Derelict Hearts

Julien Maïna

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Preface

Reader,

Thank you for choosing to take the time to be curious about this novel. This work is maybe a little bit more on the experimental side of things, given how the subject matter is handled, and how dialogue flows (chose to take from theater, instead of narrating every time a character talks). Given this is not as much a story to lose yourself in as it is an introspective piece of reality with low fictional elements; a reflection on life through a half-fictional lens — if you decide to read through it, you may not find relief at the end of this.

That you found this novel in the first place is interesting in itself, as I have decided against most forms of publishing given the usual kind of work I do, how I see things, and what I've done in the past in terms of sharing my creations. If you are not a friend of mine, then either you stumbled upon it, or someone told you about it. Whatever the case, I hope you will find this novel interesting enough to warrant, at the very least, the label of "worthwhile" in your eyes.

Who would this be for, then?

In case you are wary about throwing this book away before you finish the first few chapters, perhaps

this paragraph is of interest to you.
This novel is for those that have an interest in questions surrounding life. I'm not sure what brand of philosophy this would be closest to. Existential? Ontological? Teleological? Absurdist? Pessimist? I do not know. Maybe all of them. Perhaps none of them.

But do you think there would be something new in here? I reckon anything said here has been said somehow someway in the past, somewhere. 'There is nothing new under the sun', Saint Augustin would write, although I found the saying translates differently in the actual book; or at least in the translation I read of it — even if the meaning is composite.

Now, this preface is full of doubt, mostly because I am uncertain of how this will be received. Will you find resonance in here? Scoff at it, or forget it?
We are not each other, so we cannot know what each other think. Still, this book is partly what I think; partly how I see things. The other parts are somewhere else; not here yet. Life is confusing enough as it is, so this should bring more of that, if you didn't have enough yet.

I'd like to note here that there might be parts where poetry is interwoven through the usual prose (you may notice a specific character does a lot of that, especially early on) to a point where it can be a little confusing.
But like poetry at the beginning of each chapter, and sometimes in the middle, they all have meaning. If you know how to read poetry — or maybe more accurately

“if you know how to feel poetry” — then you’ll navigate through it effortlessly. For those that do not know, and think sometimes the writing may feel snobby, I say this as I’ve said to those who accused me of being such an individual: Turn your brain off. Cold logic is not the word of the day in here. Poetry, I think, is something that is felt through words. It is a medium that blurs the line between what is written and what is seen. Perhaps I am wrong on that, but I also don’t live in cities and have chosen instead to struggle to live through the days, so I’m not allowing myself the comfort to be an uppity prick.

And so, this novel has been written over the course of a year, during a time where I had a solo business in forestry moving around and round. It was a year of doubt and painful struggle, of many close calls, of injuries and “rest days”. Maybe some of that is reflected here. The added context might be of use to you, I do not know. Prefaces are sometimes skipped, or read halfway and then skipped, so I’m not sure this really matters to say except for those that think it does matter.

Finally, I’ll say that this novel is a product of experience, both in life and in previous creative endeavors. Given the path I chose for most things, I’ll never go and call myself x or y.

In this case, I’ll never call myself an author. Identity is a strange thing, I never quite grasped its use outside of replace a number with a name and physical features. Therefor I do not recognize its worth outside of material pointers. One will say it is to ascertain oneself

in the world, and the other will say it is to be recognized by your peers, or yet another would say it is to navigate life. Does it matter? Ego is a beast that is unfed when fed, and satisfied when it burns what it touches. Yet here it is: a parasite that gives strength and will. But let me not be hypocritical; this novel feeds my ego. The act of publishing this, even if it is on the down-low, feeds my ego.
Because I went through the "official proper channels", got it cataloged and saved as patrimonial legacy — it feeds my ego.
Your appreciation would feed it, too, and your disdain would hurt it, if it knew. But it is here, awaiting, and will disappear once its eyes are shut off forevermore.

Nevertheless, thank you again for your attention, and I truly hope you will find some worth in the lines written in this novel.

In hopes of a life that can be understood and in travels through dreams and emptiness,

Yours,

Julien.

PS: There is a companion music album that's out there. "Derelict Hearts" by Somerled (*that's me*). It's supposed to capture the feelings of the novel, but take it as you will. If you listen to it, I hope you'll find this album interesting as well!

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Dedicated to Warm.

Prologue — Ceremonial Coldness

<< Souls of a kin,
Kin of a nothing.
Dreams of sleepless nights,
Wondering and shutting eyes.

We shared tea,
Loving and living.
We shared coffee,
Hating fate singing.

Losing memories in the moment,
Encasing in amber our atonement.
Wondering when did the night fall,
After noticing that the day rose. >>

October

In the midst of a ceremonial cremation, smoke engulfs the chimney. Some of it rises to the room's ceiling, and escapes there through the discreet vents that were painted over to match the walls' colors: they are white, tampered by time passing through the wind, with a careless brush passed over some stains.

The place wasn't always a crematorium; before the buyout and renovations, it was a new-age restaurant.

Previous owners wanted to do something extravagant, unusual: invite people to dinner and lunch beyond the town, hidden from its view by the hills. Issue is, they weren't fond of advertising their business, and word of mouth didn't reach many ears in a fast enough time. They sold the place for cheap, and then went on to do whatever they wanted with the debt they accrued. So, we guess, they didn't do much.

I never cared to ask the funeral director for their names, maybe because I'd go check for obituaries — and somewhere along that possibility, I didn't want to know. Just a feeling, though; maybe they're still alive and well. But doubt fills my mind, concerning this. Broken dreams lead to tragedies most often, it seems. I still amazes me, but perhaps I shouldn't be thinking that way still.

Next to me is a tall, robed skeleton, which for this place, is a fitting and unwelcomed sight both. However, not many people can see him.

My companion and I are standing over the open oven, looking down into the obscured opening: gleaming with the light of fire, human ashes flowing up, cinders like snow. We've been here, observing, trying to care, for many a ceremony now... maybe. We don't know how much is a lot, or how many is many. I don't want to get used to it, but I guess I got used to it anyway.

Oudis, that skeletal, white-robbed giant, seems to be fixating on the bottom of what they can see. I guess, given their height, they can see more than I.

So I ask, without averting my gaze from the fire:

Lixi — "What do you see?"

Oudis — "As much as you." A deep, monotone voice makes its way silently to my ears.

Lixi — "Do you not have a better view?"

Oudis — "It's still all fire and walls with tar."
A dejected answer, like it's been asked before. *And I suppose it has, but I forgot.*

Lixi — "All plastered are memories of a dance between flames and flesh."
Adding onto the observation. *Were the flames any hotter or closer to us, my mourning suit would probably become a part of this dance.*

Oudis — "Something like that."
Acknowledgment, agreement.

Oudis appears to pay little attention when I use abstracts, but I think they like it. I ponder then, do they not want to be a little prettier when they talk? Perhaps a question for later.

The smoke is lowering in its density. It will soon be about time to get the ashes, but we prefer to wait for the grieving observants to leave. Rarely, one or two stay, though I always wonder if it's because they can see my companion — or if they're just... unwilling to leave. That they want to keep grieving, praying, communing. Whatever they need to do.

While still looking through the fire, I ask:

Lixi — "Say, do you sense anyone that senses you?"

Oudis — "Hm..."
A pause.
"One."

I turn to look at the public, most of them with their head down, and over a meter of distance between them and the chairs they all sit on. Out of the dozen present, two have their heads up. One is... physically here, but their eyes tell a different story. It's an old lady, that I believe is the wife... rather now, widow. Seems to be unwilling to register the departure still. Must have been tormenting her. Still will, and I wonder for how long — and if she will stay in a grieving state, until it's someone else's turn to grief for her instead.

Then there's a kid, looks young, like he's in middle school. He doesn't seem to want to be here. Not dressed like the others, but they don't care. Maybe he didn't know the burning one much. Maybe he didn't like him. Still, he feels like he should be silent and unmoving; he can at least feel the need to be respectful. And I can see that he stares at my friend, so I stare back at him, waiting for him to meet my gaze.

Finally, he does, and for a second, his face changes to that of a fearful curiosity towards me. But he quickly looks down, shy that he seems to be. Hard to blame anyone; those that can see Oudis don't want to deal with the knowledge that they can see what looks like to be a manifestation of Death — even if he technically isn't that, but instead a manifestation of memories. By extension, they don't want to deal with me either.

Oudis — "Lixi, did he stop looking?"
the robed skeleton asks.

I turn my head back, getting a fistful of the dead man's smoke swirling in my hair.

Lixi — "Yeah, made him look down."

Oudis — "Thanks. Less to worry about."
A tone of gratitude slips in between vowels.
Somewhat unusual.

For some reason, it thinks that those that can sense it mean it harm. Yet they're always scared. Maybe that's why, simply enough. Scared people make irrational decisions. I wonder if they could even harm that strange skeleton. Sometimes I wonder if Oudis even exists at all; if the world is not playing tricks on my mind. But then when there's people acknowledging the existence of what most can't see, I guess it does exist. Just... hard to make sense of it. I don't mind it that much, though... I think, anyway.

Finally, the burning is almost over. I go to signal the operator, as for once, he's here today. I forgot his name and never cared to learn it past a point. Don't really like those that care not for their duty. Excuses after excuses. That one — which, with Oudis, we ended up calling 'Boston' — likes to lie and make excuses for everything, even when what he's doing isn't wrong. It's never enough, even when it's more than enough.

Their insecurity and anxiety drives them to not be here a lot of times. Probably hiding at home in their beds, maybe behind a screen, forgetting their inadequacies. They had potential to be an outstanding member of society, but the weight of expectations from their peers crushed them. Now they try to be content with what they have, but it's not what they love — so they resent it, to a point where now they fear it.

If he could see Oudis, I think he would resign on the spot. He already thinks me weird for seemingly talking to the wind, but whatever, he probably things that's how I deal with the job. He's also kind, though I think that's because he's weak and tries to make up for it. Not dangerously weak, as he could never act upon anything except his survival drive, but even that seems to be less prevalent over time.

We've known him for a few years, and he lost weight. At some point, I even remember, he was on the path to 'better himself' — but he gave up on therapy and working out three months in. He was unusually cheerful and would be here all the time, during that time. I don't know what did him in; what made him give up on it. Maybe this thing wasn't 'him' per say; maybe he didn't really want it. Maybe he takes comfort in the way he is, the way he always has been. Familiarity in mediocrity. At least when he does his job, he does it properly. And no one really wants to be doing what we do, so we keep ourselves in that space just by existing in it. He'll die soon enough anyway, or so he thinks, or so I think that he thinks that.

Nevertheless, he catches my hand signal and starts

to smolder the roaring, devouring fire. I then silently leave the scene with my ethereal companion, opening the large glass door for him to go first. Whenever I do this, people looking seem to think that I'm bracing before going into the harsh outside. Yet today is cold yet fair, wind has fled, and the sun warms the earth.

As I slowly let go of the door, I catch a glimpse of my form, something that usually takes me by surprise, as I rarely care about my appearance beyond the requirements that the job imposes on me.
In the wavy reflection, my suit is still of a gray-blue with the matching tie. Forgot what my shoes look like... Were they black? Or...probably brown like my shoulder-length haircut, I suppose. Can't really make other features of what I look like, and right now I'd rather not think of the flesh puppet I'm piloting.

I'll always wonder if this is me, or a reflection of the inside — or not me at all. Always will I feel myself and not whenever I see my body. Eyes might be a window the soul, but I don't like to see them, and my one that's left is no different... Luckily I couldn't distinguish it in this malformed projection of the self.

Doors closed, Oudis and I go to sit on the painted wooden bench with a standing ashtray on the side, not far off the entrance.

I grab some smokes out of my coat, give one to my friend alongside a lighter. He lights it up, gives me back the lighter, and I light my smoke up. We smoke in silence for a minute. I don't think I'm stressed out, but it always feels nice to just smoke. Although even that is

fading the more I do this. Still, I like the taste of tobacco — the lingering of it: for minutes on end, it doesn't end.

That said, it still surprises me that a skeleton can taste at all, but I suppose it has to do with the memories he carries. Maybe he can conjure an approximation of what something would taste like in his mind, and apply it directly when he needs to.

A coal train can be heard in the distance, beyond the hills, entering somewhere in the town, like an ambiance adding rhythm to seconds, flowing unevenly like a shallow water stream.

A small band of birds with orange and gray feathers is flying by the asphalt parking lot — most likely robins, chirping in. They break the silence while the gray desert stays asleep.

Lixi — "Seems that the oven is satiated for now. I wonder when it will be hungry again,"

I mumble, trying to direct these words towards Oudis.

Oudis — "It will eat whenever. I don't think flames care much."

Lixi — "Probably not. But given it was a restaurant before, who knows?"

Oudis — "Hah."

Exclamation purveyed as a singular laugh.

"Indeed. Though it's not even lunch time."

Lixi — "It's the end of the week; might as well be."

Oudis — "For you, maybe."

Lixi — "You can smoke and taste things. Why don't you eat, even if you don't have a belly?"

Oudis — "Because I dislike it. Too ephemeral."

Lixi — "Fair, I guess."

Oudis — "Don't guess on me. You won't even eat at lunch, as usual."

Lixi — "I'll... eat a slice of bread. So you can't say that I won't eat."

Oudis — "Okay, crumbs-girl." Snickers under its jaw.

Lixi — "What the..."
Perplexed by the new nickname, I stutter.

Oudis — "Not a great name?"

Lixi — "No, it's stupid!"
I exclaim with a discreet smile on my face.
Wouldn't want Oudis to realize I'm smiling, though I think the tone betrays my intent to hide.

Oudis — "It's funny to me."

Lixi — "... Fine. A name's a name, after all. If it makes you happy."

Oudis — "I'd like it to, but it's just a name."

Lixi — "Nothing makes you happy, no matter what we try for you."

And by we, I mean me — but it feels like there's more than just the two of us when I say 'we,' for whatever reason.

Oudis — "Just being here is fine enough. Don't worry about trying to make me happy; try to be yourself if you can."

Lixi — "If I can... That why we're stuck together?"

Oudis — "Stuck? I seldom leave your side, but if you want more space, just tell,"

he says without a hint of grief or uneasiness. *It is nice, the uncompromising honesty and knowledge of sensibilities.*

Lixi — "No, it's fine, meant nothing ill by it. Just that you seem to have chosen to walk alongside me, and as far as I see it, there's nothing like you out there. So I won't question 'why me' now — Instead I ask 'why you.'"

Oudis — "I like to think myself unique. And since I haven't seen beings like me, for now I believe myself to be that. It's nice and somewhat comforting."

Lixi — "Surprising, coming from you. Thought it would make you feel uneasy or that you wouldn't care."

Oudis — "I'm a skeleton draped in robes of a forgotten belief system. My existence is always a surprise to me, so I care at least a bit."

Lixi — "Hm. Guess I can understand that. Even in familiarity of faces and my next-of-kin, existence still is surprising to me to this day. Always will be, I'm guessing."

Oudis — "Probably. You never really get used to it."

Lixi — "How long have you been... existing for?"

Oudis — "Don't know. My memories are a mess; it's all strung together, and I don't know how long ago a decade ago was."

Lixi — "Like patching up a coat with cheap leather?"

Oudis — "No. Like... How would *you* say it... like cutting a rope, burning bits, and knotting it all together in a bundle,"
he says with a finger on a cheek.

Lixi — "Must be a strong rope."

Oudis — "Yeah, unusable though."

I laugh, and can hear a little laugh coming from Oudis as well.

Oudis — "Sometimes I wonder what people think of those I talk to, assuming said observers cannot see me."

Lixi — "Maybe that they're schizophrenic or something? You get my meaning."

Oudis — "Sure. And also, you don't really seem to care that much about it."

Lixi — "Should I? When I'm here, people tend to fear what I represent, so they tend to avoid looking at me, and my coworkers are too busy doing whatever else they need to be doing anyway."

Oudis — "People tend to fear what you represent... Are you speaking of you or of me?"

I look up at the sky for a short moment, realizing what he said and quickly putting together what a skeleton tends to represent for people.

Lixi — "Oh, true. Guess both, then."

We finish our smoke, taking a last drag, flicking the stub in the ashtray, and go back inside the crematorium.

Awaiting at the entrance, I start to make the rounds to say farewell to the people here, were they to say

goodbye to an employee of some odd description. They probably said a lot of goodbyes already, though, so a stranger is maybe a bit much — which is why I simply nod if they make eye contact.

And that's how it goes. Most of them just leave without uttering, but at least they nod. Some of them have a smile on their face: relief. The widow stays. The kid that stared at Oudis previously now walks away and momentarily makes eye contact with me, and as soon as he catches the refracting sunlight on my glass eye, a fearful gleam betrays his teenage angst and he looks away. I know that I'll never see the kid again, and I'd rather it stay that way.

I leave the door open so that the widow can leave whenever. I go to Boston and ask him to come help with the retrieval for the ashes, so that he can go grab the urn that was ordered. I go grab the tools for retrieving and cleaning. Just a little sweep will be enough; the receptacle should have most of the remains in them.

