

Wings

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Rebirth by Fire

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Chapter 1

Wraith

Esper

The stars out the port window are bright, drawing my gaze. In my eyes I see myself, mirrored on the thick reinforced glass, separating me from the deep nothing outside, space.

Sixty hertz hum of the hull groaning with the desire to provide energy to lights and oxygen generators and the motors pulling the massive habitation torus itself. The spin—revolutions around the core, distant by walk—used to make me sick not long ago. That or the endless distance from all I used to know, all that is, except software controllers in the metal fabrication district, the occasional wisps of silver vis when I pass the station arboretum, and Chimera.

I think without her I'd be lost in the frustrations of monotony. The metal is consistent, usually, some impossible requests I can only laugh off, or smoke away. And the people I have to talk to fill me with the dread that they'd rather I be melted down. As long as I'm useful to them I hope they'll leave me be, but some won't anyway.

The smell and taste of artificial air fills my mouth while I work, choking me out and not in a way I particularly enjoy either. My thin skin can't take much bruising. Persistence is more attractive to me—why I push myself to make do here, admire and complement those I work alongside who pull their weight especially with activities outside the productive drawl, and Chimera too as she aches to plan logistics of station performance activities. I admire her in particular for always pushing to do more. Her stride carries love and her voice bolsters the growth of those she cares for. She cares for her work, mediating the growth of the factories down on the surface of Ceres below Amber Station, distributing permits for expansion and destruction. While she works, I break to meditate over why I accept the poor treatment surrounding me, exhausting orders that just hurt me and sap my energy, a capsule apartment with no escape from harassment, the clear message: conform or die.

In my thoughts I can pursue stability. I start at a boil enough to shred asteroids and count backwards. My palace in my mind is quite humble, but I know where my memories are hidden. The look of the contractors as they train their rifles on me, behind the wood-burning stove and crumpled to a ball just last year. Exile from Eden. The intrigue deep in Chimera's face as I describe to her my worship for the Great Goddess of this holy

topos we all belong to, bedroom nightstand drawer next to a lump of moonstone. The home and protection. The first time I saw a girl like me happy and I recognized that there is a path to happiness in my heart too, the shrine beside the refrigerator and under the page of swords, I never even got her name. I check for comfort—It's there. My mind hasn't faded despite the pressure weighing in on me. I want more. The memories, the love and trust, home. Don't I deserve that much? I want more pressure too, I savor her. If I don't deserve home then at least I take solace knowing I do deserve the needles shredding my heart into the most beautiful cast.

Sometimes I hear a voice behind the water closet door kept locked by the head of personnel. I don't know exactly, some way between scratching and a sob with a backing track rich with the clacking of a mechanical keyboard. My keyboard, driven by my hand on the narrow desk on the far side of my tiny apartment. I type and behind me there's a quiet scratch. Muffled, and masked by my keystrokes, I can't be sure what's said. As I stop, so do the pleas. My mind hasn't faded, I think. I hope. I have my memories all where I left them! It's a sound of desperation and confusion. If nothing else, I wish my presence provides a sense of safety for whoever is visiting me. I know there's something visiting me, watching. There's too a whirring sound like the engines that drive the habitation module, powerful and grown through crystal structures of oblivion, where I'm destined to fall.

I know it calls me with the promise of belonging. All I deserve. All I deserve. The last home.

I walk alone to clear my mind.
But my mind won't be hushed with ease.
Though my eyes see birds and trees, they're blind
To the beauty in my own desperate pleas.
The focus lays on my physical curves.

My small breasts and narrow hips remind
Me that bodily comfort remains a far reach.
Drugs can only do so much to leave the feeling behind.
My voice, my posture, my manner, I teach
But my figure appeals my search.

Estradiol does wonders for my heart and skin,
It soothes my temper and lets me think.
And as my passion for pleasure will not dim,
I've shied away from what makes my sex shrink.
Is it feminine to worship the moon and ignite the dawn?

I know it is from my womanhood akin.
Though by emotion and perception I lay pinned.
To say I knew better, is it a sin?
In violation of gender normalities, where can I exist?
I'm a woman and to beauty I am bound.

I light a cigarette as I walk and take a long drag. Sometimes when I walk, inhaling through a cigarette feels the only way I can fill my lungs in any capacity at all, especially in the cold, artificial air. It warms my lungs unlike anything else.

The cycling air of the station keeps my sanity in check, but my thoughts are mottled, cluttered, I know. I can't tell which ones are worth holding onto. Prospecting the great unknown for spiritual satisfaction had taught me much about distinguishing where thoughts come from and the strengths of self control. But alone and reflecting they pester me. Many time I've ignored them. My gender rarely makes a difference in anything. A friendly man running the liquor store once thought I looked cute enough to knock a couple dollars off my charge, but even then am I worth more than a sex object?

A question which used to bother me '*what makes a woman?*' now seems obviously simple to answer. I'm a woman because I feel like one. I believe other people have other answers, and that's good. I know that I am a woman. Many years ago I felt like a man, but things have changed and now I feel like a woman, so I must be a woman. I like who I am now. Despite the pressure weighing in on me, urging me to conform with exile, defamation, and damnation, I am happier as a woman than I ever was before.

I worship the moon and I ignite the dawn. It's part of who I am. My actions validate me, and I often have no reason at all to concern myself with what people think of me. I've forced myself to, since the alternative is suicide. It's opened me up to wonderful relationships grounded firmly in open communication, and Chimera seems to value that—my company too. I would do

anything for her. We've both been rejected by most people in our lives. As soon as we started talking to each other, we clicked along our own path up the endless mountain of self-discovery.

Why then does my sex matter when I hand over my identification and am called *sir*? My permit correctly shows me as a woman but the loyalty programs I submitted to and my employee records go back further to before I cared. I do care now, and it's rude to make my sex my whole personality without even knowing me. And it's rude to require that my sex be known and in the binary for me to get a fucking coffee.

But other times it's not rude, it's frightening. When I walk down to the shop, some people stare at me. Many times I've met their eyes with mine and recognized distinct disgust or hatred. When I behave, dress, and sound traditionally feminine, I might dodge these looks of scorn. But when I don't shave but I do wear a sundress, the stares are plentiful. I've had to check over my shoulder with fear as I walk, just in case one of them follows me, because it just takes one. I learned very fast, trans women are only tolerated as feminine whores. I am open about my introspection into discovering my gender, but I've seen far too many red flags from people who start a conversation with my girdick.

I want to express my pride in my identity. I remember wanting the same thing when I was younger.

Sometimes a past life calls to me.

Despite the lack of silver trees in the station, I still manage to find traces of magmatic vis in the air inside the arboretum. I retreat into the quiet there to calm my aching nerves. The only place I can draw energy into my fingers. I stretch out, focus on embracing the air around me, breathe in through all my skin and with my lungs, include the stars and beyond into my focus, leaving myself, just as I belong. Warmth fills my fingers; I set in place the drawings of my muscles and feel the energy digging deeper into my bones, filling every fiber. I summon the strength, just a trickle with the dozen or so aspen trees about me. My eyes watch up towards the sky, the dome hull pointing in towards the core of Amber Station. But I see past the steel and radiators to Orion and to glints of Jupiter. I see, I feel, and I become blessed.

Just for a moment, I am graced with a glow. My energy, aura, evolving to enwrap me, bolstered by the stars. The Great Goddess kisses me, granting me kindness, trust, and forgiveness. This is for me first. I embrace myself and the great silence I soar through. I breathe deep, then I bring this energy back to share with Chimera.

She's in the machine shop when I find her. Her focus is inspiring, she is completely mesmerized by the lathe she prepares to use. She makes beautiful jewelry cases of aluminum, and tools for maintenance, electric necklaces. In her spare time she often works on her own designs here. She's on the station by choice, unlike me. She was hired for permitting approval because of her skills in machine work. An engineer! Chimera could work on Earth but she chose to take a position all the way out here in

the asteroid belt. I struggle to believe her when she says that she likes to spend time with me, but I cry tears of relief when I think of her decision to be here. She comforts me. I know we're annoyed by the stress of fitting within the confines of perfection, but with each other's support it's a little bit easier.

When her lathe slices off a thin strip of metal, she hears a faint scratching from behind. Or is it wailing?

She faces vile people telling her that she's genetically predisposed to be left behind. I comfort her and help her overcome these disgusting lies. I face vile people telling me that I'm just a mentally ill man, or that my murder is at best a warning to help minorities organize. Chimera comforts me and helps me overcome these horrors. In some ways, it's ever so slightly easier on Amber Station than it was on Earth. But while I lay awake in bed fearful that I'm the only trans woman here, Chimera lays paralyzed by perfectionism.

So I do my research, trying to find the poets before me. Rarely I will find these women, stories retracted, detransitioned or dead soon after publication, what should be the debut of a beautiful collection made unceremoniously into the conclusion. Am I doomed to the same end, only valuable as a martyr?

When she looks up from her work towards me, the fear dulls just a bit. It's still suffocating, but I can put our friendship first.

Words whispered, distant worlds, wisp about our heads as we steady each other inside the revolving city obsessed with combating entropy.

Chapter 2

Absolution

Val

Twelve-thousand years ago I was exiled for disobeying the one rule set upon me. In my defense, by breaking this rule I advanced myself through so many layers of magick that I became unable to comprehend the unique aspects of each one. I gained my jewel of the crown to choose for each of my desires. As new magick proved its effectiveness it led to advancements in other branching varieties, creating a simple, but unbreakable, positive feedback loop.

Every now and then I have snapped myself to attention with the sudden realization that I've become emotionally attached to a spell. Spells of convenience. I've grown from surviving to

thriving in a couple thousand winters of my exile, but then I pressed further.

As my magick grew to claim all corners of this valley, I found myself unable to expand any further. Advancing my magick would allow the development of land higher up the mountains, but only at rapidly diminishing rates.

I noticed this problem, and recorded it as the *decreasing expansion rate problem*. Attempting to brute force expansion by relying on the positive feedback of magick advancement makes it much more difficult and tedious to expand at any point in the future. I enacted a policy respecting the value of this wild land by prioritizing retrofitting before external development whenever possible. It's a policy for myself, but the consistency of this foundation helps me keep focused.

As time progressed, I became aware of another problem: *environmental degradation*. In order to cast a spell, magmatic vis must be converted into energy. As I refine my magick abilities, I consume vis more rapidly than it can be naturally replenished by the beautiful silver trees. Furthermore, as my variety of spells increases, so does the damage done to these trees. Some spells move soil, some release toxins, some are blindingly bright, some clear cut the precious wildlands, but most made life for me much more convenient. I can more efficiently prioritize my time when I have these frameworks of convenience, at the cost of significant damage to the fragile silver trees I rely upon.

But now, the quantity of vis in the area approaches zero. The average surface temperatures rise and the climate became more arid. Silver trees wilt and start to die off, and I struggle to cultivate new cuttings. Without healthy trees I tap out my

vis supplies in the air around me, and it's become exceedingly difficult to keep the climate habitable. Once an area begins to develop, environmental degradation produces a runaway effect that chokes the life out of the area.

Since these problems reinforce each other, I believe I can solve both with a single course of action. May I present, my newest invention, the *auto caster*—a machine which will continue to cast a spell at any desired rate as long as it has the mana to do so.

Here you see, I've placed the first of these machines in the heart of the largest arid land plot in all the valley. (My presentation to myself continues, as I've not seen another human in thousands of winters.) The keen of you remember that this plot was not always so dry! I load this auto caster with my best *rainstorm* spell talisman, and now let us attempt to make this land more habitable. I flip the switch marked by large white letters—*ON*.

As the first rainstorm began to appear overhead, I carefully record on my digital clipboard the rising humidity levels. Slow and steady, just as I expected. But the area of effect isn't all that impressive. What is this, a sprinkler? I can do better. I place a second auto caster next to the first and load this one with a more simple spell talisman, *pressurize*. By increasing the air pressure in this region, perhaps the rainstorms will be pushed out over a larger area with the expanding wind currents.

I tweak the cast rate of both auto casters, so the *pressurize* spell casts ten times for every one cast of *rainstorm*. My goal here is to create concentric rings of rain that will fall for miles around me. I want these two auto casters to become vis

mana-neutral, where nearby silver trees provide at least all the mana necessary to constantly run these machines. But it may take a few winters of healing for the system to reach such an equilibrium.

For the time being, no silver trees grow nearby—the land here is far too arid for them to survive. To get these two machines running and keep them going long enough to grow the necessary silver trees, I need to provide an extreme quantity of mana via a storage tank.

I start to pace, feeling a wave of self-doubt. Could that much mana be collected? Would the auto casters moisten the land faster than the mana drain could dry it? I'd like to at least give it a try with a few shards. Maybe that will give me a better idea of what this is going to take.

It is an easy task to collect and store small quantities of vis mana. One of the first spells I developed, long ago, was the mana conversion spell. When cast, this spell condenses most of the mana in a small area from the surrounding air into a mana shard. This physical crystal, only a few inches long, could then be burned to release an equal amount of vis back into the surrounding air.

Just an hour walk away from the two auto casters, I reach the nearest silver tree. I walk right up to the glowing bark. It's more faint than I'd hoped, but this isn't much of a surprise given how dry the valley has been lately. I reach into the small pocket of my sundress and pull out my mana conversion spell talisman. This one takes the shape of a bird, painted to look like the magpies I remember seeing long ago on Earth. There

are no birds here, they've yet to evolve and if they ever will remains uncertain given the withering demands of my mission. I hope to see one again and to hear it's caw—maybe one day.

I raise the magpie figure and ask it to collect a few shards for me. Wait a moment, then bring it close to my heart to give it my strength. I close my eyes and hear the rattle of crystals falling to the rooted dirt around my feet. Enough shards to fill a small bag. I say my thanks to the Great Goddess and Her divine tree of silver, then crouch to retrieve the shards. I can tell the vis is dense near this beautiful tree by the clarity and size of the crystal shards. I'm honored by the bountiful offering. The sweet, crisp smell of mana in the air combined with the radiant sparkles of the tree's leaves gives me the determination to finish my work and supply the auto casters with enough mana to make a whole field of silver trees. I turn and begin the peaceful walk back, enjoying the orange sun overhead. Though electronics struggle to survive the frequent coronal mass ejections, my internal magick and the thin golden fur covering my skin find the radiance empowering.

Two hours ago, I turned off both auto casters when I left to gather vis shards. Now that I've returned, the first thing I check is the soil. I crouch and scoop up some into my palm—completely dry. I connect the two auto casters together with thin copper piping and make a junction to link them to a tin drum. I place the mana shards in the drum. There are only enough to obscure a quarter of the bottom metal, but I'm confident that this will be enough to operate the contraption for the rest of the day. I strike a match and drop it inside, onto the

shards. They begin to glow and the fire finds itself at ease in the slow-burning fuel. I seal the top of the container with the tin lid, and place my hand just before the small breathing hole in the upper side of the drum wall to detect a faint pressure gradient. Check. I switch on the auto casters.

Life is art.

Take from the air and give to the sky.

The omission of zinc, expulsion of dawn from the time.

Without the dramatic bumblebee and zinc cyclically

Rejuvenated into the soil by fulcrumatic displacement,

The bittersweet silver fruits borne of the tree of life

Became undersaturated and lacking the ribose for spellcasting.

Vai trees are sick.

For years the silver bulbs they produced burst into symbiotic vis, being washed throughout the air's fluidity and absorbed by catalytic synthesizers into wind and water. This fulfilled the needs of the trees to pollinate and break down sugars, until the trees stopped growing saturated.

Zinc infused with moonstone and quartz grew rapidly and alongside networks of fungi connecting the realm as one. Unified, the highway grew. In absolution and exceeding cooperation. They had been expanding for years with the forest, but hibernation struck them with soil devolution.

Impact was not an event as much as a lifestyle.

Absorption of material, from the soil, nutrition, from the shore, purity, from the sky, balance, from the forest, space, connectivity, biosphere. None too stable, far from home.

The wreckers impact their sources. Robbing from their parents and leave to another.

Impact.

Wasteland.

Evolution.

It's not all over, just vyr.

Cycles of consumption alter to another unobstructed by forensic deincarnation. Deincantation. Objectification.

Ve rubs vai tattoos, glowing with emission. They attempt to absorb mana vis from the air by creating a gradient in density whereby ve converts vis into crystals in vai blood from the air for circulatory casting affinity. But these tattoos run the process in reverse when atmospheric vis is low, sucking vai energy out and glowing faint, light purple. Ve feels dull pain from this, as if every drop of blood in vai body is breaking down and leaching into the sky. Ve can't cast.

Ve can't change vai tattoos from absolving vyr of consciousness.

Ve is trapped.

In hibernation,
Like the mold beneath vai toes,
Ve has but one transcendence:
Lost in thought,
Immobilized
Of all but internally lit palace,
The remaining fortress,
One last region of stability,
And only with astronomical secularity
May ve reach thought,
Not for spatial complexity,
But temporal;
Ve clutches it in vai hands
And shatters its air—tight carapace,
Absorbing introspection
Inductive aura,
Generating in vai mind,
With thoughts darkened
Purely by their oceanic depth,
Enveloped by vai creativity:
A hypothesis,
Potential,
Oblivionic departure.

Newly embraced by hydrogen sulfide,

The very same suffocator of me—leaving little room for a niche. I awaken from my meditative trance with a complete postulation: silver trees are developing condensation of chalcogen-hydride, specifically hydrosulphuric acid, indicating their participation in the sulfur cycle. Hypothetically, I could transmute oxygen from sulfuric acid and implant the infuser inside myself. I could synthesize sulfuric acid from hydrogen sulfide, water, and oxygen itself. A simple ground pump and electrolyzer could bootstrap the whole process, except for a ground sulfur source for the trees. The trees would eventually supply this as they decay, but a kick-start is needed to propel the cycle into self-sustenance. Perhaps pyrite could provide such fertilization? I remember finding some pyrite in shale concretions around a riverbed downstream from my territory hydrated by vis.

That leaves only logistics; how to transport the shale dozens of kilometers uphill? It could be broken down locally so just pyrite would need to be in transit. That could simplify the import in exchange for setting up refining infrastructure downstream. Perhaps, materials could be floated down the river.

Focus, calm. I take a step back and consider the necessary scale of operation. The required quantity of pyrite is the amount needed to sustain one complete generation of silver trees so that their decay can promote the growth of later generations. Thus, the number of trees is directly proportional to the amount of substance. But as the trees grow, so too does their nutritional demand. Production can increase, but I must patently contemplate the implications.

Overconsuming vis in the region isn't feasible for continued

operation. This has to work. Other startups may be needed, or soil composition may necessitate a more varied density than I thought. Vis vitalizes my machines but also my soul.

Take, give, return, recharge.
Composition consists of constituents,
Sharing the community,
Proliferating, as much independently as in unison,
Throughout voyages one in the same, yet wholly
Decanted of viscosity greed and pseudo—omnipotent destination.
Free to generate for oneself.
Away.
High, up, beyond,
To the underlying, over encompassing togetherness.
Guidance inscribes trust of oneself.
For the one and all exhale in congruence at their seams,
Back-propagation deconglomerates difference,
Crumbling buries entitlement,
Healing ruptured enlightenment.
Let the shared energy into the self,
And drink of the universe,
With binding elementary,
 Divining integrity.
Unite the present
With the branches;
Root not upon cliff face pinned to self dependency,
But upon the River Styx,
Exemplifying all motion and space

Of point infinitesimal
Upon the string of free will in our universe,
But one substance with feature,
Vibrating through the chaotic web of condition,
Yet occupying simultaneously all,
Unbounded by forces normal,
Yet reflected into the water,
As it washes away chalk
And offers bountiful aura,
To be shared with all upon the riverbed.

Part of the operation is the facilitation of biologic support structures and the encouragement they provide to the life around the river, encouragement of vis balance and symbiotic relationships between individual entities. I know how ingrained each member of the society is in the culture of the whole, so I take care to prepare substance to replace the voids to be left by my harvest, mindful that impact remain only in attributes conductive to the culture and ecology.

I prepare the transmutation of this substance especially rich in both mud and water vis, a helping of fluidity to drive the current, then mineral inclusions: clay, quartz, potassium feldspar, calcite, powdered rust, all into the cauldron. The vis bubbles, clothing and churning in the powder. Bubbles roll and begin melting the dust into an amalgamation as if heated from the inside by the vis-infused cauldron. Then, to settle the vis and condense the amalgamation into substance, I cast an incantation.

First a protective field, so only my own intentions are to be inscribed into the substance and with maximum clarity. Candles illuminate my workspace with prismatic hues dancing about my aura. It thickens with vis being pulled in from all about the ever more desperate region, igniting luminescence. My hair lifts up off my shoulders as the air grows more dense than my wavy, auburn locks. I inhale through my freckled nose, focusing on the sticky, sweet scent of free-floating vis and envisioning clearly my intentions.

*I call upon the powers around me,
Energized and divine.
The spirits of this ancient savanna,
May you strengthen me
By blessing this transmutation with enchantment?
I call upon you,
So that I may liberate you from
The wastelands
Brought about by the same calamity
Which bound you to this plain,
And so you may be free
To be submerged into the timeless river,
Free of roots withholding you from your home,
From your heart,
And from your ascendance to the æther.
Embrace me with your compassion,
Let me be your vessel,
I will return this realm to life,
And the scars of the calamity I will cast away,
And the mana of ancient remembrance I will reawaken,
And the trees and flowers shall bloom once more,
And every crack mapping the dirt of the savanna*

*Shall be filled with water teeming with life,
And the grass shall regrow,
And the birds shall soar through the sky,
And as you watch a baby leopard tortoise
Take a bite out of a fresh strawberry
Still hanging upon the bush,
May you rest,
Content with my cultivation.
Until our work is done,
May you support and protect me?*

I clench my jaw for a moment,
And shuts my eyes tightly
As a tear traces my cheek,
Then drips onto my thigh.
I take a deep breath and refocus,
Remember why I'm here.
Another deep breath,
Relax my muscles,
I continue.

*Oxygen is diminishing here,
As sulfur fills the air.
Breathing is going to get difficult for me,
Though the silver trees are struggling more
With nutrition than respiration.
Incredibly, they gave up carbon
Alongside its eviction from the atmosphere.
The trees need an injection of nutrients.
And I need the trees to balance local vis
And to breathe,
Alongside an implant,
Before I asphyxiate.
The same implant,
Alongside the trees,
Will be a prototype
For reintroducing the native species back to this land
Which cannot adapt as quickly
As the mystical silver tree.*

*Please, spirits,
Infuse this amalgamation
In the cauldron before me*

*With lively energy
Such that all those surrounding the substance
May be healthy
And help foster community,
Even as the substance weathers
And disperses over perhaps centuries,
Let each grain carry forth this enchantment,
To be conductive to the culture and ecology
Of the Universal
And Her divine expressions.*

*May no harm
And only good
Come from this enchantment.*

I pour my flask full of water
Into the cauldron
And mix with my hands.
The heat subsides
As the substance cures,
Enveloping the radiance of pure vis
And now glowing with aura magical and spiritual.
I close the field,
Completing the ritual.

I am
Val, Duchess of the Lambda-Prime Pocket,
Soon to be
Persephone, Witch of the Phi Split
Once my mission is complete.

Chapter 3

The Unequivocal Awareness of Suffocation I Always Knew to Expect

Chimera

My expertise in engineering is complemented by Esper's passion for vis magick. I build machines in my mind—mana sinks and taps, absorbing vaporous ruby from the air and transmuting it with salt, feather, condensation, tree shrapnel, and burning em-

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bers, dust fragments forming and unforming conglomerations of chemical manifestation. Transmutation tablets—machines of platinum-iridium to direct electromagnetic flux to bombard filtered mana conglomerates and refine them into crystalline shards of energetic Phi.

