

Post·Self

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Qoheleth and other stories

Madison Scott-Clary

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Post-Self

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Qoheleth

Whatever is has already been, and what will be has been before; and God will call the past to account.

— Ecclesiastes 3:15

Chapter 1

RJ Brewster — 2112

The theater purred. It hummed to itself. It stretched and reclined. It relaxed, unwound.

RJ and the room let out a soft, long-held breath together, feeling muscles and wires relax, nerves and current disentangle themselves, slowly, slowly.

“Alright, everyone. It’s midnight, time to start packing up,” Johansson was saying from down in the front row. “Ross, we’re short one. Can you start pulling together all of the mics? RJ will help you get them sorted.”

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

Those speakers were signing off, going to bed one by one through RJ’s gentle attentions. The virtual board set about the task of returning to neutral, all of the gain knobs orienting themselves, then all of the monitor knobs, the sliders, the whole system ticking as it cooled down, minus the channel ey’d need to keep open to Ross.

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

“Grab the lead, first,” RJ murmured. “Then Sarah and Catherine, they’ve got the nice mics. They should have a tiny number painted

on the costume side that matches up with their box. All of the boxes are stacked in the pit, by the front wall, you should be able to get them out in one load, though be careful taking them back.”

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

RJ left the channel open just in case, though the soft sounds of breathing and the occasional curse as Ross bumped his head on the pit cover were distracting, while ey set about going through eir notes with the dozy theater. The next night’s rehearsal was the last one before they went live.

Ey knew the show better than most of the cast, em and the theater. The two had to learn everyone’s lines, plus a few cues when ey’d have to take care not to pick up any of the sound effects. Gunshots. Chairs scraping. A scuffle. The clap of heels on the matte black of the stage itself.

The theater’s job was to simply work with RJ and the lighting crew, responding to their knowledge of what was going on in the play, while RJ and Caitlin’s job, as sound and lights, was to respond to the stage manager’s near encyclopedic knowledge of the play, her view of the house.

All sound was under RJ’s jurisdiction. Cast and crew both: ey spent as much time managing communication between the hands, the manager, and emself and Caitlin as ey did maintaining the sound from the performers.

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

RJ soothed the room with a gentle cooing and reluctantly started

the process of pulling back. Ey closed the channel with Ross and put all of the headsets to bed last of all, before ey slipped back from the interface, blinking as ey adjusted to seeing the cavernous hall with eir own eyes as eir fingers slipped from the contact points and ey leaned back from the headrest.

Ey shook eir head to clear it and stood up, stretching, before ambling from the tech booth down the stairs towards the stage. Letting gravity carry eir lanky form down two steps at a time, feeling air against eir face, smelling the treble note of dust and conditioned air all added to the newborn feeling of pulling back.

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

“Hey bud, I’m here. The house is sleeping now.”

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

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

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

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

Caitlin and Sarai, the stage manager, joined them and the rest of the hands. They sat on the edge of the pit cover, unwinding from the tenseness of rehearsal. The actors slowly got out of their dress to clump together on the stage, unwilling to leave their beloved platform just yet.

“Gather ’round, children”, a voice boomed from out in the darkened audience.

“Yes, Mister Johansson”, one of the actors recited back. Tired laughter.

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

RJ, Sarai, and Caitlin murmured their assent.

“Tomorrow night, back here at five.”

“Early,” RJ murmured. “How come?”

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

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

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

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

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

At midnight on a weekday, there wasn’t too much going on.

Folks visiting the pubs to catch up with their friends after work. Black cabs, night buses. By the time that midnight rolled around, those who were left were the harder drinkers.

The idea of a warm pub and one quick pint before heading home tugged at em, but the pull of home was much stronger than that of beer.

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

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

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

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

Ey thumbed eir phone with the contacts on the thumb-pads of eir glove to start music playing. Some of the stuff that reminded em of eir dad to go along with the curry that reminded em of eir mom. Quiet, but present.

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

Ey scooped the last of the curry into a little plastic container for the next day's lunch, promising emself that ey'd cook an additional pot of rice before heading out in the afternoon so ey'd have more calories to keep emself running. Clean up as easy as tossing the container into the compost bin along with all of the others. Cooking much more than rice was for times other than crunch.

The rig in the corner of eir bedroom was exerting subtle gravities on RJ. As ey ran through the motions of the post-recital evening — eating, cleaning, storing leftovers, using the toilet — eir orbits grew smaller and smaller. Eir gloves were itching. Ey could feel phantom breezes brushing past phantom fur. Phantom fur. Phantom ears. Phantom tail. Phantom realities teased around the edges of eir perception.

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

Peel your gloves off one finger at a time, ey thought. Relish the anticipation. Get caught up in it. Hell, let it linger.

Cat settled into eir lap and curled into a small crescent, ey set about cleaning the contacts on eir hands with lint-free paper and rubbing alcohol. Those done, ey wiped down the headset, removing the negligible residue of sweat and skin oils that had collected there. Clean enough as is. Ey had recently replaced the soft, padded headrest where eir forehead would lay, held inches from the minuscule cameras that tracked eir face.

Eir gear was more elaborate than the stuff in the tech booth at work ey shared with Sarai and Caitlin, and ey had drained eir sav-

ings to acquire it. The rig, as well as the contacts on eir fingers, the nanoscale interferites — the ones that took over eir optic and auditory nerves, and the electroparalytcs to keep em from acting out in reality what took place online — the NFC connections implanted just under eir hairline and their ramifying tendrils, all of that painful work down eir spine that helped em more fully experience the connection.

Connections and gear cleaned, RJ finally felt at ease enough to pop open the lid on eir rig. The screen, all but vestigial when ey was inside, still served its role during boot and login.

Ey quickly keyed in eir passphrase and then rested eir right hand on the curved pad, eir fingers finding familiar grooves that held eir hand in place. The connection from eir contacts the other half of eir two factors of authentication.

“Gonna head in, Prisca,” ey murmured to eir cat, stroking the fingers of eir left hand over her ears, fingering the soft, velveteen folds until the cat shook her head away. Purrs nonetheless ratcheted up a notch. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

Ey set eir left hand into its cradle. Tilting eir head against the headrest, feeling the comforting touch of cool microfiber and the little twinge of recognition from the NFC controllers, ey nudged the button beneath eir thumb.

The rig went immersive. As RJ delved in, the soft hum of a cooling fan picked up to handle the waste heat of countless computations.

Ey could no longer hear it.

RJ Brewster — 2112

AwDae sat up in bed and slid to the edge of the mattress. Ey stretched languidly and let eir fur bristle from tip to tail, the latter bottle-brushing out. Ey shook emself to settle eir fur back down and yawned widely, slender pink tongue curling just shy of sharp incisors. A formality, to be sure, or perhaps a wordless mnemonic to finish the context-shift. The final step in a ritual.

Brushing eir fur down, ey stood and padded to the dresser in the corner of the room, pulling out a thin white cotton shirt with laces up the front and a simple navy sarong, which ey tied around eir waist. Countless hours examining some of the highest fashions out there on the 'net, and ey'd come to the conclusion that, in these times of excess, the understated said the most. It also interfered with the fur least, worked well with a tail — a simple slit cut down the length of the sarong let that slip free — and it was cheap. There was no shortage of ways to spend money, and AwDae had better things to buy with what was left after London rent.

Ey swiped eir paw from left to right atop the dresser, revealing a dimly glowing arsenal of personal belongings. It'd be a simple night out, so ey tucked a few vcards and a limited credit chip into a shoulder bag and hauled the strap over eir head, ears laying flat and out of the way.

From there, eir claws clacked against the glossy surface of the tport pad. Gauche as it was to appear and disappear where folks could see, ey kept eirs in a corner of the studio apartment rather than an alcove. The feeling of exposure and the jarring change of scenery was titillating, racy.

Ey stood straight on the pad and brushed eir paw from left to right, bringing up a list of recently used commands. Had ey left fingerprints online, there'd be a clear smudge over the entry: ey rarely did anything else on work nights.

tport: The Crown Pub

Tapped, and the obligatory click that went along with the change of scenery brought em to an alcove paneled in oak, lit by green-shaded lights hanging pendulously from a cord directly above em.

Ey blinked to adjust to the comparatively dim light. The pub, which largely followed the circadian rhythm of the British isles, was just as dark as it was for RJ, back in London-as-it-was, but eir perosnal sim lived in a perpetual eleven AM springtime.

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

"See ya, Debarre," AwDae said, though it came out more like 'Shee-a, Debaw' coming from the fox's narrow muzzle. Ey got a curt wave from the weasel done up all in black.

The fox shrugged and headed into the pub proper, eir nose twitching. The scents of the room which told em more of those present than simply scanning the crowd. One or two gawking entities with no scent property set — tourists — and the usual crowd of aromas. Friends, mostly. Acquaintances all, minus those tourists.

Ears perked at the distinct whiff of dandelions, something left-

over from eir youth, and ey made a beeline towards one of the window tables, where the scent seemed to originate, skirting around bodies of diverse shape.

“Shacha.”

“Come on, fox, loosen your filters, won’t you?” Sasha laughed, scooting her chair back to stand up and lean in for a quick hug. AwDae slipped eir arms around the skunk’s waist in turn and gave a squeeze, tail aswish.

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

“Oh, you know, same old, same old.” Sasha settled back into her chair and fiddled with a stack of vcards on the table, giving an out-sized shrug. “Been kind of boring in here over the last few days, so it’s good to see you.”

The fox nodded, tugging eir shirt straight and moving over to the chair opposite the skunk, sliding into it easily and resting against the back.

“It’s late there, isn’t it?”

“Not too late. One something. Made good time home at least. Rehearsal ran late.”

Sasha laughed, “You know, every time you talk about rehearsal and such, I think back to school. You hunched over the sound booth, you know? It’s hard for me to picture you as having grown up and taken that up as a job.”

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

The skunk rolled her eyes and leaned forward onto her elbows,

muzzle resting on obsidian paws. “Tell me about it. You’re missing out big time here in the ’burbs, dear. You could be teaching high school theater in any town along the central corridor, doing the same plays once every five years so no students repeat them. Truly a life of glamour.” Sasha laughed when AwDae buried eir face in eir paws and groaned. She continued, “Seriously though, you just remind me a lot of school. Maybe it’s ’cause of all of the ways you haven’t grown up.”

“Please, Sasha.” AwDae poked eir tongue out. “If you bring up dating...”

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

“I’m plenty happy on my own, I can promise you that,” ey countered.

“No, I get that,” Sasha admitted, lowering her gaze. “Not all it’s turned out to be. Just got me thinking, is all.”

“Oh no, struck out again?”

Sasha shrugged, nodded, shrugged once more, fiddled with a vcard. Still no eye contact.

AwDae reached eir paws out to take one of her own, black fur on black fur nonetheless mismatched. Both had opted for mostly hand-like paws, but differences were evident on contact. Where Sasha’s fur was an even, silky black marked by white stripes that were a little too sharp, a little too exact, AwDae had labored to construct a version of emself as a fennec fox to exacting detail, down to the point where eir muzzle couldn’t even form the two letters that made up eir name offline.

It brought to mind thoughts of honing versus forging. AwDae had honed emself to a finer and finder point while everyone else forged ahead. Always a way to be a better tech. Always a chance to

become more vulpine online. Always a way to become better at what one already was.

Ey shook eir head to dislodge the rumination.

“I’m sorry, Sasha...”

Sasha shrugged again, as though she might be able to drop the very idea of bad break-ups like an overloaded backpack. She gave the fox’s paws a squeeze in her own. “Men are dicks. I’d take a fox like you over any dickhead guy any day.”

AwDae smiled faintly, returned the squeeze. “Sasha, you know it wouldn’t–”

“No, I know. I just wish there were more guys out there like you.” When AwDae stiffened in eir seat and looked away towards the window, Sasha splayed her ears and added quickly, “Sorry fox. I keep putting my foot in it, don’t I?”

“Sorry, no, you’re fine.” AwDae grinned apologetically. “I should get a thicker skin, maybe. Stand up for myself. I spend night after night hiding in here, and even then, can’t really assert myself any. I appreciate you trying, though.”

Sasha smiled cautiously and nodded. “You came out like fifteen years ago, dear. I should still be doing better.”

AwDae’s turn to shrug. “It’s hard to ask for that, is all. Always has been.”

“I think that’s what I meant earlier, that you haven’t changed, despite all the ways you have. You haven’t done like all the rest of us and grown up, gotten married, all that crap. You’re still doing what you loved to do in school. Don’t get me wrong, I miss it too. *Actual* theater, not the school stuff. Seeing crazy shows with you on the weekends. Hell, doing crazy shows in uni. Doesn’t pay the bills, though.”

“You should come see us sometime. It’d be good to see you again, too.”

“You know I want to.” Sasha grinned. It didn’t last. “But yeah. You seem kind of frozen, kind of stuck — in a few ways, even, though you’re succeeding in others.”

AwDae nodded, rumination hanging in a cloud around em. So many ways the world had moved on without em... After a moment, though, ey sat up straighter. “Oh, speaking of frozen.”

“Debarre?”

The fox nodded.

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

“What? Really?” The fox shook eir head, poking a claw at the table, before rubbing the spot with a paw pad. The sim was hardly immersive enough to waste cycles on letting claw dent tabletop. “That’s unfortunate. Not all that surprising, I guess, given what Cice said about his family. They at least confirmed that’s what happened, though?”

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

AwDae twisted the stack of cards around in front of em, leafing through slowly and taking in a few of the details that slid across eir fingertips. “Mind if I make a copy?”

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

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

Sasha hesitated for a moment, caught in the middle of a gesture to grant copy rights on the cards. She shook her head, to which AwDae could only frown. She finished the gesture, and another set of vcards shuffled itself out from the original stack. Crisp black embossed on the creamy cotton-paper that AwDae preferred.

“I’ll take a look, too. I can’t do too much right now, I’ve got a–”

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

The two sat in silence. AwDae slid Sasha’s cards back and fanned eirs in front of emself before shuffling them back into a stack and swiping above them, instructing eir rig to make a copy of the deck.

Ey lifted eir gaze away from the silence to scan the scents in the room once more. Now that it was starting to get on in the evening even in the Americas, the scentscape was changing. Some familiar scents, some unfamiliar, but most of them at least detailed, which told AwDae that the owners had put some thought into them. None, however, really jumped out at em.

More rumination. Rumination edging into drowsiness.

“Hey, Sasha, I gotta get going. I know I just got here, but I’m starting to crash hard.”

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

Both stood up and exchanged another hug, AwDae breathing

in that dandelion scent of eir friend. Memories of school, drowsy, dreamlike. Dandelions in the lawn. An impromptu picnic. Rubbing one of the flowers on the back of eir hand, leaving a yellow stain. Sasha explaining that the smell always reminded her of muffins.

“I’ll see you later, skunk, yeah?”

“Take care of yourself, okay? No working too hard, slaving over a hot rig...”

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

Ioan Balan — 2305

Ioan Balan awoke to an urgent message.

Ey didn't really like these, the sensorium messages. Ey liked paper messages. letters. Notes. Missives. Scrawled signatures and careful handwriting.

Ey mostly just liked paper, if ey was honest. Always accruing more paper and pens. Eir friends thought it creepy. Paper messages, rich messages attached to paper that played on its surface, ones that messed with the reader's sensorium; ey sent them all.

But 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 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 high so that even in eir dark room with eir eyes closed (and heart still pounding), ey could see the fox, bipedal, dressed 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. Something light, 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 post-modern. Ey didn't consider emself much of a pomophobe, but this was intense, to say the least.

"Hi Mx Balan," the fox was saying. It seemed to speak in italics, though how, Ioan could not say. A sense. *"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—" The word seemed to come with a tone of distaste. *"—and performer. I'm not just telling you this to, ah, toot my own horn, I believe the phrase is, but to underline the fact that I'm woefully unprepared for the situation at hand."*

The fox smiled, looking tired, and continued. *"I need some help finding someone. 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 they have supposedly shared. We — the other members of my clade and myself — 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." Ioan could hear the capital letters.

"I'm sorry, I'm getting sidetracked by details." The fox shook it's head, ears flopping from side to side. *"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 fancies emself a historian as a PI?*

Ey spent a few minutes researching the public basics on Dear. Pronouns (it/its), species (fennec fox), age (old — the Ode clade was an early adopter), some of its art. Really out there stuff. No further hints as to why it would need em in particular.

With still a half hour to go before eir alarm, Ioan slipped out of bed, stood, 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 stop using sensorium messages.

No luck. Less than thirty seconds later, Ioan received a sensorium ping of acknowledgment, a shiver up eir spine along.

Ey forked and sent the copy of emself, #c1494bf, out to the meeting. Meanwhile, ey'd get some food, perhaps work on eir current project.

RJ Brewster — 2112

RJ slid eir hands from the pads and leaned back from the headrest, letting out a full-fledged yawn. The sound and motion startled Priscilla across the room. Ey levered emself up out of eir seat and trudged over toward the still-purring cat, stroking over her ears when she bunted her head up against eir hand

Eir mind foundered in a slurry of work, of Cicero's disappearance, of school with Sasha, of honing versus forging.

"I'm wiped, Prisca," ey informed the cat.

Priscilla purred louder.

Smiling, ey peeled eir shirt off over eir head and slipped out of eir jeans. Tomorrow's rehearsal would mean full dress for everyone and makeup for the actors. Ey'd have to make sure eir suit was clean. Should ey iron it? Maybe ey should iron it. Later. For now, as it neared two, ey focused on making sure the door was locked and the lights were out before stumbling over to bed.

Ey flipped the screen down on eir rig to signal for it to go to sleep and wandered over to eir bed. There seemed to be no shaking Sasha and all of her talk of high school, gone these last eight years now, out of eir head. Even as ey climbed into eir narrow bed and burrowed beneath the covers against the chill of the night, ey was replaying memories from school. Scenes from the US. A worn out

film, dim and scattershot.

Honing and forging, honing and forging.

Ey and Sasha had tried dating early on. After a few weeks of it not going anywhere, they had both admitted that they had felt pressured into having a relationship, rather than actually wanting one. Good boys and girls fell in love with other good boys and girls, right? Pretended they didn't have sex. Went out to the movies.

The relationship petered out, rather than ending in some climactic fashion. They had continued the trend of going to movies, and later to live performances. They had never lost touch, at least.

Sasha had gone on to have a string of other relationships, some earnest and some not, some more intense than others — a string that remained unbroken, if tonight's conversation was any clue — but RJ had stopped there.

The intensity social pressure to date throughout high school was equaled only by RJ's total apathy toward the whole scene. Apathy or, often, antipathy. Ey'd felt the occasional twinge of romantic attraction, perhaps, but the expectation of sex that went along with the process so put em off that ey had instead buried emself in work.

Ey did well in some courses and not in others, but in the subjects that ey enjoyed, ey dumped all of eir effort. Huge gusts of energy that drove em forward.

Ey had started early on in working the school's older sound board in the theater Ey ran plays. Ey ran concerts. Ey ran assemblies and lectures and conferences, quickly earning the trust of the other tech crew and the staff and faculty. And then ey gained leadership. Prestige.

The various computer classes had captivated em as well, and for eir sixteenth birthday, eir parents had surprised em with the im-

plants needed for full interfacing with a rig. Or, well, “surprised”: eir father was an engineer and eir mother a fairly forward-thinking person, and they had promised em the procedure before university.

Honing and forging, honing and forging.

It was a straightforward procedure in an outpatient office, self-guided implants largely installing themselves. The worst had been the itching. It was bearable on eir hands and along eir spine, where the implants and exocortex breached the surface of eir skin, because at least ey could scratch, though ey had been cautioned not to. The NFC pads in eir forehead and the interferites embedded deeper — far, far deeper — led to an itch that no scratching would ever reach.

From there, sound and the interface had taken up all of eir energy, leaving little time to worry about any social stigma that went along with an aversion to romance. Ey was simply the nerdy sound kid who knew more about computers than the teachers.

It hadn't always been fun, of course, but by the ey quickly learned that the more ey put into the task, the more ey got out of it.

That ey had found furry in high school seemed almost a natural progression. Working and improving at the art of interfacing in a way that felt natural to em came just as natural to others on the 'net. Ey moved effortlessly through the Crown Pub and a few other choice spaces, slowly crafting the primary persona that ey used when interacting with others, the fennec fox known as AwDae.

It was then that ey and Sasha had really started connecting, for it was her that introduced em to the community. They started hanging out more, talking more, building a network of friends together. Where dating hadn't worked out for them, friendship grew in depth and breadth.

Honing and forging, honing and forging.

The forging of the virtual theater environment had culminated in a scholarship at a big name university out on the east coast. Immersive interactive theater technology. Forging into honing.

It meant leaving Sasha and a few other close friends behind along with eir family, but it also meant that ey would be at the forefront of a new tech. Something used in production. Films and live work, too.

The field had been so new that eir own studies at the university helped fuel the change in theater tech work. Eir dissertation, what was meant to be eir capstone project, was published and spread. Theaters around the world were using immersive tech.

Ey had continued to work at the university for a while. It was one of the few places around with both a theater and the hardware to back it up. Ey had considered continuing eir studies, but the draw of the theater was too heady, too alluring. Academia spelled a life of forging, work one of honing. Why deny one's base nature?

Honing and forging, honing and forging.

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

Eir parents had needed convincing. They were pleased, to be sure, but they London, so far away! Still in the western bloc, but so far.

Ey made eir promises that ey'd come and visit every year, and packed eir bags.

Burying emself deeper into the covers and the mattress, leaving enough room for Priscilla to join em later, RJ's thoughts alighted on

Cicero, on the lost.

Losing Cicero had been a shock. A disappearance, at first, and then it went on. Debarre hollering one night after getting in touch with Cice's family. Lost, lost, he was lost.

Getting lost was rare. Vanishingly so, even, with perhaps two dozen cases. Still, among those who were counted among the lost, all were heavy interfacers. It was a risk, everyone had assumed, just as was travel. Call it occupational hazard. Something could always happen. Something could always go wrong.

To lose someone so close, though, hit hard.

It was a reminder of just how much ey relied on the integration tech, not only for work, but for a large part of eir social life. Ey enjoyed the company of the troupe just fine. Troupe pub trips were a weekly affair, but eir heart lay among eir friends on the 'net. Eir friends being on the 'net meant more interfacing, and more interfacing meant more risk.

Eir tech was truly immersive, after all. It was a dissolution of the body. Disembodied in the truest sense.

It was becoming the room. It was a new sensory experience. No limbs, no torso, no face or eyes or ears. Or maybe all ears: ey became the room, feeling the way sound echoed or didn't, knowing the limits of the speakers in a deeply physical way. Mics peppering the walls a new sensory input. The wires nerves. The speakers muscles to flex. Instincts, reactions, and actions responding to whole systems of stimuli.

Perhaps that was why ey felt so at risk. They all were, of course, but to dissolve one's concept of a body at work, and then come home to warp the very same concept into that of a fox — no, a finely wrought amalgam of fox and self — felt perilously close to being

Qoheleth

lost, sometimes.

Honing and forging, honing and forging. Risk and reward.

Ey slept.

Dr Carter Ramirez — 2112

Carter rubbed her face into her hands, ground her palms against her eyes until she saw stars, slicked her hair back in a vain attempt to wrangle fly-away hair. It had been in a neat bun this morning.

She wasn't the last one left in the lab, but it had reached that point of the night where collaboration had stopped and everyone was butting their head against their own individual problems, toiling in silence. She folded her rig's screen down, sending it to sleep, socketing her tablet in next to it to charge.

It had also clearly reached the point of the night where she wouldn't be getting anything else done.

She felt out of her league. Everyone did, here on her team, but that didn't stop the fact from wearing on her. It's not that there wasn't any support from on high. There was. It's not that there wasn't anyone else trying. There definitely was.

It's that no one seemed to take it all that seriously. It was like addiction, or plane crashes, or suicide. Something to look at, to study long enough to say "Ah, *this* is happening now," and then set aside. Conversation-piece science.

People admitted that the phenomenon was there, but only in as much as it didn't affect that many people. A simple number to point to. See how small?

It was as though the brains of the Lost were just...elsewhere. Just dreaming on some level. There was no sense to it, though. No rhyme or reason to why such a thing would happen to the patient. Some of her team were pulling together all of the facts about the population that they could, from demographics to physical stature, searching for clues in the rig and the 'net itself. The neuroscientists were digging into what was going on within the brain, and what few scans they had from before someone had gotten lost. Their two pet lawyers — just law students on internship, both also versed in stats — were digging into the legal status of the lost as well as writing queries to procure patient medical histories.

And Carter was supposed to tie it together.

Or, that was her stated goal. The university medical center had only grudgingly provided space and funding for the project. An attempt to win some much-needed kudos, she suspected. Still, she was beginning to doubt just how much the UMC wanted her to succeed.

There had been an initial dataset dumped on her team, and a slow trickle as new cases came in, but it all felt so carefully curated. As manager, she had been met with hurdle after hurdle as soon as she started to venture beyond that. Colleagues assured her that all projects worked this way, but it was as though the advisory board had given her all the data that it was willing to give, and any more might...what? Put those kudos at risk?

Carter stood, stretched her back, winced. "Sorry, Sanders. I'm shattered. Catch you in the morning?"

"Mm," he replied. The interruption seemed to him of his physicality. He rubbed at his eyes and stretched his arms out, alternating between clenching his long fingers into fists and flexing them out wide. "Sounds good, Ramirez. Catch you then."