Whatever, not like the client will care to have it all; they will never know. Just the symbolism of memories in the ashes of someone that was. It's always weird to me, and I guess that's why I prefer burials. Oudis prefers them, too. It feels more respectful, and I think my friend appreciates that more. But not all want to give money to be six feet beneath the moon, and most people these days just want to be done with it. Time is a memory to them, and they don't want to live too much in the past. Maybe they're unable to let themselves be there for long, after all is said and done. It's 'never their choice,'

but it still is, somewhere.

Now, on the flip side, cremation... Burning is easier, faster, and, perhaps sadly, more cost-efficient. The graveyard next to the crematorium: it's just jars and polished marble boxes with fake golden plates, family names, plastic flowers. A sense of eternity, only that this eternity has a decade-long fee. In a few generations, the people that were in these boxes will be forgotten, and someone else's ashes will take their place. I know that we stock all the ashes in a room with a name-tag on the bag, but they're never picked up. Still here, like a plastic mausoleum, like a memory that's not memory anymore. Money buys death, too. It's funny, in a way. A fossil to modernity, or something.

I don't know, I don't really care about that sort of thing anymore, and Oudis scolds me when I speak about wanting to live in the past, because I never lived in it. He says that things have changed so much for every living thing now, that to identify with what isn't anymore, is like living with a ghost that never cared for you. I know he used my tongue to try to speak to me in a way I could understand.

That said, he didn't mention the fact that all things that were now aren't, and all knowledge is gone like dust in gusts of wind. I could sense, when we had this talk, that he was holding some of his words. He didn't want to be more somber than he needed to be. And maybe he knew that I knew, maybe he just wanted for me to stop grasping at a fantasy like this.

But enough pondering for now. Once the widow is gone from this place, we will prepare the remnants, have it ready for whomever wants to pick it up. Sometimes there's someone that stays in the lobby, waiting for us to be done. It's nicer for us because we don't have to stock it up. It's kind of weird, when I think about it, to have all these bodies and ashes 'stocked up' like it's some sort of warehouse or store... But it is. And that's why it's weird, I guess. Storing dead humans. Wonder if that's why Oudis doesn't mind being here as much as most other places.

Finally, we'll close up the place, and Friday afternoon will be clear of leftover duties. This weekend will not have any burials for our undertakers, so we're free to exist outside of the presence of death. Well, others are — not me, though. But I don't mind, and maybe that's why I'm here too. Just that, this peace and the ongoing suffering, having to keep it out of your mind or snuff it out as much as you can... There's something my friend wants, and I think he lives with me because he knows I can provide that. I wonder what it is, though? Maybe he forgot, or maybe he wants to enjoy his time, maybe make memories that aren't strung together like a bundle of burnt and severed ropes... Maybe.

#

— Derelict Hearts —

I — Moon of Memories

<< In the beliefs of the past
Held by all those with no purpose,
Ancient meanings are found trapped in time.
They survive them, and we trap ourselves
In turn, to live a life past our lives.

In the beliefs of the future
Held by all those with no purpose,
Lying meanings are found welded to steel.
They expand themselves, and trap us.
We live, but a life without it.

In the beliefs of the present
Held by all those lost souls,
Divided creations are found entangled.
They stare into the horizon, and we look with them.
We live, distressed at the tearing of our souls. >>

November

Through corridors of trees, driving on decade-old cracked asphalt roads with, surprisingly, no potholes to be found. The shadow of the night obscures the leaves that fell on the road. Rarely taken, moss grew on the sides, and further, the leaves accumulated over the years, leaving a padding of dried brown and black cracked flora. Slowly... very slowly decomposing.

The car's headlights sometimes illuminate a lost fawn, or a fox, or an old wild boar. Here, they act as if no car was coming through, which is surprising to me. Usually they'd gallop or hide or fixate intently at the moving machine. But they're just moving around as normal.

The rhythmic appearance of rotting wooden poles carrying reinforced electric wires guides my wandering sense. We've been on distant countryside roads for a while now. The last car we passed happened well over twenty minutes ago.

Oudis, sitting next to me in the passenger seat, forwards his posture and points to the upcoming intersection:

Oudis — "Turn right. Then you keep going until we reach a clearing."

Lixi — "Alright. Surprised there are not many turns to take to get to her place."

I let go of the gas pedal, change gears, lightly step

on the breaks, and steer to the right; turning slowly, gently.

Oudis — "Not exactly her place. She didn't want to have to remember where to go, even though she has a personal driver."

Lixi — "Not her place... personal driver... home in the middle of nowhere. Sounds familiar."

Oudis — "Of course. Did you expect anything else?"

Lixi — "Not anything less, I guess."

We exhale, as if smiling at the wordplay.

I remind myself of where we're going, and what for. Tonight is Friday night, soon a Saturday morning. I took a vacation that week, wanting to take a break from the bleak of things.

Oudis wanted to see an old friend of his — someone like him. At first I imagined a skeleton in a robe of a different color, or something a bit corny like that. But he told me that no, she's not exactly like him. Though I'm curious about something... I'll ask now.

Lixi — "Say, you said that she was like you, but not exactly like you. And some time ago you said that you didn't know anyone that was like you, but now it sounds like you've been lying, maybe by omission. Maybe you forgot?"

Oudis — "Well, I don't know other skeletons, but

other beings like me... beings that we may be called; even though our existence is only seen and acknowledged by few, proportionally speaking to the whole of living things; there's a few. But it's not that many."

Lixi — "How many, do you think?"

Oudis — "A handful at most. I'm surprised you haven't asked that sort of question before, actually."

Lixi — "I ride the wave of knowing a strange ethereal humanoid, and so it feels like asking too many questions isn't the way to go about that sort of thing."

Oudis — "Hm. You've definitely been one of the least curious humans I've met. I haven't said it before, but I'm thankful that you treat me like a friend and not 'just' a strange entity."

Lixi — "I appreciate you as you are, and you've been a pleasant friend to be around. Sure, I had and have my questions still, but you're first and foremost someone I like... or something I like? That's still weird."

Oudis — "Understandable, but that is still nice of you."

Maybe now is the time to ask further questions, as we approach the clearing. We can see the end of the forest... and it's a field, not a clearing, with how big it seems to be from out here.

Though, before we arrive, I'd like to get some more context as to what's going on with him.

Lixi — "So, what are you and your friend?"

Oudis — "What are we?"
Rhetorical question? But why would it be... or did he not hear me correctly?

Lixi — "Yeah. What are you? You're not human, though maybe you were. I don't know."

Oudis — "In that sense, I'm a collection of past memories, and of past lives. The accumulation of regrets, joys, atrocities, tragedies and achievements of every living being that used to live."

My mind can only speak to itself for now. I think, maybe, it starts to make sense: the way he is.

Soon after, we arrive at a humble-looking house. The sky cleared itself of clouds, and the gibbous moon illuminates in discreet blue hues the surroundings, and really, everything there is to see. Which isn't all that much. Overgrown grass all around, wilted flowers in front of the house, and ready-to-bloom nondescriptive plants in pots on the stairs leading to the front door. A blue wooden door for a grayed-out house made of wood from trees that don't exist anymore, and of concrete. Why this mixture? If I were to guess, the house has been here for many decades, so the why of *now* is not the why of *then*. At least the wood is termite-free, it seems.

Lixi — "Is it here?"

Oudis — "Yes. Place hasn't changed since last I went."

Lixi — "The wooden parts of the house, I recognize it. Its color and texture is so unusual; there's no way I could not. But that's probably because we prepared a few rare caskets for some rich families, and that stuff was heavy. Never thought it would look nice like this, though."

I turn the car off.

Oudis — "Well, considering no more material of that type really exists anymore, you wouldn't think about seeing it again."

Lixi — "Fair point. Anyway, anything you want to inform me on, about this friend of yours?"

Oudis and I get out of the car and start to walk towards the house's entrance at a slow pace. A gravel path, mixed in with dirt and blades of grass touching the sides.

Oudis — "Hm... she's special. You're used to dealing with grief-stricken people, so maybe you'll be able to handle her well."

Lixi — "I see. Did she go through a lot?"

Oudis — "She'll tell you if she wants to. It is not

my place to tell in her stead."

Lixi — "Fair, that too. Sorry for asking."

Oudis — "Don't be; your curiosity is not tainted."

Lixi — "What does that mean?"

Oudis — "Your empathy is pure."

Lixi — "And... what does that mean?"

Oudis — "Lixi, you know what it means."

Lixi — "Maybe."
I try to get some more out of him, but he's really being cryptic tonight. Very uncommon coming from him.

Oudis — "Anyway, don't worry too much. She'll be fine with you, and show her true self quickly. Also, there's an immense chance that she's drunk. Again."

Lixi — "Uh. Foreboding."
Drinking in here... If she's alone, it's like a stereotype waiting to confirm itself. Would only then be missing that she's an artist or something.

Oudis — "She tries to cope with her existence however she can."

Lixi — "I see. Odd thing to say, but sure."

Really odd. Aren't we all doing the same thing?

As we climb the short stairs, we start to hear a musical hum coming from inside the house. Can't quite make out the sound clearly yet. But I can make out the atmosphere changing around us. It gets heavy, heavy with invisible tears.

I stop at the door, looking at Oudis. I gesture a knocking motion.

He understands: two heavy knocks, the first with two fingers for the dead, the second with two fingers for the living.

The humming notes stop, and as the silence of waiting falls, I realize a piano was being played. If it was her playing, that ticks a square in the stereotype bingo card.

A few seconds pass. Oudis speaks:

Oudis — "Nekrichta. I came with a friend."

Loud yet calm voice. Its outwardly quality echoes clearly through the sleepless night.

Nekrichta — "Oudis? Is that you? Come in, come in, door's unlocked."

Loud voice from afar, with a strange quality to it, trying to reach us. *Perhaps she was trying to guess who it could have been.*

The tall figure opens the door, and gestures for me to go first. I nod and enter the house, wiping my feet on the floormat at the entrance and taking a step forward afterwards. Looking behind me, I await my friend. He

enters and closes the door behind him.

With the reassurance of a friendly presence in an unknown place, I turn my attention to the inside of this house. The smell of the place... old, half-abandoned. I'm not sure how to put it into words exactly. Like hope left long ago, but with traces of life ongoing despite it, trying to push through, trying to cling onto something, no matter what it might be.

Grey, brown and beige walls. The lighting is dim where there's a lack of windows and natural light, with yellow and orange fluorescent glows. Electric candles with their cables, all intertwined with other somewhat smaller and larger ones, all coated with a light layer of dust. I look up to see a single lightbulb hanging from the ceiling, straight sideways, unlit — unfinished wiring like a stillborn held by flayed umbilical cords.

In front of me, an empty frame where a door should be. Beyond it, a person agleam with the shine of the midnight moon, refracting the outside of this house into its insides: a dead night, sat in front of a piano, with what looks to be a glass with a brownish liquid inside. Now seeing this scene, as much as I bingo'd my card right then and there, I think I will now proceed to forget I ever did that.

A pale-skinned lady with what looks to be short, blond hair gives us an inquisitive look, her yellow eyes reflecting from afar. She takes a sip from her drink and starts to play the instrument she is sat in front of.

A simple melody escapes the inanimate, making the place lively with a simple sonata, rendering itself stricken with notes of sorrow, silently and mellowly

increasing in their emotional intensity. A song of what is to come, laced with the grace of ghosts.

Oudis slowly walks towards the lady. As I walk behind him, I intently listen to the musings of a hunched-over entity that looks human while radiating the same muffled empyrean aura as Oudis. Her hair is somewhat unkempt, with a bun tying most of it together. She cares but not enough to maintain an image of perfection, or anything remotely close to it, all the while wearing a long sleeve business shirt, clean in parts, shriveled in others. Looking quickly at her, how she sits, the expression on her face... It fits her apparent sadness. Perhaps that is how she wants to greet us: with a song that spells cold warmth.

We are right next to each other, now. The pianist keeps playing and we stand here, listening. The skeleton looks to the window next to the musician. I follow his gaze — or rather, the sockets where his eyes should be — and try to identify what it is that he would be looking at. It was not difficult to find: the moon. I shouldn't even have had to guess. But the situation I find myself in is unusual, and I don't know what else to do but to try to find familiarity in what is already familiar.

Yet, the situation should be familiar. It should be something I'm accustomed to. But here, there are seemingly no dealings with funeral matters.

Looking back at the player, I notice that her eyes are staring at nothing. This is a look I know well, too, but it feels uncomfortably unfamiliar still. Her eyes — now that I am up close — they are yellow like molten gold. The landscape of her face shows discreet circles of

red: cheeks and nose.

I notice the smell, too. She's been drinking for at least a little while. And, while the music playing is clumsy like her movement, there is a natural ease in what she's doing. Her physical state, shown to be either that of an intense sadness or deep drinking — perhaps both — she's comfortable navigating her body in it. Her mind, however... With eyes like that, I'm not sure if she's fine, wherever she is now. And with what little I know of her now: who is she, and how did she get here? And to the point of uncomfortability, how did we get here?

I look again at Oudis, still silently looking at the moon. My ear picks up on a new element coming from the piano: a quality I did not notice at first, that I cannot properly put into words. Something special that speaks — or rather, that wants — to say something. All I can decipher from it is agony. One more time, then I look at the person playing, and I realize why I did not pick up on this discreet sound before: simply, because it wasn't here.

A droplet falls.

Oudis turns and moves, putting himself sideways to his friend.

We watch, breathe in, and then we breathe out.

A droplet falls.

Hands on the keyboard are lifted; notes slowly drone on. Nekrichta — I believe was her name — has her foot firmly blocking the rightmost pedal from rising. I cannot help but feel her ocean through the whole of what she is now: her waves are obsidian-colored,

crashing onto the souls of those near her, spilling her colors, darkening our skies. The moon shines blindingly here, and we can only sense her pale eclipse.

She reaches for the glass of alcohol... and Oudis puts his skeletal hand on her flesh.

Oudis — "Nekri. Please."

As much as possible, his vocal presence is mellow and kind to the ear.

The droning notes stop abruptly. A second passes by and the wind enters to hum, like the sound of flames with ragged breathing.

The tormented lady swallows drool and speaks, still looking at nothing.

Nekrichta — "There from somewhere reverberates the echoes of a song of woes. One more day where the sun escapes, one more day where the moon crawls across infinity, pulled by the weight of what it hates and loves.

One more day where spirits dream and plan, one more day where hope beams out, only to break before the next sunset.

Oudis, how many friends have you seen buried since you last came in here?"

Oudis — "Many."

Nekrichta — "Do you remember them?"

Oudis — "To be them, is it to remember them?"

Nekrichta — "I do not know. I am what none is yet, and I am what already is. Never were I to be what was, would I ever dare to want what cannot be either."

I try to make sense of what she said, until, almost immediately after I start to turn the gears of my mind, she turns to me.

Nekrichta — "And you, do you remember them?"

Does she know about my occupation? Perhaps Oudis told her. But she implied he did not come here for however long. But also, maybe they met outside of here. I can only attempt to answer, even if she faces me without looking at me in the eye.

Lixi — "I..."

Pause. There in front of two strange Beings, I could lie and say yes. But I have a feeling that, while Oudis might understand a social lie, Nekrichta might not. Or perhaps she would, but she would prefer the truth of it, and knows what that would be. I cannot fool her, and ultimately, I do not want to do so.

Oudis — "Lixi, you are hesitating. Be yourself more than you usually are. Do not worry."

The lady finally locks in with my eye, ignoring the one made out of glass. She peers into me. I notice there, with the sheen of moonlight, a trail of drying tears on the side of her face. And so I realize that I once again

was wrong: her eyes are not judging, they are seeking something. Something in me, or perhaps something to believe in, I think. Those eyes, they are the ones that ask for forgiveness, for hope, for closure, for something that makes them able to finally sleep. These are the eyes of a person who wants to remove weights from a burden that cripples them. And I cannot help but show honesty to those that seek it.

I reach inward, calling my fears and dreams, knitting words into a weave of abstruse phantoms, forgoing perceptible matters and idealizing reverie into what is real.

Lixi — "An anxious road. Coveting leaves falling, humidity clasping on wheels, feeling it behind the wheel. I think about what it will be like: living, sleeping, a decade away. And I realize then, the song is the same as it was a decade back then."

My gaze turns away, reeling into that of the moon's through the window. *Yet, it feels as if I never averted my eyes.*

"The sun still rose, and here still am I alive, while everyone else disappears. Why should we just leave and leave, and the world gets left behind?"

A moment of silence ensues. I look still for a moment at the brightness of a cloudless sky at night, eventually looking back at the two others, still looking at me. I notice that Oudis has taken a more comfortable stance. I gather from this that I did not disappoint him, whatever it was that he wanted me to do... or to be?

My shifting stare finally lands back to the

ambivalence of our drunken peer, who is looking down, as if pondering without the energy to raise her head to confront the horizon. I also feel something on my hand: hers. There is no observation to make, this time, on the difference between flesh and bone. But there is one to make on temperature. She is cold, yet her skin shimmers.