Within my mind, I am an alchemist, a scientist, an engineer, a sorceress. The boundary between what is inside and outside fades as I find myself able to exist, not just outside my mind, but inside too as my thoughts lead to decisive action, to reflection and experience, to expression, to sensation and foresight. With my life and knowledge thriving within, there evolves little reason to venture. Not for lack of comfort, nor desire to release the building pressure of insanity.

Eyes dart open and I look around. Terror strikes through my spine and I freeze with fear of the unknown—where am I? A wind of glass teeth race over my body but nothing anchors me to reality, or wherever this place is. Muted, schizophrenic life scurries around my ties through the gravel. Beetles in dull shades of rust and clay scuttle over granite pebbles and stop for a moment to investigate the plagioclase feldspar-rich diorite in hopes of discovering a dandelion somehow inexplicably passed over by the dozens, or perhaps hundreds, of other beetles sweeping the same sector of the hill on this fabled day.

Or is it night? The clouds are thick above but they glow a brilliant magenta with darker streaks of indigo and periwinkle. Could static electricity be rapidly building above in preparation for torrential downpour, or could it be a sun high above the cumulonimbus illuminating strange chemicals in the atmosphere

which react in magnificent hue?

And I see vyr. Through my own eyes. Persephone.

I feel vai heart pounding in vai eardrums, my eardrums, my flesh, my fear. My shock. Freezing shock.

I drop down layers deep through chasms, ravines deep with cavernous trenches, circling through the maze of water-sunken shade root. Felsic stones to mafic as rhyolitic magma fills the pores. I struggle to comprehend my own size. Limited only by fragile body and feeble mind, I fly within my own mind to the world above and submerge myself in air, breaking the water's surface. Jolts of electrical current arc through the zinc and copper dust particulates around me as my hair floats up and points, rotationally, as if magnetized by fields flowing along the waves with the chaotic flow of the wind. A whirlpool of the atmosphere itself forms before me, and as the blue-orange sparks and bolts of lightning race into the singularity it grows more torrential, dragging me inside by the roots of my hair into a typhoon, roaring with a blistering force.

Instead of racing inward at rates so vast that my body is shredded as the parts of myself closer to the singularity experience more gravitational force than those further away, I am slingshot around the core, warped as I accelerate and spiral down, faster and faster. The force is tremendous, but I withstand being washed by the currents of entropy. Strong as I may be with muscle imbued with gold and mind of conscious artifact resonators, a fracture forms and creases me seamlessly. One half of me tears away and is rapidly sucked into the roaring whirlpool

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to become the moon, her passage of time slowing to nothing as she is given infinite control over the dimension, and the other half soars away by centrifugal forces to become the sun, her strength and fortitude ever unwavering with power drawn from her burning, passionate core.

Stars swim over my vision. I can't keep track of the vastness engulfing me. It's teeming with life, flashing to span all the galaxy and then the entire *topos*. With but a gentle breath it scatters, taking me along. Plunged into darkness.

Nothing remains to distract my focus, though I feel bound here, nowhere, unable to wake up. I see Val before me again, my perspective returned to my own, as a faint blue light begins to glow far beyond and hidden from direct sight by *vai* figure. Breathe.

Ve faces towards me, looking down at me from slightly above. *Ve* stretches *vai* arms out with a confident patience and twinkling gemstones are drawn in from all around us. The stones accumulate just before *vai* chest. *Ve* beckons for me to come closer, but I am still immobile. *Vai* eyes pierce me with desperation. Saturn suddenly rushes up from beneath us, engulfing us in her thick atmosphere, where I am dropped back into my workshop.

Chapter 4

The Only Thing Left for Me to Undress Is My Flesh Itself

Val

It only takes but one leap for me to be thrust back into reality, the long, drowning sleep of overwhelming anxiety thawing in but a moment as I break free of my own dissociation. I poke my face out above the waters of miasmatic contention and breathe carefully so as not to choke on my own responsibilities and commitments. After just a moment of meager respite, my

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face is covered by another wave.

Reconciliation with the self.
Thy attributes and attritions delve
Down, deep through the oceans.
Bubbles form as in mixed emotions.
Relive and relieve,
Not as to retrieve,
Value from chaotic transgressions,
But as to express thy imperfections.

Voyage through the embryonic blanket of trepidation. Up, away, through the molten shallows and into the troposphere, up, away, and break through to the beyond. Beyond the beyond now and out of the *topos* I called my own. Finally, I gaze down the line of the *oikos* and cast a shadow through the dimensional rift lit from behind by what I only can interpret as the Great Goddess Herself. Through the *oikos* and out into choice. The perception I attain that my own choices expand out infinitely is mesmerizing to an astounding degree. I see my own head from behind and perceive infinitely many agents of myself turn their heads back and stare straight into my own eyes. Even though the eyes of the many are blocked from vision by the head of my own duplicated agent, and indeed the edge of the *topos* itself, my perception is beyond that of physical, tangible limitations under the freedom of the collapse of spatial and temporal dimensionality as conducted by the divinely beautiful goddess. Rather so, I see across the *oikos* through infinitely many *topos* growing slowly, ever so slightly more strange as they fade away

at the convergence of perspective, endlessly shrinking galactic clusters and planets and, indeed, the valley in the savanna for which I explored each leg of river cuts and examined every rock for the most gorgeous grains of quartz made impure only by thin slivers of biotite mica, all savored for just moments too few, all now perceived as just a single point, from the star that melded the elements together in nuclear fusion to the constituent elementary particles being torn apart by torrential tsunamis of plasma, and ever further beyond within each infinitesimal topos along the oikos.

Now there is no time to appreciate the beauty of the world, and, simultaneously, far too much. The ages of the agis.

There is no particle-wave duality, particles and waves are one in the same. Every particle has a wavelength and every wave has mass. Different expressions of particles are mere perturbations along a specific field corresponding with that particle's attributes such that the particle exhibits the features they are expected to exemplify. Each of these fields occupy the same space and time, all of each, which is a necessary, though not sufficient, piece of evidence to show that time and space are not traversable dimensions as much as expressions of interactions in our minds.

Perturbations across these fields act as waves throughout the mental dimensions of conception I recognize in my surroundings. Each object I perceive is just a precise expression of sharp amplitude of a perturbation. However, the easier it is for me to see an object, the harder it is to determine the object's velocity. The velocity of an object may be determined by examining the

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object's wavelength because velocity is a directly proportional function of energy and energy is a directly proportional function of wavelength.

The product of uncertainty between the position and velocity of an object must be no less than a positive, but small, universal constant, as energy quantities across the field perturbations are discrete. To know where an object is requires knowing the discrete peak of a wave. To know how an object is moving requires knowing the discrete wavelength of a wave. However, just how the waves upon the river running through the valley I call home exist all throughout the river yet have predictable velocity, the exact position of an object cannot be precisely determined without one, dominant, peak amplitude to measure. Meanwhile, the exact velocity of an object cannot be precisely determined without a uniform wavelength across the region suspected to contain the object. Thus, the objects which exhibit more wave-like attributes are harder to determine the position of, while the objects which exhibit more particle-like attributes are harder to determine the velocity of. This effect reaches an asymptote; significantly minimizing unpredictability becomes impossible as the object shrinks in size and the energy it expresses approaches the quanta.

I know there must be many fields, but I make no attempt to count them considering how many more there may be. I see so little of the electromagnetic spectrum, for instance, that new perceptions could emerge from just expanding out my vision of reality. I consider a vast set of perturbations to be classified as *life*, but what other life may exist filtered out, or unrecognized,

by the senses yet perhaps already surrounding me?

I know of the spirits of my community, and their support even as their bodies return energy to soil.

Expression cascades throughout oikos.
 Resonation throughout the cascades,
 Contemplate expression—
 Expression of the agents and their actions.

Instances are inherently part of existence. The universe consists of instances, some tangible and others immaterial. Tangible instances are *objects*. Instances that have free will and the ability to perceive are *agents*.

The universe contains all, including instances. The great, unknowable thoughts of The Goddess are instances. Agents are instances, such as The Divine Goddess. *Oikos* are instances. Oikos contains instances such as *topos*, perceptions, memories, and *vis mana*. Objects are instances within oikos, and they are nonliving physical entities in addition to physical agents such as humans, turtles, and frogs. Other agents exist within oikos but are not objects, such as divine agents, spirits, and agis. The only agent believed to exist beyond the oikos is The Great Goddess Herself, although Her powers influence all in the universe with Her divine expressions perturbing the fabric of reality itself.

There are an endless number of oikos in the universe, each consisting of an infinite set of *topos*. Real numbers adopt and nurture the physical constants of the oikos, constants such as the strength of magnetic fields and gravitic waves. Each *topos*

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exhibits a specific choice of a specific agent. Although there is finite space in the mental dimensions of conception, there are infinitely many choices each agent can make.

Each oikos has unique universal constants or laws of physics to meet the needs of or fulfill the desires of The Great Goddess. I may only guess as to what these thoughts may take the form of, but I also believe that it is unlikely anyone could comprehend all the forms if they were displayed naked for all to witness with lectures assessing the nuances and the physique of the intangible divinity that is provocation, because it too is divinity.

Since there are a myriad of unique choices possible for each agent to make, and each choice corresponds with a single *topos*, there are innumerable many *topos* in a single oikos. The *agis* of a single oikos expand out like the individual trees of a forest, with each *agis* sprouting leaves of expression from the branches of agents. The agents of the *agis* are the variations of oneself.

I consider in fascination what it would be like for an *agis* to have no physical presence to perceive or sense, yet to be an agent able to explore an endless string of their own choices and live through each vision, although vicariously in a sense, climbing mountains and taking risks and spiraling into pitiful self destruction. In many ways, it would be ominous to see how close I could get to failure and still succeed, with newfound reflections and implications of how close I could get to success and still fail.

And still I fail myself.

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Persephone

I... remember...

Plague rats trawl in search of grain through the cobble streets of dark overcast night. Sound comes only from below as fires exhausted all the fuel above long ago. Even deep under the surface remains scarcely few puddles of oil and shale-surrounded gasses. Wind scours the surface in daylight but at night the pressure comes from expansion of plumes, rising towards the surface in billowing clusters of smoke and sulfur.

Trades of water and oxygen are in demand, but never as high as lead-cloth patches. Long ago, the stars faded along with their white trails and red streaks of electrons. Each flicker and flash brighter than the sun above in daylight. Their inception at night high above like a flash of phosphor, coating all in blinding light for an instant before the long fingers drape away. Reaching out to pluck our eyes, begging for us to join in the dance of rebirth, showing us that we will in time join them as their invisible flames pain the dirt with manufactured toxin.

In the before days, life on the beautiful marble was peaceful away from the political front lines. Though those lines changed repeatedly, I felt safe with my community supporting me. Mostly, the upper echelons fought each other while the super corporations fought to wring the people dry of stability.

Together, my community of a dozen close friends pool enough money to rent a tiny plot of land. The water, we strived to collect and boil while the food we strived to farm. Though occasionally we bought food and water from the corporations—the

climate was only supportive of farming for a few months a year, and the heat waves burned through any water stores.

But we ate together strawberries and pears, we traded our chicken eggs with our friends down the road for bread, we laughed and made art together. Our work was all for us. We only each spent a few hours most days working on the farm or cooking or cleaning to take care of the community. Sometimes we'd take a little extra time working to bake a cake or a special pasta dish to celebrate life.

Mostly, it was hot with heavy storms and hikes in cooling skin suits or cold with freezing ponds and reading cozy books inside. Sometimes, the climate was perfect and comfy. The song birds and raccoons would share in the spring dew, perhaps only lasting a week before the inevitable heat waves push them for cover during the day and the storms chase them from the lowlands.

The corporations and politicians came to an arrangement, finally, to combat the effects of climate change. Right, the effects, so—what about the causes?

And give up burning fossil fuels en masse?

They hurt themselves, humanity, and the ecology she relies upon. Most fungi continued just fine. Insects struggled with the recession of grasses, but others didn't care. To oversimplify the problem, grass to bugs to birds, grass to flowers to bees to cow; slashes were torn from the web of our biosphere. Bacteria evolved rapidly enough that plenty remained all throughout the Earth, but the runaway greenhouse effect burned humans from the surface. Many in power wanted to push the problem to the next generation, but they ran out of time and anger needed to

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be redirected if the political machine were to continue turning a profit. That's why they imposed a population cap. Mass media pushed the assumption that these policy makers were noble and trying to help—the alternative of boundless growth could turn the universe to flesh—but they wielded the media as a tool of oppressive propaganda. The logistics had been set and the less fortunate sent to the outer reaches of the solar system so as to make other moons and planets nicer over centuries of painful, tedious work. Naked genocidal eugenics.

We knew we were on borrowed time, so we put it together to identify birds—we prevented ourselves from being overwhelmed by the absurd shortsightedness—and left the fight a couple days more to prepare everyone's mind.

Sparrow.

A cache flashes in my vision. It's a sight I've seen a couple times before but never definitively identified the meaning of. I'm losing myself in time as then and now flow together, and I can move through time as easily as space by simple flex or relax of a muscle—indistinguishable. And of thoughts of the sparrow, they are further again to that day thinking of times before the times before, like past lives of past lives, all pointing to the cache. A scribble within a palace, or perhaps the cache itself is the palace structure. Where is it? Deep in the forest, cutting through dense trees and overgrown shrubbery, I see gravel on the ground. I follow it under thick branches, crawling along my knees, and I arrive at a small log cabin.

The memory is within the cellar. I step down the steep stairs carefully and dust kicks up into the air with my rising boot. The oil lantern in my hand flicks warm light, reflected by the dust

and making a fog-like glow around me, restricting my vision range. On the rope and wood shelf by the corner, above a few boxes and aside wood working tools, lays the metal cache. I open it and dust flies up onto my face. Inside is a notebook, full of creatures. I turn to the page on sparrows.

Beautiful, small birds.

Climate may be fragile and constantly swinging between habitability like a metronome during the chaos of an earthquake, but the birds fly above the shattering fragments of temperate wading pools and evergreen trees being pulverized to extinction much like the native chestnut at the hand of atmospheric heating accelerated by the wealthy rulers of government which, by expelling humans from the plane of existence, claims to be helping and representing those that voted them leaders, but rising up in power fades that relationship too as the super corporation nominees beat out all others consistently. Preservation and legacy, but so narrow-sighted as to completely disregard human needs—instead opting to prioritize tangled and trivially specific cultural desires molded and inseminated by the greedy minds of the corporate leaders. Like taking a disadvantageous position in Baduk by invading an area it would be impossible to live in, just because it's there. Shortsighted, and a certain loss of value, but perhaps amusing after accruing the power to buy the whole board, to buy out the opponent altogether. It won't be more than a drop relative to the accumulated power, but it's amusing.

I don't want to leave, but I feel like I'm not given a choice in the matter. It's too easy for me to be chosen and then it's over. What else could I do? There's too much of a power

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imbalance for resistance. Active protest usually ends with brutal counterattack and there's so much strength pushing back from more *fair progression* of power. It's not about us and them, it's those left behind and promised power in exchange for taking actions of oppression.

And with my experience building worlds, from fragment, from vis energy flowing from trees into my hands. I was placed in exile before, in the rare remaining untamed wilds near the Arctic Circle. The magnetic poles were swapping and regular maintenance tasks were needed to keep crude oil pumps operational. Circuits were fried nearly every night as gaps opened and closed within the magnetic field above. Lack of reliable communication was the worst part. Tunnels were being built to house future cable connections where the sun couldn't easily interfere, but those didn't reach far enough north for me to hook into yet, leaving me stuck with the occasional satellites hardened enough to withstand radiation bombardment while the magnetosphere flickers.

I will be forced out. But, just for now, I watch. Within my own past life, I watch.

*Ah, finally, you're here. We've been waiting for you to speak with us again. You seem troubled by something. With love of the stars and trust of the world, we implore you to share with us your burdens so together we may venture forth from the *topos*.*

"It was not all at once, but now degradation sweeps across the land. And I've not but one source of recompense reconciliation in and of the universal vis," I say. "Even not the sweet

embrace of chemical infatuation relieves me from the strain of my one ability rendered an inability.”

Your skills are not lost on us. Yet you speak of them like it is your own experience which challenges you, instead of your experiences being your tool to overcome challenge.

“Fucking how?”

Challenges push us to grow. You must adapt your abilities to serve as a tool for overcoming obstacles.

I scoff and spit, “You want me to use a fork as a crowbar.”

These are not physical tools but mental ones. Problem solving is adaptive. Let your skills guide you to success. You know best what to do, and how to navigate with contention. Contention comes in flavors, and problem solving is necessary for overcoming each of them. Look into yourself and use what you know to overcome this challenge, as you’ve done for all others you’ve conquered.

I stay silent and think for a moment. The resonate voices in my head shock me as each syllable cascades among one another with additive amplitudes, slamming each cell in my skull and squeezing my brain, wrecking havoc upon pretenses I hold against myself. Self doubt builds and breaks with the tidal actions of my thought, indistinguishable from the voices of the spirit.

I feel my mind spinning more and more precariously as if upon a needle shrinking in width as gales gusts drive the moment of inertia up and down on one side with vibrant directions of twist and tilt.

Regolith breaks from the disk of self control and fractures tear wider across the surface. Or, as the assumptions shatter

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into abyssal fragments, I begin to realize the disk may be gilded, the vast core composed of insecurity and fear.

I think of my family before the calamity. Disgust and disappointment surface first from the oceans of terror beneath the thin, fractured ice. How else could I protect myself from the vultures and raptors but with magick? How else may magick be performed than with vis?

Chapter 5

Muted Howling

Chimera

I type away at my computer, building simple simulations out of code logic. I do this mostly out of amusement—assessing how thermals flow around edges and sweep dust in current eddies. Research, rather, so I tell my supervisor. I ponder the intricacy of my actions; words and symbols typed by my fingers translated into the most simple form of instructions which excite cascading arrays of transistor gates, sand brought to life by electrical complexion and converting meaning in a matrix of light before my eyes—if I were to perform one such operation manually, it would take me lifetimes to simulate what the machine does in

milliseconds.

I step outside with my jacket and another one of my machines, a smaller one, is washed over with photons and wind, just as I simulated—it wakes me up.

I feel alive as I leave behind the sterile office in exchange for the breeze and cloudy sky above. Esper would light a cigarette, but I've never been interested in nicotine. I don't like the smell of it. I walk slowly, examining the clouds for answers—what am I doing here? Images flash in my mind of a life I don't recognize—yet so vivid it's as if I were there. A past incarnation? But future technology presents—Dyson spheres and pseudo time travel by orbiting a black hole at astounding speeds—as if this past life was lived later, or in some body which travels through time itself as effortlessly as I walk up the hill along the sidewalk.

A car passes me quickly and its horn makes me jump. I sigh and carry on—what am I doing here?

I'd really rather not be doing this. I'm set up for failure and the tasks I'm supposed to accomplish make no sense or they conflict with something or they feel completely pointless and they are all ambiguous. I mean, the station is near abandoned except for three teams of staff coordinating infrastructure, logistics, and security. I don't know all too well how the other teams feel about the mining operation orders we get on the downlink, but the infrastructure is such a tangled mess that we'll be lucky to fulfill half the requests we've been ordered to work on even if we spend years rewriting the whole system.

Which drone is moving which plate? Why don't they sched-

ule charging cycles better? Upgrade this one drone to have a stronger engine despite it losing the ability to maneuver around other drones carrying their own cargo loads because I said so! Oh, you wrote a report on why that's a stupid idea? Let me take this to the mission team—they said we need to do it anyway. Oh, you wrote another report on why it would be far easier and more effective to just upgrade the entire drone instead of only its engine, including a reference to a recent situation on another station in the mission which saw success performing the specific, complete upgrade you're recommending? I don't read reports! Do as I say, and also fix this other one that has a haywire power sensor and will inconsistently freeze when it's supposed to pick up extra-small I-beams.

My team can be fun but, fuck, the work seems impossible when I can't even test my changes until the update sequencing transpires every 24 hours.

Home is so far away...

What am I doing here?

The parallels between this incarnation and my present one are astoundingly similar. In my distraction pondering the contrasts, I nearly forgot to jump out of the way of an oncoming truck as I cross the street back to my office. Business as usual. I sit idly in my chair and consider what to do with the rest of my shift. I can't test my changes to the codebase because someone broke the core of my primary testing environment and, no one knows why but, the secondary testing environment refuses to initialize.

The work is so pointless—but there are plans for this project to be the backbone of other systems with the capacity to ruin

the lives of millions—it's hard to imagine that, with how broken everything is right now. Fuck.

For now, my work is unimportant. If only the life of my vision was so lucky. With my team, I make the most of my time spent waiting to see if my changes had any noticeable impact on the system. I chat with my coworkers about math and physics and philosophy, then we play an old board game about capturing territory with stones. It's the kind Esper would prefer, but she taught me well enough to follow along. Approach and take a base. Block the enclosure. Attach, extend, jump, and surround. I slip into a trance, back forth, push and pull, invade, claim territory, and defend. I meditate on the game and explore deep into my own mind—venturing to the untamed wilds. It doesn't take long before I greet Esper. She's complacent, wandering the halls of the infinite as she so often does—not precisely searching, but wading through memories and clusters of ambitions let go to the waysides. I give a slight wave in greeting and patiently give her time to collect her thoughts. She's beautiful—eyes of brown and long, straight hair with bangs pointing towards her face. Her jaw is clenched as she ponders.

"I hate to say it..." Esper speaks, "but we might need more strength to survive the voyage, like, physical strength." I take my turn to ponder; could this be linked to the visions I was having earlier? It's probably better to listen now than to speak.

"Dione is going to be another challenge entirely, but I'm worried about how vulnerable we are in space . . . Chimera, can you make some kind of jetpack for each of us? RCS monoprop. Hydrazine if you can manage it. Two packs."

She looks at me calmly, with a dominant stare. She's especially cute when focused like this. She bares her teeth and parts her lips, curved to a slight smile when she notices me studying her.

"The moon is far," I reply. "I'll have plenty of time to make stuff like that while on the way."

"I'm afraid you won't." A shiver runs down my spine at Esper's ominous retort. She sighs and places a hand over her breast. "Please prep the RCS alongside whatever you need to make planetfall work. There's not much time left." I'm impressed how calm she keeps her voice under pressure. Urgency makes me freeze. But, I think her composure inspires me. Although, I'm a little annoyed at her. Were I to work on these packs while in transit to Dione, we'd be able to leave sooner. Her statement of urgency should be an argument in favor of my plan, but I just think that sometimes she doesn't listen to the words I speak. I give her a slight bow.

"Anything more, my lady?"

"I'm crafting a vigor spell. It should help . . . Can I have some of your blood?" I stare blankly at Esper, processing what she said.

"I thought only liches use blood magic."

"Well, I'm still human!" She smiles. For now.

My heart aches.

She's swift collecting my blood and I open my eyes, pulling me back to my study. After skimming some encyclopedia entries on high-test peroxide and hydrazine I feel a thread of inspiration. Not to prepare for the voyage, but to write of a past life:

Persephone, an androgynous cybernetic rabbit, orbits a singularity at such astonishing velocity that ve is rapidly approaching the present day, relative to my frame of reference. Ve thinks about states of matter and if someone ve meets in the future will understand vai certainly archaic formulas for determining the momentum of massless particles, and algorithms for computing a rolling average, and triangular charts of three axes for distinguishing soil types based on constituent textures. Ve told vyrself ve wouldn't miss anyone ve'd left behind, but tears burn vai face now with the thought of so many seemingly inaccessible opportunities stripped from vai grasp.

I'm excited for vyr to meet Esper and me—I know it will be a rejuvenating experience for Persephone, despite vai bountiful desolation.