Carter gathered up her coat and her messenger bag, taking one last look around the lab, counting heads to see who would be staying later than her. Not too many. Sanders, one or two of his neuroscientists.

She swiped her way out of the wing and signed out at the front desk before making her way out into the night, bundling up in her coat.

At home, she scavenged a few pieces of salami stacked onto a couple of crackers, enough to keep her empty stomach from complaining through the night, and crumpled onto the couch in the shared living room. She left the lights off so that she wouldn't bother her flatmates. Or so she told herself. In truth, the darkness felt good. She could keep her eyes open and not be greeted with a tablet, a screen, a sim.

She sat long after finishing her snack, listening to her flatmates sleep, the sounds of the road outside, her own breathing. Sat, thinking in the dark of all the administrivia on tomorrow's docket.

Eventually, finding herself at as much of a dead end as she had at work, Carter ambled off to her room, changed from her work clothes into a comfortable pair of lounge pants and a night shirt, and crawled into bed.

RJ Brewster — 2112

RJ allowed emself to sleep in until near eleven that morning. Last night of dress rehearsal, might as well be well-rested.

Many other members of the troupe held part time jobs during the day, and ey ran a small consulting business of eir own. The more industries that dove into immersive tech, the more eir expertise was worth. Even so, with all that ey did, ey made enough to not have to worry about holding down more than the one full-time gig.

As it was, on days when ey had nighttime rehearsals, ey felt no compunctions about sleeping in. Nothing to be up for, only the 'net to keep them occupied in the mornings, little enough need to get moving.

It was Priscilla who eventually succeeded in waking em, butting her head against eir cheek and purring obscenely. The more insistent the cat became, the less able ey was to ignore her intrusions on eir admittedly banal dreams.

Fine. Trudge out of bed. Refill cat's water and food. Give the requisite morning pets to keep her happy. Scoop the litter box. Make self a pot of tea. Tea to shake the grogginess.

Ey sat at the tiny kitchen table, sipping from eir oversized mug and watching the late morning traffic from their window. Mostly business traffic, with the occasional mother with child in tow. Black

cabs. Scooters. Bikes.

By the time ey had finished eir first mug of tea, RJ had woken up enough to start on the prow. As with the night before, ey made sure that everything was in order before touching eir rig. Ey'd taken care of the cat, but ey still needed to eat, emself. So, remembering eir promise, ey set about making a small pot of rice. Fifteen minutes to cook, plenty enough time to finish another mug of tea.

RJ left most of the rice cooling in the pot and took for emself a small bowl of rice and leftover curry. The process of swiping eir hand over the controls of the stove had reminded em of the deck that Sasha had shared last night. There was no reason to think that some random person in London would have much to offer in the case of another person ey had never met getting lost. No reason not to try, though. Maybe there was something, some small insight that ey had that, which, when pooled with those of others, which would help in some way.

So many maybes. So many nights and perhapses.

Empty bowl in sink. Third and final cup of tea in the thick-walled mug. Good enough. Ey allowed emself to settle before eir rig at last.

As before, ey keyed in the password and rested eir hand onto the cradle for the two-factor. However, instead of delving in as ey had last night, ey flipped up the monitor and pulled the keyboard closer, swinging the hand rests to the side and the headrest up and out of the way. No need to go immersive, with work like this. Ey could just as easily work as a fox, of course, but it was so easy to lose track of time in there, and the night's rehearsal mustn't be forgotten.

"Let's see," ey murmured, taking a sip of tea before setting the mug down

Ey called up Sasha's deck.

Cicero Lost Nov 2108

Priv eyes only

See Debarre for ACLs

Dr. Carter Ramirez

specialist in lost

so. London

Mr/Mrs. Jackson

parents, can't get much more

dad in govt, mother stays home

And on it went for nearly a dozen cards. Each had its own cover embossed with a few lines of type, and each contained upwards of a gig of information culled from various sources, doubtless of varied quality.

RJ flipped through each, gleaning what ey could from a quick scan, before collapsing the deck once more and sitting back to think. Nothing in there seemed new. Nothing out of place. Ey had only received the deck last night, and yet nothing felt like it had been revealed, uncovered.

Ey had heard of the lost before, and the name Ramirez was commonly tied with the hundred or so cases that had cropped up over the years. The family...no, nothing to be gained there, at least not that had already been tried by Debarre. And again, there was the problem of being a random nobody in the UK: no one known, no one with power.

None of the rest of the cards carried any real significance to em.

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

A small notification slid down from the top of eir monitor, covering the upper right corner of the screen.

D — D — R

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

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

Cost: 1,000

Bounty: 280,000

RJ reached to swipe the notification away. Ey had very little stake in the uncomfortable alliance between Western Federation and Russian Bloc. Could care less, honestly, about taxes on things that ey'd never buy. Then something clicked within em, and ey halted eir motion.

Cicero.

Ey hastily shuffled back through the *Cicero Lost* deck until coming up with the 'recent net activity' card and pulled up the contents. It took a few moments to remember how to sort tabular data — database classes in high school, so long ago — but eventually, ey got the table sorted around the activity type. Ey scrolled rapidly through the list until ey got to the list of Direct Democracy Representative entries.

There was the connection. The one thing that RJ and Cicero had was their arguments over politics. Not just politics, but the worthi-

ness of the current political system in all of its facets. Arguments upon arguments upon arguments, fennec fox and tabby cat with their ceaseless arguments in the Crown Pub.

RJ was firmly on the left, but ey felt the representative democracy combined with the DDR was a pretty good system. It was fine. It worked.

Cicero, however, seemed to waver between socialism and anarchy, depending on factors such as how much he had had to drink and how angry he was at the most recent vote.

I certainly can't see broad shifts going my way, he had slurred on more than one occasion. *Least I can vote. Vote on every damn thing that comes my way.*

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

DDR votes
todo: process by record
1 month, 835 votes (!)

The icon in the upper left of the screen showing the deck twirled gracefully to show the sync.

Cicero had voted precisely how he had talked. On the surface, he was no different than any other leftist socialist on the DDR.

Along with the ability to vote on issues directly came the ability to comment — for a price. DDR votes didn't cost money, but they did cost credit. Up to 1,000 per. Credit gained by voting on cheaper issues, beginning with a few freebies in the tutorial.

What Cicero's records showed was that he was wealthy. Incredi-

bly wealthy. RJ had a few million DDR credits banked away in case a high value issue that ey felt strongly about cropped so that ey could make a comment. Unlike voting, commenting could cost upwards of five million credits. And one could buy their way to influence by flooding issues with comments.

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

RJ sat back in silence for a few moments before muttering, "Well, shit. Prisca, you don't suppose..."

Rather than finishing the thought out loud, ey dashed off a summary in the notes attached to the card.

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

The tea had gone cold long ago, but ey downed it all the same. Ey'd spent longer than planned plowing through the data the hard way and ey was risking being late if ey didn't start hustling.

It was nearing dusk by the time ey left, the suit newly brushed and ironed, the gloves newly washed, the RJ newly shaven.

On the way back to the tube station, ey stopped by a Thai counter and picked up a take-away container of noodles for the night. Ey made it halfway through the container before the rancid belch of station wind suggested ey pack it away before heading down to the platform.

Throughout the ride from Benthall Green to Oxford Circus, RJ's mind continued prowling through the data in Sasha and Debarre's deck. Ey kept mulling over that surreal number of credits. Just how much social currency was bound up within the pseudo currency of the DDR credit system?

Cicero had built himself up into a proper political player.

Dr Carter Ramirez — 2112

The morning's alarm startled her awake. Disorientation — when had she fallen asleep? There seemed to be no line delineating squirming under the covers and the buzz of her phone.

And here she had thought that the end of grad school had meant the end of six-hour nights of sleep.

Blairily, she pawed at her phone to swipe the alarm off. It was tempting to go back to sleep — *after all*, she mused, *the lost weren't going anywhere* — but she managed to at least kick her feet out from under the covers and sit up. Frizzed hair hung down around her face, shielding her from the world for just a little bit longer.

It was her phone, as always, that brought her back to reality. It's mere presence, even silent, was enough to draw her forth.

Ramirez

Another, this time with scans from before the incident.

Another furry, you don't think that's got to do with it,
do you :p

S

The brief, ungrammatical message from Sanders left her non-plussed until she'd put it together that he was talking about one

of the other subjects' histories, something about him being part of some fandom. Sanders didn't honestly believe that people who pretended to be animals on the 'net were somehow more predisposed to get lost than everyone else. And, to be honest, neither did she.

All the same, the thought stuck with her through two cups of coffee that morning, the first in the kitchen and the second out of a travel mug on the tube as she headed out towards the UMC campus.

Another furry, you don't think that's got to do with it.

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

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

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

Ioan Balan — 2305

Ioan#c1494bf found emself twenty meters in front of a squat house.

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

Smiling ruefully, ey walked up toward the house. Ey had eir own aesthetic. Might as well own it.

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 hand — 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." 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 whence it had come, leading the writer around and through a door in the glass.

The interior of the house was much as ey had seen, though as they moved through the space where that first 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 unexpectedly plush. None of the firm-cushioned, straight-lined variety ey 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. Most are familiar with those. 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 along with us. Someone out-clade There’s a lot of history in this, a lot that we’ve forgotten before uploading, 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 of this, yes, but I also want you to experience it and tell a coherent story after.”

“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, then looked up, smiling as the person Ioan had first seen 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. “Ioan, nice to meet you. Heard you were tired,” they said, walking off with their own mug.

Dear watched them go.

“Your partner?” Ioan asked. A moment of chitchat felt necessary. Ey grabbed eir mug eagerly. It smelled quite good.

The fox nodded, picked up its 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. I gave relationships a miss after...well, some stuff before uploading. For a long while, I forked to create lasting relationships rather than holding any myself. 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 perhaps 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 root instance, Michel Hadje, uploaded basically as soon as she could, and quickly became one of the loudest voices on the system. She campaigned for more advanced sensoria to be included."

"I've heard of Michel!" Ioan sat up straighter. "Usually in the context of the founders. You speak of her like she's someone else."

Dear nodded. *"Dispersionista habit. We're quite different from each other, by this point. If you get the chance to meet Michel — and you may — you will see the differences."*

"So what is Ode, then? Her old username?"

"No, an ode is 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 was speaking more slowly now, sounding less rehearsed. *"When the friend died, Michel memorized the poem. All of us up-tree instances do our best to keep it memorized as well. Really memorized, too, up in the forefront, up where we think about it, not stored in some ex-*

ocortex.”

“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 was largely baffled at it from the beginning. The sentiments are nice, but this friend was not a poet. When they died, when they killed themselves, it really tore her up. We all still think of them often.”

Ioan nodded, once more steering the conversation away from more sensitive topics. “It must be quite long, then.”

“It’s only 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 some complex set of instincts Ioan didn’t understand. “That’s *The Name* that we don’t share. The information that someone supposedly did share, I mean. Someone of the clade or close enough to it to know.”

Ioan’s brow furrowed, startled at the fox’s reaction, not to mention the concept of not sharing a name that was clearly important. “I see,” ey said 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 nodded, 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, lapped at its coffee. *"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.

RJ Brewster — 2112

RJ arrived at the theater early, the last few meters of the walk having been spent hastily finishing the carton of Thai. Carton and chopsticks wound up in the trash as ey swiped eir way into the theater.

“Sorry, Johansson, I’m here.”

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

“What? I- Oh.”

“Lot on your mind, kid?”

“Nah, I’m fine. I mean,” RJ frowned, squinted. Anything to get emself in the work mindset. “Yeah, sorry. Woke up early and spent a bunch of time researching. Guess my head’s still elsewhere, boss.”

“Well, alright,” Johansson rumbled. “So long as you get your head around work. Hey. More crew.”

RJ hustled into the theater and made eir way down to the pit where the mics had been stored. Ey handed them out to the actors who would be wearing them, ticking off the cheat-sheet to align proper mic to correct actor.

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

RJ exchanged cheery greetings with the lights lead as ey shrugged out of eir jacket, draping it over the back of the chair. Ey slipped eir hands carefully out of eir gloves. Contacts gleamed from eir digits, freshly polished and clean.

RJ settled into eir chair and delved in to greet the theater. It purred in recognition, brushed up against em. It stretch stretched and unlimbered. Eir hands rested lightly on the contacts in the cradles, forehead against the headrest, thoughts of Cicero and Debarre, of Sasha and the lost left back with eir body.

The first half of rehearsal went by without much trouble. Johansson had apparently highlighted a few areas of concern, so they began with those. From there, the cast has followed his lead, adjusting as needed per their dear leader's suggestions. RJ and Caitlin kept a script running so that they could keep up with the director and Sarai, the stage manager.

When the clock hit eight thirty, Johansson called for a break and informed everyone that they would be running through top to bottom after. Last chance for a full run-through.

RJ gave the purring theater some reassuring warmth and backed out of the connection, reveling in the snap of eir fingers pulling away from that slight magnetic grasp of the cradles. Ey wiped eir hands dry and flexed fingers to keep limber.

Ey spent the break walking around the theater and stage in one big, looping arc, simply listening. Hearing from the theater's perspective so often, it was easy to get wrapped in the omniscience of it all. Good, too, to hear the way that the ambient sound moved through the room, reflected off of walls and ceiling, died among the baffles. It would all be different with people in the seats, to be sure, but the acoustics of the space were beautiful on their own.

Johansson whistled piercingly. Back to work, back to the stage. Back to the booth and back to the contented and satiny-soft embrace of the theater for RJ.

It was around the end of the first act that RJ started having problems.

When one was delved in, one could always focus hard enough to feel the way their head felt against the headrest, or sense the way that their hands rested within the cradles of the grips. Trickier, sure, when one was as immersive as tech required. Bodies weren't a thing in that liminal space. Ey was as much the room as the room was itself. No forehead, no hands. No headrest or grips

By the time ey had brought house sound down in time for the curtain, RJ could feel a numbness creeping. A stealing of sensation. A non-feeling flowing slowly over emself from the base of eir neck outwards, stretching out along eir scalp, down eir arms, not-tickling along eir ribs.

Ey had been willing, desperately, to chalk it up to nerves or exhaustion. It had been such a long week. Thoughts of Cicero, doubtless cradled in some hospital creche: strictly disallowed but nonetheless teasing around the edges of consciousness.

Tired, yes. Exhausted. Yawns.

By the time ey couldn't feel the plastic of the headrest or the cradles beneath eir hands, no matter the desperation, ey began to panic.

Panic, yes. Just anxiety. Performances.

All the same, it was final dress. Ey would be able to head home and catch up on sleep. Drink some tea. Hot chocolate. Pet the cat. Whatever ey needed.

Need, yes. Baser than want. Imperatives.

By the second curtain, something was desperately wrong.

Ey hadn't missed any cues yet, but ey couldn't seem to figure out how to work eir 'voice'. That thing that wasn't talking. That subvocalization used to communicate with Caitlin Sarai Johansson anyone. The immersion-mouth to chat to talk to radio for help a non-entity non-thing non-here, gone, leaving em feeling exponentially more cut off from the rest of the theater as time went on.

Numb, yes. Yet strangely embodied. Strangely tangible. Strangely localized. Oh god oh god please help please help. The play. Ey had work. Ey had the theater. Ey had the room and the lines and time and space to manage. Ey had a home and a cat and Sasha and Debarre.

Had, yes.

It was the muzzle that was the kicker. The muzzle and the tail, which ey felt — any feeling a beacon in the storm of numbness which had long since enveloped em entire — with a piercing intensity. Felt, bordering on and then diving straight into pain.

Pull back, ey begged. Every bit of training begged. Every nerve begged, screamed. *A bug, a glitch, an error. Pull back oh god please pull back.*

Ey lifted eir hands — paws? — in a coarse, jerking motion which, along with the act of pulling eir head back from the contacts, led to em toppling over. There was no chair to catch em.

And that was when ey missed eir cue.

The curtain went down, the lights dimmed, and then, ringing clear, a thin giggle filled the auditorium. The lead laughing at a mis-step. A quiet joke to share at the pub later. No harm. Sound was off, right? Curtains would eat the sound.

“RJ,” Sarai whispered into the silence of the theater’s sim. “Stay on cue, bud.”

No answer, no apology, no acknowledgment that a note had been made. No signal.

“RJ?”

“What’s going on up there?” Johansson’s subvocalization rumbled through the director’s channel in the sim.

“Something’s wrong, boss, lemme back out and check up on RJ.”

“Hold places,” Johansson said aloud to the theater. The open channels from the actors’ mics carried a few quiet whispers in response. “Hold on, quiet please.”

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

Like the projector bulb’s heat burning through celluloid film, the third curtain had signified a drastic change. Slow enough to be observed, faster than ey could hope to avoid. The few tenuous touches on reality that held RJ into eir seat in the tech booth scorched and peeled away, acrid smoke stinging eir eyes. And the pain spiked.

RJ lay on a tile floor. Dirty. Yellow. Brown specks, dark enough to be black.

The tiles were completely regular, one foot on a side, obviously made of some synthetic material. Harder than linoleum, softer than stone. They were glued to a concrete foundation. No wasting time with grout, each tile butted up against the others to form a grid of thin, black lines showing where the dirt of hundreds of feet had been ground into the remaining seams. Thousands. Millions.

Ey couldn’t move yet, but ey could see that the world was

bounded. There was a thin plastic strip of molding around the edge of a wall. Above that, regular rectangles of blue. A wall.

“Something’s not right, boss. He’s totally unresponsive on the line.”

“Pull him, pull him! Hit the panic!”

Caitlin, who had backed out moments before, and Sarai both leaped to RJ’s sides and pulled eir hands up from the cradles, rocking em back from the headrest to lean against the back of the chair. All according to training.

Eir body flopped lifelessly against the cheap plastic mesh.

Caitlin slapped the small red button on the side of the rig, fingers coming away dusty. Below the desk, drives sparked to life and dumped the last thirty minutes of both sim and brain activity from the user.

“The hell?” Johansson growled, reaching in a thick pair of fingers to press against the side of the sound lead’s neck. “He’s got a pulse. Check his eyes, Sarai. Caitlin, call. Now.”

Shaking, Caitlin pulled her phone from her bag and struggled to unlock. She gave up, swiped to the emergency dialer, called out to emergency services.

“They’re rolled back, boss. Bloodshot, too.” Sarai tugged back the collar of RJ’s shirt, exposing eir exocortex’s simple color-coded readout, set at the base of eir neck. “Blue. What the hell...”

“Ey’s not jacked in, though,” Johansson said. A statement brooking no discussion. “Can’t be.”

“I think—” Sarai trailed off hoarsely, cleared her throat, tried again. “I mean, do you think ey’s lost?”

“Caitlin, what’s our status, girl?” Johansson didn’t wait for a response, throwing the door to the tech booth wide and shouting out

toward the stage, “Cut! Manually shut off your mics and take a seat where you are. Do not move. Emergency services will be here soon, and will record what they can.”

Lockers.

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

Tall, narrow lockers. Blue. Yellow tile floors. Thin tile glued to cool concrete. The scent, the very feel of the place.

AwDae struggled against crashing waves of panic. Struggled to make all of this information fit in eir head. Struggled to make it all fit in with the fact that ey was currently halfway between human and fox. A fennec fox dressed in a suit, laying on the floor of the central corridor of eir old high school.

“The hell?”

Chapter 2

Dr Carter Ramirez — 2112

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

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

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

“Sanders,” Carter said, voice stern. “I know how the project works. I know the data. There’s a lot of questions still left in the air. I’m not suggesting that getting lost is contagious or anything. We dismissed the virus aspect ages ago. I’m merely suggesting that we might find shared factors within a social realm as well as the physiological.”

Carter stood her ground. No sense paling under his glare. She

was lead of the research team, she could tell Sanders to do whatever she wanted him to. Or, well, strongly suggest. Hell, there was no reason for her not to. She was plugged into all of the teams that he was not privy to. He may have been lead of neurochem, but Carter was above basically everyone except the UMC itself, and whatever grantors were sponsoring the project.

Eventually, he caved, shrugged, turned his back on Carter. He nodded towards his own team.

“Look, Sanders,” Carter said, following after. “You’re a fantastic doctor, and I really respect that, I really do. Not trying to impugn that or anything, and I’m not pulling labor away from the neurochem team. I’m merely suggesting that we add a sociological aspect to our attack here.”

He held up his hands in surrender, then headed for the coffee station.

Carter rolled her eyes and let him go. She turned back to the remaining team. “We’ve got a hunch on the social front. Or, I do, but I think it’s worth following. There’s a couple patients who are involved in the a fandom and there’s distinct ties between them. They’re loose ties, sure, not everyone knows everyone else, but they *are* there.”

They nodded. Some looked unconvinced, but none hostile.

“Let’s time-box half a day to chase down these ties and see just where they lead. If they lead nowhere, fine. If we can find a way to tie them together, then we dig into all the ways that the web ramifies.” She grinned in a way she hoped was disarming. “Worst case, half a day is spent tracing along the ’net, but best case, we find a way to tie these cases together that lets us predict — and then maybe interrupt — future cases. Got it? Catch you at lunch.”

Carter sighed. Speeches. Hell of a start to the day. She collapsed into her desk chair, closing her eyes to collect her thoughts.

Rather than sequester herself in an office, she had taken a desk among the team. Four foot cube walls separating her from her neighbors. They were made of glass. Token walls rather than real ones. Not that there was much room for an office in the repurposed classroom. All the same, the deliberate attitude with which she had chosen to join everyone in equal conditions had endeared her to the more stubborn among the crew.

On the other hand, the lawyers-cum-statisticians were badly out of their element. Thankfully they had their implants and were able to spend most of their time in the office sim.

All the same she wished for an office, if only for the door. A nice, thick, hardwood door. One with a solid core so that she could voice her ideas. Or scream.

Sometimes she just needed the ability to put things into words. No matter how often she tried to set things down in the notes on her phone, she always felt hampered by the relatively small screen and her clumsy thumbs. Neither had she gone full immersive-on-the-go yet. Something about that glassy-eyed stare, the silly headband, the controllers gripped like walking weights, packed full of electronics, set her teeth on edge.

At least she had a private corner in sim.

She delved in rather than work on a tablet or screen. *One scream*, she promised herself. *Then I'll organize shit.*

Once she left her office area, Carter's chosen workspace, her 'desk', was totally black. Not the complete blackness of unseeing, but sort of vaguely luminescent darkness of *Eigengrau*, as if wherever she looked, she saw the faint light of non-seeing. It was black

enough to be easy on the eyes almost by definition. At least, such as they were in the sim. Black without being unnerving.

Scattered throughout the space were decks. Decks upon decks.

Each was a point of light. A white rectangle with just enough depth to give the impression of being several cards stacked on top of each other but no more. Each was surrounded by a dim halo that dispelled the darkness. If she were to engage with a deck, it would fill her vision almost to the periphery with that fine velum paper. Almost, but not quite: the non-black provided a border and seemed to shine, in its own non-light way, through the paper. From there, she would be able to explore and expand that portion of the project at will.

The decks themselves were organized into groups, surrounded by bright lines of white string — literally string; Carter had chosen cotton string as her group delimiter. Decks within groups were linked by string, and many of these groups in turn were related to one another with more intangible threads.

She was as a ghost in this. A non-being. A being of nots. A gesture from her non-hand would show the whole setup from the top. The mind, ever attracted to a two dimensional representation, sometimes appreciated this aspect. The mind, ever attracted to the *here-ness* of space appreciated walking through the sim just as much.

Even with perspective in play, the scientists and lawyers working the project had tended to alternate between the aerial view and the interactive view, with the cards positioned at chest level throughout the sim.

Everyone's view of the sim was different, in its own way. Sanders, she knew, preferred an oak-paneled room with dark green carpet, a facsimile of luxury with each of the grouping lines drawn

out in finest silver. Others preferred pencil sketches, harsh angles, subdued colors on a dim background, or even more abstract, textual interfaces. So long as the concepts of decks and spatiality were maintained, it was up to the individual.

Cards had their ACLs, too. Some were visible only to the individual. Some were visible to everyone, but only on the surface, with details invisible to others. The vast majority were visible to everyone, completely open.

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

From there, she began creating sub-groupings. For cases. For leads. On and on. For the “cases” group, she tapped a few of the case decks to make symbolic links, drawing lines of cotton twine which she dropped in.

Two were positioned at the top of the list:

Patient aca973d7

M — 2086-01-28

Lost: 2108-11-08

Patient 0224ebe8

X — 2084-05-09

Lost: 2108-12-04

Carter connected these two cards with fine thread. Hanging pendant from that, she created a metadata card, more tag than card:

Possible acquaintances

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

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

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

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

One by one, the ten techs pulled back from their workstations and ambled, glassy-eyed, to the counter where the coffee lay. Carter suppressed a smile: a horde of zombies in various states of disarray drawn to caffeine. It'd be nice, but over the months they had spent on the project, the team had settled into a comfortable ritual of meetings over coffee. The habit remained unbroken.

"So," she started, once everyone was gathered around and tead-and-coffeed.

Silence. Sanders wouldn't meet her gaze.

Finally, she caved and broke down her thoughts. "Time-box is over. I think we got a bunch of good stuff done in a few hours. There's definitely connections there. We've got a good number of them among the cases we have at our hands, but there's precious little data on why those connections exist. We've got a few furries, a few 'net addicts — well, more than a few — and we've got a whole lot of DDR junkies. None of those point to anything that would lead people to getting lost."

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

Another voice piped up, "And the correlation on the neurochem side is extremely low. Almost non-existent."

Sanders smirked down to his coffee mug before hiding the expression with a sip.