Her hand grasps mine, and attempts to interlock with my fingers. I let her, sensing her drunken clumsy attempt at doing so. There is pity in my mind, to see her like this. And that pity convinces me to let her be tactile. I do not mind, but... there is something still different. Her grasping my hand like this seems to be a gesture of thankfulness and of acceptance of my presence. What changes from the 'usual' grieving individual, is that her sense of grief feels completely different.

As she slowly gets up from her piano stool, using me as a support to not trip over, I realize the difference: she is indeed like Oudis in essence, it seems, although most definitely not as tall and not as...skeletal, I suppose. An epiphany occurs in my mind. As I try to articulate a question to confirm my newfound answers, my mind occurs the other realization of sensation. A hug.

A hug? I guess I should have seen it coming. I'm not fond of physical contact, but now is not the time to have personal preference. I'll ask the question later, then. I look at Oudis, hoping that he'll tell me if it's a decent idea to try to comfort the person hugging me further. Knowing what I have in mind, he nods.

I hug her back and speak, trying to hold onto my

abstractions. The need to impress must go away; it needs to be natural again.

Lixi — "Seldom ever would we reach to answers that give us pause, to let us hope in the peace of our dreams. Misunderstood sentences ricocheting off petals, flowing through the slowest of winds, mountains growling against clouds, engulfing their peaks once more. And we hear it all, senseless to their carelessness, careless in our fragile mortality, immortal in shifting and decaying memories."

The light bouncing off the skin of the back of her neck gently pierces my lone retina. She buries her head, her grasp tightens, and something else happens —

Her ocean that desaturated the coloring notes of her music now flows into my inner self, differently this time. Perhaps it has to do with the moonlight, but I start to feel heavy of heart. My eye, too, becomes heavy, and I close both eyelids, as if wanting to swim against the current of her soul.

A swirling tempest floods my mind and dyes it with her lament. Our souls bathe in the same floating space, under clouds seemingly unending.

Her ocean is wide and infinite. The tide has a spherical form. She is the eclipse, both sun and moon; the culmination of dreams and hopes of every living thing. And I sense, as I brave her storm, that her horizon is empty, and that her winds are weightless in their fury. I look back and there is no shore as the tides erase their lining. She is weightless, above and below herself.

Nekrichta — "Please, stay the line."

Her voice parallels the gravity that keeps pulling me in.

What is going on? my mind asks, trying to go back to the reality in front of me. But I drown its wonders; its action now must be inaction, if I want to understand the person in my arms.

My curiosity lets me dive below her obsidian lake of tears. Her suffering is clear, the agony I picked up in the humming of playing slow notes was not for show of ears.

A mirage draws itself, clear as spring, in her distant fears — my peers that have yet-to-be, living and dying... all at once, swirling; the happiness and sadness of their success and failures.

She is hope, but has almost given up on it all. She cannot process pain well; she drinks from it, drowning instead. She is not human, and in the same vein, is more than human. It is a lonesome place, but a vessel to keep a vacant company lives above this depth.

Perhaps it is enough now. Her stream of consciousness pushes me upwards. I let myself swim back to the surface, crawling to the ship ashore, drifting away from her entropic sea.

We open our eyelids synchronously, and loosen our grasp. I cannot smell her alcohol odor anymore, so I assume that it's probably imprinted all over my clothes. I let her end this immobile dance whenever she wants, which she does, now that we've come back to the inland of material reality. She is smiling now, somewhat. A

little relief is drawn on her red face, although her eyebrows betray the attempted portrayal of solace. Her jaw moves, and words like notes waltz around my ears — now, only for me.

Nekrichta — "The home is a garden that I can't keep alive. I receive guests and friends... dearest of friends — they flood my heart, but it always become vapor that escapes into my lungs. I wish to speak in love, and lovingly do I speak, but my words are the sound of dreams, and dreamers die when they awake."

She and I let go of each other, and suddenly, I find myself breathing in deeply. Nekrichta takes a step back and turns her head around, looking for her drink. Oudis is holding it, and he gestures a simple "no" with his free hand. She pouts and goes to sit back down with very little grace — not that she cares.

I stand, unmoving, wrapping my head around what happened. Soon after, my working mind comes back and the gears turn once more like a clock, forgetting incessantly the ticking second before the one that now isn't.

Thinking back on my epiphany before letting go in the pursuit of ghosts, I ask both entities:

Lixi — "You two — are you the whole of the moon?"

Oudis — "She might very well be. Some time ago, whenever a time ago might have been, someone who used to help us gave us the title of 'Manifestations.' I do

not know what to make of it, but perhaps it is a correct label."

Nekrichta — "Severed seas in future spectra of light, befitting a fair sum of feathers flying over oceans sleeping through nights."

Although I thought myself now to be more attuned to her way of saying things, it seems that this journey to her world did not help in understanding that much more.

'Manifestations.' If Oudis is the Veil and an aggregate of memories, she is that which pierces it. I can understand why they are friends — and also why they seem to rarely be with one another.

One embodies the past, carrying both the bliss and pain of existence, while the other embodies the future, carrying the hopes, dreams and tragedies of what will be, all the while unable to turn away from entropy. Both of them exist in a constant state of psychological torment, although Oudis seem to handle it much better than his counterpart. I guess that, carrying the memories of everything would make one wise enough to take a step back and push through their pain. Or maybe it's not wisdom that does it for him; maybe it's just a cold heart. And in return, maybe Nekrichta has a heart so full of brightness that it turned on its head and is now an eclipse, full of a forlorn love and despair of what is to come, with only the experience of her existence to keep her anchored to whatever world we find ourselves in.

Which makes me wonder, then...

Lixi — "Apologies, but I have a question for Nekrichta. Can you see the future?"

Nekrichta — "Bright goodbyes and waving hands, ash clouds filling lungs and stomachs. A shadow of sorrow evaporates from burnt leaves of time, and the universe saw all colors in shades of gray."

I'll take that as a yes. If that's the case... I don't know what to think. Perhaps I should not think about this at all. I don't think you're supposed to think so much about that sort of thing, but them — they can't help but think this way.

Lixi — "Oudis... I know you're suffering too, but what made her — Nekri, if I can call her by that name — talk in such ways?"

Nekrichta wants to answer, but as she starts to form a word, she is suddenly stopped by the skeleton's voice.

Oudis — "She's drunk to the brim tonight. In her inebriated state she speaks factually, but in her tongue, in her ways. I think you understand her well, considering you like to use abstracts too, so don't rely on me to translate anything, especially after she warmed up to you."

Lixi — "And... when she's sober?"

Oudis — "Last time she was sober was when alcohol didn't exist."

Lixi — "You two are that old?"

Nekrichta — "How old is old? Old... old... am I old?"

Oudis — "Too old to remember how old. Point is, I wanted you to come here because I thought you could help us two, like someone did before."

Lixi — "What happened to that someone?"

Oudis — "Died of a heart attack at seventy something. It was... I don't know. Long ago. He was a chemist, that I remember well. A daydreamer and dreamer both, and was really a joy to be around. Different than you — in character, I mean — you're very often quite serious."

Lixi — "Hard to not be."

Oudis — "Not complaining, do not worry. Would not have stuck around if you were annoying."

Lixi — "Thank you... I think."

Nekrichta — "Oudis! What's her name?"
Exclamation, impatience in the revolt of a question.

Right, we never even made proper introductions. Or did we? I can't remember now.

Oudis — "Lixi."

Nekrichta — "Oh. Pretty name. Beautiful name. Very. Lixi!"

Exclamation, same impatience.

"Will you — *hic* — apologies."

She taps on her thorax and suddenly changes her posture and tone.

"The air in the mourning flies by our face, desolation drying our tears. Anguish and love that doesn't die, swirling, unable to hold. The 'natural world' or whatever else it's called... Have you been in a forest lately?"

Her tangents and sudden changes are hard to keep track of, but I think I can get the gist of it. Her mind is intact; it is just that she's... drunk to the brim, as Oudis put it.

Lixi — "Only drive through them, mostly. Haven't spent time in one for many weeks now."

Nekrichta — "Next, when next you will. Go there. Stand near trees; sit, feel. Sorrow permeates the trees."

I'd want to say it's because it's winter time, but given it's her that says it... I'll go there in spring, to know for sure.

Oudis — "Lixi, we appreciate you being here. If you don't want to help, that is fine, and know that I'm still glad you met Nekri, and that you let her hold you. I think you helped her alleviate a lot of her anguish, even

if it's only for a day or two. Knowing her, she'll remember you fondly, when her clarity is here. And by clarity being here, I mean when she'll just be tipsy and not near blackout drunk. But she likes to be in that state too much — not that I blame her — so I don't know when she'll be more herself... Or maybe at this point, her being drunk is herself."

Lixi — "I don't know if I want to help, as I don't even know what kind of help you want. But I'm glad to already have helped a bit. Also, why do you not drink like her, considering you still ingest things? Somehow..."

Oudis — "Not my thing. I like to stay clear, to see things for what they are without filters. And as to why I can ingest, that is a great question. But I can't answer that, because I don't know, like Nekri doesn't know why her skin refracts light like this."

Nekrichta — "Moonwarmth doesn't make me warm anymore. My shirt was ironed by dear Paragoria... He is warm, him."

She glances at Oudis, who does not pay it mind.

Lixi — "Paragoria?"

Oudis — "Like I'm by your side a lot of times, Paragoria — or Pariah for short — is by Nekri's side most of the time. I used to live with these two before meeting you, mainly to keep an eye on Nekri while making sure Pariah could handle her antics."

He tilts his head towards the shining lady.
"Actually, where is he tonight?"

Nekrichta — "Pariah... dining with friend. He said that... He said. I don't remember. Sometime soon he'll be here? Morning... sometime... Do you know how long is sometimes? Sometimes I think that time is strange: always ticking, road moving, unmoving, flailing arms to the wind, screams in the leaves."

I have a feeling that this missing man needed to go take a break from living with this Manifestation. I guess that he must be strong-willed, or something else, to be willing to live with her. Actually, I wonder...

Lixi — "How long have you and Paragoria known each other?" After saying this to the woman in front of me, I remember that her conception of time — and that of Oudis' — isn't a very reliable one. So I try to think of an alternative... "Was Paragoria young when you met him?"

Nekrichta — "Young like young crows are! Because he was a crow, a beautiful crow that knew the world would be blue, cold like blue, freezing pale blue — and he wanted to be warm too."

Interesting enough. I wonder what he's like. We could stay here, I suppose, to wait for him. I turn to Oudis, to ask:

Lixi — "Oudis, should we stay here to wait? Or let

her sink in sorrow by herself?"

Oudis — "You pull on strings I don't really have, Lixi."

Lixi — "But you do have them."

Oudis — "Always will for my friends. Of course we will stay, as long as it's also fine for you."

Lixi — "Okay. I'd like to know though, what is that help you need?"

Oudis — "Perhaps it would be best to wait. But know that, if Nekrichta is right, and I do not see her to be wrong, you helping or not will be inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. It has more to do with making sure we..." Nekri suddenly stands and takes the stage.

Nekrichta — "End it. Free us. Share your tears, plant a tree for the gallows of life to grow on... grow in... inside out the belly of the beast, water it and watch it decay, with no trace."

An audible sigh comes from Oudis. He really wanted to tell about it himself.

Oudis — "What's said has been said. We want to disappear, to stop existing. We can't die as long as people believe in what we are manifested as. Hence, we will not die as long as the living exists. As long as

memories are made, I will keep on existing with them. As for Nekri, I believe she would still be alive even if all humans were to disappear. There is something about the will of life that goes beyond many things, and that's the kind of hope that fuels her existence."

I move around the standing entities and go to sit down on the stool where someone was a minute ago or so. I can feel the coldness of it, as if no one ever sat on it. I'm trying to register the ideas presented to me. It is hard to come to terms with, especially so soon after experiencing it all.

Lixi — "I'll... think about it." Confused voice with a hint of sudden fatigue.

Oudis — "Do not feel pressured. It is a kindness you would do to us, but not to others. I will be honest with why I chose to be around you: 'Why you' instead of 'why me,' this time.
Because you carry scars that will always be here, that you cannot heal from.
Because you believe in things that shaped your life so that it could be one of pure clarity.
Because you gracefully deal with suffering, although you have not dealt with many forms of it. But you know they exist, nevertheless you despise them.
Because you used to love the world, but you grew cold and resentful towards it.
Because you can be trusted, and because, despite it all, you still have hope, and you still want to live through the pain of life, hopeful that there is worth to it at the

end of the road.
But we... do not want to bear this immortality anymore."

He is on point for many things. I don't know if he prepared his speech in advance, or if that's one he used before on someone else. Maybe he picks his friends based on utility and if he'll get along with them; one or the other? Or something else. I don't know. I should feel betrayed but I know he's not here to hurt, and I know he's here to help me as well. Still...

Lixi — "That idea of yours... to put an end to life so that you can end your own suffering. How selfish can you be?"

Nekrichta — "Not sudden. Slow, peaceful, like a serenade played melancholically near a cliff, for the cinders of the dead we used to love... we used to. Used to forget." Her eyes suddenly sparkle, only for her to blink twice and have them back to their usual state.

Oudis — "Yes. For generations down the line most will still live and cradle life. If you are willing to help — and if we succeed, human life will not end abruptly. Life will slowly be unable to take hold, ultimately ending with only a few humans remaining. At least, that is our prediction. We trust them to be the last ones standing. I think it would be deserved, as pretty or horrid as it may seem."

Nekrichta — "Echoes of muffled sounds, lungs

drowning in rivers of mud, hungry butterflies dyed in gray, starless skies, dust of stars."

Lixi — "And so... a slow death. So slow that nobody would notice, and eventually nobody would know how or why it all came to be."

Oudis — "They'll adapt to it."

Lixi — "Can't you two just keep going until a more... natural way of ending things presents itself?"

Both grunt, expressing dissatisfaction. A negative answer; they really must have been there for so long that time became an eternity... unbearably counting hours, mixing dates with a day, a millennium away.

A time so long that what they go through is not something that I can entertain the idea of. Like how big numbers are hard to comprehend, even when you see them. I cannot imagine what they go through, but I know that it is real. And maybe the intensity of such a thing can be 'worth' more than many little things? Maybe, they are justified in their wish?

Oudis — "For living things that die, sometime someday I will collect their selves in some way. Memories accumulate, and I grow to exist with them. I cannot forgo all of the beauty and atrocity of what life can be. Make no mistake, I still believe that life is beautiful... to a point. But it all muddies, and with time — a quick enough time, already my soul — were I be a culmination of them all, or simply be a singular one —

it all becomes an inescapable shade of darker colors. And even if sometimes hope still exists, and even if sometimes the days are still pretty... it always hurts somewhere, and I cannot appreciate them anymore. And I don't want to keep going through it."

Nekrichta looks down to the ground. She does not need to say anything; she already made me understand without speaking.

I do not know what to think, what to say, or what to do. I will sit still for now, pondering about it, wrapping my head around it. Maybe... What is this man's name, that is supposed to arrive soon? Maybe he will help me to come to a conclusion, to an answer for the pained.

Silence falls. Soon after, Oudis suggests that we move to the table in the living room. He tries to keep drinks away from Nekrichta, and is most often successful, but she still sometimes catches a drink. Her alcohol tolerance is... incredible, to say the least.

Oudis does not speak to me, as he knows it may not be the greatest of ideas at the moment. Nekri sometimes utters abstract tellings, but I am too focused on my unfocused mind to pay heed to her words.

An hour passes by. Oudis watches the clear moon through the window. The Manifestation of this astral body comes to bring us food. Water, dried meats and other salted snacks. Meat like this, clearly homemade... a sign that we really are in the countryside. I suppose that the man we are waiting on is a hunter, or that his

friends are? Something. No matter. I give my thanks to the gloomy, gleaming lady, and she smiles weakly.

Hours pass. Discussions between the two Manifestations are had, as I'm not listening still, forgetting to count minutes.

Time passes. The front door opens. I look. A man, seemingly in his forties, likely as tall as Nekri, closes the door behind him and wipes his feet on the mat. He looks at us three, freezing his movement. He was not expecting Oudis and I. Nekrichta exclaims:

Nekrichta — "Pariah! Did the tree sing beautiful whistles tonight?" She stands up and approaches the man at a leisurely pace.

He moves again and smiles. A smile of gratefulness directed at us, while looking at the moving moon.

Paragoria — "Yes. Beautiful sways of words. Pretty poems were told, like when we often count them to us two, floating to share the unconscious of our slumber."

The now-beaming human lookalike grabs the right hand of the man and looks at it, caressing it with two fingers, drawing gentle, invisible lines. He lets her, and while his companion is busy admiring his skin, looks at us — at me — and speaks again.

"Thank you for being here. I assume you're the one that made her hopeful for a little while again. It is always nice when it happens, I believe."

His head rotates towards the skeleton sitting next to me.

"And Oudis, as usual... thank you for being a friend

to us. And... honestly, we missed you. Is the young lady next to you a friend? How long will you both stay?"

He asks the last two questions for Oudis... *but I'd rather let the Manifestation of Memories answer.*

Oudis — "A great friend, much like you. I told her about our... what you do not want to be a part of. She's called Lixi; works in a funeral home — and she'll be the one to decide when we leave."