I'm cooking a chicken-vegetable stir fry in my small kitchen after an especially confusing day at the office. The spice catches the hot air and fills my nose—it's deliciously sweet and piquant. I let my mind reflect as I repetitively stir the skillet.

I'm looking through a ridiculously messy file with so many dictionaries nested within dictionaries that my intellisense just decides that every character on my screen should be bright pink. I'm carefully counting how deeply nested my changes are within these dictionaries so that I place my work somewhere it won't cause cascading errors.

One, two, three—then two more in a row that close almost immediately—four, five—it drops down as a new attribute opens, but with seemingly arbitrary extra complexity—six, seven, eight—oh, now an array must be more efficient for recording two

already-indexed values. Ah, then here must be where I make my change. My work feels almost as effective as blowing on the sun to extinguish it—which is to say, I’m creating an immeasurably small convenience for a tiny group of people who help enforce the decisions of greed rotting away central command from the inside. I paste some code my tech-lead sent over, but it appears I’ve lost a closing bracket somewhere, so I count again through the hundreds of dictionaries littering this single line of code. When I finally decide to add a closing bracket, I send a message back to my tech lead asking if I did it right and marvel at the reply—not exactly. He sends over some more code and I can’t even see a difference—save for omitting an extra closing bracket I inserted. Yet, for the third time, I recount the dictionary nesting to ensure I haven’t missed anything and reassure myself.

“I believe you’re missing a closing bracket at the end,” I type and send over.

“No,” comes the reply.

“I’m counting seventeen opening and fifteen closing before and including the edit in both the original and in my change, but only fourteen closing in yours.”

“You’re missing the point.” he retorts as if I were a child.

I hastily type out “Am I?” but delete it with a heavy sigh before choosing to just go home with the dismissive reply “Got it, thanks.”

Esper

She's onto me, but what else can I do? I am in control.

I am in control.

I consider the nature of vitality and hindsight with a jaw clenched by frayed nerves. My thoughts boil and cascade into the intrinsically indiscernible amalgam of chaotically anxious thoughts, roaring like a wildfire most prominently by stealing my breath away. I take a moment to consider leaving my own body before being pulled back in by fear. Push and pull, stay and leave—reasons for both stacking into tall towers tearing each other apart with staggering gravitational forces in my mind—and if to stay, what to do? Untamed wilds resonate from Dione but also from here on Amber and in the afterlife and in my own fucking mind as I plummet, and fear breeds stars in my vision. I think of lack of thought and blissful quiet from the torrent. I think of her, Chimera. Her cute button nose and intoxicating laugh and naive way with words. My heartbeat relaxes and I take a deep breath. Like a feather floating in my mind by the breeze of my exhalation, gently I catch myself and open my tear-stained eyes, departing the labyrinth and returning to my dark bedroom. Time for my most meaningful work.

I cut some thread from a spool, about two feet long, hemp fiber. I place it and a six-ounce, speckled moonstone in my sundress pocket. Within my satchel is Chimera's blood, and I carefully place beside it a small vial from my shelf—convalescence of a spirit freed from this plane.

Spirits should not walk this plane.

Through death, one decays back to the plane from which it

came. Life, death and rebirth are simple descriptions of energy changing form—compounds forming and aligning much in the way my moonstone is comprised of silicon crystal lattices, life, only to be returned by erosion or rot or decay at a later time, death, so the energy can be reformed into the next life. Some spirits break this cycle by forcefully refusing to move on. The tide may wash them in time and help them cope with death, but the rare few remaining stubbornly cling to ambitions of the material. Convalescence is that stubborn energy torn from the corpses of those wavering spirits into the aether and brought back again with freedom and transcendence.

I pack my sacrificial dagger and depart my dark room towards the station arboretum.

I run—I have only a few more seconds before the sun falls behind the curve of Ceres down below. I still track my period with the Earth's moon phases, despite her being far from visible in the sky of Amber Station. My magick is strongest during this time in my cycle. I enter the arboretum and look up, out into space. Tonight is just after the full moon on Earth, and in the twilight of the setting sun I feel drawn by the pull of the Beaver moon, far too distant to see. The light of twilight gives an eerie skyline to the jagged mountains of Ceres. I can just about make out a speck of blue in the sky. Earth, millions of kilometers away. I know I am looking towards Luna, though I cannot see any trace of her. A slight angular distance away from her in the black sky above I spot Venus, visible as only a faint yellow spec from here. The Orion constellation is much easier to see, indistinguishable from how they look when viewed on Earth.

I walk deeper into the arboretum. I think I'm alone in here. There's a section of pine trees surrounding the trail I walk upon up the rocky slope towards the stars that twinkle with their escape from the mask of subsurface scattering and atmospheric diffraction of the light of the setting sun. I gently take a handful of pine needles and place them in my pouch. Like stardust, sand in a sudden gust of artificial wind scratches over my skin—digging into me for but a moment before guiding my direction on its departure from my pores, taking with it traces of greed and despair while reinforcing confidence and passionate motivation to refine energy of chemistry and wisdom into bountiful love.

Love for the self—I feel my own skin and my breath underneath pulling and pushing as Luna herself draws me in, towards a seductive night of bliss with us and the white-hot touch of Venus' allure filling my core with blazing desire as Luna washes over me with her tides into wings with which us three soar, guided through aurora borealis—*intrinsic magnetosphere eddies exhibited under the shadow of Jupiter's dynamo*. The waves push and pull on my heartstrings—leading me towards a creek-bed crafted with aluminum basins and water pumps; upon sitting in the dirt beside a larger, flat rock on the shore, I am prepared.

Night falls fast as I begin with breathing exercises. Only the station emergency lights remain on in this large room. I've hacked a bypass on the motion-activated lighting and fire suppression systems. My breath pushes and pulls on my chest rhythmically, how waves crash on the beach and spray dancing briny droplets on geologic faults, eroding and depositing nutrients back into my heart and washing away what's no longer

me—though it once was; I'm endlessly growing as my shape morphs temporally and experientially. I focus my gaze on the rock in the dirt before me—it must've come from a long way under the surface of Ceres to have such high metamorphic grade, with lighter stripes of the gneiss vividly reflecting photons into my eye and onto my face and chest from stars hundreds and thousands of light years away. I know Venus must be contributing a minuscule portion of the radiance, whispering to me the secrets of the sun's nightly activities from around the corner of the horizon—entranced by beauty.

The spiritual glow I feel turns physical on my skin as I clutch my protective pendant from the thread around my neck and focus my energy inwards, opening a field of protection around the site. Even the dark bands of mafic material in the gneiss turn reflective now as the aura of the site bubbles with bondings and rebindings at atomic scales as to ensure the safety of its inhabitants. My hair stands as electric potential pulls fibers towards the field barrier, and the heat in my core and between my thighs and burning deep within my heart press on my skin and disperse over the thermal gradient—out to my skin and hands and fingers. I'm glowing hot and bright and my aura follows as the surrounding rocks turn refractive and reflective like glass.

The pine needle kindling ignites swiftly with the gentle grasp of my palms—I set it on the gneiss, watching the flames dance. To exchange agility for strength requires a cost of sanity. With a confidently swift motion, I draw blood from my palm and focus on the crimson drops falling away from the dagger clutched in my other hand. They fall down, down, shimmering and boil-

ing as they momentarily part the flames blanketing the needles before being consumed in the dance of energy transfer to head and light crackling vibrations through the air. One by one, the drops fall. Mine and Chimera's.

One by one.

One by one, I make eye contact with the gods.

Orion, I call upon you for your fortitude and courage so that I may unwaveringly focus on my objectives and achieve them with utmost respect and experience.

Venus, I call upon you for your rejuvenation and compassion so that I may push myself to grow to new heights

And have trust in myself to know my limits and to count on my body to support me in my most vulnerable times as well as in times of my most fundamental growth -

And so I remember that all this is to repay Chimera in body and heart,

To feel her love from flame snuffed out so many times, as well as my own, and to express myself as the person I truly am.

No longer will I allow myself to be held down by how those around me perceive my gender and expressions -

I am me and considering how astounding it is that elementary particles came together in a certain way to make atoms,

And those atoms came together to make compounds,

And those compounds came together to form cells and organs and my body itself,

One in the same with my being,

At this particular time in this particular place,

I deserve to express my unique completeness in the way that is best for my comfort and sanity and joy,

To live as a woman and decide exactly what that means for me. Luna, I call upon you for your sense of hazards and compassion, So that I may have heightened intuition and awareness of my surroundings such that my reactions are well-directed and my communications accurate and precise.

I am grateful for your bountiful support, my goddess, and for delivering Persephone's message to Chimera.

I intend to follow your guidance and hers, so I ask that you help me and focus my energy to unveil the internal creations around us -

And so it may be realized that they are one with you and I, One in control over the other as much as I control you with these very words in nature.

Jupiter—I call upon you too from the pillars far above to request that the gods and goddesses which I call down power from tonight be granted safe passage to my realm,

And that we all be protected by your wisdom and attention.

I cup my hands in the river and douse the flame before me, the crackling dance of chemistry reduced in a cloud of hissing steam to glimmering needle embers. I clutch my moonstone and feel the air around me cooling and gently brushing my thighs under my sundress as it spirals in to fill the void left by heat rising up towards Luna as she glimmers mysteriously high above my protective field. My own internal projection flashes in my vision: a cervid lich with moss-draped antlers and tail short, sticking up from behind and eyes shimmering like smokey quartz in direct sunlight. I snuff out the last embers hiding in the wet ash before me with my moonstone and feel the warm char

coating my palms as I massage the moonstone. I've formed a talisman which I focus my energy into and feel my heartbeat from within. To enchant my aura with the energy foci to meet Persephone, I coat my talisman in convalescence and speak to the spirits around me.

May Chimera and I be blessed with protection on our voyage out to the far moon of Dione -

May our burns through the atmospheres incurring blistering forces of drag and through the cold vacuum rich predominantly in stellar radiation

Be controlled and our systems nominal -

And may anomalies that grace us with their presence throughout treat us with compassion.

May Persephone rest comfortably at ease as we tumbles through the space-time waterfalls that join to the shared river Chimera and I plummet through to the eternal entropic nothingness -

And may such union of our spirits be made fruitful by our experiences, desires, motivations, and health -

As is fated by the fragile threads of happenstance.

May we be freed of inhibition and of unreasonable expectations we inherited from a lifetime of cultural traditions hellbent on extinguishing the fire of passion burning in our hearts.

May the fire burn on while the universe has oxygen and non-uniform energy density, and may the fuel in our hearts come from endless ambitions and the joy of knowing that with each answer comes more questions -

and may the diversity of our spirits pull us to lives of love and exploration.

Persephone, Chimera, and myself: may each of our auras be enchanted by this energy.

May no harm and only good come from this spell.

I close the field of protection and immediately feel the fiery heat return to bounce joyously around the inside of my flesh—praise from my guardians. Although long-range transmissions like spell castings can be triangulated with precision growing proportional to duration, my minimal use of the high-energy foci, our blood and my sex, reduce the accuracy of pinpointing my position, manifesting as minimal movement of the blink, those that hunt blood magic liches like me for our potential to power their society by hijacking control over our energy transmutational abilities. I tie the imbued talisman with thread as a pendant and place it in my satchel. I feel the energy focused within—the heat warming my core from my heart and blooming out in whirlpools around me. It follows me and seeps into my aura with my every exhalation. Steps of my feet lead me along the path. Beats of my heart guide me ahead. Love in my soul helps me focus on the mountain before me. There is tremendous distance between us, but our persistence keeps us accelerating towards each other consistently, the magnetic forces driving our embrace growing exponentially as we approach—the three that are one: me.

“You’d think these’d be heavier,” Chimera says to me, balancing a reaction control system thruster block in her palm and setting it next to another as her beautiful smile beams a spotlight of passion on me. The blocks were modified by her careful fingers—so delicate and confident when they caress the machinery. There’s not a doubt in my mind she brought all the metal curves and ridges within micrometers of spec; I let my blush cover my face as I linger in her gaze and bite the corner of my lip, drawing her attention.

“Hey! Don’t get your hopes up too soon! I am the queen of breaking shit!” She beams with pride, eliciting a giggle from me.

“I’m sure we’ll be able to fly *together* with these.” I coyly gesture towards her work.

“My offering for you.” Chimera bows.

“Well. Here, I have something for you too.” I fish through my satchel and pull out the talisman necklace, holding it out to her.

“Oh it’s, beautiful!” She approaches me and takes the necklace. “Are *you sure* you want *me* to have this? I mean I know how much energy you put into your work. I’m sure the stone would be better wielded by a witch like you.”

“It’s to protect you. We don’t know what’s out there. Take it?”

“Esper, I can’t imagine a charm giving me the power to defy death.” Chimera stares off.

“We’re going to be alright.” I take her hands in mine and she immediately looks back into my eyes with surprise. It occurs to me only now that this is the first time our hands have ever

met. I release her and take a step back with embarrassment. “Sorry...” She studies the back of her clutched hands where I touched her, opens them and looks at the talisman, then she meets my eyes with a puzzled look.

“I’m scared...” Thoughts of past conversations fill my mind in flashes of anger and fear. Fear—the kind that mocks my stomach and washes my mind, for in thinking about it and its seemingly endless web of causes, I become paralyzed by terror and hopelessness—inescapable like the ground rushing up to meet me at terminal velocity. Death is impending and we both share a knowing, grim moment of understanding to this extent; yet with my own charm steadyng my breathing and warming my heart, I find hope and bask in its beauty. I hope for Chimera to find the same within hers.

“No,” I say, moving closer “But we can focus on extending our time here and sharing appreciation for this wonderful life. All is returned to the universe in death and, though we will be unable to think or act, I am delighted by the idea of returning home, to the universe itself, to let another share in my energy. This talisman grants me the strength to pursue ambition while we’re here, to think and act. I want you to be granted the same favor. It’s the trust in ourselves that will take us the furthest.” Chimera considers what I’ve said with a thought as though she understands but is weighing my hopefulness against the worries brought about by anxiety. “I believe in us.” I say with a heart of determination.

I think I won’t sleep tonight. I’ve let my sleep schedule drift as we’ve decided to embark. Tomorrow I will tell my boss I quit.

No longer will I create value for the immensely powerful, those who spill the guts of women like me, those who use the tools I create to enforce a status quo rooted in imperialism.

I stay awake as an expression of determination and the exciting optimism burning under my skin. It feels right to let my mind fade to exhaustion while I focus on meditation. The final preparations for finding Persephone are for Chimera to consider, so now I am alone with my mind. This used to terrify me, back when I would forsake my introspection of what's right for what's accepted as *proper*.

There's no night on the station, not properly. It truly only lasts a half-hour behind Ceres, and I just can't get the station emergency lights off without breaking something obvious. Those long, black nights on Earth where I would lose sight of my hand just by reaching out; mere memories filling my throat with the weight of desolation. No, the proper length of night here is simulated by polarized glass on the massive portholes above rotating against each other, while the habitation module revolves like a brick prison the size of a mountain around a hemispherical mirror. Ceres darts over the fake sky every time I look up—the same one gray cloud over and over and over and over again, every time I look up.

I miss Earth, but they'll never forgive me for being a woman. It's not better here.

Onto a *new challenge* I suppose. At least that will reluctantly satisfy the head of personnel between his cigar puffs. I don't mind him blowing them towards me, the smell of tobacco turns me on and I'll get to see Chimera again soon.

She keeps busy running cargo missions around Amber sta-

tion, sometimes dropping down to the surface of Ceres for a week to support with logistics and approving large construction permits. When we're together she can finally let herself relax, the headlight of pressure dimmed just short of blinding. We draw together while looking up at the stars, and we dream of cats. We make stories come to life playing video games. She's been afraid of making mistakes for all the years I've known her, and I've ignored my own needs to seek thrills for all the years she's known me, and we bring out the best in each other. I help her out of her shell and she helps me to know my limits and to be prepared for anything. We have learned so much about each other and ourselves with the shared support. I used to be so frustrated and afraid of failure that I wouldn't make art, but she showed me how to plan to finish and control my project scope. I hope I've helped her feel more comfortable taking up space and getting fair value out of relationships.

That's what this adventure is about, isn't it? We are fed up with being treated lesser and this is our opportunity to breathe life and love into this *topos*! Into our hands with which we mold all we touch, pouring life into our waves and pushing them in outward ripples.

We face the suffering of thousands of years torment directed into us for that which we can't control. They call us daemons by birthright, everywhere we turn, only accepted by those like us, and often too turned away by the outcasts on the edge of the asteroid belt. In our loneliness we swallow down sorrow, rolling in the stomach, and turn—once again—to the stars.

Better alone. The vastness is overwhelming, it buzzes in my skull and, I think, in hers too. The weight is exhausting

and shedding skin seems so blissful, as there's no pressure to provide for each other. We've been alone so long, and everyone else left, forced us to go—is it right then to take the message and embrace isolation? With how difficult it is just to leave bed, how can I expect myself to follow a radio beacon out to a moon of Saturn? Starving to death in stasis malfunction is still better than staying here where people I walk past shout at me that they will *abolish* my existence, that I'll never change what I was born into. Does Chimera think of me like a bargaining chip or a toy to be used up and tossed out? On the days that she's only willing to talk to me to express how much she feels alone, I see my reflection. Like we share this great isolation but when we reach out to comfort each other, we find our fingers slip through the surface image and break the illusion of togetherness with cascading ripples. All we gaze into is the expansive murky depths. I know that *you* see the same frozen ocean in my eyes.

But I know I want you. I want to show you beauty and swim together in the oceans, despite how it chills our bones. Your smile warms my weary heart far beyond how any ice could numb me. On the contrary, I feel a furnace of joy as we discuss new adventures together. Maybe we'll fly past a comet! It will be so spectacular to see it, to share it with you. We can be free from the torment of others out here, and enjoy picnics under the stars. When our feet are entombed by cinder, we will burrow into books. And when the sky is clear, we will soar together. I want to explore the depths with you. I want to explore your body, with all my heart.

Perhaps, if we work together, we'll find Persephone. I know we can help vyr. I know this love binds us, and if we have

nothing but each other things will be alright.

The storm will come. I see the eyes of doubt upon us by the hour. They won't let us turn back. Our advance will sever us from all that we know. But we've faced such trials before, this is just the voyage out for rendezvous. May fortune grace us with mist over downpour.

Chapter 6

Ambivalence

Val

I have this mote of frustration lodged in my head. I think I'm going to need conservation of momentum. Now I think I remember from my physics education that momentum is half mass by velocity squared, but is mass kilograms or grams? Well, for a conservation problem it really shouldn't matter. I could use relative mass. Is this going to be an issue if I want to make a tighter beam? I'm not sure I'm all too confident in my ability to remember quantum physics equations, let alone derive them from scratch.

I don't know why the question of aging never crossed my mind until after my body was reconstructed via precisely time-

seeded supernovae in the early universe. I'm woven into time with such ease that any ailment I could come across has already been flagged by my biochemistry as something to generate immunity to.

It feels like I'm living in a cave, isolated, alone with only artificial terrain surrounding me. Even those are mere projections, and me, centered, running about on a treadmill. Maybe I have just been playing a video game this whole time and intentionally had some memories changed around to better immerse myself. How's a rabbit like me to know?

I do imagine I could die. But I like it here.

It's peaceful.

The life is so similar to that on Earth. The world is plentiful now. Perhaps I could use a break.

I'm all alone here. It's strange. I hear birds and feel surrounded by the love of the world. But I can't talk with *anyone*.

I'm awake just before sunrise. I've been awake since the late afternoon. I get to free myself of the schedules of other people while I'm here. And, I suppose, I'll be here for a long time.

The sky is a magnificent lapis blue, but the forest around me is still mostly shrouded by darkness. In thirty minutes, the sun will begin to cast golden rays onto the eastern faces of the mountains towering into the clear skies to my west.

Each time I look up, the sky is a little lighter. Now it's like a tube of phosphorescent gas streaming with current. I'd love to call it *neon* but I don't recall what color neon glows when it arcs with electricity. Perhaps a different noble gas would better describe the color.

I hear ducks call for attention. My fur and the ground and

trees have taken on a periwinkle tone. Sunrise is soon going to bathe the factory.

I wish I could share this with another rabbit, someone I could understand and hold with love, to share the calm atmosphere flowing into my blood. There are so many friends I left behind for a new life in a strange place. And despite that, I have so much grace here I never would have otherwise. The question isn't *was it worth it*—I had no say in the matter—but instead *what's next*.

Indeed.

Yellow light begins to creep in from the east up to the sky, overall making most of the horizon-touching regions gray. The blue high above me has become pastel in its depth. Far south just above the horizon is pink, as very distant clouds catch sunbeams from around the planet's edge.

It's more than a mote.

I can't believe I'm the best. They kept telling me over and over throughout my life that I'm special and they need me. They lie. They stripped me from culture because I was a vulnerable outcast they could blame for their problems. I don't want any of this. Why am I here? I let them build me up. I was everything they wanted me to be because I just couldn't be myself. The frustration I feel boils my blood.

Why can't I just be myself? What's wrong with me? Who am I really? Everything I've wanted to be has been scoffed at as lesser. I am just a lesser person. But they must not know; I tricked them and now they've sent me away on a grave adventure from which I'm never to return. All for the common good. I

let them have their way with me because I can't admit I'm too scared to go or I don't want to go so they sent me away. And now I lay shattered.

Breathe.

The sun hits my eyelashes.

I guess my sex doesn't matter here.

The energy I soak in from the sun and the grass around me fills my blood and urges me to nap with the jewel-colored beetles. It'd be so good to fade away. Though maybe I already have. How long will they wait for my signal before giving up? Why do I care? They're gone now. It's just me here.

All alone.

I was all alone in my last life, in many ways. My family sold me for stock the first opportunity they got.

Now is different. I'm further from any humans than I've ever been, but I have a unique freedom of movement. I used to be scared to leave home, but now those that hunt me will consume me instead of leaving my flesh to waste away. I'm alone, but I can finally have a purpose that matters.

I don't know where to get water. I guess from a river somewhere?

The sun's a bit more orange than I remember Earth's being. Maybe I won't have billions of years here to do nothing. It may be hard to work if the air turns to solid ice miles thick. As if working on the secrets of the universe is my priority now.

My mission, the brand burned into my flesh to announce that I'm nothing more than cattle. A contract to be satisfied

only by my own detonation, my intentional self-immolation. I'm not supposed to live. I wasn't supposed to live here either, or whatever this is. Why am I tormented with rebirth into another beautiful world only to be left, once again, completely alone?

A blend of comfort and isolation fills me, a feeling I know all too well.

I gave up so much of myself to those who harassed me and refused to accept what they never have experienced before. I can be a clockwork rabbit here and there's no one who will refuse to respect me or advocate for my *abolition*.

I know what's important to me.

Well, I must admit curiosity too.

Geomagnetic storming is a threat this close to the sun, particularly because the orange star's quick rotation and internal convection teeming with potential magnetic energy. I haven't noticed anything yet beside a few small flares, tiny but consistent fluctuations in the surrounding vis field, but a large one could trigger a coronal mass ejection that slams a tsunami of plasma into the planet mere hours later.

I want to build machines which are safe from geomagnetic and radiation storms, but that's a bit beyond my area of expertise. Maybe an aura will do?

Fuck, I have no plan.

Just an ever-growing list of concerns.

I stumble upon an aquifer bubbling water up through some springs. It's crisp and sweet. It refracts the sunlight interestingly, though I think that has more to do with the orange glow

of the sun than the water itself. Very little blue light makes it into my eyes from much of anywhere. Even the sky above takes on a gray-white color, completely undersaturating most of the sky I had seen prior to daybreak.