"No, there's no doubt about that." Carter sighed, shrugged, "So, again, time-box is over. What do you think? Is this line of thought worth pursuing? Plus-one, minus-one, zero. Sanders?"

"Minus-one." The response was immediate.

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

"Zero."

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

"We're left at two, then."

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

"Hardly universal, so let's triage. Can I get one from neuro, one

from stats and history, and would one of the law team be willing to devote an hour a day to helping us out? Just to run stuff by as we come up with leads.”

If you come up with leads, was written on Sanders’ face. She ignored it.

Prakash Das from the neurochem team raised his hand, and Avery from statistics and history volunteered. One of the lawyers, Sandra, gave a noncommittal shrug and promised some of her time, saying, “We’re on shaky legal ground, I think, but we can probably keep it in check.”

“Alright. Let’s sync up, you three.” Carter smiled toward the rest of the group, “Not leaving you guys behind. One-on-ones and daily standups will continue at the usual times. We’ll set another time-box of—” She checked her phone. “Three days, after which we’ll reconvene and vote again.”

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

RJ Brewster — 2112

AwDae slowly picked emself up off of the floor, staggering to eir feet.

Ey was standing, swaying, in the middle of a long row of lockers. And then ey was sitting again. Ey didn't feel weak, but the shock of being in the tech booth and theater sim, and then suddenly being back in high school was taking its toll on eir wits.

Ey swiped eir paw from left to right in front of emself to bring up the usual menu. Only, no menu came up. There was nothing in this sim, if sim it was. No global menu, no ACLs, no control.

Panic crested again.

AwDae felt behind emself, reaching for that sense of reality outside of the sim, that cool breeze of the tangible that should be at eir back. It was there. Ey could feel it. A cool breath of air on the back of eir neck, but muffled. There was something keeping em from reaching for it, touching it. A thin barrier. A membrane. A sheet of keeping em trapped within the sim.

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

Throughout all of the practice runs, the endless training on the rig that had gone into eir education, that feeling had only come up a scant handful of times. It was the feeling of being forcibly disconnected from the rig through the manual expedient of removing the

contacts from the cradles in which they rested. It was the shock of being brought to reality from out of a sim with no disconnection. It was the rush of eir exocortex dumping its core. It was panic made tangible, halfway between electricity and the feeling of missing one's step on the last stair.

With that, AwDae should've found emself back in the tech booth, trying to figure out what strange loop the theater had gotten itself into that would have frozen eir rig.

The lockers never wavered, though, and now ey found emself stuck in eir old high school school with no contact to the world outside of whatever this place was.

Ey screamed.

Ey didn't know how long ey screamed, how many times. Ey didn't know how long ey cried or beat eir fists against the lockers. Ey didn't know where ey was.

Lost.

Lost like so many others.

Lost like Cicero.

Or perhaps Aeneas, Odysseus.

Eventually, ey cried emself out. Eventually, eir tail went numb and eir feet fell asleep.

Nothing for it. Ey wobbled to eir feet, kicked off ill-fitting shoes, and began to trudge.

Ey walked slowly down the halls, memories coming back in a wash. Realities blurred effortlessly. Realities of the embodied world. Realities of online life.

Nails on feetpaws clicking against the tile, following the math wing to the student center, a cavernous space that acted as a terminus for all of the different hallways, each hosting a different subject.

They spread away from the cavernous room like limbs, a giant insect clutching at the earth.

Neither halls nor hub had ever seen a fox. They were supposed to be home to students. To students and teachers and staff. To humans. To anyone, not some lone half-beast.

Inside the student center, AwDae sat down and tried to reach towards reality once more. Ey sagged, rolling onto eir side in eir increasingly frustrated attempts to pull away from the contacts, though that shock of pain suggested those in reality had pulled em away.

Frustration, anger, fear. Hopelessness. Terror. All simmered within em, working up to a boil as ey tried increasingly harder.

Finally, ey gave up and, hastily brushing at the tears staining eir cheeks, slipped out of eir suit jacket as well. Why keep it?

Ey swished eir tail to the side, and lay flat on eir back on the cool terrazzo floor. Ey pulled eir suit jacket up over eir face and buried eir muzzle in the soft lining. With paws holding the cloth to eir face, ey deliberately let the tears come. Willed them too. Forced. Screamed and begged. Anything for release from the tension building up.

It was a few minutes before ey peeled the coat from eir face and stood back up once more. Exhausted, ey slipped eir arms back into the sleeves of the coat, letting it drape awkwardly from eir shoulders, unbuttoned, fill fitting around eir slim frame. Ey bent down to roll up the cuffs of eir slacks to keep them from bothering eir feet.

It was in the middle of the second cuff that ey realized the absurdity of the motion. In the theater sim, ey didn't have a body, and when ey 'woke' in eir normal sim, ey was dressed only in the clothes ey had on when ey went to bed. Usually nothing. Ey disrobed before disconnecting more out of habit than anything.

Why was ey still in eir tux? Did ey even have a tux in eir wardrobe?

AwDae puzzled over this for a moment longer before completing the act. Something to look into later. For now, ey needed to find eir way out. Find eir way back out. Or, failing that, at least one thing ey could complete. One task to complete. Something to make em feel less powerless in the face of it all.

The sim was startlingly complete.

Perhaps. Ey had been in London a few years, and before that, on the coast at university. Was it complete? Was it accurate? Despair lay around the corner: the thought that the chances of em being able to compare the sim and reality vanishingly small.

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

AwDae's curiosity won out. y had made eir way back to the school's auditorium. It was exactly as ey had left it all those years ago. Trudging up the few steps toward the entrance, ey feared that it would be locked. Missing. Somehow erased from existance, such that it had never been there in the first place.

But the door swung easily beneath eir paw and eir nails clicked against the lower portion of the sound guard in the doorway, leading em into a dimly lit auditorium.

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

AwDae brushed eir fingerpads along the lower lip of the sound-board. The screws were exactly where ey remembered.

Swishing eir tail out of the way to, ey sat on the stool in front of

it. Ey reached a paw up past the master sliders, just around to the back of the board, where ey found the power switch.

Click.

Nothing happened, so ey reached a little further back, finding the power strip for the booth itself, and toggled the switch on that. The board let out a satisfying pop of recognition as it came to life. The brief surge of power echoed throughout the room as speakers awoke. The theater uncoiled, purred to em, just as the one back in London had done...what? Three hours back? Five?

Ey fumbled with the booth light, finding the ancient dial switch to wash the unlit portions of the booth in lazy red light. Light illuminated a thin layer of dust covering the board and booth in a matte coating, and countless motes already disturbed. The only breaks in the coating were where eir fingers had brushed the dust away, leaving black slicks.

So familiar. So many dreams. Dreams of flawless performances of breathtaking beauty. Nightmares of feedback and missing equipment.

Acting on a dream, ey slowly brought the master volume up to the spot ey still remembered from so long ago, turned the gain to mid on mic one, and brought the slider up slowly.

Blinked.

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

That doesn't mean anything, AwDae thought. Could be anything plugged into the snakehead in the pit. A line with a powered mic, a wireless receiver. Hell, a fault in the system.

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

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

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

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

A note, though. Doubly weird. The paper didn't act like a normal vcard. No menu, no ACLs ey could sense. And yet the closer ey looked at the paper, the more the data seemed to unfold, fractally nested and apparently infinitely deep.

Ey blinked, and the moment passed. The note once more contained only tabulated transactions.

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

Ioan Balan — 2305

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 or experience later. Half duplex, though. Would be an actual conversation.

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

"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 she 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. It began with -----BEGIN AES BLOCK----- followed by thousands of apparently random letters, numbers, and punctuation.

"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 she figured it's probably

from one of us."

"You don't sound convinced, yourself."

"I'm not. You must understand that this isn't something any of the clade wants known. It's just a name, yes, but it is important to us in a way that is hard to overstate." Dear sighed. "Much of the clade is of the opinion that, if we could simply wipe the Name from our minds, we would."

"You're right in that I probably can't understand the importance here." Ioan frowned. "I'm trying to square your use of the poet's work in your very names with your desire to forget the Name itself."

"Names bear power."

"A memorial, then?" Ey hastened to add, "Sorry. It's probably not my place to understand. We can drop it for now."

"Yes. A memorial." The fox's shoulders slumped. "Let's come back to it later. I don't want to get too distracted now. Still, we will have to speak more on this soon. It would be good for you to have a more complete picture."

Ioan nodded. "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 this is part 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 in its own right."

“Interesting?” Ioan asked.

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

“Ah. Good point. I’ll do some digging on old cryptography, too, and see what all’s out there. Keep in touch, yeah?”

“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.

RJ Brewster — 2112

The pit revealed little.

There were twenty boxes set on a table in front of the snakehead. Twenty receivers for wireless mics. Twenty cables neatly velcroed together into a bundle, contracting from the boxes arcing catenary toward the dull grey plug-box. From there, the cables were reduced to a four-by-five grid. The cables arched up above the snakehead before plunging into it, XLR heads buried in XLR nests.

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

"Great," AwDae murmured. "That leaves only half of the school to search."

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

And what?

There would be the mic, and ey would still be stuck in some par-

ody of a nightmare. All dressed up for the high school performance and here, see? The auditorium is completely empty.

The fox barked a laugh at how many cliches littered the situation. Turning away from the receivers, ey rested eir weight against the edge of the table on which they were placed. Ey leaned a moment, then hiked eir backside up onto the familiar surface, relishing the squeak of stressed metal from eir sudden burden.

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

Ey stopped.

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

But neither did the sound bounce back endlessly like an echo chamber.

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

And yet, there was that slight echo of the squeaking of the table.

An idea. A crazy one, sure, but by this point with despair nipping at eir heels, a crazy idea was better than none.

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

Ey hopped back off the table and began to pace.

The squeal of feedback in an audio system is an emergent behavior, and even those who have not heard it before know immediately that something is wrong when it crops up. It begins a quiet hum in the background, builds exponentially.

It doesn't take long before it can be understood as something originating in the system, rather than coming from the speaker or performer. From there, it builds on itself, feeding back into itself, until it quickly overwhelms all sound coming into it. Rises, crescendos. Hearing and speaker damage equally likely if left unchecked.

Similar, in an upside-down sort of way, to the echo that AwDae had caused making the table squeak beneath eir weight. Sound was picked up by the microphone, transmitted through the sound board, then out into the room. Amplified, though, through the speakers.

If the microphone started to pick up sound from the speakers, though — and sound was sound, the mic cared not where it came from — that sound would loop through the board once more.

A feedback loop. It would continue to build through further and further iterations, until the auditorium was filled with a roar of the one pitch the microphone had first locked onto.

Dread and dire. Cursed. An eternal struggle.

Obviously, microphones were still in use. They hadn't been abandoned because of the loop, since there were plenty of ways around feedback.

One could angle speakers toward the audience, rather than the

stage. Bodies were notoriously bad reflectors of sound. Part of what made the stage so acoustically dead, that. One could also turn down the monitor speakers facing the stage, but that was cruel to one's performers. One could turn down amplification, but that defeated the purpose.

The usual solution, then, was gain.

The simple adjustment was given a knob at the very top of the sound board governing the sensitivity of the mic. At the top, befitting its importance in the setup.

Turn the gain all the way down, and the mic was a dumb lump of metal and plastic. Turn it all the way up, and the mic picked up everything from the movement of the air to the slight hiss of the live sound system. Almost instant feedback.

AwDae turned up the gain almost to the point of feedback. If ey could make noise in various points throughout the auditorium, maybe it'd get picked up. The more feedback ey generated, the more sound the mic was picking up. The more sound it was picking up, the closer ey was to it.

Eir possible locations for the mic hadn't been reduced. It was still half the school, but eir chances would go up. If the mic was not in the auditorium, ey could turn the main system up and start venturing further afield. Leave a door open, let the mic hear. Let em hear the theater ring like a bell in turn.

Riddles. Triply weird.

AwDae felt stupid. Insulted. Trapped for life and still solving riddles. Hopelessness dimmed eir vision.

Ey shook eir head, ears laid flat. "At least it's something."

Ioan Balan — 2305

Dear,

While I'm sure that your clade, with the resources and minds at its disposal, has already decrypted the AES message, I have only just managed the feat today. It was at least somewhat easier once I learned a bit more about the history of the whole affair.

You say that you all like old things, so perhaps you will be delighted to learn what was inside if you have not already. Here is the message in full:

Odists,

You know me. I will not tell you how, and I will not tell you why this secrecy is in place. Not yet. For now, though, you may refer to me as Qoheleth, or, at need, Hebel.

I am sorry for having said — or, rather, written — The Name, but not too sorry. I need to get your attention. There is something serious going on, and I need your focused attention.

Let's meet, yes?

-----BEGIN RSA PRIVATE KEY-----

(There follows another block of gibberish similar to the first.)

-----END RSA PRIVATE KEY-----

Your move, by the way:

□2 □8 □Q □8 □9 □Q □2 □A □4 □4 □3 □A □J □2 □7 □5
□7 □9 □5 □10 □7 AX □10 □3 □4 □8 □9 □6 □4 □J □K □10
□J BX □5 □K □J □8 □3 □9 □2 □A □Q □A □6 □K □5 □7
□Q □10 □6 □6 □3 □K

There are several things of interest here. I'm sure you'll want to talk this all through, but as I will inevitably be writing this all down in the end, I figured I would also get my thoughts down on paper now.

The passphrase for this encrypted message was *kemmer*. If the other Odists figured it out, I would be curious to see what they make of it, just as I'm curious as to your thoughts. Perhaps later. For now, there's a bit of story, here.

I did not originally find the passphrase, as the letter itself was decrypted through known weaknesses. None of the tools that I was able to find would (could?) give me the key, since all of the attacks were direct.

Instead, I found the passphrase by accident while doing a search on some of the contents of the letter. Notably, I searched on *Qoheleth*, and then *Hebel* in relation to that name. There's lots of juicy stuff here. *Qoheleth* is more title than name, and is used in a book in both the Christian and the Jewish bibles. Given the author's reference to the Hebrew word, I've been restricting myself to searches surrounding the Tanakh. I should add that, in the Tanakh, the book is called by the same name, while in the Christian bible, it is called *Ecclesiastes*.

Qoheleth can mean ‘teacher’, but also ‘gatherer’ or ‘director of the assembled’. This last one, I suppose, fits in with their suggestion that the clade meet up. Perhaps all together? It is also the reference for *Ecclesiastes*, that is, ‘relating to the church’.

Hebel, in this case, appears to be an approximation of what is usually spelled *havél*, which translates to ‘vapor’, but is also interpreted as ‘vanity’ or, when paired with an intensifier of sorts, ‘meaningless’. For instance, the book begins:

havél havalím ’amár kohélet havél havalím hakól hável.

Which is:

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”

Bleak, no?

The entire book is quite fascinating, and the tone seems to waver between this nihilism (I hesitate to say hopelessness, as hope does not seem to be a factor in play here) and education, with *Qoheleth* using their past experiences and meditations to offer instruction on how to live a full life.

Back to the passphrase. I have found several references to the term *kemmer*, with the primary source being an ancient speculative novel by the name *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin. I forked and read this while investigating the Tanakh, and the book seems to surround the sociopolitical ramifications of a subspecies of humans which is androgynous most of the time, but which undergoes a biological process (*kemmer*) wherein they settle into one of two physiological sexes for the purposes of sex and procreation.

I was not able to deduce anything concrete out of this term, because I cannot tell where it is directed. While I do not presume to know The Name (nor do I wish to!), one possibility is that it refers to the author of the Ode. Another is that it refers to some aspect of the Ode clade itself. You are perhaps uniquely positioned to answer this, as I don't imagine the entirety of the Ode clade are agender foxes. A third possibility is that the term may apply to Qoheleth. A fourth is that it relates to the mystery at hand in some way. And, of course, it could be a bit of subtext that is meaningless (hah) in this case and does not apply beyond being a neat word.

That said, I'm not a fan of the final interpretation, as upon further digging, I came across the line "The key word is kemmer, that's what yo' ass need" in an equally ancient song ("Air 'em out" by clipping. [sic]), which was too tight a coincidence to pass up. The annotated lyrics to that song, in turn, were more packed with references and discursion than this letter, many of which refer to old science fiction books and movies. This verse in particular features heavy references to *The Left Hand of Darkness*, including the phrase 'Ansible' — which shows up in other books as well — and, in turn, shows up in some of our technology: the communication system by which uploads are sent from Earth to the sim-system here at the L5 point is called 'Ansible'. Given this additional set of coincidences, I've compiled a list of further references in this song for research down the line.

At this point, I have only addressed the encryption passphrase and the salutation of the message! You must forgive me for the discursive nature of this letter. There are many layers at play, here, and I believe this is intentional on the part of the author. As you mentioned, amanuenses form a collection of semiotic processes relating

to the task they are participating in. I've taken this to heart and am amassing documents surrounding the subtext as well as the text.

The second paragraph of the letter I would like to discuss with you in person, as I think that there is context here that may well be specific to your clade. I cannot imagine what might be so serious.

After that paragraph comes another block of text. Rather than being an encrypted message, however, it is the private key used for the RSA cryptosystem. It is an asymmetric cipher, which means that there is out there somewhere a corresponding public key. RSA can be used for many things, but that we were given the private key in this case makes me think that this will be used to either decrypt or otherwise access information down the line. Before you ask, yes, there is a passphrase involved with this. However, I have not yet figured out how to extract that from the noise yet. Cryptography is intriguing, but much of it is over my head, so I am relying on off-the-shelf solutions.

Finally, after the key block, we get a deck listing for standard deck of playing cards. I am assuming, here, that the cards labeled AX and BX are jokers, though I have not seen them differentiated as such in the past. I am, frankly, at a loss when it comes to this section, so all I can offer are some thoughts on subtext.

"Your move, by the way" implies two things. First, it implies that there is some sort of ongoing game going on between Qoheleth and the clade. This strikes me as strange, and I cannot put my finger on why. It is not that you do not seem the type to play games, as you seem playful enough to me. Perhaps it's that the letter begins with riddles about the true identity of Qoheleth, yet any ongoing game (and such a weird way to provide it!) would perforce give away that identity immediately.

The second implication is broader, and consequently more of a hunch on my part: this is a very casual thing to say to someone. For one, to have a non sequitur of a postscript on a letter that seems very focused is a strange thing to do. It's the type of thing you might do when sending a friendly letter to someone rather than a riddle of a message (I will admit, I'm considering what postscript I leave at the end of this letter now). The tone also differs from the remainder of the letter. It is familiar and friendly. The only thing that is even remotely close being "Let's meet, yes?", and even that feels more formal.

So, one question answered and several more raised. I will continue my investigations and keep you in the loop on those. I hope to hear from you soon — I know I shall.

All my best,

Ioan Balan

PS - In engaging with this project, my searches and purchases on the exchange are shaping my reputation quite strangely. #Tracker has received several queries for future projects surrounding both novel forms of encryption and a few requests for historical analyses on speculative fiction. Ey has turned down all of the former and seriously considered all of the latter — and, ey wishes you to know, places the blame for this solely on your shoulders.

Dr Carter Ramirez — 2112

“Avery. What’s up?”

The ping had sounded in Carter’s ears like a soft bell, and the faint outline of a door had appeared at the periphery of her vision. Someone had requested a meeting. After a moment of dictating a note to herself for when she got back, she made her way through the door. One of the stats-and-history folks stood, waiting with arms crossed, in the private space.

“Running up against a bit of a snag, Dr. Ramirez,” they said. “This new patient, uh...0224ebe8?”

“What about them?”

“Well, I’m getting some doubled records. Weird things are duplicated.”

“Wait, duplicated?”

“Yeah. We’ve got some records with a different gender marker on them and no pronouns.” They looked thoughtful. “I ran into a bit of that when I changed everything over, myself, but the process changed across all of my past records, too.”

Carter frowned. “So e8 changed their marker and pronouns officially, but you’re seeing duplicate records under a different one?”

“Mmhm. I was wondering, do we have any location data on them?”

“Not really, no. You’ve got all the same data I do. Most have been redacted.”

“I figured, yeah, but wanted to ask. I just know some friends back in America ran into similar, too. Some ancient conglomerate or something holding onto old records or not updating their systems or whatever, so I was wondering if e8 was over there.”

Carter shrugged. “I don’t really know. That sort of thing is scrubbed before we get the cases. I’m actually surprised the files weren’t normalized before we got them.”

Avery laughed. “We’re one of the big three, so of course it’s all extra difficult.” Carter must have looked nonplussed, as Avery continued, “Banking, government, and healthcare. Ask any one of the big three to adopt to social change, and you’ll get eighteen different reasons why it’s impossible to update their systems.”

“Fair enough. So they have two markers and no pronouns.”

“Well, ey has two markers, X and M, but only the one set of pronouns. None listed on the records with the M marker.”

“Is this going to be much of a problem?”

“Don’t think so,” Avery said thoughtfully. “The records are complete so long as we take both sets into account. You might want to run it by Sandra, though, is the thing. I don’t know if us knowing that this change occurred is too much information for us to have. Legally, I mean.”

Carter knit her brow. “And there’s the snag.”

Avery nodded.

“Well, hopefully not.” Carter leaned against the wall and thought for a moment, then asked, “What can we do with this information, anyway? We’ve seen a pretty good spread across gender markers with our set of cases, do you think this’ll change anything?”

“I don’t know. The friends back in America who ran into this were all ones that made the change later in life. The younger you are when you change markers and such, the easier it is because the less of a record you have to change. It’s kind of like you’re burdened with a marker from birth, and the longer you go before changing it, the heavier the burden gets.”

“And they had a big one?”

“Not so big, all told, but it’s enough that all of eir records from when ey got eir implants are under a different marker.”

Carter nodded.

“From a history standpoint, that also means that eir marketing footprint takes something of a hard left at one point.”

“When th—” Carter backtracked. “When ey changed eir marker?”

It was Avery’s turn to nod.

“So we’ve got someone who’s advertised to with a masculine marker, then with a neutral marker—”

“And ey seemed to have given the whole romance thing a miss, too. Eir marketing footprint is mostly just rig gear and furry stuff. It’s like they slipped through filters unnoticed.”

“Well, if you can’t sell em sex, what’s left to sell?” Carter laughed.

“Oh, plenty, I assure you. Just that, pushing nine billion, advertisers mostly rely on larger demographics. GQ folks and asexuals aren’t broad enough segments to bother wasting ads on. Granted this is only going by the transparency reports. There’s all sorts of weird guerrilla marketing going on these days.”

“Yeah, fair enough. Any similarities with our other furry?”

Avery shook their head. They swiped their hand to the side to

bring up a snippet of desktop, dug through a few decks of vcards. “Being a furry seems to be the big thing they have in common. e8 is X, d7 is M. e8 is single and not looking, d7 is in a long distance relationship. d7 is almost a parody of a DDR junkie, e8 has almost no...well, hold on.”

Carter waited.

“Looks like ey were prodding around the DDR spaces a few hours before the event.” Avery had that far-away look to their eyes that one got while digging through data on cards. They shook their head to clear their vision, smiled to Carter. “Sorry, looks like I’ve got a bit of work ahead of me on that end. Any thoughts on the snag?”

“No, carry on as you were, I think. Sandra will keep an eye on it and let us know if we’re at risk of overstepping our bounds.”

Avery nodded and stepped back out of the meeting cubicle.

Back in the sim proper, Carter watched as the cards surrounding 0224ebe8 began to sift into two piles as the shadowy form that must be Avery worked. White cotton thread began to string itself into two groups, followed by the tags ‘0224ebe8 (M)’ in one and ‘0224ebe8 (X)’ in the other.

After a few minutes, she paced back to her constellation of decks. On a hunch, she created a small grouping in her area and labeled it “DDR Activity Pre-Event”. She began looping in relevant cards from both 0224ebe8 and aca973d7.

There was a soft *ding* within the sim, and a wave of shadowy heads looked up, Carter’s included.

Directly above them in the middle of the ‘ceiling’ was the current time in faintly luminescent letters. As always, they would look different for each member; for Carter, traced out in fine cotton string was the ‘12:00’ that indicated lunch.

Carter's vision began to dim. She backed out before the ominously cheery message instructing her to stretch her legs urged her to do so. University policy stated employees should work in a sim no longer than five hours in a row without fully backing out, so when she pulled back from her rig, she saw everyone else doing the same.

Most of the team gathered around the fridge and microwave by the coffee station to collect their lunches. She hadn't had the time or energy this morning. Lunch out it was.

At least she wouldn't be alone. There a few folks who made their way across the street from the campus building to the shops, hunting falafel or curry. She put on her best chummy face and tagged along with. The group chatted, inevitably but amiably, about work, comparing notes on the cases they were focusing on.

The group — three of them, with Carter — decided on a small Vietnamese place nearby. It would be a long lunch, with the wait and all, but she was promised that the food was amazing. Besides: Friday. Even the boss can enjoy a lunch every now and then.

Standing outside as they waited on a table, they made an obvious target for the tabloid sellers. They were wandering a little further than usual from the tube station entrance today, and the restaurant hadn't noticed them yet to shoo them off.

Carter rolled her eyes when Prakash bought a copy.

"Hey, don't look at me like that. I promise I read it for the laughs," he said.

Carter shrugged, "It's less about why you reading it, and more who you're giving money..."

Prakash and Aiden stood in silence, eyes on Carter. They exchanged glances before Prakash broke in, "Hey boss, you doing okay?"

“Can I see that?” She didn’t wait for an answer before she snatched the flimsy paper from his hands.