Lixi — "Way to put me on the spot... Anyway, pleasure to meet you, albeit somewhat from afar. Apologies for not getting up yet."

I get up and go shake the man's left hand, as Nekri is still looking and holding his right one. His grasp is firm, fair yet somewhat warm and kind. His posture is a strange mixture between tired and proud. His neck is wide. His face is gaunt, scarred by a difficult life. One-eyed — his other is opaquely white — but he does not hide it like me.

This man has a heavy heart; there's something buried that he selectively shares. In this moment, it's easy to tell with whom.

"We'll leave whenever you want us to leave. I have no obligations on my end for a while, and am on vacation."

We let go of our handshake. I look towards the shining being who pays no mind to our discussion. She is still drawing lines, although now she elegantly moves them with her thumb. *I am unsure what to make of it, what kind of relationship this spells. But it is heartwarming to observe.*

Paragoria — "I see." His voice brings my vision and attention back to him. He quickly gestures at me to wait, and turns to the closest being to him, speaking as if Oudis and I were not here.

"This time I remembered to remember. Called old Avelöf last morning, and went to see him this evening. Wasn't sure if he would come through with what he owed us, but he did, tenfold. We're set on food for the coming months. He and his wife also let me use their bakehouse, so I made you plenty of sweets with that little smokey taste you like, all coated with drops of your homemade vanilla rum, even if I... whatever, I know that you enjoy this as well."

An old man and his wife that may be able to see Nekrichta... I wonder if that means people can see her as if she were "normal," unlike Oudis.

The one this man is talking to is contently nodding back at these words. Nekri's jaw begins to move with the shadow of shifting palms, mincing her thoughts before vocalizing them with phantasmal adjectives.

As she thinks, I focus on this show of hands: they are now exploring themselves in a simultaneous duality. My gaze can hardly move away from this. A perfected repetition; a spectacle of a harmonious show of a wish to attain a tender eternity.

Nekrichta — "A cyan silk sewn in threads of gratitude, grounding you to moving sands. Your will is a hope, with self-sacrifices in sweat. Your time paid

forward, returning lent blades dripped in your own dried blood... I still don't understand why your feathers are warm, when they are white on the inside, wings tearing their scar tissue each time we yawn together in our nest... always warm... But still, ever as always, I am here, wishing for you to never be away, ever long."

If I've ever seen love before, this must be the pinnacle of deepest affection. And... passion like this can only take roots if their garden has an alcove for the beast of uninvited change. Tragically ever-in-love, knowingly drifting towards a bottomless waterfall. A love that eventually will explode, after one's mortal quietus, creating a river of a deep lethargic red: the twirling shade of their dreams, the widow's sorrow permeating aisles in grocery shops, making the uncaring care in a thorny distress.

The caring cyclops focuses back to me:

Paragoria — "You can stay however long you want. We have a bedroom for guests ready to go, although no clothing changes. I'm hoping that, at least, you wouldn't mind staying to rest before going back to your home? We'd have a large breakfast to share with you two, if you want. As well, it is reassuring to hear that you've already been told of their plan. What do you think of it?" The hand-holder now holds her own, hiding her face by looking at the ground, and goes back towards the table where Oudis sits, passing through an open door connected to the living room.

Lixi — "Of course. Thank you for the hospitality.

As for the plan... I'm still conflicted. I don't know if I can understand what they're going through. But... maybe there's something else. Something else, in the whole of life itself, that screams from inside our strange friends."

Paragoria exhales, looks away... looks at Nekri, who is now currently cleaning the table we sat at. A slight smile appears on the man's face. He looks at me with a neutral yet determined expression.

Paragoria — "You can tell why I do not want that."

Lixi — "It is clear. You love her. I'd even go as far as to say, from what I've seen, that you both deeply love each other. But..." I ponder loudly. "Isn't it strange to love a Manifestation? I mean, loving like this? And to have one love you back deeply?"

Paragoria — "It is. I am weak of spirit in that sense. I think that I may be wrong, yet I know that we would likely still live together until I die first. But I do not want her death. Yet I do not want her to suffer either. Selfishly perhaps, I would want for her to fight against her pain and sorrow, and to break through it all, becoming the beacon of hope that she used to embody." He pauses. "That she used to... that is what Oudis told me, her story. She confirmed it, when she wasn't... too drunk."

Lixi — "I see. Perhaps it would be best, however... the encroaching end isn't wrong either. The rule of

entropy, it doesn't seem to be incorrect."

Paragoria — "I don't think it to be incorrect either. But instead of a deafening, hopeless silence, do you not believe it would be better to have everything fade away with a smile?"

With a way of speaking like this, I can tell why they're living together, and I can already tell that I'll get along fine enough with them as well.

Lixi — "I understand why you may believe the former as the finality of this plan, but the latter seems to be what the plan entails."

Paragoria — "I know. It's just... I don't want it to end."

He slowly turns to look at Nekri, and a pained expression appears on his face. I look to her, too. She is laughing at a blunder she most likely made. Liquid is spilled on the table, empty glass in her hand. Oudis is supporting his forehead with a skeletal hand, elbow sitting on the table near the spill. He doesn't seem to be upset or surprised. I'm guessing that, if he had skin on top of his skull, he would be smiling nostalgically. This would fit him. This... I suppose, fits her, too. I turn back to look at Paragoria, who now has a slight smile on the side of his mouth. I guess that's the kind of expression I would put on Oudis right now. What I imagined. A pretty nostalgic memory being relived, as if it never ended.

This man does not want life to end. Somewhere, nobody really does, I would assume. And I would think — hope, rather — that even for the two that want this to happen, they do not exactly want this. Although, they've seen more and been through more than any of us alive now, before or after.

Maybe they're the ones who are right. Maybe their sense of life has been warped due to how every experience compounds in their minds. Maybe they're wrong. Or maybe, we two humans just want them to be wrong, even if we may agree on certain things. Even if I may agree on many things.

All that we see is conflicting. All we can do now is keep living through time, forced to move forward by the nature of our existence, by the nature of life, by the nature of us being human. I resent this, yet I am grateful to be that way. Oudis didn't miss the mark, back when he analyzed me. He never missed the mark. But please... for once... miss it. Please.

II — Limitless Breaking Smiles

<< And yesterday the day passed again
Always in the same unpleasant seconds
The annihilation of what was in moments
Kept in, inside decaying memories
Singular Ones that do only exist within here.
As the sight darkens as the light brightens,
As the light dims to give way to clear the horizon:

One sees as much as he hears from far away,
From coasts and forests, inside walls of air.
The wind blinds as the snow comforts,
Everything within existence is taken as such.
Lived with all since their creation,
To and to; inverted and orderly, the same is.
Horizons refracted onto the mirrors of obsidian seas.

Proof of what is and what will always be
And to cherish what is now and only,
To cherish what never will be,
Is as lifeless as the inert.
There is no more understanding possessed
Into what is, and the only wish is negation.

Complete incoherence given coherence
Through the present time, as it is, as it was.
Where the act of creation has no say

Where words cannot convey
And to experience eventuality
What did it mean to be, presently. >>

January

It has been a few months now since Oudis first introduced me to Nekrichta and Paragoria, whom I've quickly come to call Nekri and Pariah, respectively, as there are a lot less syllables and, more obviously, we've quickly become friends. Although the weight of my skeletal companion's request has rested heavily upon my mind since November, still there is avoidance to think much about it at all. Until now, it's been a secondary information that added depth to my relationship with all three of these folks, something that linked us together and brought us closer, as grim as it might be.

All that happened until today were small talks and the occasional get-together for lunch or dinner out at either the couple's home, or mine (*and New Year's Eve. I was surprised Nekri didn't drink more*). We never went outside to eat, as we just enjoyed the isolation and intimacy provided by familiar walls barring the outside world from looking. When we would go outside, it would

be to walk on trails and go to desolate places, such as the unkempt garden of Nekri and Pariah's house, which has its charm. They say the grass is taller than any human after spring, and they 'like it that way.' Maybe it provides an additional sense of protection from the world, especially for Nekri, or maybe they're just lazy. I'd guess the former, given I always hear about Pariah being busy fixing or making things, and helping out his friends and acquaintances.

Today everyone has agreed to get together and spend the weekend in the couple's home.

Smoking trails fill half a room, smell permeating tissues and the air itself for hours following. The walls, green and pale like late winter leaves, grow increasingly opaque to the vision as words and sentences are uttered between puffs and inhales, faces obscuring through each other's eyes, the artificial white light dimmed and amplified both by inner clouds. It smells like pepper and spice, with water and sweet foods, immobile in waves of consumption. All senses except touch are playing in this never-ending night that began at the end of dawn, with music caressing a paradoxical rapport to life-pumping blood through hearts and minds — every cubic centimeter of marrow brought solemnly alive — these thoughts and moments immortalized through a cycling infinity running as fast as lightning, saving minds in a delirious applause: unbecoming individuality, a communal experience bordering on the madness of clarity. Of sharing stories and filling of drinks — mostly alcoholic for Nekri — while the souls of this night are brimming with the same frequency as the ambient folk

music making our veins vibrate.

Paragoria — "[...] and then the guy just went and tackled him on the staircase!"

Oudis & *Lixi* — "Damn!" we exclaim as smoke blows through our noses.

Nekrichta — "Drunken rage took that one down..."

Paragoria — "Punched him over and over on his face, asking him over and over if he had enough."

Lixi — "He had?"

Paragoria — "Didn't last long before he could answer the question, broke the fall with his arm. That one took a bleeding; the face too, actually, now that I think about it."

Lixi — "Wonder who was scared most there."

Oudis — "What then?"

Paragoria — "It stopped. Beat-up guy went back to his room and not long after, the adjutant just told him to go wash it off or something."

Nekrichta — "Washed it off after a few sleeps..."

Lixi — "I take it nothing happened?"

Paragoria — "No charges, nothing. Glances of faked guilt thrown, that's it."

Oudis — "Not unexpected."

Nekrichta — "Never unexpected."

Lixi — "That must have been one hell of a workout, though."

Paragoria — "You bet."

Oudis — "Wouldn't be something to do very often. Reminds me of the time someone tried to beat up Nekri."

Nekrichta — "You have to tell that story?"

Oudis — "No, but you got to."

Paragoria and I look at Nekrichta with wide eyes. Or at least I do, and I think he does, but I glance at him and notice a smirk. He must already know how it ended.

Lixi — "Well... please tell!"

Nekrichta — "Just some odd guy that had all of his hopes crushed in front of him. Desperate attempt to cling to it as much as he could, throwing fury to strangle it. Long story shortened to a T, I broke his collarbone as he launched himself at me. Bothersome one that he was, but some flowers are born already half-

wilted."

She shakes her head as if disapproving what transpired, though not for her actions, but for the individual in question.

Oudis — "Sometimes you find people like this, albeit rarely, very rarely."

Lixi — "You ever wonder about how many of these actually got this kind of thing in them?"

Nekrichta — "Often, many days when no one is there but me."

Paragoria grasps Nekri's shoulder and caresses it with a gentle firmness, fabric wavering under the pressure of his love for her.

Paragoria — "Wouldn't it be nicer if we were always together?"

She grabs his heavy hand and leads it down in the rift of open space between them, caressing his hand as he dances around his thumb in her palm.

Nekrichta — "Just wishing you'd be here more often is all."

Paragoria — "Even if small, I can take some weeks off. It's been a while, after all."

Nekrichta — "You wouldn't mind?"

Paragoria — "Of course not."

Oudis and I can't ever interrupt when they get all lovey-dovey like this; it's simply too romantic and cute for us to stop them. Although I feel like a voyeur half the time, it's hard to turn away. And it doesn't seem like they mind. Would I normally wonder about how relations like this form, and how they hold, and why do they seem so lovely to me? But tonight is not the time for that.

Everyone left their egos at the door — unkempt hairs and clothing; salted, leathery skin; the most honest of smiles and laughs through exclamations of absurdities and tragedies. And here hears the irregular ticking of digital clicks from blown audio equipment. Uncaring, all-present feel this way, for it adds to the paradoxical nature of an always-tired and ever-energized Nature.

I look at my cup; there are cinders at the bottom. I must have been clumsy, but it's already empty. It makes me feel cold for some reason. Is there more tea to be had? As I look amidst voices and frequencies, the wind of tomorrow touches my back and arms and I feel colder. A sudden thought: why do we have to go to places we do not belong so we can live in places where comfort was never granted, where home was lost in a cold fire, and where we wake up in the ashes of dreams someone else had?

But I see the pot now, still more than half-filled. The

night cannot end now, and I will run from thoughts that I can't be unshackled from for a while longer amongst my peers. Perhaps they feel the wave too; the second of silence that occurred when the song stopped playing. Did it end? But my voice will drown the clear water of a matte, wordless ambiance that invites itself in through the moonlight:

Lixi — "Anyone for more tea or coffee?"

Oudis — "I'll take a hundred and some centiliters."

Lixi — "You asking like you count!"

Paragoria — "He ain't counted even his balls!"

Oudis — "Can't count what you don't have."

As the liquid is being poured, it is impossible to hear its gulping as the music starts picking up again. The warmth of indulging in this forgetfulness comes back. And so I forget that time passes by, and my vision eventually starts to blur. Fatigue sets in and time already comes for sleep once more. Some day to forget, or to remember, I don't know which yet.

*

A short rest, a short dream; past cementing itself in memories doomed to fail us eventually. A manifestation of what used to be comes to haunt my subconscious for my brief sleep. A past I dislike to talk about, but one

that I reckon has shaped my life up to now. In my teens, my dearest friend — innocent and saintly around the contours of her heart, the most compassionate and understanding soul that I ever knew — died from a disease, perhaps without surprise. I don't remember — and my dream doesn't either — if she suffered long, or if her suffering was what made her to be this way.

If so, she hid it well, or maybe I was too idiotic to realize her pain. To be born and grow to die so young, I'll never understand the cruelty of this reasoning. My dream didn't blame anything or anyone, but my memory, now that I recall it as I exit this sleep, remembers blaming notions of God — maybe plural — then notions of nature, then to blame her, then myself, then her parents for even bringing her into this world, then finally apologies and forgiveness.

But none of them will ever know. I cut ties with her family long ago now, so I have no knowledge of their whereabouts. I'd rather keep it that way, and they understand why. Or rather, I like to believe they understand why.

I'll never know, but I would rather not worry of what is to come, and instead simply exist, despite the taking. That is all I can do. That is all that I will ever do.

Stirring up fully back to consciousness in the strange and comforting haze of a dark room, warm sheets still, rested without wanting to open my eyelids quite yet. It must be morning. I must be at home. That's what I've been used to for the longest time now, but quickly enough I recall that I'm not there, and that last night I was with others.

It's not my bedroom; it's not my place. When this happens, as rare as it may be, I always wonder, *does it mean I don't want to be here?*

Nevertheless, it's a strange time again. Another year and another month, a nondescript day that came and that will go again, to become a memory for a moment within it, that will be stored somewhere to most likely never be unearthed again.

Or so I would usually tell myself, but given the circumstances and the rarity of this situation... For me at least, perhaps this will be a day in memory as well. Or perhaps not... we'll see.

After some minutes — unsure of how many — I get up, open the bedroom window, and go freshen up in the bathroom.

A reflection appears in the mirror. Would I have recognized the eyes, maybe years ago when I cared about the living as much as I care about the dead these days? Though, even that is not as important as it might have been in the past. So, I ask myself again, who do these eyes belong to? Are they part of the past, of someone that used to exist?
What morphs within the body, if everything dies and gets replaced? Even the soul doesn't seem to be a constant after wounds appear and scar away.

I wish I had an epiphany here. Something that clicked, a sudden understanding of why I stand here without exactly being here. But there's nothing to say, nothing to find, and nothing to think.

Looking like this... I am reminded of the countless

consumed media pieces that portray a similar happening to the now. Looking so dramatically enticed by what the mirror reflected back to them, silent monologues that could be read through their eyes... yet here I am, like many a morning, staring at nothing. What is reflected here is flesh, covered by some things. Skin like autumn leaves, clothing in ripples like the confluence of rivers during a calm dusk. All in all, this is a shape. And I adorn this shape, caring for it enough to show "it is me" to others, yet not to myself. So, when I look in a mirror, I suppose it makes sense that there is no feeling of being there, at all.

But all that talk feels like there is no question or answer to set up and resolve. It just is, and that is that. One more thing like so. I should just clean this face..."my" face, I guess. Doesn't matter if it is or it is not at this point.

I hunch and open the eyelids off my dead socket, grabbing my glass eye. Might as well clean up everything here and now. Think I grabbed everything with me — *where's the hydrogen?* — there it is. Glass... and off we take care of all this organic mess.

After all is said and done, I go back to the bedroom to make the bed and close the window. I've not paid attention to the sounds going on around the place here, but now that I do, I can hear some movement and speech coming from downstairs. I guess they're already awake, or rather, at least Paragoria must be. I don't know about Nekrichta, but for certain Oudis did not sleep, as usual.

A feeling occurs before I join them. A thought sparks it: the lack of knowledge of Oudis' relationships made our friendship feel wider, more free. Now there is pressure applied on my thorax, something that needs to be alleviated: even after last night, we still are acquaintances, not friends, and so...their voice still sounds metallic to my heart. I just hope that this won't last for long.