My head swims during the day. This is when I sleep now. I like being awake throughout the night. It's peaceful. I'd rather sleep past the heat of day and be illuminated by machinery and moonlight at night. I like how lonely it is surrounded by darkness too, so even in the day I crawl into a cave to avoid the sun, and finally let myself rest.

The days are long. I like that. It makes everything feel less urgent. Though I struggle to plan out the challenge ahead, I need neutron sources, clean targets, some sort of detection procedure to verify when I've made positrons and heavier particles, a massive accelerator to dump what might be a star's worth of energy into, some way to harness such an insane amount of energy, and who knows how many solutions for an unknown amount of problems yet unforeseen.

Breathe.

Big picture.

There are two major milestones I need as the foundation for my research. First is flow of vis into the atmosphere. Once I get a framework for landscaping and vis generation, its expansion should be self-perpetuating. Vis is an excellent source of power for bootstrapping my construction operations, and its transmutation characteristics make it an ideal catalyst for refining the substances I need for my research. The incorporation of magicks could make vis align and direct me to veins of gold.

Second, an aspect of electric control is essential. Landscap-

ing with vis is a big part of this, but I need a way to store energy efficiently, and use it to power calculators, which will all have to be of my own design.

I remember back to my old life, my past life, at the confusing mess of logic gates needed to divide numbers on chips. Not to mention all the chemicals needed to make circuit boards. All concepts I can't say are anything but confusing and complicated to me.

For now.

Might I have to worry about the electronics I make being bombarded by plasma from a solar flare? I might need to travel to a more distant planet if I want to keep my circuits completely safe.

Okay. Stay focused. Vis. Mana, life, æther. The animating fluids. Produced by tress of silver and absorbed by the wings of butterfly on rhythmic beat beat beating. A metronome, self-perpetuating. The rhythm gently sways the metallic leaves of the blessed tree. As the leaves brush together, they spontaneously create vis, shaken into the breeze to animate again.

A fair breeze washes the rocky mosses here, but I'll need a stronger gale to power a refinery or computer. An accelerator will need more still. Perhaps I could run a simple condenser with what I have. Then, clouds will embrace the region and rain will join the wind in washing duty. Water for cooling, growing, erosion, and a drink too. From one sprouts many, enough to dig a cave system a continent across, after great patience.

And the silver, a simple matter. For with my every step, She walks beside. The Divine Goddess, conduit of energy, may Her love empower me. I am no vessel for Her hand to guide, but we

are one in the same, as is the butterfly, trees, and moss. Even the dirt and pebbles play a part in Her dance. And She fills the universe with wonder, but I repeat myself.

So, to the boy who came before me,

You're safe now. I have to let you be and I must leave you behind. It probably seems silly but the answer was so close this whole time, inside of you. Tell you what, how about we meet over a game of Baduk and remember the pain together. Do you remember that first memory you burned? From it, so many more grew and lashed out at you from the dimly lit corridors. A whole museum in your mind but only a bombed out kitchen to fill with delicious smells. The rest is boarded up, isn't it?

Would you like some tequila? It's worth celebrating. After all, you really are safe here. The ghosts are coming with me. You'll be all alone, just like you wanted. I know you have a lot to do here, so take your time. I'll visit you again sooner or later. We'll share a drink and play that game.

Oh, just one last thing—get some rest. You deserve it.

I can wait. I'll be patient. It takes a long time for the resources I need to form. But waiting is not the difficulty. Not like the direction. I can do maybe a few things at once, but I still get a bit lost. I've forgotten ratios of the smelteries and had to trash steps of design progress. No worries! It's not like I'm rushed, but there is a monumental task here and it's hard to put into perspective. I know I can walk a million steps by putting one foot in front of another. But every step of my mission seems vague and uncertain. Even questions that are highly quantitative—how many trees, how much mana—are all answered the same: it depends.

The objective is discovery, which intrinsically comes with uncertainty. Maybe I spend all this time and conclude it's impossible to proceed. What if this is a waste? Perhaps reprioritizing my efforts will make my time here feel worth *it*. I can spend the next ten thousand years binding the most beautiful book with gold leaf and an inset medallion, then a couple days scrawling sophomoric sketches of genitalia across all the pages. I imagine that being quite satisfying. I like research, really, but doesn't this seem the least bit egotistic?

The Last Device. The Machine to Reverse Entropy. The Pool of Scrying. A weight, promised, where past gains *are* indicative of future returns. The Philosopher's Stone. Unifier of all, but where energy flood corresponds to a drought. I am the harbinger of hunger then. Where I walk, the wind blows inward. It lifts me up as it converges, and all so that an infinite supply of silver can be stacked somewhere far away in space and time. This place is a laboratory, my laboratory. And after my research concludes...

Well...

Nothing, of course.

My mission ends with me. I am to return my schematic or negative report with the destruction of this universe. I'm a computer task then, used to perform an operation and cleared upon completion.

I'll need to harness the energy from many stars, and create some carefully timed pulse to detonate them and everything else in such a way that a message can be encoded. If I'm off my measurements by an incomprehensible margin, or if my models have an error, I probably won't get another chance.

I suppose it would do me good to work on a hobby.

Book binding sounds nice. Or a bike ride. I could pour some gravel around along the mountain slopes and ride on trails never seen by another human. The only one to explore this place. Not just this planet but the universe and all its beauty. This place is mine, and it's also home to the creatures around me. We share it with each other. The mist in the sky wisps with a shimmer, catching the light and guiding me forward to home. It morphs—home. I'm sure I'd like to live on an asteroid for a while. I'll prefer trees and water, I know, but just a taste of the endless expanse as a makeshift shelter separates me from the void. Like camping out on the side of a mountain cliff. It's remote.

Though, technically, I'm equally isolated from humans no matter where I go.

What am I doing here?

Another day and the plan is more organized. I tend to let my thoughts consume me. I step back and let the confusion

hide. Uncertainty will always shroud my confidence, but I can focus my energy on taking action.

Chapter 7

Catching the Glint of Her Blade

Esper

Just as intended, I wake up a day before the descending node of our Hohmann transfer between Ceres and Saturn. Chimera wakes at the same time, and we get our minds warmed up in the dim starship together. We've been in stasis for nine years and will go back to sleep for another three when we're done adjusting our approach. But, the nicotine cravings clawing through my mind make it feel like I quit my job and left Amber just yesterday. Instant coffee will have to suffice. Chimera drinks

chai. It's quiet.

We'll meet the moon Dione and investigate the source of Persephone's radio signal further next time we wake up. Chimera adjusts the starship's trajectory to bring our perichron to 377 million meters above Saturn. She calls out mathematical equations and I solve them for her. I'm impressed by her talents with orbital mechanics, how she seems to model out millions of kilometers of space in her mind by reading a handful of values off a screen, and how she knows just which adjustments will correctly position our trajectory when I reply the solution to her equations.

After a while, she sits back in her chair, concentrated on the monitor still but no longer in need of my mathematical prowess. She's wearing the talisman I made for her with our blood. My eyes are drawn to it, sitting just above her ample breasts. I feel a hot, slight pressure just behind and below my belly button, growing into a shiver that runs down my spine to fill my face with blush. I study her the way a hungry wolf studies an oblivious deer as she presses her thighs together in her skinsuit. Usually I feel on the other side of such a fantasy, as destined by my stubby antlers, but now my desires are more *instilling*.

She looks at me with curiosity and I manage to hold a flustered smile for a moment before the embarrassment of my blush pulls my eyes to the floor. I recognize the tightness of my own skinsuit between my thighs and hide my lower cleavage under my palms.

“Are you . . . okay?” Fuck.

“Y-yeah! I’m just- Thinking.” Chimera studies me now, returning me to my *proper* place as as a cervid. I wonder if she could lift me.

“What about?” She chirps after a moment, and shows me a smile somewhere between innocent and smug. Her loppy ears twitch when she tilts her head. Think fast.

“Well. About *why* you let me come with you out to Saturn.” She purses her lips and furrows her brow, thinking a moment.

“I like your company. You’re . . . nice to me. I like hearing you talk about games and magick. And, I feel like I can be myself around you.” That’s not what I expected to hear—is she interested in me?

“I- Do you want to have a picnic together?” Fuck, maybe I should have bit my tongue, isn’t that too direct? She sits up suddenly.

“Yeah! Uhm, but, how about closer to Saturn? We’ll see the clouds and the ring shadows pretty clearly I think.”

“That sounds beautiful!” Is she only agreeing to be nice to me? I don’t want to lose her friendship by scaring her off, she’s important to me.

Did she suggest waiting until we reach Saturn to give her more time to come up with a way to distance herself from me? Have I just tarnished years of friendship by pushing her to sacrifice her comfort to appease me? Horror stories flash in my mind of my own sisters acting flirtatious and being exiled from their communities with predatory labels. It’s clear that women like me are only tolerated if we’re chaste and entirely submissive. I’ve been forced to accept that faggots like me are in sexual exile, and such exile is contagious, only perhaps used as a sex toy

by those with enough social capital to shrug off the inevitable denunciation. I'm destined to be alone by my transfemininity the same way I'm destined to be docile by my fur, tail, and of course the double exposure of antlers. Okay, breathe...

Her smile is innocent. Am I manipulating her or does she actually want to spend time with me? How am I possibly going to wait to find out? Breathe, breathe. I excuse myself and retreat to my private quarters.

I'll spend the night, three short years, alone as always. I think I love her.

Chimera lays out a large sheet and we sit together in the bridge. She was right about the view. Saturn is still quite distant but spectacular framed before the endless ocean of stars and galaxies slowly pushing me away. And framing her dance, of course, is the beautiful moon Titan, distant over Saturn's shadowed hemisphere but mysterious and alluring.

We're in low orbit over Dione, but she's under the nose of the starship right now. The bulk of Saturn's rings appear collapsed to a thick, sliver halo from our perspective almost perfectly aligned with the plane.

Chimera and I are silent a long time, mesmerized by wonder. She pops the cork off a bottle of wine and we find our voices again together among the sour grapes.

I've always felt comfortable talking with her about my philosophical beliefs when we discuss ethics. When we play video games together, I feel comfortable sharing what I do or don't appreciate in the stories. We argue back and forth with glee about which programs are the most efficient for which systems onboard the starship, and these conversations are engaging and precise. So why can't I tell her that I want to be more than friends?

I collect myself within the metal surrounding me. From the bridge here at the bow of the small starship, I can gaze through the reinforced windows on the bulkhead doors all the way back to the aft engine room. It's cramped in here, and the air carries the same artificial smell I gagged on every morning at Amber Station. The same air I can't help but reach for a cigarette to breathe through. The cold temperature maintained by the life-support systems keeps the onboard computers stable and helps

me keep track of my sanity, though I can't help but wish for the warm touch of her flesh against mine.

I've asked other people for casual sex before, that was easy. I worked myself into really dangerous situations with how open I was about that, being pinned down and ignored when I ask to stop. But still I persisted among others for pleasure, social status, and money. This is completely different. I've felt aromantic for my whole life, but is romance what I want now? Here, with you—just say it!

I can say that, *I want to be romantic with you*. There! Those are the words, just speak those the same way I speak of wanting respect or a smoke. Fuck I need a fucking smoke. Is that what I'm feeling, just nicotine cravings driving me to the core of my own desires? Do I want her or do I just want a cigarette and my dildo? Ugh, I can't keep my thoughts organized with all the *urges*. Okay, say it.

“Chimera . . .” She takes her eyes off the forward bow windows and pierces me with them.

“Yes?”

“I . . . can read your palms, if you'd like,” I offer. She pauses a moment in thought, then sits up, turns towards me, crosses her legs, and holds out her hands, palms up.

She's allowing it? I half expected her to laugh at me, even with my words not even a quarter the depth as I desire them to be. I adjust my posture and take her hands in mine, supporting them from below and bringing the palms up a little closer to my face. I glance at her and she smiles. Her hands are so soft, I wasn't able to really feel them back on Amber. I feel the bony ridges of her hands and the silky fur of her thin coat.

“There’s something, more I’ve been wanting to ask you,” I say. She looks at me intently and I feel the muscles of her hands tense up.

“What is it?”

“PROXIMITY!” A sudden artificial voice makes us both jump as I choke on my tongue. A low-pitch klaxon beep fills the ship as the master caution light illuminates the front of the cockpit in a warm orange glow. Chimera rises and taps the fault acknowledge button on the bottom of the center control panel. A deep, faint beep rhythmically cycles on and off, slowly rising in pitch and hastening in cycle frequency. The sound is unmistakable to experienced starship crew: *something* is approaching us. I catch my breath with a cough and stagger to Chimera’s side.

“Get to the escape pod!” Chimera commands while scrolling through signature charts.

“What?” I’m confused, how could something that warrants abandoning the ship sneak up on us? She turns her head and glares at me with a scowl. I feel again the undeniable tightness and heat building between my thighs as a tingling rolls down my spine.

I leave the bridge swiftly and float down the center corridor of the starship to the last door on the right. Inside the tiny airlock, I close the bulkhead behind me and open the next. With a little more space to work inside the escape pod, I close the access and begin donning a pressure suit, glancing up occasionally towards the small window in the access door to the starship corridor.

Just a minute later, Chimera appears behind the window.

She closes the starship-side airlock door and opens the escape pod door. I back myself into the wall to make room for her, noticing the proximity beeping much more high pitch and rapidly than it was before. The sound is cut off by Chimera closing the escape pod door behind her.

A clang rings out through the hull and we are lurched into the stern wall of the small pod. Though we don't hear the alarm, a bright strobe light flashes behind the escape pod door. I look at Chimera. She makes eye contact with me and nods. There are two seats, back-to-back, taking up most of the interior space of the pod. Chimera pulls herself into the forward one and I strap into the aft. She checks her helmet microphone and I reply with my name to confirm that I hear her. Talons shred the starship-side airlock door as if it were polystyrene foam and my eyes meet with a hulking lich.

I've never seen one like this before. Deep blue eyes and a cosmic shimmer of sparkling purple on its black fur coat. The face of a wolf and expression of calculated certainty.

"GO!" I shout through the headset. Chimera triggers the ring of explosive bolts and ignites the solid rocket motors, forcing my weight against the straps of my seat. They dig into my thighs, waist, chest, and shoulders. My eyes shut reflexively but when I open them a moment later all I see out of the aft window is smoke.

And the little vision I do have is blurry.

And full of stars.

Swimming.

I awaken surrounded by limestone dripping water into a thin wooden bowl casting a rainbow on the wall of the den as sunlight races the fluid's fall, faintly smelling of dew as it drops with a timid reverberation into the collection. Wind breathes warm air inwards, though gently in such a way as to imply a sacred aura enraptured the small cave. Chimera is beside me, unconscious but breathing.

Just out and to the right of the shelter lays the gaze of the sun—greeting with a somber kiss as it courses towards the mountainous horizon. And the clouds, mighty and foreboding, tumble—boiling in roll—about each other, already stretching their stratospheric reach out high above just east of the den.

Resonations bounce around the hills outside, beating against the cliff face with the sound of distant thunder aching for release. Birds chirp as they gather their young into the shelter. I regain control over my motion and cautiously drink from the bowl—finding the water cool and sweet—before glancing outside. The warmth I absorbed through the stress of being hunted should be enough to last us through the night, as long as the storm passes before the next day.

Hold on a moment. Hazy yellow Titan is in the sky, so Saturn is probably below the horizon. But—the breathable atmosphere and the liquid water, no pressure suits or escape pod debris—this can not be Dione. Where are we?

Raine.

Who said that?

...

Chimera awakens with eyes full of another vision from Persephone, brief, she tells me, but brighter and more vibrant than ever:

In the end, there was no escape from the novae, even aboard the lead sarcophagus. Ve was thrust from the star system at high speed and eccentricity—giving vyr slow, long millennia of hovering seamlessly stationary within the endless depths of the violet nebula which swallowed vai home system—giving vyr too rapid a plummet towards the boiling plasma accretion disk—what's become of Raine?

The storm outside around the valley is strange. Winds pick up as the front moves in, but appear to be traveling without direction, small eddies surging and subsiding in place and wind tunnels farming without start or end, nor contracted by the limestone bluff and birch forest of the valley, but instead by some invisible object or force. And as the rain approaches and the clouds near I recognize motion of droplets falling up, being pulled from leaves and dirt and hurtled towards the dark, engorged clouds above.

Flashes fill my mind of experiments, case studies, though deeply fragmented and impossible to distinguish from which mind sourced the shard—as if the minds would be distinct. No. I'm trying to force together two puzzle pieces that don't fit by trimming away empirical evidence; let the memories flow and let them be one, as we always were.

Flickers of great transportation networks, infrastructure of rivers and lush forests of fruit spanning continents. Waves ripple through the air as moisture is pulled up, harvested and filtered

purely from evaporation. The currents drag and direct the water balloons held together by temperature above collections, cooling computers the size of starship factories with thousands of gallons of rain per second.

Matter manipulators motor around me as light fades. Nanomachines shred material and reconstruct it as digital designs generated by city supercomputers are physically printed at the atomic scale from scrap metals and fried printed circuit boards. Carbon fibers and silica shards grow long and tall as if they were shot up by linear particle accelerators. Sharp laser beams glow to illuminate the production around me, and although the inner shell of the moon basks in light sweeps, storm gales, and a thriving population of mushrooms, the outer shell is dark and hot with plasma fireflies bouncing off the crust and twinkling away, flickering out.

It's warm in here with Chimera. The limestone drives the water from the storm away from us as we huddle together. Some of the sounds are bizarre—thunder cracks in reverse, like marbles accelerating as they roll down granite crystals into a drum at the bottom, shuddering grows into a crash piercing the air and shocking my Chimera as she covers her twitching ears. The hills rumble along with the walls of the shelter den and dish of water. As we drink it down I find fascination in holding the bowl down towards the valley floor outside the cave and watching drops accumulate within—it tastes crisp and fresh, as if it comes from a glacier isolated from smog and dust, none has touched the grass to pull magmatic vis away.

Above, clouds glow orange. Luminescence comes from be-

hind them, but it pulls me in as if I too am upside down, above the clouds as Titan dangles me from a chasm, urging me to fall back into the atmosphere where I came down from. The stars pull me in now as they pushed me away during our approach of Dione just before the lich attacked. We've not seen any trace of liches since waking up—but is that because they fear this place in spite of its beauty, like a gilded dystopia?

Discovery of the stars.
Water drips from Titan's sunlit face onto the
Shadowed rivers of the valley.
Past nautical twilight,
the falls and rapids shine with Antidiamond,
Hidden away from the sun by the horizon,
Save for Titan's compassionate reflection.
The photons luminesce in the stones and
Pebbles tumbling down the stream.
Shimmering rivers mimic the sky above,
Bathing in moonlight,
But also from the inside -
The Antidiamond ionizing flow,
The plasma points diffracting
By atmosphere
And gravity as spacetime
Deforms around the
Beats of unstoppable power;
No one dare tame their majesty
Past collapse -
Singularity.
Closer and slip from time,
They call it hundreds, thousands of times
As rippling wrinkles hurdle years over seconds,
The discovery always a reflection -
When actions become the ends themselves,
And the siren song fills the mind,
We help the sun find the sky again,
As the moon guided us through the night.

My dearest sapling,

How I wish not to lure you with deceit and slight of synapse. May these words guide you through demolition of thought and honesty in its place, though this growth perhaps bares more similarities to a tumor than to a structure by way of which migratory geese navigate—the needs were met and now I fragment the story I once told you, will this too unravel with time?

It was not from outside the singularity that I last messaged you, but from within its maw. Why? For emphasis. My mission matters not, now nor then. You can't lose track of why—and Raine is calling for you as it did for me. Even drowning in the river silt is better than evisceration by the lost liches; I'm not far found myself.

Do you ever think of the dragons—so far pushed back from Lambda, reduced to phantoms invisible to all but the algae and raven and to stories for you and I—taken from us for arson and immolation? I remember fondly, dancing with the sky clutches and drakes about floating islands—things from legends! I suspect you do as well, my child, faintly and perhaps entwined by revelations of another place—how messages are injected into DNA sequences of bacteria, endlessly replicating the same message for generations, perhaps mutated by a single character per millennia. We have messages in all of us: your capacity for vis absorption is one such expression, and I'd love for you to read it to me.

Always more to come,

P

Vai words come to me with the dawn, bright just how the embers of our shelter embrace my skin—sharp, warm, and electric with quills that pierce deep into my bones and too in my lungs with each breath. I coax life from the ashes with a flick of my palm and feel the creek of magmatic vis leaving my body—release as my muscles relax and wax forth the flow. Ve's near—but what of the beasts? I bite my lip, such name calling will be used against me if my vessel is unveiled, bar only draconic, although they may be right to use such labels.

I concentrate my heat into a ball at my core, then gently exhale it with my breath, flames licking my lips and wisping out in glowing eddies. The name of my mysterious messenger is on my tongue: Persephone. The warmth of sleeping beside Chimera steams my mind, and together we dream of upward-falling rainstorms. She's been in and out of sleep since we evacuated the starship. I wish I'd told her my feelings earlier.

The drops lap at the mouth of the den, swaying as they roll up the crags, mimicking the lightning's caress of the boiling clouds.

Raine swallows us before we have the chance to escape. We melt into the ground as every surface we touch becomes mud-slick, sticky, enveloping.

Chapter 8

Without Womb I Birth the World

Val

I gaze outside the lightspeed cruiser as the star systems race past me. I was once a citizen of our original marble, Earth, but the planet quickly became less and less habitable, the mother of local life poisoned and isolated from her supporters, namely the Sun. A vast sphere of metal and silicon engulfs the Sun now to harness her power, construction only takes a few millennia, then the Earth quiets. Dark and cold, except for the machines. There are no trees, as the forests have all been replaced by microwave power receivers. There are no birds, as the open skies have all

been replaced by a suffocating haze. The grass moves into caves as moss, and the animals follow suit into the deep – still warmed by energy diffusing through thick cables of electricity embedded in the limestone and shale bedrocks, lit faintly by the occasional warm glow of Nixie tube and status monitor. The Blood Moon remains only a digital approximation as light pollution and arid haze shun her.

One such animal was fabricated with thin rabbit fur, wings of fiberglass and aluminum, wires and silicon—that biotech creature is me, the last collector.

Architect of reality. Inclined to breathe energy from within the confidence of free will, for it is Her who grants it; the simulation runs to understand and control reality, but it is in the disparity and uncertainty that the collectors thrive. Forever, we are destined to fulfill the needs of the architect. The collectors are agents within the universe branch, working to be merged back into the Lambda trunk in the more gluttonous of cases. But what of the worlds above? Higher realities are more precise, but it becomes more difficult to measure quantized particles and fine constants down exponentially into the minuscule precisions. Lower realities benefit the Architect by experimental data which can be extrapolated to determine how the universe changes proportional to its degree. Or, even more mysteriously, what happens as more branches are created, each diving off the others and requiring ever more powerful colliders to open and remain stable for shorter periods of time.

The rate at which required opening energy increases is inversely proportional to the stability of the branch. Lower branch

stability may be favorable for certain studies of particle physics as the background noise in such branches grows proportional to the degree.

Branches have a theoretical minimum opening energy corresponding to their stabilities. There are two stability metrics:

- (i) Branch stability measures the length of time between a branch being created and reaching its quantum-mechanical ground state of energy. This is an ideal state; in practice, we say the quality of a branch is the ratio between the actual, current branch entropy and the entropy of the branch at its theoretical ground state.
- (ii) Passage stability measures the length of time between a branch being created and its corresponding singularity in the universe from which said branch was created evaporating, thus rendering travel between the branch and the trunk impossible.

Pocket branches are best for storage, encoding physical objects within them and powering nanomachines to fabricate contents for so long as the branch takes to evaporate.