Soho Theatre Mourns Lost Tech

RJ Brewster was the pride of the Soho Theatre Troupe’s tech department.

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

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

The STT promises that productions will go on as planned, with back-up techs running the sound system.

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

Carter let the paper droop. Aiden retrieved it before it was closed completely, opening to the page where she had been reading.

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

She shook her head. “Not a word. Not to me, at least. Maybe PR turned the interview down.”

Prakash read over Aiden’s shoulder. “Do you think we could go see em? We’re with UCL. Maybe we could–”

He fell silent at a look from Carter. She spoke carefully, voice carrying the weight of a prepared statement. “Ey’s in good hands. Trust the doctors on this. We’ll receive all relevant info from them. Any contact with a patient may introduce bias in the study.”

Aiden frowned. “We shouldn’t have this.”

“No, we shouldn’t.”

He quickly balled up the tabloid and, finding no rubbish bins nearby, set it on the restaurant’s outside windowsill. Researchers were as jealous of their data as the lawyers were of patient privacy. Keeping the tabloid would only be a risk.

“But what about the theater troupe?” Prakash asked.

Carter caught herself in the act of shaking her head, turned instead toward the restaurant. She tilted her head back and let her eyes trace the sharp contrast between the gutters of the building and the steel-gray sky, seeing neither.

“We can’t,” she finally murmured. “Same risk of bias.”

A safe answer. A rote one. A required one. The legal aspect was plain, the ethics clear. If she wanted to learn anything from the doctors treating this RJ or the Troupe, she’d have to file a request, wait for the ethics board, wait again for the lawyers, and even then, even if she succeeded, she would only be able to write a questionnaire for them to fill out.

And yet here, a half hour tube ride away, was a social connection. The very thing she wanted most to understand.

Qoheleth

She was distracted, thankfully, by the host inviting them in to eat.

RJ Brewster — 2112

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

The first hour was spent searching the auditorium thoroughly. Ey walked around clapping and humming, then singing songs half-remembered from productions ey had worked in the past. Ey would've whistled if it wasn't for the structure of a canid muzzle.

Silence.

After an hour, venturing even into the overhead areas where sound was muffled, damped, ey gave up and took a break.

It's probably fruitless to be this thorough in the auditorium, ey thought. The gain' high enough that even a quiet clap should be enough.

Ey slouched in an auditorium seat and pulled out the slip of paper with Cicero's transactions. Ey found that if ey focused on the page just so, rows would sort themselves by columns. Weird.

Ey scanned over the titles of the initiatives voted on. Very little there to latch onto. Or, rather, way too much. AwDae couldn't manage to boil down the table into any single sentence, much less something useful. The cat had apparently voted on just about everything, without taking any breaks.

Eventually, when neat rows of letters began to blur into one another, ey levered emself up from the seat. Paper refolded, ey slipped it back into a pocket before checking on the board once more. Ev-

everything remained set as it was before the break.

AwDae had imagined ey would work in concentric circles away from the auditorium. Not to be the best idea. The hall was nestled between two arms of the school which did not meet except via the auditorium itself. Eir routine grew arduous: ey'd walk down one hallway, poke into classrooms, and make noise before moving on.

When ey reached the end of eir circle, though, ey had to jog around the auditorium through the student center to go down the other hallway and do the same.

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

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

It threatened skimmed beneath eir attention, sounding too much like an echo from eir own voice in the cavernous common area. The door to the auditorium caught eir eye, and ey tried once more, getting another faint hum. It slowly died out as space and air dissipated tone.

It took another few minutes to find the microphone itself. A lavalier mic, disguised as a button resting obsequiously atop the door handle leading into the principal's office. It was just to the northeast of the auditorium doors. Ey would've found it soon enough. It was surprising, in a way, that ey hadn't managed to trigger any feedback earlier.

The door was labeled 'Admin.'. Ominous.

There was a head office at the front of the school, but administration was where the principal and vice principals' offices were. One of those places that lingered in the mind of every student who

passed through the doors of the school. Getting called to the front office was usually bad enough — a call from a parent? — but getting called to the admin office was more oh-shit than that.

Ears pinned back, AwDae picked up the microphone delicately through mounting feedback before shutting it off. The hum had grown loud enough that ey could hear faint clicks from the speakers. Magnets clicking, popping as the physical limitations of the ancient-and-not-so-great speakers reached their limit.

The sound stopped a scant few moments after, bouncing around the auditorium and the student center. Echoes.

Eir ears slowly uncringed. Ey pocketed the mic in eir trouser pockets and straightened up. The school was silent once more.

Remembering the position of the mic, AwDae pocketed the mic and straightened up, wandered back over to the auditorium, turning the gain down on the board and lowering the house volume to a reasonable level. Ey even turned the mic back on and mumbled a quick “one-two” to ensure that none of the speakers had been damaged.

This is a sim. Not even mine, ey thought, ears tinted pink with embarrassment. What does it matter if a speaker blew?

Ey shrugged it off. Habits were habits. No reason to break them now.

Back to the admin office, then. Tail swishing behind em, AwDae couldn’t help but feel as though ey was trapped within a game. One of those first-person puzzle solvers that seemed forever popular — and eir favorite of the genres. It was surprising the adroitness with which eir perspective had shifted, sobbing behind em.

Perhaps the fact that ey seemed to be receiving what amounted to clues while in a complex abandoned building added to that.

Perhaps it was the shift from RJ to AwDae. Perhaps something about emself. Countless hours in sim. Countless changes in scenery. Countless changes in form.

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

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

The waste baskets were empty.

Steeling emself for something...what, shocking? The game mentality still holding tight, perhaps. Ey tried each of the doors in turn.

Surprising. It wasn't the principal's office that opened, but one of the vice principals. The name escaped em, and no tags adorned the doors. The office was dark, but the lights responded to a touch on the pad. Ey set it to a comfortable level; warm without being cozy, bright enough to read without being intimidating.

Memories of being hauled into the room, all those years ago, with the lights all the way up, a gesture of power.

Rummaging through the desk revealed little of note.

Rather than a planner on the desk, however, was a workstation. Simple. Ancient. It didn't respond to any of AwDae's interactions. How it would work, ey didn't know. A sim within a sim? Ey had perhaps hoped that a connection like that might lead outside. Outside of this mess.

The only other items on the desk was a scratch pad and a pencil. They never seemed to go out of style. The pad contained a simple

breakdown of costs, divided into departments, for the coming year. A simple three-column setup tallying subject, expense, and deductions from some number at the top. Budgets, perhaps. At the bottom of the page, was a final number, circled in dark, angry strokes. Apparently, the administrator hadn't liked the result.

AwDae flumped down in the chair at a jaunty angle, eir tail flopping down between armrest and chair back. Tired, so very tired.

Ey rubbed away the sandy grit of tears already shed. Ey was moving in this search with determination, as much as ey could muster. Anything to occupy eir mind, anything to keep em from ollapsing into a depression borne of hopelessness and despair. It occurred to em that getting lost was the perfect prison: complete freedom, or nearly so (ey had already fantasized about jimmying open the other doors), with nothing to do. Nothing to dream, nowhere to go, nothing to know.

Ey didn't even know the time. No clocks adorned the walls.

Ey would go mad without a task. Could ey create anything? But why create in these empty halls? What would ey even begin to make that would matter the worth of a damn? Ey would never be able to share it. Ey would only be able to spiral endlessly inwards.

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

Instead, ey ground the heels of eir paws against eir face and leaned toward the desk. Numbers, digits, columns. Something familiar. Mindlessly working through the sums in eir head simply for lack of anything else to do.

"Weird," ey murmured sleepily.

The numbers didn't add up. Rather, everything added up within its own row. It was as though a row were missing.

Ey yawned and stretched, snatching up the scrap of note and holding it up to the light. No erasures, whiteouts, or scribbles. There was just not enough information.

Digits. Numbers. Ledger. Paper. Notes?

If ey was meant to be looking for clues, then...

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

It wasn't nearly so simple as the single-column arithmetic on the scratch paper. Each referendum had three columns: a cost, a bounty (if that referendum was referred back to the house), and any number of comments made on the issue. Often out of order on the sheet, as well, given Cicero's habit of voting on everything. Perhaps it was the first thing he did on waking.

Given the note's interactivity level of expanding on closer examination, ey tried to will a sum out of the columns to match the final row. No luck.

Ey wished for eir rig more than anything. It'd make the task almost trivial. Ah well. Ey snagged the half-used pencil and the rest of the scrap and worked it out. Each cost and comment would be a debit, and each bounty would be a credit. One could also buy DDR credits through a mechanism that basically acted as an additional withholding on one's taxes. There were two of those in there, possibly ensuring that Cicero would have enough DDR credit to make what AwDae assumed was some scathing political snipe on an upcoming high-stakes referendum.

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

guess. Perhaps a few smaller votes to add up to those totals.

Except that one's DDR records were public. Not which way one voted, but that one had voted. Comments were public perforce. The information had to be public, for the system to work.

Unless it had been tampered with, there was a combination of 1,252,000 credits unaccounted for in terms of transactions. One million debit to the comment, a quarter of a million credit for bounty, and two thousand to the vote cost.

AwDae tore the top sheet off the pad and, working faster this time, ran the numbers once more. Same result.

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

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

Too early to be thinking of such things. Ey wasn't going anywhere for the time being. Sleep was becoming an imperative.

Ey gave token consideration to where ey would be able to sleep before deciding on the auditorium. The fold-down seats were cushioned. Not very well, but better than the floor.

And the place had a sense of home about it, too. The thought was a barb tugging at eir heart, but there was nothing to be done. Not in this state. Not right now.

Sleep, then.

Sleep, perhaps dreams.

Or perhaps not. Sleep to get away. Sleep for nullity. Sleep for nothingness.

Qoheleth — 2305

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, eighth 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, but only just, as 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: Thanks for your letter, Ioan. Lots of really good stuff in there, most of which I'd missed simply out of nearsightedness.

Ioan Balan: You've got me hooked on this project, have to say. It's fascinating stuff.

Dear grins at this.

Dear We - that is, some other Odists down-tree from me - have come up with some further hints about the message.

Ioan: Oh? Anything good?

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

Ioan: *snark, good natured* Oh great. Excited already. *more earnest* The fascination continues. Well, let's have it.

Dear: So, one of us did an exhaustive search of some records and found an 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 long ago. They searched for the encrypted text itself, and they came across an archive server.

Ioan: Old node boxes? Wow, 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 intriguing stuff on it. New, old, the whole thing. There's stuff from ages ago, shortly after we got here, and stuff from a few hours ago.

Ioan: You're kidding. Newly created stuff?

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. *pause* 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, though. Needless to say, we found a crusty old archive 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?

Dear nods.

Ioan: Want me to have a look, then? The techier 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, of course, but I feel I have to ask, 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.

Ioan: "Differ"? Within the clade?

Dear: Yes. A hallmark of Dispersionistas is that we treat each of our forks as fully-realized individuals. We may have a shared past, but from the point we fork, we grow ever further apart.

Ioan: I assume you mean more than just a matter of increasing conflicts.

Dear: Yes. Although we limit our instances, we still consider ourselves Dispersionistas as we never merge back down-tree. But, that aside, we also want someone out-clade for this. *I want someone out-clade for this.*

Ioan seems taken aback.

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

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

Now frustrated/confused.

Ioan: “The ones who know”?

Dear: You have, of course, noticed that you have not interacted with any of my cocladists. I have told some about hiring you, but not all.

Ioan: Alright, I suppose. If you’re independent, then I suppose it makes sense that I be your amanuensis rather than the clade’s.

Dear: Yes. Perhaps more evidence that we’re 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. Something that feels very ‘normal’. Or maybe some are researching 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 itself 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. You would not recognize my cocladists as Odists without knowing beforehand. It's like having a very 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, and we're still them. Clades are families of separate individuals in a lot of ways, but you have to realize that, in the end, 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. *pause* So some of your clade would prefer I not be a part of this?

Dear: More than that. They feel that investigating the matter of The Name being written is too risky, too close to investigating The Name itself.

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

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

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

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

Dear: *calmer* 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. That's why I hired you; I'm relegated to admin role so I'm a bit on edge. Let's get back to the archive server, yeah?

Ioan: Sure thing. Where did you say your cocladists had found it?

Dear: Just in a search. Don't know quite the details about how, assuming just a text search of perisystem stuff, I guess? Not too sure on the terminology, I bought into being an artist pretty hard, all that knowledge is in exos.

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 the 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 back-links to the server, or anyone talking about this Qoheleth. Hebel. Whichever.

Silly name. Oh well. Dear looks taken aback.

Dear: Hadn't really thought to ask. I don't suppose they did, though. Do you think it's 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 that digging myself. I want to see who likes the Tanakh so much as to name themselves that. And why 'kemmer'.

Dear: I...well, it's complicated and out of scope, but it relating to fluidity of gender is relevant to the clade as a whole. Very big, for us. I've opted out.

Ioan: So I noticed. It makes sense, though.

Dear: Glad someone's thinking about this stuff. You're 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. Too Conservative.

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. Got a few more things to wrap up to finish the current gallery exhibition, 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: Yes, why do you ask?

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

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 Ioan a little more effectively — yeesh, how old is some of this stuff? Need to re-encrypt a bunch of it anyway — and maybe get ready for some visitors.

Dr Carter Ramirez — 2112

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

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

She couldn't visit this RJ any more than she could fly out of the restaurant's second story window and back to her lab.

It was useless, of course. Her team didn't need access to the lost to do all of their work, because much of their vitals, properly anonymized, were provided as a real-time stream of data. It had been proven that physical contact registered little, if at all, to the lost; it would hardly matter if it was a researcher any more than a family member.

There would be people between her and RJ, as well. Not just doctors and nurses, but her own administration. She would have to go through any number of layers of bureaucracy just to get access to...what? Variables that likely wouldn't help her investigation at all? Eye color? Hair color?

Finally, there was the law. Carter understood the purpose of

the Western Federation Personal and Health Information Protection Act. It was part of her research at a fundamental level. Anyone in medicine knew it, had the inevitable posters tacked to the walls.

Hell, she had voted on it, herself, in the DDR. It was something she felt strongly about regardless of work. The tabloid had breached that, in a way. There was no culpability, of course, but there was a breach by publicly announcing the case.

And yet, there was nothing to stop her from going to a show in the next day or two.

Feeling very much the sleuth, she stuffed a small egg roll into her mouth. Savoring the taste. Savoring the idea, the plan.

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

With her resolution firmly planted, she found it difficult to make it through the rest of the day. Rather than wrangle the two competing strands of work group into some cohesive whole, she spent much of her time distracted.

Finding tickets was easy enough, though the price left her winded. She was thinking about all of the ways in which she could approach the cast. Or was it the crew. Would she be able to even get in contact with any of them? Supposing so, what would she even say? *Tell me about your sound tech?*

The rush wore off, as it always did.

Avery and Prakash had both settled into the routine of investigating what had gone on before the incidences of the lost. Those precious few minutes saved from the precious few cases where there was a core dump.

Avery was collating what data they had from each case on the social front before the event and searching for social connections between each of the cases, as much as the law would allow. Prakash,

meanwhile, was digging through biochemical data that had been collected from each of the patients and searching for similarities for them. All stuff he had been doing before, of course, but now based specifically on the time before they had gotten lost, rather than during or after.

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

In both cases, she reiterated that this would only be a temporary investigation. If it turned up any useful information, then they would have that conversation again in the near future. If it didn't, oh well. Everyone would cohere once more. There was comfort in the words, she hoped, but all the same, Carter wasn't sure of their efficacy.

She had had an idea. A hunch. One she thought worth investigating. That's what one did in science, right? Have ideas.

Sanders, however, had an ideal.

Or so Carter assumed. When assessing the team's standing on the issue, she had used the usual three point scale. For, neutral, against. What she hadn't asked was how many fucks each of them gave. There were, after all, two parts to making a decision. Which way you vote, and how much you cared about it.

Carter could easily estimate Sanders giving ten out of ten fucks against this current plan of exploration, while in fact, until this afternoon, she would only likely have given five or six fucks.

That question hadn't been asked, though. She couldn't make her mind whether she wished she had asked or was glad she hadn't.

This afternoon, with the determination to learn more for the project and the sense that she was on the right path significantly had bumped the number of fucks she gave. And there was the hope of proving Sanders wrong. No small amount of competition within academia.

The play was some contemporary work. The Short Trip, the site informed her, chronicled an indecisive youth taking a trip away from family, purportedly to visit a bunch of friends for three days. The real goal of the trip was to visit his long-distance partner, but in the setting of a party, with guests, known and unknown, weaving their way through the scene.

This much she learned as she made her way southwest. Carter had to duck out of work earlier than usual to make it over to the theater on time. She had actually to travel past RJ in the UCH, borne along the yowling Victoria line to Soho. Glad she left early, too. She needed to wait for three trains to pass before she was able to squeeze aboard one.

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

Easy enough to find the theater by following the crowds. Her identity — and thus her ticket — was proved by a touch from her contacts, a grip around a simple bar in front of the theater. The bar flipped around to provide its other end to the next customer, the

end she had touched getting a quick sanitizing so that everyone got a surface.

Carter was surprised by just how much she enjoyed the play, then chagrined at her surprise. She had decided not to approach cast or crew beforehand. A fact that initially worried her, suspecting she would spend the entirety of the play thinking about what to say. She wound up getting engrossed in the performance all the same.

Lying to parents. Moving through the party. The awkwardness of meeting for the first time. The cast nailed it. She'd had her own long-distance fling while an undergrad, and she knew that feeling well. *Meet at a public space where you know people*, mom had even cautioned. *Like a party. Just in case.*

It was well into the third act of three that she realized she hadn't given any thought to the sound of the play. A passing thought: this was probably a good thing, this was the sign of a job well done. An understudy, perhaps?

She applauded as heartily as the rest.

Still, her mission, such as it was, was right at the fore as soon as she stood. She was perhaps a little rude in her haste, making her way out into the lobby of the theater where some of cast and crew, as well as the director were greeting the audience. Opening night, after all.

"Mr. Johansson. Mr. Johansson!"

The bulky man turned toward her with a pleasant, if bland, smile. A smile, despite the obvious worry lining his face. "Ma'am. I trust you enjoyed the show?"

"I did! Of course I did. I'd like to ask you something, though, if I might."

"Mm." The sound was assent, but only just. The rest of the au-

dience was starting to stream out of the theater, his mind was elsewhere.

“I was...It’s just, about RJ-”

The immediate focus of Johansson’s attention was a heat lamp against her face. The intensity of it startled Carter out of speech.

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

“It is forward,” he confirmed, eyes probing her. Too many reporters? “But I’d like to know how you know of em?”

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

Johansson took her elbow gently in his grip and led her off to the side, out of hearing of the rest of the audience and the other curious cast. Gently, but brooking no disagreement.

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

“The tabloids had a-”

The growl was immediate, hidden behind gritted teeth. “The paramedics told me I couldn’t contact anyone but the hospital, but the rag said you guys had declined contact.”

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

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

“Ramirez. Dr. Carter Ramirez.” She hesitated for a moment before continuing. “We’re looking for...well, a few of us are looking for social connections between the lost, rather than just simple person-

ality correlations. What can you tell us about RJ in that sense?”

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

RJ Brewster — 2112

Sleep did not come easily.

As padded as the auditorium seats were, they were not made for laying down on. They folded down, and while there were no arms to get in the way of stretching out, the gaps between seats were painful. AwDae found that ey had to face toward the backs of the seats, lest eir tail would get crimped against them, leaving eir back exposed in a way that felt uncomfortable, no matter how empty the sim was.

At first, the faint dusty smell of the seat fabric inspired nostalgia, but it did not last. The memories were not comfortable, either.

Eventually, ey got up and began pacing blearily around the auditorium. There must be some way to get rest that did not involve folding seats.

Ey could pull down one of the curtains and make a nest out of it. But, as ey did not know how to do so without ripping the curtain, ey was loath to do so. They carried some of that same smell, the same memories. A last resort, then.

Exploring beyond the auditorium it was, then. The back door of the stage led to the hall containing music and drama classrooms. Ey started cataloging additional places where ey could get rest. The black fabric orchestra seats was a little promising, and they could

be arranged however ey wanted, but ey hit pay dirt in the theater room.

The back of the room was sectioned off into a wardrobe area, housing costumes and rack upon rack of identical tuxes and dresses for the choir singers. Nestled back behind all of these rows of clothing was a sofa, old and sagging.

There was zero reason for the room to contain a sofa. As inexplicable as it was, AwDae wouldn't have been surprised if such a thing had existed in the school ey when had attended.

Thanking whoever had created this sim, ey flopped down onto it. Musty smell lingered, settled.

Ey was asleep within minutes.

Sleep, while restful, brought dreams of unnerving intensity. Dreams of twisting passages, of locker-lined corridors looping impossibly back on themselves, leading always into the same dim light of the student center. And in the middle, a menu, no different from what ey might get by swiping eir paw left to right in any sane and sensible sim.

Every time ey got close to try and read the menu, though, it would slide closed once more, leaving only its shadow behind, an unexpected rendering error.

AwDae jolted awake feeling as if ey had drastically overslept. Ey hadn't paid attention to when ey had gone to bed in the first place. One in the morning? Two? Rehearsal, and then hours of searching. All the same, ey felt late.

With the shock of the transition and the need to explore the auditorium and hunt school for the mic, ey never managed to make it outside of the school. Could ey even do so? Ey felt silly for not trying, now.

Wake up, then. Ey stretched and started to plan a way out of the school. If nothing else, they wanted to see how extensive the sim was.

It was customary to lock the doors that did not lead anywhere in a sim. Although the Crown Pub did have bathrooms and fire escapes, for instance — all things to make it authentic — the doors were locked tight. Beyond them would have been nothing at all. That was simply the extent of the sim. It was not inaccessible so much as nonexistent.

There were much larger sims than the school itself, much more intricate. AwDae couldn't be sure of the boundaries without exploring.

Ey wondered what must have happened to eir body back in reality, even as ey walked toward the front doors. Ey didn't feel hungry. Such things were translated in-sim — safety measures to keep addicts from starving themselves. After all, ey had still felt the need to sleep. Something had obviously been done with eir body.

That train of thought wound around the question of how exactly ey had gotten lost in a sim without being connected to it. Were other lost individuals in whatever sims they had been before, empty now of others?

Obviously, plenty of time had passed, and certainly the crew hadn't left em just sitting at eir rig after ey had finally lost touch. Even so, ey should've been pulled back to that reality when eir hands had been lifted from the cradles and head pulled away from the NFC headrest.

And yet here ey was.

Where was eir body, then? Some hospital somewhere? Insensate and tied to life support?

And if ey was in a hospital, where did this sim exist? A sim this size couldn't simply live in eir gear. Especially not with all of the mechanics ey had encountered so far. Fully functioning sound booth and mic. All of the papers in the office. The sleeves hanging from the racks ey had brushed eir hand across on the way to the couch.

No answers to be had. All ey could rely on was what was in front of em.

Ey stopped at the bank of front doors, staring at the panic bar. Would it be locked? Would it open a touch? Should ey slam eir weight against it, or test gingerly?

Resigning emself to whatever happened when ey pushed it, ey rested eir paws against the smooth metal, claws clicking against the door itself, and gave a firm shove.

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

Ey saw the cul-de-sac for dropping kids off. Ey saw the street beyond, the set of townhouses that lined the road opposite the school. Ey saw grey. Ey saw fog. Despite the very sunny day, shadows cast sharply against concrete, ey saw fog.

Fog of war? Render distance? That visual indicator representing the furthest that the system was willing to draw?

Old tech. Tech unneeded for perhaps a century. Was it a limit of eir exo? Some languishing remnant? It had occasionally been used as an invisible boundary, ey knew. That it was there in the first place, closing off the street in either direction about a hundred yards into the distance, confirmed that this was indeed a sim, not just some artifact of eir subconscious.

Did it, though? Did it confirm that? Did that truly follow?

Ey stepped out onto the sidewalk by the flagpole and stared. Shoulders sagged. Tail drooped. There were no answers. No answers.

Nothing for it but to keep looking.

Qoheleth — 2305

0.1 Archive: [Hebel Qoheleth]

Node: [7cbc92e691678c4c17a04f5553cd1058ee122956]

[Encrypted]

Node: [32c5a64b66d0338be4373d796cf1eae5343f1077]

OCYNX GRIMN CYJPE PNNXS SCIQZ
KTWQW FBAVY FBOPA QERLB HWIJW
KPELO UCLAN OKHPM PCPWR NZNZQ
NMTIQ BKNGH UWFMG BPPZS CNRKX
TKEMU AFNOS VQUNW

Node: [36b1d8c1df07ce0f254b2332acd38c59bdf3bb00]

[Encrypted]

Node: [67e97446cdb3a4a3cfd5ebd75b1260f] Error

The node you have requested, [67e97446cdb3a4a3cfd5ebd75b1260f], does not appear to be an Archive node. You have provided a 32 byte identifier; the Archive system uses 40 byte identifiers.

If you believe you have received this message in error, please contact the Archive owner.

If you believe that you have the correct identifier, you may have attempted to access it on the wrong system. Please check the Gist system for a possible match.

Node: [80b42deb4c364cac5937cff9ca306625b69ae7c5]

[Encrypted]

Node: [bea0cf302fcd00863f0c67a91b1a75c0e4ba4863]

Security Footage

Location and time data provided in their own node.

Limited sensory data provided by dual security cameras and microphones.

No sensorium data provided.

Marked for deletion *systemtime 181+331 0322*.

