Window dressing

The windows were naked. They gaped open to her, blind and unseeing eyes though she couldn’t tell which side they were looking at: the apartment full of stuff or the outside world.

Someone had left the lights on after they died. It had been 17 days and the lights were still on, blazing into the early morning light. The neighbors had to appreciate that at 2 a.m.

She dug the keys out of her pocket and searched for one that worked. It was time to clean up.

What I really mean to say is that she is not always a she, sometimes she goes by they. Sometimes she goes by she. It changes at the slightest whim. A breeze touching her cheek could change it. But she rarely let anybody know what she was feeling because it got too complicated. So she let certain people learn one pronoun and other people learn a different pronoun and she lived frozen in that pronoun for them because it was easier than living as the right pronoun each moment. She flickered faster than people were willing to keep up with.

(Dear self: You don’t have to use consistent pronouns because it’s likely no one will ever read this book. You can literally write anything you want into being, including your own delicate gender identity.)

And why interrupt a scene laying out the death of people with an explanation of a character’s gender? Because that’s how it is, all the time, it’s a constantly confusing and disruptive experience that butts in at wildly inappropriate time.

The question is, are we at the end or the beginning?

It was his 43rd birthday today. She woke up feeling him next to her, scrolling through something on his phone. She did not open her eyes. She wondered if she could get away with not wishing him a happy birthday at all and then decided she could not. She rolled over and stood up …

In lieu of a character or compelling situation, I investigate the world:

I want to write visionary fiction.

I envision a world:

* That has suffered the Great Mourning, a massive species and then human die-off. But mostly species, experiences, entitlements of hte era that all perished. Naturally a hashtag arose: #greatmourning2020. It shortened to #greatmourning then eventually just #mourning. The resulting period of grief transformed the human animal into a better animal, a wiser animal, a more thoughtful animal. Communities came together to process and to prevent further die-offs. We mourn the death of puffins. We mourn the death of cars and car culture. We mourn polar bears and winter. We mourn Miami Beach and Manhattan.
* Everyone can and does fix things. Part of me wants 3D printers in every home, like microwaves.
* The world tends to improve on biology rather than replace.
* In this world the human body is valued–the need to be physically active, to feel physical pleasure and challenge, are important to us. I think here of the bird people from the end of Seveneves.
* I do not want to write the book I always write, where the main character is brave, and lonely, and different from everyone, and almost always ends up dying in this isolated state.
* In this society we solve problems together and are taught from a young age to manage interpersonal conflict in a productive and loving manner. It’s as important as reading. DEAR SELF YOU COULD HAVE SET AN EASIER PROBLEM THAN CHOOSING TO WRITE IN A UNIVERSE WHERE EVERYONE IS IN HARMONY
* I don’t know if bicycles are around but they might be.
* In this world we do not have superstars. I literally do not know how this works in a compelling fashion.
* The only conflict I can think of write now is that our hero(in)(e) is a historian who wants to know about the Great Mourning. OR perhaps just a historian/academic in some sense and there’s a mystery there to be solved. I don’t know what it is. I also don’t read mystery novels so this should be a real party.
* There are no genders except for play. English mutates into a language like Japanese, using very few if any pronouns. Gender becomes more like a subculture than a demographic (e.g. you can choose to be female the way you can choose to be goth). Sexuality is fucking awesome in this world because you just get with whoever you want to get with. I don’t know that our bodies have changed all that much but *shrug* maybe. This will be insanely difficult to write given the existing English language (See bullet point above.)
* This world has a whole lot of people in it who disagree on so many many things but not on the basics of kindness & survival & collaboration. Which is a lot.
* People sing and dance together.
* Where *does* the individual fit in to all of this?
* POV: First? Third? Omniscient? Second?! !!??
* I can feel the world I imagine which means I can find it. They sat in the darkening forest together.

Su was starting a fire, but it was getting dark.

They sat around and sang while she worked.

How did they sing?

They sang a quiet song about fires, they sang a song about the tinder and the tree it came from. What crazy kind of song is this? It started with Lo who smiled as the words came pouring out as a solo:

Why won’t you light for us?

Maybe we offended you.

Maybe we’re not in the right context.

It’s a weird song and not like the songs she’s been learning about in her ancient music studies.

She tries one of them out:

C’mon, baby, light my fire

And the group howls with laughter. This is not how you write songs. You don’t write songs to the person, you write them to the world around that person. But some of them have heard of these old songs, these love songs as they were called. The long period of time when so many songs were about a man and a woman and the love between them.

She has struggled to understand it for the past few weeks. She listens to them and she gets it, sort of, the electricity that can pass between two people–mostly it’s baffling how many and how long it went on.

Most don’t even seem to be about a person.

Anyway the fire lights and they all keep singing now about the warmth and the dinner that is coming. The song is improvised, really, though they sing together so much that it’s hard to remember what it was to not know the song that the others are singing. Which is why they keep laughing at her (me?) when I interject with my old time songs; it surprises them and we all laugh.

Tonight, though I’ve resolved not to, I will sleep alone, but what is alone when there are trees and animals and bugs around. What is alone when the whole world is still here with me.

Perhaps I should resolve to forget the word alone.  
# OUR HERO

## WHO’S THE HERO

Okay, how do we have a hero when the whole concept is a world without a strong sense of heroes?

This actually isn’t that hard to understand. People make nobodies into stars all the time. They don’t have to be raised up in front of all in the book world to have a grand struggle on the world stage or whatever. Think of Flora 717. A hero if ever I saw one, from a communal world and very much dedicated to that world.

Given the theme, the hero needs a connection to history which is why she’s an academic/historian of some kind. She is perhaps also a botanist. An ethnobotanist? A historian of ethnobotany? That sounds hard and also who does that job anyway. Maybe it’s just her hobby and not her real life.

Updated: She’s not an ethnobotanist. She’s a musicologist, if anything, but Fi is helps with the ethnobotany part of things.

The puzzle will need to be surrounding the issue of the ethnobotany. Things that have crossed my mind: The forest scenes in Stranger Things (e.g. another universe touching ours), the Northern Reach trilogy (e.g. a menacing and inhuman threat)

## WHAT ARE THE TWO CONFLICTING NEEDS OF THE PROTAGONIST

She desperately needs to know the truth and/or to make sure the truth comes to light.

BUT she also needs to survive, preferably with her loved ones intact (is that a thing you can ‘prefer’? Isn’t it a need at this point?)

OKAY.

She desperately needs to know the truth and bring it to light.

But she needs to survive as part of an intact community/family.

OR

She desperately needs to help the Delvers survive this threat, so her world stays intact.

and she desperately needs to find out why she was rejected by them and to live out her place in the prophecy.

## WHAT MAKES THE STAR THE STAR

She is the star. She is the star because she is uniquely able to pull everyone out of the morass with her, she is the center of gravity of this group, people are drawn to her and always have been.

If the story is a big blanket stretched out tight, she is a weight rolling around on it. (That’s a weird metaphor from dance making.)

She earns a strange title at some point: King of All Birds (but not that becuase that’s a song title).

OKAY BUT: As established below, Lo is also a bit bookish and shy and not prone to Big Leadership Stuff. She cries off to the side during singing practice. She is always looking for answers outside of herself.

The thing that makes her a star is that she says no.

Faced with her loved one, turned dark, worming their way into her psyche, she says no.

But what I need to know now is:

Who is she? What DOES make her a star? Flora 717 is a star because she does incredible things in service of her hive, is constantly stretching and changing to be the bee the hive needs her to be, and yet contains and protects her secrets.

The Dude is a star because of his utter self-contained nature, his chilled out life and how he reacts to this disruption. His unshakeable self confidence.

Neo is a star…because he is the blank canvass on which we can all write our own stories. He’s a nobody who sees the truth, escapes the Matrix and saves the world. Just like he always knew he could.

Hiro is a star because he’s a badass pizza driver, samurai-sword wielder total nobody. He is just a guy living in a storage shed with his pal, who saves the world.

Lo is a star because she’s a super smart, semi-magical book worm. She’s just a person who is unaware of her great place in this world. She brings the Delvers to everyone–and if they had chosen her, they might have avoided that fate.

## WHAT IS THE CROWBAR?

In other words, what is the stuff that the villain speech preys upon? Right now she is so hermetic, so sealed off and …

…maybe that is the thing!!!

The thing is that her weakness is a preference for being alone, though she knows that’s not a thing that they’re all supposed to feel. She is supposed to forget the word alone but she desperately craves it. She craves isolation, not having to be part of the big web.

This is getting a bit weird as her main thing but maybe it works.

We’ll see. But I think the big threat in some ways is the sustainability/adaptability of patriarchy and power structures that we have now. And we sealed them up but we maybe fucked it up.

UPDATE: the crowbar is not this. She does feel those things but mostly the main crowbar is the question of why is she helping the people who rejected her? Io knows Lo’s long suffering from this early rejection and uses that knowledge against her to get her to leave the project, to give up.

# BAD STUFF

## WHAT IS THE JEOPARDY

The jeopardy is her two conflicting needs. She will be forced to choose. Perhaps in her choosing she can outwit the villain and get them both–but in her heart she will know that she has to make a choice.

(Flora 717’s two needs were to survive, which entailed fitting in, and to be the unique and magical bee she knew she was. She didn’t get them–but she did get to survive in that weird parenting way. And she definitely was the unique and magical bee. In some ways her needs (though she didn’t know them) (how interesting is that!?!?) were to save the hive and to destroy the hive. And she saved the hive by destroying it.)

(Damn.)

That feels almost right for this story, but I’m writing visionary fiction and the world I’m drawing isn’t one I want to destroy. But the feeling of learning something horrifying and knowing that you must bring it to light despite great upheaval is very interesting to me.

I also don’t really love the “dark government” or “dark corporation” angles because I want a world without them–or with extremely weakened vestigial forms of them.

Lo doesn’t know her choice at first. Going into the Villain Speech, she thinks the choice is help the Delvers or don’t. Be generous to the Delvers or be selfish and bitter. That’s the crowbar Io uses against her and it very nearly works. She has spent so long feeling left out and powerless, invisible to the people she wants to help most….Io is able to point out to her how good and special they made her feel and how they had denied that to her. Io doesn’t even know about the whole rejected-as-an-infant thing but it supports things for Lo.

But during the speech, she realizes that she doesn’t care, that she is still interested in helping people. And she somehow realizes that she will end up destroying the Delvers even as she helps them. Maybe the actual specific song or the specific spell that they have to do just flat out ruins the Delvers. Or maybe she realizes that having independent voices with a stronger independent mind behind each one will be better than the weird hive like behaviors of the Delvers. Maybe she needs to train lots of people to help her who aren’t allowed to hear the Delvers’ secrets.

UGH should I just pick one or is it better to keep letting it unspool at its own speed?

## WHO’S THE VILLAIN

The villain is (no joke) (but lulz) a ghost or virus or meme or something like that, embedded inside of the very old tree. It is unleashed on our poor unsuspecting magic redhead (not Lo) who realizes the grave danger but cannot stop it herself.

The idea gets out and starts infecting people. FUD spread. Hatred and division grow. Our loyal true-hearted narrator is the only one who can counteract, though she is bookish and shy and not likely to give great speeches to the world.

So the villain is perhaps a mindless terror, rather than a malicious person. But we have to give somebody a really good villain speech. A really good villain speech from somebody so close to Lo, who knows her weaknesses and knows what will make her want to turn to the dark side.

The terror found the man with the coffee.

TODO: What is the relationship between the man with the coffee / the virus / the ancient cult / Io?

## WHAT IS THE MONSTER?

Monsters in gardening include: \* Animals that eat everything \* Poisons \* Drought \* Mold \* Bugs \* Floods/natural disasters

Monsters in history include: \* Mold \* Decay \* Loss \* Disruptive events that destroy records \* Disinterest \* Fallibility of memory \* Ghosts

Mold is an obvious overlap here. Mold as it grows from small spores, a treacherous threat that works, I suppose in much the way that this culture works–communally, collectively, piece by small piece, transforming into something good (to the mold).

The Bad Guys are the actual avatar of the villain–regular humans who have become infected into this thing. They named themselves ironically the Bad Guys, since gender has mostly disappeared and men in particular are infrequently represented.

Here’s what I’m thinking: The glass tube they put in the tree is a mold, but it’s a special magical mold. And it breaks when Fi is delving. It escapes out the original hole and spreads far and wide – but the Delvers see it as a variety of visions. There are Delvers who are infected at a certain radius from the tree (the way spores spread) and a bunch of non-delvers who start having disturbing fantasies–who are in turn preyed upon by the Bad Guys

## HOW DO WE KEEP THE MONSTER FRONT AND CENTER IN ACT TWO?

Act two is going to be a lot of research and will need *soething* else to happen to not be terrible.

I think *we* know that Io has turned but Lo does not. So we see Io creeping around and “helping” Lo but we know that it’s bad news.

## WHAT ARE THE STAKES

The stakes are huge–the whole society. Not sure how yet.

The Delvers are a group of kind and sensitive people that keep society stable–and they’re in danger. It’s up to one woman with a love of old song books to keep the Delvers on track, but as she learns more about her mission, she realizes the Delvers are in danger whether or not she succeeds. It’s up to her to decide the fate of the Delvers–and the fate of the world that relies on them.

YAY BOOK JACKET BLURB! ^^

## WHAT IS THE VILLAIN SPEECH

# OVERVIEW

## WHAT’S THE COUNTER THEME

This one is fascinating. In a world like the one I envision, what is the counter theme? If the theme is something like: we can grow together into a stronger species, what is the opposite theme? What will be the ongoing struggle in the other direction? Or will there be a crisis? There has to be a crisis or this book will really be terrible.

## WHAT IS THE INCITING INCIDENT?

The inciting incident is one of two things:

Either our star becomes aware of some information that disrupts their sense of equilibrium and joy–some deeply threatening information that either needs to be kept secret or that needs to be brought to light (at great social cost, I’m guessing).

OR

There’s an inciting incident from the outside. A new generation of babies is born unable to connect with each other. A force from outside (another planet?) comes in and fucks shit up. Animals gain the ability to speak to us and turns out they are huge dicks. I don’t know.

ALSO

Don’t forget that bad things can just happen.

The inciting incident is the afternoon with the tree. I don’t know what it incites yet, but that’s the moment.

## WHAT IS THE EMBEDDED CLIMAX?

I don’t remember what an embedded climax is meant to be. But here’s the thing I think it is:

The bad thing (whatever the bad thing is) must be brought into the culture, must be digested by it and transformed.

Could the bad thing threaten the tree?

Be the tree?

Be inside the tree?

## WHAT’S THE CLIMAX

How do we have a gardening related climax? It sounds so boring and slow. Why did I do this to myself.

Okay, I think it’s a mold or invasive species that unlocks the baddy.

The climax goes something like this:

Lo has the cure/the key. She has the right song but they all have to sing it together. She’s trying to gather her people together and get them in the right place and right context.

She goes to her most trusted person but they’ve turned. They’ve gone bad and they want her to go with them. She doesn’t realize it at first then realizes that something is very very wrong. She tries the song on them but it’s not enough by herself. They sing a counter melody and she feels herself falling. She runs away. She knows she needs to get the others and she still wants to get her bestie. But her bestie isn’t there anymore.

And now the bestie knows waht’s up and pursues them all, disrupting and flipping them as able.

Finally Lo is able to reach the tree, has the robes, has the folks and together they sing, the mountains quiver and the buildings vanish and they are in a new place, they are the original ones who tried to cast this spell of protection and failed, the tree is flaming and they get it right this time. (We have to find the flaw in whatever it was before.)

They return to the present moment, much older and more tired.

Lo has lost her bestie. She writes a new song of mourning for the loss, but a new song–with a solo. With some love song references.

## WHAT’S THE CONCEPT

together = better

It’s like Cloud Atlas but for raging feminists who hate cars.

It’s like a time travelling Snow Crash.

TODO: Develop the concept.

## HOW DO THE CHARACTERS REPRESENT THAT CONCEPT?

TODO: How do the characters represent that concept?

## WHAT’S THE GENRE

I’m thinking like… a visionary mystery novel. An informational mystery novel.

Unsurprisingly Snow Crash continue to point the way but I can’t put my finger on how.

IT’S A THRILLER!! DUH. This is always what I write (that’s a lie) but it’s totally a thriller. I love reading thrillers but they’re all full of ridiculous men and women treated like trash. I want a thriller that can happen in a world I want to live in and FOR FUCK’S SAKE I want a thriller with a feminine/female/nb protagonist, this shit shouldn’t be that hard and NOBODY GETS TO FUCKING SWOOP IN AND SAVE HER.

## WHAT’S THE THEME

The theme has something to do with:

History and how we care for it

The Great Mourning is a period of loss and letting prized things/beings/experiences slip into the past gracefully. Then understanding that things will die and we are here to help the dead decay and feed the living.

We let the GM fix a lot of things about our eocological problems. We are still, however, a species with conflict and desire and ambition.

# The theme is death, maybe. History & gardening.

There is also a strong musical component because like obviously. I’m sure there’s a novel that I’m biting this whole singing-to-the-plants thing from but I can’t name it at present.

## WHAT IS THE SETTING

North American city in ruins? Deciduous foresty place. Highways are gone.

## RANDOM THOUGHTS

“Rosa Luxemburg said the revolution would be a spiritual transformation and Adrienne traces that out beautifully in her post.” Femme Too Deep podcast. Some people want to behave and some people want to get free. They’re all surviving. -adrienne maree brown

What it is for someone to love someone(s) they know are bad for them. Choosing individuality over a group that insists on the primacy of the group. They decided it was time.

They took a knife out of their pocket and started sharpening it. Okay, Tara, but really: How primitive is this situation?

The mirror was smudged because they were always leaning over to pop pimples and balancing their weight on their knuckles. But the view was clear.

First the scissors. Long heavy ropes (but a better word) fell to the floor.

They left the top part a bit longer, but the sides were close cut. (Do they have an electric razor? What is our relationship to electricity in the future?)

She used her knife to crop the sides. It was not easy. In fact, it looked like shit, choppy and uneven. The top of the hair was floppy.

She looked like a punk rocker. Maybe this would work.

The Great Mourning started with Kevin Spacey, though it could have started anywhere.

The history books say it could have started with the election of Donald Trump, with the riot at Charlottesville, with Citizens United. There had been dozens of books on when the start might have been. What the cause. The books were congenial, helpful to each other when able. It could have started with the death of Trayvon Martin or any of the dozens of other Black deaths.

But it started with Kevin Spacey.

It started there because as we all learned together, it starts where it will start. Not where it should start. It only starts where it should start if the people involved are truly ready and lord, the people of the late 20th and early 21st centuries were not ready. It pained her to read about them sometimes, their utter unpreparedness for life. They even knew it to be true in the moment, though they were mostly worried about not knowing how to cook a good Thanksgiving turkey (another tradition she had questions about) or how to change a car tire. They worried about the wrong things entirely but their worry did come from the right place: They knew they wanted to be better, they knew they had the capacity to be better, they jusu couldn’t see in front of themselves.

Anyway a totally irrelevant show called House of Cards got cancelled when it turned out that the star of the show was a creep. It was sort of confusing to her from this vantage but he had been admired widely. Many things were lost but there was still video from the era, some of it anyway. She watched interviews with him and he seemed smug. Smug but also funny, maybe.

Anyway it came out that he’d been a creep and there was a giant crack in the wall that let all these other voices speak out together as a big chorus of condemnation.

She was surprised to learn from this distance that actually Kevin Spacey wasn’t the first, that some guy named Harvey Weinstein had been accused by dozens of women and then suddenly the whole industry they named Hollywood had been turned inside out. That most people didn’t give much of a shit about Kevin Spacey but they had a phrase for it: The straw that broke the camel’s back.

Poor camel.

(Actually for several hundred years after they had only allowed women to make or star in movies.)

She knew though, from her teachers, that women were discounted. It’s part of how they dismantled gender altogether.

Anyway she returned to watching the interviews. She had about an hour of time on the machines every day, there was plenty of time to watch. They were boring, frankly, clearly just about either the art of acting or the specifics of making this particular movie, most of which sounded awful.

