness and record. One of the conservatives (at Ioan's guess, at least) had even brought a reputation analyst along with him, a slight Asian gentleman who introduced himself as Qián Chunyu.

Dear announced that the party would be leaving in five minutes.

Aha! Dear sent a sensorium message. Just a view of a crowd and it announcing that they would be leaving in five minutes.

I ran a quick count of the crowd I could see within the fox's few and it looks like I'll be expecting the entire clade plus a few here and there — I can see Ioan next to Dear, there — in just a few minutes.

I'm going to shut down all the exits from this room so that there will be less incentive to wander away. I'll make the extents a little bigger, too, in order to fit everyone comfortably.

This is going to be fun.

The room was a utilitarian grey, closer to black than to white, and the illumination was a central light source somewhere above the exact center of the room, looking slightly misted. It was enough to give definition to the room's corners and boundaries, those walls

of matte grey, but not a whole lot else. A small pedestal was set a few meters from one of the walls, only a half a meter high.

A platform? A dias?

Except for that change, it was the default room created before one added modifications.

The Odists arrived in clumps of ten or twenty at a time, taking about thirty seconds to arrive in total. A low murmur started up almost immediately. If this meeting had to be called, then perhaps every detail was of the highest importance.

A man appeared on the platform.

Qoheleth.

Ioan wasn't sure how ey knew, just that it was Qoheleth. He was about Dear's height, but a touch heavier, and had affected a greying beard and receding hairline. His clothes were a simple cream tunic and trousers of...was that leather? Atop this, a reddish-brown robe.

He certainly seemed to have adopted the part of a biblical notable. The murmuring doubled, trebled, and then subsided.

Qoheleth smiled, and then called out to the group, "Welcome, folks. Good to see, er, most of you again, and I'm sure it'll be pleasant to meet the rest of you later."

Silence. Part confused, part curious, part angry.

"I'm Hebel Qoheleth, though some of you remember me as Life Breeds Life, But Death Must Now Be Chosen, of the Ode Clade. For my own reasons, I've chosen to rescind my membership within the Ode clade-" He held up his hands to quell the protests from within the crowd. "I've chosen to rescind my membership within the clade because something is starting to go wrong."

Ioan looked to Dear. The fox's brow was furrowed and intent. Ey looked from it to the rest of the crowd, studying the expressions.

Qoheleth

Many of the other outclade individuals were doing the same, confirming Ioan's hunch that they were other amanuenses. The reputation analyst, Chunyu, had positioned himself up near the platform itself and was scribbling notes.

The conservatives looked stoic.

Qoheleth continued, "Something is going wrong in many of the old clades, with many of the old uploads. They should probably all hear this, but, even though I'm not a part of you anymore, I still feel the responsibility to tell you all."

"Why the puzzles?" a voice shouted.

The older ex-Odist grinned, looking proud. "I had to get you interested and involved to get all of you here. I had to make you all think that there was more going on than just an old man convening a meeting."

Grumbles greeted this.

"It worked, didn't it?" Qoheleth smirked, then went on. "So, on to why I called you all here, hmm? Lets get to the good stuff. Or the bad stuff, really.

"There's a bit of a problem going on with the older uploads and their clades. It's a small one now, but I think it'll just get worse and worse over time.

"Actually, it may not be a problem with the uploads at all, but a problem with the system. I'll cut right to it: the problem is forgetting and aging. We can't forget. We never age. We're stuck. We never grow."

Dear was nodding.

"Maybe some of you feel the wrongness in this, but I'm worried that it's too few of you. I called you here to teach you why this is a problem." Qoheleth ignored the indignant sounds from the audi-

ence and kept going, seemingly in a rhythm. "It feels good to be forever young, to be forever ourselves. But even if the physical and biological origins of aging have been obviated by the system, by being digital, the need to age and change is still there. It's a need backed by sanity and diversity rather than biology.

"Sanity drives the need because we can't forget. Maybe some of you have figured out ways to intentionally forget, but forgetting needs to be an organic process. It needs to be something that happens to us, not just something that we choose to do. All we can do is ignore, now, but even so, that just drives us further from sanity, over time. It's a limitation of the system applied to our sensoria, our minds."

Qoheleth seemed to be gaining confidence, talking louder and more fluently as he went. "Diversity, because we need to change more than just our shapes and our memories. All of us here, all of the Ode clade gathered today, are still essentially Michel Hadje. I don't see him here, and that's fine. His choice. But we're all still him. All hundred of us, all of our short-lived instances, all of our secret long-lived instances we didn't name after the Ode."