Walking down the stairs to join those already awake, my nose picks up a familiar smell stemming from the kitchen. A light fog makes itself known through the sunrays coming from the small window there with the stairs. It smells homely, and nice... and bittersweet.
Nostalgic memories momentarily flood my being, and my spine shivers, swallowing the dim light whole, singing and breaking the heart of love.

Mother, were you to be here, I would have asked you where father went to this morning. Maybe he was sound asleep from yet another tiresome week, or maybe he went to help prepare another showroom or convention. Reminds me... I never really understood the appeal of these places, but I never felt self-righteous enough to judge, either. These events are always packed with folks.

There are laughter and smiles; lots of effort and memories seemingly made whenever those are happening. Yet... at the same time, I always felt that something was off. Still to this day, I don't know what it could be.

Never mind that. I finish going down the stairs and

enter the kitchen, standing under the doorway. Here the trio is sitting and shifting around the place:

Oudis has his back against a wall, arms crossed, cup of coffee next to him. Does he really need to pretend he needs all these things? Hm, what am I saying? Maybe he likes it.

Nekrichta has her back turned, hunched over, organizing a cabinet full of alcohol bottles. Surprisingly, not seeing any glass or bottle outsi — oh, never mind — it's right next to the microwave, hidden on the counter between the appliance and the dish rack.

Paragoria is standing straight, half-sitting on the table in the room, legs straight and foot on the ground, the other wrapping over. One arm is crossed, hand supporting his other arm. He holds a cup up to his chin, smoke rising from it.

The two masculine voices are — or were, rather — talking. They turn to me:

Oudis — "Lixi! Hope you slept well, even if just for a little. Were you able to dream?"

Lixi — "Unsure, I can't remember already. Maybe I did? But I slept well enough to be bothered by having to wake up."

Paragoria laughs, and follows:

Paragoria — "Glad to hear that; I'll assume the bed was comfortable enough then."

Lixi — "It was pretty nice actually, yes."

Nekrichta — "Nice to hear you slept well here. Want some coffee, tea, anything to eat?"

Lixi — "Thank you for the offer, it's kind of you. Please, some coffee and..."

I look around the kitchen to have an idea of what's available for satiating my belly.

"Actually, just coffee, thank you."

I'll eat later; want my brain to be fully operational this morning.

Nekrichta — "Sure thing. Sugar?"

Lixi — "Two, please."

No better way to know people than to go struggle with them, I've heard people say in the past. I guess we'll see how true that is by going on a manhunt with however much Oudis can remember.

Lixi — "So, where are we going today?"

Oudis — "Visiting an old friend. Or rather, his descendants. They kept living in the same house as he used to, last I recall. Just a hope that all of his belongings are still there."

Lixi — "Looking for something there then?"

Oudis — "Indeed. We parted ways on friendly terms quite a while before his passing, as he was already

working on something for me; he just didn't have the heart to keep hanging around me anymore. Still, I believe he kept his promise."

Paragoria — "First time I hear of this. Why didn't you go there sooner than now? Must have been decades, right?"

Oudis — "That is the case, yes. I just went and traveled again around these big changes in the human world, so my interest in his project was kept in check until now."

Nekrichta — "Oudis, you never told me about it either. What made you come back to whatever it is that this thing might be?"

Oudis — "Sorry, Nekri, I just don't think it would have been useful for you. As for what made me come back to it... just time passing by."

He's keeping it vague and simple. He's being honest, but also hiding something... I'm curious to know what this is.

Lixi — "Okay. Whatever it is, I wanna see it now. So, when are we going?"

Paragoria — "Aren't you a curious one?"

Lixi — "Of course I am. Aren't you?"

Paragoria — "Not really. Not much anymore, at least. But whatever, I'll follow you two if Nekri follows you."

We all look at the moon lady that had her shine stripped away by the gleaming sun.

Nekrichta — "Um. Where is that place you want to go to?"

Oudis — "It's a coastal town, quite lovely and lively."

Nekrichta — "That sounds nice. Sure, I'd like to go if we get to walk around the beach."

Oudis — "Of course."

Lixi — "That settles it then. When do you want us to depart?"

Oudis — "Given it's Saturday, I guess we might want to go there around noon, maybe before that. It's about an hour away by car."

Paragoria — "Guess I'm driving?"

Oudis — "Unless Lixi wants to."

The stern and proud-looking man looks at me, waiting for an answer. It doesn't seem like a yes or no bothers him. He will accept whichever answer I give.

Lixi — "Who slept more?"

Nekrichta — "Dearest didn't sleep much at all."

Paragoria — "How do you know that?"

Nekrichta — "You snore when you're asleep."

Paragoria — "Nekri!"

Nekrichta — "What?"

I smile, and I think Oudis would too, if he could show it.

Lixi — "I'll drive then."

Paragoria — "Alright."

I guess he wanted to drive, even if he doesn't show it much. Thank you, Nekrichta. Would rather not have to worry about the driver falling asleep at the wheel.

III — In Pursuit Of Ghosts

<< I think I dreamt it
Standing on the street in the wind looking south
Hunting for singing
Indulging imagining words in the wind

But nothing means nothing
Everything is fleeting
Don't get used to it
I say, look upon the ruins

Two distant branches on the hill
There's no song, no sacredness now
What I'd called the spirit world blows into dust
Like me, and the song
Born of alienation

Ancient questions
Answered alive in me again
Indulging imagining words in the wind >>

— *Ancient Questions, by Phil Elverum*

We've been on the road for a solid thirty minutes or so now. The GPS says the town is about twenty-five minutes away still. Oudis insisted on guiding me, up until we went on the highway. Maybe the highway wasn't constructed back then? Or maybe he never took it, just walking by countryside roadsides; guess both are possible.

Paragoria is in the front passenger seat while Nekrichta is right behind him, and Oudis next to her and behind my driver's seat. We figured it might be better in case we got stopped by police that couldn't see one or two Manifestations. That said, I doubt it will be needed much; there have been so few cars that there might as well have been none.

Nekri put on music without asking anyone after grabbing Pariah's phone, but I really like her song choice, so I don't mind it as the driver. And no one else seems to mind as well. I've also caught myself turning up the volume a few times when no one is talking, and consequentially turning it down when someone does talk.

I'll have to ask her later if she could send me her playlist or albums of choice.

Lixi — "Quick question, does anyone know if today is a public holiday or something? There hasn't been much traffic today, even on the highway."

Paragoria — "Less than usual, for sure. Might be a holiday today, didn't check."

Oudis — "Way back when, walking around, you

wouldn't meet a single soul for days."

Lixi — "Okay, thanks, old one."

You could hear Nekri chuckle, while a quick glance at Pariah indicated that a smirk on his face was there. Oudis doesn't really try to talk more, but maybe he's smiling internally, although it's always going to be...a little difficult, shall we say, to be able to see facial expressions on a skull. Which almost makes me feel guilty, but given the reactions, I take it that he likes to talk about the far gone days a fair bit.

However that is odd, as I thought that he did not remember much of the past.
Hm, well, "most" doesn't mean all, so it makes sense I suppose.

As the moment passes, snowless countryside scenes also pass by us: hills and curved roads, forests that left their life deep in the ground for a little while, empty dirt fields and pastures... It's not just that no one's outside; it's that *nothing* seems to be outside. I guess it's a holiday for animals too.

Sometimes when the road is safe and goes on straight for a little bit, I catch a glimpse of the moving landscape to my right. Often, there are abandoned farm buildings, seldom relics of a bygone era, and other times just things you would have thought would still be used. Empty barns and empty houses, lots of them rundown by the passage of time, as if half the world today doesn't want to exist anymore — so they appear dead, possibly to feel like they aren't there — to hide itself from itself.

This can't be nice for the mind, but I've been so used to seeing the dead that I also seem to have been desensitized to seeing a dead world. I don't feel more or less of anything, which is odd, because I think I should probably be feeling a certain way?

Lixi — "Hey, Pariah. How does all this landscape around us make you feel?"

Paragoria — "Hm? Sorry, not really paying attention."

He takes a look around for a few seconds.

"There's not much to see; just winter stuff."

Nekrichta — "Even the plants hide like moles; maybe his mind is doing the same."

As Nekri finishes her sentence, she places her hand on Pariah's shoulder and seems to gently move her thumb around it. The man places his hand on hers and, I assume, mirrors the action. Can't really pay attention much, but I'm guessing it's something cute like that.

Guess what Pariah said was a fair enough thing: to not really care about what's around. I find deserts fascinating, so this seasonal version of one intrigues me, even more to the point when so many things seem to be left to rot in the wind.

Oudis — "At what point did all the farmers decide to give up on all that they had?"

He speaks on what I wonder about.

Lixi — "Do you think it had to do with an increase in taxes or something? Unlivable cuts in subsidies? Maybe also advancements in technology and other building hazard codes having something to do with it all?"

Oudis — "Probably all of them at once. Not something I kept a close eye on — I just witnessed it — but whether or not I remember it is another story entirely."

Lixi — "Say, you've ever been friends with a farmer?"

Oudis — "Yes. They tend to be dependable and strong people, but it's a different world from the rest. *Now* different, at least. Before all the people in the present, let us simply say that there was a deeper and easier understanding between farmers and non-farmers.

Easy to blame the exodus to cities and towns, but I think there's more to it than that... Hm, you also can't ignore the slow decrease in harvest quantity and quality over the years.

Maybe the Earth is getting tired, too."

Sensible enough. Parts of the new just can't coincide with the old; it's just a shame it has to annihilate it all to make sure it can thrive, but what can you do? Abandonment seems to be a human choice more than anything else; there are no real culprits except the usual suspects, so at the end of the day... I guess it's about

where one places themselves in their outlook towards Humanity.

I wish there was more I could say and think about this. Just all this would have filled me with a strange strain of nostalgia back when I was a teen. Why must this change too? Perhaps I buried my youth in some fashion, and driving like this again reminds me of these times. Nostalgic memories that go however many years back, remembering when I first started to stray away from normalcy in many forms. When I used to escape for half a day or an entire day, to walk away into empty fields and hide in forests, to simply stroll around the towns I used to live in, thus removing their oppressive nature by going against their purpose. To when I used to live in town, take the bus and just go around aimlessly. Eventually to take the car out of the sprawling colony, and spend fuel for nothing.
But that nothing had meaning to me, yet I knew — only to me.

What am I reminiscing about now? There's no need to hold onto a past self; she's long dead now. I just wonder if I stayed buried in her coffin, or if I unearthed myself.

Eventually we arrive at the coastal town. No need to try and find a parking space in the center of it. We'd rather walk through the streets, up and down. However, it was built on cliffs. I wonder how durable all of this is? I guess they're not thinking about erosion much, but what do I know, I'm no engineer nor geologist — just a curious idiot, I suppose.

Oudis — "Oh, there we are. Been a long while. Looks like it hasn't changed much at all. Maybe different shops?"

Nekrichta — "This looks like one of those stuck-in-history places we used to be so fond of."

Pariah and I look at each other, then at the two in the backseat.

Paragoria — "Used to be? Why not anymore?"

Nekrichta — "They weren't stuck in history anymore."

Guess that makes sense. A modern place can't hope to keep itself in times where the past can't be allowed to exist, except probably in museums. The rest are just ticking time bombs of change. However, many generations still need to look at their watch to inevitably stop caring about History, thus forgetting lessons, burning living libraries by letting sands of time blacken the bowels of local pasts, with the occasional curious one "discovering" what was, with as much respect for it all as his fellows feigning interest to feign virtue and to hide carelessness.

Not that I'm any better to anyone; it's just a prediction. Maybe I'll be wrong, maybe I'll be right, but for now the only thing I know for sure is that I'll be dead and forgotten by then.

Pulling into an empty parking lot, I'm quite glad to see there's no ticket to get. Whatever, not like I'd have paid to get one.

Getting out of the car, I close to door and stand there for a moment, looking at the horizon. Elevation-wise, I seem to be looking down, and the ocean appears: sparkling blue, reflecting the cloudless sky and winter sun that reappeared as we approached the coast.
I breathe in deeply. It does smell like the ocean is near, and it just brings me back to both childhood and young adulthood memories. I wonder if it was silly of me to go live in the plains, but I guess I like it here quite a bit, too. The countryside sounds seem to be kinder than that of the sea, now that I hear its distant sights again.

The other three have gotten out of the car, with Nekri wanting first to go walk on the beach, and Pariah wanting to go get a coffee right after, if we spot a bar or something.

Walking down the old town with hands in our coat pockets, at least for Pariah and me, the landscape around shows itself as vibrant in the winter: beach sand and the colors of the houses and humble buildings parallel each other quite well. I wonder if they chose to have this color scheme on purpose, or if it was because it made sense to use whatever materials they wanted to use. I mean, seems that a fair few of these places aren't painted, but that's probably just me wishing that they're not. Whatever, they're pretty, so that's enough for my eyes to be happy.

The streets are empty, almost eerily so. There's the

rare passerby wearing a smile; an old person, usually. We make eye contact, smile back and say hello. Hm... maybe this is one of those vacation weeks a lot of people have. Makes me curious, though, why wouldn't there be tourists or just travelers coming here? It's a nice day, I realize: clear sky, beautiful ocean, all in an aesthetically pleasing place; but I guess it's a little too cold for most, still.

We get to the beach. There are no boats on the water, and this substance is of an unclear blue, while the sand is seemingly colored lighter than in other places, which just serves to remind me I haven't been to the ocean in so many years, as I've forgotten what it usually looks like. Were they nice memories? I can't recall.

Nekri is holding on tightly to Paragoria's arm, and they're walking in sync. You can hear chatter between them, with a little laugh here and there.

Oudis and I are right behind them, not speaking, just walking; maybe enjoying the sound of the wind and waves. "Maybe," because I'm not sure if I am, and I can't tell if Oudis is either.

It should be something enjoyable, yet I cannot seem to bring myself to care enough for it to feel like it is. It just is, and that is that.

Lixi — "How are you feeling, Oudis?"

He turns his skull towards me as we keep walking and stays silent for a few seconds.

Oudis — "Unfocused. I'm thinking more about why

we're really here; it's making it difficult for me to care about the here and now."

Lixi — "Just gotta keep Nekri happy. We'll get there soon enough, don't you worry."

Oudis — "I know."

I kind of forgot why we were here in the first place now, truth be told. Oh well, guess it could be interesting.

Lixi — "You know where we should be going after the beach and... I guess the bar?"

Oudis — "Yes, it's about two roads away from where we parked the car."

Lixi — "Couldn't we have stopped by then, when we were walking down to the beach?"

Oudis — "Would rather make sure Nekri gets to enjoy here first. And we have to walk up back to the car anyway."

Lixi — "Fair enough."

We keep on walking for however many minutes, arriving at a cliff that, from afar, seemed like it would have been blocking our path — but now that we're close to it, a hole right beneath it has appeared in our field of vision, creating an arch for us to go under. We look

behind us to see the town starting to feel a little far away.

We decide to at least go under the arch and then just go back. It will take some more minutes for us to get back to the... um... very busy town.
Nekri took the liberty to get her shoes and socks off and run by the water for a bit, trying to get Pariah to come with her, but that man kept on refusing, all the while blushing slightly, like he couldn't bring himself to have a little fun with his totally-not-wife. Which reminds me, why aren't they even married? But that's their story; maybe it makes it more special this way for them. Not that they needed for it to be more special, given Nekri's nature, but here it is.

Probably to avoid "having to" abscond for a time with Nekri, the man turns around to face us and waits there for us to catch up. As we get closer with Oudis, he asks me:

Paragoria — "Say, Lixi, I was wondering about something."

Lixi — "What's up?"

Paragoria — "You're on vacation right now, yeah? What do you usually do when you're not working?"

I look at him as if he were a giant flying whale for a few seconds.

Paragoria — "Is that an odd question?"

Lixi — "No, no. I just never really know how to answer."

My brain doesn't even process the answer; more so it instead asks why is he even asking this? As if I were hiding something... but there's nothing to hide.

Lixi — "Whatever comes to mind, I don't really have things that I'm passionate about, if that's what you mean."

Paragoria — "Nothing at all?"

I scratch the top of my head. Guess there are different ways to answer this, so I might as well ask.

Lixi — "How real do you want me to be?"

Oudis — "Realest."

Lixi — "Oudis..."

Oudis — "What?"

He knows already; he's egging Pariah on.

Paragoria — "Heh, sure, realest."

I sigh slightly before giving my answer:

Lixi — "I certainly used to like to do more things, take more pleasure in them; even work used to be

interesting enough. I don't know what it is, if it's life experience that made most things tasteless, but yeah. I used to like to read about any topic that piqued my curiosity, do whatever seemed interesting, make things even if they were a bit shit, got more proficient... then I eventually made my way to more esoteric things like philosophy — not academic philosophy, mind you — and for some reason, I was quicker on the uptake about certain things there than most, like my brain was already attuned for it. Then I started to actually think about things."

Paragoria — "Big mistake."

Lixi — "Big mistake."