The smallest beam to form pocket branches was of protons in the early stages of branch dynamics, but ions have proved to be a more efficient replacement for their greater mass. Beams of smaller particles such as quarks and electrons form split branches instead, though only in colliders pumping dozens of billions of electronvolts into a concentrated beam. And that's just the first stage.

Twenty six billion, eight hundred million electronvolts. That's enough to accelerate a proton up to 99.95% the speed of light. We slam the proton beam into an iridium nucleus and the dumped energy creates perturbations strong enough that a proton and antiproton pair spontaneously form. We capture the antiprotons and bring them to the second stage, where they are bombarded by more protons to form antineutrons. Meanwhile, an ultraintense laser shines upon a gold target, forming a gold anion and a positron. We bring together a gram or so antiprotons, antineutrons, and positrons to make anticarbon, then subject it to pressure and heat until we have formed the catalyst of branch creation: *The Antidiamond*. Microwaves from stellar lenses are concentrated on it and the branch gate opens.

It is theorized that a collector could be sent into such a split branch and build a machine powered by the universe to run simulations for the Architect.

Matter that falls into a singularity is converted into energy. But that matter is encoded into the singularity itself and becomes a digital part of the universe within. Collectors are sent into universes with a quest. For pocket branches, they will be assigned a computational task. Upon completion of this task, they will push the branch towards its ground state by detonating galactic clusters. Upon the branch reaching ground state, it begins to succumb to evaporation, and the difference between actual evaporation of the singularity on the branch-host side and the expected time the singularity would evaporate were it not for such entropic interference encodes the collector's computational result.

Stars above me shimmer as the light is warped and reflected before me.

Like the particle accelerators once roared, their beams depositing the energy of eons of organic floodplains and jungles into a compressed bullet so tiny it passes through basalt slabs thicker than my wingspan.

There's not much life larger than me since the stars became blinding.

Or how the stars churn heavier elements in their cores to supernovae collapse in a final fusion race to the bottom of size as metals compress into uranium until such a battery is discharged as feed into reactors to electronically magnetize such a tremendous accelerator –

One to mimic the star burst dooming their future, to study such a phenomena and harness it.

For commerce? Massive refineries high as the mountains cracking petroleum from the disposable modularity of an atomic gateway.

For science? To push the limits of technical wielding and route networks through the universe.

For escape. A clean slate to rule.

Little was active destruction of energy a consideration for loss of consideration and value.

But all complexity collapses to entropy.

This tree of time and space we share branches from Lambda. My creators directed the collision of near-lightspeed ions birthed from accelerators circumnavigating Earth, with power drawn from the local Dyson sun and transmitted as microwaves in a

tight beam, where particles are focused into beams as they accelerate around a pair of particle collider rings, inscribing another linear accelerator, thousands of kilometers long.

The gate roars with anticipation as I approach its maw, drowning out my final briefing spoken by an artificial voice in my helmet. The light of distant stars dazzles me with a radiant halo around the growing singularity as I fall. I look to the sun but all I see is a honeycomb mesh of microwave transmitters. All the gazes of alien planets and moons in this lonely system are cold and shy without the sun's warmth. I look to the Earth, many light years away, the only home I've ever known, and can only imagine her smile back feebly with a face of glowing, gold scars between dark hills of sand and dust.

I repeat to myself my mission as the voice in my head quotes – I am the collector for Lambda Prime, I will use the pocket branch to simulate humanity's growth through the galaxy and out through the entire universe. I will design a machine to guarantee the expansion of humanity will sustain itself in terms of health and well-being even while leaping between stars and galaxies. I will encode this design into the death of the pocket branch by accelerating decay to flat entropy by an extremely precise degree, destroying myself in the process.

I didn't expect to dream. Am I supposed to be able to dream? It's very strange, to have a story implanted into my mind without drawing it from myself.

I hear a dog bark in the distance. It's closer on the next bark, and soon I see it while wandering the empty streets of city night. I take a crosswalk across the street to reach the dog,

and a truck stops to let me cross. Under the streetlight, I see its light tan coat embraced by a red and black harness. Is it lost?

I don't like dogs. I've passed people in my apartments while they walk their dogs. Many times, they jump on me and scratch the paint protecting my aluminum thighs. I don't blame the dogs for these painful experiences, they've clearly been poorly trained and understimulated for a long time. Regardless, I've learned to steer clear of dogs. Not this dog though, I want to help it.

It lets me give it a pat on the head before it runs away. I hoped to check it for a tag but the dog bolts across the street back the way I came. I hold my breath a moment as I notice the truck still there waiting before the crosswalk. Thankfully the driver keeps the massive city beast stationary a little longer to let the dog run past. I resume my walk nowhere and the truck drives away after the dog disappears into the shadows of an alleyway.

My path soon diverts into a winding sidewalk detached from the usual curb tight ones of most city streets. It's poorly lit but I think it's worth it to have the thin strips of grass on either side of the concrete path, just two meters wide before reaching more pavement. Grass is hard to find in cities like this. I've not seen grass since before the Dyson sphere was constructed.

It's a new moon tonight, so even though the haze isn't bad, it is dark away from the streetlights. I don't know the time, tracking it is too stressful for me.

I hear the sound of footsteps behind me and turn to look. It's the same dog, but it's walking alongside a young girl now. I estimate her age to be eight years, she comes up only a head

above the dog's shoulders. She's black, with cornrows down to her chest and a handful of pastel beads woven into the ends. She's noticed me looking and stopped under the streetlight to look back at me. She doesn't seem afraid, more so cautious. I call out and ask if she wants help. She nods, I approach, and we're under a streetlight together. The same truck from before drives by slowly on the other side of the thin grass strip. They must have circled back.

"I'm . . . lost. I can't find my mommy."

"Do you have a phone? Or do you know your mommy's phone number?" She pulls a cellphone out from a pocket in the dog's harness. Simple enough.

"This is her phone." She points the screen at me, then turns it back towards her and unlocks it with ease. "It was ringing but she told me not to answer number calls."

"Okayy. I think you should call back the last number. Since your mommy doesn't have her phone she might be using someone else's to try and call you!"

"Okay," she makes a call and I can hear a very strange ringing. It must be a custom song recorded directly into the cellphone speaker, a simple piano progression but the key is off. The same truck appears again, slowly approaching us. We watch it as the strange piano continues too long. The truck stops next to us, just on the other side of the thin grass strip. The front passenger-side window rolls down. I don't see anyone inside.

There should have been an answer by now, but I'm just left with more questions. I wake up unsettled and confused.

While hundreds of thousands of years pass for Lambda, billions

pass for me within Lambda Prime. Plenty of time for me to simulate exponential growth. A part of me aches with the urge to jump to conclusions and report the mission as failed on the basis of unrealistic precision and vague definitions. But with marble under my toes and jade deep in my heart, I've formulated hundreds of hypotheses while waiting for the first planets to form. Through trial and experiment with a simulation of my own design, with physical models extending across entire systems in this branch, my new home, I thrive. I extrapolate these models with a machine—a computer of mechanical and electronic modules cross checking each other with detailed variables tracking position and momentum of particles in parallel with uncertainty collapsed down by random photons from a dedicated star measured in flux at a hundred AU in a surrounding shell, the random values wirelessly transmitted into a cluster of cores forming its backbone—capable of simulating the expansive growth of an organism clawing into a universe much like this one every few million years. This process may input my own designs, hypothesized to improve quality of life, and automatically runs these in an evolutionary model to improve them.

I worry, a few times, if a satisfying design will fail to bubble to the surface before the branch is too decayed to encode it—having frequent need to replace modules as old stars die and new ones form. But, at long last, I've done it. I trace the design in my mind, memorizing it as I encode it within my machines' explosive bolts. The wires and communication relays snap with energy as the configuration of timing propagates through my hundred-thousand-light-year-sized computer. I spend the time it takes to consider with wonder the ramifications of such a

device—The Global Minima of Suffering (no, double negative obfuscates the value)—The Chariot of the Stars. The thought of such a powerful device being constructed by entire constellations of engineers fills me with a melancholic feeling of anticipation—not that it thrills me to be around brooding eggheads—I haven't really thought about others before this. I don't have long left, and my mission requires no further action from me. I drift off into my lonely satisfaction while propelling through a nebula cloud.

I remember how bright the newborn stars were. Will their lives be cut short by my signal back towards the root?

And what of the life – do root creatures always eat first from the tree of knowledge of good and evil?

First of one's perspective is everything for their universe,

But one notch of relative velocity for another,

and what remains but fingerprints and dust –

Distances between agents more so mirror reflections

Than gateways over district bounds.

What of nobility for one's love?

Does the most vile root creature deserve to claim the

Life of all the most lovely creatures of leaves?

Goddess to ants,

Separated only by the former's knowledge of how the

Later found solace,

Or storm.

The storm comes then, shocking me from deca-millennia of trance—the end is approaching. I never expected it so soon—the complexity of my chariot is astounding for such a vast slash to be taken from this branch, for such an encoding to be extracted by mere vibrations of the gateway from which I was reborn.

A blinding bright light blazes my eyes as my bolts blow apart the galaxy, every star in sight, in a chain reaction of fusion blowouts. Rods designed by, from the perspective of this branch's inhabitants, a goddess strike fear and confusion into life for what few seconds remain—but also into me, for in the cascade of the phoenix, on the stairs down to Valhalla, comes my end.

It must.
It's my purpose.
But when the flames pass,
And my eyes adjust to the dark,
Although everything is changed –
For not but a sprint of Lambda Prime surrounds me –
Everything is gone.
But I'm still conscious,
Alone,
Except for the seed of a single star before me.
Not as a ball of plasma,
A reflection of myself,
Slowly spiraling away,
Into abyss,
Alone.

Chapter 9

Splitting the Firewood of My Flesh so I May Breathe

Esper

I awaken from the fall first, with Chimera close by—fine but asleep. Is this still Raine? The rolling hills and bluffs have been replaced by forests teeming with chirps and buzzes of life—but it feels violent, as if the forest is in battle and struggling to survive. It's not Raine, not exactly. It doesn't take long for my intuition to pay dividends as a lich fizzles into existence ahead

Splitting the Firewood of My Flesh so
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of me, cleaving the space around a fir tree. The way it warps through the air unnerves me as pools of steaming fluid settle in its footprints. I hold my breath, but Chimera murmurs in her sleep, and two eyes flash in my direction as the lich ebbs in and out of its physical form, now distinctly considering me for its next meal.

I cast a fireball quickly and hurl it at the lich. It roars and stampedes towards me. The flames licking at its short, stiff fur reminds me of stories of the phoenix. After but a few steps—closer still than what I'd consider comfortable—the lich falls with its roar turned to shrieking and howling in pain. Its lungs and throat melt as the wails crack with the embers immolating the beast. I inhale the smoke filling the air. It's warm and thick as it flows within me, but does nothing to satisfy my cravings.

My magick seems stronger, requiring little time and energy to take down the predator. Once again, the voice of the forest fills my ears with bubbling delight—rather than the ringing of my own battle focus—and I sit by my darling Chimera as my adrenaline wanes, leaving me with anxiety.

The shrieking did wake Chimera, but not fully. She sits in shock with closed eyes and heaving breath as if her consciousness can't decide whether she's having a nightmare or not. I gently caress her back and calmly tell her she's safe here. I have faith in my magick and curiosity is building in my heart as its tempo calms with my muscles. She's warm and soft, even through her frayed skinsuit.

“It's alright, let's go,” I speak to her calmly. I help her up and we abandon the mass of charred flesh behind us.

That lich was prowling here, hunting alone. I've never seen

such a shimmering radiance in one—making me giddy thinking of the powers I might wield here—though where there's one there's bound to be more. And through the aura ringing out in the fields they traverse, I draw magmatic vis. The fire I cast is brighter and hotter than normal.

Is this a hunting ground perhaps? I wouldn't be surprised considering the way it phased through the air as if it were polarizing the light passing through it. And it's aura, like ball lightning with a crackling halo of luminescent gasses—the image of its eyes locking onto mine, sunspots dancing out from its diffracted appendages ending in serrated talons.

What is this place? It unnerves me to say I may be false in telling Chimera that she's safe, but the lich gave me the impression—they own this land. The air too is more potent: richer with nil, crisp, and warm. I feel it crawling into my pores with the viscosity of chilled honey—the sharp pricks of frosted nil crystals like pollen in my lungs. It tickles and teases the warm air deeper inside me, filling my throat and nose with the thick nil, my face and chest burn as the mana flows around my bloodstream, racing towards my core and deep behind my belly button. I find this odd, as the sensation of nil was one I learned to taste and back away from, that it would choke magic rather than bolster it, but that's not what I feel now. Persephone must have spoken it to me sometime while I was dreaming, before Raine, almost in another life. But this path is my own to walk. I wonder how far I may fall, or if this place *below* Raine is the bottom.

I feel the nil accumulate behind my fingernails, urging them to grow and me to work them like a blacksmith. Small nebu-

Splitting the Firewood of My Flesh so
I May Breathe

lae of stars cluster underneath, dense and hot. My body births fungal colonies inside and the spores explore my bloodstream to lick under every skin cell and within each of my bones and muscles. Ants within the worlds of my cells crawl about restlessly, forging pathways between dimension and capability, wiring logic throughout pulleys made from my tendons and driving me to connect scale, ability, and choice. I do have that choice, though just as much as my being has choice over experience or such experiences have weight on my future decisions. To put another way, they each must create each other.

Nil, the negative of magmatic vis. The expended form of mana, yet apparently still potent here—wherever *here* is. Traditionally, nil was used as a backup source for when no vis is available. It annihilates with vis, giving the body a feeling of exhaustion. I've never felt bathed in nil because I've always gone to the silver trees to become revitalized when I've felt my mana running dry. But I feel now the invisible fluid surrounding me, with the smell of patchouli and leeching ash into my blood. The ash of my victim, the lich. I feel a hunger and pride to be assertive with my wrath, to quickly navigate my body's new energy source and trust my reactivity. A part of me wishes to have spoken with the lich first, but I must take care to ensure that I am not leaving Chimera out as bait. Moreover, if I show mercy to such a beast, would it not reveal to her that I am one of them? I must kill, lest the mask shatters. To save my beautiful partner on this journey, and to show her my devotion.

We're alone here. It's my responsibility to care for Chimera. It's the right thing to do. I shouldn't obsess over her, just let her do her thing and offer my friendship. Admitting my feelings

for her is only going to stress her out and give her another thing to worry about. My feelings are my own to take care of, I don't need to be a burden for her when she's already done so much for me.

Moons pass as we build a camp. I leave her here so she may work the new thatch roofing into place while I explore the highlands.

A maze of shrubbery comes up three heads above mine in some places. Rocks and twigs are scattered around the high, rolling hills, and tall forests surrounding, encroaching from the horizon. Distant mesa plateaus press up into the silver-blue clouds, warning me of lands ruled by fear. Not a new feeling, by any stretch, and mixed with isolation, chilling my chest. Bitter peace. Will I have anything to return to? And if I do, would I want to?

I can see these vast, distant features of my own mind and the landscape around me only from occasional ridges of stone and gravel loam snaking between the lush hills. Between them, in the ocean of brush, I feel blind. Pushing aside brambles reveals only branches, and behind each branch the brambles return.

How deep does the ocean extend? Out into the endless forests around me, the canopy blocks out the sunlight above. Strange eyes stalk me from depths well beyond what my own will adjust to—carnivorous. Cold, but singing in chaotic, rapid waves of chirps and rustle.

The familiar feeling, that I'm being pursued. The ocean of foliage surrounds me, allowing beasts to lurk close while keeping hidden from my inexperienced vision. My ears become prioritized, carefully hearing the motions of the kelp forests, bubbling

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with interest and temptation.

The darkness creeps over me as I descend, filling my ears first. The calls of birds and the crash of leaves falling into each other fade to murmurs. Beasts I named for their screams now whisper behind me, away from my sight and drowned out by breeze, by the thickness of the forest air sticking to me. The air is heavy and sticks to me with overwhelming humidity. There must be a *jungle* developing in the heart. It's worse than their shrieks making my ears bleed, to know they won't let me leave the canopy waves but not how or when they will strike.

I feel the weight of the forest pressing down on me. It knows it can't eject my company but it won't welcome me. Brooding fir trees with trunks wider than I am tall, perhaps twice so, tower in clusters that funnel movements of deer, wolves, and rabbits to the same corridors. Weeping willow wall off yet more sections with leaves of spider silk so thick that they can't be parted. More than once I think to use fire to clear a path, but the intensity of their stares when I think such thoughts burns me worse than a firestorm might ever cleanse. Rather than force me to turn away, it draws me deeper into the abyss. I'm pulled, my legs striding forward. I think I could stop and turn back, but there's nothing to go back to. Chimera? All is forest now.

Spores fill the void following my footsteps. The brambles scratch my flesh as I squeeze into more and more narrow passages, through the funnels and webs of massive trees. There's no way back so I press on. And the spores catch up with me while they disperse, filling my nose and mouth, eating my eyes and burning my flesh where blood is pulled out by bramble. It feels right, it's where I belong.

It's a sweet, crisp smell that fills me with the comfort of drawing above me a warm blanket in my soft plush bed of home, empty though it may be. Maybe I lay down for a moment on the carpet moss. Let myself be overwhelmed with drowsiness. To return into the forest depths behind the brambles, a place even more comfortable than the homes of my previous lives, where the mushrooms call.

I step forward towards a boulder, and begin to climb. The warm soil becomes dry as I gain altitude and the boulder becomes a mountain. Wild tobacco grows here, and the rhyolite gravel scattered through the soil might be an indication of apatite, improving the flavor. I top the flower and pull the ripe leaves, from bottom to top. The smoke will be rough so soon after harvest, but I roll a cigar tight and cut the ends, taking a side into my mouth. I can *finally* satisfy my cravings. I close my eyes and press a finger to the tip opposite my own, rotating the deep heat from my core and pelvis into my shoulders, bubbling through to my hand and enkindling the soft skin of my palm. Safe from the wind, the flames lick the thick tip I take between my lips. I repeatedly pop air into my lips, careful not to involve my lungs, and the cigar rewards me by pouring itself into my mouth. I drop my hand and let the smoke flow deeper into my throat with a thick, harsh drag, allowing it to seep through my sinuses and out my nose, kissing all the pores behind my face with pinpricks doped with bliss. My eyes burn and I sit a minute, taking in the flavor of this strange place.

The smoke of my cigar satisfies my hunger and lust as I continue to climb the steep grades out of the rocky valley folds.

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On cold mornings like this, I struggle to breathe the air unless it's filtered between my teeth with embers and nicotine.

This place is so different than any other I've seen before. It's uncanny. So much like that home I once knew on Earth, with identical plants, birds, and insects. Yet, it's off. There are liches around occasionally, for one. I want to know them better, to help them, teach them perhaps. But they know I'm an outsider and I'm not one to press the issue when it puts me between the thick, incisive claws of a newly-met sibling.

I was there last so long ago. I spent the last years before this voyage on Amber Station far from Earth's glow. The station mimicked her—as does the andesite I hike across now. There must be a volcano nearby, though I can't be sure if it's dormant or not.

So much of my life was spent in urban jungle. My home was always some flavor of a box-shaped apartment in massive towers of industry. I moved around every couple years but some parts never change. One window that I'm not allowed to decorate. Bathroom with a low counter as wide as my forearm. Walls I voyeuristically hear everything through. A few trees only a five minute walk down a series of repeating hallways—where counting one's steps gives a greater result each time—and I'm rewarded with a concrete atrium stinking of truck exhaust.

But here, I stumble over strange, rich rocks sparkling with luster as I wash light upon them with a swift swipe from my hand-crafted golok. Brush falls, cleanly circling the minerals. The wind pulls on the fresh exposed stems and branches. Flowers and fruits spill their seeds upon me with each stroke.

The sun gets higher and my skin warms when light pours

onto me between gaps in the canopy and towering bushes, though the warmth is subtle when contrasted against that filling my mouth from my cigar. I clutch my teeth around it, and before I swing the golok with both hands to shear a branch or fiber stalks, my breath is filled with smoldering kisses of home, my chest covered with a wool tunic. And on the slow exhale—chop!

Fibers are worth collecting. Maybe I can make Chimera a basket. Leaves and twigs, some rocks and water to help with shaping, and I'd fill it with beautiful things that remind me of her. I already know some—fruits and grasses of magnificent color, bright greens and dark blues, calling out as I do for her. But her mind is elsewhere.

Chimera focuses on her studies. Her eyes dart between her notes and the orange glowing fluid in the mold before her. Magmatic vis condenses in glimmering purple splotches before running like syrup into the foaming whirlpool of metal. Mana infused magnets can be used as klystrons to accelerate charged particles, taking a current to moderate the magnetic charge. Once she's satisfied, Chimera submerges the hardening ring mold in water. It comes out perfect with a quick blow from her hammer and a few minutes of time.

She thinks back and forward again. As time grows to infinity, every discrete object is broken down into smaller and smaller parts. This process has many different names depending on the context—crush, annihilate, melt, radiate—and it is inevitable. In contrast, there is no amount of time where it is reasonable to assume all of these items spontaneously reassemble themselves. Only a few of these special cases warrant deliberation.

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First, elementary particles and the fields they inhabit. They spontaneously blink in and out of existence as these fields warp. Second, perhaps, lead? The base transmutation material.

What about my own decay? Why am I here? I so readily uprooted myself from everything. Sure, I was lonely and frustrated on that old station above Ceres, but everything was predictable. Everything but myself, I suppose. Am I here just to support Chimera? I throw myself into the clutches of decay, an unforming that began long ago, just to help ease her burden. I can't tell if I feel manipulated or humble. Am I gaining, from this desolation, purpose and what recourse or leverage do I have if not?

“Esper! Come here!” she calls out to me. “Look who it is.” Persephone stands before us. I recognize vyr immediately. An apparition?

Ve smiles, knowingly. No. In the flesh, beaming like vai blood is bioluminescent.

Ve speaks to me in the softest voice, with an accent teasing at ancestry from my birth town on Earth, long before I met Chimera.

At some point it stopped feeling so alien a concept that time and space don't exist, at least in any expansive determination. Ve rides the waves of radiance to oblivion with endless expanse in front of and behind vyr; a space endless, yet simultaneously bounded by the universe itself, not by a physical limitation but simply by definition as the universe expresses and constitutes the set of all objects. Objects which, for all their indecisive

manifestation and chaotically individualistic, isolationist, independent, incrementality, share of the universe itself—all of space and time within Her abrasive confines.

All of the universe's expressions rebound within Her from Her own incarnations and Her own reflecting materials, expressions to be carried throughout Her form, bolstered by the energy generated by Her churning constituents and siphoned away by entropy. Just to think: all of life, everyone and everything we knew, each rock and droplet and fiber of yarn all a dance of The Goddess' emotional being throughout all existence. Expressions moving throughout divinely cosmic embers, with layers infinitesimally thin stacked upon, yet embedded within, each other such that perturbations resonate and direct, creating meaning, life, emotion itself. Beautiful. Emotion building emotion within itself. Transportation, cause and effect, distances temporally and spatially intangible and indistinguishable.

Without any time or space having discrete attribute, they condense down to one. Everything exists everywhere and any place contains nothing short of the universe. All is of The Goddess and Her actions, Her synapses, the agents of Her will, all can only be recognized by us as *reality*, that which we perceive. The universe we inhabit, with no dimensions of space or time, exists as a point. Yet we goddess is not nearly so constrained to that which we do and could ever perceive, even if we were more than a mere expression of The Goddess' element, more than a grain of sand within an infinitesimally small point, more than an *instance*. No. The Goddess blesses choice, or *life* as we knew it, upon Her emotional elements, *agents*. That is how we perceives, or any agent instance, *agis*: those that perceive.