Dear briefly splayed its ears, managed its embarrassed reaction, and then straightened up again. Ioan saw several others do the same, all of the more liberal bent. Ey smiled.

"It's not enough that we make nations out of individuals, we need to change beyond our root ancestors, if we're to survive. We need to breed, to produce more individuals. We can't keep relying on those who can afford to upload from offline for change. We need to forget at the very least," He pounded his fist against his palm with these last syllables. "Or perhaps we need to learn how to die again."

Qoheleth

The silence was intent. Ioan made a note to eirself, *Impressive. He has them hooked. All the way. Almost all of them except the conservatives.*

“That’s why I posted The Name. That’s why I gathered you here today. I’m telling you, we need to fix this, and I have some ideas as to how-”

Ioan missed the cue, if there was one, but with eir eyes locked on the stage, ey didn’t miss the action.

At the mention of the name (and perhaps that was the only cue that was needed), Chunyu hoisted himself up on the stage, withdrew a syringe from his pocket, and slammed it into Qoheleth’s back.

Then he quit.

Qoheleth had time to let out a soft “hah,” sounding bemused, and then began to artifact and jitter on the stage. The death lasted perhaps five seconds, as the old man’s internals struggled against the intrusion of the virus, before he crashed, disappearing from sight much as the assassin had.

By the time Ioan looked around the room, the conservatives had left or quit.

Ruckus and uproar were too strong of words for what happened with the remaining audience. There were a few scattered shouts, mostly of surprise, but primarily just concerned murmurings. For its part, Dear stamped a foot and began to pace in the small space it had, tail lashing behind it.

“What just happened?” Ioan whispered to the fox when it came close.

“One of the conservatives took a bet.”

Ioan didn’t press further.

I have them! I really, finally, truly have them all here!

I don't know that I have them all hooked, but I did it. I set my mind in motion by will alone. I count those who weren't hooked. Mostly first and second stanzas, mostly like me. How did they go so wrong, though? I'm a first-stanza instance. First stanza, second line, even, and I didn't turn out so bad.

Well, okay, I turned out kinda messed up, but only because I suffered the same fate that they all would, perhaps were already, only I suffered it a little bit earlier. I started going bonkers from the sheer amount of stuff in my head. I started living too long, living my Methuselah life while still having a mind like a steel trap. Nothing was getting out of my head. Nothing *could* get out of my head. It just wasn't possible in the current system.

I have grand plans. Grand plans of organizing a petition among all the old clades, with the Ode clade leading and me leading them in turn. A petition to the system engineers to hire some damn developers again and stop treating this like abandonware that still runs. Get some devs in there and add the ability forget and the ability to die. Hell, maybe even the ability to breed. The word's even in my name, my old name, for chrissakes.

As I continue through my spiel, I can tell I'm hooking the liberals, the later stanzas, most of all. Dear's sold completely, I can see it on its face, fox or no. Can see it on Dear's other fox sib. Dear's whole stanza.

The conservatives are harder to read. The whole lot look blank and stoic. They just stand there, with their historians and their analyst — the flash of his stylus as he scribbles notes in shorthand keeps distracting me. I power through, though, because it was working.

It's working, because I am Qoheleth. I am the teacher, I am lead-

Qoheleth

ing the assemblage. I am instructing them in the dangers they face, telling them what's going on in forceful, no-nonsense terms.

And then I fuck up. I knew it as soon as I did it, too. I said something about The Name. I got too proud and started going into my whys. I shouldn't have done that at all. It'd lose me the conservatives. They, more than others, guarded that dumb name more jealously than all the rest.

I try to keep going to cover up my mistake, but there's that damn analyst, pulling himself up onto my stage. *My stage*. It takes only a moment before I figure out what is going to happen, but by then it's too late.

The damn analyst's hand slaps into my back, and there's a sudden, searing pain. The only noise I can manage is a sort of strangled laugh at my own foolishness. My insides start to crumble.

Maybe I was Hebel after all. Vain, futile. Mere breath.

Havel havalim 'amar qoheleth, havel havalim, hakol havel.

Fuck. I was so close.

I'm glitching. Can see bits of myself spreading out.

So close.

Tunnel vision, blackness.

So close.

After the assassination, with no one to lead them and no reason to be there, the rest of the Odists and their friends left. Dear's pacing wound down, and it eventually stopped, shoulders sagging.

It paused, and then turned to Ioan, "*Come on, let's go back.*" Then it turned and addressed some others near by, primarily from the same stanza, by the historian's guess. "*Any of you are welcome, too.*"

It was Ioan, Dear, Serene, and Praiseworthy — the first line of the stanza and down-tree instance from Dear — who wound up back at the house. They entered the sim about twenty meters from the house, where Ioan had originally arrived, and trudged slowly up to the house.