The Great Mourning had started with this indefinable ache in the hearts of everyone. It was an ache that someone you liked was bad in some way. The phases of grief were real and they’d all been experiencing them for years without noticing.

Maybe if I stop drinking so much Diet Dr. Pepper the polar bears will live.

It’s not so bad to use excessive force.

What the fuck is wrong with us that we let these things happen?

And it was finally that we just started naming it.

We were sad to lose Kevin Spacey. We were sad that all those movies he had been in were now filled with a creep whose face we didn’t like looking at. We were sad that baby puffins were dying of starvation with fish stuck in their throats because their moms could only bring them fish that were too big for them to swallow. We were sad as American democracy, flawed as it was started to crumble. But we didn’t see it, we just moved forward forward forward until the Great Mourning began.

The economy took a big hit that year.

Bark, land, admission

To be frank right now we are just in the world, exploring. Looking for a story. Looking for people. It’s not my fault that in most worlds most of the time it’s a lot of boring people doing very standard things.

(Is it?)

Lo felt the bark of the tree against her back as she woke up. The day was clear and lovely. She was glad for the tree and glad for the sky around her as well . She could hear the others cooking breakfast already. The smell of mushrooms cooking drew her closer to them.

She wanted to admit something to them but couldn’t quite put her finger on it. There was something bothering her. She felt guilty a lot but couldn’t understnand why or what made her feel that way.  
This tree is very old.

She wonders if this tree lived through the Great Mourning.

Something no one regrets: Planting the right tree.

She regarded the old tree, not for the first time. She closed her eyes and felt the roots as they grew out from the small tree into the massive tree it is today. The branches were not round but were buttressed, like wings out from the trunk. Knots larger than her head protruded from the trunk, like knuckles on an old human hand. The roots extended and extended and extended—a good fifteen feet away you could still find yourself tripping on them.

The branches were full, the tree was strong.

A villain speech, for giggles:

“What I’m really trying to say to you, Lo, is that the thing you’re looking for isn’t here. There is no magical answer, there is no way through.

You know the XXXX (device) will get you what you want. You know where it is and how to use it. And yet here you sit, sanctimonious and alone."

Lo did feel very alone. Maybe more alone than she had ever felt. In this dark, metal place, this cold, loud clanging place, she didn’t know if there was anyone else in this world, even though she could remember walking through the door. She could remember the feel of the pine needles under foot, the wind carrying the smell of the lake to her, as far as she *knew* everyone was still out there, being themselves, doing the work they were working on together, and yet she felt desperately alone here.

They regarded her with those beautiful eyes. In another place, in another time, with another world around them, perhaps they would have been lovers. But in this place and time they were not. She couldn’t even regard them as an enemy, but that word was as close as she could get–it was an intimate malice and she was terrified.

[stuff happens]

She realized that she was not, in fact, alone. Io was here with her. Io with their malice and their desperation and their bizarre institutional backing and whatever their long goal was, Io was here with her in this metal place.

She laughed.

Io ignored her, continuing to cook.

She had her way out, now. And Io would never be the same.

Lo is the main character. The world is a different place where we work together, where we’ve developed all kinds of ways of making things work with our bodies, with the earth. Like in 17776, many problems have been solved.

So the main problem is, perhaps, simply an emotional one. In 17776, the main issue is that the old probe can’t catch up to the new times. The new painless times. The struggle for meaning in the face of absolutely no threat.

They had asked her to read the book. That was fine. She was, in fact, very good at reading, which seemed obviously like something a person could be good at.

It was the cooking that did it. It was always the cooking.

Obviously someone needed to cook and since they were basically sharing all duties, she volunteered to cook one night. It would be fine. She could follow a recipe.

She is the guardian of a secret and the organizer of a team who needs to either find the secret or make it all work together.

They were all out, working. The house was quiet, no devices humming, no sound of lights burning. All the lights were off so she sat in the kitchen near the largest window. The large wooden table was from her childhood, her parent had collected the wood themselves from fallen timber and sickly trees. That’s how all furniture worked, which is also why people tended not to have large families.

The wood didn’t match, making stripes of darker and lighter woods. The softer woods bore the marks of her childhood drawings, pens and crayons pressing light shapes into the wood.

She had the papers out on the table. A stack of books off to her left, neatly lined up on the edge of the table. In front of her the map stretched to nearly the ends of the table, and the folder of data was off to the right.

She was beginning to think this was the wrong map. The right place, but the wrong map. Maybe the wrong scale, or maybe she needed a different *type* of map.

Maybe it was a map from the wrong *time*.

She moved over to the bookshelf and pulled off her oldest map book. She wouldn’t have computer time until Monday but for now this would do. She pulled it out. There was, indeed, a map of her forest–but so large that the forest itself wasn’t even marked. The copyright said the book was published in 2047 but she knew that this map could have been much older, just copied and copied and copied forward in time.

If she could just *get in* to the forest, this might all be for naught. But ever since the fence had sprung up with the menacing signs on it, that had seemed like a poor idea. She just needed to know what was growing there, to see if anything had *changed*.

The next day she tried to visit the tree and found the fence locked.

Write about how they locked it up and kept it locked up–this is the forest they are hiding from her.

THINGS THAT GOT LOST:

*The history of the tree, the way the strangeness of the tree in its context obscured from her that true strangeness about it. Something is hiding in this tree and she needs to know what. (Alternatively she gets offed and somebody else figures it all out.)*

She felt stupid for not noticing before, the obvious strangeness of this tree. But she also knew that the tree had been strange to her for years, and strange to others before.

She had always found it strange to see this massive ancient creature in the middle of the city, and she knew that it had likely survived even the Great Mourning, the Great Mourning that had taken out entire species, this tree had lived.

She thought back to the men who had planted it here–the old Spanish missionaries. It hurt her a bit to think of it, but she took a breath and accepted that the painful thing had happened and could not un-happen. It was a fundamental teaching: things cannot un-happen.

She thought of them arriving from Baja California, with wagons and burros, across the arid coastline. Finding the people here and finding their sacred spring and planting this tree here then.

Even as a symbol of conquest the tree was beloved because trees are beloved. And so the invader remained, a strange and massive reminder of the disruption of the Europeans coming to the Americas.

It grew, and grew. The water of the sacred spring bubbled up and fed the tree with its clear water. The roots of the tree spread out into the ponds of the spring, protected and living together with wild calla lillies and reeds. It grew and grew and the strangeness of it obscured its deeply held secret.

She sat with the tree the rest of the day. One man wandered by, in an old-fashioned business suit. He seemed to be like her, seeking a peaceful and quiet place, though he stood out for his bizarre attire. They greeted each other and she went back to her studies. She delved into the tree’s history in so many ways–tasting the bark, the leaves, the soil. She used her mind to speak with it. She danced with it, feeling the shift of the ground beneath her and learning more about the roots as they grew below the earth.

The secret began to take shape in her mind until it coalesced, finally, as a clear image in her mind: There were seven dark, hooded figures gathered around the tree, the tree a flaming beacon–somehow both aflame and still living. THe city around was gone, the mountains in the near distance shrouded with marine mist. The animals around the seven were fearful but the figures themselves were unafraid.

The tree held great power. She needed to tell Lo. It would save them all. She knew it.

She began to run out of the park and back to the house. She smiled, she laughed. Today was a good day.

[chapter break]

[A few meta thoughts as we begin: The tree may in fact be from another planet/culture/civilization. The tree may be physically hiding something. And the tree may be false–may be the secret will help the other side but our protagonist is unable to see it because she is so committed to plants and nature. A Trojan horse ish thing.]

*Su riding a motorcycle to get to the library. She takes the freeway because it’s less obvious. She loves riding. Describe the beautiful day she experiences. She sees a car ahead and gets spooked. Only the gov’t uses cars now and only for ceremonial purposes. She tails them, watches them park it under a tree and start walking away. TOwards the library.*

Su started the bike. Technically they all shared the small tough dirt bike but everybody knew the bike was Su’s. When someone took as much joy from something as su did from the bike, who else can really make a claim? She spent hours fixing it, making new fuel, and dreaming of those days she would get to ride it.

Since gasoline had gone away, they’d invented new fuel sources–fermented leaf litter, algae, corn syrup–most of which could be made on a local level with at least some degree of success. So you’d still see vehicles on the road, though mostly smaller ones–smartcars or motorcycles, mopeds. Some of the governments had shipping lanes up in the north, but they were mostly wind and sun driven and hard to replicate on a smaller scale.

She pulled out of the alley and headed west. She pulled onto the freeway, wary of obstacles and potholes as usual.

She couldn’t go as fast but she loved the freeway–the tall walls with their privacy, the long straight lines, no traffic. It was worth the wilderness that had grown up in the cracks of the pavement.

One time she’d gone out East and some of their freeways had been turned into parks, and while she had to admit they were perfectly nice, she had to admit they made her feel a little sad. Lo had told her about the start of the freeways and she was relieved not to have to ride on them–the speeds sounded exhilarating but the crowds sounded unbearable. She couldn’t really imagine the freeways full of cars crawling along at low speed. The past seemed a strange nightmare when Lo talked about it but they msut have liked what they had given how sad all the songs were.

She realized she’d gotten distracted and while she was navigating a deer trail through the bushes just fine she hadn’t noticed the Jeep up ahead. They were driving a bit faster than her. She had no idea if they knew she was back here–they were louder than her engine. She kept following–it was almost unheard of to find a vehicle of that size still in operation. It was almost mythical–a vehicle for the ultrarich or the ultradangerous. It was certainly interesting enough to follow for a bit. Her mission wasn’t urgent.

So she tailed them on this perfect late autumn day. The sun flickered through the leaves on the trees as she pushed faster than she liked on the freeway. A rabbit nearby darted off as she approached. The sun warmed the back of her hands and the smell of leaves was rich in her nose–the trees were still fairly young on the 405 so the pines hadn’t moved in yet.

They didn’t change their speed so she suspected they didn’t see her. She was feeling a bit smug about it–she liked to keep the bike matte, to wear a lot of brown and green–Bu would have stood out in her purples.

The jeep swerved off the freeway. She was starting to get whiffs of the fuel they were burning–it smelled like algae. Expensive.

*What happened to neighborhoods when the cars went away. Everything was far apart, how much work it took to get everything. they had to mourn the fact that they coudlnt’ go to Ikea in Burbank anymore, with an aside about how this was before IKEA became what it is now (mystery!)*

How much they felt like they got trapped in these shitty neighborhoods. How they eventually realized that this is just their shitty life now. How much it was like a hurricane but on a grand scale.

That’s when the change happened.

The cars went away gradually at first. It happened more or less the “free market way” (a concept Lo struggled with in school). Gas prices kept rising so people started driving less and less. Even the government stockpiles and subsidies weren’t enough.

It was way, way too slow for the polar bears though. And the ice caps. All told they estimated that global warming killed some 12,000,000 species. It was also the end of free market capitalism and fossil fuels. It was the end of Ferrari and American car culture, for better or worse.

One of Lo’s favorite laments was a threnody, really. A threnody to the open road. A threnody to the feeling of an engien shifting beneath you, to the pleasures of getting somewhere at top speed, whenever you wanted to. Stopping by the side of the road and feeling the rush of the traffic along the freeway behind you. To be truthful, she found this particular song a bit terrifying but it was also so keening and sad.

In general she found the old times sad–she watched video clips of movies and the way people were pushed aside during a foot chase or cars were just thrown off a cliff with no regard for the occupants just because they weren’t the star–it gave her a dark chill.

But anyway, back to the history:

People started driving less and less and then out of the blue there just wasn’t any more gas, at least not in America. They had kept the secret very well. One day the gas station owners were expecting a delivery and it just wouldn’t come. Depending on where you were in the supply chain you may have gotten an extra couple weeks but most of the small towns in the middle of America ran out first. Nobody in the large cities paid much attention at first so they weren’t any more prepared when their own end came. In about three weeks it was over.

Some large companies still had stockpiles for their fleets, so for a while business was stronger than ever. But realistically it was a short term solution and then it turned into a nationwide disaster.

The effects they had been watching after hurricanes and earthquakes were suddenly nearby. It was like they had been practicing for this.

It wasn’t terribly exciting, for the most part. People died from pretty boring things: Old food they shouldn’t have eaten. A fall they didn’t really recover from. Not enough water. The small towns were a mix of hard hit and just fine–depending on what they produced for the greater economy. The American nation was a very large but tenuously connected road and without trucks to bring food and supplies, many of these small places disappeared. Songs were written but most of those were known only to specialists. You could find them inscribed in the sidewalks of these old places, or written inside of the old Walmarts–the ones in the Walmarts tended to be best preserved though it was hard to find them written along a wall or down the middle of an aisle.

Certain neighborhoods and towns did better, but it was a bad time. That’s when it all really came to a head.

It had been several hundred years but the scars of the old world hadn’t healed completely. The old roads were still in use. Once the catastrophe part had stabilized, many neighborhoods had started decorating and building in their roads–leaving lanes for bicycles but filling in with trees, rose bushes, storage sheds, ponds.

Of course many neighborhoods were abandoned.

The freeways were abandoned or converted as well. They were so excruciating to walk along, all cement and straightlines, that nobody wanted to. In some cities they were covered in graffiti and art but even those neighborhoods grew bored of them and moved away. Some turned into parks. Many of them became something like a river floating over head, dangerous but useful.

*The way the lessons from the Great Mourning are immortalized in songs now, so she knows them. And maybe she’s just part of a cult? Rather than this being teh same as everything.*

Her music studies were going well, she thought to herself. Not everyone would have been able to learn all these songs the way she had, mostly out of books and going to weird events where other music nerds would gather.

She toyed with her dinner, a particular song stuck in her head:

*Needing is one thing, and getting / getting’s another*

It was an old song. It was from before and had nothing to do with anything else, but it’s stuck in our writer’s head and feels relevant.

She had been specializing in the songs of extinction, lately. There was an older person in town who got together with people once a month to sing those songs, songs of rage and fear and loss about the last elm tree, about the lost stripes of the tiger, about all the dead koalas. The deeper you went the more you got into small creatures: The disappearance of the Rio Grande Silvery Minnow, the battles against the zebra mussels and lion fish as they devoured ecosystems whole. Bananas actually had an entire subgenre about them–songs about identical creatures being identically vulnerable, about banana splits. One about the old joke about banana peels being slippery made her laugh particularly hard.

At the church, they sang together. They couldn’t bring books or written versions of the songs from the library to the church, so when she found a new one at the library she was compelled to learn it herself, singing it over and over at home and on her bike until she could bring it to them. Ml knew a lot of the songs and could help her when she fumbled.

It was lovely, really, the singing of these songs together. The churches were so resonant, absolutely the right place for singing of any kind, and the light streamed in on them. Many weeks they wept together at the end.

At the end of the recent session, as Lo sat and dried her face, Ml said to them: “This is why we sing. We can’t forget the pain. And the music carries it to us, fresh as the day it was born. And we also have to remember how we handle the pain matters. It matters to let it flow through us. The pain will always win if we don’t let it flow.”

She nodded. Her shoulders slumped and she felt tired. The group of singers had gathered around her in silence, as they always did when someone was suffering extra.

It was wise. But it was hard.

I want to write at length about what the climax is here.

Lo has found some information that not everyone can access. This information is very important and very dangerous. I’m not sure yet if it’s dangerous to Lo and her crew or if it’s dangerous to an outside entity.

Let’s brainstorm about outside entities that could be harmful but are not human:

No, wrong question.

We already have these on-theme monsters:

Monsters in gardening include: \* Animals that eat everything \* Poisons \* Drought \* Mold \* Bugs \* Floods/natural disasters \* People stealing or disrupting your harvest \* Invasive species \* Catastrophic earth events (meteors, global warming)

Monsters in history include: \* Mold \* Decay \* Loss \* Disruptive events that destroy records \* Disinterest \* Fallibility of memory \* War \* Illiteracy

A list of ideas: \* The Great Mourning caused us to revert to illiteracy from a belief that spoken word cultures were more sustainable \* The patriarchy is hidden in the tree. (lulz at that sentence but let’s roll with it). Some kind of pattern or habit or something is exposed in the vision of the tree and it unleashes some of our bad patterns back on us (thinking here of the “sustainability of patriarchy” from Cynthia Enloe) \* People are just different from each other and this utopia is bound to have dissenters. I just don’t want to present a visionary future that is the kind of utopia you can’t help but destroy (which is what i’m experiencing right now).  
\* \* How do they do it on Star Trek? That’s a visionary society. Everybody in the Federation is committed wholeheartedly to the ideals of the Federation–but the ideals are difficult to uphold and there are external enemies who don’t care at all/maybe even hate the Federation.

Okay so maybe the idea is that humanity has come together.

Then a threat from somewhere else appears–could be an alien, could be a weird apparition from the past (I THINK WE KNOW WHICH ONE IS A WINNER) but it does NOT like what is going on and wants to push us into a different habit. Some people fall prey to it, others resist strongly.

OKAY I AM LIKING THIS.

Lo pulled the hedge clippers out of her bag and released the safety clasp.

The sky was a curious green she’d heard about from books but never seen herself. The clouds were heavy and looked almost purple somehow.

The forest smelled so good. She stopped for a minute and just sucked air in through her nose. She had never smelled it this strong before–after the rain it was sometime stronger but this was like the plants themselves were calling out to her to be there to make things right.

She resumed clipping the wires on the chainlink fence. Where they’d even found this fence was beyond her–she’d seen it around but it was always ancient and this was new, almost shiny.

She cut a small hole big enough for her to slip through (though her pack caught on the wires). As she crossed the barrier she felt the hairs on her body rise, almost as if she had crossed some other kind of boundary. She felt them watching her.

She put the wire back in the hole, which seemed incredibly dumb but at a glance it seemed…relatively intact.

It didn’t much matter anyhow. If and/or when they found her, it would be too late, either for them or for her.

She pushed through the undergrowth of the forest, making a path where there wasn’t any. The tree was about two miles away and although there was plenty of undergrowth there were also buildings and other human-made things kept inside the fence.

She walked past old apartment buildings, faded into almost colorlessness, some covered in giant bougainvilleas or star jasmines, but mostly they were naked in the darkening air. She didn’t like these uninhabited parts of town and always felt like someone was around who she couldn’t see.

It wasn’t totally wrong. She jumped as she heard a familiar whistle from her right. She looked around, crouching to hide herself in case Jy had turned.

God, she really couldn’t handle it. She needed all of them. They all had to survive this together or not at all. She shook her head–it was a ridiculous thought but it wouldn’t leave her alone.

She crept through the bushes and the whistle sounded again. She saw Jy move out of cover next to a building and she looked for a long time.

With Io there had been no sign. She looked closely at Jy. They seemed nervous. They seemed scared. And then she realized it didn’t matter: Without Jy they couldn’t sing the song. They couldn’t complete the Action and without the Action they were lost.

She responded with her own signature whistle and stood up a half foot. Jy whipped around to look for her and smiled when they saw her. Her legs swung through the brush as she ran, still crouching, to Jy’s side.

They hugged. Jy whispered, “I didn’t know if I’d make it through.”

Lo didn’t say anything.

She clapped her hands on Jy’s shoulders. “Alright, little Jy. Let’s find the others and get this done.” They turned back toward the south, knowing the tree was there and they set off.

[Do we need to demonstrate how they all get there? It probably depends on how well we know them all.]

The tree was gone.

The tree was gone. They had cut down the tree!

How could they have cut down the tree?

She spun in a circle. There were dozens of trees around but they were young in comparison.  
The corpse of the big tree lay on the ground. Some of the leaves were still green but it was dying. It had fallen on the small low building nearby, crushing it under its weight.

This had to be the tree the magic one had reported. It looked like the pictures Lo had dug up.

She ran to the tree and put her hands on the trunk. A hot energy burned her hands and she whipped them away. She felt tears and fear building up inside her.