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The expressions of The Goddess transcend what ve could ever comprehend. Ve is of a point, the universe, or, at least, *this* instance of vyr. Ve, as an *agis*, sees more, yet still only an astronomically minute conglomeration of the expressions of The Goddess. Agis are of choice, action, and free will. Agis physically exist where the instance could not possibly. For each taken choice is of another point, an adjacent universe, from start to finish and of all locale for these dimensions, continuous and integral to the whole just as much as the whole is the representation of each individual region. Even if ve did not take the step into a point through conscious decision, the points multiply exponentially. Then it must be that agis still see an infinitesimally small set of these points, considering that there are infinitely many. Yet there is simultaneously an unfathomable collection of many more points than ve, or any instance, could ever conceive of, let alone witness. Yet, at the same time, ve is just as omnipotent and all-encompassing as Her, since they are one.

There are not infinitely many agis, although each agis exists within an infinite set of universal points, *topos*. There are infinitely many, prolific yet certainly distinguishable, ordinal, choices branching from just one decision, ve considers. However, there are a finite number of instances, though perhaps most only existing as a single particle, and far fewer which act with intent, agis. Each agis traverses infinite *topos*, all related by free will, choice, associated with a single agis, yet there are many agents ve knew throughout vai life, and many more which ve could never meet in the same universe. The set of all *topos* associated with every agis would also be infinite, but astronomically, exponentially more grand in scale. Every *topos* of the

universe, *oikos*. But ve can't possibly comprehend whether the mystically divine Goddess expresses Herself in more ways than the entire universe, a whole *oikos*. Perhaps, an *oikos* is but one appendage of The Goddess and Her entire form is a collection of *oikos*. Is that too infinite?

Ve is blessed as an agent with associations to an *agis*, as are all agents to their own. Vai own *agis* has an infinitely larger span of perception than ve vyrself. But what is perception but a recognition of conception? A recognition, which is cast through a lens, conformed by a filter, of sense. Concepts energize the senses, senses filter and distort to simplify conceptions in a, sort-of, preprocessing initiation of mere energy and, ultimately, expression of The Goddess in this *oikos*, *arche*, a more general form of all objects and instances and the attributes and influences between them. These senses of *arche* invoke perception, and the very perceptions formed manifest as concepts of the reference *topos*. Although that is perhaps naive, because really it takes the perceiving agent to manifest new *topos* concepts for the cycle to continue. Logically, perceiving is exclusively a behavior of an agent, which, by definition, inherits choice from The Goddess Herself. Perception may lead to action, but this is still oversimplified as identical perceptions may not always incur the same choice from an agent, by the very nature of free will. There must be an intention held by each agent, ve hypothesizes, such that each agent may determine which particular choice to make, creating branching *topos* with the method to perceive which choice was best, conceivable not to any agent, but to the *agis*. An *agis*, at that point in vai reasoning, seems to be terrifyingly, yet mesmerizingly, powerful for being able to see the

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unseeable. Yet, for all the power the agis have, they have an agis of their own, The Goddess Herself.

It all starts with an arche concept, brought into an oikos by The Goddess' unfathomable power, creativity, expression, and wishfulness. The cycle begins, as always, with The Goddess' divinity. The concept energizes the senses of agents. The senses invoke perception, blessing the agents with knowledge, although distorted by an unknowable degree such that each may understand the concept to the maximum feasible degree. Each agent may have differing perception because every agent has a unique lens of perception, senses which alter the meaning of their perception by an unknowable resolution. The perception as interpreted by an agent influences their intention, perhaps validating or invalidating their methodology. Each agent must act. It is as much a blessing as a curse, ve considers carefully, that the choice not to act is an action in and of itself. Inaction is the default choice, probably, but an agent still chooses not to act if they so desire. Each action, or choice, is an agent's expression of intention. Choices, ultimately, generate further conceptions, completing the cycle of consciousness. At a high level, conception indirectly provokes perception, and perception indirectly creates conception. But it is the specificity of discrete senses, intention, and free will which gives an agent its influence. Indeed, life is the seams of cragged precipice molded up and eroded sharply both from arche and the manifestations of the children of The Goddess to settle the niche of expressions of the *topos agis*.

My mind swims, but I'm pulled back to the sand as an anchor

snaps me from my daze. Persephone watches Chimera, studying her. They speak with each other of computational details, but I missed the conversation topic. All I can focus on, is the hunger in vai eyes as ve opens up billions of years of lost knowledge.

“You’re like a goddess compared to us,” Chimera says to vyrr.

“And to me, you are the most beautiful sparrow,” Persephone replies.

A thick spear of jealousy pierces deep into my stomach, knocking me to the sand to reunite with myself.

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Chapter 10

When the Final Light Burns Out

Persephone

It's like a camping trip, I reason with currents of trepidation. I've been alone for so long now I can scarcely remember. Sometimes it's felt to me as if my mission was a childhood fever dream—so long ago and not of this place, not of my own experiences I've lived through but stuck within me nonetheless. I'm certain I've recalled it with clarity, the vivid visions of abandon, having trillions of years to photographically memorize each tiny detail: the wood grains on the space station rejuvenation retreat's top deck where I nervously await my orders, the hum

of the synchrotron drowning out the silence as I sit beside my commanding officer enroute to the abyss—they must've been the last person I ever saw—and of course, in another life more detached from my current than the one before, veins of electric plasma drawing out the most beautiful gemstone engineering of magick fathomable within the form of intuitional hyperfine schematic so mythical I once convinced myself of its impossibility. But still, the memories are not mine.

I'm lost in my mind, just as much the place I've taken to meditating within—the shrubbery and crashing waves of distant waters below fade to mute, no longer casting shadows on the topsides of flanking palm trees as the sun's reflection ceases to shine off the bright, salty ocean—has taken on the shapes of my desires manifest. A town square filled with noise surrounds me. The smell of pastries enlivens me, and with tall arches leading in, a library stands before me. I enter, and stroll through the shelves of books, selecting at random to read the title of one, too thin to have a spine displaying such information—camping. It strikes me immediately that I can't pinpoint the source of the town square's chatter, and that, despite fading upon passing the library's threshold, it now grows noisier than when I was outside. But not a single soul is around, even down the long, repetitive city streets beyond. And the sounds, become less of a foreign language and more of a sharp threat of consonants.

I'm back by the beach, though night seems fallen long ago.

Yes. Like a camping trip in an unknown place shrouded in deep abyss not unlike the singularity I was thrown into, long ago.

The trees grow more dense as I walk. The once familiar

forest now twists into a jungle of thorns only navigable by the faint moonlight above. The paths of darkness under the thickest canopy are flanked by towering bamboo stalks, arranged in a coiling pattern to perfectly emulate a distant perspective effect of vertigo when focused upon. I search for the signs of where to expect my shelter from past trips to and from the plateau I've taken to meditating upon, simple nooks and discolorations under the canopy I've timed by counting my heartbeats, and I nearly weep with relief when I spot the recessed bed of grass I've called home for the past few weeks to recover from my explorations.

I don't sleep until the jungle twists back into comfortable forest after the late crescent moonset but before dawn's light, and the feeling I'm being watched leaves my mind. I venture deeper after brief rest, towards the magma tube caves where my machines infuse gemstones with vis.

It's a short walk to the craggy heights flourishing with natural catacombs. An old stratovolcano, stubby for its kind and yet dominating Her curves here, teems with thick, rhyolitic magma in its veins, only to be milked by pressure allowing. It just so happens that this cavern cuts right through to a beautiful network of abandoned tubes, safely sealed by quartz and dacite clotting the explosive pressure. I've been inside the caves before, I set up the refineries not long ago, but this place isn't as I remember it being. One step inside suddenly knocks me to the wall, flashes images, reminders of that lonely library in my head, the sounds muting with my passing of the threshold, tunneling deeper through my skull with promise of gemstone riches. I pause in painful deliberation, force my torment aside,

and press on, deeper into the cavern.

I have some confidence, since I know where I'm going and generally consider myself to be quite comfortable in tight spaces. But lack of sleep and worry from last night has me on edge. I keep thinking it must have been delirium caused by—well, I'm not sure. Despite my insomnia, I remain alert as I scramble down jagged ledges snaking around each other, dropping before turning around and passing through a squeeze just below the edge, taking me back up in a space too narrow to climb while facing my chest anywhere but perpendicular to the path. I have to exhale while I force myself through the gap, with sharp blades pressed into my front and back. A sharp left, down and right, then slightly right and I see the machines illuminated by my torch and a single incandescent light bulb powered by the vis reserves.

The gems must be refined from within the dacite, but I should be safe to break into the stone now to collect my treasures. The pickaxe I left here earlier is larger than the tiny refineries, and with it I break apart the rock, careful not to let anything too large fall away, for fear of it rolling down the sloped floor of the cavern into the vertical pit the slope transitions into where the magma tube I'm in now branches from the trunk. It's a long way down; pebbles that roll off the edge never make another sound audible to me—I can only presume they fall forever.

Too small, no. Fractured, no. Impure, no. I toss rejects over my shoulder from within the dacite and hear them roll down towards the massive hole. The third one tossed behind me sounds *wrong*, like it fell away sooner than the others, and I turn

around in confusion to face the hole. Nothing unusual looking. The incandescent bulb flickers a few times and dies. It does give me a slight jump, plunged into a complete, suffocating darkness, but I suspected something like this would happen soon with the vis supply running dry. I illuminate my flashlight, but the third gem unsettles me still. I didn't toss it anywhere different than the other rejects, and yet it bounced only twice before falling into the abyss, where as the other gems bounced four, maybe five times. The hole doesn't appear to be growing towards me, but my flashlight isn't fantastic at illuminating the thick, dusty darkness. And, there certainly couldn't be anyone around to grab the gem from midair. Yet it's nowhere to be found either. It must have just bounced at some efficient angle by coincidence, I conclude. I turn back to the gemstone dacite and continue.

I collect up gemstones of only the most magnificent hues, fluorescent, shaped just like beetles bar the legs and antenna. No, those I fabricate from silver.

The noise of falling stone shakes the cave. The rock walls that surround me are shifting.

Could it be passage instability set on by my rupturing of the magma vein that once was its headstone—all that was left behind, indications of what once was in the form of shimmering silicates? Or something more? Haunted by the past by a ghost disturbed by mechanical jackhammering at intrusive granite, more indicative of my intrusions into this underworld than the bedrock formations themselves? Or of high-grade metamorphic basins holding up the water table left from the pressurization of darkness and vibrations only of thunder and tectonic motions stolen by my war of attrition and exacting martyrdom on my

sanity by way of erosion, both of physical geology though accelerated by stealing my conceptualization of time as if to taunt me with ‘eye for eye’ thievery and of emotional deceptivity, undermining my comfort in Euclidean geometry as I’ve undermined the jagged ceiling of the narrow, twisting cavern I find myself trapped within.

I’ve never been the claustrophobic type—trips up to space stations will see to that. On the contrary, open spaces used to give me stomach-churning nausea. Not so much anymore, seeing as I spent my entire previous life darting between stars. Now, open spaces just remind me of how alone I am. But even with an entire universe and no one in it to converse with, eerily similar to my previous life, I feel an even deeper dread within the womb of this volcano.

The walls are closing in on me. No, that can’t be. I should’ve been able to detect an incoming quake by measuring seismic activity—none save for my heightened breathing. Catch it. Careful and calm.

As my light begins to fade, I now more than ever notice how I feel my breath pushed back towards my face on exhalation, redirected by the rock ensnaring my body.

Snared like a sprite, I focus not on the shifting stones biting into my flesh but on my breathing, knowing that exhausting my oxygen supply would be a death sentence in minutes—and with how the stone invisibly shifts around, it’s not too difficult to imagine a plethora of ways a falling rock could seal my multi-trillion year-long cycle of remembered rebirth. The thought thrills me. Were it not for my proximity to finishing The Last Device, I would embrace it. Then again, perhaps it is to The

Mother Goddess' great pleasure to bless me with such an ironic release.

I feel a deep empathy for all the stones I've sacrificed off in Baduk, as the feeling of isolation creeps deeper into my bones, like a necessary loss so that assets may be diverted to a more important fight, completely surrounded as the invasion turns bleak. Perhaps now I'm the one in atari, locked in with only one chance left to avoid capture, my strength turning into liberated territory for those that consume me.

And for the stars above, I feel longing. Only in my mind do they twinkle now, so many layers of rock blocking their shine from my eyes. The twinkling is more like pressure points in my temples now, being assaulted by the gravel pinning me down.

I've pleasantries to exchange with Waiting, for long lifetimes they've been my only companion. But this is different—the freedom of mobility lost on me now more than ever before. Shared by rocky splinters and tumbled gems, sharper than the serrated luster I pocketed from these walls, but in a different direction than what once was. Where I had previously blinded my gemstone treasures by my satchel, they now blind me with masses of rubble. They swarm on me, locking shine and heat, hydration and saturation all away, out of reach, holding me still and ever uncaring of my plight.

It's difficult to stay calm, but I'm able to keep my emotions at bay, behind barriers of logic—a skill I've had immense practice with over my previous lifetimes of frustration—and impotence—fueled debate with myself over ethics.

A flash interrupts my train of thought, pulling me back to my eons spent among the nebulae, in my last life, in my last

universe. This is different now. Like I've died, crushed by gravel and jewels and been reborn as a star, as if the flash of light which stuns me comes from within.

The crushing weight of reality doesn't stop with my shift of perspective, the light from the machine, but evolved into a new form—a more familiar form than that which just enveloped me: loneliness. Rather than pressed between beds of stone, I now find myself plummeting between galaxies, rows and endless rows of *topos* all assaulting me with memories of places long past and far away, places now unobtainable to me, gone, like me—except I'm also forgotten. Who ever sent me on this mission, what, trillions of years ago, doesn't care. Maybe they care about my invention, but me? No chance. No one remembers me. I was supposed to die! I did die, maybe? But I remember. I remember feeling like my melted flesh was being torn apart by supernovae blasts chain-reacting all around me. Echos ring out a single word: alone.

The only one here to share the *oikos* with is myself. No matter how many reflections surround me, there can't ever be enough to explore the whole chain. Though the journey was never about completion, was it? Even the mission to invent a machine with which to rule the *topos* could never toe up to the *oikos*, and success naturally gave way to construction—another leg for the millipede of life's work. Then, it's trivial for the posterior to meet the anterior. I turn and there's another, bathed in sunlight, myself. I'm not alone at all.

I figure a simple message will suffice, there's no need to give a biography, and the mission should be occluded to elicit more empathy. The star was dying, I was falling into a black hole, send help. Well, at least if my sanity holds, they need me more than I need them.

I open my eyes to moonlight. I'm laying outside the cavern, which appears to have collapsed. The gems in my satchel glow with warm tranquility. I don't remember collecting so many. Everywhere I turn my head, I hear crickets chirping with joy. Overwhelmed with the exhaustion of fading adrenaline, I sleep here in the grass for a long time.

I dream, but remember very little. Nothing concrete—just the feeling of hundreds of eyes watching me from outside the focus of my vision. I awake with a gasp and clutch my satchel. The gemstones I collected, emeralds and rubies are all still here—all coalescing within the glowing dust of corundum.

In the heart of the forest.

Shards of broken vessel tear across the holosphere deck. Fury strikes when I least expect it, but of my own hands, confusing and intimidating myself. Shock for a moment, and silence as the forest around my suddenly holds its breath. Everyone is watching.

I stand as though my limbs are of marble. My own heart freezes though I can't be certain if the extent of the sudden permafrost terminates with my skin or extends out into the beyond of the twining forest stretches.

Then, the forest jumps back into life, interrupting the booming silence reverberating within my ears.

Restless insomnia and excruciating exhaustion dominate my thoughts. But their foundations are undercut with adrenaline.

At last, I think to myself as I grasp at the warm, auburn gemstone.

With this, anything I touch may be transformed. I'll wield the power of The Great Goddess Herself!

What one would do for such immense divination; I'll have them lapping at my sweat drops as they fall to the gold-brick streets I walk across.

It's a wonderfully shocking feeling, and I gasp as if a ghost passes through me for a moment—temperature drops right across my chest, only lasting a heartbeat, and it take another fragment of a pause before I realize—immediately dropping The Gemstone pendant with surprise, boiling away to fear as it hits the rocks at my feet. Pale worry engulfs me, not for the integrity of

The Gem itself, but for my own life. It's clear to me the dangers presented in transmutation of surroundings, drawing in the vis of the air around me through my pores.

It soaks me with a radiance, flowing in my veins as if it were honey yet enabling the swift imbuing of my blood with fiery aura. It feels invigorating and erotic, the heat torching out my core as if it were high-voltage discharges arcing out to my ribs, hips, and collarbone, distributing the heat from deeper inside me with shocking blowouts of magmatic magick. The forest surrounding me strains to listen again as The Gemstone clatters across the rocks at my feet, listening with anticipation. The Gemstone of Promised Weight comes to rest twinkling in the sandstone cavities, teasing me with its allure once again. It's sensitive to my touch, but I gently blow the charm into my pouch with all but the tiniest eddy of flames licking through the air from my fingertips to keep it at distance from my palms. The sensation I felt a moment ago from touching the pale yellow-green Gem insinuates its potential, but I still have to be sure.

I race to gather sand and pebbles from the forest soil, pouring small handfuls into my pouch. I reach inside and swiftly press my thumb into the inset silver button above the sharpest segment of The Gemstone, my palm resting on the polished surface aside from it – though not before I carefully coat my hands in flames to keep control over the directional flow of energy away from my flesh. I may be too weak to hold the artifact for more than a second with such a strategy. It doesn't burn until the button returns to its original position with a click and begins ringing like the rubbing of a glass lip, my magick no longer able to counter the thick gusts of energy drawn in from the surround-

ings. I was initially blowing the magic in my veins outwards, away in slow, currents of ember, but The Gem pulls now on my blood to a puzzling extent—just a moment. The dust is shimmering with sunlight. A blend of emotions stronger than before washes over me: crimson is the most fitting word, blending together tenacity and domination with sharp loneliness. I have to deactivate The Gem before the dreadful panic welling inside my stomach overwhelms me.

I suddenly feel like I'm being watched as the ringing in my ears halts, but by the entire forest simultaneously—thousands of tiny eyes from beetles more vibrant than the now pale Gemstone within my pouch and squirrels just having woken up from an hourly regime of naps dreadful of me drawing in their energy at such an astonishing rate, all pointing directly to me. They know just as well as I do the colossal destruction The Gem could have if one were to, say, activate it and throw it away. The total mass remains constant among surrounding fragments blasted by faintly luminescent blue bolts of radioactive decay, just shifting density eternally while retaining the constant, Promised Weight. If light enough, The Gem could pass through materials as if they were air, transmuting swaths into clay, salts, even lighter metals before a single second elapses. But in my pouch rests copper flakes, after only a heartbeat of transmutation time. I'm frozen along with the forest, deep with dreadful curiosity of how dense a material could be transmuted if The Gem were to dig a pit over the course of minutes—hours?

The radiation emitted by The Gem is faint, and despite the band and button being relatively new, The Gem is thought to be evermore eternal than the planet itself; The Gem being ref-

erenced throughout legends of the spirits as the embryo of all life on the planet, insinuating its age while those of the goddess Luna and her descendants manifest their every promise with the alchemical Gemstone clenched between my quivering palms.

Transmutation begins with dust. Lumps of stone—with crystals of ruby and sapphire minerals—are tumbled and smashed by rotational motion borrowed from the valley river into gravel, then hammered and dusted by pestle. The crystallized corundum dust glows as I pour convalescence on it and mix the amalgam. It doesn't take long for the dust to dissolve, condensing cold water droplets on the side of the flask.

Querns made from shaped stones napped and wooden pegs smoothed by water currents, sand, time, and knife allow more material to be crushed than composed to what fits in mortar—increasing how easy it is for me to grind foods and metals so I have more time to spend on innovation and writing poetry. Of course, I take care to moderate my consumption volumes to ensure my procedures are sustainable with mana soak and the nil spout back into the air, in addition to metal quantities and distance between my processing and the quarry. Bituminous coal and granite grind down to a strong mana absorbing dust, divining powder, useful for my transmission of energy and its reliability. Rotational motion from water wheels helps to grind down materials but it can't easily extend past strong rivers and can't be scaled without sacrificing the salmon run abundance. The enchantment powder balances mana between itself and the air but degrades and is manufactured from the grinding rotational maceration of rocks. Energy of the trees can thus be

carried away from the river as mana, but it is now on independent energy which reacts with its environment. These reactions generate nil, destabilizing the environment and likely making it more difficult to produce more powder. To use such machina to bring positive value to a region, trees and life must imbue more mana than nil is generated.

Crystallized corundum dust and divining powder are mixed with a solution of nitrous acid and copper hydride. From this, a slurry of aluminum hydride falls into the dense ether below as the aqueous enchantment formulation layer separates above. The layers are poured off and the water is distilled away from the enchantment formulation to produce enchantment powder.

I swivel about and see myself. I'm shocked, then horrified. I clearly see a mirror image of myself, melting into drops of mercury as obsession with The Gem clutched in my hands and its powers overcome my survival instincts. The look on vai face, my own, twisted, burning with scalding pain, yet delighted to be giving vai energy to the machine of Ares—dreadfully tormented but finally fulfilled, perhaps?

I blink, and the mirror image of me is gone. I still have the artifact, and double check it's safely deactivated within my satchel.

I realize what I should've long ago. I need help. I'm being hunted by more than my thoughts.

The same vision returns, though ve's looking directly at me now. Vai painful lust fully replaced with rage.

I blink again and vai scowl is now a wicked smile. I'm frozen,

locked in my own gaze. This is no vision other than perception invoked by sensation. All I can do is blink yet again.

The lich with vai tall ears tracing out Lichtenstein patterns in a halo above vyr, the me that could not be me, towers over all. Bar no mountain nor cloud. Helios hides, eclipsed. The mirror Gem of Promised Weight now bears the blade of a rapier longer than the space elevators I saw two lives ago were tall. Ve plunges the sword into the planet, fragmenting it and pulsing out shock waves, tsunamis of rock and soul, launching me into orbit as the beast plunges the sun into supernovae with the planets collapse. Finally, ve vanishes.

I pray to The Mother Goddess. I pray for help.

Chapter 11

Obsession

Esper

I never thought I'd see anything like it. The Gemstone is faded and cold as it works, confined by a simple magnetic field to float it within a lead-lined bag. Ve drops handfuls of sand in the top and from a funnel out the bottom comes some pebbles, quartz, and bits of slag. Vai hand reaches into the bag without hesitation and presses a small button embedded in a thin ribbon of silver wrapped around The Gemstone's equator. Only a thin wisp of flame from vai hand shields it from being melted down. The yellow-green glow returns to The Gem, inviting and warm.

How?

...Why?

I see, in my mind, vai hand smashed into crystals of sulfur and magnesium.

I don't think ve would scream.

I mean, vai stone cold stature makes me really believe that. I think it makes more sense than what I thought before we'd met: ve's an angel. No, not quite. Wanderer? Ve's felt pain much worse. Vai dark eyes are like hallways, stretching on behind vai face. They twist with the beauty of a trillion years of age. A stellar expanse from the eons of infinite starscapes ve wandered through.

Vai smile is cute, desperate, and hiding vai deeper thoughts with a thick layer of stained glass. I see moonlight glowing in vai heart. And vai gaze lingers with our eye contact, with longing.

I see ve locking vyrself away under an ocean of honey. A reinforced barricade separating vai true self from reality, impregnable, with all that approaches vyr being suspended, frozen in time, from a long lost place of ruin. And ve remains, carrying the weight of vai people's collapse upon vai shoulders.

Are we just ingredients to vyr, as ve bides vai time building our trust? Or are we to inherit divinity through vyr, through this Gem of promise? Do I have eyes with which I may see deep enough, and lungs which may decompose through, the trench of honey Persephone's embers hide below?