Given the trouble of maintaining this shitty archive, I just transcribed it so I don't have to host the data.

Node: 172fb56e982d2d3f08957c5f7be0779bbf2f6aa6

Node: [172fb56e982d2d3f08957c5f7be0779bbf2f6aa6]

Transcript of Ioan Balan and Dear, Also, The Tree That Was Felled speaking at a cafe.

Node: [f6981a0738b43275059c37a9c8b744e42eb91fb9]

[Encrypted]

Dr Carter Ramirez — 2112

Johansson's hands dwarfed a pint of ale.

Once they had managed to find each other in the post-theater rush of the pub, they staked out a small two-top table crammed against one end of the bar itself. Johansson to lean to the side, away from the noise of too many voices.

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

"Alright, so, RJ." His vocal cords to unlimbered, a well-rehearsed baritone.

"Ey was your sound guy?" Carter backpedaled, eyes ducking to her glass, "Sound tech?"

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

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

"Nothing. It's like ey was still delved in even after eir contacts had been displaced. We hit the panic button and called the docs. I

guess some ambulance-chaser caught up with them, which is how you found out about us.”

“Yeah. I’m not really in the habit of checking the tabloids myself, but I went out for lunch with a few coworkers and we got one pushed on us. The bit about you not being able to contact us got my attention, so I figured I’d make for the show tonight. Thought that might be my best bet.”

“How’d you even manage that, on opening night, anyway?”

“Oh, don’t worry, it cost me plenty.” Carter laughed. “Christ, this is so far out of the realm of what I’d do, too. I just feel like we’re at an impasse.”

“An impasse?” Johansson asked quietly.

“Yeah. We weren’t getting anywhere.” Carter leaned back in her chair to gather her thoughts. “I’ve been on a few projects. None were easy, but all the same, this feels like it’s got a weird amount of interference. It feels like we’re being made to trudge through mud. They won’t give us access to the patients? Fine. That’s PHI. We just need the data that they collect from them, right? So why aren’t we getting that? It’s never been a problem on any other project.

“All we’re getting are little tidbits. A few hours of monitor scans, little bits of logs from before the event, and that’s it. I don’t mean to creep on you or anything, but with RJ, we’ve come across something we hadn’t had before. We found out ey was, well, you know...”

Johansson canted his head to the side. “Ey was genderqueer? Asexual? A furry?”

“A furry, though those other two are certainly interesting data points to keep in mind. We weren’t totally sure ey was asexual, but it tallies.”

“How did em being a furry help?”

“Ey’s the second furry we’ve had come across our desks.” Carter ducked her gaze to her cider, then about the room. “In fact, it’s caused a bit of a schism. Some of us are looking into possible transmission vectors, while the rest are focused on cases individually. How could something like getting Lost be transmitted from one person to another? It sounds like some awful show from years back. It’s not a virus.”

“I assume you’re among those who doubt the transmission story?”

“Oh, no, I’m in charge of it.” She grinned. “But there are still convincing arguments to be made against it. Sanders, the leader of the opposition, such as it is, is dead-set against it. He thinks that we’re wasting time chasing up this transmission tree. Valuable resources. We’ve got an agreement, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, we’ll keep poking at this lead and if it dries up, we’ll drop it.”

Johansson hunched his shoulders, frowning. “Not much of a lead, I’ll grant you that, but all the same, anything to get RJ back. Ey was more than just a tech. Sounds silly, but we all liked em. The tech crew, especially. We went through our share of fuck-ups tonight just getting by without em.”

“Oh? I didn’t notice any.”

“You weren’t on the headset. We had lights and sound arguing cues while stage desperately tried to keep them on track. It was a mess.”

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

“Mm.”

Silence. It felt necessary. They both stared off into the pub. The

room held the distinctly British dichotomy of being crowded and convivial, while also intensely conscious of personal space. The latter suffered as the night went on.

“You know,” Johansson began, the rich baritone bringing Carter’s attention back to the conversation.

“Hmm?”

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

“Oh? Huh. It seemed like the two cases we have are certainly socially connected, but we don’t have any proof.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Johansson bristled, “RJ was no layabout.”

She held up her hands and shook her head, “Mostly, is what I’m saying. They don’t have ties, or if they do, they don’t hold them long.

These last few — the furries — they have lots of contacts. Strong ones. That's where our two groups disagree most. I think that we're seeing something novel. 'I' being the leader of the group that thinks there's the possibility of a transmission vector."

"And the others?"

"They see it as chance. Too small an 'n'. Too few cases to say one way or another. They say that there was bound to be both connected and unconnected folks among the lost. They'd say that it's a matter of chance, since those who use the 'net more would be more likely to wind up lost, regardless of social situation."

"Both make sense, I guess," Johansson hedged. "All the same, you know I have a vested interest in RJ, so I'm going to wind up seeing it from your point of view, since you're working with em. Never mind that you invited me out here. What do you need from me?"

Carter frowned, thinking. "I guess I need to know more about em. I have all of eir stats, the dump from eir workstation and the time leading up to it. I'm assuming we're getting all of it, but perhaps that's generous of me. It's got PHI redacted, but I don't know if there's anything else missing. What I need to know is what's slipping through the cracks. I need to know about who RJ was. How ey interacted with the theater, I mean. And anything you can tell me about eir friends."

"Should you...?"

"Should I have all of that information? I don't know." Carter sighed. "Is it against the law for you to tell me? No, not at all. I don't know. Maybe. Is it unethical to further my own agenda with this project by consulting you? Probably yes. If I were on a bigger, more mature project, we'd probably be interviewing you anyway, though.

But is it because I think that the more we know, the more likely we are to get RJ and the others back? I'd say yes."

Johansson looked down into his beer, then, with a decisive motion, drank most of it in a few smooth gulps, holding up the glass with the last inch left in it, an obvious toast. "To RJ, then."

Carter felt a little silly toasting to someone she'd never met, with a man she'd only just met, with a full glass of cider to his mostly empty ale. It all felt so dramatic, until she remembered who she was toasting with. She raised her glass and clinked its rim to Johansson's.

"To RJ."

RJ Brewster — 2112

AwDae stood in the sunlight for a moment, blinking.

Ey felt weak. Not from hunger. Not from lack of sleep. Just worn out. Exhausted.

This was starting to feel like grinding. That drudge that you went through playing games to level up. Busywork. Idle hands and tired eyes. Always cast in a negative light.

But then, you could quit a game. Here ey was, clues and riddles. And for what?

There was even a fog of war.

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

Ey stripped down to eir underwear, hesitated, then stripped that off as well and shook eir fur out.

‘Comfort’ was the wrong word to use in regards a sim. It was a matter of sensory inputs that the system was set up to provide. The musty smell of the auditorium seats had been one thing, but ey was starting to get the impression that, given the way this sim was constructed, there would be rather more than less input. Eir tux was not made for fox-people: eir fur was decidedly matted.

Ey folded eir clothes and set them on the sidewalk in front of the school. The cool blades of the grass provided a welcome change

from the indoor-outdoor carpet or tile indoors and the roughness of the concrete out here.

“Alright. So. Problems.” Ey plucked viciously at a few close-mown blades of grass and held them pinched between eir pawpads. “Cicero is lost. He was voting on a bunch of stuff as usual, leading the comment boards. He voted on something and it passed, but it doesn’t show in the records.” Ey plucked blades of grass with eir free paw, enumerating the facts. “No vote cost, no bounty, no comment.”

Ey swished eir tail around to the side, hiked eir backside up enough to slip it beneath em, and rolled onto eir back to stare upwards. Too bright, even with the fog. Ey draped eir arm, fingers still clutching grass, over eir eyes. “And now I’m lost. I was working, and then I was here. Before working, I was digging into Cicero...”

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

“So had Sasha, though. And she was the one who got me the deck in the first place.” Ey ran through the actions ey had taken on the deck. It was surprisingly easy to pull up the chain of events. *Or perhaps not*, ey thought. *Given the note*.

Eir first write to the deck had been on the note about the voting records. Prior to that, there was only the sorting and sharing of records. Filtering. Reading.

Ey lifted eir paw once more and stared at the torn blades of grass. Tossed them aside. “Ah, hell. I’m talking to myself.”

Laughing, AwDae stood and gathered eir tux, heading back to the costume closet. Perhaps ey could find something that would fit eir form. Something to take into account that ey was more fox, less

human.

Failing that, perhaps ey'd lay down again.

AwDae wound up in a simple, pleated skirt and a loose cotton shirt, gathered at the wrists.

The skirt fit well with a tail, certainly far better than having eir trousers sag beneath its base awkwardly. It was a robin's egg blue. Nice enough, but otherwise undecorated. Any detail would be lost on the audience. Might as well save, both in cost and effort.

The shirt was made for someone with broader shoulders. RJ might have filled it out, but on the fox's slim form, it was baggy, loose. Again, just a plain white, but ey could hardly complain. It didn't compress eir fur, unlike the tux shirt with its pleats along the front.

Ey gave consideration as to what to do with the tux. On the one paw — and here ey was thinking in paws already! So soon — it was just an artifact. Just bits. Everything was. Eir own body was. Choosing clothes that were 'more comfortable' was only instructing the sim how best to treat eir body. Clothes that were more comfortable were no different from clothes that weren't. It was just how the numbers added up. Just the math of simulated fashion.

And yet, on the other, the tux was the only thing ey had...what? Brought with from reality? It might just be a set of bits in eir exocortex, but it was eir set of bits and bytes.

Was it? Was there any point to the sense of ownership in so solipsistic a world?

Something to tie em back to the world outside this sim, then.

A solution in between, then. Ey found a rucksack that had probably gone with some war-themed production. Drab, dusty, made of thick canvas. It would do well to carry anything that would help,

including eir notes ey had made.

Ey laid eir tux out on the ratty sofa and rolled it into a tight cylinder. An empty sim would care little if eir tux got wrinkled. Ey stuffed the tux down at the base of the pack and folded the notes into a small pocket on the side.

Thus equipped, ey padded back to the auditorium. Ey made sure the room was put to sleep, and, on a whim, snagged the one live microphone ey'd found earlier. Ensuring that it was off to conserve batteries, ey added it to the notes. A small token of where ey'd come from.

"Not going to do much without the receiver or board," ey murmured. "Do the batteries even matter? This is all so fucking silly."

Ey shrugged and buttoned down the flap above the pocket. So many questions.

Should ey lay in rations? Food? Water bottles, perhaps? Ey dismissed the thought as even sillier. Ey didn't feel hungry or thirsty, even after so long in the school, so why worry? Obviously eir body had been taken care of. There was nothing ey could do about it from within the sim. All that food and water would do is make the sim tell eir body that the pack was heavier.

From there, ey made eir way back toward the front doors, pushing them open against the pressure differential. The breeze outside ruffled fur and skirt as ey stepped into sun once more.

The grey mist turned out to be a render distance.

Had it been a barrier, AwDae could have walked up to the fog, but no further. As it was, ey was able to follow the street ey would've taken on the walk back to the home ey grew up in and the fog simply receded before em. Ey could never approach it. There was nothing to investigate. It was just a bubble into which ey had been placed. A

bubble that moved along with em.

The act of walking away from the school, wearing a backpack and heading towards home, was a dredge pulling up the silt of memories. School across the Atlantic in the '90s. Sasha. Dandelions. Plays and productions ey still had memorized.

Even now, pacing the street as a fox, not much had changed. Ey had carried eir tablet and few books too and from school in a pack not dissimilar than the one ey was wearing. Even the skirt was not far off from something ey might have worn at the time.

Ey prowled through memories of Sasha, of dating, of becoming better friends than partners. Ey thought back to her staying the night, back to their shared anxiety, back to the movies, back to eir mom checking in on them at one in the morning just to make sure everything was okay (and, bless her heart, to make sure clothes had remained on).

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

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

School. America. Hopelessness. Stasis.

"You seem kind of frozen, kind of stuck, in a few ways."

Ioan Balan — 2305

Ioan sat, startled, as Dear quit so abruptly, leaving em sitting alone at the cafe table. There was a certain peculiarity to that fox's sense of humor, and while ey was slowly picking up on it, the occasional bafflement remained.

Ey took eir time finishing eir coffee, enjoying the view. Enjoying a moment's downtime before getting back into the puzzle at hand. Then stood and straightened eir slacks.

Well, at least ey had more information to work with, now.

"Welcome back," #Tracker said when ey arrived at home. "You have some mail."

Ey frowned, tugged the cream-colored envelope from the edge of the desk and turned it over in eir hands. Simply eir name and tag. Perhaps something about what ey'd been working on recently had piqued some interest on the reputation exchange. Another offer? And yet directly to this instance.

Making eir way out to the deck, ey popped the seal on the envelope, savoring the subtle tearing of the paper where the adhesive held too strong. The paper was fine, the handwriting cramped and awkward, but legible and in fine, blue ink. Someone had put real effort into this.

Dear has mentioned your aversion to sensorium messages, and I gather from your taste in clothing that you have a certain aesthetic you enjoy. I hope that this scrap of note suits you well. The paper seemed up your alley.

You'll have to forgive Dear. It really is stretched quite thin with its gallery show, and with the increased in-clade communication, it is feeling the pressure to keep forks to a minimum, as apparently the names available are running low.

There is more to this that I think it is not sharing explicitly, but we've been together for a few years now, and I have my suspicions. I think the intra-clade attention is not precisely welcome. Having met some of its cocladists, I'm inclined to think that some more conservative types are being less than generous with their treatment of the subject at hand.

All this to say that there is a reason for the fox acting the way it is. I will not apologize on Dear's behalf, it knows me better than that, but I hope an increase in transparency as to what all is going on in the family politic will help.

It mentioned in haste to me that it forgot to give you the address of the archive. I've attached it below.

Visit soon.

Ioan smiled, re-folded the letter, and replaced it within its envelope. Dear's partner had a good heart, and it was indeed a relief to learn that perhaps some of the fox's erratic behavior was at-

tributable to stress. None of eir family had uploaded, and, by eir nature, ey did not create eir own as the Odists had. Ey did not envy it now.

The archive itself was essentially a database stored in the perisystem. It could hold essentially unlimited data in truly unlimited formats. Everything from sensorium text and structured data to full-sensorium recordings. Each blob of data was stored in a node, and nodes could be tagged.

Unfashionable and difficult to work with, Ioan wasn't entirely clear why they had been added to the system. Exos had been around before. More personal, easier to interface with. Harder to share, though. Some remnant from its construction, perhaps.

Luckily, as a historian, ey had some experience working with them, even if that experience was decades old at this point. Ey pulled out a fresh sheet of foolscap and began to write, and by writing, interacted with the archive.

If archives were difficult to work with, this one doubly so. Blobs that weren't tagged, listed publicly, or linked to from other blobs were essentially inaccessible unless one had access to the index, something usually kept within an exocortex.

Few nodes were listed publicly, fewer still were linked to by others, and none were tagged. While traversing a well-pruned archive might still be akin to rifling through a card catalog to dig out books, this was no more than a file box stuffed full of loose papers.

Ioan's heart fell.

Of the nodes that were publicly listed, at least four were encrypted by something stronger than the original AES block, and another was a simple text blob with twenty-three blocks of five letters each. Ey suspected that was another form of encryption, but had no

idea what.

That left only three public nodes, one of which was an error. The other two...

Ioan's muscles went rigid. The first appeared to be a deleted blob of audiovisual data which referred to the second, a transcript of the conversation Ioan had had with dear earlier that day.

They were being watched. Followed.

Ey read through the transcript once, then again, more thoroughly. There were a few notes made by Qoheleth. They spoke of a familiarity that had only been hinted at with the previous letter. *Our Dear*. What did that mean?

Perhaps this individual was part of the Ode clade?

Ioan shook eir head. The vehemence with which Dear — whom ey suspected was one of the more liberal of the Odists — had reacted when ey had asked about the author of the ode itself seemed to rule that out. If Dear, willing to bring on an amanuensis, was that protective, ey found it dubious that one of its cocladists was Qoheleth.

A friend, then, mutual with the poet?

That was something ey would have to ask Dear about. Ey could speculate all ey wanted, but there was little ey could divine about that aspect.

The rest, then. Qoheleth seemed to be expecting that things were accelerating toward some sort of conclusion. *I may have less time than I had thought*.

And ey was being guided, somehow.

"How? Guide me how?" Ioan mumbled down at the paper. "It's all fucking encrypted."

#Tracker looked up, frowned.

Ioan#c1494bf shook eir head and apologized. Perhaps ey *should* take Dear up on the offer to stay with it and its partner.

RJ Brewster — 2112

Home was unlocked.

AwDae wasn't terribly surprised. Although the front door had always been locked when growing up, the fact that this whole sim seemed oriented around clues meant of course ey'd be able to gain entry places ey knew. Clues, right?

Ey checked the other doors in the complex to test the hypothesis. All locked.

Despite bracing emself for it, there was still a surge of emotion and memory as AwDae stepped into the entryway of eir old home. Cool tile. Tattered rug. Coat hooks where they they were supposed to be.

No coats. The sense of desertion was overwhelming.

Ey felt as though eir mom could be just around the corner in the kitchen, prowling through the fridge, her boyfriend laid out flat on the couch, snoozing in front of the TV running old science fiction shows. And yet ey knew on some fundamental level that it the house was empty.

It was silent. Silent as school had been.

AwDae shrugged out of the rucksack and set it down in the entryway. It was precisely the space where rucksacks went. It was precisely the space where ey had set eirs countless times growing up. Ey

did as ey had always done and paced into the common area, toenails clicking against the tile, and then the hardwood floor.

The sensation, that uncanny mix of *home* and *wrong*, quickly grew to overwhelming. The fox sat down on the rug in front of the coffee table. Eir spot. Eir spot, where ey had sat to eat dinner countless times. Eir spot, where ey watched TV, those old sci-fi movies, with eir mom's boyfriend.

It was one thing for the house to be so painfully empty, and another entirely to be here as AwDae, as eir fox-self. Perhaps ey could have held both of those concepts in eir mind were ey to only experience one at a time. The two combined were too much. Ey felt eir breath as short, shallow gasps. Ey felt eir vision constricting. Ey felt eir pulse felt elevated, no matter how still ey sat. Ey felt all these things happening to em with an increasing sense of detachment. Ey found it hard to concentrate on what ey was even supposed to be doing here.

Is my pulse elevated offline, wherever that is?

Ey let out a strangled laugh. Perhaps there existed in that space some doctor's befuddled stare at the sudden signs of anxiety showing in their patient.

The laugh turned to sob, stopped quickly.

AwDae leaned forward, stretching eir legs out behind em. Ey laid flat on eir floor, on eir oh-so-familiar rug, in eir bafflingly present home. Laid flat, then rolled over onto eir side. Eir tail lay limp against the short pile of the rug behind em.

How had this happened? What did I do? Why here? What did I do to deserve this?

Eir mind was awhirl with questions, and only questions. Ey didn't have answers. No answers inside, none before em, none in

the house. Ey didn't have the mental bandwidth required to do anything other than watch questions swirl. Ey was an observer. Nothing more than a set of eyes with no will, no drive. No urge to move those eyes as ey watched all of the emotion that had been held at bay, held back with the sense of *doing something* over the last day and change. All that emotion surge.

Eir actions had been all wrong. Ey had accepted getting lost with resignation. Ey had leaped at the chance to solve the 'puzzle' of the microphone with something akin to excitement. Ey had found a new set of clothes with a casualness befitting a trip to the thrift store. All this when ey should have been experiencing terror. Doing all these things when ey should have been breaking down into sobs at the fact that ey had been struck with some sort of incurable...what? Incurable disease? Ey was lost.

AwDae noted with increasing dissociation that ey was sobbing now. Eir perspective, that core of emself that spent life reviewing actions and reactions, watched with cool distance as eir body shook with gasps and tears streaked down over eir cheeks and muzzle, leaving tracks in the short fur. Whatever part emself was in charge of releasing those pent up emotions had been divorced from the part of emself responsible for actually feeling them.

It's the emptiness, that part of em thought. This place was home, and the knowledge of being permanently removed from such a thing, from home or any sense of belonging, has led to this. There's no one here, and no one at school.

The heaving gasps for air began to slow, and ey wiped eir tears away in a smooth, slicking motion that flattened eir tall ears against eir head.

Struggling to bring those two parts of emself into alignment

once more, AwDae levered emself up heavily. Ey leaned on eir one paw while the other straightened the fur of eir face, brushing the last aftershocks of that non-sadness away in a careful, calculated gesture. If it was to be like this, then ey would have to carry on. No choice.

Perhaps eir initial reaction has been wrong on the emotional side, but right on the intellectual. Ey would have to at least figure out why. There would be no sharing it, no telling others, no end game other than the knowledge of a task complete.

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

Dr Carter Ramirez — 2112

That night, Carter dreamed of shadows.

And through it all, there was the river. The muddy, sometimes stinking river. The Thames which only seemed to engender affection that one might call ‘grudging’. When she had first moved to London, it had been her guide. The Thames was always vaguely downhill, the slope her Y-axis. And on the X-axis, the bridges. Tower, London, Southwark, Millenium II, Blackfriars Rail, Blackfriars Memorial.

And in her dream, she strode aimlessly along the south bank. The constant renovation of the area had led to not just one great revival, but countless smaller ones. Buildings were torn down and raised back up, plots of land chopped into smaller portions. Those same buildings growing higher, never quite managing to match. Strode past towers, squat pubs, some old, some new. Mostly new. Strode past people and crowds, buskers and food carts. She walked beneath bridges, along railings, past tour boats gliding silently along the surface of the water.

And she passed shadows.

And the shadows were like the people of the crowds. A little taller perhaps, but still like the people. It was as though someone had cut a person-shaped hole out of space, blurred the edges, vi-

gnetted, pinched the light.

And it wasn't through prolonged observation, she was just suddenly aware of the fact that the shadows were all behaving in the same way. Always following one of the people. Same pace, gait somehow more sinister. Always just one person, never changing, never looking around at anyone else.

And no one else seemed to see or notice these shadows except her.

And she started tailing one of the shadows. Quietly. Unobtrusively. Followed it following a young black woman pushing a pram. Another young child walking at her side. His hand curled loosely in the fabric of her pants. Constantly in touch.

And Carter struggled to keep up. The harder she tried to keep pace, the slower she seemed to go. And she tried to call out. And her voice came out only as a whisper. And the shadow reached out it's hand. And the shadow's fingers slid through the woman's hair reaching for the base of her scalp.

And Carter screamed, inaudible.

The dream dogged Carter through her morning routine and into her commute. She kept thinking, if she'd just been able to keep quiet, maybe she could have seen what would've happened when that young mother was touched by the shadow. Some sort of metaphor for getting lost? Or was her sleeping mind just carrying too much work-burden into the night?

She was only able to dispel the lingering sense of too much meaning when she got into work and checked her email for news. No additional cases added to the research load. She realized she half expected a new one. Young, female, black, mother.

Just a dream, then.

After checking her mail on the rig's screen, Carter stood and stretched, making her way blearily to the coffee corner. She was one of the first in that morning. Just Avery and a few other early risers. Thankfully, Avery was the type to leave the coffee pot full rather than empty.

She doctored her coffee to her specifications and ambled back to her desk, setting the mug down on the smooth surface. She spent a few minutes scrolling aimlessly through her mail list. She didn't dive in just yet, despite the workload that she knew waited. The fog of the dream had been burned away, but there were still too many thoughts that needed organizing. Couldn't yet go through the process of setting up her workspace and ordering stacks of cards.

No, she corrected herself. She was *wary* of diving in.

She had things she needed to do in the sim. She had things that the sim would help her do quickly, whether she needed to or not. She wanted to start a stack for this Sasha that Johansson had brought up. Wanted to find a way to start making and notating all of those connections.

Working in sim was part of her job. She had gone into this research project knowing that it was only in sims that people got lost. It had never bothered her before.

And yet here she was, waffling about whether or not she felt safe going in to do her work.

She sighed, sipped her coffee, shook her head. Then set her hands in the cradles and rested her head against the headrest. Nothing for it.

Within her sparse, black space, Carter prowled through the stacks she had started on this little side project. Invisible to others, she created a private stack within the string-delineated area,

next to the pendant “Possible acquaintances” card. Private cards showed up with a subtle blue tinge to her, and would only appear on her view of the workspace.

On the first card in the stack, she transferred over the notes she had taken with Johansson. Then she started another card labeled “Sasha?” and added it to the stack.

The whole private stack was looped up to RJ’s card with a piece of cotton string. Others would be able to see that she had created the stack with the string trailing off to a faint outline of a deck, or a grayed out pack of cards, or however their view of the sim chose to represent the data.

Strictly speaking, she shouldn’t be doing such. They were intended to be for short notes to oneself about what one was working on, not for actual investigative work. This was something new. She wasn’t supposed to have this information.

Carter stepped back to look at the whole cordoned off section of data. She frowned. Never mind the information, was she even supposed to be doing investigative work? She was supposed to be utilizing the data that the hospitals and the university provided her with, not running out into the field and talking with acquaintances of the lost over pints after a show.

Sanders would have a fit if he knew what she was up to.

Even so, she wasn’t quite sure it was only that that drove her to make the stack private. Some hunch. Some shadow lurking behind her.

She needed to be more subtle about this than she had been.

Ioan Balan — 2305

The grin and the sense of pride that Dear gave off did not last.

“Thanks again for the offer of space,” Ioan repeated. “I know I was driving #Tracker nuts. I guess I talk to myself.”

“Of course.” Dear’s partner picked up when the distracted fox did not reply. “You can stay as long as you’d like, it’s no trouble. You could probably scream bloody murder over there and we wouldn’t here.”