“It’s not fair. It’s not right. It wasn’t even a good idea! It won’t stop us! ANYONE could see that cutting this tree down was the wrong thing to do. This was the oldest thing left on this earth after the Mourning. And they know that! They know that!” She screamed at the carcass of the tree and felt her hands start to blister from the heat.

“Lo.”

Jy put their hand on her back.

“Lo.”

They said it again, quietly and she felt the fear draining out of her from the spot on her back where their warm hand rested.

“Lo, we have to try it anyhow. We can’t bring the tree back.”

She nodded. She wanted to sing for this lost tree right now, but she knew there were more urgent matters to attend to. The Bad Guys were winning. They were out there right now, having their meetings and planning ways to overthrow us all. She wanted to tear them apart with her own hands, to use them to fertilize this tree. And she felt sad for the fact that The Bad Guys were so lost. So hurt that they would do this to a beautiful and ancient tree. She saw the world from their eyes for a short moment and felt her own emotions lock up. No one would want to live in that world.

She slumped to the ground. She felt leaf litter under her blistered hands. She felt the wind touching the tears she hadn’t realized she let out. She looked up and saw her people standing around, ready to help.

“It is the only way. Change is coming.” She spoke quietly and they felt briefly afraid of her. “This is the natural order of things; change sets in.”

She nodded. She could see the fear in their eyes but she could also see them setting their resolve, aligning with each other. Getting ready for battle.

She stood up and brushed the leaves from her knees. She wiped the tears from her face and reached out to Jy and Su.

They walked around the stump of the tree, hands outstretched to one another. The purple clouds overhead flickered with lightning and the wind picked up. The storm was not natural. It was the manifestation of the evil that had been living in this tree. Lo didn’t know if the tree had been cut down to stop the evil or if the death of the tree was meant to seal the evil in the world, to give it no escape. But it didn’t matter anyhow. They would try.

Su started the song, somewhat to Lo’s surprise. She had always been the quietest one.

*Long fibers stretching tall* *Let us see you grow. Let us see you rise.* *Flat paper leaves that move like blood* *We let you see us grow. We let you see us rise.*

Lo joined in with her, singing the counter words.

*Together we are trembling* *Together we are strong* *Our eyes are wide* *The perfume of your love, the perfume*

Jy added the third:

*sacred water sacred water* *we’re holding on* *flowers of your holy love* *we’re closer, we’re closer*.

They kept singing the first verse looping together. Their voices rang out together, but the song was noticeably incomplete. Lo looked at Nw and saw them standing there, staring up at the clouds, utterly paralyzed. Lo knew instinctively she couldn’t walk over to Nw right now. She began clapping with their song, and Nw jumped. They looked over at Lo. The fear that had set in ever since that night with Io surged in her chest. Her voice wobbled but she kept on singing and clapping. It didn’t matter in Nw had turned. Lo needed to believe in her heart that they hadn’t. It was the only way.

Nw seemed to turn away, slowly, or to be caught in the act of doing so: a body that wanted to go one way with eyes that were fixed on Lo disagreeing. They seemed hypnotized, controlled by something outside themselves.

Lo took a chance and added a new line. The song wasn’t working yet anyhow, maybe it was okay to alter it.

She took a deep breath and pitched her voice high, a wail over the other two:

*C’mon, baby, light my fire*

She could feel Jy & Su both whipped their heads to look at her but they kept singing. She stared directly at Nw, pleading with every fiber of her body, returning to the original melody and words. There seemed to be a light growing from the stump of the tree.

Nw had shifted their intense focus to the light. They walked forward and almost touched it. Lo wondered what was going on in there but couldn’t move if she wanted to–her legs seemed to be stuck where they were.

Finally she heard, in a great burst, Nw’s voice joining them, rich and strong:

*Meet us under the old willow tree* *We will be there to fight* *When we fight we fold* *Must us under the old willow tree*

Nothing seemed to be happening with the tree yet but Lo could feel tears flowing down her face. Through everything they had managed to arrive here togther. She needed to learn to control her rage.

But everytime she contained it she only felt the pressure grow. And the rage would grow with it.

She felt an obsessive need to be better, to prove herself, to know that she was better than these…

She caught herself. That was where they got their foothold.

Everyone has strengths and weaknesses. It’s entirely possible Uy was smarter and stronger than her in all ways, but it didn’t matter.

And that was what distinguished them from the humans who came before. She closed her eyes. She took a deep breath. She let the thoughts drain from her, imagined them sliding away from her like water, dripping off her chin and running down the back of her head.

TODO: Finish meditation scene.

The tipping point. The tipping point. The tipping point.

They had given up on the tipping point eventually. The human race, it seemed, was a crescent moon, a rocking chair. It was a swing and it desired equilibrium and while it could swing wildly it was unlikely to come unmoored off the center bar. Back and forth, generation upon generation. Not a cycle just back and forth.

Could it be a saw? Could it cut through the basic substance of our lives?

Or did they just need to move the swings somewhere else. Put in a new center bar.

So they started pushing on the foundations.

There was the Great Mourning and one phase was, of course, rage.

They had learned to channel their rage. At first it was just emotional and then it actually became something greater.

They could focus it and make things happen. There was a literal energy that came from them and took down their enemies.

A blast of rage could leave a mind washed clean and pale, a mouth drooling. It was not permanent but it wasn’t too different.

It was dangerous.

“Well, that’s a good story.”

Su had always been the skeptical one, so Lo waited for the rest of the snark to land.

“I mean, it can’t be right. There is no way those three people in that one band could have gotten married and broken up that many times.”

“You thought I was full of shit when I told you about all those old car movies, too, but I wasn’t.”

Su pursed her lips, then shrugged. “Fair. I Didn’t believe you then and there really were eight The Fast & The Furious movies.”

“And they were good. You didn’t believe me on that either.”

Lo tapped her pencil on the table. This is how it went, time and time again.

Io was in the other room, cleaning the countertops and humming a lovely low melody. Io’s voice distracted Lo frequently.

TODO: Finish red-head coming in to share the vision.  
She couldn’t get him out of her head.

He was unremarkable, like a bowl of cold oatmeal congealed in a paper bowl. From the ill-fitting pants to the stylish glasses he was not note-worthy. His pale skin and hair, his baby face, his adult body–none of it noteworthy but yet it carried the power and privilege of his race and his gender and his education in every step.

And he knew it, was the worst part. And he wanted to keep it that way.

I don’t know how this fits into the story.

|  |
| --- |
| His shirt was perpetually rumpled. He seemed to always be wearing the same outfit, though it seemed much more likely he was the type devoted to wearing the same outfit over and over rather than the type to wear the same exact shirt and pants–more of a political statement than anti-consumerist. |
| Looking at him you could see a soft-bellied, mid-rank Nazi. But without the insignia it was hard to tell. |

Anyway it’s not about him it’s about her. It’s about how you can brush against pure evil and barely notice, because most of us are capable of dark deeds. But in this time, after the Great Mourning, and the Rage of the Women, and the end of the genders, we all worked so hard to keep it under control, to find the right outlets, to be better than we ever needed to be, that she was shaken to her core to see that this was even an option for humans anymore.

It was rare for anyone to choose the male gender, though not unheard of. They’d been increasing, very slowly, for the last few hundred years, but by and large it was a style thing.

So at first she just attributed her discomfort to his uncommon identity. She had only met a few men and wasn’t sure No one barges through things much any more but she was ready to barge through everything last thing.

It’s incredible distracting to have people watch football while you’re trying to focus, to do something new and incredible.

She looked at the dice on the table and looked back at the map. It all came down to this moment, or it would if things went well. If they went poorly, they had a few more hours of gaming ahead of them.

Her back ached from standing and sitting. She carried stress in the back of her pelvis and would need a good long stretch on the floor after this, but it was worth it. They’d been going at it since 10 am and if she didn’t win now, it was likely to go for hours and she’d lose.

She didn’t hate to lose, but she wanted this one. She felt it in her bones how much she wanted this one.

She recounted her units. She recounted Su’s units. Su was reckless. Lo was not, particularly, reckless. She was not as decisively in front as she’d like to be, the element of chance still lurking over the moment. But it was the right moment; she could close her eyes and remember the arc of the game–this was the peak. It was time to risk everything.

“I’m going to do it.”

She moved her units into the space and grabbed the top of the box. Together they counted the units, comparing strength; they counted nearby units for support. They subtracted for punitive conditions; added bonuses for political strength.

She threw the dice–a motley collection of bright colors ricocheting and spinning around the cardboard. The last die spun for a good ten seconds, slowing so she could almost read which numbers flew by.

The six came up.

She threw her hands up and cheered. Su slammed a fist on the table and the cardboard squares slid off their little piles.

She’d done it–she’d won women the right to vote! She burst into one of the old songs, while Su slumped in her chair.

It was an old design–one of the first wargames designed by women, from the early 21st century. Sort of an acquired taste compared to the more elegant and economical designs of the time–full of real people and real moments, balanced together to model the struggle of the suffragists in the early 1900s. It had been published and republished and passed down through the generations, and it was one of Lo’s favorites.

The concept didn’t make a ton of sense but it meshed so well as part of her studies that she couldn’t resist. There were even suffragette songs–not included in the original but added by a later party when the game was digitized.

“You don’t have to crow.”

Lo grinned. “But I do, dear opponent.”

Su rolled her eyes but smiled back. “It IS part of the deal, I suppose.”

Lo walked around the table and stuck her hand out in the ancient gesture of the handshake. Su returned it, and then used Lo to pull herself up and give her a hug.

They looked at the game together, Su’s arm still collegially draped around Lo.

“It’s terrifying, isn’t it.”

Lo nodded.

“I feel crazy but…Does it feel to you like those times are returning, somehow?”

Su didn’t notice or acknowledge the look. “I had a dream last night that the genders returned. That there were some Bad Guys at work. And in the midst of it all there was a great burning tree.”

Lo looked sharply at Su. She hadn’t told anyone about the woman’s vision. It had been bothering her for the last week but she wasn’t convinced any of it was real.

“Tell me more about it,” Lo said.

“It was a really big, really old tree. And it was…on fire? It was on fire and there were a bunch of us around it in robes. And I felt this great….I don’t know, it’s impossible to describe but I felt this dark energy in the air, like an evil was coming out of the sky itself.”

She paused for a long moment.

“It was awful.”

Lo turned and walked to the kitchen sink. She positioned her glass under the silver neck of the faucet and turned the knob. Cool water flowed out into the glass but her hand was shaking trying to hold it there. Su was still looking at the board, had moved to rearranging piles and trying to see where she might have salvaged a win.

“Anyway, I’m sure it was nothing. I’ve just been anxious lately.”

Lo put the glass down, worried that she would drop it.

“Have you ever had that dream before?”

“Huh?”

“That dream about the tree, have you had it before?”

Su grunted. “No, not that I can recall. I can check my dream journals but I think I’d remember this one.”

Lo put her weight on her hands and leaned into the cool stone of the cabinet. These granite countertops had been outlawed for causing too much environmental damage, so they naturally became even more popular. They were lucky to live in a house with one and Lo frequently pressed her palm to the surface to feel that cool smooth surface.

She needed to tell Su what was up. You can’t save the world alone. She knew it was true. She had known it was true and she wasn’t sure why she’d kept the secret except…something about the secret had asked to be kept.

She returned to the table and started to pick up the pieces. Her legs were suddenly so tired and she felt close to tears. She picked up the small bag that held the Suffragist pieces, but staggered back into her chair. The cat had taken up residence since she stood up and leapt clear with a quiet meow.

Su was alarmed and stood up. “Lo!”

Lo closed her eyes as her head lolled back.

The last thing she said was: “This is harder than I expected it to be.”

When she woke up she was on the couch. Su and Nw were there, with Io hovering behind at a distance. Su smiled when her eyes opened.

“I’m glad to see you, honeybee.”

Lo smiled. She felt exhausted, like she had never felt before. She couldn’t remember what had happened.

Su helped her to a sitting position and looked into her eyes. Lo looked down.

With a jolt she pulled away from Su instinctually, remembering the dream she’d had.

She could see she was scaring Su and realized she had likely called the other two to join them. She knew she needed to tell them but could feel the same fear from before welling up inside her.

It was Io who broke the silence: “Lo, what’s going on?” Their voice was, as always, soothing to Lo–a sweet combination of concern and confidence, an intoxicating presence.

“Get me a pencil and some paper, please. And my backpack from the other room.”

Nw, ever the helpful one, popped up immediately for all three things. The beauty of living together meant they all knew, more or less, where everything might be. # SCENE: Write about the incident that caused the tree to be what it is.

He had been travelling with the padres since they left the Old World. He was travelling as a humble servant and secretary, a man whose name would never be entered into any permanent record though his was the hand that scrawled it.

He’d been travelling for so long, over hellish open desert, the suffering of which he’d hoped to never encounter. His tongue had blistered from thirst by the time they reached this place and the kind people here. The first missions had established a nice system of churches but their maps had led them astray.

The people of the mission had kindly brought him to their sacred spring. He wanted to dunk his entire head in the cool fresh water but they were holding him back. They dipped into the water and brought it to him. He drank so fast it hurt his mouth, his throat, but he didn’t care. He drank so much that he Hvomited it all back up a moment later, falling to his hands and knees. He could see distress in their eyes but didn’t care. He started to crawl toward the spring but a woman stepped in front of him and begged him not to. She offered another bowl.

He drank it, then she led him away to sit under a tree.

It was only after another hour of resting and drinking water that he saw the tree. He could have touched it earlier, that’s how close it was, but he had eyes for the water only. This tree was magnificent–young and strong, growing well from the fresh water of the spring. He knew this tree: this was the tree the padres were said to plant at every spring they encountered. The long branches drooped toward the water like hair over a woman’s face. He knew this was the tree he’d been sent for.

“Senor, you like our springs?”

He nodded and reached out for the water jug. “I do.”

“We are proud of the water, and we take good care of it. It takes good care of us.”

He nodded again. He wasn’t sure he could speak much.

“What’s your name?” he finally asked.

“Loana. What should I call you, senor?”

“Senor is just fine.”

She nodded. She looked at him and said very carefully:

“Senor, the water is sacred. You are not allowed to touch it at any time. If you need water, find me or another water keeper and we will fetch it for you. It is important you not break this rule or you will be severely punished. We will all be severely punished.”

He felt his cheeks grow hot. How could this woman have any idea what he was thinking? It was just a regular conversation they must have with strangers.

“Senor, do you understand?”

“Yes, Loana, of course I understand, I’m not stupid.” He spat the words at her and stood up, less steadily than he’d like.

She stood up next to him and he realized that despite her deferent attitude she was at least as big as he was–tall and broad-shouldered. And she did not seem afraid of him any longer.

He didn’t know what had sent him on this journey but he knew he was meant to be here. He knew she was part of this journey.

That night he slept in the small building outside the mission. It had a rough bed in it, and a few other men passing through were sleeping there. The padres were inside, undoubtedly gossiping in their Latin and eating better food than he got.

He got up to relieve himself and saw the springs and the tree. The moon was three-quarters full and the ground was well lit–no need to worry about tripping as he headed off to the forest to relieve himself.

He pulled his cock out of his leather pants, holding it in his hands. He sighed gently as relief entered him. This place was nice. It was no wonder they’d sent him here on the mission.

He remembered the day he’d gotten the call. A young child walked up to him in the street and said the Boar was waiting for him at the barn. He didn’t ask any questions–this code was not a surprise and the child wouldn’t have known anyway. It was likely the child didn’t last the night, given the import of the message–he hadn’t thought about that child since that day. It had been a girl child, it was always a girl child for obvious reasons. Her face was clean but the rest of her was fairly filthy–oily hair and hands with dark edged fingernails. Her big blue eyes had caught him off guard.

He’d gone to the back room of the tavern–the Boar’s Hunt, they called it. A figure waiting in the dark had gestured toward a door. He walked across the brick floor, a bit unsure but trying hard not to show it. The door was as old as the rest of the bar and dragged heavily on the iron hinges. He found himself faced with a dark staircase with a light at the bottom, a candle in a wall niche.

When he got down there the voice called to him from the back of the room. “Toma la luz.” (writer’s note: pls forgive my Spanish.)

“Si, senor.”

“Ven aqui.”

He didn’t respond but grabbed the candle and walked toward the voice. The candle illuminated a room with a large circular table in the middle of it. The table seemed to be…was that blood? There were large stains on the surface, and a large crucifix engraved on the surface. The hooded figure sat away from the table in the corner.

“Me dicen que eres un hombre [reliable].”

“Si, senor, me trata tener honor en cada momento.”

“Me dicen que tienes la corazon de sombra.”

He didn’t know what to say to that.

“Queremos un hombre como usted. Necesitamos ayuda de alguien que entienda nuestra…mision”

He glanced at the table.

“No, no es la misma mision de los padres.”

“Si, por supuesto, senor.”

“Tengo un regalo por….las femeninas de la futura.”

Raul wrinked his brow but didn’t speak.

“Quiero que irte a California y darlelas.”

He passed a glass vial with a dark dust in it. In the candle light he could see a strange pattern form as he reached for the vial but as soon as he grasped it, the light faded and it seemed to be nothing more than iron filings or something like it.

“Tienes preguntas. Pero tambien tienes dudas. Y por eso, mandamos tres otros. Si gana, el regalo eternal estare suyo. Damas y putas, oro y sangre. Todo que quiere.”

Raul felt his palms grow cold. He hadn’t realized another man had entered the room until the senor asked them both to have a seat. And then they heard the plan.

It had been three, maybe four years since that day. He knew nothing about the other men who had been sent. He had no idea if he was the first or the last. The padres had no idea of his true mission. He was sworn to secrecy and could feel the scar on his wrist from the blood oath. But he needed to know.

He put his dick away and walked back towards the mission. His body was not remotely recovered from the journey but at least now he had enough liquid in him to piss. Tomorrow he would ask.

He was told to drill a hole in the tree during the full moon, and then to shove the vial inside of the tree, into its core. It needed to be the full moon, not just before or after. It needed to be this tree. It needed to be hidden again once it entered, a special salve put on the tree to ensure no infection entered and killed the protector of this special gift. What, where, when and how were abundantly clear to him; the why was obscured and he liked it that way.

THe old man who knew the moon cycles had mentioned it to him–it was great luck. So that night he lay in bed, trying not to toss and turn so much that the others would wake. He drifted off at one point and awoke with a start. Sure, he could do this in a month but he was worried the padres would need to move on and he’d need to invent a reason to stay. Much easier to get it done and to wait for the rewards.

The moon turned the world a soft blue–only in the new world, in the desert had he seen full moons this bright. Each plant cast a perfect shadow of itself, blue on light blue. The tree was obvious. He was obvious as he walked over, so obvious she almost couldn’t believe he was making the attempt.

Loana had known since the first day that there was something wrong with this man from what he called the old world, but it had taken a few days to sort out that he was not only wrong but he was a Bad Guy. They had discussed it over dinner, her and the other water keepers. The legends didn’t teach them exactly what was coming, but they knew they needed to protect themselves and their families from these greedy Bad Guys, these people who didn’t ask questions or know anything about themselves and their place in the world.

She sat in the shadow of the tree, unmoving, watching his figure as he approached. He was handsome enough, but she was repelled entirely by him. Something about his oily face, his smile that implied more than she wanted and followed always by a frown or at best, a smirk. She didn’t like any of the Spanish, really, but the rest had insinuated their way here.

He acted like he could see, walking quickly as a man unafraid of stepping on a cactus or rock, but she could tell that he was also unafraid of a woman hiding in wait for him.

CONTINUES IN 2017.11.15.MD

# SCENE: Write about when the tree released itself into the Bad Guys.

Many many miles away a pale blond man sat at a table, reading a book on the thick slab of wood that formed the table’s surface. It was late, not sure what time. He had a cup of coffee near him. He had a notebook open next to the book, taking notes on what he was reading. It was a book he found in the back of the library and it seemed no one had read it in a very long time judging from the dust and the nearly immaculate but very brittle binding.

It was a day like any Tuesday. He lived alone; he ate what he wanted when he wanted to. He didn’t have a lot of friends and his family was long gone. He read most nights until 2 a.m. or so, feeling the coffee fill his stomach and warm him up.