Paragoria — "Don't worry much about it. I stopped thinking about things when I got to a place I was satisfied with. Now I just help friends and family, just stay close to them and enjoy their company, while hoping they enjoy mine."

He says this as if taking on a counselor's mantle. *I do not like his wrong assumption, but whatever, can't blame him.*

Oudis — "That, and you always said that Nekri was a priority."

Paragoria — "Since we're honest here, I said that because I was — and still am — afraid of what answers I may find as I keep on thinking."

Lixi — "Can't blame you. I was terrified at some point because of what I found; it kind of turned my life aspirations upside down — if I had any, that is — since now I can't remember what I used to be like, and what I used to want to do very well. But still... it's just, now I just do things to occupy my mind as to avoid thinking more than I used to, because inevitably, given just a little time alone, my mind will drift to these questions and ponder. And I'm afraid of that place, frankly."

Paragoria — "Oh, I understand now."

Lixi — "Understand what?"

Paragoria — "Why Oudis stays around. I knew you must have been hiding something a little odd at least, but now I get it."

Lixi — "Well, with his whole plan thing he talked about, I don't blame him for choosing me as a helping hand. It's as if he knows I might be more likely to help."

I glance at the skeleton with a smug look on my face, and he just shrugs and looks away, as if he was asking *what did you expect?* with two movements.

Pariah laughs, maybe a bit forcefully, then puts on a more serious demeanor and asks:

Paragoria — "There are many lost people in this world, and you seem to be one of them. You think this will help you to find a home?"

A few seconds pass, as to allow me to conjure up an answer...

Lixi — "I stopped looking for one; I'm homeless now and getting comfortable in the cold."

We can hear Oudis next to us walking a bit closer, as if he wants to say something.

Paragoria — "Oudis, before you say anything, I'm not here to judge the only course of action you found to stop your suffering. I'm really not cut to reason morally on things."

It fits an old soldier that followed orders without questions. I'm sure he can think about morals, but it's more that he just doesn't want to, since then I'd assume he'd probably have to justify whatever he did in the past. What did he do in the past, actually?

Lixi — "Say, Pariah, when you were in the military, what did you do?"

Paragoria — "Was in an artillery regiment. Why?"

Lixi — "I mean, did you do anything that would warrant you not think about the morality of things?"

Paragoria — "Oh, I understand. Maybe now's not the time to talk about that sort of thing, especially when Nekri is smiling and having fun."

The three of us look at Nekri in the near distance, still running along the waves, having fun by herself.

Lixi — "I guess you're right; apologies."

Paragoria — "No worries."

We keep on walking in relative silence, only breaking it if we notice something in the landscape, and then when Nekri finally comes back to the group.

Once we're back on concrete streets, we walk up a road and Pariah stops us. A seaside bar, one that suddenly jolts Oudis' memory.

Oudis — "I used to come here with my old friend, one a week, every Thursday morning. He would usually bring someone else, otherwise people would think him crazy, since not everyone here could see me. More people here than in other places could, though — but I still was a most unusual sight."

Lixi — "Funny that it's also a Thursday morning right now, isn't it?"

Oudis — "It sure is."

We enter the place. Dark wood, blue hues, white accents. Nice enough, cold enough. Invites introspection, maybe? Or perhaps that's just me. The place is empty, except for one person, the barman.

Going to the waiter who's cleaning glasses behind

the bar, it's time to order some coffee. The man speaks first:

Barman — "Hi, welcome, you three! Anything you want this morning?"

Now the question is, which one of the Manifestations is he not seeing? Pariah speaks first to order, seemingly unbothered. He must be used to it while going out with either, or both, of them:

Paragoria — "Hi. Yeah, would like some coffee. Large. Though I wanna ask to be sure: how large is a large coffee for you?"

Barman — "It's..."

He grabs a cup off the counter, which doesn't seem that large.

"... about this big."

Paragoria looks back at us, nudging and holding his hand up, gesturing us to say however many we want. Oudis says none, Nekri says one, and I say one as well.

Once he gets our answers, he turns back to the barman.

Paragoria — "Three, please. I'll pay now if possible."

Barman — "Sure thing." He smiles politely.

I approach the bar as we start to wait for the order to be ready, and I ask:

Lixi — "Say, it's a pretty day today, but I haven't seen many people outside."

Barman — "It's been a slow week here; people are gone on vacations and all. The usual at this time of year."

Lixi — "Right, we figured it might have been that. Say, you ever wonder why people don't stay here?"

Barman — "Home is nice for them, but they want to go somewhere else. I guess it's a way for them to escape work itself? Lots of folks dislike their jobs, even here."

Oudis — "Wouldn't that be because there's the industrial sector not too far off?"

Two seconds later, there's no answer. Now we know for sure that he can't see Oudis. So, I repeat his question, to which he answers.

Barman — "Probably. I'm lucky enough to enjoy my job to be waking up most days without sighing. Anyway, are you from around here?"

Lixi — "No. Not me anyway, but a friend here has lived in the region for a few years."

Barman — "I see. Taking you on a sightseeing trip?"

Lixi — "You could say that."

Barman — "You'll like it, I'm sure. Enjoy your time here!"

Pariah speaks before I give an answer, which is probably for the better, as I had the most generic of answers ready to be spewed out:

Paragoria — "Unless the wind gets harsh, I figure it will be more than fine."

Barman — "Then you'll have a nice day."

He smiles as he puts the coffee cups on a trail, and gives Paragoria the note to pay. He takes some coins from his jacket's inner pocket, counting them and giving them away.

Then, the usual thanks, the exchange of money, with the "do you want to keep the ticket" question... to which he says no. As we're ready to move away, I ask one last question:

Lixi — "Is it fine if we go sit outside?"

Barman — "The umbrellas aren't opened, but sure."

Lixi — "Thank you kindly."

Kind of said that without asking first, but they don't seem to mind. They seem to prefer to be outside today

as well.

We make our exit as I grab the small tray before Pariah does.

He then goes on to take the initiative and push the door to the outside balcony, where Nekri chooses a table close to the railings, positioning herself to the side of the ocean and the building we just came out from. We sit down, each of us that wanted coffee grabbing a cup, adding some loose sugar from long paper packets, with Nekri emptying the entire thing, Pariah adding just a bit, and me in-between. Twirling it all with wooden sticks that nearly fell off earlier when I turned away from the bar.

I turn my head to the left and look at the azure horizon. Closing my eyes, I breathe in, stay the line, and breathe out. An albatross can be heard not too far from where I sit, and the waves crash softly on the sand.
It is a beautiful day today. A rare thing to appreciate, and something to appreciate, at least for me, because it is rare. I wish we could simply enjoy every day like this one, but routine always takes away the magic of things. So maybe it's better this way, as sad it may be. But it's not very sad, is it? Sitting here, not having to worry about anything but my own mortality. If that's the only thing I get to complain about, then what is there to say? Lucky me, I suppose.

We all sit still in silence, a strange feeling of peacefulness engorging our beings, as if the coffee brought us to shut up and just exist here for a bit.

A tinge of guilt creeps up as I look at what seems to be a singular worker on the beach. Technician, which I

assume is taking readings for the surroundings. Wonder if they work in a lab or some NGO type thing? Maybe a contractor for the local government. They're wearing an orange vest and carrying some iron contraption in their hand. Do they like what they do? Do they care? I guess they would have to care, to be alone there. Unsupervised work only works for those that are dutiful, after all. Or so I would think.

Sometimes I recall some fellows who have been trusted with tasks, and they just took advantage of their newfound situation to fuck around and not really do their job. But whatever, eventually it always gets found out and they get disciplined or removed from their position. Sometimes both. Only issue after that is that these sort of positions get rarer and rarer for others who might have been perfect for them. Eroding trust on a global scale sure doesn't seem very fun, but I feel so far removed from all this at the same time, I can't really tell if it's a bias or if it's really happening.

That said, finding trust is difficult in many places, but I don't know why that is exactly. I figure that it has to do with the innate selfishness of the human, modern or not. If you don't like what you're doing, why can't you change it? Easy question, difficult situations. Always the same story anyway, and who can blame them? Family matters, financial security, "just to fit in," that sort of thing. Choices, forced or not; rarely the balls to say no and move away. It's too dangerous, their life as it is always too fragile, and they are too attached. Choices made out in a distorted idea of clarity, shackling themselves in a way they thought was consensual, in a way they thought was respectable.

That is not criticism, for I would be a hypocrite, and I try not to be. My shackles are lighter than theirs; that is all there is to it.
Truthfully, I envy them. I used to often wish that I had some part of my life that was akin to those that I see, smiling with their loved ones, laughing during the nights, sharing food and drinks, making memories in communities. I was a voyeur in that sense, but it isn't like I didn't experience all of this. They bring memories back to me, whenever I see it. I wonder if it's a perverted thing to observe like this?

But now I'm here with what could be considered friends; at least I trust my newfound fellows to indeed become people I could consider friends very soon, and somehow it's only happened after I stopped wishing for things like this. I figured that there was no use to wish for things I didn't actually want, because I didn't even go bother myself with walking towards that wish. Now, without a doubt, as much as I enjoy their presence, I can safely say that solitude seems to be more preferable to me. But sometimes decisions just take it away for a while, and that timeframe for me is now.

Here, breeze caressing my skin, clinging onto the simplicity of life as if I were a modern-day monk. Yet, I am not that. That's something I wish I could be, until I realize that to be me is fine enough today still. Maybe then, I don't actually wish for it. Just silly ideas and dreams implanted by whatever or whomever; just pretty things from afar, given little to no thoughts about.

I wonder why I would want to be what I am not?

Always needing to keep these weird unfounded desires in check, remembering to plant my feet firmly on the ground I tread on. I am lucky and thankful to exist in the way I do, to have made all these choices that permit me to be here today.

Oudis would likely say that this is all to be closer to your own soul, and to see the world as it presents itself, as well as seeing what hides beneath its carcass. To exist removed from the world in some ways — many ways, perhaps — as well as to exist embedded into this world, unable to retrieve what it really means to be human, except in acts of spying onto a fragment of someone's day. 'Observing'; 'voyeurism'... whatever it ought to be called.

Whatever it is that I say, I also wonder if that truly is what I think, or just posturing of me? Of all the experiences I had, now all I do is hide, afraid most days to take another step; afraid of death, and of Time passing by. But still. The day is beautiful, and most days are pretty. And maybe that's fine, too.

Already now near the end of my cup of coffee... Time has passed, and I don't want to look at the sun's position in the sky. None of us seem to want to do so. It's a little warmer, though.

Trying to take in the calm atmosphere, I realize the technician is gone from the beach. Oudis and Nekri are talking, Pariah is listening in. I don't know how long it's been going on; I feel like I was gone for a while, stuck somewhere in my head, like I gave it away to the sky for a time. Perhaps I can stay up there a little longer.

Now, the beach is empty. That technician, now gone, makes me wonder... Out of eight billion souls in the world, what is the importance of one in the midst of this giant number? And why do some clump together to form groups and communities, walking alongside one another for a moment, sometimes loving enough to form couples that know now of the skin and flesh of someone else? It's odd. Just... the whole thing. This drive to be with others, this drive even to exist in a way that can be seen as worthwhile or to have... whatever, it doesn't matter. They're making meaning out of meaninglessness, some of them despite the absurdity of what it is to Be; knowingly so.

But I... can't. No matter how much I try, it always comes back around to the same place. And it's a desert I've yet to visit. I want to go there, somewhere, someday in that place. To know. I want to know what it is to not know, because there's nothing to ever know. Probably one of my most stupid ideas to date, but I'm still alive and there's not much else I care about except the weak hit of "well-lived" days... if that. Which, ultimately, are very few and far between. I guess today is one of them? I don't know, maybe I'm giving meaning to it... hm. Maybe I'm a hypocrite, after all. Whatever. If all is bound to be nothing again, guess I don't have anything to position myself as, so... What value is there here? I don't know.

And, back to what's in front of my eyes, what value is there to this coffee? A little joyful moment, a little comfort surrounded by familiar comforting faces, something that can be had and shared across the globe. Warms the spirit a little bit. Finding comfort in the

uncomfortable fact of existence. Striving towards things that make us forget of the pain of it.

I don't know why I think about this in that way. I already know of it. Already thought of it multiple times, and I forgot how many times by now. Is that comfort itself? To rework what was already sorted? To re-discover what was already discovered? It is confusing.

<< I don't want to stay here,
I want this feeling to leave.
I'm still learning all the same things
Again and again.
I still haven't gone where I've been.
[...]
For every hand reached to heaven's high,
I'd wait my whole life for a sign.
Every time I stood mystified,
The purple always faded back to white.
It'll take my whole afterlife to learn how to abide
It's in the waiting I don't know why;
It's hard starting famine under festival lights. >>

— *Famine Under Festival Lights, by Justin Allen*

Sighing, I finish my coffee. Sitting here, right arm now holding my head, looking no more at the beach, but at the seemingly infinite horizon.

I wonder what the people on the other continent way over yonder are doing? Are they sleeping? Is there

going to be fisherman dying today out in the sea? It's calm here, but I don't know what's happening in the middle of blue tides. What tidings will the waves bring? Let's hope for them to be safe today — least I can do, I guess. Hm. Maybe. Whatever.

Back down again, the others are looking at me and ask if I'm okay. I excuse myself, saying I was daydreaming. They smile and ask now if everyone's ready to leave.

Now standing, I bring back the tray to the counter. We all exchange pleasantries once more with the waiter, wave our farewells, and here we are, now outside again. The wind blows still; the waves can be heard, albeit a bit more faintly. I look up at the sky. Few clouds, with blue memories embellishing their trails.

It makes me question, what does it mean to exist beneath these cyan hues? A question that I often wonder about, with no beginning of an answer in sight. A simple void wonder that may never be more than pondering a substantial nothing.
I recall again this worker on the beach. What made them be there on this day?
What path did they take in life to end up in the position they are in?
Did they want to do this, or was it a bridge between obligations and desires?

Although I suppose it's always a bridge. Always a little sacrifice of something, so that one can find a little hope in what they do, or something along these lines. I'm not so sure. Personally, I never really found hope in work, nor joy in leisure. The waves of time import my

soul to the reaches near a swallow, but I do not hate it either. Maybe there was hope at some point, but now it's just the fear to die, and maybe even, the fear to exist itself. Hiding behind beautiful tellings and pretty half-truths, a reach for a divine touch of something — anything, really. I'm not sure, though.

What is with this sudden melancholic mood? Never the matter. Oudis snaps me back once more by addressing the group, declaring now that we are to walk to wherever next: a house.

Nekrichta — "What if they're not here?"

Oudis — "At least we had a nice time here today, didn't we?"

I can't help but smile at his answer. I don't know if it was a nice time; I felt detached pretty much the entire way through, but the others seem to have enjoyed it a fair bit, so it can't be wrong for them.

The others are smiling as well, now that I look at them. Seems a little cliché, quite frankly, but I guess there's a reason why clichés are a thing. We go on and walk up the hill, going from a small street to another small street, a few more turns, and we've already arrived. The perk of towns like this is that they're pretty small overall, making it easy to get wherever just by walking. Quite enjoyable, I think.

Paragoria — "Should I knock?"
Pariah asks, probably anticipating that whomever

might be there today would not be able to see the Manifestations.

Oudis — "Sure."

No hesitation. *He doesn't know these people, after all.*

After three heavy knocks, a voice can be heard, though it's unintelligible from where I'm standing.

A few seconds pass, and the door opens: an aging woman, maybe in her late sixties to early seventies, stands at the entrance. The door is wide open, as if there is no stranger danger anywhere here.

The lady looks at each of us. She seems to have seen Oudis and Nekri, especially the former, as she recoils for a bit. A few seconds later, she regains her composure and laughs a little.

Woman — "I guess he was right after all... Hello. A skeleton... Oudis, right?"

Oudis — "Correct. Pleased to meet you."

He extends his skeletal arm, opened palm. She considers her next course of action for around two seconds and gently shakes it.

Woman — "Name's Natalia. You know, I always kind of believed him, since he wasn't the only one to tell stories about you."

Nekrichta — "Didn't know you were famous like

that!"

Me neither. He likes to keep his past hidden, doesn't he? And that doesn't even seem to be negative stuff. Not that I'm surprised; it's just always surprising to hear about Oudis' past.

Woman — "And who are these people with you? Hello, everyone!"

She's quite the jovial one, isn't she? I guess at that age you gotta keep moving to keep the body running well. We introduce ourselves in turn, with as much politeness to an easygoing stranger as we can have.

Woman — "You're here about my late husband's research, I take it? He said you would eventually come by."

Oudis nods and starts to apologize about the passing of the man he was friends with long ago. He even says sorry that he wasn't at the funeral, but the excuse is quickly rejected. No need to give excuses, the lady says. How scared would the folks at the funeral would be if they saw something that looked like our representation of Death there on that day?

Not that most would have seen him, though now I question even that. Perhaps here, they would have.