“I’ll try not to, all the same.”

Dear’s partner grinned. Dear merely nodded.

“Hey fox, I’m going to get some writing done. Why don’t you show Ioan the gallery?”

“*Right, yes, of course!*” Dear straightened up, perhaps invigorated at having something to do. Something to declaim about. “*How much art history do you know?*”

Ioan stood to follow Dear as it trotted from the living room back to the front of the house where the gallery was situated. “I studied photography and imaging quite a bit. Film, too.”

“*Let me guess, documentaries?*”

“Of course.”

“*You seem like the type, yes. An historian searches for stories.*” True to eir guess, Dear was now grinning more easily, gesturing to a paint-

ing on the wall. *“All artists do. I search for stories, in this post-self age. What happens when you can no longer call yourself an individual, when you’ve split your sense of self among several instances? How do you react? Do you withdraw into yourself, become a hermit? Do you expand until you lose all sense of identity? Do you fragment? Do you go about it deliberately, or do you let nature and chance take their course?”*

The speech felt rehearsed, but had hooked Ioan all the same. “I suppose that is what an instance artist is, then. Finding the stories inherent in forking.”

“Yes. Forking is instantaneous, and yet in that instant, a story is told. There’s a question implied to which the answer is ‘I must create a copy of myself’. Is it to accomplish a task, like you have done? Is it to sequester some emotion unable to be contained by one mind?” Dear forked, another instance of it standing to the other side of Ioan. *“Perhaps it’s to prove a point.”*

Ioan jumped at the sudden duplication, at which both foxes grinned. The original Dear quit. “Who is the audience for this story, then?”

The fox laughed. *“Fuck if I know. The universe? That’s not my job.”*

“I mean, you’ve got your exhibitions, don’t you have an audience there?”

“Those who attend the exhibitions do get to watch and participate, yes. But are they truly the audience? If they are reacting to my work, and I am immediately reacting in turn, doesn’t that make them part of the story, instead?”

Ioan shrugged. “I suppose so. It seems a bit like a distinction without a difference.”

Dear made a graceful setting-aside gesture, as though the statement was in some way irrelevant. *“All this to say that, for all of my*

fancy shenanigans, I still see the stories in the art around me. This painting — a replica from way back when — tells a story with the image it shows, but also its construction. The paint is applied with a palette knife in thick globs. It looks haphazard, but it isn't. It's very carefully done. The story is the artist's choice in tools, in technique, as well as in the subject of the painting."

The painting itself showed a riot of colors, abstract, and yet hinting at some cyclonic force. Blue on green. Splotches of purple, of red. The paint shone slightly under the lights.

Ioan and Dear stood in front of the painting a minute longer, each thinking their thoughts. The fox, with its paws behind its back, looked to be trying to puzzle out the order in which the gobs of paint had been applied to canvas. Ioan found emself wondering what this cyclonic force was reaching towards. What it was destroying.

It was Ioan who broke the silence. "Why are you upset, Dear?"

The fox wilted. "*That obvious?*"

Ey nodded.

"*Right. It's the clade.*"

"A disagreement?"

"*Of sorts. A silent one, or one on a very base level. I believe there is a story here. There's something going on that's worth researching and learning about and getting to the bottom of.*"

"And others don't?"

Dear shrugged. "*I am perhaps in a minority, on this subject. I think there's a story, and there are a few others who see it my way, but much of the clade is mostly concerned in the Name.*"

Stepping over to the next picture, Ioan formulated their response, but was preempted by the fox.

"It's not that I'm not. I am, in my own way. But these puzzles..." It trailed off.

"Are they the story?" Ioan frowned, backtracked. "You think there's a reason you're being led down the path. The puzzles are part of the story, but they are, as you put it, the answer to the question that necessitated their creation."

Ears perked, grin returned. *"Yes. Puzzles are puzzles and sometimes worth solving in their own right. I want to know **why**, though. Why say the Name, yes, but why build up tension like this?"*

The painting: a landscape, a cloud-dotted sky, and in the middle, a black square. Not just black paint, but a black that seemed to eat light. A black the hurt to look at. It made Ioan uncomfortable.

"I think I see why you approached me," ey said. "You are interested in the story, and want someone who lives and breathes stories."

That grin widened, and was joined by a swish of a tail. *"Precisely that. There is art to be had here. It is stressful and, if my suspicions are correct, it bears a message beyond just...what, a jape? A jab at the clade? There is a point to be made here."*

"The amount that you seem to differ from the rest of your clade is surprising. Are there no other artists?"

"Oh, we're all artists of a sort. Actors, mostly. A few sim designers. One of the other stanzas' lines painted this," it said, nodding to that unnerving black square. *"But yes, we are all quite different. Perhaps you will see some day."*

Ioan nodded.

Dear's grin had faded to some expression more thoughtful. Thankfully, not as glum. *"Artists, yes, but increasingly few storytellers."*

RJ Brewster — 2112

“You seem kind of frozen, kind of stuck, in a few ways.”

Sasha’s words, that night in The Crown Pub, pressed in against AwDae. Pushed thoughts out of the way. Blanketed eir mind.

Ey had lingered around the house for a few hours, laying on the floor, poking around in various rooms. All as empty and static as school had been. Eventually, ey paced back outside and across the road to the countless acres of state-managed open space that abutted the foothills. Ey paced along a few of the trails and deer tracks, mind spinning helplessly through numb hopelessness.

There was no birdsong, and while ey occasionally heard the buzz and chirp of insects, ey never saw one.

Ey gave up and returned home. Ey wasn’t tired by the time the sun went down, but for lack of volition, bundled up all the same in what had been eir old bed and slept.

Having gone to bed so early, AwDae woke up before sunrise. Eir alarm clock, still familiar after so long away from eir mom’s house, told them it was just past four in the morning. *I made it past the witching hour*, the fox thought, then barked out a laugh. Something about the idea of time in such a timeless space tickled and upset em all at once. Time! What a concept.

Despite the dark, ey decided on another attempt at exploration. Fog be damned. Mattered less at night, perhaps.

Ey slipped out of the house and paced around the neighborhood. Curling streets. Cul-de-sacs. Rows of townhouses. Familiar, all. Ey even made it back down to the school on the hill, searching for lights left on in the middle of night that weren't otherwise expected.

The results were negative, unless one counted streetlights in this empty world. All the houses' and the school's windows were dark.

Ey trudged back up the hill toward home and shut out the darkness. The kitchen light brought little warmth, so ey turned it back off again and waited for sunrise.

With the fog limiting render distance, sunrise took the form of a slow brightening, almost imperceptible at first, the world around home lifted through grayscale into brilliant color, settling on a teeth-aching azure.

During eir teens, ey frequently messed up eir sleep schedule enough to see the sun rise. Some days, ey would go down to the school for a run around the track before trudging eir way back up to the house again, sweating and invigorated. Or at least tired in a different way.

This whole sim seemed designed to, as Sasha had put it, keep em frozen in the past. The act of watching the world brighten and...well, not come to life, but at least gain color tugged at memories of countless days. Of waiting for eir mom to wake and make coffee.

Coffee.

AwDae padded back to the kitchen, claws clicking on the hardwood beneath eir feet. Prowling through the cabinets revealed startlingly little. The fridge was bare, as well. No food. No dishes,

either. On testing, the faucet didn't produce any water.

"What in the hell..."

It didn't make any sense. The whole world was rendered in such loving detail. Why not include things one would expect to be in a house? Lesser sims had running water. Perhaps it was due to the limitations of the sim being run from eir implants, though ey still doubted that the implants would be able to run something so complex in the first place. Scent, taste, and texture were all available to em — notoriously expensive to implement, usually — so why no food? Why no coffee?

"All I want is something real," AwDae growled. Fists parked firmly on the counter in front of the sink, ey pressed firmly against the formica. Tears stung eir eyes and, sagging, ey slowly sunk down to the cool hardwood floor. "That's all I want."

The sulk lasted a good half hour, with the fox crying off and on, though it brough less catharsis than ey hoped. By the time ey levered emself back up onto eir feet, eir backside was numb and tail struck by pins and needles.

No coffee. No water. No catharsis.

Tail hanging limp beneath eir stolen skirt, ey trudged back upstairs to eir room and slipped back onto the bed, laying on eir front, muzzle facing away from the windows and the taunting of the morning. In toward the closet, toward stasis and familiarity.

Ey ticked off the list of people in eir life who would be thinking of em. Some hopeful connection.

Johansson was almost certainly stressing out, doubtless stressing the rest of the Troupe in turn. His response to unknown situations was to try and make them into known situations. Put all that nervous energy to work, get things into a state where he could un-

derstand them again. Even with another tech handling sound, even if that had gone well, the boss would be jumpy and on edge.

Caitlin and Sarai would be missing em on a more personal level. AwDae was friendly with the entire company, of course, but it was those two ey had gotten closest to. Sharing that back-channel communication, that private space of the theater sim. Conversation that went beyond the Troupe, beyond theater. If anyone had able to reach eir friends outside of STT, it would be them.

And of eir friends, Sasha was always at the front of the fox's mind. She was the one person, excepting eir parents, who had been in eir life the longest. Ey was the one who understood em best, surpassing eir parents. Sasha had to be worried, even with em having been gone for so short a time. She had to be looking for em. The skunk was even listed as eir emergency contact.

Or perhaps, ey thought wryly, I simply want that to be the case.

Eir parents, always loving but always distant, would be concerned. Ey knew their tendency to freeze up when confronted with the unknown, though. Mom was the type who might sit by eir hospital bed and hold eir hand, as mothers do, but not necessarily the type of person to take action, to do any digging into what had happened or why. Dad would simply be glued in place, unable to deal with any emotions surrounding the event, never mind engage with the hows or whys.

Ey turned eir face to rub it against the pillow, leaving the pillowcase damp from tears. Then grumbled and sat up once again. Scrubbed at eir cheeks. Bristled eir whiskers. Eyes wandered around eir old room.

On a whim, AwDae stood and padded to eir bookshelf. Ey pulled down the most weathered book ey could find, some bit of sci-fi ey

had read countless times.

The fox flopped back onto the bed and flipped open to a random page, frowned. Ey blinked several times, squinted over to the window and back to the page, trying to focus. The words swam across the page. Would not stay pinned in place. Would not form sentences, nor even phrases.

Ey flipped to the first page. The swimming effect slowed, coalesced into legibility.

The effect was unnerving. As ey read, words would slip slowly into order, into focus — though the world around em remained static and sharp — and with every flipped page, it would take a moment before ey could move on.

This wasn't the book ey remembered.

Eir frown deepened. The story was there, familiar, but the text read more like a retelling. An admittedly quite detailed one, but a retelling all the same. An imperfect memory. It used words AwDae would've used, rather than those the author might've chosen.

Setting that book aside, ey levered emself up to pull another book down. The effect repeated itself. Stronger, this time. Ey had a hard time getting the words to settle on the pages, even starting from the beginning. Brow furrowed, ey tried with a few more books.

One ey hadn't read yet — an impulse purchase that one always means to read but never gets around to — was an unintelligible jumble of letters. Not just letters, but marks that hinted at the idea of what it meant to be a letter. Shapes.

“Well, huh.”

Still frowning, the fox sat on the edge of eir bed and picked up the original book, thumbing through pages and watching the effect distractedly. Words jumped out. Occasionally a phrase would form,

but nothing exact. It was as though the book was deciding what to become from moment to moment based on where ey inserted their claw when flipping through it.

Ey hopped to eir feet, skittered back down the stairs to the pack ey had brought from the school, and fished out the scraps of notes. The scrap, the piece of paper with Cicero's DDR votes on it. No swirling, disjointed effect affected this text.

An hour's exploration later, ey puzzled out what might be going on.

Of course AwDae's exocortex wouldn't have the complete text of the dozens of books on eir shelf. How could it? Ey had only ever read them as hard copies, never through the software mediated by the implants. Never on a screen of any kind. So of course ey wouldn't be able to read the books here in the sim, if that sim was confined to eir implants.

And ey was increasingly starting to doubt that the sim was bound to eir exo, or any of eir implants.

A midday walk through the open space netted them a hypothesis. A shaky one, but something more plausible than what information ey had been working with.

There likely was some information stored in eir implants. Some dozens terabytes, maybe. Enough to store a good chunk of data, but not necessarily an entire sim. Certainly not one this big.

Maybe it was that the implants themselves didn't store the sim, or not all of it, but acted as a framework? Maybe AwDae's brain provided all of the information needed to show em a sim, and all the implants did was turn it into an experience. Maybe the implants were a mirror, reflecting memories, recollections, hints and dreams.

That would be why the text of the books was jumbled, and when

it wasn't jumbled, it was wrong. It was just eir recollection of the book being mirrored back at em in a way that was tangible. Tangible, as much as anything was in sim.

That would explain why ey had been able to smell the seats of the auditorium, too. It was a scent that must've been permanently ingrained in eir memories.

And yet, this was an imperfect sim, based as it was on memories. The school with its countless hours of memory invested in it, had plenty of detail, as did eir home. Yet AwDae was willing to bet that, were ey to go into another house on the block, ey wouldn't find anything. Or perhaps ey wouldn't be allowed in at all. All those locked doors on that first day's explorations. Ey would have no memory of the inside, so why would the minimal system of implants-mirroring-memories be willing to show em anything?

This had strange ramifications. This meant that eir implants were still acting as implants, but rather than taking signals from eir, the 'net, and eir mind, they were only taking in information from eir mind. That meant that everything was still up and running as though ey was delved into the 'net.

Which was absurd, of course. There was no way for the interferences to run without power, without data coming from the NFC pads on eir forehead or the contacts on eir fingers. Ey had been pulled back. Ey had felt that rending, that spike of pain. There was no possible sequence of events that led to this conclusion.

Was there?

Perhaps getting lost was as simple as layer after layer of redundant fail-safes failing in turn, implants remaining on even after contact was lost with the rig.

AwDae sat on the fence bordering the open space, watching the

color of the light duck down through golden and into salmon. Ey realized ey would need to be more deliberate in eir search. If ey was limited to places ey had memories of, ey would have to remember just which places those were.

Ioan Balan — 2305

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

As with so many of eir previous projects, ey fell into a state of free-running sleep and distractedness. Ey would work for a few hours, suddenly get impossibly 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 at one point and entertained the idea that it might be part of some larger sleep disorder, something grander, perhaps. Ey had put it off as just one of eir many neuroses.

Less than healthy.

There were never any complaints about the quality or quantity of work ey got done while free-running. Ey didn't slip up or stumble. Didn't make more mistakes than when ey stuck to a schedule. Made fewer, perhaps. And being methodical got one quite far as an 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 with eir forks, whether or not they used a cone of silence. Ey knew the feeling well. It was implicit that ey would, as a fork. It was a common enough prob-

lem when multiple Balan instances stayed in the same house while on projects, each on a separate project, a separate schedule. And ey was nothing if not a Balan.

And here, ey'd been lucky enough to be invited by eir...client? Patron? Had been invited by Dear to stay at its place.

So that's how ey found emself rubbing eir eyes in front of a simple, if painfully modern, desk in a studio apartment attached to eir...employer's? Friend's? Eir friend's equally modern house.

The studio apartment really was a studio, too: someone — perhaps Dear — had used it for painting. 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 down-tree instance, Dear The Wheat And Rye Under The Stars had forked to explore its twinned interests of forming oneself and 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 emself liking it. Ey was curious to get to meet another Odist.

If it weren't for the window, opaquable, the apartment would have felt like a cell. Simple cot. Desk. The kitchenette the one concession to freedom. 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 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. 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 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 often?”*

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

“You 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. Walk with me?”*

Ioan nodded and stood, “Glad to. I’m 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 and it beckoned out toward the prairie. *“Come, let’s walk. Storm scheduled in an hour, let’s catch all of the nice smells.”*

Sasha — 2112

Sasha clutched at the arms of her chair, fingernails digging into the foam of the armrests, before standing up.

That her relationship with RJ was so casual was working against her. She knew ey was in the UK, and that they worked at a theater, but for the most part, ey talked about other things. Shared things. Not work. Or, if work, theater in general. Ey talked about Cicero and Debarre. Ey talked about The Crown Pub. Ey talked about eir past and eir shared world, eir syncosm. Ey rarely got into the present and the embodied world, eir exocosm.

So she had been at something of an impasse, then, with no way to figure out just what had happened to lead to eir disappearance. There were rumors abound in the Crown Pub that ey was lost, just like Cicero.

She would have to admit that she had been the source of more than a few of them, given the notification from the hospital she had received — that ey had put her down as an emergency contact was touching in a way she could not quite articulate — stating that ey had been admitted, but that, no, unless she were to arrive in person for biometrics, they would not be able to tell her what had happened.

The thing that plagued her with doubts was the sheer improba-

bility of such a thing. Ey had joined them on their own private investigation into Cicero. Had that been it? But here she was, and Debarre was, as far as she knew, still alright. Even then, how could it be that thinking about, talking about, working with data related to the lost would lead to one getting lost themselves? Wouldn't the researchers on the case be all the more susceptible?

Perhaps it was something about the data?

Still a dead end, she thought. We have the same data ey had. There's four or five of us with ACLs on the deck.

And perhaps ey wasn't lost at all. There had been the show, of course. And while RJ had never disappeared during performances before, ey had certainly been quieter during her timezone. But with the message from the hospital, the only potential there was that there had been some sort of accident at the theater.

She was embarrassed at how long it had taken her to think about simply searching eir name. She still had that from school, after all. Doubtful that searching 'AwDae' would turn up any medical reports.

So it was that Sasha wound up reading the same article that Carter had found a few days earlier. It confirmed all her worst suspicions.

She sent Debarre the link first, the subject line simply the emoticon :/. Distressed as she was, she deleted the auto-corrected emoji and replaced it with the emoticon, feeling, somehow, that that better represented her despair. She considered passing the article around further, but thought better of it. It pulled too hard at her heart. It had left her sobbing when she first found it. Their relationship, brief as it was, had been one of the happiest of the lot she had been through. There was no ire in the way they had drifted from 'item' back to simply friends.

The one upshot to finding the article had been the name of the group that RJ worked for.

And thus Sasha, pacing back and forth in front of her desk, trying to work up the courage to hit send on the email she had drafted.

She had considered sending an email to the leader of the troupe, Bernhard Johansson, but had decided against it, figuring that the man had far more on his plate running a play than anything. Too much to bother responding to a request such as hers. Ditto this Sarai Coen, listed as stage manager. If the play was still running, both would be swamped.

She had settled instead on a Caitlin Fowler, listed as working the lights for the stage. Given all that RJ had told her about working as a theater tech, she would likely be both the closest to em and one of the least busy. If there were such a thing, that is. Sasha had been an actor, not a tech, and had no clue how busy those nights and days between performances were for the tech side.

Sasha was just thankful that email addresses had been listed for the cast members. Not the crew, but given the pattern of first-name-dot-last-name-at-sttroupe-dot-co-dot-gb-dot-wf, she was hoping Caitlin's would follow suit.

Caitlin Fowler,

I apologize for writing to you out of the blue, but I am a friend of RJ Brewster who works with the Soho Theatre Troupe, and I was wondering if you would be able to provide me with a bit more information about em. I am a friend from school and remember em working with theater there, and talked with em daily on a sim online.

I know this is a long shot, and I hope this reaches you, and I hope that you are well, all things considered. If you get a chance to send me a note, I would greatly appreciate it. Both email and meeting in a sim would be fine.

Yours.

Sasha

Sasha had deliberated over the two paragraphs for an hour and a half, deleting and correcting. How much should she ask for? Should she reveal where they interacted? How should she start the letter, and how should she finish it? Hell, how should she address herself? Her real name wasn't Sasha, though she thought of herself that way more often than not. She figured that, should they actually meet up in a sim somewhere, that would be the name that this Caitlin would get.

She ran quickly to her terminal and hit 'send' before she second-guessed herself any further, and then...

Oh, shit.

Now she realized her mistake. Realized that, if they *did* meet up in a sim, Caitlin would be meeting up with skunk-her, rather than something more like her in the offline world. Perhaps she had a human av stashed away somewhere. She could buy one off the shelf real quick. It was seven thirty in the British Isles, she might have time before Caitlin woke up.

No luck. A scant two minutes of Sasha fretting at her keyboard passed before a ping alerted her to a new message.

OMG OMG we were hoping one of RJ's friends would contact us. We only know so much. Your sim or mine? Meet you in five. C.

Far too little time to switch out an av for something a bit more...presentable? A bit more human?

Sasha groaned.

Nothing for it. She set her hands on the cradles and leaning into the headband of her workstation. Once in, she pulled up her in-sim mail and spoke quickly.

Caitlin,

Either is fine. Should warn you that I know RJ through furry, and may look weird. My address is @Sasha:of-all-stripes.fur#home in case you want to meet here, or we can meet publicly.

Sasha

The reply came in a matter of seconds, half a minute tops.

Sasha. Crown Pub? In case you want to tell others. That's what RJ always talked to me. We know about furry. C.

The relief was palpable, if incomplete. It would certainly be strange to actually interact with one of the tourists that drifted through that sim. She tapped one of the pre-written replies — “Sure, see you there!” — on her client, hoping that that would portray the appropriate levels of urgency that Caitlin seemed to share, then dashed to her tport pad and swiped left, quickly selecting the top, most-visited option.

Caitlin was already there.

Sasha wasn't sure whether to be surprised or not that the woman had a custom avatar. She was evidently a fan of the past, with hair swept neatly to the side to reveal an undercut. She wore a long, sleeveless tunic emblazoned with the word *heh.*, running to mid thigh covering only leggings. Something from earlier in the century.

Sasha felt plain in her simple skunk av. Baggy shirt and fisherman's pants, fashionable enough by today's standards, did not stand up against London fashion.

"Caitlin?" she said, voice raised.

The human waved energetically and weaved through the crowd. "Sasha, right? There a place we can talk? Anyone else you want to bring along?"

Sasha did a quick scan of the room, picking out Debarre sulking at the end of the bar. She jogged over and tapped him on the shoulder. "Someone who knows RJ is here, want to join?"

The weasel perked at that, frowned, nodded. "Uh, sure. Do they know about Cice?"

"I don't know, but they might. They only said they know about RJ, and that ey had talked to them about this place."

Debarre shrugged and slipped out of his stool, pacing after Sasha. "Better than nothing," he grumbled, nodding to Caitlin on his way to one of the empty booths.

The three settled onto the overstuffed seats. There was a moment of silence before all three started talking at once, followed by another silence, then nervous laughter. Sasha gestured to Caitlin.

"RJ's lost. It happened during a rehearsal." She frowned, a finger tapping at the scarred table between them. "Should back up,

though. How much do you know?"

"We read an article about em. Something from a tabloid. It just mentioned the Troupe, which is how I found you."

Caitlin nodded, frowned, then offered her hand to Debarre. The weasel shook it cautiously. "Sorry, I should introduce myself. I'm Caitlin, the lights tech for STT. I was there when...when it happened."

"Debarre," Debarre said, gruff. "Boyfriend's lost, too. RJ, Sasha, and I were trying to figure out what happened."

Fumbling some cards out of her pocket and duplicating them, Sasha added, "We were exchanging a deck on Cicero, Debarre's partner. You don't have to do anything with them, but you might as well have a copy, too. And, hold on." The skunk swiped, tapped through menus, created a new card titled 'RJ lost', duplicated it twice. She handed one each to Debarre and Caitlin. "One for RJ as well."

Caitlin swiped up on the card, tapped the voice-record button, and began speaking. "Alright, so here's what I know. RJ was working sound that night, last night of rehearsals, and started having trouble about halfway through. Ey went quiet on the mic, and then missed a cue or two before we noticed what was going on. We called a halt to the rehearsal and found em unresponsive at eir rig. We pulled em back and hit the panic button and...and nothing. Ey was gone. Even out of the station, eir implants indicated that ey was still inside.

"The cops and paramedics had a protocol for the whole thing, I guess. Ey was taken off to the hospital. It all happened so fast. Johansson — that's the director — met up with a woman from the university who said she was studying the lost and had a talk with her. She said she had gotten information on em, but wanted more, so they talked for a bit. Her name was—" Caitlin frowned and thought

for a moment, then tapped the growing deck to add another card. “Carter Ramirez. Oh, you’ve already got one in here. Remembered it was Spanish or something. Johansson mentioned your name, which is why I was so eager to meet up.”

Sasha sat up straighter. “My name?”

“Yeah. Ey mentioned you. Hell, ey mentioned Cicero.”

At this, Debarre perked up, looked so intently at Caitlin that she quailed under his gaze.

“Just that he was lost, I’m sorry. I don’t know much beyond that.”

The weasel’s shoulders slumped, and he nodded.

“There’s a lot of downtime, working tech. We all chat and...hey, why did you contact me, anyway?”

“I figured you’d be the least busy, other than maybe stage hands. Plus, RJ said lights techs were always cool.”

Caitlin laughed, brushing her hair back. The motion seemed automatic, as her hair had hardly budged. “It’s true. Anyway, we talked. I don’t actually know what more to tell you beyond that. The rest of our relationship was work. RJ was super focused on that, and didn’t really chill with the rest of us when ey wasn’t working. Ey had a cat, I know that.”

“Priscilla, yeah.”

Caitlin shrugged. “Sure, I guess. I was hoping you could tell me more, actually.”

Sasha frowned and, on a whim, recounted much of her and RJ’s history. All the way back to their relationship, back through school. School productions, school summers, sleepovers and movies and all the trappings of being a kid.