There was a flash in the distance bright enough to cast a shadow from his coffee cup for the two seconds it was lit–he looked up and could see a very large beacon of light off in the distance. He could see it out the window of his third-floor apartment. He stood up and walked over to the balcony, wondering if he’d see it again.

For the better part of ten minutes he waited but nothing more happened. The building he lived in was largely abandoned–he liked the quiet but now he wished he had a neighbor to confirm with.

He sat back down and tried to get back to reading. He sipped his coffee and started the page again.

Maybe it was a strange form of lighting. Or maybe someone had lit a bonfire? He kept getting distracted by memories of the shadow of his coffee cup.

It hadn’t looked like what the shadow of a coffee cup should look like. It had looked like a small creature was crawling on his desk–almost like it was crawling into his cup of coffee.

He scoffed to himself and went back to the book. But he found himself reading the same paragraph three times. He couldn’t keep his eyes off the coffee cup. He picked it up and swished the cooling liquid in the cup. This was nonsense. He took another sip to prove to himself everything was fine and indeed, it was just a cup of lukewarm coffee.

He decided he needed to get some sleep. Maybe he should call somebody up in the morning–he’d been spending too much time alone. His cat meowed at him from the doorframe and he took it as a sign.

He did not notice the shape the coffee made as he poured it out into the kitchen sink–it looked uncannily like an old willow tree, frozen in that shape for a moment before the black liquid seeped down the drain.

His dreams that night were awful but not scary, somehow. Everyone around him was afraid, it seemed, but they seemed to be afraid of him. It was absurd. They acted nice to his face but he could see the way they talked about him when they thought he wasn’t looking. He felt both immeasurably powerful and utterly powerless, a lone ship on a large sea, floating above it all but at the mercy of the elements, the fish, the loneliness.

He awoke and lay in bed, looking at the dark ceiling. The crickets had gone to sleep; everything was silent. He felt a fever coming on. That had to be what it was.

He woke again, shivering and yet overheated. The sun was high in the sky. His cat was hiding in the corner, utterly unwilling to come back by him.

He awoke again. He didn’t know what day it was but he was a new man. He was a man. He was awake and ready to take everything that belonged to him. He could tell he had changed. He had finally found the thing he’d been looking for; or perhaps it had finally found him. He had a small bag with him, tied to his waistband. She had to give him credit for walking quietly.

Okay, maybe she doesn’t watch him approach. Sorry, hapless reader.

He swung wide around the tree and approached from the side away from the mission, trying to keep the tree between them so he wouldn’t be spotted. He walked with bent knees quickly and silently up to the tree, then crouched in the shadow side, moonlight falling on both sides of him. He pulled the tool they gave him out of its bag–a device to bore into the heart of the tree. He felt along the bark for a good place to begin and found a relatively smooth section of bark. He pressed the borer up against the tree and started turning the crank. He was grateful that it didn’t squeak but it wasn’t exactly silent as it drilled a hole an inch across and ten inches deep in this young tree.

He worked quickly. A noise came from above, like a wounded man, and he dropped the tool to the dirt. He stayed crouched, putting his hands on the smooth bark and craned up to see if someone was in the tree. It was dark. He squinted against the bright moon but couldn’t see anything–no movement, no strange shapes. He could hear only the sighing of the branches, and smell the fresh sawdust from the tree and the fresh vegetation around the tree.

He waited a few moments for his hands to steady. He picked up the tool from the dust and finished boring the hole. Then, from the back he kept around his neck, he pulled the vial. He hadn’t looked at it since they had given it to him, though he frequently felt the outline of it in the bag. They hadn’t told him what would happen if it broke. He had not asked.

The vial looked fine. Unable to resist his curiosity, he held it out into the moonlight to see it better. The plain gray dust inside went from dull to iridescent, and as before it seemed as if there was almost a pattern in the dust. It almost looked like words but he couldn’t read this language. He felt his entire body go cold and snatched the vial back into the shadows. The letters disappeared.

He turned back to the tree and carefully placed the vial in the hole he had made for it. He pulled the other vial from the bag at his waist–a tree protectant. He stuck his finger in the opening and the thick green liquid coated his finger. It smelled like something he’d never smelt before, camphorous and strong. He rubbed the liquid in the hole as far as he could, especially around the opening. Then he cut the bark off the wood he had bored out, and settled it in the tree, a little camouflage.

He was excited now. He’d finally done it. That future of whores and ladies, gold and blood was upon him, or would be. He could stop worrying about this life, this worthless fake mission–

She came up fast behind him and pinned him to the tree. She had been on patrol and he managed to come up when she was gone. Honestly luck is better than skill–there was no way he’d managed this on purpose.

“What are you doing, senor?”

He smiled, despite the knife at his neck.

She eased away from him, keeping her knife at the ready. They had never killed at the spring and she’d like to keep it that way.

“What are you doing, senor?” Her deference from earlier was gone completely and now he could see it was an act. This woman had killed before and would again. Even though he knew he’d get his reward, one way or another, she did seem to be something of an obstacle.

She scanned the tree and while her eyes were off him, he gripped the borer in his hand, ready to use it against her. But the knife at his throat kept him pinned.

“Nada, senora. No hago nada. Solamente estoy [praying] en la sombra del arbol sagrado.”

“El arbol no es sagrado. Solamente el agua es.”

His eyes flickered to the tree, afraid he’d done the wrong thing and she took that opportunity to pull him off his feet away from the tree. But he was not new at this and as she pulled him her guard was done, and he slammed the cutting edge of the borer into her neck. Blood fountained from the wound and he took pleasure in her eyes widening for him until her knife slid up and under his ribs.

She hadn’t really meant to do that. She didn’t like killing but a deep part of her brain had taken over with a desire to live and to retaliate. Her hand was firmly pressing into him still but as he staggered and released the grip on the borer she stepped back and felt the tool stuck in her neck. She knew this was the end. She wanted to drag him and his foul blood away from the water. She reached to grab his boot and tried to pull, but felt her grasp fail. She fell to her knees and crawled to the edge of the water, the water she had given her life to protect. She reached a hand into the blue pool, lit so well by the moon she could see the small fish sleeping there. She reached out and saw the blood on her hand washed away by the water. She had not failed.

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The next watcher found the bodies as the sun was coming up. She ran to tell the others. They would need to fix this tonight.

# TODO: Finish Su’s scene.

(Note to self why do all of my scenes involve someone stealthing around. WHY NOT COMBAT!? WHY NOT ACTION!? WHY NOT DIRECT CONFRONTATION!? I do not know the answer, hapless reader. I do not know.)

Su knew she was supposed to go to the library for that book Lo needed. But she also knew something was not right about this strange trio who had parked their car on the freeway to hide it and were now strolling nonchalantly down the street together. She parked her bike in an alleyway and started walking after them.

Two of them were smaller, the third taller. Maybe six feet tall. They might not have seemed suspicious but seeing them in a car was enough to get Su’s attention regardless. The one on the left wore a long dress, a soft jersey knit type thing that fell to the tops of her shoes, and a blue sweater over the top. The one in the middle wore jeans and a t-shirt, a striped shirt, and a wool hat. The one on teh right, the tall one, wore some kind of coverall. They looked like they were dressed for different kinds of weather, even. She followed along at a distance, then decided to go around the block and see if she could get a good look at their faces by passing directly next to them.

She picked up her pace and jogged quickly to the right, then down an alley and took a quick left, only to nearly run into them.

“What the fuck” snarled the one in the hat.

“Whoa, sorry, didn’t know you were there.”

“Watch where you’re fucking going, [slur] [not sold on this]”

The word was so old Su almost didn’t recognize it. The person who said it seemed shocked it had come out of her mouth but – almost pleasantly so. Like she didn’t realize she could be so terrible.

“This is Bad Guys turf, twinkie. I wouldn’t hang around here no more.”

Su blinked in shock.

[Something I hate about the universe I’m building. It’s so utopia-ish that it’s hard to generate conflict…other than a “hey this ain’t your utopia no more” pollyanna-ish vibe. Feel like I’m trying to sprint before I crawl.]

She backed into the alley and discovered the tall one behind her and felt a sharp point pressing through her jacket into her flesh. She started to shake and stepped forward, away from that blade. “We know you’ve been following us. And we want you to know that there’s nothing here for you but trouble.” Their voice was quiet and nearly familiar–maybe an accent Su is familiar with. Su nodded.

“Now say it out loud with me:” They paused. “I solemnly swear to leave this alone.”

“I solemnly swear to leave this alone.”

“I solemnly swear that I won’t come back.”

Su repeated everything they said though most of it got lost in the fear of the moment. The idea of threatening somebody’s life was so foreign but somehow her body knew what to do and kept her safe.

She sprinted back to the bike, her library errand entirely forgotten.

Su was weeping when she walked in the door. Lo stood up, startled–it wasn’t common to see people cry outside of the Circles. Lo walked toward her and wrapped her arms around her, feeling Su shake and tremble as she wept. They stood there together without speaking for another five minutes.

Finally Su felt whole enough to begin speaking and started telling Su everything: about the car, the threesome, about the knife.

She kept apologizing about the library but Lo wouldn’t hear it. They sat on the couch together, arms entangled, as Su recovered. The sun outside was beginning to set in that golden yellow color. It was time to go back to the drawing board.

They put out feelers about the Bad Guys, carefully, carefully. They watched responses–tics, eyes shifting away–they didn’t want to ask the wrong people.

What they heard was terrifying. Over the past few months more and more incidents were happening. There were four that were reported in the news but that dropped off quickly.

They reached out to the journalists and never heard back.

–

# Continuing scene from 2017.11.10.md

Io’s voice seemed pitched just so for her, almost like a dog whistle. It wormed into her mind and distracted her from conversation. It wasn’t malicious–just something about that particular vibration.

There was a knock at the door.

They weren’t expecting anybody in particular, but it wasn’t a huge suprise to have someone swing by. It’s why they all lived so close together–easy to borrow things, to get a hug, to find friends. Su reached behind herself, remaining seated, and turned the knob. Lo was still sketching and not looking up, so she didn’t see the person at first. She didn’t even look up until Su said, “Can I help you?” There was a red-headed person standing inside their home, their back against the front door.

“I saw something, I need to talk to them.” The red-head was staring intently at Lo. “I’m sorry to come in without an invitation or introduction. I saw something and I think you’ll know something about it.”

Lo didn’t react; she was still processing what had already happened. Finally she gestured to them to come closer. “What should I call you?” Lo asked quietly.

“Fi” was the response. “She or them is fine.”

“I’m Lo, though it seems you know something about me.”

Lo was not particularly famous though she was well regarded as a historian, for what it was worth. Fi stared at her and Lo stared back, willing her heartrate to slow a bit. Fi glanced at Su and back at Lo.

“Su, do you mind stepping out for a moment?” Lo kept her voice calm, measured.

The redhead kept her distance from them both, but once Su was out, they pushed towards Lo. “I saw something. I think it was from the past and I need your help.”

Lo invited Fi to sit and started tea for them both without asking. They were so agitated but slowly beginning to calm. “Let’s wait a minute so you can catch your breath.” She pulled the loose tea from the cabinet and started packing it into small steel tea baskets.

When the tea was ready, she came back to the table with the two mugs, and slid one across to Fi. “Tell me what you want to say so badly.”

Instead, Fi reached out her hand and took Lo’s hand. Lo wasn’t particularly comfortable with this but Fi seemed peaceful so she went with it.

As they sat quietly, holding hands, Fi was looking intently at Lo. Suddenly a strong itch started on Lo’s shoulder. Lo reached with her freehand to scratch and suddenly it stopped. She blinked and looked at Fi.

Fi smiled, a very small smile.

“Is that you?” Lo asked as she felt a warm prickling sensation move up her arm from where she held Fi’s pale palm in hers up to her shoulder.

Fi nodded.

“So you’re one of the delvers.”

Fi nodded again.

The delvers Let’s talk about how Lo gets to the place of the villain speech (2017.11.04.md).

Two lines, one reward.

I don’t know what that means but here I am.

She was scared. It seemed she was always scared these days, locked in this battle and barely able to look up and see the world.

*Two lines, one reward*.

That’s what the pale man had whispered to her right before he left. It didn’t seem related to any part of her work but he said it.

And defeating him was the key.

And she knew, as well, that whatever he said to her was to lead her a certain way.

She had come out to the lake, based on what she had seen on the old maps. There should be a big building here. It was an old airline hangar, from when they used to have planes around. She could hardly imagine it, though she’d seen footage of it. They sang songs about it every so often, their lost ability to fly and how they would never regain it. How they would fight not to regain it, not like that.

She parked her bike under a tree. She patted the tree and walked to the water. It was a nice lake, sort of a kidney shape. The water was calm today, a blue sky with picturesque clouds, but the wind was very cold. She pulled off a mitten and put her hand into the very edge of the water, boots planted firmly on the rock shoreline. The water was cool and refreshing.

This is why she was here. She was here to remember the beauty of this world and to protect it from the Bad Guys.

“Lo.”

It was no big surprise to hear Io’s voice behind her, but it still hurt her to realize that all she suspected was true. As always they spoke her name with that intimate concern, that connection they had always had.

She stayed squatting at the edge of the water. This was the end, of everything, perhaps, and nothing would likely be the same again. She gazed across the mirror surface of the water, reflecting the yellow needles of the birch trees and the distant mountain. The ripples from her fingers touching the surface were still smoothing themselves on the end of the lake. She remembered being a small child, seeing the ripples from rocks they tossed in, and asking her parents about ripples. She remembered the peculiar ripples at the spring, caused from water rising out of the earth itself. She touched the surface one more time and stood.

(Note: foreshadowing here for the waves of the singing, and teh small touch making a big impact. Sorry current reader but them’s the breaks.)

She felt in her heart the same love for Io she’d always known, and felt also the darkness that had fallen across them all since the tree broke open. She felt the weeping that had taken them out of their normal lives, the rage, the fear.

She knew it had been there all along.

She turned to face Io and they were there in front of her. The building was visible over their shoulder, covered in ivy. She didn’t speak. There was no need to speak–they each knew why the other was here.

“Let me cook you some food.”

Io turned and she followed them, watching the breeze play in their hair.

The outside of the building was covered in ivy. She wondered if anybody had known where this was until Io and the Bad Guys had found it–it was very different from what she expected. Two pine trees flanked the door. Io opened the door–a newly installed door in an ancient building. The steel lock and door knob gleamed.

Two lines, one reward.

Inside there was a lot of metallic clanging. She hadn’t been able to hear it outside; the building must be insulated or sound proofed. It was dark, but bright lights aimed at the door disoriented her; she could feel her pupils contract against them. She could see two lines on the floor leading away from her–like guidelines through the maze of machinery. She suddenly smelt something pungent under the oil.

## [She wakes up later in an industrial kitchen, that’s when the villain speech comes in.]

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TODO: Write about the Delvers.

TODO: Write about the deep wound of vulnerability from oversharing and connecting with others. Vulnerability hangovers.

TODO: Write about the social technology that holds this all together. It’s obviously tied up in the singing, meditating, and maybe something else. There’s a strain of some magic, maybe, with the delvers.

The Great Mourning finally took both sides of the political divide.

It took awile for the young people to be tired enough. Instead of the ongoing refreshing energy from the young people, they were tired. Everyone was tired. Nobody was encouraging anybody to do anything. They stopped reading the news.

This is not working for me today.

So you’re one of the Delvers.

Fi nodded. Lo tried to keep a presentable face. The Delvers made her a bit uncomfortable, sort of a wish to be more like them and also knowledge that they led a very different life from the rest of us. They were important and powerful and weird as fuck.

The Delvers were a highly specialized group of people who inherited the highest levels of knowledge around the stability technologies, and in some way were responsible for maintaining them. During the Great Mourning, or rather immediately after, and for several hundred years, humanity had recalibrated, somewhat organically towards kindness, survival, and prosperity on a biological level, rather than towards progress in a capitalist sense. Science was still important but rather than trying to find an enzyme to dissolve the last bits of fossil fuels from their traps underground, a lot of science turned toward how to be better people. What they learned was that in large part there were certain technologies that helped people align with each other, increased empathy, and generally made the species more stable. They studied bees and other colony-based animals. Bees did not, generally fight amongst themselves. (We will skip, for now, the protracted battles over whether or not humans were meant to be separated into levels, to say only that the answer was no.)

The Delvers knew a lot of things that Lo did not about singing and how and why they sang so much. The Delvers also had slightly different nervous systems tha the rest of the species–they tended to be more sensitive to physical stimuli, with very large eyes. Nothing you might notice on the street, but when you saw a group of them together, there was something extraordinarily beautiful about the experience–serene beings with their big, shining eyes, watching all as they moved and making small adjustments to keep everyone aligned. A smile here, a helping hand, and something Lo couldn’t quite explain. They didn’t *speak* to you in your mind, not exactly, but something about them helped her feel calm. [What she doesn’t know but I don’t want to forget is that thing that people can do with the sympathetic nervous system. Essentially they’re able to modulate other people’s emotions through very advanced levels of what we already do: breath control, pupil dilation, pulse rate, and perhaps something a bit magical. Maybe chemicals or homones they can choose to release.] That’s why they were called Delvers–it was like they could reach inside you and find what they were looking for.

Delvers were chosen at childbirth and trained in secluded facilities off in the wilderness called Wells. It was an honor to give birth to one, and when the training was done they would come back to live in the community they came from, for the most part. And they led many of the bigger songs with the community, deciding when and where it would happen. They were known to stand on the street corner and sing long songs about something happening in the community–about the work that goes into keeping the street clean and neat, about a parent caring for a child, or a child caring for a parent, about long lost mournings from that part of the world. Not everyone stayed to watch, but Lo frequently did, as part of her general studies.

As a kid she’d been frustrated that she hadn’t been chosen as a Delver (no doubt the cause of her unease as an adult though I’m not sure we need to say that right at this moment). She loved music and singing so much, and the Delvers knew all the songs. Her parents were always having to drag her off from watching them as they sang, carrying her in their arms as she cried–cried until the Delvers invariably did their thing and helped her calm down. But it was one of the few walls she had in her life–the feeling of separation from the Delvers. When she first went to school, her teacher asked her about her dreams for her life and she said matter of factly that she’d like to be a Delver when she grew up. The teacher had laughed, which made the other kids laugh, and Lo was embarrassed without knowing why.

That night her parents sat her down and explained about the Delvers, that she was too late to go, they only take babies and they didn’t take her. She heard them but resolved privately to make them take her. She’d learn fast. She sang well already.

But, as we can all tell, they never came for her. As she got older she came to understand that they had physical abilities she did not–and she also learned that in many ways to be a Delver was to live a role of service your entire life. You didn’t get to have a family, or lovers–at least not the way anybody else did. And you were responsible for the emotions of so many, many people.

So, she became an amateur historian of the music and the songs. She taught them in her spare time [TODO: Do any of them have jobs and if so, what are they?] She wrote books about them.

ANYWAY back to the story: The redhead waited for her to speak.

“You have a story from the past for me?”

Fi opened their mouth but did not speak. They had yet to make eye contact with Lo and it made Lo a bit anxious. “Yes, I do. I was alone and discovered something strange. Something bad.”

“Why not take it to your people?”

“I did. They felt sure we could handle it and I don’t agree. I wouldn’t leave them alone with it and so they sent me to you to find out more.”

[LO IS ON A MISSION FROM THE DELVERS WHO REJECTED HER, YES!]

Lo nodded, trying to keep her face neutral. “Okay, tell me what you need from me.”

Fi took a sip of tea and looked out the window. Lo felt herself grow calm, something she resisted a bit but found difficult to shake off. Delvers help everyone feel better but not many have friends because it’s weird that your friend can make you feel a certain way without your consent. Lo gave up and went with it. She did feel better.

“Okay. A few nights ago I was at the old springs at Usuyyn, are you familiart?” Lo nodded. “I go there a lot, it helps me remember what this place has been through and it keeps my delving sharp. Plus it’s quiet and I don’t have a lot of people to worry about.” The delver looked a bit embarrassed by that confession.