We enter the house one after the other, the head of the household pointing towards a mat for us to rub our shoes on. As we do so in a line, Pariah, being the last of

it, closes the door behind him. All in the living room, as normal as one would seem. A place that tries to appear warm and comfortable, all the while carrying memories of times long past, of people long gone, of things that don't exactly exist anymore.
There is no hope to be found in places like this, just comfort in memories, a nostalgic pillow made of air, a wooden musical chair that's always empty of skin, the only organ on it being synthetic membranes we wear as cover.

I already stopped looking around and caring for what all this means — this is their story, and maybe they display it openly, but maybe no one here was meant to see it.

As I think this, Oudis and the woman I already forgot the name of start talking. Nekri is sat next to our mutual friend, while Paragoria is leaning next to a door, showing that he probably doesn't want to be here. Me neither, really, as I'm just standing between them all, out in an open space that's not yet cluttered by baubles and whatever else. And so they talk, and I already tune out.

Shouldn't I care about what they say? I'm here for that, no? But Pariah seems to be somewhere else too when I look at him. Eyes empty, looking beyond what's in front of him. Should I sit down? How long has it been now? I feel like I've been repeating myself, but maybe I have not; it's all rather odd.

However long has it been now, Oudis and Nekri stand up while the woman sits there, looking at a big,

open book. Photos? Oh, when did she open this?

The skeleton gestures us two in the back of the room to come with them. We climb a stone stairway down into the house's basement. It's all relatively small, quite dusty, with cobwebs here and there and a faint musky smell. Wooden furniture that shows age is scattered somewhat orderly, closed books and file holders. Leather pouches and covers, glassware, like an old lab. Which this, I suppose, is one.

Oudis — "So what did you two think about when we were talking about my old friend's life with Nekri and Natalia?"

Lixi — "Oh, right, that was her name."

Paragoria — "Wasn't exactly listening."

Nekrichta — "You two looked like you didn't want to be here."

Lixi — "Yeah, felt more like a kid who was dragged with their parents to see old friends they met decades ago."

Paragoria — "Pretty much. Wasn't our place to be there."

Oudis — "Fair enough. Won't bore you with the details then."

Lixi — "It's not that we don't care; it's just that...

well, Pariah said it already. Not our place."

Nekrichta — "That man lived an interesting life, you know; other humans would have been proud of his achievements!"

Paragoria — "I'm sure he was a great man. It all just felt too private."

Lixi — "Exactly."

Both Manifestations shrug and start looking through the drawers of the furniture. We instinctively join them a few seconds later. Doesn't take much time to find what we may be looking for: Pariah finds an ordinary-looking small box with a lock.
Oudis take a step back, laying it on an open space on a small table to the side, wondering if they can just break the lock open with the various tools that are available in this space. With Nekri, we start to look for the key. I find it under a file that was sitting on top of a cabinet. It fits in the lock. I'm guessing the owner wasn't really trying to hide this thing that much.

A letter covers the top of the box's insides, with a vial in its bowels.
Nekrichta snatches the paper from Oudis' skeletal hands and reads out loud:

Nekrichta — "Dear Oudis,

I hope your waking life is cradling you more than

pulling on you these days. It must have been a long while, and if you find this, I'm guessing I must have passed away. How is my family doing? It must be hard to tell from your point of view; you never met them, after all. But I guess someone let you enter here. Legacies can be unpredictable, and I'd hate to think of such matters being entrusted to someone with a penchant for property hoarding.

Finicky people, I could only do what I knew best for them and my loved ones. And you being part of them, I finally found a way to help you out as you requested all these years ago. I acknowledge that what's enclosed might evoke dismay or even revulsion; however, your conviction has swayed me, even if the specific details as to why have faded from my memory.

I still trust you, even if in some ways you abandoned us. I still remember your reasons, and I do not hold you in contempt for it... unlike Augustin, as he's still upset with you. Time may bring forgiveness from him, and I hope he, too, sees the wisdom in your perspective before his own demise.

Anyway, you'll find here a vial. Got the strongest glass container for it; I think it should hold for many centuries, even a millennium. I hope you'll find it before any of that, though, as by then I assume my home laboratory would have disappeared — though at some point, if everything else is gone, that's probably what you wanted, making this whole thing a little useless on my part. But I digress.

The solution's potency should not lower in intensity as the years pass. Get one of the leather pouches I have

laying around (or get your own, I'm not your mother). Pour its contents into an ocean — any other location is not advised.

What's inside is a self-replicating microscopic fungi, capable of affixing to any living organism. Its modus operandi involves cross-infection through water and air and targets reproductive functions, albeit without inflicting unnecessary pain.

I recall our philosophical discussions about the nature of life and existence, where your insights, often at odds with my stance, illuminated profound truths. Though I resisted, perhaps more due to Augustin's influence than my own convictions, I recognize the validity of your perspective. But who would accept it? I didn't, as you must remember; hopefully still, my family is alive and well. If they endured, make sure to tell them I love them, and should you choose to pursue your wish, please apologize on my behalf for the inevitable repercussions. None of us except you really desired this outcome, yet now, with my age, I acknowledge the righteousness in your reasoning. At some juncture through the years, I resolved to shed selfish inclinations and confront reality as you perceive it.

I hope you're right,
Forever, your friend."

We stay silent for around thirty seconds, processing the letter.

Lixi — "I guess you got what you wanted."

Righteousness...for any human, it would be considered self-righteousness, but Oudis being a congregation of many living things that happen to take the shape of a tall skeleton...maybe it's one where righteousness could be applied. Makes me wonder if anyone he's met may have seen him as a God of some description. But ultimately, when you start to know him, there's little that could be considered otherworldly or divine about him.

Oudis — "It's hard to believe that people you never knew would hold onto something for you for that long. I believed in that old friend, and he hoped and believed in himself. It stands to reason that his peers believed in him too, then."

Lixi — "Sure, sure. But after his death?"

Paragoria — "You're very cynical, Lixi. A lot more people than you think are trustworthy and honorable. It's simply that they rarely get the occasion to express this trait."

That's what I get for not interacting more deeply with folks. I get half a picture of what's really happening around the world and in my own backyard.

Nekrichta — "So... what now, Oudis?"

Oudis — "Perhaps... I should not choose what to do with it."

We three look at him, a little confused. I think of something to comprehend, and propose a course of action:

Lixi — "We could live for a while. Not think about this."

Paragoria — "None of us are fit, really, to take the decision on behalf of anyone."

Nekri stays silent, however. There's something that she doesn't want to say. She looks a little uncertain.

Oudis — "Nekri?"

He urges her to speak her piece.

Nekrichta — "I know you want to use this and shorten your suffering... our suffering. But the others... I'm still unsure myself."

Oudis — "I know."

Silence falls again. This time, it lingers for more than half a minute, and our heads drop to look at the floor, thinking.

I do not know exactly what to think about this, personally. In some ways, here and now, I would not care too much if this fungi thing was released into the world

or not. It is, however, a very selfish thing of me, simply based off my ambitions and wishes, of which I have none anymore, and not out of certainty or even on the truth of things, like how Oudis' friend implied in his letter. I guess I need time and reflection on this.

Paragoria — "We'll keep it, then, and just store it somewhere until we know what we want to do."

Paragoria taking decisive action. I could not have expected anyone else to do this, except maybe Oudis — but he's too in his head at the moment, it seems. Maybe the words of his deceased friend are also swirling around in his mind.

We all look back up to each other and take turns to nod and confirm this course of action. I take an empty satchel and bring it to Oudis, and he puts the vial inside it. He gestures that I should carry it, to which I oblige. I don't really mind it, and I suppose if folks outside see a floating bag, it would not be an ideal situation for anyone involved. Or maybe it becomes invisible once Oudis holds something? I have no idea how it works exactly, even to this day. He does not, either, which is surprising; you'd think he'd have tried to experiment with other people, but maybe he just doesn't care at all.

We go back upstairs, and Oudis shares some of the words of love his old friend had for his family. The lady of the house tears up and thanks him.

As we exit the building, the skeleton is the last one behind us, and I'm right in front of him. I go through the main door, holding it, waiting for Oudis. He talks

some more with the lady, but I can't hear what he's saying, and off we go back to the car, with silence surrounding us, voices unheard.

Once we arrive back at the car, Paragoria asks for the car keys. Guess he wants to drive this time, splitting the weight of it.

Nekrichta — "You sure? Are you not tired still?"

Paragoria — "Coffee."

Nekrichta — "Okay. But if you're feeling like you'll start to doze off, give me a sign and we'll switch, okay?"

Paragoria — "Sure."

I throw him the keys, which he catches effortlessly without even looking, and off we go back to Pariah and Nekri's home.
Same thing happens as before, where Nekri grabs Pariah's phone and puts on music of her choice, which I still appreciate, and Pariah as well, seemingly. Oudis has a hand on his fleshless chin, looking to the horizon. Best not bother him, and I assume we're all thinking the same thing, as no one is talking.

We all have something to think about, but this will take time, maybe a lifetime — maybe we'll never get to a conclusion. I don't know now, and I sure won't know tomorrow either. So let's just exist for now; we'll get to it when the time is sound.

IV — Tragedies of Time

<< Wondrous is this stone-wall, wrecked by fate;
the city-buildings crumble, the works of the giants decay.
Roofs have caved in, towers collapsed, barred gates are broken,
hoar frost clings to mortar, houses are gaping,
tottering and fallen, undermined by age.
The earth's embrace, its fierce grip, holds the mighty craftsmen;
they are perished and gone.
A hundred generations have passed away since then.
>>

— *Translated excerpt from "The Ruin", VIIIth century*

March

Here we are, sitting in a car in the midst of a glowing night, moon still shining outside and inside next to me. Oudis and Paragoria are gone to deal with matters of their own, and Nekrichta wanted to spend time with me, so I obliged her request, considering we

haven't had that much time, one-on-one. We cooked something and went on the road, stopping by a grocery store before its closing time, got some sweets and alcohol (*as she likes that so much, alcohol especially; even if no one else in our circle approves of it and would rather she stops entirely, we recognized early on she had no plan on stopping and, considering what she is, it doesn't matter that much in the end*). Then went on to drive some more, finally stopping by an empty parking lot, by request of my co-pilot.

She hasn't been as abstract lately, sometimes clearly stating things, which is unusual for her, but it's a nice change of pace: not having to decipher whatever meaning there is behind her sentences and on-the-fly poetry; it all makes her easier to live with on the regular. Although, she's still as drunk as ever. High-functioning hyper-alcoholic, if that's possible. Guess it is, considering what she is. Where does she get the money for it all, anyway? Is her companion paying for it all? Ancient questions...

We stop the car somewhere in a parking lot's corner, not too far away from the grocery store. Here we have view of a road that has very few cars passing by, with fields and forests appearing behind the asphalt line; with a bright moon, lighting it all in a precious visual memorandum.

We are hiding under the shade of a seemingly old and run-over commercial area. I think I recognize it somewhat. A snapshot from my childhood. What was once a vibrant place where people would come to shop and dine, slowly but surely crawled to a halt. Perhaps it

was due to unforeseen economic consequences of a world changing, or of laws regarding savings and deposits, or of the industrial area it was attached to not caring to meet ecological laws and being forced to close down after failing to plead their case in court — most likely all at the same time.

From the car we spot the remnants of a dilapidated children's clothing shop. I remember it somewhat because it always seemed out of place in between a gardening shop and a power-tool lending company; I think it was for lending, anyway. Though, mainly for this latter one, I only really remember yellow and black signs, with old cardboard cutouts soaking right outside in mid-autumn rain.

A business fails, a shop closes down, and a restaurant runs out of money. People leave for bigger cities, and deaths of community leaders happen. Then another business closes down, and people stop caring about where they live, and the cycle keeps going, though I'm not sure where it ends.

New democratically-appointed mayor arrives, trying to change things bit by bit, trying to rekindle what once was; failing to do so, of course, as is customary these days mostly everywhere it seems — or maybe it was always the case — and, even in what they succeed in, they ignore some parts willingly. Like here.

You can make out thorns, vines and bushes growing through cracks that were made over time under summer heatwaves and the following flooding winters. The few old social buildings on the outskirts have been torn down and the lower income populations were displaced

to major cities; not their problem here anymore. As such, the police presence was reduced, and you can often see a singular officer patrolling in a car. Didn't stop the drug trafficking, of course, but there's certainly a lot less of it, which helped with the peace of mind of the older inhabitants here that thought it was going to turn into a gang-ridden hideout — although I suppose they never realized it was their own children that were trying to escape the unmoving nature of this decaying town they were born and lived in.

Whose fault was it, then? Maybe it was just the humans' unending need for perpetual motion. When you got all that you need, you start to create what you want, even if it's detrimental to the self or the whole. Entertainment comes first, it seems: building a reformed, wobbly belief that life is alright, living with a smile as the sun hits your shirtless back: 'life can be fine' starts to replace what would otherwise have been a growing existential gnaw devouring compassionate souls. Perhaps that is what they need to survive, now. However, I'm no better than them. As much as I speak of them, I speak of myself as well; I'm just more attuned to the silent sky, especially since meeting Oudis.

But I digress. So much has this place changed that it now turned derelict; now only is it a spot for people like Nekri and me: void tourists — or most often, for the romantics and those that crave for a fake, post-apocalyptic setting to immerse themselves in. Whatever, we all have things we gravitate towards, and we end up falling through the same waterfall anyway.

Nekri takes a sip from one of her recently purchased bottles. Don't really care to check what she bought, but probably a strong yet fruity liquor, knowing her taste. Getting used to it, I guess; been a few weeks since we all met at her and Pariah's house. But now it's my first night out with just her, and I hope it's not going to play out like a babysitting thing, but I don't know; probably just underestimating her. Her unpredictability can be bothersome, so let's just hope the slots have rolled on a favorable outcome tonight, if one were willing to leave this sort of thing to be given meaning through chance.

Nekrichta — "Thanks for bringing me here."

Lixi — "Hm? Don't mention it; anywhere would have been fine. But why this place?"

Nekrichta — "I like. The simple disagreement of the world of nature and that of Man's."

Lixi — "You almost sound like Oudis right now."

Nekrichta — "'Suppose so, suppose so... you know, Oudis has a giant soul, but there's many souls in his soul too. Like a soul eating at itself, yes."

Lixi — "And... ?"

Nekrichta — "I follow his wish. He will always keep on looking for a way out, and it's hard to look at friends when they hide their pain like this. But he can't hide

his from me."

Lixi — "Friends? Wouldn't you be more like brother and sister, since you guys are more or less the same... 'thing' that isn't a thing?"

Nekrichta — "Friend is friend, no matter where they're from. You'd know that. Love is love in all forms, and hate is love, too. Oudis hates to love, but he can't help himself. I mean, look at you. He loves you dearly, like a dear friend loves his fellows."

Lixi — "That is kind of you to say. He's been very goal-driven since he brought me to meet you. He wasn't really like that back when I met him at the funeral home."

Nekrichta — "Phases. Oudis is Oudis, and Lixi is Lixi. You're still confused, so I don't know who you are, really, but that's fine — your spirit is shining and strong, like that of Pariah's. You're to be a memory and a hope, both."

Lixi — "You sound ominous when you say that. Almost scary, if you weren't yourself."

Nekrichta — "I am what I am and that is that. I am not here to fill buckets of pain."

Lixi — "Right. Manifestation of Hope."

Nekrichta — "So they say. But what hope did you

see in my soul back then?"

Lixi — "A tempest."

Nekrichta — "Raging turmoil. Mine as much as it was yours; but yours is also everyone else's. But it's been... I think... it's been getting strange lately."

Lixi — "How so?"

Nekrichta — "Always were waves, but they were grand waves, pretty to look at, safe to swim in; now they are violent, and the sky is dimming."

Lixi — "Hm... I guess... it makes sense."

Nekrichta — "Hm."

Time passing by; silence falls yet one more time, for a minute or two. I try to reflect on what she says, but my attention regarding what we just discussed is a bit everywhere, and this lack of focus brings nothing. Not to mention I keep glancing at Nekri, trying to see what she feels. I can almost make out a smile and a look of contentment, but I'm not sure.

Nekrichta — "Do you want to hear a story?"

Lixi — "Sure. Does it have a title?"

Nekrichta — "Guess you could title it... 'The Man with a Scar for a Face.'"

Lixi — "It's not going to be a fun story, is it?"

Nekrichta — "Not up to me to decide what the listener wants to take it as."

Lixi — "Alright, sure."

Nekri pauses to drink her alcoholic sustenance — which is what it is for her, I realize — and grabs a mint candy from our shared mixed bag.

The car is off to the side of a lamppost, right at the edge of being illuminated by it. A spot chosen by her, actually: she wanted "the best of both," as she put it. Without artificial light right on our eyes, we get to see across the night a bit more clearly. And then the light from the lamppost is sidelining our lower halves, and we get to see what we have in the car. Also, I get to see that we've been leaving crumbs all over our seats. Really don't want to clean... whatever.

I relax my body a little and listen intently for what Nekri is about to tell. Now that I think about it, she never really spoke for long. It may get to be interesting, hopefully she doesn't babble about, although I'd be more surprised if she did.

Nekrichta — "There existed an individual. He grew up sheltered but did not like the warmth of his nest, so he flew into the cold weather while carrying a necklace to bring him safety in case things got dire. Of course, things would get rough every now and then. But always there was this net for him to land safely in. A privilege,

awarded to him for merely existing somewhere where souls can be lucky, where his mistakes were never death sentences.