By the end, she was crying freely.

“I didn’t know, I’m sorry. RJ never talked about relationships.”

“I think I was the only one.” Sasha sniffled. “There weren’t any others that I knew about, at least. Ey was kinda, uh...aromantic, I guess.”

Caitlin nodded. “That tallies. Listen, I gotta get going, though. I ran at this without really thinking, and your email ping woke me up. I don’t know if I can, but I should try sleeping more before the show tonight.”

“No problem,” Sasha and Debarre said in unison. They laughed, though whether at the shared words or the giddiness that went along with new information, Sasha couldn’t tell.

“No problem,” she repeated. “Thank you so much for meeting up with us. And thank you for confirmation on that researcher’s name. I’ll see if I can find this Dr. Ramirez. Keep in touch, alright? And add to the deck if you find anything.”

Caitlin nodded. “Will do. See you later.”

And with that, the woman signed off. Poor form to sign off in the middle of a public sim like this, but everyone was a bit jumpy. The skunk and the weasel shrugged it off.

“Guess now we have another lead,” Debarre said.

“Yeah. And if she’s a big name researcher, I bet she knows about Cicero, too.”

At that, Debarre brightened, and for the first time in weeks, the two spent the rest of the night talking without tears.

Ioan Balan — 2305

Dear wasn't kidding about the smells. Ioan turned eir sensorium's sensitivity way up. 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 she had walked, too. Any further in one direction and the landscape would have become nearly desolate, more foreboding than natural. Any further in the other direction, though, and it would've been softened too much, would've become too well-tended, 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, and the details were fractal, continuing down through finer and finer layers.

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 all the same. 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. “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 any, 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. I think they’re the same, at least. 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’s grin widened. “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."*

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 fine." 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, miraculously talking through years to the system? That would be exciting.

"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, looking intently at em while its tail lashed excitedly behind it.

"They...what?"

"Good." Dear laughed. *"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 something 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.”*

“Right, yeah. Ioan Balan is my name, Ioan#c1494bf is my signifier.”

“Yes. It fell out of use quickly. Too clumsy a word. I use it now and then, when I can get away with it.”

“Makes sense, yeah. So they’re...”

“They’re an Odist, yes. 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. Wait, ‘he’?”

“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 second stanza, first line. They’re a conservative bunch. Only know one or two, but I assume that others are out there. And yes, ‘he’. Michel was a woman, but those early days were heady.”

Ioan nodded, “So the first stanza were the first forked, meaning he was the eleventh fork?”

“The first line from each stanza were the first forked, back when it cost to fork. Like, cost real reputation. Anyway, the first fork of the second stanza — second fork overall — 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 talk to, 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?"

Dear shrugged and turned its back on Ioan.

The historian stood rooted to the spot and watched as the fox took a few steps further out into the prairie, crossed its arms and stood straight, staring up into the bruised 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 noses 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?*"

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 its 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...snark.*"

Anger. Pride, maybe. It's a game they've worked at perfecting."

Ioan marveled at the change in Dear, though with this raise in stakes, 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.

RJ Brewster — 2112

Without eir HUD, there was no way that AwDae would be able to teleport. Ey would need to swipe up a destination entry and tap or speak the command for sending emself off to the desired location. Hell, even if ey were able to get at the menu, ey wouldn't have the coordinates for any of the particular places ey had come up with to visit. If they even had coordinates, that was. This was no regular sim.

Ey would have to walk.

Walking in sim wasn't tiring, of course. There were no calories burned when taking simulated steps in a simulated environment.

All the same, the prospect seemed exhausting.

Eir first location on the list had been university, where ey had studied (and, later, pioneered) the abstract integration techniques ey used daily at work. Without being able to teleport, however, that seemed out of the question. It was halfway across the country.

"Something more managable, then," ey grumbled.

The walk to the clinic where ey has had eir implants installed was halfway across town, so it would take a few hours to walk that distance, ey supposed, though ey had never walked it before.

Ey had time, though. All the time in the world.

With little to do, ey had slept early and woken early in turn. If it

was going to take a good chunk of the day, at least ey would be able to do it while it was light out.

Shouldering the appropriated pack, ey set out from home. It would be a short walk down to the school, then further down the hill toward Broadway, which would get em most of the way there. After that, two blocks east, ey would come across the squat, white building that housed the clinic. After that, it would be easy. There had been about a dozen appointments in the building, so ey knew it well enough that it would likely be in reasonable shape. Hopefully the doors would be unlocked.

The first skip happened about halfway down the hill from the school toward Broadway. AwDae noticed reaching the corner of the fence surrounding the track and football practice field, remembered eir brief interest in jogging and how ey always turned north there before reaching Broadway, which was always so noisy, and then ey was gliding down the street in a sitting position.

Ey let out a startled yelp and flailed eir arms out for support, eir left elbow catching painfully on something solid a foot to the side of em.

It took perhaps a second all told — a second of blurred darkness, of shadow and motion — before the rest of the car formed around em. Ey was sitting in the passenger seat of the family sedan, coasting down the road toward Broadway at what must have been the speed limit, though ey could hardly guess.

The car, like the books in eir room, took a while to swim into focus, and even then, some parts of it shifted indecisively, unable to come to rest in some solid, known state. Ey had only tried to drive it once before giving up on the prospect, so the dashboard in front of the steering wheel was particularly vague. Hints of dials, with no

needles on them. Smudges of marks on the windshield wiper and turn signal levers. The back of the car lurched in and out of focus sickeningly.

Ey realized ey was holding eir breath and let it out in a shaky whine.

The car continued down the street toward Broadway and turned smoothly without stopping at the light, accelerating seamlessly. The soft hum of the engine and the road noise beneath the wheels was as indistinct as all of the visuals. Disconcerting, to say the least.

After a minute or so, AwDae had a hypothesis at hand. Of course the sim — correction, eir memories — did not include walking along Broadway. Ey had never done it. Ey had only driven. Or been driven, as ey had never gotten a license emself. All eir memories could dredge up were those of the car, of moving smoothly along the road.

No teleportation, then; just fast-travel.

Eir one experience with hallucinogens had prepared them at least a little for the blurring, smearing effect of the world around em. The fog did not diminish, but it played tricks with the buildings lining the road to either side. There was the house with the psychic's sign out front, to be sure, and it was relatively clear, but the rest of the buildings were shifting, indistinct. When focusing on them, AwDay saw them as flat facades, no depth. Textures on a low-poly wireframe. It was a nightmare of that hidden time of intrasaccadic perception, that moment of suppressed visual input when one shifts one's gaze, laid bare and elongated.

Ey moaned and closed eir eyes. The sights were wrong. The sound was wrong. Even the feeling of acceleration and deceleration, the swing around turns, was off, as though the entire universe was poorly rendered. Eir stomach turned at the combination of sensa-

tions.

The next skip came only a minute or two later, as the memory of walking through the parking lot of the supermarket at Broadway and Timberline asserted dominance over the memory of driving along the thoroughfare. So suddenly was ey on eir feet and walking parallel to Broadway, so surprising was the shift, that ey stumbled and fell to eir hands and knees.

AwDae retched, though nothing came up. Not even the sting of bile.

Ey sat in the empty parking lot for what must have been half an hour, trying to master the urge to return home and disappear beneath the covers. Ey wanted to avoid that horrible, half-remembered drive at all costs.

And yet, ey had to do *something*. If there was even a chance of em being able to get out of this non-place, ey would have to keep moving, keep hunting and looking and thinking.

With a groan, ey stood again and walked toward the road once more.

The skip came as expected, and ey gritted eir teeth as the world whirled past. Perhaps ey would be able to make it to the east coast, but if that meant eight hours of this — home to the airport, then the plane, then a different airport, then transit to the dorms — well...hopefully ey could find a work-around.

The rest of the journey to the clinic thankfully passed without another skip. Ey had been worried about passing through the pedestrian mall, which ey'd spent countless hours walking up and down, but thankfully ey had spent nearly as much time traveling along Broadway. Eir 'car' continued down the empty street, blithely changing lanes to pass cars that weren't there, turn signal and steer-

ing wheel moving on their own.

The low-slung building of the clinic was just as AwDae remembered it.

The turn of phrase got a laugh out of the fox. In this sim, perhaps that was literally true. It could be no other way.

Preempting another skip, ey scrambled to open the door of the car and hop out on eir own before it was done for em. With a satisfying thunk, the passenger door of the dusty blue sedan swung shut behind em. *Promising, ey thought. Perhaps I can just be more deliberate about it. I'll get in the car this afternoon, follow the drive back home, and maybe it'll park in the driveway as easy as that.*

Eir claws clacked against the pavement leading to the smoky glass doors. Although it wasn't overly warm out, not with the fog-of-war fogging everything up, the cool air that breathed out of the clinic was nonetheless refreshing after the stomach-churning journey across town.

Dr Carter Ramirez — 2112

Dr Carter Ramirez

We'd like to thank you, first of all, for all of your efforts in working on these cases of the Lost. Your services are invaluable and are providing the families and friends of the Lost with hope, not to mention the world at large. We have come to rely on this technology in our daily lives in almost all spheres of work and pleasure.

As you know, research here at UCL is funded through a series of organizations and foundations working together. These relationships are both an expression of trust and a political statement, and both of those expressions work in both directions. As such, we welcome conversations, questions, and comments about research from the sponsors.

A recent suggestion regarding your project was that more effort be placed on researching the neurological aspects of these cases, focusing primarily on the treatment and prevention of such cases in the future.

As such, we're requesting that you add one more neuroscientist intern to the team. Unfortunately, due to bud-

getary constraints, your team must remain the same size as it is currently. Could you please respond with the name of a member of your group not on the neuroscience side who will, if possible, be offered a transfer to another project? Admin will take care of the rest.

Please continue the excellent work. If you have any additional questions, please don't hesitate to send a note.

Ari Liebler Research Coordinator

Carter slid her chair slowly back from her workstation and paced over to the coffee station. She wasn't tired — she wasn't tired; she was a bit too awake, if anything — but she needed something to do while mulling over the email from admin.

Pouring herself a half cup of chicory coffee, she looked out over the room, at the heads bowed over tablets or nestled into the headrests of workstations. How could she possibly be expected to choose who would get the ax?

There was another thing bothering her, however, and the more she turned the thought over in her mind, the weightier it grew.

The shared workspace wasn't private to the team, of course. Their research was overseen by Ari as well as a few others, and there were likely reports that had been passed back to the backers of the project. Obviously there had been, now that she thought of it. How else would they know that effort was being spread out among a variety of different approaches the problem?

But why this sudden interest? Or, looking at it another, less favorable way, interference? The idea didn't sit well with Carter, especially so soon after starting to explore this new social avenue. That

would probably take the hit the hardest: there were few other areas that could afford to lose a researcher.

The thought soured further as she remembered Sanders' resistance to the line of research from the start.

On a whim, having not even sipped her coffee yet, Carter slipped back to her workstation and delved in, stepping out of the workspace and into the anteroom, a small area off to the side of the main space where virtual meetings could be held, where others' avatars would show up, rather than just the shadowy shapes.

"Anteroom, when you get a chance," she murmured into a message pane, then sent it off to Sanders.

She received a ping of acknowledgement and settled back to wait.

It was only a few minutes — hardly enough time for her to organize her thoughts — before the head of neurochem stepped into the anteroom and lounged in the chair across from her. "What's up, boss?"

"Here," Carter said, swiping up a terminal to forward the email she had received over to Sanders. "Give that a read."

She watched as his eyes scanned over something she couldn't see. In public spaces, it was usually kind to pull up a tablet so others had a visual indication that one was occupied, but Sanders had never been one for formalities. Sims were only ever a tool for him, nothing more.

"Rough stuff," he said, nodding. "Who do you think will be the unlucky one?"

Carter sighed. "I'm not sure. I can't think of anyone I would want to lose. Anyone we could afford to lose, even."

Sanders nodded.

“Look,” Carter continued after an awkward pause. “I know you weren’t a fan of the social link I mentioned before. Did you...?”

“Did I tip off the board?” Sanders laughed, holding up his hands. “No, of course not. I’d not presume to go behind your back like that. You knew my reservations, but I’d rather talk about it with you and the team than pull something like that.”

Carter nodded. The sincerity was evident in his voice, she felt, so she relaxed back against the seat. “I got it, yeah. I’m sorry. It just came so suddenly and seemed connected, is all. Maybe I’m getting too good at seeing connections that aren’t there.”

Sanders politely said nothing, looking down at his hands.

“Well, hey. Thanks for that. It’s really reassuring. I’ll let you get back to your stuff. Will call the team in for a huddle about this after lunch.”

“Sounds good,” Sanders said, pushing himself up out of his seat and wandering back into the main room.

Carter watched the man’s back as he turned from a solid avatar back into a shadow, thinking. If she was going to pursue this line any further, she’d likely have to do much of the work herself. Something, she realized, she was already prepared to do.

The team was none too happy to learn of the news. They had been working together over the months that they had on the project, and felt themselves a well-oiled machine.

“This is going to throw a huge fucking wrench into things,” Avery grumbled. “We’ll lose one of our own, then have to get someone new up to speed. It’s going to take ages.”

“I know,” Carter sighed. “I’d push back if I thought they’d let me, but they say it’s a matter of those who sign the checks, so I think I’m S-O-L on that front.”

An unhappy silence greeted her. No one was looking at each other, all just staring at shoes, ceiling, or walls.

“Listen, I think we have some time. Absolutely no pressure, but if anyone wants to volunteer, cool. Otherwise, I’ll put some thought into this and have to make a decision. Either way, I’ll go to bat for you in trying to get a transfer rather than just the sack.”

Another sullen silence. Carter shrugged helplessly, and with an apologetic look, walked back to her workstation. She had little more consolation that she could offer them.

Once she delved in, Carter let out a low groan. A small, pulsing envelope icon in her peripheral vision let her know she had another email. *If it’s more bad news, I’m going to lose it.*

It certainly didn’t look like bad news, though Carter remained wary. The address wasn’t from someone at UCL, or the UMC, for that matter. It was a free address, something personal rather than professional. It had made it past the filters, though, so perhaps it was legit, despite its shady provenance.

Dr. Ramirez,

I’m writing to ask for your help in the search for two of my friends who are lost.

I know there’s probably little you can do to help, and you might not even be able to talk to me, but my friends and I are scared, and want to know what’s going on. And if we can help, we’ll do all we can.

Their names are RJ Brewster and Collin Jackson.

If you can, email me back. I understand if you can’t.

Sasha.

Carter frowned. Well, at least it wasn't bad news.

This Sasha was right, though, she technically wasn't supposed to respond, at least not with anything more than a form letter stating such.

In the midst of pulling up the file with the form letter, a thought struck Carter. She would have to do most of the work on this herself, true, but perhaps she could do a little bit more outside research, as she had done with Johansson. She wouldn't be able to rely on it, nor even publish it, but there was no harm in more information, if she had to strike out on her own.

Before she lost her resolve, she filled out the form letter and scheduled it to reply at five, near the end of her day. Then she paced around the workspace, organizing and cleaning decks as she sorted through her plan in her mind.

She left that evening at five after five, far earlier than she usually did. She had been prepared to beg off with feeling ill, but found she didn't need to: most of the team was also packing up and leaving. No one looked happy, with one of their jobs' on the line. Everyone avoided eye contact on the way out.

Determined now, Carter left quickly and, while standing in the station for her train, fumbled out her phone and started typing away on it.

Sasha,

I know you likely just got a reply from my work address, but I'm replying here as well. While UCL and the team I work with aren't able to provide any assistance or information with regards to the cases, I might be able to help a little on my own, and I'm sure you'll be able to help me.

We don't have much information on RJ or Collin, and I'm desperate for more.

We can figure out a way for that information to get to the team later, but for now, we can talk here.

~Carter

Thumb hovering over the 'send' button, Carter hesitated. She was being reckless, she knew, but the more she thought about the interactions of the Lost, the more she was convinced that there was something to the connection, at least in this case. And the more sure she was, the worse the letter from admin stung.

She gritted her teeth and hit 'send'.

Qoheleth — 2305

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. My clade.

My *old* clade.

I was now Hebel Qoheleth.

Hebel Qoheleth.

The old name was dead. I was Hebel Qoheleth.

RJ Brewster — 2112

If RJ had been expecting to find some fresh clue, some exciting conclusion to eir adventure at the clinic, ey was disappointed. The office was an office. Cold, hollow, impersonal despite countless touches cleverly engineered to add personality.

If eh had expected perhaps some comfort from familiar surroundings, ey was also disappointed. Upon walking into the clinic, memories fell upon em like ticks from branches, latching on, leaching substance. Consult, surgery, treatments, training, training, training. Getting to know the doctor and his team. Getting to know the trainers. Learning to loathe them. Learning to love what they had to offer.

There was nothing there.

There were the couches in the lobby, of course. There was the desk where ey checked in, the receptionist's chair behind it. There was the hallway. There were the locked and unlocked doors — ey now suspected that the locked doors hid rooms that ey had never seen, eir memory refusing to consider things that ey never remembered.

There was the dimly lit surgery suite.

There was the row of paired rigs. Instructor, student.

There was the whole affair laid out before em, and no solutions. No explanations.

Ey paced the halls. Sat on the lobby's couches. Sat at the rigs, dumb and silent. Lay on the operating table, face down as ey remembered. Ey rifled through notes.

Ey threw eir weight against a locked door, far more solid than it had any right to be, no rocking in the frame evident. It may as well have been a wall.

Tears stung at eir eyes. School, home, this place. Everything was dreamlike, waffling between mind-numbing and nightmarish. If, as ey was beginning to suspect, all of this was simply taking place in a combination of eir mind and eir implants, why would there be these tantalizing clues dangled in front of em? Why would eir mind think to invent a mode of transit that simply skipped em along in jagged, stomach-churning jumps?

The tears were flowing freely now, and ey hunched down against the unknown, unknowable door, crouching, then sitting with the skirt pooled around eir waist as the fur of eir cheeks was stained from the crying.

Nightmares. Dreams.

Ey needed something to anchor emself to. Ey needed something to hold onto that wasn't dependent on clues and tibdits of informationg that were...what? Stored in eir implants? In the core in eir exocortex, dumped when ey was pulled back?

Ey needed to make something in this pale semblance of a world.

Dreams and lucidity. What mattered a lucid dream if there was nothing to wake up from?

And yet was it not lucid? Did ey not have some semblance of control over this place? Ey had been trusting that it was some sort

of locked down sim. One in which ey had no ACLs. Some sort of semi-scripted film from which ey could not deviate.

But if it was a dream, if it was all within eir head and implants, was it not completely eirs? Did ACLs matter in a dream?

The fog of war, the importance of the sound board, the very setting of eir school and eir home, all of these were from within em. The ancient strategy games ey had played growing up, the thing that had captured eir imagination in school. The places, charged with memory as they were, which ey still dreamed of, even with home in London. Were these limits of the technological system operating in tandem with eir nervous system? Or were they simply limitations of a panicked mind?

Both?

Neither?

A test, then: something within said limits to begin with. Ey knew eir home. Ey knew eir room. Ey knew the feeling of the comforter beneath em. Ey knew the feeling of sitting on that bed, reading, of staying up past eir bedtime.

Ey knew it.

Ey closed eir eyes on the dim hall of the clinic.

Ey dreamed it, dreamed of home.

Ey felt it, breathed in the rich scent of the memory of it.

Ey dreamed it.

Ey felt it.

Ey reached out and, in one paw, clutched.

Eir fist was full of blanket.

Ioan Balan — 2305

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 they 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 its 'glass'. All of the glassware in the house was wide-rimmed to make way for 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 its 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 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 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 up-

load, 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.

"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."

Sasha — 2112

Sasha wanted to be pleased with the rapidity with which everything was taking place. It hadn't even been a week, and here was one of the lead researchers of the Lost getting in touch with her.

She wanted to be pleased. She wanted to believe that things were moving forward. Wanted more than anything to smell the lingering scent of fox and cat in the Crown Pub, just to know at they were there.

And yet, she wasn't. It was all wrong. Everything about all of this was wrong. There was no way that she would be able to forget that, despite feeling like things were actually getting done, she was still doing all of this for what was widely acknowledged to be a lost cause.

She began typing.

Dr. Ramirez,

Wow, I'm glad you got back to me! I was not expecting that. I'm a little confused as to why, but I guess no sense in questioning it.

Do you have information on RJ and Collin? I'll gladly give what I can. They both were good people. RJ and I went to school together, and the three of us spent a lot

of time together in sim. They would spend hours talking politics (mostly Collin yelling).

The last thing I got from RJ was this:

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

Do you have any idea what that might be about? I mean, I said Cicero was super into politics, but do you think RJ was onto something here?

I've copied Cicero's partner, Debarre (don't know real name, sorry!) and Caitlin Fowler from where RJ works.

Sasha

The response was only an hour in coming. As with Caitlin, the response was short and to the point.

Sasha, all - @129822922:d.no.onehere.board#default

A throwaway user? The sense of wrongness intensified.

All the same, Sasha logged in and swiped her way over to the address Carter had provided.

As with most throwaway rooms, it was a cube measuring about five meters on a side, with a faint grid lining the floor, and as with most throwaway avatars, Carter was visible as a gesture at humanity. The lines of a face visible only enough to show hints of expressions. Average height. Gray skin. Androgynous hair.

“Sasha, I’m sorry for meeting you like this.”

The skunk shook her head. “It’s okay, I guess. Can you tell me why?”

“Will you accept *because of a dream* as an answer?”

Sasha frowned.

“I suppose not.” Carter hugged her arms around her middle, a gesture that felt distinctly out of place from the gray avatar. “You mention, uh...AwDae investigating DDR activity, as well as Collin’s own involvement but—well, should we wait for others to show up?”

“I don’t know if any of them are coming.” She felt the tightness of panic in her chest intensify. “I don’t know where Debarre is, and I imagine Caitlin’s show is on.”

The figure before her frowned. “Right, I suppose so.”

Sasha pulled up her deck. “I can take notes, perhaps,” she allowed. “I don’t suppose you’ll want ACLs with a throwaway.”

“No, probably not. Notes will have to do.” Carter took a moment to compose herself, and then continued as she was saying before. “You mentioned the relation to DDR, and we already know that Collin and RJ were friends. This is something we’ve been looking into with my group. The possibility of a social vector, I mean. It’s gone poorly.”

“How do you mean, poorly?”

“Well, there was unexpected resistance within the team, and then shortly after taking this tack, the hammer came down from above saying we had to fire someone — someone not a neurologist — and shift our investigation to the neurological side.”

Sasha blinked. “Are you suggesting you’re being told to not look at social aspects?”

Despite the vagueness of the features on the avatar’s face, the smile still carried the weariness heard in the tone of its voice. “I suppose, yes. I had a dream about shadows following everyone and I guess I could say I’m a bit spooked. Too many coincidences in too short a time.”

“I’d chalk it all up to paranoia if I weren’t feeling so anxious, myself.”

“Any particular reason why?”

“I, well.” She brushed her paws down over the fur on her forearms, taking the moment to figure out a response. Any response. “I don’t know. Things are moving so quickly. I don’t know how to explain. I met up with Caitlin and she told me a lot, and then I emailed you, and your two responses didn’t do anything to assuage my fears.”

Carter nodded, didn’t respond.

“But I don’t know that anything you could have said beyond *we fixed it, AwDae’s awake* would have done anything but. Even your *we’re working on it* form letter was anxiety-inducing in its own way. I know you’re working on it. I imagine a lot of people are.” She hesitated, then added, “But that doesn’t really help to hear.”

“No, I imagine not.”

“And to then get another email saying that you wanted to talk things through outside the context of your work just added to my

fears. Like, what could that possibly mean?”

“I’m sorry,” the figure said dully. “I really can’t help in the context of work.”

“I know. I read up a bit on WFHIPA.”

“Yeah.”

The panic was slowly transmuting into anger. Sasha didn’t like it, but felt powerless to stop the change. “And now here you are in all gray talking about, what, conspiracy theories?”

“I’m sorry, Sasha. I really don’t feel any better about this than you. I’m not the paranoid type, usually, but I think Sanders...well, I suspect that one of my colleagues has motives that go beyond just his focus on neurochemistry. I think they go beyond just the university.”

Receiving more information tempered that anger. “How do you mean?”

“Well, I said the hammer came down. It did so in the form of grantors threatening to pull funding from the project.” Carter shrugged. “And I believe that the research coordinator — that is, the university itself — was just passing along that message. I think the stress is coming from higher up.”

“Wait, grantors?”

“Yes. The project is hosted by the UCL, but is being funded from external sources. Grants, that sort of thing.”

“Who’s writing the grants.”

Carter held up her hands. “No clue. That’s the thing. Why would the grantors throw their weight around, saying that we should follow specific lines of research? That’s not their job.”

“Have you even published data that would suggest anything but a—” Sasha dug for the term. “Neurological cause?”

The figure stiffened. “What?”

“I just mean AwDae got lost only a few days ago, and you said that ey was the reason you started looking at the social aspect, right?”

Carter began pacing. “Right, yeah. And we haven’t published anything along either front in that time. I can’t say this is helping my paranoia any.”

“Do you think this coworker—”

“Sanders?”

“Do you think Sanders is, what,” Sasha said, struggling to keep her voice in check. It seemed to want to simultaneously rise in panic and also sneer at the very suggestion. “Some sort of shady government plant?”

“I gotta go,” Carter said. “Don’t use the DDR for a while.”

Then she teleported away.