“Anyway, the last few times I’ve been there, there’s been something…off about the whole thing. It’s felt bad and dangerous, and I haven’t been able to find the source. I’ve asked around if anybody had a bad experience there and no one would admit to even going there–and there’s not… Well anyway I just don’t think it’s a recent thing, regardless [note to self: how to write a scene where someone interrupts themselves before divulging a secret]. So I was sitting under that big tree, if you’re familiar…?”

Lo knew the tree–it was one of the nearest artifacts from before the Great Mourning. She had written about it in a book for the neighborhood. [NOTE: Do the Delvers control the production of media? Do they censor things to make sure everything is okay and going to keep us on the right track? ]

“Did they send you because of my book?”

Fi shrugged. “They do things for lots of reasons but rarely share them with me.” They paused.

Lo looked at them expectantly. “So. The tree?”

Fi swished the cooling tea in their mug. “The tree.”

Their big eyes caught Lo off-guard when they looked directly at her. She realized they hadn’t made eye contact the whole time.

The jolt of fear and isolation that washed over Lo when Fi looked directly at her was so unexpected that Lo burst into tears. The powerful sense of longing, loneliness, hatred, violence, and dissonance that flooded Lo was like nothing she had ever seen. She heard the angry voices of people fighting with each other, screaming in pain, war cries. No. She heard a single voice screaming with an unholy power, a sound made by the fearless, the deathless, the defiant. The voices were cacophonous, disgusting to her, against everything in her body and soul. This was not the way humans were meant to live.

Fi looked away immediately and Lo felt the unreasonable onslaught stop. The voices disappeared like changing the station of a radio [Does Lo know what or how a radio is/does?] but the feelings remained. She discovered tears on her cheeks and her tea cup had been knocked over, tea streaming to the kitchen floor. Fi reached out to her and placed a clean hand on her arm. She felt the emotions start to fade as well, as if a narcotic were calming her. Fi kept their eyes turned and made a quiet singing hum uner their breath until Lo’s pulse finally returned to normal and her breathing calmed. Her hands were still trembling–there was little Fi could do about all the adrenaline that situation had released into Lo’s body. They could do a lot to calm but the body still had to process those chemicals and when the heart wasn’t racing it left the hands to do the dirty work.

After a long silence, Lo stood and took the overturned teacup to the kitchen. She set it in the sink and leaned against it. The distance reduced the dreamlike effect induced by the Delver, though the dissonance between her body’s obvious stress symptoms and her mind’s calmness remained.

She cleared her throat. “What did you just do to me?”

Fi’s voice was glassy. “That was what I got from the tree.”

“What do you mean you got it from the tree?”

“I was under the tree, like I often am for my Recharge. And I’ve always felt like that tree was special and a bit odd. It’s wise and has looked over us as we make all our changes.” Lo could tell Fi was hiding something about the tree, maybe it has something to do with Delver business, but it was clear the Delvers would keep their own secrets as long as they pleased. She turned back to Fi and crossed her arms as she waited.

“I was there and I just suddenly got this flash of the feeling I just shared with you. It frankly scared the shit out of me. I haven’t been allowed to go out Delving since because they’re worried I’ll push the wrong things out…anyway I felt that and I dug my fingers into the ground there. I was trying to see if I could delve the Tree.”

“The tree? Is that a thing?”

“I really shouldn’t tell you much about it but if you come to meet the others you can learn more. Just trust me, for the moment.” They breathed in. “So I delved the tree and I learned many terrible things that have happened near that tree but I also found a little surprise in that tree. I don’t understand what it is or why it’s there, but I know people died to prevent it being there…and people died to make sure it stayed there.”

“What is it you want from me?”

“The Delvers know you are strong, and a good singer. They know you know a lot about this tree, and about history. They think you can find out what has happened to that tree.”

“That’s it? The Delvers have a research project for me?” Lo found it unlikely they’d be summoning her to Delver HQ for a little library work they could do.

“Well…I think I broke it. I think the thing in the tree hasn’t encountered an intelligence in a very long time and I think I somehow set it free. After the cacophony I had this vision [descripion elsewhere]. THe tree was on fire and not on fire. I mean, it’s still there. It’s unburned. But I could see all of it as if I were right there. And then that night we saw a beam of energy breaking out of the tree and headed straight to the sky–and then it turned and went out in all directions.”

“And?”

“And I’m worried it went somewhere.”

“No offense, Fi, but I’m not a big fan of your kind. I mean, I’m glad your around and all but I’m a bit confused why they would wnat a normal person to do this for them. You’re the *Delvers*.”

“We….I don’t think we can handle this situation on our own. I…”

Lo had never seen a Delver weep before, not like this. They always had the iron core of their training, or their serentiy or whatever it was they learned to do. So the weeping seemed sort of cosmic. This weeping seemed deeply personal, and Fi seemed afraid.

“I can’t look at people anymore. You felt what happened. That’s what happens to all of us. We’ve sent three others and they all came back…broken.”

Why not you? You seem alright.

“I’m broken, too, but…I…I think the tree protected me. The tree is good, whatever else is happening it’s seen many things and through it all it’s been benevolent toward us. And I can tell that, I can be protected by it. But even with that I’m no good any more. I can’t delve. We can’t have this in the world. We need the Delvers.”

## The idea of all the Delvers falling sick, or whatever you would call it, turned Lo’s stomach. They couldn’t survive that. She knew enough about the time before to know she didn’t want that. Not e

Here are some more thoughts about the Delvers:

They’re essentially a network of cells of Delvers who have been trained centrally to uphold certain types of values and behaviors–they’re a benevolent organization that is perhaps a bit too strict about what they disallow, but they’re very contextually sensitive and local. There is not a lot of national/international media except for what is put out by/approved by the Delvers. But they are also vulnerable as the local Delvers are just people and can’t necessarily do it all. It’s not a particularly authoritarian organization–it’s very networky and distributed–but the standards and values are centralized.

Do the Delvers wear sunglasses to protect the populace when they are feeling their own emotions so that folks don’t get stray bad feels?

Certain delvers have particular sensitivities – like Fi is good with plants.

TODO: Does the Dark Cult have an ongoing protection of the tree? I already killed Raul who put the thing there but he could also conceivably tell the padres he wants to stay and start his own sleeper network to protect the tree–raising his boys and recruiting others who push out the women keepers of the tree? And maybe that order is still around.

TODO: We have a very compelling problem for Lo to solve. We need a conflicting desire. Ther’es something there with the fact that she hates/envies the Delvers, but is it enough? Is it enough that you have to help the people who didn’t think you were special enough as a child? Does she prove her value in the final tree scene? Is this how she gains the weird title King of All Birds? I think she gets the title sooner but when she fixes the tree situation she actually kind of breaks the Delvers, somehow. She makes a new social structure or convinces them that everyone needs what they have. The Delvers need Lo to succeed, but they also are threatened by the way she resolves it. Lo knows she has to save the world and is interested in the particular problem.

TODO: THe original coffee man is a delver who gets corrupted and begins corrupting other delvers because the techniques of the Delvers are useful in bad ways too.

TODO: THe Delvers Leadership are aware of all this fucked up shit going on but only vaguely–weakness of a network like this–and that’s why they bring in Lo. They actually already know she will threaten them and will threaten society but the Bad Guys are worse. (Are the Bad Guys partially motivated by their lost childhoods and lives of servitude? At least, does the vibe get to them?)

TODO: What about Lo is a problem for them? It could be that she *was* special and for that reason they rejected her. Maybe there was a prophecy about her. She is too introverted and not natively interested in being in community so they didn’t think she would be good enough. Her parents hid her from the Delvers as an infant but she is super powerful. What is the future she brings about? If we know how she brings about a new future, we can learn what it is about her that brings it to happen. I think it also has be related to her conficting desire.

Lo desires to help the Delvers because she knows it will keep the whole world safe, but she suspects something dark at the heart of the Delvers–that they are hiding lots of feelings from everyone else. Lo desires to help the Delvers because the Bad Guys are threatening her friends and family and life, but she has always been resistant to the powers of the Delvers (not completely immune, just more aware of the mind control aspects than other people) and isn’t 100% into the Delvers being the bosses. Lo desires to help the Delvers but believes the tools and songs of the Delvers should be for everyone. Lo wants to help the Delvers but knows that the Delver system of taking babies is unfair and cruel to the children and their families–she saw a woman weeping and screaming when her child was taken from her (when Lo was five or six) and it was the only time she’d seen someone that scared and angry in her entire life.

Maybe it’s just that Lo wants to help the Delvers because the Delvers are an important part of the society Lo loves and values, but the Delvers are maybe not the best for everyone. [con’t from scene with Fi] She knew enough about the time before to know she didn’t want that. Not everyone knew or understood the purpose of the Delvers, but Lo did and Lo didn’t want everyone else to find out again.

“Okay, well, I guess…I’m kind of in the middle of a few things but we can at least talk about it a bit more.” Truthfully she didn’t have much going on at the time.

Fi glanced at Lo but remembered themselves and glanced away again. “Thank you.” The sound of relief in their voice affected Lo heavily. “I told the Delvers I’d bring you to our local home and they could give you the rest of the information you need. Can you leave now?”

Lo froze. She’d already had a lot of shocks today. “Fi, could I ask you to wait here while I check in with my friends?”

She stepped out onto the balcony where Su was trying and failing to look nonchalant about the intruder. Su had always been a prickly one, more independent than the rest of them, and very defensive of the people she loved. She looked closely at Lo, but Lo just pulled her close for a hug.

“I’m going to see the Delvers.”

Su pulled back to look her in the eyes. “Why the Delvers? Why are they here?”

Lo shook her head. “I’m not sure, but they seem to need a historian. I’m just going to visit the local Well and get the details. I’ll be back but I’m wondering if it might not take a day or two. So I wanted to let you know. Can you tell Io and let them know I’m sorry I didn’t stay to say goodbye?”

This scene has lost alllll steam so let’s move the fuck on.

Lo grabbed her bag from the rack on the back of her bike and nodded to Fi. The ride had been about three hours and her legs were a bit tired and stiff, but not bad. The nearest well was in an old church, as many of them were. It was beautiful, really, and very large. She’d never been inside one of the Wells. The experience was overwhelming.

This Well was beautiful to Lo. Her reservations and fear melted away as they drew closer. There were a few rings around the Well itself, a sort of labyrinth of entrance, not hedged but merely manicured. Large dried hydrangea globes bobbed in the breeze. An inner circle of maples were lit in full orange. After the long ride she started to feel refreshed. It seemed cooler and cleaner here than anywhere else she had been.

The building itself was hexagonal, with large windows. As they pedaled toward the center, Lo was sure they were being examined in one way or another, though she couldn’t see anyone who paid them much mind. A few delvers were replacing some dead daffodils with pansies.

As she fussed with the clips on her backpack, a tall person stepped out of the front door and greeted them both.

“Fi, good to see you. Lo, thank you for travelling with Fi to get here. Let’s go inside and I will get you something to eat and drink.” Lo nodded appreciatively. She could feel a narcotic effect setting in–her mind seemed clear but she was strugging to find anything to worry about.

As they entered the building, they walked down a long hallway that seemed to bisect the building. The floor was smooth stone, and the hall was low-ceilinged and dark–lit mostly from light that flooded in through the windowed doors at either end. They reached the far side and took a right, following the outside of the building with the glass exterior on their left. They entered a small room.

The taller one started making tea and gestured at two chairs in this strange windowless hexagonal room. “Make yourselves comfortable. Let me know if you need anything–there’s a bell by the door.” They pointed at a small plastic button on the wall–it looked positively ancient to Lo. In general the room seemed like something from a historical exhibit–the thick orange carpet, wood paneling on the walls. She thought it looked like a living room from before the Great Mourning era. The tables and side bar were all very low slung, sleek looking, but the fabrics were all heavily textured–velvets, linen, brocade, things she couldn’t name. A single plant hung from a crocheted holder. She wondered how it lived in here with no windows. [Ed note: I feel like this is a picture perfect living room from the 60s.]

Then the tall one turned to hand each of them a teacup and saucer, then placed a small tray of ginger cookies on the center of the table and wordlessly left the room.

Lo picked up the tea but didn’t drink right away–she blew on it while waiting to see what Fi did. Fi took the cup as well and drank a few sips immediately. Lo figured it was probably fine and drank as well. She was thirsty after the ride. A cookie would help, too.

She reached for a ginger snap and noticed Fi was nervous. “How ya doing, Fi?” Lo tried to keep it light. “You look a bit spooked.”

“I’ve just…I haven’t been in this part of the Well for a long time. And never like this.”

“When did you come here?”

“When I was younger, they wanted to train me as a server, before my expertise with plants became known. How do you feel?”

Lo swallowed the cookie. She didn’t know if anyone was listening and decided it was better not to confess much. “I’m alright–I feel very calm, really.” She assumed that was intentional on the part of the Delvers.

Fi nodded. “You know, I’m not sure when, but it’s likely they’ll turn that down for you at some point today. But with new people we always–”

The door swung open. Another Delver swept into the room. They wore very small sunglasses with reflective lenses–glasses that were nearly the exact size of their eyeballs. Their hair was very long and straight and swept over the top of their head and down their back, with no part. They wore a black silk shirt and form fitting gray pants–not the robes Lo had noticed on the other Delvers here at the well. Their smile was almost embarrassed–one of those half-embarassed, sheepish smiles that means the giver isn’t really embarrassed at all.

“Lo, I’m Un. It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

Lo automatically reached out for a handshake and felt immensely comforted when Un’s hand took hers and shook. “Nice to meet you, Un.”

“Fi, thank you for your service in this matter, you can go to the bunks and make a spot for Lo.” Fi rose and bowed a short bow, then left the room wordlessly.

They sat together in this small living room, not speaking. Lo was overtaken with a calmness and joy she couldn’t explain in the moment. Un was merely waiting.

After a few moments, Un spoke. Their voice was low and beautiful, almost a bit gravelly.

“Lo, I brought you here to talk about what Fi saw. We need your help and we need you to know things that no one knows outside of the Delvers.”

Lo nodded enthusiastically. She felt so drawn to Un that she of course wanted to help out.

“But you need to know things and make your own decisions. I know it is very pleasant being here, so we need to give you some time to adjust.”

Lo didn’t really know what Un was talking about but nodded anyway.

“I’m going to slowly turn down my connection with you. You may feel a bit lonely as it happens, but it’s just a matter of comparison, not actual loneliness. We’ll have you stay overnight to recover and then we’ll talk more in the morning.”

Lo frowned a bit but it passed quickly. “Lo, can you tell me about your bike ride in?”

Lo began to chatter about the bike ride, with Un asking periodic questions. This was a standard practice when humans had to be brought in for any reason–Un had been doing it for a very long time and was known to have a light tough. Lo was fine at first, effervescent nearly. Then as Un decreased the delving, Lo became slower and less talkative until she finally seemed nearly dejected.

It all went like normal, but there was something else about it as well.

Lo had transferred her feelings back to Un, in some ways. Un hadn’t felt a genuine resonance with someone outside the Delvers in a very long time–it was uncommon for non-Delver adults to be able to affect a Delver, especially one of Un’s abilities. Un filed this information away–they’d been told Lo was special but nothing more; maybe this had something to do with it. As Un felt Lo’s emotions begin to crash, he discretely dropped a pill in her next cup of tea. She needed rest.

Lo awoke the next morning with a headache. She was in a lower level of the Well, in a room with several bunks but no one else she could see. She didn’t really remember much after her conversation with Un. And the peaceful feelings she’d been full of yesterday seemed entirely gone. She felt clearer than she had in a very long time, but also…she felt a creeping sense of unease.

She sat up and saw an insulated flask (presumably tea) and a note written on a single index card by hand, black ink:

*When you’re up, here’s some tea for you, and a bit of food for you. We’ll come down for you when we’re ready.*

She dropped the note and poured herself a cup of tea. Something unexpected had happened to her yesterday, to be sure, but she had no idea what. She tore a roll in half and started spreading butter on the middle, then jam, then a piece of cheese. Then she smashed them back together and ate them like a sandwich. At least the food here was pretty decent.

She had a large bite in her mouth when the door swung open. It was yet another Delver she didn’t know. This one was wearing reflective glasses as well, but wore the robes she’d seen on so many here.

“Good morning, Lo, how are you feeling?”

“Fine, thank you. What’s your name?”

“I’m Zo, forgive my rudeness!” The Delver knew she wasn’t fine but didn’t say anything and restrained themselves from outputting any calmness. “I’ve been sent to bring you upstairs for a meeting. Are you ready?”

Lo was already smearing jam on her second roll & adding the cheese, mouth still full from the first. She stood up, tea in one hand, breakfast in the other. “Lead on, Zo.”

Zo almost asked her to leave the food but realized there was little point in it and little harm. They followed some dark hallways until they found a staircase and headed up. They went up four flights of stairs, Lo holding onto her breakfast as they climbed. On the fourth floor, they entered a large chamber with a big hexagonal table in the center. There were 17 Delvers in the room, three on each side of the table, with a spot for (she presumed) herself between Fi and Un. Fi, for all their awkward lack of eye contact, brimmed with supportive friendliness. The rest sat expectantly.

“You might have warned me it was a formal gathering,” she muttered to Zo.

“It’s….complicated.” they said quietly, then cleared their throat, “I present Lo Ana Iuy to the Council of Delvers.” then bowed and turned to leave.

Not a good sign when your host is as scared of your situation as you are.

TODO (maybe): Write about the actual Council of the Delvers–what do they say, what are they like?

Un stood up and the other Delvers followed. They took off their glasses and looked at her, except Fi and two other Delvers she hadn’t seen right away, off to the side. They sang a shining song that nearly seemed to pin her to the wall.

*We need you here* *We are so thankful.* *We will write songs for you.* *The threat is real and you are the protector.* *The wind is cold.* *The void grows large.*

The word void woke her from the trance of the beautiful song. The force of the Council working in concert was not something many ever experienced–they used it only for helping the other Delvers stay in sync, and non-Delvers were usually not able to withstand it. But this one was different than any others. [con’t from 2017.11.20.md]

Something about the way they said void had made her tremble–her stomach heaving. Her vision blacked out in the center of her eyes. The song was still reverberating in the large honeycomb shaped hall when her vision returned.

Un felt for Lo, but also knew she was not someone to pity. They had read her records, and it was clear she would be able to handle herself–well, no one could really handle themselves around the Delvers but she would be fine. Still, only occasionally and with great preparation for the other had they ever done what they just did to Lo: a concentrated blast of gratitude wrapped around a core of fear and anxiety. The fact that she was still standing showed her mettle. Un was intrigued, to sya the least.

“Lo, good to see you this morning.” Un called out to her across the hall. “Join us, if you will.”

Lo walked over to Un, hoping she looked more level than she felt. “Quite a greeting you all put together.”

A quiet round of laughter moved around the table as the Council moved to put their sunglasses back on and took their seats. Lo smiled as she sat down. She would not let them put her off. She would resist their powers as much as she could.

[does lo have a special ability to retreat inside herself? does she know that she has it or is it instinctive?]

A person across the table stood up. They were also tall–they looked perhaps like a sibling or close relative of Un. Lo assumed the Delvers were genetically different from the general population so perhaps it was logical for them to look alike. “We are here because of a grave threat to the Delvers. We believe you’ll be able to help us.”

“Forgive me if I don’t introduce all of us. We needed everyone here for…well, reasons you’ll come to see. I trust Fi told you the basics?”

“They told me that something happened regarding that old tree out by the springs, and that it had…infected or damaged some of your Delvers. They said you needed help with the history of the area.”

“Indeed. Fi came back damaged but relatively healthy. The other two Delvers came back burned out. They can no longer Delve, nor can they Receive.”

They paused and looked around the council. Early morning light streamed through the windows onto the table and Lo wondered if she could get some coffee.

“We have things to tell you about the Delvers that non-Delvers are not allowed to know, but without this information you”

Actually maybe not. Maybe they withhold the info and that becomes part of the conflict.