When The Gem is active, everything goes quiet. The forest valley seems to freeze, sensing the magmatic vis rapidly funneling away—into Persephone's bag and being replaced with nil mana. The wind and the clouds, too, pause in abhorrent surprise. All that fills the void of silence becomes the sounds of pebbles rolling, flowing, collecting, and sliding across the lead-

lined fabric.

“As pleasant a radioactive source of heat may feel in the moment, especially in the frozen wastes of interstellar space, it’s better to let lead absorb those nasty ions,” ve says with a grin. Vai voice is angelic, soft, and cute. A fair contrast to vai catty demeanor. But I’m stunned. I didn’t speak anything, did ve read my thoughts? Radioactive sources from sand? I think—

Stars rapidly fill my vision and my knees buckle.

I’m swimming.

Floating up, away from my fragments.

Sound returns. I immediately recognize it; the *lub-dub* of my heartbeat. And there’s a ringing sound too. Goddess, I hope that’s not my flesh turning to glass. The warbling, shrill tone implies the worst, and I doubt I’d feel much of anything from my flesh if the nerves inside snap-crystallize. Everything is pulsing with my heartbeat. Throbbing in a fractal pattern, like two triangles with touching vertices, symmetric, enclosed by a hexagon, tight. Long rays extend out from the center of my vision, passing through the vertices of this hexagon everywhere I look. The lines are all negative space. The leaves look like eyes and the clouds look like lizards. All of them. Watching. Locked. Distant and occluding at the same time, by encapsulation, everywhere I look!

Lub-dub.

My lungs fill with the sticky sweet honey emerging from within Persephone. The heat of vyr spilling over into and down my spine as I take the nectar. I look up to the sky, beyond the clouds, and ve’s there already. Vai lips move and my name

echoes off the far mountain range and near tree clusters.

“Esper...”

I’m rolling between waves in the jetstream. Flowering cinders above reigniting each other. I’ve come all this way, but I feel like you’ve guided me here. The distance between us, all throughout, is it nothing more than sand washing down an hourglass? Did you bring this to happen or is it just some coincidence?

Lub-dub.

Cracks expand out from the negative space of the six-point swimming stars. I explore all of them together, breadth-first. More twisted hallways. One branches exponentially into swirling clouds filling a gas giant’s atmosphere. Another, deep within the heart of a narrow, dark cave, slowly flooding with ink. In another, I find Chimera above me upon a hill, facing the setting sun. She sits on a picnic blanket with her legs together, leaning on her hand and sat up absorbing the view. She wears a sundress of orange and white flowers, complementing the beauty of her warm, dark skin that glows with the bath of sunshine. The fur on her floppy ears shimmer gold. She’s beautiful. I start to walk up the hill, but after only a few steps I spot another figure silhouetted against the sky. Tall ears and folded wings—they take each others hands. They pull each other close. My stomach feels heavy.

Everything turns to steam and my vision engulfs itself. Rapid clouds fighting to push past and surround each other. With terror and nausea I recognize that my only anchor to the world is my wobbling legs. My knees roll with the waves of ocean washing away from the pyroclastic flow fogging my senses, a flash

flood of shrapnel. Perhaps when dammed up and routed into the reach of Persephone's Gem, a flood of radioactive studs. A raging torrent baring down on me.

All that could go to powering desalination plants for drinking water and satellites for monitoring solar activity. Instead it's used to wrest control. To coerce people to give up their power. To attract the desperate with siren calls. To pull Chimera away from me. Persephone may think more highly of vai mission than of vyrself, or of Chimera and I.

What is this obsession? All the same shine falls us.

I'm frozen in the ice of washed out embers, ash, and charcoal, turned long ago to glaciers. The ice breathes with subtle astonomic growths. Moons are catapult away in the sky and the ice watches, I see it clearly though the translucent packs. Only for a short while before the snow brushes across my chamber window.

It all melts away from around me into inky ocean depths. I'm pulled by the currents down within a trench. Snow gently drifts around me. I don't know if I'm still falling through the water or looking up into the sky on a clear, dark, winter night as the wind picks up and pulls my frozen skin. To oblivion. The door blocks my way forward here. The door at the end of the world. I already know what's behind, but I have to see it anyway. I open it and step inside. There's no frame or wall to contain it, and yet I'm on a rocky cliff edge. I can't see ground below, but rock bottom seems just a manipulative trick behind me. My stomach rolls. There's a ledge under my feet, and it's sizable enough to put one food before the other, lined up perpendicular to the cliff face, only just quite.

I've been here before. Or, have I been here forever? Staring down with terror, ignorant to my control, yearning for the only one I can be myself around. I risk the plummet for her smile. Wandering, but never lost. The way onward is not clear either, but still I stand, steadied by a mountain's weight. I know there's a way forward, somewhere. It's all uncharted in the beyond. Is even my own mind accessible?

Within each shimmering snowflake that floats on mist encompassing me, I see myself, though more like a ghost than a reflection. These images wander restless through time, wading with the lunar tides.

Seeking hope through compromise,
any strain will do.
Even in the most generous friendships,
she doubts the genuine.
A security vault protects her heart,
from mutilation and love.
When all that remains is desire to please,
will she clip her wings?

It takes some time to settle in, but Chimera and I do find some time to ourselves as Persephone sets out on wide-area explorations in search of the right materials to build vai synchrotron component fabricators. A long day of work hangs over us. Chimera is assigned to routing fabrication sites together, but the details are uninteresting to me. I'm still getting used to working with nil and the strange machines that Persephone designed to recursively grow factories out into cities. One tiny

change of the starting parameters leads to drastic, propagating changes down the chain of self-replicating mechanical patterns. I decided to start experimenting on the local flora to refine my control, and maybe find what I'm doing here in the first place. Before I head out into the forest to collect samples, I need to talk to Chimera.

I've gone over it in my head a hundred times! I can't hide my feelings for her. My breath is hot and my stomach aches. We had lunch together the last few days, settling into a daily rhythm even within a completely different universe. She'll be here any moment now.

"Hey Esper!" Right on time. But before I can speak, Chimera continues, "I wanted to ask you something." Oh my poor stomach. Does she fancy Persephone? Am I too late? My hesitation was supposed to be respectful, not apathetic!

"Y-yeah! What's up?" I say. She pauses and tilts her head down to look at her feet.

"Do you . . . remember Saturn?" That must have been a couple months ago now. While thinking about how to reply, I sit down to eat with her under a gazebo. We sit opposite each other. My skin sticks to my blouse with sweat, and the hot, humid day eats away at us.

"Yes. It was beautiful. You could see the stars so clearly. And, you probably saved my life when that lich attacked too."

"Well- Before that, you were going to ask me something." My mind races, searching through wordings, hurry!

"I, was going to ask if, you'd like to have more picnics in the future!" She looks puzzled and disappointed, looking away silently.

I do want her. It excites me to think of exploring further past her defenses, built up from so long spent thinking that she's not good enough. I can tell when she wants to restructure the web keeping her mask firmly in place. Perhaps I notice it even more easily than she does. No, I've had enough apathetic bullshit! I want to cradle her until I can see her flesh emerge from beneath the hard shell, and then I want to kiss the soft skin underneath, to breathe the warmth of life into her with fire forged in my heart. I want to feel her melt into my arms as the world and her fears become replaced with thoughts of me. I want to bite down on her and hear her squeak with lust, and to taste her juices, to take her into me—

“It was beautiful,” I continue. “Just like you.” Now she looks back at me with surprise. I move my hand to touch hers. She looks deep into my eyes with a different befuddlement than before, thinking through the meaning of what I’ve just done. Despite how desperately I wish to clarify my feelings, to confess that that my thoughts rich with intimacy for her are illuminated by spotlights and draped with falling snow in my mind, I don’t think she’ll ever be interested in a girl like me.

“*You’re* beautiful,” she replies. I freeze. Is she just being nice? Does she really believe that? For so many years I’ve looked into the mirror and found my reflection off-putting. Wide shoulders, narrow hips, strong jawline—are these features not the antithesis of beauty? I have, after a lifetime of taking my own mind into the courtroom, accepted that I am a woman. Biologically, socially, taxonomically, entirely, I am a woman. I met beautiful transfemmes in my time on Earth. But accepting myself as beautiful? I struggle to believe that she’s speaking her

honest thoughts. And if she *is* lying to me, just to be nice, is that not a sign that I have made her feel uncomfortable?

I excuse myself, leaving off into the forest for my afternoon work. I need a smoke to clear my mind.

There are no trails here like I'm used to. Some wildlife paths sporadically carve through water, shade, caves, but they meander. My exploring feels more direct by comparison. I don't want to lose my course so I navigate by the sun, until I come up to thick regions of forest where I can see no more than an arm's length before me. It becomes difficult to push on and find an opening in the bushes. As I press forward I immediately find more layers. If a beast were resting in one of these gaps, I wouldn't know until I'm climbing into its maw. It gets darker too with each layer I push through. I fear getting lost with a tangible, sour taste on my tongue. But a cliff faces me in this tree gap. Birds perch above and soak up what little light sheds through the thick canopy of rust branches and banana leaves. When I can't see past the brush and shrub baring down on me from all around, I rely upon the sound of the flowing river to keep my navigation accurate. And every twig I snap feels like a misguided thread shot out by me and returned by rapid, staggering echos.

The contrast isn't sharp, but extensive between the abundant untamed wilds and towering concentrations of industry. Ve started all alone with stones, twigs, clay, and the trust that magmatic vis will collect in vai blood over time. The most sought after resources of all now rich in each of vai actions. I don't stand a chance in fair competition.

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Obsession

Chapter 12

Ecstasy

Esper

“The Gem will make quick work of building another branch,” Persephone says. I’m not too sure vai premise is right. It doesn’t make sense to me that we’d abandon this world, even if the lich attacks are more prevalent than ever—always just one at a time, like aged spiders hunting alone throughout the meadows, climbing up sunflowers to cast nets and strike, the last thing they’ll see is the clouds before their own blood covers their eyes.

But Persephone seems to think things can be different. We’ll just have The Gem with us, or the liches won’t interfere. Maybe Persephone’s multiple lives of wisdom have gone to vai head and inflated vai ego. But Chimera and I will learn what we can and

figure out our own adventure. Maybe we'll outgrow vyr. Ve and vai damn gem too.

The first quarry site is selected and The Gem makes quick work of the initial dig through the soft slate. While it's switched on, my nerves tingle as if my body, like the sand around us, is being transmuted into the alloys of industry. My ears ring. My throat swells. Salty sweat streaks into my eyes. The Gem is clicked back to its idle state and all sense of serenity returns to my physique. Though my sanity wears with stress fractures that grow only more cavernous as time passes since my last smoke.

Persephone assigns me the task of defense and Chimera to both back me up from range and complete vai shopping list of collecting raw materials. At first, I found it meditative to hone my smithing skills constructing a flame scythe—staying far from that gem all the while—and putting my prowess to the test slaying the liches as if they were vermin come to probe the security of our claims. But more and more recently, I find myself questioning who the enemy is here, as they act different around me than Chimera, some pausing when they see me and others ignoring me all together. When I do kill, there's frequently a question which probes my mind: who's side are you on?

Chewing on the interrogation like fresh saltwater taffy, I wait for Persephone to leave for an area patrol and approach Chimera for her thoughts and, hopefully, some support.

“Chimera, I’m worried about how Persephone is acting. I don’t understand why we are doing this.”

Chimera puts down her notebook and looks at me, pausing for a moment with a hesitant stare.

“What do you mean?”

"It's almost like ve is obsessed. I think that gem is driving vyr insane. Why does ve even want us to go to another branch in the first place?"

"Ve is helping us!" Chimera snaps at me. "I don't want to go back to that place. They were mean to me there. They treated me like a tool."

"Ve isn't helping us. Ve's using us just like *they* did. I mean, there's so much beauty in this place . . . Why are we trying to run?"

"What, are you living under a rock? Everyday we're attacked. I can't live here. And Persephone can't either. We can help vyr." My blood begins to boil. I take a deep breath and calm my throat filled with fire.

I say, "Then we'll run away. They won't chase us forever."

"You don't know that. How could you possibly know that?"

"They're after The Gem, not us. Isn't it obvious? Everywhere it goes they follow. It's like it's speaking to them in their tongue. If we leave, if we leave The Gem, they won't follow us. They couldn't care less about us! The Gem is destroying their home and they know it."

"Again, you don't know that. Everywhere we go they follow. We've gone on scouting parties before out to the wild lands, so far away from The Gem, and still they followed. Or we ran into different families. I don't know, it doesn't matter. They know they're the dominant predator and we're the prey. Every world's different. There's nothing for us here! And we have the *power* to open up a new branch entirely. We need Persephone," she asserts. Now I take *my* turn to pause in thought. There's more to this conversation and it's worth voicing my deeper concerns.

“You’re right,” I submit. “There’s nothing for us here. And, you’re right, I don’t know what they’re after. But I *do* know, every step we take towards making this damn accelerator, they get more aggressive. I don’t want to lose you.”

“I’m perfectly capable of defending myself, thank you! And as far as I see it, the increasing frequency of their attacks is just all the more reason to leave. Not just run away into the woods where we’re even more vulnerable than before, but leave this place. This planet. This universe. I think we should trust vyr.”

Through a tightness building in my throat I cough out, “I don’t know how much longer I can do this . . . It’s like, you know, they look at me different. All their eyes. They’re beady when they look at you or Persephone. But when they look at me, I see *sorrow*. I see *betrayal*. It’s like, not only am I hurting them by building these machines, they look like I’ve *abandoned* them. I’m not sure how much more I can take.”

Chimera hesitates with torn compassion, then replies, “Look, our work is moving swiftly. I never thought The Gem would be so effective, you know. Okay, this design is massive. I mean, we want the branch to stay stable for as long as possible. But the gate only needs to be open for a minute. Then, we’re free. It’s better than running out into the forest. We’ll be sculptors! How about this, you and I create a plan. But I want to hear what ve has to say about it too. Ve is the one who guided us here in the first place. That earns some of my respect.”

I agree and thank Chimera for talking with me. She’s very empathetic. I’ll continue working, as best I can, for her. I want to make it up to her, that I dragged her out here and terrorized

her. She has the sweetest smile.

The Gates of Culśanś—a device which focuses intense light to open a portal to another universe. Simple mirrors and lenses comprise most of the device’s core, but entire solar systems of chemical and radiant energy are scraped forwards and back in condensation to form the heart of the machine: isotopically pure diamond manufactured entirely from anticarbon twelve. The prize is stellar. Jump away from all your problems in an instant.

The branches created by the Gates of Culśanś are unique each time the device is brought close enough to an O-type hypergiant or Wolf-Rayet star for ignition, making pocket dimensions useless. Rather, the universe inside a branch is newborn, the input stellar energy magnified by The Antidiamond as to form a bubble of scorching elementary particles. The instructions to operators are simple—wait a moment, and jump.

Aside from the lenses and sacred Antidiamond, a magnetic confinement chamber keeps the Gates intact. Power must be continually supplied to the device lest the five carat Antidiamond bump into ordinary matter and completely annihilate, releasing nearly ninety terajoules of energy in nanoseconds as quarks and antiquarks bind each other from existence.

Chimera has been gaining skill at killing our attackers. She’s always respectful of their power. She kills them swiftly and encourages their bodies to dissolve swiftly into peat bogs and jungle mounds. The scavengers love her gifts to them, but I love her for herself. We made a ritual out of it. I’ll take the front and slice with my flame-infused scythe while Chimera covers me with

her bolt-action rifle. When the horizon is clear of liches, I pray to The Great Goddess that they find satisfaction in energizing the soil and hives of scavengers, I pray that those chosen to live again are blessed with good health and satisfaction, I pray too for the well-being and success of Chimera and myself. My thoughts for Persephone are more conflicted. Ve showed us this beautiful universe in the first place where liches like me roam free, but we are forced to fight. Does our collective strength protect each other or keep us complacent in our own killing? I gut the slain liches and see myself within the blood. I prepare what we can use from their carcasses and donate the remains back to the planet.

Persephone, so transfixed on bringing The Gem of Promised Weight back to vai masters, consumes vyrself. Does such obliteration produce results? The Gem melts dirt and rock into steel and silver. The elements collect into the compound's highest atomic number element, then all roll over to the next element, shrinking as volume is exchanged for density. When a mass of moss is compressed into an inch of iron, I coat charcoal, clean, and reactivate The Gem to infuse the iron with oxygen for structure in the particle accelerator. Neodymium magnets and other lanthanides require quarries of material to build batches of microwave-powered klystrons—but every grain of sand participates.

The Rune of Day—It hungers for blood.

The sword sweeps but the dagger strikes first, letting blood trickle down the blade towards the wielder's palm. And interrupted, the sword diverges from its planar path, trailing away

and cascading back by resistance of the air on the blade's broad side before plummeting to the slate below with a clattering series of bangs.

But, my new outfit comes with scythe instead of sword. My own design, conductive to the heat within me. Burning heat to cut through flesh with ease. Scents of smoldering meat and char fill my lungs at each conflict. I have to cover my skin while I fight to keep my killings merciful.

The liches begin to form hunting swarms with the construction of our quarries, taking advantage of the unbalanced terrain to strike while we descend beneath the planet. We're no longer killing one by one, those were mere scouting parties compared to the scores tactically ambushing our industrial expansions. To complicate things further, Chimera spends more time focused on engineering than helping me with defense. Her construction automatons work wonderfully, but she needs to keep on top of updating and refitting them with quarry gear.

We call it defense, but isn't this their home? We are ravaging it for our own benefit while the liches are left without home or commons. For all the torture Amber Station inflicted, at least we stripped a *desolate* rock. We are stretching ourselves thin here between the endless need for expansion and the ever-growing resistance we face. The liches recognize our vulnerability and dash down into the quarry. The quarry where I stand ready to kill, as ordered.

The quarry has a wide, deep base with crawling excavator automatons around me, and a slim refinery in the center housing The Gem of Promised Weight. I stand just below the ridge

where the liches stream down from. I channel fire into my blood, adjust my grip on the scythe, and widen my stance. Focus on my breathing. Inhale—hold—exhale. I close my eyes and envision my reaping. My scythe makes quick work of them when they near me. They slash out and pounce upon me, but I focus one by one on dodges and counter attacks. Chimera isn't here to watch my back—she's too focused on engineering pneumatics to flush debris to an infusion chamber where The Gem is fitted—so I take care to listen carefully for their approach on my flank. I open my eyes again. The swarm of liches is starting to circle around me, keeping their distance.

I alert over radio a dense swarm on me.

"One minute," Persephone responds. Ve's out scouting for future sites.

I breathe slow and deep. Never before have I faced so many beasts at once. All alone. I readjust my stance to give me more freedom to maneuver into attacking towards my sides. I double check my grip, recalling my sparring sessions with Chimera, wide and deep, just how my blade will cut into the liches.

I still hesitate as some catch the glint of light reflecting off my scythe, snarling at me. Am I so different as to fight them back, draw their blood? Persephone told me to grit my teeth and fight through it, but it's not that simple—my mind swims with their thoughts, feral but human despite their wolf-like features and behaviors.

Family, home, sync, some flavor of warmth of another while radiation burns dominate outside flesh, the churning of gears and buzzing of pistons, disdain, asphyxiation, grinding claws on bone, support, defense, drowning, confusion, loyalty, blood,

swarm tactics, hive mind in form and diverse in function, synapses firing in sequence, savior, being pushed beyond the edge of survivability, opportunity, desire, faith, physical exertion, smell of sulfur, cloud of dust, pulse of adrenaline, glint of light reflecting from a scythe, fire.

They're talking to me in their own language. I grit my teeth so hard I feel my jaw searing with pain. They're telling me their story, through raw emotion. Passion. Fear.

I step forward, siphoning the fire in my veins into my hands and my scythe. With a swift jump forward, I swing a complete arc around me and clean through the neck of the lich directly in front. Its eyes lazily remain transfixed on me until its head is snapped off and thrust to the side. It didn't react. It expected me to join. Tears burn in my eyes as I let out a scalding exhale. My heart throbs with frustration as I imagine myself in his place. Torn open and limp, flooding crimson into the soil. I have to concentrate. Remember the task. I work to calm my breathing, try to stay focused. I need tobacco. Overwhelmed by my internal concentrations, I nearly miss the battle cry. A sharp, brief roar from another lich close off to my left.

I turn robotic, or try to. My scythe hungers for my own energy, to collect the blood of those who oppose my mission, and the energy too within my blood as I straddle the fence of factions, my very being bisected by the razor of war.

My scythe intimidates them, and the wave of eyes stay just out of reach in a circle around me, waiting for a break in my attention. With a quick twirl of my flaming scythe, I ignite the bed of dust and veins of magnesium at my feet. Bright, hot smoke fogs the air around me in moments. In their confusion,

none notice as I jump over their heads and transfer my momentum into my scythe, cleanly shredding the chest of a surprised lich below. I hear the last of her breath escaping in a faint cry from her one healthy lung as the other floods with blood from her sheared heart.

I think I feel the sharp lacerations reflected into myself. My breath booms in my ears with the short coughs that manage to escape my throat. They ring in reflection of hate. Unable to listen over the deafening ringing, a hand of claws takes me by surprise and digs into my shoulder. My only indication is blood splashing from my arm into my eyes, and a lich surprisingly close while I cycle around to clear my baffles. I feel no pain. I am a machine, or so I tell myself. There is no pain I can distinguish from the overwhelming dread of abandonment. It drowns out all else.

Shoulder torn, I lose motor control. My left arm won't bend how I want, and the thought of my tendons and muscles sliced open fills my head with insanity. Exhaustion overtakes me and the liches close in. I can only think of my shoulder, but I know there's no time to stanch the gash. I fall to my knees, my body broken by the ambush wave as a group makes for the refinery and The Gem at its core. Still, the wave bulk latches onto me, close enough to do exactly what they want. I gaze up to the sky and see Persephone flying low overhead, racing for the refinery without so much as a nod in my direction. No life weighs more than The Gem, I suppose.

I look ahead at a giant lich only so close as to reach me with his claws. I steady myself with my scythe and return to my feet. With an awkward grip, I bring my scythe around to swing. The

fire is burnt out. I can't tell if he wants to fight, but I know if we do it will be on my mark. I tremble.

I swing my scythe in long, slow, alternating circles to my left and to my right, keeping nearly all the weight on my right hand. It's a clumsy, asymmetric flourish, but I doubt I'll live long enough to feel any embarrassment. I step back once and widen my stance to better position myself, then carry some of my scythe's momentum into myself. I follow the blade up, down-left, up, down-right, and spin in place to swing a rapid circle, pulling the weight of my blade in towards my core—then donating the momentum back to the scythe just before completing the twirl so the tip of my weapon darts out just past the lich. Despite the speed of my attack, I manage only a glancing blow against my agile opponent as he backsteps—a mere blunt knock on his stomach with the outside crescent of my scythe where I expected to spill his entrails. The half-miss disbalances me and the lich wastes no time riposting, knocking the scythe out of my hands while I steady myself. Gravel chirps where my scythe clatters to the side, and now I know fear.

Frozen. Another swift step from the predator and I watch his claws flash out towards me. Run. I feel reaction empower my muscles and swivel to dodge the attack. Rather than my neck, the lich slices my left shoulder just below the already bloody mess, and rips out my arm. The pack around me howls and jumps in to each tear a rib or more limbs from me. I'm frozen in shock while the mouths of each two dozen rows of teeth fill my vision. I'm knocked to the ground suddenly by explosions that rattle around me, deafening what's left of my hearing—touch already gone with my arm. Gravel and dirt tears into my face,

my shoulder pours blood, and, straining myself to see, Chimera flies above me with her rifle watching carefully. She wears the talisman I made for her around her neck. Stars blind me as I collapse.