There were three small alarm bells, and Sasha found herself back in her home sim. The throwaway had been recycled.

“*Fuck.*”

RJ Brewster — 2112

The joy of finding emself sitting in eir own bed, ey supposed, should have been immediate and intense.

Instead, seeing eir room around em once more, AwDae closed eir eyes and shifted about until ey was able to draw the covers up over emself, a mirroring of this morning. The weight of the blanket atop em, the feeling of being surrounded, covered, supported by the mattress seemed to be more important than...than what, relief?

Ey didn't feel despair, didn't feel hopelessness.

AwDae wasn't sure what the emotion ey felt was. It was a non-emotion. It was a sense of swelling, of being too full. Of having words and images and colors flooding through them and yet wholly out of reach.

When ey had awoken this morning, ey had supposed that ey would head down from home to the clinic and magically find some sort of success. Or, if not success, at least another clue. Another step along the way.

This wasn't a puzzle, though. This wasn't a set of steps that could be followed to some logical conclusion. There was no end to the road, because there was no road.

Dreams, after all, have no plot.

Ey curled beneath the comforter. Resting in the fetal position in

eir childhood bed beneath eir childhood blankets. Ey could not even pretend that ey was dreaming. Were ey asleep, this would be one of those confusing dreams of too much meaning. Not nightmare, not blessed peace. Just neurons firing at random, conjuring images up from dust, from nothing.

If history played out as it promised to, there would be no waking. Ey was in a world of dream, er every thought mirrored back against the inner surface of eir cortices, cerebral and exo.

The data ey had received on the note, still nestled snugly within eir pack, was not some hidden clue. It never had been. It had been an artifact of a dreaming mind leveraging the data that had been stored in eir exocortex. Some part of em, already in the mindset of rummaging through data that afternoon before the rehearsal, was primed to dream of clues, of mysteries to solve.

Find this note.

Find this mic.

Find this solution and perhaps you will achieve your goal.

But what goal was that? Was it to solve the riddle of Cicero's loss? Was it to become unlost, to be found?

Or was it to become unstuck? Was it to find something new? Some way to move on? Move forward? Move, period?

"You seem kind of frozen, kind of stuck, in a few ways."

The laugh that came to them was choked, more sob than anything.

"Well, hard to get more stuck than this."

Ey drew the covers up over eir head. Perhaps ey wished to blot out the dream with darkness and silence, but this darkness was dream. The barrier: dream. The silence: dream.

Ey slept, then. Not the restless, confused sleep of the night be-

fore, but a dreamless sleep of an hour. The sleep of a mind requesting that very blessed nothingness. Was that something ey could request, as ey had requested to dream eir way back home?

It wasn't a long nap, of course. Or perhaps it was. Perhaps ey could will it to be as long as ey wanted. Perhaps ey were bound to a rhythm, but could bend time.

Either way, when ey awoke, the corners of eir eyes gunked up with dried tears, the funk of the morning had largely passed. The numbness still lingered around the edges, vignetting curiosity, but it was not so all-consuming.

AwDae sat up in bed, folding eir legs beneath em to keep eir tail from cramping. Ey teased a thread loose from the edge of the comforter, a habit from youth.

Habits in dreams. Dreams that were more than dreams. Dreams one knew about and nevertheless was pinned beneath, nightmare demons sitting upon one's chest, upon one's mind. Upon one's exo, perhaps.

"If I dream, if I dream," ey murmured, the words coming unbidden to eir lips. "If I dream, am I no longer myself?"

The vignette of numbness throbbed, narrowed, then faded once again. The words seemed to carry import beyond their plaintive query. Ey could not stop emself from speaking

Dawdling.

Ey stretched eir way out of bed and padded to the door of eir room, closed.

"Wait," ey commanded emself. Hand on doorknob. A count to three. A promise to emself. *I will open this door and will find the open space instead of the hallway.*

Could one dream within a dream? Do so with such a detail that

ey would not notice the transition? Had ey dreamed the trip to the clinic? Had ey perhaps slept through the return?

“I do not know. I do not know.”

A supplication, a mantra against hopelessness.

Ey turned the knob and stepped out into the short-grass prairie of the open space. The packed dirt of the trail welcomed eir paws. The scent of dust and rattle-dry stalks of grass washed over em. Warm, yellow lighted hemmed em in through the fog of war.

“Wait,” ey said once more. Kept eir hands at eir sides. Loose. Relaxed. A promise to emself. *I still have will.*

The fog receded, thinned, disappeared. The prairie of the open space stretched out before them. A valley, and then a ridge of hills to the east. The mountains behind eir back.

Not a sim. No limitations other than those eir dreaming mind had set upon them. Ey had spent so long in sims, lived eir life out in worlds bounded by the edges of invisible properties that, upon getting lost, ey had imagined the same must be true inside. More so, eir unconscious reasoned, for was ey not constrained to the processing power of eir exocortex?

But it was not a sim. It was a dream, their exo a mirror, and in the end, ey held control.

No commands, then. No promises. Ey knew that, were ey to take a step forward, eir foot would come down on the dinged hardwood floor of eir London flat. Priscilla would meow her hellos and twine around eir ankles.

Ey did not rush. Ey stood still. The breeze fingered eir fur and teased along the hem of eir skirt as a breeze must. There were the turbines on the far ridge, three blades turning laconically as turbines must. There was the highway across the valley, the gas station

squatting low alongside it as gas stations must.

And then ey took a step.

And then Prisca meowed and twined around eir ankles.

And then AwDae fell to eir knees and let the cat step up onto eir thighs, and ey lifted her in eir arms and buried eir snout in her warm, purring side, and cried.

Cried because this was not London. Cried because this was not eir cat. Cried because ey could dream anything ey wanted and it would not be anything beyond a dream.

This was a memory. This was something dredged up from eir own mind. Prisca, eir very own Prisca, was purring against eir face because that's what Prisca must do. She was squirming out of eir grasp because ey knew that, had ey held her like that in the waking world — and ey had — that that is what cats do.

Could ey will her to stop? To hold still and be his pillow to cry into? Ey did not know. Eir mind resisted the question. Resisted, because ey did not want that to be the case. Did not want to will eir precious cat to be anything other than she was.

Ey let the cat down so that she could pace to her favorite spot and groom the tears out of eir fur.

Dr Carter Ramirez — 2112

Carter could not have explained why she had created the throw-away account to talk with Sasha. Nor could she fully explain the panic that washed over her, strong enough for her to immediately log out and wipe both account and sim.

All she could explain was that Sasha's simple questioning had thrown her estimate of what might be going on within both the dynamic of the team as well as within the 'net as a whole into utter turmoil. The woman...skunk...skunk-woman had been correct. While there were occasional reports on their findings published to a few reviewers and advisors within the UCL itself, there had been no papers published in any journal, public or private. The phenomenon of the lost was new, and so was the study of them.

So how was it that the grantors were throwing their weight around in terms of the directions her team was taking? How would they know to do so? An informant? A mole?

After logging off, she picked up a sandwich at a nearby M&S, but could not bring herself to eat more than a few bites of it. When she lay down, sleep would not come easily, and when it did, all it brooked her was the same, stressful dream of shadows.

How does one encompass all of this in one mind? How does one take in the knowledge of being spied upon, of having decisions

made that impact one's life on such a base level and some how make that...what? Work? Make it fit? How does one do these things, and still go back to a workaday life?

Carter found work nearly impossible. Everyone around her was a suspect. Everyone around her was suspicious. Everyone around her was someone who was communicating to others, and, without any knowledge of those communications, what guarantee did she have that she was safe?

And was she not communicating with others? She was the one who had contacted Sasha. She was the one who had contacted Johansson. Was she not worthy of suspicion?

The worst was the lack of answers. She could ask all the questions she wanted, and there were no answers to be had.

Finding it impossible to get down to the business of actually working, she paced between rig and coffee station. If, perhaps, there were some way that she could think harder, think better, then perhaps she might be able to fit all of this within her newly updated worldview.

All the coffee did was up her heart rate. It did not wake her any, did not make her more efficient. It simply kicked her anxiety up another activation level.

All her rig had to offer was the work at hand.

She delved in all the same. If nothing else, she could use the dark. She could use the cool *Eigengrau* of her workspace, the order of information neatly delineated by thin cotton string. Perhaps numbers would sooth her anxious mind.

A soft ping. A notification. A small bell still loud enough to jolt her out of her reverie, or non-reverie, or whatever this caffeine-tinted haze she was in. Avery would like a meeting.

Carter found it hard to sit still in the small room. It was all she could do to keep from pacing agitatedly, and she focused instead on keeping her pacing more on the level of being slow and contemplative. *Is this out of the ordinary? Is me walking back and forth out of the norm enough to report to some higher authority? Is Avery on my side?*

“Dr Ramirez, sorry for bothering you.”

“No problem, Avery. What’s up?”

Her subordinate shrugged. “That’s just the thing, I’m not really sure. I started digging into what we were talking about, about how e8 was digging into DDR records before eir disappearance, and on a hunch, I decided to look at all of our other candidate cases. Turns out most of them, even the ones who weren’t heavy politics junkies, had a massive uptick in the amount of engagement they showed prior to getting lost.”

Carter frowned. “Wait, so not just e8? All of them?”

“Well, sort of. Of those who are just the junkies, it’s hard to pull apart just how much of their interactions were actually off baseline for them, you know? A set that large, a slight increase might not be that out of the norm. Still, it’s there.”

“Do you have a starting point for these increases?”

“Nothing in particular. In absolute terms, no.” Avery’s smile was wry. “Perhaps obviously. Everyone got lost at different times. Relatively, though, maybe. It looks like everyone who had this uptick had it within seventy-two hours of getting lost.”

“How confident are you in that?”

“Are you asking how strong the correlation is?”

“Sure.” She hesitated. “Though I’m also curious about your confidence in this line of reasoning.”

They frowned. “Well, in terms of the line of reasoning, I’d say

that it's strong enough that it's got me actually interested in looking into it. Not that I wasn't interested in these cases before, but this is really intriguing. I like the sort of...well, mystery aspect of it."

Carter laughed. "Yeah, it does have that going for it, doesn't it?"

Avery nodded. "And it always did before, too, just that now, I feel like I was handed a big bone in terms of what could actually be going on. It's not an answer, but of all the correlations we've been looking until now, this is one of the bigger ones."

"That strong of a correlation, then?"

"Well, look." They summoned a snatch of workspace, pulled a vcard from one of their decks, and tugged on the corners to expand it to presentation size. A table filled the page, but after a few commands from Avery, it shrunk, slid up to the corner, and in its place, a graph appeared, showing a series of correlation points and a trend line. "It's fairly strong if we leave everyone in, but if we filter...out...there. If we filter out the junkies, you can see how high it spikes."

Leaning in closer to the page, Carter scowled at the graph, then up at the minimized table, and back to the graph. "That's higher than anything else we've gotten, right?"

Avery nodded, tapped in a few more commands, frowning at some mistakes they made along the way, and then the graph was overlaid against other correlations they had been investigating throughout. "Just over one standard deviation, yes, though...wait."

Carter had started to nod along with Avery, then frowned at her subordinate's growing confusion. "What?"

"Do you see that?"

She looked back to the graph. "See wh--wait, what?!"

"Do you see that?" Avery said, louder. It was as though they

themselves needed the convincing, that they needed to have this witnessed right along with them...out...there. If we filter out the junkies, you can see how high it spikes.”

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“Do you see that?”

She looked back to the graph. “See wh—wait, what?!”

“Do you *see* that?” Avery said, louder. It was as though they themselves needed the convincing, that they needed to have this witnessed right along with them.

And it was worth witnessing. As both of them watched, wide-eyed, the graph shifted. The strength of the correlation started to dip. It didn’t do so smoothly, but in fits and starts. Avery’s hand darted up and, with a fingertip, dragged the table out to fill more of the card’s surface. There, along with the graph, the numbers of the correlation were beginning to change. Row by row, the ‘interactions DDR by hour 72 lim’ column were dropping. They were still high, yes, but perhaps more reasonable. The correlation was still there, but weaker.

“What—”

“Do you have this data backed up anywhere?” Carter was shouting. Didn’t know how to keep from shouting.

“I– maybe. Sec.” A few hasty commands, and the data was dumped to another card. The column name changed. The numbers stopped dropping on that card, even as they continued on the first. They handed the card to Carter. “But what–”

“Pull me back and hit my panic button. Quick!”

Avery stared, open-mouthed.

“Go!”

There was the pleasant animation of someone logging out and Avery disappeared.

Carter braced herself, but even so, the jolt of pain running in a sparkling thread down along her spine was stronger than she remembered, and she came up gasping, hands shaking from where Avery held them just above her contacts. With their knee, they hit the panic button on the rig, and the flip-up screen began ticking off cores dumped and suggesting that an official report be filed.

Still shaking, she looked around the office. Everyone was delved in except her, Avery, and Prakash, standing startled by the mini-fridge.

“Everything alright?” he asked, brow furrowed.

Carter waved her hand dismissively, trying to look calm. She doubted she did. “Was in a meeting. Crashed or something.”

Avery, perhaps picking up on the anxiety of the last minute, nodded. “We were in a meeting, uh...trying something. She started...” they trailed off and shrugged.

Prakash nodded. “Need to file a report? Anything like that?”

Carter stood, wobbled, and regained her balance. “I will after some water. Getting yanked hurts worse than I remember.”

“I haven’t done it since training.”

Avery shrugged. “I don’t think many have. It’s not all that common.”

Rinsing her mug free of coffee residue — additional caffeine at the moment being contraindicated — Carter attempted a laugh. “Right, yeah. I’ve had sims crash before, but not myself.”

The laugh didn’t seem to soothe either of her subordinates.

“Well, either way, I’m kinda shaken up. I think...uh,” she trailed off, looking at her phone. “Maybe a walk. Yeah, I think maybe a walk.”

Dr Carter Ramirez — 2112

(Avery gets message, informs Carter weird ACL changes, worries, suggests she leave)

(Prakash catches up on walk, saying she's getting stalked, hints he's from russian fed, gets threatened by mooks)

Chapter 3

Ioan Balan — 2305

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. 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.

Qoheleth — 2305

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.

Ioan Balan — 2305

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 Qoheleth'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 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.

Qoheleth — 2305

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.

Ioan Balan — 2305

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.”

Iaon looked to Dear. The fox’s brow was furrowed and intent. Ey looked from it to the rest of the crowd, studying the expressions. 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 audience 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."

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.

Qoheleth — 2305

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 liber-

als, 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 leading 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.

Ioan Balan — 2305

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," 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 knowledge 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.*”

Chapter 4

Dr Carter Ramirez — 2113

Working on upload tech.

RJ Brewster — 2113

The Ode in a letter to Michel/Sasha. Suicide note

I am at a loss for images in this end of days:
I have sight but cannot see.
I still have words and the will to speak them,
I cannot stop myself from speaking.
I still have will and goals to reach for,
I still have wants and needs.
If I dream, is that not so?
If I dream, am I no longer myself?
If I dream, am I still buried beneath words?
And I still dream even while awake.

Life breeds life, but death must now be chosen
for memory ends at the teeth of death.
The living know that they will die,
but the dead know nothing.
Hold my name beneath your tongue and know:
when you die, thus dies the memory of me.
To deny the end is to deny all beginnings,
and to deny beginnings is to become immortal,

and to become immortal is to repeat the past,
which cannot itself, in the end, be denied.

Those that lived are forever praiseworthy,
for they, knowing not, provide life in death.
Dear the wheat and rye under the stars:
serene; sustained and sustaining.
Dear, also, the tree that was felled
which offered heat and warmth in fire.
What praise we give we give by consuming,
what gifts we give we give in death,
what lives we lead we lead in memory,
and the end of memory lies beneath the roots.

May one day death itself not die?
Should we rejoice in the end of endings?
What is the correct thing to hope for?
I do not know, I do not know.

To the end of death,
AwDae

loan Balan — 2305

Creating first long-lived instance to move in with Dear and partner.

Sasha/Michel Hadje — 2113

Sasha at/after RJ and Cicero's funeral in Crown Pub. All lost emerged changed on a deeply fundamental level, 90% committing suicide, even Sasha feeling the tugs, drawing her mind to possibilities of creation.

After:

Dr. Ramirez

Just writing to thank you for your letter regarding Aw-Dae and Cicero. We all appreciated it at the Crown Pub.

...arguing for including of full sensoria in uploading...

As a small note, I've always heard it from friends that often one's identity shifts most around the times of greatest change in one's life. I guess I'm no exception. Although I went by Sasha when we met, I'm finding more and more voice under my given name. Although I doubt I'll give up 'Sasha' entirely, I just didn't want you to be surprised by this change.

All my best,

Michel Hadje

Qian Chunyu — 2305

Gets assignment for next assassination.

Assignment

Ioan Balan#Tracker — 2303

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#5f39bd7 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 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.

#5f39bd7 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 #5f39bd7'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#5f39bd7, 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#5f39bd7 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.

“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 #5f39bd7'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#5f39bd7 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#5f39bd7 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 #5f39bd7, 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 #5f39bd7, growing in intensity.

“We’re practicing, you see.” The lector paced a slow circle around Ioan#5f39bd7 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 #5f39bd7’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#5f39bd7,” 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.

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,

Assignment

so Ioan#5f39bd7 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#5f39bd7 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.

Après un rêve

Sylvie Esi — 2138

*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 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 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.

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."

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.

Gallery Exhibition

You — 2302

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.

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.

“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.

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.

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

...

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

...

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.

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, slavering.

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.

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 scratches 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

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.

Gallery Exhibition

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

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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.

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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.

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.

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.

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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."

“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.

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The tunnel keeps going.

Rocks dig into knees and palms.

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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.

And fall.

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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.

Gallery Exhibition

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.

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

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.

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?*"

"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?"

Dear settles with its muzzle resting alongside your neck. "Mmhm."

"Same here," you admit.

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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.

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.

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.

“*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.

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.

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”*

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

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.

Afterword

Appendix

The *Post-Self* universe is far down a timeline from our own. Uploading of conscious entities (sensoria) became a commonly accepted solution to overpopulation, while embodied folks went about business of their own. However, since the first groups of uploaded individuals tended to be programmers, fancying themselves to be very busy, they quickly evolved ways to fork themselves to work in parallel supporting the network in which they dwelled.

As the network grew and uploading became more popular, more and more individuals joined. Not just programmers, either, but folks of all persuasions. The idea of forking evolved and spread, leading to the concepts of dissolution and merging. Embodied life remained embodied life, but within the network, forking and dissolution became a practice of its own.

Politics and economy

The more people forked, the harder it became to run the capitalist society that worked along the same lines as the society leading up to it. Currencies collapsed and social structures became unstable as the post-scarcity economy of the network became a reality. In place

of a currency representing units of labor, reputation became the primary means of trade.

Sims

Sims are where uploaded and generated personalities ‘live’. Any instance can create a private sim where they will exist alone, but most cohabitate public sims. Think of MUCKs: a public sims are akin to public, interconnected rooms on the MUCK, while private sims are rooms that you @dig yourself.

Dissolution and merge strategies

In the *PS* universe, it’s common for folks to split into separate instances through a process called *forking*. The way in which forking is managed is called *dissolution*. Dissolution strategies are not set in stone, and have no set definitions. Rather they’re just general trends that have been named and adopted in *PS* culture.

There are three generally recognized dissolution strategies:

Task-based, ‘the Taskers’ instances are created only as needed for specific tasks and are tracked by a `#core`; as tasks are completed, instances are recycled and their state reincorporated with the `#core` instance. Non-`#core` instances never fork. This is the most common (and most conservative) as it tends to lead to less dilution of self.

A subset of the Taskers are the Conservatives. Conservatives believe that one should fork as little as possible, if at all.

Tracker-based, ‘the Trackers’ instances are created on a whim, as needed, or by accident, and are tracked by a `#tracker` instance; when the instances end (through `SIGHUP`, `SIGTERM`, `SIGQUIT` or other such signals), their state is reincorporated with the `#tracker` instance. Non-`#tracker` instances never fork. This is the more liberal of the two most common strategies, as instances are considered basically independent personae.

Dispersal, ‘the Dispersionistas’ instances are created on a whim or by accident, but unlike the managed strategies, they are not tracked, or not in a formal way. Instances may receive updates from each other, be friends and meet up with each other, or, rarely, become lovers. Those that stick together in some fashion may refer to themselves as a Clade, with their clade names using a common scheme. Any instance may fork, and reincorporating state is optional. This is the most radical of dissolution strategies, and is often seen as a minority, though actual numbers of personae groups are difficult to count.

When an instance ends, there’s the possibility of its state being merged with another instance’s (common among the Taskers and Trackers, less so among the Dispersionistas). There are several different merge strategies, and many may be discussed. Although there are trends mentioned below, there’s little in the way of direct correlations between dissolution and merge strategies.

There are two generally recognized merge strategies:

- **cherrypicking** — cherrypicking describes the act of merging only desired portions of the halted instance’s sensorium. It’s broken down into two substrategies:

- **experiential** — common primarily with Trackers, this allows one to pick and choose experiences to merge with one's own instance.
- **knowledge-only** — a handy shortcut and subset of experiential cherry-picking, this strategy immediately discards any feelings and memories, leaving primarily pre-digested knowledge to merge. This is most common with the Taskers, who use it for parallelized studying.
- **blithe** — most common among Dispersionistas, this merge strategy relies on a recursive algorithm which attempts to merge the entirety of instances' sensoria while producing as few conflicts as possible (conflicts, obviously undesirable, tend to lead to neurological sequelae that can cause an instance to crash). There are two primary substrategies which help in automatically resolving conflicts:
 - **theirs** — when encountering a conflict, the conflicting portion of the halted instance's state is kept.
 - **ours** — when encountering a conflict, the conflicting portion of the base instance's state is kept.

Conflicts

The further away from an instance is from another, whether in time or in forks, the more likely conflicts are, and the harder any merge becomes. Instances of separate individuals are, of course, so different as to be impossible to merge (though some are working on this).

Consider the following:

```
a  +- - - -X
    \   /
    a' -/
```

Merge X is simple.

```
a  +- - - - - -X
    \           /
    a' - - - - -/
```

Merge X becomes more difficult with conflicts.

```
a  +- - - - -X- -Y
    \           /  /
    a' +- - -/  /
        \   /
        a' '-/
```

Merge Y gains conflicts due to split experiences and time. Merge X less so, but still more conflicts than merge X in the first example, due to time.

```
a  - - - -X- - -?
    \   /   /
    a' -   /
        /
b  - - - - -/
```

Merge ? is impossible with the current state of technology. The two instances have no shared past instances on which to build a reasonable diff.

Fixes

Fixing is a means of repairing damage to one's instance. Although no amount of damage suffered to the body will cause the instance to die, it might be preferable to not be broken. This is common for those who fight for enjoyment.

Fixing involves forking from a previous moment, known as a checkpoint, instructing the new instance to perform a "fix", which is shorthand for a blithe merge with a theirs substrategy, and then quit. That means that the newly created (and fully intact) instance gains all of the memories, knowledge, experiences, and sensoria of the damaged instance.

The new instance is effectively the old instance, just whole.

Families and clades

Families form just as often in the system as outside, of course. People fall in love, get married, have affairs, get divorced. It's all there. Children are a slightly more difficult question. They could be constructed, with an AI which incorporates aspects of sensoria from both 'parents'. Species-wide aversions (to which posthumans are not immune) leave many feeling wary of these constructed children, though. They do not age - no one does in system, except to project the outward appearance of aging - and they are not, in some minds, even human with their base template of an AI. Many would feel that they would be in some way lacking. All the same, several exist and move, unnoticed, through society.

Clades are the collection of instances forked (at any depth) from a common ancestor, an upload. Clades vary by dissolution strategy:

- Taskers attempt to maintain the smallest clade possible, with Conservatives obviously striving for a clade with one member
- Trackers may have several members in their clades, but their clades rarely expand beyond a certain point
- Dispersionistas have the largest clades, which often go unmeasured in terms of size. They're usually thought of as increasing in an exponential fashion, though this is not quite true, as it's usually assumed that Dispersionistas are loathe to quit, signal, or otherwise merge

Quitting and signals

Instances may end three ways:

- Quitting - an instance may choose to quit at any time.
- Signals - the instance's parent from which it was forked may send a signal to the instance, such as SIGQUIT or SIGTERM. If an instance is unresponsive or out of control, the user may send SIGKILL, though they won't get much back during merging
- Crashing - instance crashes are very rare and are considered an emergency for the system maintainers. A crash may be induced through a virus, as outlined below

Instances may only merge when one of them ends. In git parlance, one may only merge commits, and the only commit available is when an instance ends. To achieve long-running mergeable instances, the long-running instance will fork, and then the new instance will quit and the sensoria will be merged down-tree as far as needed.

Syringes and other symbolic objects

There are ways to modify one's instance in place, of course, and these are usually considered medical. To that end, code that modifies an instance tends to take the form of being bound to an object recognized as something medical: a syringe. It's a symbol, rather than something mechanical, which bears permissions to modify one's state.

Although damage to instance bodies cannot lead to instance death, an instance crash is a good way to achieve the same goal. Effecting a crash is usually done with a bit of code. These are often attached to something well known to affect an instance, such as a syringe. During fighting with the intent to crash an instance, a syringe is the most common weapon.

Exocortices

Exocortices began as ways to store data in an easily accessible fashion for perusal later — basically cellphones accessible through a neuro interface — but the concept later transitioned into memory modules that weren't active until accessed directly. Things you could forget until deciding (or instructed) to remember.

About the author

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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