“We would like to send you to the tree to see”

“We have heard reports from distant Wells that some of their Delvers have disappeared. The”

TODO: This Council of Delvers scene is a mess and I don’t know where to go with it.

Un, Zo and Mq sat in a small room of the Well together. Fi was there, too, off to the side. Un would have to sort out what to do with Fi and the other damaged ones–they made the Delvers uncomfortable and that kind of tension would not be good for the community as a whole. But they couldn’t simply eject Fi, either. Bad for morale.

Zo cleared their throat, “You called us here to talk about the situation?”

Un nodded. “There are many things going on. First, we have our damaged Delvers here.” Zo glanced unintentionally at Fi and saw them cringe away from the attention. “Second, we need to remove the threat of the tree. And third, we need to figure out if this has anything to do with the greater problems with Delvers in the region.”

“I have some ideas about the second one,” Zo started. Zo’s role as community organizer [need a better title] meant she knew a lot about the area and the people who lived there. “There’s a woman named Lo who writes books about the area–she’s knowledgeable and well connected. If anyone is going to know something special about that tree, she is where I’d start.”

“We obviously can’t send any more Delvers, not after the way the last one came back,” Mq responded gruffly.

“She’s not a Delver–she’s just another person. I’ve only met her once or twice, but I reviewed her book on the area before she published it and found her quite insightful.”

“What’s her full name?” Mq asked. Mq’s specialty as a delver was to test new born babies to see if they would be a good fit for the Delvers. It had been quite a while since Mq had done the tests themselves–now a gray-haired and rugged faced person, Mq was responsible for training and overseeing the corps of Finders. They pulled up their book of names.

“Lo Ana Iquy.”

Mq began flipping through the book, cross-referencing their enormous storage cavern’s organizational scheme. “Fi, fetch me this file, if you would.” Mq scrawled a ten digit number on a note card and passed it over.

“In the mean time, I have reports of more Delvers going missing. We haven’t lost any here but there seems to be a handful of Wells suffering from missing Delvers and….other disturbing incidents.”

“You think it’s related?”

“The timing is incredibly suspicious. I’ve sent envoys to each Well reporting missing Delvers to tell them what we experienced. I don’t trust it by mail.”

[stuff happens, or maybe the file is brought in with them]

Fi returned with the file, put it on the table and returned to their seat on the side of the room.

Mq opened the file and started scanning. Un could see something interesting was presenting itself by the way Mq’s eyes opened slightly.

“I don’t think she’s a good choice.” Mq said, still lost in the file.

Un arched an eyebrow and waited.

“She has…a strange history. We tested her as a baby and I thought at first she would be perfect for us. She’s got a strong voice and memory for the songs, but there’s something about her…we brought her here and although she was very well behaved, there was something…off. The nursery was disrupted the entire time she was here. She had a lot of power for both unification and disruption but we couldn’t get her to work for us. We had to send her home.”

“They found her singing strange songs, even in the crib.” A long pause. “She liked to sing songs like the old songs, songs where she was the soloist, if you will.” Un almost had forgotten the word. “The other babies would sing along with her but the nurses found it…discomfiting. They felt like she was exerting a strange power over the other children.”

“Is that all? It hardly seems enough to say no in this case.”

“Another Delver had a vision about her. They awoke from it in a fit, screaming ‘Beware the King of All Birds’. And when they calmed down they described her perfectly-they said a person named Lo had risen to destroy the Delvers, that she would be the end of us.” Mq paused at length. “It was Gi who had the vision.”

The three of them sat in silence.

“Let’s send her.” Though they weren’t a hierarchical organization, Un spoke with the kind of authority only earned by long and hard service, smart ideas and a good eye for the Wells. The other two didn’t respond at first, until Zo turned to Fi.

“Get her for us.”

[Note: Zo probably isn’t the one who helps when Lo arrives]

[This scene is something to do with how Lo breaks the Delvers]

She looked up from the mud under her knees.

She didn’t know how long she’d been there, but she was very cold. It had probably been a while.

Her last memory had been of her and her friends, Fi and Su and ??, singing the song of the tree. She closed her eyes. Why did she remember them in robes?

Why did she remember the tree rising into the sky as a vision of flame?

She looked up and saw the tree still dead, but blackened. The stump was missing entirely; a large muddy hole filled with spring water remained.

She stood up and walked to the spring. The water looked clear as ever. She dipped her hands in and washed her face. The water was cool but not as cold as she was. Her hands came back a bit red–that headache must be more than just a headache. She saw her friends a bit away, Fi holding Su. They hadn’t seen her yet.

It was time. It was time to dismantle the Delvers and share their knowledge among everyone. The time for meaningless songs and elaborate gift exchange was over–now was the time when all would know the meaning of what they sang, all would be able to write a new song whenver they needed to. All would know what it was to love via giftgiving, not to merely feel the love required biologically.

Here she was, King of All Birds, ready to lead a new flock to the future.

The towns where the Delvers had gone bad were most badly hurt–after these months of violence and cruelty, they would need a lot of work. She looked into the bubbling, rippling water. It would be dangerous to go into these wounded towns and neighborhoods, to bring back the order that they were no longer equipped to live without.

She wouldn’t be able to do it alone–she would need the Delvers.

She turned to find Un. They were curled up sleeping beneath a tree. She admired that they’d been able to climb somewhere and go asleep intentionally.

The sun shone brightly through the bare branches of the trees. The wind was sharp and the world smelled of mud and green life. They had fences to cut down, people to teach. They needed to get started right away.

The bubbles continued to break the surface of the springs. She thought of all who had passed by this exact spot over the centuries–hunter gatherers, Spanish vaqueros, American families, curious teenagers, and now this: the dark resolution to a problem centuries in the making. She cupped her hands and drank deeply of the springs. She would need its strength for the time to come: The Time of All Songs. She knew in her bones everything would be different.

Su was reading a book when Lo returned home from the Well. In truth, she’s been trying and failing to read a book–Lo was supposed to be home today and she wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

So when the door opened, Su pretended to keep reading but her face broke into a smile.

“I’m home.”

Su threw the book down and hopped up.

“You can’t do that again.”

They stood and looked at each other for a while. Lo knew that Su hated this kind of thing but..she hadn’t had a lot of choice. Then Lo dropped her bag and hugged Su, singing a quiet, regretful but not quite apologetic song in her ear.

“They needed me.”

“What’s happening?”

It was a long story and Su didn’t entirely follow it. But the basics: They needed to learn everything they could about the tree and its history and share it with the Delvers. They needed to understand what lived inside of it and they needed to understand if it was as bad as the Delvers thought.

They sat down to make a plan. Over many cups of tea, and many breaks to hum songs together as they stretched their bodies, they put together a plan. Su would go to the Library to get the books and maps Lo needed. Lo would look at her existing research materials. And then, once they knew a bit more, they would go to the tree itself. They weren’t Delvers–they should be safe. At least as far as anybody knew.

[That’s where the scene of Su going off on her motorcycle occurs.]

Su hadn’t come back and Lo needed to get to the tree before the next full moon–she wass sure there would be a relevant before and after, that something would change. The old legends she had found in her research indicated that the tree turned dark on full moons, that strange vapors and noises were witnessed then, and that the tree was friendly on the new moons.

The full moon was a few days away. Lo needed to go now to see how it changed. It was time for her to move.

–

After about an hour on the bike, she knew she was getting close. It had been a few years since she’d been here but it had been such a big part of her research she didn’t need to look at a map.

But the fence was new.

Was it? It looked new. But who would have a fence like this anymore? Wire wrapped together in a grid, with sharp razor wire at the top. [Council of Delvers]

Here is what we know so far.

We won’t cover what we learned from your excellent book on the subject. But we believe there was a song used over the years to cleanse the tree, sort of. We don’t know if it was a song of protection or removal. We have a few songs in our records of songs from the group of Watchers, but none of them seem to be quite right.

We think there may have been another entity involved, someone who was corrupting the watchers until they finally fell into ruin. It seems like perhaps we have been lucky that nothing has happened before this–or perhaps Fi caused it by Delving the tree itself. We don’t know. We’ve never encountered anything like this–a sentient tree, maybe. A powerful spell set on the tree, perhaps. But we have members of every Well within a 500 mile radius and they all have had problems starting the night of Fi’s vision.

Lo waited. “I’m sorry but, really? A vision? That’s what we’re going on here.”

Un glanced at the oldest person at the table. They nodded.

“Lo, what we’re about to tell you is known only to Delvers. If you share this information outside the Delvers, well, we don’t know what will happen to you but we know that it would bring ruin to the Delvers.”

“We’ve been engaged in a multigenerational program of selecting extraordinarily sensitive people and training them to use those senses in ways that normal humans are not able to. And, while we don’t force anything, we encourage marriage and child-rearing among Delvers who wish to do so to increase the sensitivity of our kind even further.

Over the centuries of doing this work, we’ve found some extraordinarily talented individuals–and we’ve learned to trust their instincts. The information they sense manifests in strange ways, as visions that are sometimes literal and sometimes simply a warning processed into a more abstract form by their subconscious. And each of these Delvers tends to specialize in certain ways. Fi’s specialty is, was…" they paused “plant-related. From a young age they were an exceptional gardener, able to heal almost any unhappy plant. They used to report stories from the plants, and gradually we’ve been able to hone it into a very powerful ability.

“So, yes. Yes, we are going off a vision. It’s what we’ve done for centuries and it’s what we’ll continue to do.”

Lo glanced at Fi, who looked at her directly now that she had glasses on. She remembered the dark visions she had received from Fi the first time they’d met. Lo looked at Un, and then scanned the Council slowly.

“You want me to find a song.”

“We want you to find a song and we want you to sing it at the site of the tree. We can’t risk any more Delvers going there. Bring in the damaged Delvers.”

Two figures emerged from the far side of the room, guided benevolently by an older person. They seemed to struggle to walk in a straight line; the guide held each by a shoulder and walked slowly to keep them relatively on track. They wore a different color of robe and very large reflective goggles.

“Fi came back unable to properly Delve and to connect people. These two…” Un sounded truly sad for the first time. “These two are now dangerous, with the skill of a Delver but they seem infected by a desire to disrupt and scare people instead of bringing us together. They…they nearly caused some discord here at the Well before Fi realized what was happening.

“We think this may be what happened to the missing Delvers. We don’t have proof that it did, but the type of reports we’re getting from the communities where they went missing show bizarrely clicquish, tribal behavior. The sort of thing Delvers are trained to prevent. So now we’re spreading from the healthy wells out to the weakened ones, trying to stop the spread of this…virus and we can’t risk any more good Delvers at the spring. We need you, Lo.

It was the second time this week Lo had heard anything other than serenity and unity from the mouth of a Delver.

He didn’t go to the Well again.

He could barely remember the strange vision of the night (?) before, only knew that he felt uncomfortable when he tried to think of that night or what came before.

He felt lonely. And angry.

When his neighbor came to borrow a book, he invited them in for tea. They joined, glad to spend a bit of time with a friend. And then he did what he wanted–he unfurled his abilities and pushed a little bit of fear into them as they talked about the Delver they’d seen that day, singing to a little girl on the side of the road. He enjoyed watching their posture change as his emotions colored their own. He’d always been good, so subtle that most people didn’t notice the work he was doing on them.

He went for a walk the next day. He went to the market, felt the weaving of all the people coming and going, the knots formed everytime two people spoke–asking the price of two silvery fish, saying hello.

He felt the Delver approach long before they got to the market. He didn’t have much time, so he took off his glasses and looked into the eyes of a passing parent with their child. He encouraged them with his look to fear their child. He could see them clasping the child’s hand more closely. The Delver was getting close and some part of him knew that was going to be a bad scene.

He turned down an alley and started walking quickly away. He bumped into someone walking the opposite way and they fell–then he felt a seizure in the web, the network. They’d sniffed him out; they’d sensed another Delver and the confluence of the disturbance and him…well, he guessed it made them nervous for him. They were approaching more quickly and he felt a sense of nausea as they came closer–loathing that filled him up. He started sprinting away, the people around him turning to gape at him like the wake of a boat on the water. He needed them to ignore him if he was going to escape.

The Delver was still seeking him, and then he felt another blip off to his right. Was it possible they had summoned help? He darted down a road to his left, bicycles swerving to avoid him. He knew a back way up here–an old road that had been divided into a bicycle path and a walking path, with the walking path splitting off into a separate wooded area. And on the other side of the wooded area was his home. He just needed to get clear of all these people and their feelings. He started singing as he jogged along the path, a song of joy and companionship, hoping it would soothe the people around him, make them forget he had passed. It seemed to be working so he kept it up until the break in the path. There wasn’t much traffic and the Delvers had stopped their pursuit. He slowed to a walk and stopped at a boulder next to the path to catch his breath. He let his senses open up to sense as much as he could. The surface of the community was normally like a calm pond to him; now it was a turbulent pond, water that had been disturbed by so many forces you couldn’t tell the source of the disturbance. He found it beautiful, energetic, the swirling and choppy flavor of the moment.

It felt new and fresh, and it felt powerful. He felt a future stretching out before him, very different from the old life.

The elevator broke. This is new and I’m immediately trying not to worry to find the best way out of the situation. I turn to look at the woman in the elevator to judge her reaction. She’s calmly sizing up the situation, near as I can tell, and not terribly concerned about me. She’s about 6 feet tall–bigger than me–and has a short haircut, curly, very dark hair. Her eyes are large, but so are all her features. She is not very expressive so it’s hard for me to know what’s going on with her.

“Looks like we’re stuck.” I say.

“Mmmm”.

Not a talker. Okay, I don’t need to talk either. I consider the buttons. I press the already-lit button for the fourteenth floor but nothing happens.

“We’re not going anywhere.” She says.

I laugh to break the tension. “So it seems.”

“You don’t like to make direct statements, do you?”

I’m taken aback and purse my lips, putting on my “I’m thinking face”. “I suppose not.”

“See?”

I laugh and am surprised when she laughs as well. “Most people don’t realize how much they hedge. Sorry to be so rude.”

“No worries, really.” I begin to think maybe I’m trapped in the elevator with someone interesting, at the least. “I’m Tara, I work here. How about you?”

“I’m Lo. I was coming to visit a friend who works here–do you know Su?”

“The long brown haired one?”

“No, they have short hair, they work in janitorial.”

“Sorry, no.”

We wait for a long moment.

“Ever been stuck in an elevator before?” I ask.

“No, I’ve only rarely been in one.”

“I take them every day.”

“What do you do here?”

“I maintain the archives.”

“Mmm, interesting.” She seems to be warming to me, finally. “You know, I’ve been looking for someone to interview about that. We’re a bit stuck here, waht do you think?”

“Interview for what?”

“I’m writing a song about how we keep the archives, how we save them as time moves forward. Just sort of a pet project.”

“Well, sure….I guess we might as well.”

She pulls a notebook out of her bag and sits on the floor. Wanna join me? It might be more comfortable"

I sit cross-legged on the floor–the first moment I remember there are about 12 stories of empty air below us.

“It is what it is, isn’t it?” she says. It’s a bit more cryptic than I’m used to but I nod and laugh.

“It is.”

“Okay, so, Tara, how is it to keep the archives?”

“Well, the biggest”

[This feels a bit elaborate and not a lot helpful. Thanks anyway writing exercise. ]

Fi arrived the next morning, knocking on their door around 9 am. Lo had not been expecting Fi (yes she had been).

Fi offered to cook breakfast that first morning and it became something of a habit–they cooked breakfast, eggs and vegetables and mushrooms. This particular day they’d gone out to the forest and found a giant puffball, which they’d cooked in big crescent moon wedges. Lo admired the plate, the big wedge of mushroom with two eyes made of eggs. Fi was growing on her.

“How’d you sleep, Fi?”

“Just fine. I had a dream…”

Lo listened without looking up. She’d learned that Fi was a bit skittish about their sensitivities and abilities, and wasn’t used to talking about them outside of the Well.

“It was from when you were a baby.”

Lo studiously contained her face. “What do you mean?”

“I mean it’s from when you were with the Delvers.”

Lo put her fork down, the tines resting on the unbroken yolk of one of the eggs. “What do you mean?” she repeated.

Fi looked up, eyes hidden behind her glasses. “You really don’t know.”

Lo waited as patiently as she could, feeling emotions rising inside her, feeling as if she were being brought to a boil. Fi put her hand on Lo’s arm, and Lo could feel the pressure draining off somewhat.

“Tell me what you mean when I was with the Delvers.”

“I, I assumed your parents would have told you about it…”

Lo just waited, her face calm as a pond.

“I shouldn’t tell you.”

“I should think you won’t be able to avoid it, now.”

“I…Okay, look, you can’t tell them you know. The Delvers or your parents. Nobody.

“When you were a baby the Delvers took you in.”

The rage inside her finally blossomed into a bright red spot in her eyes. She’d known from the moment Fi had resisted telling her, she’d known the rage would come and she’d waited. Almost smirking and now that it came she felt she could break every stick of furniture in the house. She could throw her teacup at the wall and she could nearly feel every scrap of rage and sorrow she’d ever felt at not being chosen rising in her, it felt like it was physically moving up from her pelvis, up her spine and she could feel a bunch of sharp-edged rubies moving in her blood and she was ready for battle.

Fi sat motionless, a rabbit caught in the panther’s line of sight. No part of them blinked, twitched. Lo believed that Fi may have stopped breathing.

She laughed. She put down her teacup. She walked out the front door.

She went to the spring, alone, for the first time since this had all started. The tree was there, with a welling of sap on its bark that looked new–looked like blood. She walked up to it, arms numb, hands numb, head floating. She peered at the smear on the tree, the dripping color, and determined it was likely sap.

She had known, of course.

She had known exactly where she belonged, from the start, from her earliest memories. She wanted to storm into her parents’ home and get the answers she wanted to know everything she wanted to reverse it all and suddenly her hand was very sore because she had started hitting the tree.

She stopped. She sat beneath it, looking into the water.

She almost didn’t realize where she was or why she had come here. But then it dawned: The Delvers couldn’t follow her here. And maybe here she could if there was something about her that was or wasn’t like them.

Goddam her hand hurt.

There were a few birds nearby, singing their short melodies to each other. The grass from the meadow rustled, dry and tall this late in the year. The smell of mud was strong.

The tears were hot on her face. She was crying as hard as she’d ever cried and was relieved to be alone, here, in this fucked up place the Delvers had sent her to. The Delvers who finally decided she was worth their time, now that it threatened them. What the fuck was wrong with her that they didn’t want her? What the fuck happened when she was there? How had her parents hidden this from her after her incessant and demanding interest in the Delvers? She wiped the tears from her face, which set off a new round and she sunk her head into her palms.

A few hours later she was asleep beneath the tree. Her head ached but she was exhausted–unable to summon the wash of rage from earlier. She was defeated. She had been defeated. She had been rejected and now here she was, errand boy for the victors.

She looked up at the tree and saw another opening beginning to drip sap. And she realized there was something new happening.

There were birds. There were birds in the branches, birds on the ground, birds in the nearby tree. There was a bird on the small rock next to the sprint. Sparrows, swallows, crows, even a hummingbird, a flycatcher, and a few geese. They were silent. They were watching her.

She looked behind herself and realized they had surrounded her entirely. She scrambled to get her back against the trunk of the tree.

They sang together, all at once. Not the same song, but a song: A chaotic trumpeting, a mass of chirps and trills and honks all at once. She stood up, bracing herself against the tree.

A crow flew down from the tree and landed in front of her. It cawed, a single plaintive squawk and then it pitched forward, opening its wings wide to her, head down to the ground. She didn’t move.

The other birds lined up near the crow, behind the crow, and started adopting the same posture.

They were bowing to her.

She felt compelled to return the gesture and executed something like she’d seen in old movies–a courtly bow, leg extended to the front. She felt as much as she heard the birds start to depart while she was down, and by the time she straightened the last few birds were lifting off and flying away.

This was not what she had expected.

–

When she got back to the apartment Fi was waiting. They sat on the couch, drawing pictures of plants–an aloe vera, an exotic looking plant covered in spines and round bulbs. Fi looked up and dropped the pencil.

“Lo I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have told you.”