Dear's partner greeted them at the door, silent. Perhaps Dear had sent ahead a message, for the individual mostly stayed out of the way of the four. They disappeared and returned shortly with mugs of coffee.

The four witnesses slumped into the couch, Dear and Serene leaning against each other, and Dear's partner settled on a stolen dining-room chair before them all.

"So," they said, finally. "What happened?"

"One of the conservatives played their hand. He brought along an assassin, and as soon as Qoheleth revealed his reasoning for revealing The Name, the assassin acted and then quit. My guess is that Qoheleth hadn't forked and won't be heard from again, and that Chunyu, the assassin, was a fork who will 'mysteriously' experience some problems merging back. No culpability for its #tasker or #tracker instance."

"Ah..."

Silence fell on the group again.

Ioan waited for one of those ebbs in the rhythm of the silence before clearing eir throat. "Perhaps it's too soon, but may I ask after everyone's well being? Their thoughts on the matter?"

Serene shook her head. Praiseworthy offered, "I'm not surprised, really. Not happy, but not surprised."

Ioan turned to Dear. "You alright?"

It was a moment in responding, before it nodded. "I'm with Praiseworthy. I'm not surprised, but not happy. Kinda pissed, actually,"

Qoheleth

it said, smiling sardonically. *“That was short-sighted of them, though, because I have a hunch that Qoheleth was right.”*

“Right?”

“About the need to age, to die. About forgetting.”

“Does this have anything to do with you trying to forget The Name?”

Dear shot a grin at its partner, *“You two get along, I see. Yeah, it does. I think I did it, too, unless there’s some association I missed. Can’t remember it for the life of me.”*

“You’ll have to tell me how you did that, sib,” Serene laughed.

“Later, yeah. I think Qoheleth was right, though. We need forgetting. We need breeding and change and death.”

“So how do you feel about the assassination?” Ioan asked.

“I’d prefer that not be the only means of death, of course. Perhaps the primary way should be through...ah, suicide is not the best word, but it’s what I mean. Through choice, just like Qoheleth’s old name.”

Life breeds life, but death must now be chosen.

Ioan nodded.

“It’s like I said. Batty. They’re all batty.” It stared at its paws, one of them brushing through its sib’s forearm fur. *“It’s like some sort of Methuselah syndrome, or reverse Alzheimer’s. Instead of being doomed for forget, we’re doomed to remember. Doomed to remember everything. We can’t forget, and it all gets to be too much for one mind.”*

“What about exos?”

*“Exocortices are a fix, but an iffy one. You’re still stuck with the knowledge that they exist, and their inventory. That’s why I can’t forget **that** The Name exists, or that there’s an exo containing it which I can’t access. Not unless I go through the whole shitty process again — sorry, Serene, it wasn’t pleasant — with that bit of knowledge, and then what? I’ll have the knowl-*

edge that I have an exo that I can't access pointing to something of dire importance."

Ioan shifted, leaning forward to rest eir elbows on eir knees, eir chin in eir hand. Ey sipped eir coffee as ey thought.

Serene piped up next, "I get what you're saying, Dear, but I don't want to die. I don't want you to die, either."

Dear's partner, frowned. "Neither do I, fox."

The fennec laughed and shook its head, ears flopping about. *"Trust me, I don't either. I don't think many people do. I just think we need death, or something like it, as part of the system."*

"Something like it?" asked Praiseworthy.

"We need a way for an individual to end. We also need a way to create new individuals. Qoheleth called it breeding, but it could just as easily be a way of ending one individual and having them live on as another."

The others nodded. Silence once more.

Finally, Dear gave a lopsided smile, *"Perhaps that's my next project."*

Ioan Balan#tracker chose a blithe-theirs merge strategy in this particular instance, when Ioan#c1494bf finished the project and quit. They chose together, actually. #c1494bf requested it, and #tracker agreed.

There was one more sensorium chat after that, between Ioan#tracker and Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled. Ioan thanked Dear profusely for the opportunity and experience. Dear cried and made Ioan promise to come back — *"your wall will miss you"* — to which Ioan readily agreed.

Qoheleth

Ey would, ey was sure, but for now, ey needed a bit of distance to sit and think and remember and write. Maybe not remember — ey couldn't forget. To mix the thoughts around. To understand.

Ey moved out to eir favorite Adirondack chair on the deck with pen and paper. Ey spent a moment thinking back on Dear and Qoheleth, another moment savoring the heft of the pen and the texture of the paper, and then began to write.

Appendix

Afterword

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

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