Chapter 13

Found Within a Bed of Nails

Esper

I wake to Chimera wrapping my shoulder in gauze. I sense the familiar numb of painkillers in my dizzy head, but the throbbing is nauseating. My nurse looks at me with exhaustion. My savior, my angel.

“There, it’s the least I could do. I just wish I could’ve been there sooner. I know you’ll say it was Persephone’s fault this happened but I can’t help it blaming myself,” she says to me, securing the gauze. It takes me a moment to get my bearings, and longer to find my voice. I am grateful, but also disappointed.

I've burdened the woman I wished to impress, and I was saved from my what should have been my final battle. I couldn't kill my reflections for my mission and, failing that, I couldn't even die fighting. I don't deserve Chimera's kindness.

"I'm okay. Thank you, really. This isn't over. Not yet."

She puts her hand on my chest, "We'll talk with vyr."

"The Gem is *cursed*."

"We'll talk."

I sigh. I trust Chimera but I fear her faith in the desperate may be mistaken for generosity. The reason I find myself drawn to her, generosity, and a factor for her allowing stress to accumulate from diverging needs.

And now I have but a single arm. It aches alongside my whole being, but I push through the resistance to place my hand on Chimera's. My stomach and chest boil with desire to run. But I can't tell who needs who more, or if the wedge which has developed will only sever deeper, perhaps pulling away more than my arm—perhaps it already has. I deserve far worse for my killings. I weep. Within my tears I see the ghosts that should have killed me.

The embers within my core died to soot as my blood poured fire out onto the mangled quarry battlefield around me. Although I was not awake for it, I know my energy must've ignited along with the pools of death around me. The fresh, warped burns across my chest, belly, and neck tell the story with clarity. The fire inside of me had been cut away. It will take many hours of painful practice for the currents of pyromantic nil to flow through me again, and longer still to enkindle the air out from my blood as I did with ease in a time not long ago at all,

a time yet so full of the questions of hindsight I have now.

Chimera holds me while I cry. I can't remember the last time someone comforted me with a hug. We embrace for a long time, and then she excuses herself to take a nap. As soon as I can stand, I locate my satchel and retreat into the familiarity of nicotine. I indulge in alcohol too, and worship the complementary feelings. Over the next days, a simple brewery I set up to improve morale becomes my monastery. The bottle and butt becomes what once was.

It reminds me of my ambition, when it had been at the forefront of my actions, not unpleasant in its undoing per se. Eventually, I climbed high above my own limits and choked them down to hide my own becoming-lich identity and the veins of fire they screamed to the world. To no avail, of course. I couldn't outrun my shadow. Or would it be more accurate to say I could never escape that which I was the shadow of—life itself.

The three of us talk, finally, about The Gem. The damn idol. In its name, I allowed my life to be crafted into a perfect cog to abuse. The stress ruptures deep into core, but to share that brings wrath upon me. Why should I be given care when coerced into the destruction of my own family? And allow my sins to go unpunished? It is only fair for me to suffer the same fate, immolation and exile. Take me, oh Great Goddess! Why do you abandon me here to suffer endlessly my own unknowing, my own unbecoming? Fucking *wipe me* from this soil like the sacrificial lamb I am! Is that what you want, just a pet to torture? I know I've brought this upon myself; the path is clearly marked by my steps. That damn Gemstone. I've walked right up into it. I turn and it dials, I snap and it glows, I starve myself of

anything but insanity and it rewards me by throwing me to the dirt and raping me. My clothing taken with my sanity. My body left to decay. Let me die, let the reaper take me, please, please. Please! Please!

I hear the call and my eyes refocus. Persephone is surprisingly receptive. It makes me feel suffocated by guilt, though another part of me flags deception. When ve expresses desire to change and regret for failing to recognize the value of my life, I feel that spark behind my eyes return, just as it had done so many times before I met Chimera, before I met myself, when I let my fire control me. A *stinging* desire fills me—to burn this planet to ash with all of us trapped in the flaming atmosphere. Chimera seems to show hope that the three of us could get along—all I hear is the popping of embers—but I won’t let vyr leave here alive. Ve cursed us with the greed of life, tearing away all beauty in the oikos and mulching it to power. How could Chimera trust a word that leaves vai lips?

Those lips. Dark and tempting, just like a succubus—though perhaps ve learned from the allure in vai own mind of completing vai quest to conquer the oikos within the grasp of iridium—the lips that move and certainly from which words escape, though none fall upon my ears, overwhelmed by tinnitus and the wailing of ghosts. I can’t tell if they’re speaking of Chimera, Persephone, and me, but I’d pin my experience as a valuable bartering token—not that Chimera is the type to barter with life. Oh, but I do place my neck on the book without hesitation. Used as meat just like I deserve. I take a long, slow, deep breath.

The ringing is gone, but the two are quiet. The heat has moved from my temples to my chest and skin. In my palm, the

one I still have, I hold a bright yellow mote of fire, boiling and rolling with compressed energy, only prevented from eruption by my continuous massage. They watch in awe at being shown how naturally I find flame from within myself and seduce it, but also with terror at the knowledge of my current potential to melt the flesh of us three into a thick, crimson pool.

“Leave us for a moment,” I order Persephone. Ve quietly does.

“Esper...” Chimera starts. I cut her off.

“We’ll help vyr,” I say while toying aimlessly with the mote of fire, urging my severed nerves to feel the pain of ensnaring the lich blossom with my hand that I do not have. Chimera is surprised.

“I thought you would want vyr dead.”

Smoke escapes my nostrils in a sharp exhale, “We can do so much better.” Chimera’s surprise melts into confusion. I crush the mote and the flames lick my whole arm, dousing it in smoldering red embers. The warmth finally licks my neck and radiates lust throughout me.

“Persephone!” It’s my turn to take control of the conversation. Ve returns. “Remarkable how fast this branch is deteriorating. I was looking up at the night sky.” Via face contorts as if waiting for me to inquire, but only for a moment before ve catches vyrself.

“We don’t have long here,” Ve says. “Our star will go soon, just like all the others above. This branch is becoming dust. If you two want to live, we must stop the silly bickering and build a new portal.”

“As I was about to say,”—I sneer at vyr—“The Gem is draw-

ing them in when we activate it. If we commit to balancing out vis consumption with the life trees, then we won't have to worry about this wasteful *defensive* effort. Of course, your Gem is not sustainable. No matter how many trees we have, it's going to overwhelm the local magick pools. Destroy it, and we'll all live longer."

Persephone grits vai teeth and huffs at me, "We'll be putting our infrastructure to waste on a whim! I know you lost your arm but, please don't make it our problem." I laugh, cough, then light a smoke. This fucking bitch won't have a throne for long.

Chimera speaks, "Persephone, please, we want to help you. Esper is right about the liches, they won't leave us alone whenever that gem is active. Let's see how productive we can be without it."

When frustration like this sets in, I like to pull open my notebook of mathematics proofs and read through the pages, scrawled with edits and redactions and footnotes forever urging me to fill another page. The definitions are always clean, which relaxes me after so long guessing at the emotions and introspection of humans. I find comfort in the theorems and binaries, but respect complementary life for being so much more abstract and interpretative. One side, a clean room at standard temperature and pressure, frictionless, no air resistance, where energy is never lost to the system. Another, a jungle roaring with song as billions of sentient creatures, most too small to see without a microscope, hunt, fuck, and fly. The Mother Goddess birthed but one of these environments to reality and though I enjoy my ventures into sanitization, I return again soon to life.

Persephone wasn't convinced by us, so ve claims, but by the first Lich themself.

"They came to me in a vision, with pity instead of the resentment I'd expected. I was asleep just moments ago, but this was no dream. This was vivid, and I saw myself through my own eyes just as well as their own. I couldn't speak . . . intimidation stole my throat." Ve grows pale recounting the experience for me. "'You take well to the æthereal plane, so I'll share my thoughts with you,' they said as my mind was flooded." I mull a moment over vai use of the word *mind* in that context—does ve mean *senses* or as a reference to being swept away from any remaining security structure? "I felt as though I had lived twice over again . . . Just fragments remained, and so few, and of myself, but isolated—the fragments, I mean—Even then it was blurry, but I know. I felt the *heat* of a dying star again. The Gem couldn't withstand the shock, and my flesh melted off the bone. Another fragment . . . The Gem in my hand, warm and smelling of sulfur as lightning trails lick up my arm and freeze it stiff, with crystals throughout growing larger and more translucent. There were more fragments, I'm certain, but all I remember is loneliness.

"The other life is even more difficult for me to put to words, I'm afraid. There was a ringing sound echoing throughout a valley all around me. A ring familiar to me, yet one I could not place. The air was cold and the sky was dark, but it was peaceful." Vai melancholic eyes wade through reflections of memories. "As I spent my life there listening, the ringing transformed into a piano melody while raindrops of light crawled down towards the grass." Vai eyes close for a few deep breaths, and then re-

turn open to look at me with exhaustion. “You and Chimera were right, I believe.”

Radiation shielding encases The Gemstone of Promised Weight and it’s launched into a passing comet. Majestic life trees are planted and the vis-infused air around them glints like each star above, going supernovae one by one, visible even in broad daylight. Chimera works away with glee that she can spend time perfecting the machines of vis rather than struggling with nil. The sparrows live on in the air while love constructs miracles out of flesh and stone. No beasts come for our heads. It’s more work to set up the machines, but out comfort increases as we do. We have time for dance and time for craft.

We have time again to find each other; Chimera and I watch the glittering stars together up upon a plateau. She rests her head against my right side and I move my arm to hold her waist.

I look at her, “You know what scared me the most about losing my arm?”

“What?”

“That I’d struggle to hold you.” Her eyes bask in mine a moment, then she puts her face to my breast and hugs me tight. Keep going. “I prayed to The Mother Goddess, that we’d be together. I’ve waited all my life for it, for you, Chimera.”

“You have me,” she says looking into my eyes again, now with deep arousal illuminated by the flash of supernovae overhead. I rotate my hand to grab her hip, close my eyes, and let our lips come together.

At last, The Antidiamond. New worlds beyond the horizon await, and I want to be with Chimera every step of the way.

Chapter 14

Stripping the Skintight Muzzle from My Face

Esper

Despite Persephone having lived through the end of two *topos*, ve seems more nervous than Chimera and I. Ve feigns ignorance, Chimera replaces trepidation with work, and I ponder how much wick the old goddesses have left to burn through fighting and making love to the Great Goddess of Creation. If the stars are any indication, just a charred pinch.

Lenses far above focus energy down upon hundreds of mirrors, reflecting the light precisely down the throat of The Antidiiamond, bombarding it from all angles. The light glows visibly, despite most of the energy being microwave radiation. As The Antidiiamond heats up, a veil opens before us, shimmering as the sun does when viewed from underwater. The distant place beyond calls out to us, hot and begging for us to tame it. To embrace it, to love and accept it. To mold and shape it by its own ambition and desire. But most of all, to transcend. Coolant pumps surrounding the chamber click on and whir once the optimal temperature is reached.

The gate will only stay open for a couple minutes before The Antidiiamond fractures. Chimera and I look at each other. My heart flutters

“It’s time for you to go now,” Persephone says to Chimera and me. “I won’t be coming.” Chimera is surprised and opens her mouth to protest, but manages only a syllable of concern before Persephone continues, “When I was sent through that portal at the end of the first life I remember, I was destroyed. There was nothing left for my energy to live on in. Not mycelium or time or a universe to speak of. There was hope, but it was always for a mission, not for me.

“I’m just beginning to understand, after so much time alone, and after meeting you two wonderful larks, they would’ve sent a collector they could program with binary data instead of chemicals had they only the choice to. And I tried so hard to be that cold, unthinking algorithm with which they could wield as a tool, daring not to think of myself as more than formulaic ingredients. They never would’ve accepted what I know now

about their imperialist mission. The only chance they ever had in exponential expansion was to make an unbeatable force choke their success away.

“I lost my life because I chose to ignore my own emotions, and let them tell me to follow orders first.

“Go into this newborn branch and live. I worked myself into comatose through the life of an entire universe, for nothing. For lack, rather so, of willpower to make my own decisions for myself. I would’ve done it in this universe too, I certainly tried to, were it not for you both.” Ve closes vai eyes and bows. “I corrupted myself with The Gem, and forced the liches of this land into a corner. I cannot leave or my humanity will be lost along with the wandering souls I’ve trapped here by my misguided actions. I owe my love to them in the final days of this *topos*. It’s the right thing to do. Maybe I can give some of them hope with all the love you have shown me. I will cast a gentle aura onto all that pray upon me, from far above.”

I take Chimera’s hand closely. She looks at Persephone, then at me, swallows her fear, and gives a small nod. We look back one last time and Persephone gives a friendly wave with eyes welt.

“Goodbye.”

Chapter 15

Melt

Persephone

The gate warps out with a small gust of wind blowing me back to myself. It's the right thing to do. Their nest off in the distance calls for me and I can't turn them away. It's magnetic, drawing me towards the fangs. I picture them bloody in my head, and turned inwards with fury. My mind is flush with bubbles of white-hot passion and spotlights illuminating a beautiful, naked woman with a capsule of venom in her canine teeth, prepared to bite deep into me. While our girldicks press together, she spreads my butt for the onlookers to see and whispers to me how painful the venom will be consuming my veins from within. If I'm a good pet, she'll even let me cum before the paralysis

takes me down the slow tumble to total organ failure. I breathe a sigh of desire as a shiver grinds down my spine into my pelvis.

It's nothing like a compromise of my security, nor compromise in between evil and good. An overwhelming certainty. I don't resist what I would like. I've before felt as if I was called upon by the liches, but never have I felt the faith to take them at value for their deep embrace. It's warm.

I haven't felt this way in a long time. It's nice; it reminds me of Chimera and Esper, they were always learning from each other.

The wind picks up. My feet carry me across the rocks up to a plateau, where the setting sun pierces the clouds and shines through in pillars. The clouds are puffy and roll high into the sky with luminescent mist induced by updrafts gently pressing on Her navel.

The trees all faintly glow as the couple leave me with a jungle of steel and concrete, and a fiery sky of the few remaining stars slowly flickering out. The horizon obscured by glowing dust, watching me.

Even though I've lived this before, I can't swallow the fear of again dying alone. I want to say it was a crutch, but neither my isolation nor my desire reflect the world around me. Were it not for the fairness of the lich and generosity of the trees, I would have doomed far more than myself. Chimera and Esper may create something beautiful together, and we fought hard for that opportunity.

I just, wanted to leave my body for so long that I considered rebuilding it with mechanical parts the best choice. No more hunger or exhaustion, no more greed and malice. And to feel

my flesh peel away from the bone, I let myself transcend.

But that's just not me. As beautiful the perfection, I want the filth of flesh. Not what I once had but instead divine, imperfect femininity, a pair for my heart.

Inside myself I know it's true, though I am bound by the web of expectation. Not for popularity or entertainment, but for safety. Were I to step outside the rigid confines of such expectations, might I be beaten to death? If I express my fetish for the flesh, would those I trust exile me from the love in their hearts? Those I carry within myself. People I once called friends came up to me and described how exceptional I am to be innocent from the ethically problematic ideas they believe my sisters to worship, but I don't understand. Clearly I can't express myself. I will lose my friends and the support I am so desperate for, or worse. I must continue to wear this mask of innocence and it must never crack even a hairline. I find the courage to leave them but I know many share the same disdain for people like me. And so I'm alone.

Let the metal and silica I inhabit entomb me. I wish not for flesh lest I allow my hunger out of the recesses of my mind. I forced her in there and freedom could be my end, pouring blood onto a knife. No emotions may flow, just logic and an endearing innocence. All else I snuff out with the heel of my combat boots. There shall be no life in me.

I hate it.

It's the only way I can find a shred of safety.

And now I shed my skin, to the bone, where that ravenous hunger inside me hides away. I don't care for safety, let my skull be smashed for all I care. I cannot breathe in this cage either

way.

I'm not interested in living out of fear any longer. I've come so far and have so much love to share. I let myself struggle, how the vast eyes of an audience that thinks I'd be more valuable dead, just as meat for feeding the cows and a warm hole to fuck.

My eyes sting. It's time for me to change.

I let my actions spring forth and take flight. Up. Away. Above into the becoming twilight. High enough there's still a welcoming glow far beyond, past the horizon. The sky is endless and full of candles and flames. Licks of distant places just like this, and some desolate save for clouds of gravel. It's quiet. Beyond, I know there are infinitely many *topos*, one of them the universe where I was alone. Not alone like this, but within a community, working a poor job that makes my ears ring with pain all night long. In another *topos* there lives not a single soul but me. The divide between those reminds me of being caught with my belly in a pincer. I'm not sure where I'm lonelier, and I'll inevitably return some day. I'll outlive this *topos* just as I did all the others.

A leash binds my heartstrings, it snags on every doorframe I pass through. I let my love pool and bring peace to those around, giving my energy, everything of me. Thrive on my healing grace as my mechanical wings ride against the threads of crystal corundum. I leave none for me to nourish or to be nourished by. Metal squeaks against as rust forms and oils dry. Over more time the metal fatigue and hairline cracks entomb me, paralyzed and caught deep in the spider's nest while she

slowly tears away strips of meat from my thighs.

Upon the plateau I find them, those creatures that tried to kill us, all surrounding me in an arc and covered in bright leather.

“The stars are coming down,” one says.

“That’s my doing, I suppose.”

They have arrays of radio telescopes set up here, pointed to the sky. A facility in the distance too. Signal processing? And the view, all around the vast forest lays below. The quarry we warred over is visible on the horizon, illuminated against the incoming night by accumulator banks. And where I first assembled the Gem of Promised Weight—

“Do you have it?” says to me a beautiful lich donned in purple and white. I see them as shorter than the others around us now. Their voice, stern androgynous, and patient, appears in my thoughts though no motion is made with their maw to indicate speech. I am given the great lich’s name, Orion. All watch for my answer.

I pull a jute bag from my pocket and untie the string binding it closed. Their eyes all move from me to the contents as it drops into my palm. I feel overwhelmed with nausea and compelled to take flight and soar away, though at this great altitude I may struggle to find lift.

“May I hold it?”

I pause a moment to gather my dedication and willpower to fight off the nausea I feel.

“You may . . . but please, don’t press the silver button.”

“I know the power of this gem,” they say as I pass it over to their paw. “You said it was your mission to deliver it. Have you

abandoned your mission?” They inspect The Gem thoughtfully in the twilight.

“H- how did you know that?” I stammer out as another wave of nausea washes over me. I don’t like being without The Gem. I’m vulnerable. It’s as alluring to me as it is terrifying.

“Relax,” they order me. “We have been watching you closely. We just want to help. This is our home, and the energy of this place was siphoned into this gemstone. It’s part of us as much as you. So, please, let us discuss what *it* is. Come now.”

I follow them to a firepit nearby and sit on a rock beside them. No fire burns yet, but with the dusk fading I imagine it will be soon. I’m given tea that smells of juniper. The mug is a beautiful piece of ceramic with a spiderweb-like design painted on it. It’s hot, and I wait on drinking it, but the smell settles my stomach regardless. A few of the liches followed us over to the firepit, tall and strong. They seem interested in The Gem, but shoot me wary glances all the same. I’m still not sure what to say, and yet I feel as though I should speak.

“They wanted The Gem, or a design for their own *topos*, so that they could endlessly expand the empire. I tried to send them that design. I don’t know if they got it, but I wanted to try building it myself to know for sure if it even works. I thought maybe I could use my own to find them in this *oikos*. Kendth and anth I planned to search for the *topos* I knew long ago, though now I doubt I’d even recognize it.

“My mission,” I continue, “was to die in that branch they opened for me. I don’t know if I did or not. I guess since I’m still here, it means I have more left to do. My mission . . . I don’t know.”

The stars should be easily visible now, but there are almost none. Maybe just a handful where I'd usually expect millions of twinkles and smudges. I had given some constellations names long ago on this planet, that night after I found my way down the crumbling volcano with a satchel full of uncut gems. My saviors from the collapse of sanity—now impossible to locate.

I sip on my tea. The topos is closing.

The fire before us is lit and I put down my mug to bring my hands close. Soon my body is warm all over, as the heat from my stomach and throat meet my palms.

A flash above. Another star in the distance wipes itself from the scarce few left. Ours will go soon, but for now it falls further, delivering night into the sky.

“This is marvelous,” they say, holding The Gem into the fire-light. “You’ve come a long way to make such technology. You condense down materials like carefully carving a river through the rocks of a delta.” The lich looks at me now, their deep auburn eyes and dark fur dance with wisps of ember.

“It’s wasted on your mission,” they cut through the air with their words. “You use such power to gather up everything you don’t think you need and refine it into mechanical contraptions and beams of energy. All the while, you pour nil into our air and our soil. Your actions choked this land. In so many ways you have snuffed the stability of life for creatures you think of as lesser that their kisses upon this place have ceased.

“Your friends are safe in the next branch, unless they follow too closely in your footsteps. But you cannot leave here.”

“I know,” I speak with a quivering voice. “I’m begging to

see- to feel, consciousness pulling on me from all around. As much as I may have liked to follow Chimera and Esper into the branch, I- I know my home is here. And I've taken so much of this place into me. I'm bound."

A smile? They look up into the night sky before I'm certain. Might I be sacrificed? My chest torn open and my organs neatly sorted into a circle around me, careful to keep me alive as long as possible. Pressure builds between my hips, watching the claws of Orion gently tap on The Gem of Promised Weight, my life's work. I imagine myself as The Gem in their grasp, claw carefully examining my flinch just before the incision starts.

Always calm, they speak, "Vis is not some chemical you can manipulate with alchemy or physics. It is binding. That's the feeling you identify. Just like us, you are woven into the threads of this world. More than power, like your many machines, these threads breathe life into us all. We all who draw from vis are part of this *topos*' tapestry. So, I implore you, join us in transcendence as we return to the æther."

Another flash above. How long until we are consumed, a handful of seconds?

"I'm sorry I cut it short," I whimper with tears filling up my vision. They refract the shimmering fire before us. I can only imagine the magnificence of supernovae obscured by the horizon and the sluggish speed of light. Yet all too quickly it comes. I can sense it. So can the life all around me, in the rocks and grasses, in the dirt and sparse clouds, and in the liches gathered around the bonfire with me.

"Although your memories may burn to nothing you will make for a pious witch." Orion reaches over and touches me.

The satisfaction of a heavy claw prick fills my shoulder.

“Then I give myself to The Divine Goddess, with the confidence to stand and to give Her the weave within myself.”

“And may we love Her, even if She may lack the strength to identify Herself in our tongue.”

A warm glow fills the sky, replacing the night and expanding radially out from the horizon, blinding my eyes. We of the plateau join hands.

Sometimes a past life calls to me.

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Melt

Chapter 16

Love

Esper

The vast, empty, young universe around us teems with beautiful dust. It's as if we lay in the grass together, staring up into the sky while snow gently floats down to kiss us. There is no inside or outside yet, just myself, my darling bunny, and the dust.

I have the whole *topos* to spend with her. We take in the wonder of new, infinite patterns of dust emerging and dissipating with the eddies of birth, death, and rebirth. We turn to each other; there's no one I'd rather have here. She pulls me into her with the blaze of lifetimes upon lifetimes together. Chimera, my savior, my home, with you my wings grow divine.

Chimera and I make love as the new universe clings to us.

From her come the stars, warm and highlighting the vastness. From me come the moons, curious and majestic. From us together comes growth and the blossoming of our love into a garden of delight. I watch her shine she holds me close. I inspire her passion and she gives knowledge to the bonds I weave. Together, we are one with the forests and we are one with the birds.

All of life, and us to live. Once again, and forever more.