“You needed to tell me. I needed to know. I’m becoming who I am, I can feel that, and nobody knows quite what that means.”

Fi didn’t respond to that.

“Fi I need to know what happened.”

“I don’t know the details, it was before my time obviously. All I know is they took you in from your parents and there were…troubles. There were troubles with the other babies. The nursery couldn’t control you by delving, so they sent you home. I don’t think they’ve ever done that before.”

“That’s it. They just sent my home.”

“I don’t know; you can tell as well as I can that I’m not very important to them. I assumed your parents had told you. Mq is scared of you; Un seems…Un seems intrigued.”

“They never said anything. It was literally the only thing I ever wanted, to be part of the Delvers. It was…” Lo stopped. She was tired of reliving this loss after the day she’d had and the … the thing with the birds.

“So what was this dream of yours?”

“You were at the Well. You were singing–not like a baby sings, more like a talented child. And a bird…a bird came out of your mouth. A crow. It hovered above you as you sang, and then it flew away. And…the Delver nurses came in and called you King of All Birds.”

“King of All Birds? What is that?”

“It’s probably nothing; I’ve never heard it before. Just some weird dream shit.”

Lo’s face sagged. This was going to be harder than she ever anticipated. But it wasn’t time to tell Fi what had just happened at the spring. What is the economy in this world not quite our own?

Do they have jobs? Do they need jobs? How does the market run? How do the Delvers work?

I think there is still some semblance of our material world–they need to be able to get bicycle tubes somewhere. They have computers available at least part time, so there is some kind of centralized source of power. They have running water. This kind of infrastructure is pretty hard to run without cash and people working on it.

I may not need to solve this but first, does Lo have a job?

The closest thing she has to a job right now is her historian type activities. She writes books and learns lots of old songs. I feel like she is kind of a loser in terms of work and spends a lot more time on her own passion projects than she does on the things that would make her money. This is probably still tracing back to her sense that she missed her shot when the Delvers didn’t bring her in. She feels pretty deeply that she deserves to do the interesting work she loves but there is no space for that in the world, so she’s been spending her time building a life full of learning and delving and sensign although there’s no way for that to support her without being one of the Delvers.

What are those things? Maybe she worked as a librarian for a while, or maybe she still does but is pretty flaky so they don’t really rely on her.

What does Su do? I think she’s a mechanic for the neighborhood. In general the level of mechanci ability is very high compared to our world but she’s a specialist and knows how to fix things that are very hard to come by.

I think there are maybe 3d printers in every home but I’m still working that out. It doesn’t seem super important at this point.

The Delvers get a small cash allowance. People tithe to them for their services–sometimes right at the moment on the street and otherwise during singing services or on holidays.

Housing is generally not an issue–after the Great Mourning, housing was overbuilt for the remaining population so people generally were able to move about and find a house they liked. Houses are mostly passed down generationally–a family will have a half dozen or more units that can be allocated to children. If more is needed they can go property hunting and find a building in decent shape and just….move in. There are also folks who maintain what are essentially apartment buildings and accept rent for them. Property ownership isn’t super critical anymore.

Who pays for infrastructure improvements? Medicine? Schooling? (What holidays are there?)

Raul stayed aroudn [ed note: yes technically i killed him but I might regret that] the spring after the padres left. They hadn’t told him he had to stay but he felt that he should, somehow, stay.

They had made this journey before. They had made it so many times and they hated it everytime.

Fi preferred life outside the Well and now that her abilities were damaged she was dreading going back.

She set her jaw as they strapped on their helmets and got on the bikes. Lo noticed that Fi had been nervous, or something–she seemed a bit distressed about something other, new.

She knew she was supposed to love going back to the Well. The Delvers all seemed to love the Well, but Fi had never liked it and the situation had only gotten worse. At home she had friends who cared for her and they had space to live with the plants, to recharge between sessions. At the Well, she was just one small part of a huge group, an detail only relevant when she was wrong or missing or out of place.

As they pedaled she remembered when she first left the Well. She had loved it there as a child, or…well, it seemed to her at the time that she liked it but as she got older and had more control over her life, there were details that stood out.

She remembered hiding. Hiding all the time, running from the more exuberant kids to get quiet time in the forest. It felt a bit too on the nose when she thought of her current patterns. She was a good Delver–or, she *had* been before. But she needed more time to recharge.

And there seemed to be something just a bit off. They came together to sing songs about how every last person matters, but the truth was they didn’t all matter. Un and Mq loved the Well, they said it all the time–but they also loved being the center. They loved knowing what everyone was up to more than they loved everyone.

And Fi seemed to be the only one who could see it. The holiness of the Delvers, their role as Savior…it blinded non-Delvers to her unhappiness, to the corruption growing in their midst.

She shook her head. She was just in a bad mood.

And yet she felt the need to prepare for the trip to the Well. She felt the usual detachment process begin. She had tried in the past to stay open; she had the skills from her Delver past to control it. She had stayed open. She had stayed present. But even that wasn’t enough and eventually her mind would close, her eyes would constrict, her ears would stop listening and her body would take over.

The last trip, after the incident, that had been entirely different. She was so terrified that she had pushed as hard as she could to get there and her sensors were wide open, all defenses down.

She’d never seen them see her through the lens of need. They responded instinctively to her crisis and she remembered what she though the Delvers were supposed to be to each other. Nurturers, care takers. They took care of her for the better part of a week, helping her regain control of her senses, opening and closing her emotional apertures. Her eyes had been a problem–the first person to greet her had been greatly damaged by the flood they received when they locked eyes with her–and they still hadn’t managed to help her close them down. She learned quickly to keep her glasses on, to avoid eye contact.

And then it started slipping back. They had a bigger crisis on their hands and she became someone to fetch things, to work, to get things done. She was no longer particularly relevant. [Ed Note: this much exposition is eyeroll-y. And difficult for me to write. Hopefully soon it can be actually good scenes instead?]

“What’s it like there?” Lo’s voice startled her out of her thoughts. She smirked a bit, since Lo couldn’t see her face.

“The Well? It’s…” The thoughts at the forefront of her mind were not what she wanted Lo to hear. She took a breath and let those concerns flow freely out of her. “It’s lovely. I love the ride there, have you been this way?”

“No, not very far. Only to the edge of town.”

“Once you get out of town it’s beautiful. The sky looks so much bigger as you go down into the valley and the clouds are always in crazy shapes…

“The Well is nice. I don’t know what it will be like for you; we almost never have non-Delvers around. But it’s a place of great warmth and welcome.”

“Who will I be meeting?”

“I don’t know very much about the plans.”

Lo didn’t say what she thought but wondered why the person who had seen the vision had been sent to fetch her, but didn’t know anything about the plans. She got the sense Fi didn’t feel entirely comfortable with the situation, either.

“Is there any etiquette I need to know? I’d like to make a good impression.”

“Un and Mq know about you, but in general things are pretty structured. They’ll tell you where to be and when.

“I guess I’d only warn you that it is easy for them to effect you, obviously, and there’s sort of a…calming cloud around the place. We tend the overall atmosphere to keep ourselves happy and harmonious, but I would be surprised if you don’t feel it…too much. You might be prepared to feel out of control.”

Fi felt bad but didn’t feel ready to share more than that. She couldn’t jeopardize the mission, even with her doubts.

Time passed. They fell into silence again. Fi noted gratefully the dried heads of a field of sunflowers she always looked for. They passed through a small town, mostly ruined, with a few houses that seemed to still have residents–a flat-roofed ranch house with a pumpkin carved and sitting on the steps, a two-story Victorian with freshish paint on the gingerbread woodwork.

“Who lives here?”

“I don’t know…you know, I’ve passed through this village more times than I can count and I have never stopped. I’ve never seen anybody even walking around here. We always stopped a bit farther–the halfway point.”

Lo looked around…the houses seemed well cared for in the midst of crumbling buildings. A wooden home was completely devoid of paint, the entire thing sagging and slanting off to the side. The old post office was closed and boarded up. They pedalled on.

Fi was right–this was a beautiful ride. She found something comforting with the soft grade down into the valley, the way the sky opened up above them, the distant ridge of a mountain blue, the land in front of it vaguely pink until it reached the greener base of the valley. A deer watched them from the trees.

At a wider spot in the road, Fi pulled off. There was a shelter here over a table and picnic bench. Behind the shelter, a spring babbled over some rocks.

“Here we are.” They stopped and pulled some food out of their bags–cheese, bread, dried meat. Lo pulled out a jar of good mustard and started making sandwiches. Fi leaned over and stretched their hamstrings until Lo handed them a sandwich.

“How are you doing, Fi? You seem stressed.”

Fi flushed. They’d never been asked by a non-Delver how they were doing and it felt awful. It had to be related to their diminished abilities; they couldn’t mask their feelings like they used to and now here was a non-Delver being affected by it.

“Sorry, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to pry.” Lo could tell Fi was humiliated by the question. She’s been trying to help.

They ate in silence, no traffic passing. The bright mustard was great with the fatty spiced salami, and Lo was hungry from the ride.

“You know, I always wanted to be a Delver.” Lo couldn’t remember the last time she’d said that out loud–maybe when she met Io when they were 15.

Fi looked up out of the corner of their eyes, mouth full, nodding encouragement.

“Yeah, I always thought I’d be good at it.”

Fi stayed quiet.

“I mean, you can see it in my work, can’t you? I feel like I’ve spent my whole life trying to learn what you’ve known since you were a child.”

“It’s not all that it looks like.” Fi muttered quietly.

“I’ve been telling myself that my whole life: that it can’t be as great as it seems. But it’s hard to believe. I have to learn the songs in my spare time, and I don’t have anybody to sing with most of the time. I don’t know why they didn’t want me.” She drank some water. “But I’ve made my life anyhow.”

“It’s ultimately what we all do, isn’t it?” Fi said it quietly. “Shall we sing together? A song of thanks for the food and the ride?”

It was Lo’s time to blush. She’d sung with Delvers countless times but never just two of them at one time, alone. She was always part of the larger crowd.  
“C’mon, it’s fun. I won’t be rude about it.”

“What song?” It was always the Delvers who chose the song.

Fi started the song:

Hot fire and warm fields of grain Cool breeze and the glade We are coming home We are coming home to be Well

They repeated it twice before Lo joined in. She didn’t know this song, but it came easily to her.

As soon as Fi could hear their two voices rising together, carried by the valley air, she realized she’d chosen the wrong song. This song was only for Delvers to sing, to sing as they came home to this particular Well. But it wasn’t the wrong song entirely.

Io didn’t much like this Fi person hanging around. Lo’s attention was split and she was singing all the time.

They were sitting at the kitchen table working on some chords for that stupid Delver project. WHy should Lo help them when all they’d ever done was reject her?

“I’m headed out.” Their departure was so casual they weren’t sure Lo noticed they were leaving until they heard her call goodbye when they were down the stairs and halfway out the door.

They thought about going to the Delvers. They could tell their emotions were a bit out of whack lately; they’d been feeling increasingly jealous of Lo and Fi. And normally this is how they fix things, right? They go talk about it, they sing a song and they find a gift fo Lo and for Fi to help them normalize and warm up that relationship.

But the Delvers had seemed like the wrong solution. Io wondered if it was time to move on from Lo. They didn’t realize they were already halfway into town when they saw a person walking in the woods. They said hello and the person–a very pale, sort of forgettable person–said hi back. Io felt a desire to stop and say hello. Just to feel some kind of human companionship. But before they could open their mouth to speak, the other person spoke.

“Howdy, neighbor.” The voice was low. Io began to suspect they were a man–it was so rare to see one.

“Hi there.”

“Don’t suppose you’ve seen a small dog around?”

Truthfully Io hadn’t been paying the least attention. “Sorry, I didn’t notice anything. Are you missing one?”

“Yeah, my beagle…” Io felt a powerful wave of sympathy and wanted to help immediately.

“Aw, a beagle? What’s their name?”

“Meatball.”

“Let’s find Meatball.”

When they stopped in front of Io’s place several hours later, the pretense of the dog search had been erased from Io’s memory entirely. Their memory of the afternoon was a bit foggy, but they wanted to hang out with Os again. “Want to grab some tea tomorrow?”

“Sure, why don’t you come to my place?”

[etc etc]

## Lo looked a bit curious as Io came in but didn’t ask. They didn’t need to share. [Need to establish a better relationshp sooner.]

Here’s some unofficial backstory:

Lo and Io met in high school or whatever it is you do in this world when you are a teenager. They met in high school and befcame deeply infatuated with each other. They were both kind of strange and academic, and they hung out a lot and had ever since. They liked to find songs together, though Io wasn’t much of a singer. They had fallen in and out of phsyical relationships through the years.

At present they are not in a physical relationship–Lo is not in a physical relationship with anyone. She cuddles with Io and Su.

Io loves Lo and always has and is very protective of her, but also somewhat unproductively judgmental. Io is always Lo’s harbor in the storm.

TODO: Write about how relationships heal this world.

As they got closer, Fi could feel the change setting in. Their attention span felt considerably shorter. Their nose got stuffed up and their shoulders rose higher. It was bad enough coming home before, but now…she could tell they weren’t sure what to do about her.

As soon as they got inside, Fi was dismissed to begin preparing the sleeping arrangements for the Well. They glanced at Lo, worried that she would feel abandoned, but knew they couldn’t give too much away or they’d risk punishment from Un or Mq.

They remembered when they felt special for being close enough to know Un and Mq. All their childhood they’d seen the leaders and wondered how she could be good enough to know them. But now that they’d come closer to the leaders, they wished they were back on garden detail.

The wind carried dust in it as she climbed over the fallen tree to approach the spring.

She knelt below the tree, in the mud, on the leaves, and bent her head.

She was lost. She had found the song, she thought, but she didn’t know all the parts.

She started to sing what she did know:

Together we grow We heal together Together we gather We love together

And cut short. Her ear had been filled with a piercing pain when she reached the last line–she couldn’t tell if it was a bad noise or something else, but her ear was hurting.

She waited, rocking back and forth on her knees with a hand over her ear. She decided to try again:

Together we grow We heal–

Again the pain. Sooner than last time. It didn’t feel mechanical, it felt almsot–intelligent. It felt sensitive to what she was doing and why. She shook her head and drank some water as she waited for the pain to pass.

After the pain subsided she tried a different song altogether, one she had learned from the archives:

It’s been a long, long time comin’, But a change’s gonna come, yes it is.

The pain didn’t appear. She kept singing.

[insert two more lines]

It was a song she’d never heard the original performance of, but she had transcriptions of it. It was a song she loved–she loved the idea that no matter what had happened, change was coming [ed note: is that waht the song is about?] It made her feel better. Whatever was happening now to the Delvers would change, whether or not she succeeded. Whatever was happening to Lo and Fi and this tree would change. She felt her inner equilibrium balance out.

As soon as she tried the original song the pain in her ear was very sharp–she reached for her ear and wondered if she would feel blood. But after a few seconds of silence, she was fine.

This was not what she expected. She hadn’t truly expected the song to work with just her voice, but she hadn’t expected a negative reaction? Was it the song itself? Was someone fucking with her?

She stood up, a bit woozy from the pain. She placed her hands against the bark of the tree, feeling that old papery surface and wishing, as always, that she could know what the tree knows. She listened to the rustle of the leaves, dried but not yet fallen.

The she heard something a bit different. It sounded like a footstep. She wasn’t an expert but it sounded mostly like a human footstep, with the soft rustle of a windbreaker.

She whipped her head around and saw a pale person turn and start sprinting away. They were carrying something in their right hand–a small box with some kind of stick or antenna out the top.

She’d seen this person in the market before. There was no reason for them to rush off–unless they were somehow responsible for her pain.

She knew with a sinking feeling they must be.

He’d never been particularly mechanical but this little device had come together nearly on its own. Io, in particular, had been a help–sharing their mechanical knowledge. Uo [or whatever his name is] could fix a bike or start a fire, but creativity in engineering was not his strong suit.

He hadn’t told Io what the point of the little device was, or who his target was. He said he was making it to freak out the birds. Which was true–it was very likely going to freak out the birds.

As they worked, trying different knobs and antenna lengths, they talked. Uo asked Io abou their childhood, prying so gently at any small wounds until they were bleeding fresh. Uo could tell by the usual signs, the heart rate elevated, the palms slightly sweaty. But instead of his previous goals–to see that behavior and then reduce it – he tried the opposite.

It was, frankly, terrifying to see Io in that state of rage. Io had almost never seen anyone so angry, even during training. Io went from calm and helpful to irrationally angry, afraid of people coming for Lo, mad about sexual promiscuity (that had been a neat trick Io was particularly proud of) and nearly gleeful that the birds who heard this thing might fall from the sky.  
Uo had done good work here. Now he just needed more people.

Instead they’d shot the shit

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TODO: After Lo finds Io in the warehouse, she must dismantle the frequency generator. Su has to be invoved somehow.

TODO: Write about how the Delvers don’t like Fi when she fucks up and they also don’t like Fi when she’s neutral and they also don’t like Fi when she’s doing the right thing. A costly mistake.

Fi seethed as they walked down the hall to fetch the files. It wasn’t fair that they were alsways treating her like a servant. It wasn’t fair that they had been here so long and never been welcomed into the council.

They walked down the hall without thinking, heading straight to the Archives. Normally if a Delver met another Delver, they would either seal off their emotions or the two Delvers would pause to help the angry one reach a type of equilibrium–but since the incident at the tree, they hadn’t been able to do either with her so this Delver at the archives simply avoided eye contact and disappeared into the stacks.

Fi used to love the archives. The wood paneling on the wall was warm, and it was so quiet there. They used to go look at all the botany books the Delvers kept on hand–it wasn’t a college library or anything but they needed books to teach the children until they were ready to move into the world. And Fi learned the names of all the plants around her, and then they learned the names of all the plants they had in the books. They read books about the historical uses of plants, about ethnobotany, about food and medicine uses. It was a good place but once she was old enough they asked her not to come to the Archives for pleasure anymore.

Just another example of how they didn’t really think she had much to offer. But this time was different. Fi had always known they were special and had mostly beeen content to let the other Delvers ignore her–the plants were there for her. They didn’t notice how verdant the gardens Fi tended were. Always it was a good growing season and Un never noticed that Fi was the one constant–even in years of bad weather, floods or droughts, she could grow a decent crop. But because she wasn’t as good with people as with plants they found her just barely tolerable.

The Archivist returned and handed the file over to Fi without looking at her. She took the file, feeling her resolve stiffen as she walked back down the hall. She would solve this problem and they’d have to see her value. She would do it or she would never come back here.

A fight breaks out

Okay, we need a fight or revelation between Lo and Io. I don’t know how to get there but if there’s anything I know, it’s that stability is an illusion. Change is everpresent. Even when there is equilibrium it is ever shifting, and a push too far can take everything from great to disaster. So let’s do this.

Io had been spending more time out of the house, but Lo had only recently started to notice. She was so busy with the problem with the Delvers, and Io was so self-sufficient and independent that it hadn’t seemed to be a problem.

What Lo doesn’t know is that Io has been hanging out with the Pale Man, who has been both vocally expressing some subversive and dangerous ideas and also emotionally manipulating Io with his Delver skills.

*What are the subversive and dangerous ideas espoused by the bad guys? What is their manifesto?*

We are the Bad Guys, and if you don’t find that funny, fuck you, we’re laughing regardless.

We believe that humans are a competitive and combative species, and that we are denying an important part of what it means to be human when we allow the Delvers to control our feelings.

We believe that the Delvers are a bunch of manipulative fakers who pretend to have the interests of all humanity at heart but instead are merely seeking power and control.

We are here to liberate humanity. We are here to help humanity feel the full range of their emotions: Not just the positive, pollyannaish utopian feelings, but also the feelings of rage and jealousy. We believe it is important to acknowledge and honor the origins of our species and to finally express the fullness of our power. Keeping these feelings bottled in makes them even more dangerous and people need an outlet for their less positive feelings.

We are fatalistic, we are meant to die and be forgotten.

*Manifesto of the Delvers* (possibly a speech that is given to the classes at the Well, or perhaps in the book to Lo) (maybe Fi shares it with Lo against orders. It’s the Oath of the Nightswatch, but secretive. So Fi can recite it.):

Long ago the world fell into the Great Mourning. And as we mourned together we learned that humans were stronger together, and that we needed to learn more about how to achieve peace, to actively work towards peace, which meant that we needed to change our nature.

We learned that behavior can guide emotions, and we developed a guardian class to help us learn and perpetuate the behaviors that helped us be our best selves. We are the Delvers. We read the signs, we moderate, we facilitate, we sing. We bring humanity together to be its best self, so that we might live until the heat death of the sun. We sacrifice our own lives so that others may live better. We are the openers of the heart, the soothers of the soul, the drainers of the poison.

Io came in late that night. Lo had been working on a song most of the day; her voice was tired and she had a mug of herbal tea clasped at her heart. More than her voice was tired–she was tired. She had been working so hard and they were stuck. She was tired of hearing the reports of the Bad Guys causing trouble. She was tired of having to spend so much time moderating her own emotions–it takes time to meditate, to exercise, and she didn’t want to spend the time on it.

Truth be told she hadn’t been getting enough sleep. It was almost confession worthy, to deny the need for sleep, but she also could fake it just enough. She could stay up a touch later and get up a touch earlier and get a bit more work done.

She’d sleep when they solved it. She knew that Fi would be mad at her–mad that she was being careless when it mattered so much, but she also knew she needed to solve this soon. She could feel the balance of the scales slipping–she could feel the world sliding toward the Bad Guys, slowly at first and more quickly over the past few days.

The mug felt good against her–she could tell her body wasn’t doing a good job of regulating her temperature, a sure sign she wasn’t sleeping enough. The house was quiet around her and the noise of the door flying open caught her off guard–she normally would have noticed Io’s footsteps. She realized that she hadn’t even known Io was out. Still the behaviors were a bit strange–Io didn’t usually act so careless with the door, and they laughed a bit at her when they noticed Lo sitting on the couch.

“Hi”. Lo’s statement wasn’t far from a question, though she knew it was on her that she didn’t know where they’d been.

“Lo.” Io stumbled over the shoes in the door and dropped [something].

Was Io…was something wrong? She put her tea mug down. “Are you….are you okay?”

Io just laughed, the sound a bit slurred and indistinct. Lo’s heart beat faster–she wondered if they were sick or something. There was no reason she could think of that Io would be acting like this.

“Loooooo.” They stretched her name out in that way…that way they used to do when they would fight in high school. Io knew that Lo hated it and she couldn’t remember the last time it had happened. She suddenly knew what was happening, though she hadn’t seen anybody drunk in her lifetime. She remembered a scene from an old movie when someone came in drunk and it all matched: the clumsiness, the slurring. And the cantankerousness.

“Lo, little one. How’s your little project going?”

She didn’t say anything and Io just got angrier.

“You know you’re not going to get anywhere.”

“Where did you even find alcohol?”

“Don’t matter. We’re going to win, you know.”

“Who? What are you even talking about?”

“The Bad Guys. We’re totally going to win. It’s not hard when you just want to let people be themselves.”

Lo backed up into the coffee table–she felt her body fly into a fear response, her energy suddenly very high, her knees bent and her eyes unable to see details only broad strokes. This had to be….it had to be a joke right?

“Io. What are you saying?”

“Aw, I’m just fuckin’ with you, Lo. Just fooling around.”

“Why would you say that?”

“I dunno, Lo.” They barked a harsh laugh at her. “Let’s go to bed.”

She looked at Io from the corner of her eye. “Okay, let’s.” She guided them to the bed and they laid down fully clothed. She pulled their shoes off, and pulled a blanket over them.

Something was very, very wrong. She couldn’t believe that Io was one of the Bad Guys but nothing about this was normal.

The next morning Io slept til noon. Lo went to Su’s place after breakfast. Her home was a tidy Victorian, mostly purple with some yellow and blue trim, a sunny spot in a neighborhood that was mostly overgrown. Su’s lawn was well kept, standing out as a spot of calm amidst the tangle of wilderness around. She threw her bike against the porch wall and knocked.

“Hey, Lo, what’s up?”

“Do you have a minute?”

“Sure, come on in. I’m just doing some laundry.”

Lo entered and inhaled the warm scent of clean laundry. Su’s house was always so clean and calm it made her a touch envious.

“So, what’s up? I’ll get you some water.”

Lo didn’t really feel comfortable talking about it. What if she’d imagined it all? And, she realized the real fear: What if Su had turned too? Lo wasn’t sure what she would do if her two best friends had both gone bad.

But she also knew she couldn’t move forward not knowing. She had to take the risk.

“Io is…something strange happened last night.”

Su waited, in her practical and stern way.

“They came home late last night and…I think they were drunk.”

Su’s eyes opened wider but she remained quiet.

“They were…slurring and stumbling and…”

The fear settled in her stomach and she nearly couldn’t say what she thought. But she knew also that if it settled enough, she’d never get the words out. So she rushed to it:

“They … they acted like they are one of the Bad Guys.”

“What the fuck.” Su’s voice was perfectly still, almost glassy.

Lo fumbled through the story: Io’s drunken behavior, belligerence, intimidation, and then finally that weird little sentence: “We’re going to win you know.”

“And then I put them to bed and they fell asleep and as far as I can tell haven’t been up since.”

They sat together in silence. Lo’s stomach continued to churn, as she waited to find out what Su was thinking.

It was a long wait until Su got up and stormed downstairs without a word. Lo waited a few seconds and then followed. As she descended the stairs, she could hear soft padded thwacks and low grunts.

She reached the basement and found Su punching a padded bag. She didn’t stop as she spoke to Lo, ragged from exertion but as cold and controlled as Lo had ever seen her be.

“They can’t have Io.

“They can’t fucking have Io.

“Io was the nice one. The sweet one. Io was yours.

Lo didn’t know what to say but she felt the tears start to flow down her cheeks as she listened to Su’s quiet voice. The sound of her fists pattered throughout the basement.

Lo slumped against the support pole next to her. She hadn’t been willing or able to actually make the jump to the thought that Io might not be hers anymore. She felt a flood of memories enter her: When they met, their first kiss, the time they fostered a kitten for a month. Io had been always her quiet ally, her support in tough times. Io read poems to her every time the new moon came and cooked dinner.

She didn’t know how long she was there or when Su stopped punching. She felt Su sit next to her and wrap her arms around her. The relief that Su hadn’t turned contrasted so much with the pain of Io’s defection that she gasped as if she’d been thrown into a pool of cold water on a hot day.

“Lo.”

She tried to get her breathing under control.

“Lo, we need to finish the song. It’s the only way we can have any chance to get Io back.”

Su. Su always with her pragmatism, her direct focus. Su who loved Io almost as long as Lo had. Su. Su was always going to be the one to pull Lo out of this. Only Su had the emotional stamina for this. Lo felt so much gratitude to have her.

She took a long deep breath, and felt a fresh wave of tears.

“Su, I can’t. I can’t do this without Io. Where will I live?”

“Shhh. Lo, we need to finish the song. We need to finish the research. We need to do it.

TODO: Write about Io & Lo from before.  
When she woke up it became clear she’d been drugged, or something like it. Ether? The last thing she remembered was that sharp smell and then a dizziness.

She found herself bound in the corner of a metal room, alone as far as she could tell. The floor was corrugated steel, like the floor of a truck bed. The walls were steel too, but smooth, and the ceiling as well. There were shelves all around her. She was very cold and her whole body hurt. She realized she must be in some kind of fridge or freezer or something. Her muscles were cramping from both the position she’d been held in and the temperature.

She had to get out of here. Soon.

Her legs weren’t actually bound–just her hands. Io would pay for this. She had expected a treacherous conversation, sure, she had expected danger–but she hadn’t expected to be kidnapped and left to die in an industrial refrigerator.

Actually let’s back up. Lo doesn’t really know what a refrigerator is because she’s never seen one.

The air felt and smelled like the few times she’d been somewhere very cold–when she went up the mountains and stayed in a cabin for a week one winter. Was she somewhere cold? Had they abandoned her in the north?

She gingerly rolled onto her knees and took a breath. Her body was incredibly stiff but functional. This was a very peculiar room–all metal, no windows, and a strange door with a rubber skirt around the entire frame. She struggled onto her feet and wavered a bit as her muscles stretched to acommodate the new position.

Voices, muffled, came from outside the room. She froze, unsure of what to do. Hide? Get in position to attack? She scrambled toward the one door, standing next to it and then froze in place. The voices seemed to be arguing with each other, but it was so muffled she could hardly hear them. As she listened, her hands started stretching toward the ties that bound them together, trying to find an out, a way to get these off her. She had never been bound before and the sensation was very distressing. But her wrists weren’t flexible enough to get to anything like the edge of the ties–they seemed to be some kind of stiff and scratchy fabric.

She needed to get her body in order if she was going to get out of this. She stretched her legs behind her, feeling them spring into usefulness and alertness as blood started moving. She explored the mobility of her shoulders, her elbows, her wrists–it wasn’t much but she was able to shift her shoulders enough to relieve some of the pressure.

The voices seemed to be growing quieter, maybe they were leaving? It was so muted she couldn’t be sure.

But she also couldn’t stay here in this cold place. She needed to get out and find somewhere warm. She inspected the handle of the door–it was strange but fairly easy to sort out. She pressed her ear against the door–why was everything so cold here?–and couldn’t hear any voices. She turned and grasped the handle as best she could with her hands, and opened the door. As soon as she felt the door clear the latch she jumped back from the opening.

The door swung shut again. She waited. She waited for the door to open, or to hear footsteps or shouting. Nothing happened. It seemed perhaps she would be able to walk out of here.

She tried the handle again and crept out with the door once it opened. She was surprised to feel warm air in the corridor–maybe the other metal room just wasn’t insulated. The floor was linoleum. The ceiling overhead was tiled with some kind of bizarre tiles and the lights were long fluorescent strips. She’d only seen a place this ugly and depressing in movies. She recognized it as some kind of large institution–like maybe the staff area of a large restaurant or a hotel. Doors lined the hallway with numbers and sometimes name plates on them.

She didn’t see or hear anyone. The linoleum hallway passed beneath her feet and suddenly she was flooded with so many things she didn’t want to lose when she died. The way the golden leaves of the tree outside her window flooded her apartment with yellow light on a fall afternoon. The taste of hot tea late at night, filling her from the inside out with warmth and contentment. She felt her cheeks flush as she thought about that copy of Wild Mind her parent had given her, now yellow and delicate. Who would love that book?

She was surprised, then, to hear Io’s voice from a door she had just passed. As the memories peeled away she realized she had been reckless, heedless. She turned her back to the wall and peered in the room. It was dark.

“Lo…” Io sounded…hurt? They sounded hurt.

She peered in but didn’t enter.

“Help me, Lo.” Io’s voice was even quieter now than usual. But Lo had been taken in before and was not so stupid as Io thought. She looked both ways down the hall but it was still empty. Io moaned. “Lo, I didn’t mean for this to happen…”

She squeezed her eyes shut. None of this could be real. She was not here to save Io. She was not here at all.

She realized Io was weeping.

“What happened?” She didn’t mean for her voice to be so cold but she apparently couldn’t help it.

“They said you’d be safe, Lo. They said they just needed to talk to you.”

“Well, I assure you they did not just talk to me. What happened to you?”

“I fought them when they took you away and…I lost.” Lo couldn’t say she was surprised, she could hardly imagine Io a strong fighter.

“Please, come inside. They’ll find you outside.”

Despite a loud voice inside her that told her not to, she slipped inside the dark room.

“There’s a light switch by you.”

She turned and used her shoulder to turn the light on. Io winced when the bright lights came on–they were in a small office type room. A cheap fake wood desk sat in the center of the room, but Io was crumpled in the corner. Blood on their face and they were cradling their left arm to their chest.

Lo couldn’t help but come closer. She hated to see Io in pain.

Io whispered to her: “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I picked the wrong side.”

Lo just stared at Io. She wanted to wipe the blood away, to pretend none of this had ever happened. But it did happen. And she knew it happened because her hands were still tied behind her back.

“I just…I wanted more. They promised me so much and I’m sorry I forgot that we all need to be together, to work together, to dream together. I forgot that we can’t be two groups. I forgot that I would lose you if I did this–I thought I could turn you and I was wrong.

“And I’m so grateful I didn’t turn you. I’m so grateful you are stronger than me. You’ve always been stronger, Lo, and I always was trying to keep up. I didn’t think they’d actually get violent, Lo, I’ve never actually known anybody who was violent. I thought it was exaggerated. I thought it was fake. I’m so sorry, Lo.”

She watched as they closed their eyes, the pain clear on their face.

“I hear you, Io. But I have work to do now. Can you help me?”

Io nodded and gestured for her to turn around. Their gentle fingers started unravelling the knot on her wrist until she felt the bindings loosen. She shook off the memory of all the times they had undressed her from behind, unlatching a bra [i’m not sure i believe in bras existing in this world] or a necklace. Her hands swung down and her shoulders protested as they resumed their normal position. She flexed and stretched her fingers.

“Thank you, Io.” She looked toward the door, wondering when they would arrive.

“They have a device here. It’s a type of broadcaster. I don’t know exactly how it works but something about it makes their…our work easier. It helps people understand and believe the Delvers are dangerous.”

“You still thin that’s true, don’t you?”

Io looked directly in her eyes. “You know it’s true yourself. Even if you don’t agree with us, you know the Delvers are weak and dangerous.”

“It doesn’t matter what you think and it doesn’t matter, particularly, what I think. What I know is the Delvers keep us all moving forward together.

“You don’t know what it’s been like since you turned. You don’t know hurtful it is to have someone turn away at every turn. You don’t know how much I’ve been avoiding my onw famiyl and friends. [con’t from 2017.11.28.md]

“You don’t know what it’s been like since you turned. You don’t know hurtful it is to have someone turn away at every turn. You don’t know how much I’ve been avoiding my onw famiyl and friends.

Knowing that you were wrong, that you turned away from me when I needed you, I was too embarrassed to tell people. I was too embarrassed and I withdrew into myself. You know how I get…"

Lo’s voice broke off, ragged and filled with a deep sadness. She had expected rage and energy but now she felt only tired. Only weak. Only alone.

“Look, Io, I need your help.” She had promised Fi not to use the word alone, to forget the meaning of it. She was never alone in this world, and never going to be alone. How could she be alone when the birds all knew her name? “Where’s the broadcaster?”

Io was struggling against the pain. She noticed a large blood stain blooming under their coat, a giant hibiscus on the white cotton. She realized that Io was hurt much more than she had initially realized. No wonder they didn’t stand up, no wornder they couldn’t help her more. She put her hand against their cheek and felt a coldness she wasn’t prepared for. She looked around, surely there was something to stop the bleeding.

“Lo, I’m sorry. I wasn’t wrong but I’m still sorry.”

She found a towel in the corner, ignoring Io’s words as much as possible. She needed to get out of here and she needed to keep Io alive, even if long-term decisions were less clear. She tore the towel into two pieces, using a small Swiss Army knife she pulled from her pocket. She remembered her grandparent giving her this knife when she was young. She barely understood what an army was, except for her studies. She pulled Io’s shirt away and they groaned. It looked like a knife wound, maybe. “What happened, Io?”

“When I brought you in they attacked you and took you away from me….They promised me they wouldn’t hurt you and I freaked out when they took you. They beat me and then one of yhem pulled a knife.”

“They just left you here?”

“Well they didn’t have much nicer plans for you.”

She tied the towel around their chest, holding the bulk of it against the wound and pressing hard.

“Lo, you have to go on without me. I will probably be fine but I’ll definitely be a problem for you.”

She felt the hot tears welling in her eyes. Even after all the bullshit and weirdness she loved Io. Even though she knew they’d chosen the darkness over her. Even though even though even though.

A pair of footsteps sounded in teh hallway striding toward where she’d come from. They sounded angry–she had forgotten to close the door.

“Lo, go now while you till can. The device is huge, find the main room and you can’t miss it. Follow the blue tiles.”

*Two lines, one reward.* She still didn’t know what it meant.

She turned in utter fear and went to the door. She glanced out and seeing that they were still in the freezer, she took a moment to look back at Io and then stole out the door and crept away from the two who were looking for her. She got to the end of the tunnel and took a quick right–better to be hidden and lost than found. She kept creeping down the hallway, glad for the soft soles of her boots. She willed the seekers away from her, away from Io.

She realized that there were blue tiles on the floor, and green, and purple. Some kind of routing to different areas of the building, apparently. She followed it–down a hall with only a few working lights, linoleum getting dirtier than where she had started.

There was so much to do that she didn’t want to do. She wanted to stay and finally talk to Io, she wanted to explore this ancient ruin, she wanted to learn what all these strange doors and devices did, but she had one job.

Stop the jammer.

She heard footsteps behind her and tried a door – it swung open and she stepped inside and gently closed it. She fdidn’t turn the lights on–just hoped the room was uninhabited.

She heard the shouting and footsteps pass her in the hallway. They were calling for help, telling everyone she was missing. f Because I knew you I have been changed for good.

That was the phrase that kept pestering her. She had seen it on some street art–a small and beautifully rendered sentence in the midst of a profusion of flowers and skulls mixed together. She should keep her eyes open for street art.

As she walked home from the market she was lost in thought, scanning teh ground as she worked on the words of the song. She didn’t notice the person coming the other direction until they bumped into each other. She flushed and apologized immediately, though the other person, a very pale person with light hair, didn’t say anything, just looked at her reproachfully.

She tried not to let it irritate her but found it kept coming back to her, almost unnaturally. Maybe she needed to get some more sleep, or drink some more water or something. She sat on the nearest bench and put her food down. She needed to just take a breath.

She put her head down and realized there was writing on the bench, right where she was sitting. It looked like someone had taken a permanent marker and decided the bench was the right place to leave a note. Not a slogan, but an outright paragraph.

“If you don’t join us, you’ll regret it. The Delvers are here to control us. You’ve always known something was wrong about them, but you refuse to see it for what it is. You’re a bitch and you’ve always been a bitch. Join us or don’t. We’ll be just fine either way. [needs more detail and length and personal vitriol.]”

Lo read it several times over. She’d never seen anything like it. Had it been left for her? She felt silly for thinking it but something about the note seemed very, very personal. She wondered about the person she’d bumped into. The note had a similar dark feeling to it, a brooding rage.

Now life has killed the dream I dreamed.

What I really mean to say is what kind of broken world do we live in that someone would leave a note like that for someone else at all? That they would defile a public bench to do it? What kind of world is it that we wake up in every day?

A bird landed on the sidewalk in front of her. It looked at her, made eye contact or so it seemed. And it opened it’s mouth and sang a little snippet of the song.

She was nearly as startled by that as by the note on the bench. Was the bird really looking at her? Really trying to sing the same song? Perhaps she’d heard the song before and incorporated it unknowingly into her own work.

Or maybe this bird song had always been important. Maybe the original singers had copied this bird. What kind of bird was it?

The bird looked a bit bored as she just stared at it. It cocked its head to one side and hopped a bit closer to her. It was a beautiful bird–very small, small enough it could stand on her hand if it wanted to. Brown with blue feathers on its head and the edges of its wings. It sang the line again.

This time she sang the next line back at it. The bird hopped a few times, excited, or as near to excited as she could tell from a bird. She sang the line the bird sang and it joined her for both the lines. She felt her mouth open in wonder. She started the third line, the one she wasn’t sure about, and the bird sang with her, though they diverged–and then the bird flew away. She felt disappointment wash over her and then she realized someone was walking down the path towards the market, shoes slapping the red brick path.

Well, it was a clue, in any case.

“Hey, Lo…I was wondering.”

Lo nodded as she tied her shoes. “What’s up?”

“Do you…do you think I might be able to stay with you?”

Lo shrugged. She never minded an extra guest. “Sure, we have space.”

“Thanks, Lo. I…I’d rather just stay nearby so we can work together.” The truth is the thought of returning to the Well turned her stomach.