He wanted to see what the world was like, to see what things looked like outside of what he was told they were. Traveling, he saw more and more over time, jumping from place to place, flying left and right, trapping himself and unshackling periodically. Clarity was always followed by blindness, and blindness was always followed by clarity. He saw things for what they looked like, and eventually, he saw things for what they were.

Not everything, because he didn't want to look at everything, even though he said he wanted to. He knew that were he to look at the skeleton of the world, he would not return — so he gouged one of his eyes out, to make sure he would always have access to his inner world. 'No world like mine,' he used to say. All the suffering he encountered, his and others'; all the joys he experienced, the extremes and the mellow days: he did as much as he deemed was enough. But it seemingly never was really enough, either to him or to a malcontent outsider.

He kept walking and sleeping, running and falling, standing and sitting. To find understanding, he chased after death dreams, extremes that would bring him beyond exhaustion, near his own grave and others', never really finding what he wanted after all.

He was an observer; a voyeur, some might have said.

But he was there nonetheless, existing without ill intent. He found life to be strange, and his especially —

since he was mostly himself, and due to the path he took, knew himself more than anything else. Obviously, I suppose, but usually people chase things so that they don't have to reflect much on what would have given them grace in the first place. Or do they? Their hopes fade and me with them, so I do not know anymore.

Still, what of this man's reflection? He could see it less and less, day after day running into one another. Scars of life accumulating on his body; funnily enough, most of them were not even his. He chose to carry them for the sake of those he once loved, never betraying their trust, even if they never asked, even if they forgot about him. Even if they died somewhere along the line, he knotted and threaded with them. He had a duty; he was beholden to them, as once their joy was his too. But he was picky — extremely so. He wanted naught to do with most things, alive and not. What would happen is something any could have seen coming: his willing dissociation from his peers, growing ever apart from the humanity he wanted to understand and love, retaining with those he knew only the memories of what once was, that now weren't, and that never would be again.

He would eventually open the window to let flies out, and let his garden become an unkempt forest, vines and thorns amassing moss. All he did was pave a way so that he could walk there. Sometimes a bird, usually a crow, would come perch on his shoulder. Their claws would slightly pierce the skin, but he never winced in pain. Instead, he welcomed the bleedings, laughing at the bruises whenever he noticed them.

He looked at growing flowers through spring and summer without seeing their colors. He smelled their death before the day they would return to the dirt.

He wanted to see less and less things that were alive, eventually hiding from the world, and he wondered in his glass dome: why was nature? Why was life? Why was time?

He hated and loved in the same breath. Still, however, he would seldom send letters to the lifelong friends he kept. He wanted to be with them, to spend afternoons and evenings on wooden balconies, looking at the sun set over hills, creating memories he would foolishly wish to keep for an eternity blooming further than mortality.

Yet, hypocritically perhaps, his sun never really rose; he was kept at bay by the waves he wanted to observe, and always was washed ashore on the rocks of the cliff from which he jumped. Climbing back always, until ages later his back hurt, when his bones were too brittle to jump as often as he used to.

That was a man. A man that wasn't a man, but was also more than a man. Maybe he didn't deserve to exist; maybe he didn't want to exist, but the world and himself kept on spilling this blood; always warm, with hands cold like a corpse. Why was he, and why was anything?

One day he looked in a mirror, and didn't recognize who or what he was looking at. He remembered that he never really asked himself the question of what he looked like. He just was, and that was that. And people were, and they were there. But, now only, it is a

reflective memory of humanity that broke the mirror. The shards were already lodged somewhere in his thorax, and he drank to the health of it all: two fingers for the living, two fingers for the dead, two fingers for the world that we all live in."

The following momentary silence indicates the end of this story.

A light gust of wind flows through the window opening, slowly weaving in between strands of our hair, slowing down our heartbeats, bringing us back to a forlorn reality.

Lixi — "That was something. I'm not really sure what to take from this, though. Is it... knowing you, these were all mostly metaphors. But is that about someone real?"

My night consort of now, wonders for a brief moment, then answers:

Nekrichta — "Real and sometimes not; mostly so, hidden away, forgotten as they live, remembered as they die, forever to dust after their passage through time. Like anything, and everything, remembering the eventuality of things."

Her hopefulness is as much her hopelessness. I would wager a guess that this is about Pariah, or maybe someone she used to know way back whenever 'way back' means for her.

But I can only here now sit with her in this car, as

she grabs another bottle and as I light up a smoke for myself, car windows rolled down. The heat of spring nights is cold enough for us to be comfortable, and with no one but us and the leaves, things seem proper and fine, I would think.

Lixi — "Thank you for the story, Nekri."

Nekrichta — "Thank you for listening. You're pretty."

Lixi — "Huh?"

Nekrichta — "Bright soul."

Lixi — "Oh, right. Sorry."

Nekrichta — "You had a funny reaction."

Lixi — "Don't act like Oudis..."

Nekrichta — "He's always with us, anyway; is he not?"

Lixi — "'Suppose so. Makes sense, though."

Nekrichta — "Somewhat, yes. How did he meet you, anyway? He hasn't told me."

Lixi — "Was working in, filling a day — I think it was a Tuesday — at the funeral home, as a receptionist for that morning... or afternoon? Whatever. He entered

with his white cape, looking around and approached after he noticed me staring while we were the only ones there."

Nekrichta — "Did he ask you if you could join him for a walk in the yard?" She smiles at me.

Lixi — "Does he do that often?" I start to talk with a smile in response to what might be an old trick being played on me, and my falling for it.

Nekrichta — "How often is three generations for you?"

Lixi — "Well I guess you don't change a strategy that works. But yeah, he did say that. You can guess my surprise; I thought he was like the Grim Reaper or something."

Nekrichta — "The myth does come from him, somewhat. He's always found it funny. One day he has a scythe, the next a colorful flowery hat. But the people he met never meant ill when describing him; it's just those that aren't kind in their depictions are not of him, you know. Because he isn't death. They all have these abstract ideas of a thing that is, but Oudis is people and their fellows; it's just that they don't know Oudis — as Oudis then would not know them at that moment, up until they are him, eventually."

Lixi — "Makes me wonder how can he keep his identity through the ages."

Nekrichta — "We wonder much the same, then."

I sigh softly at her answer.

Lixi — "Anyway, will you drink to something or someone tonight?"

Nekrichta — "I think... I'd want to drink to the life of dear Paragoria."

Although I expected her arm to move, she instead turns her head and looks out the window, staring at nothing.
I leave a silence to take hold before breaking it:

Lixi — "Then I'll smoke to his health." As I end my sentence, she turns back to look in front of her, through the windshield.

We smile at each other without really looking in each other's direction. But we don't need to; why would we? Things are as they are, as Nekri puts it. No matter what, they always will be the way they are meant to be, and nothing else can change that but the passage of time; all up until anything isn't. And maybe that's what my friends here want. They just want to exist, with scars that are not blooming with rose petals. No more suffering for them. I suppose I cannot blame them; they must have seen more than entire eternities combined, at this point.
Who would I be to go against their wish?

And are they wrong to want it all to stop, especially when it will anyway?

Make it happen faster; grace the world with the stillness it always had before life corrupted this peace.

Maybe I've spent long enough with Oudis and Nekri. Pariah seem to have a stronger resilience to these ontological influences, but I would bet that there's more turmoil in his head than he lets on about. And it is clear to me that Nekri does not want to impede on his secrets, and divulge any of them to me. So I will not pry.
He is kind and strong, and I don't believe it to be my right to ask for what he doesn't want to share. I would hope that, eventually, he will. But... that sounds like a silly thing to hope for. The way things are now, in our intermittent pursuit of an end to life, it is nice. I like it. I wonder if these memories we make will be kept?

Lixi — "What a beautiful night." I smile.

Nekrichta — "Yes. I'd want them to be more often like this."

She smiles.

Lixi — "They could be."

Nekrichta — "But will they?"

Lixi — "We can only wish."

Nekri laughs, bittersweetly. I look at her and realize

that my look must be one of a sweet, nostalgic melancholy. But I cannot shed it.

It feels as if this is a moment that is supposed to only happen when one is alone, yet here we are, together crossing the same lane. The grass is not greener than anywhere else here, but the moon shines brighter where we sit.

I guess things are alright even when colors appear gray; that never anything could be anything despite the drive to go forward — that, despite it all, we still exist, and we still get to feel at peace sometimes up until we die. And maybe that's enough. Maybe we feel alright.

As we bathe in the glow of a night, my body relaxes as nicotine flows in. It feels as if we are looking to flowers taking in the sun, curious and entranced to the fact that they exist, dyed in red, blue, purple or whatever pretty thing they have to appear as. I do wonder if flowers would find themselves to be pretty. I am reminded then, in the shade of the reflection of a dimmed sun, of a story.

Lixi — "Say. Would you be interested in hearing a story?"

Nekrichta — "Of course. Give and receive. Would love to hear. Does yours have a name?"

Lixi — "Hm... let me think for a second... you could call it: 'The Woman Who Gave Her Hope Away.'"

Nekrichta — "Hope it's not about me."

Lixi — "No, no — but you do that too, do you not?"

Nekrichta — "Perhaps..."

She lifts a bottle up to her mouth and drinks while exaggeratedly looking to the side, trying to be comical. *I suppose it works, as I catch myself softly laughing at her playfulness.*

Lixi — "There once was an individual who was left to be used as a tool expressly for monetary purposes, as soon as she was birthed into this world. She had many siblings back when she was a kid: one after the other, dismissed to adoption centers, labeled as bothersome sacks of annoying needs. That is what their mother thought of her children. They were had from numerous unknown fathers, so that she could cash in social financial help to raise the children without the lash of responsibility from anyone or anything — all until a neighbor called social workers to take away the remaining kids.

Lies after lies, the mother would eventually lie herself on the ground in a puddle of her drool, still able to somehow get money for creating life she never wanted to cradle in the first place — culminating in her with veins open, drowning in vomit.

But this isn't a story about the mother, as she had no stories to be told of her, even during her unceremonious funeral — lest you consider that being buried and thrown in a half-empty pauper's grave is a story on its own. And perhaps you're right, a life is a life,

and all have their stories, but what is interesting pertains to the individual hearing or counting it."

Nekrichta — "Sorry to interrupt, but now *you* very much sound like Oudis."

Lixi — "Damn... you're right. I'll try to keep away from the gas pedal."

Nekrichta — "It's alright, say what you want. I like to hear you say things."

Lixi — "You have a strange way of complimenting people."

Nekrichta — "Does it bother you?"

Lixi — "No, not really. Just unusual and somewhat funny, I guess."

Nekrichta — "Then that's nice. Please, keep going."

Lixi — "Alright. So, the story is about one of the daughters of this person. I suppose you know what can happen to dejected and lonesome people, when they are left to find something warm in a world that birthed them cold and bloodless?"

Nekrichta — "How hopeful was she? What did you say the title of the story was before? 'The Girl who Left her Hope'... or something?"

Lixi — "I think it was something like..."the One that Gave Away her Hope"? Can't remember either now. Maybe you can tell by the title... possibly. I'm getting confused by it now."

We both laugh in unison at our flawed short-term memory. I take a drag, she takes a sip, and without a sound my listener postures herself as a deeply curious auditor, urging me to keep telling the story.

Lixi — "So then, this person, an adult in her early thirties now, sought after a perceived warmth of family. If she could not have one in her childhood, then she would make one of her own.

A father for four children, then the grown man left. She found another, married him, and borne another two children from her now-husband. They were a happy family, or so she thought, living in a middle-class housing neighborhood without the money to pay for it, cockroaches and dust growing, leaving a house to be derelict before they were forced to move out into a cheaper, rougher neighborhood.

And as they moved, a social worker moved to spy on them, and declared that the family was not happy. Her family then was no more, and her instruments to love now were merely instruments to the failure that became her life; that is, not by anyone except by her own standards."

Nekrichta — "Hm..." She contemplates for an instant. "You can't really hide the fiction of it well. I understand this is a real story. So I ask you, about the

husband: I expect something happened to him?"

Lixi — "A memory is a memory. The father was able to retrieve his two kids, and raised them with someone else."

Nekrichta — "What of the other kids?"

Lixi — "Who knows. I've yet to meet one of them again; I moved away long ago from all this. Do you think they could remember someone who once went to drink tea at their childhood house that was being progressively left in a derelict state? I would wager they'd rather forget some parts of living."

Nekrichta — "Hm. Maybe the title of your story should be 'Suffering,' or something."

Lixi — "Volume 27."

Nekrichta — "Chapter four."
She says it without missing a beat.

We laugh at the absurdity of tragedy, and in a way, of us being able to tell such stories in a place where stories once were. I suppose there's a lot of irony, to speak about things that once were, in places that now aren't.

I would be glad if we never were to be made as stories in the same way we told of them, but I suppose in some form or fashion, we will become stories no matter what, even if we were to hide. For them to be of

hope or despair, I don't really know who writes them, but I suppose it is of no matter all the same.

Nekrichta — "Guess it's my turn to say thank you for the story. But honestly, I think I preferred mine. Not ego flaunting, just that yours is too overly sad for me."

Lixi — "I understand. But don't worry, I didn't finish the story on purpose."

Nekrichta — "It gets hopeless?"

Lixi — "Do you really want to hear it?"

Nekrichta — "I don't know. Am I as curious as you?"

Lixi — "Well, I don't know if it counts as morbid curiosity, but you're not the one working in a funeral home."

Nekrichta — "Perhaps for the better."

Lixi — "Perhaps. I hope you keep on caring for your well-being, even if you have to go through intoxication. I know you're one to give compliments, so I want to give one as well: You're a kind person, Nekri."

Nekrichta — "You're too sweet. Do you not want a drink?"

Lixi — "No sweeter than what you're drinking.

Also, I'm driving you back home, remember?"

Nekrichta — "Not even a sip?"
She slightly nods her head, repeatedly.

Lixi — "Not even a sip."
I slightly shake my head left and right.

Nekrichta — "Hm. I'll offer you a bottle next time you stay at our home then."

Lixi — "I'm not one to drink, but I guess I can make an exception for you; just this once, though."
As I finish my sentence, Nekrichta smiles and attempts to tap on my shoulder in such a soft and candid way that her hand sways around, as the friction between skin and fabric occurs: low velocity and fumbled movements make her touch friendly and sweet, explicitly showing longing for a friend's heart in this night.

Nekrichta — "You better, and I hope you'll like what I'll get you."
Her hand stays there as if she forgot where it was, already taken hold as a place of comfort, not wanting to move. Her arm is asleep. And so I gently take her hand and slowly move it back to her side, before answering to her bantering threat:

Lixi — "Of course I will."

We exchange a look and a smile of appreciation.

The wind weaves once more through our hair, defining this night as a memory to dearly keep. I suppose that is how friendships are formed with her. I think I'd like to be a real friend to her.
There's maybe something about being one to Manifestations as well, even if it's like being friends with harbingers of nothingness.

But even then, there's something that's destructively, perhaps nihilistically 'cool' or absurdly 'crazy' about that sort of thing. Maybe I'm an idiot for feeling that way, and honestly, I don't really understand how this sort of thing comes to be. So I'm probably an idiot. I'd rather see them as friends rather than anything else, even if they are anything else.

As Oudis and Nekri would say... Friends are first and foremost friends, before anything else.

V — Grave Robbers

<< Dreams imprint themselves on leaves
Gone are they in the next winter as well.
Bark retaining memories:
Places that were,
Never meant to be again.
So, when the trees die,
What then? >>

April

This Saturday morning, the sky is blue. Little clouds. Gentle wind: spring.

A distant contentment fills me as Paragoria drives his car through the countryside forests and their old, narrow, asphalt roads. I am next to him, sitting in the passenger seat. The Manifestations are off to do their own thing, pursuing their goal without our assistance this time around.

Pariah wanted to show me a place he and Nekrichta said I "would probably like to see." They're always cryptic like this when they're together and speaking as one, but it's certainly not as full of euphemisms as when I first met Nekri. If Oudis didn't trust them either, I would have had a hard time accepting this offer. So unless they want to get rid of me — and I don't know why they would — this sounded tempting. Something a little strange, unfamiliar, somewhere, nowhere. So of course I would be curious; and soon here we will be.

On the way, we go through a small village with a few commercial things going on in there. It is a marketplace day, their bakery open and restaurant closed, as well as their grocery corner shop, butcher shop, and bookstore. He stops a little bit after this area, next to a worn-down sign that normally would indicate a tobacco shop. I'm surprised.

Lixi — "Thought you didn't smoke?"

Paragoria — "That hasn't changed. But I still owe a friend a carton of cigarettes. Do you want anything?"

Lixi — "I appreciate it, but no thank you — already got everything I need."

He nods and goes in through the open entrance, then comes back empty-handed about fifteen seconds later. I look at him with inquisitive eyes. He sees what I'm trying to say, looks away as if in shame, and off we go again.

Lixi — "Pariah. What was that? You went in there and left without anything?"

Paragoria — "Well... you know that sign? It was discolored for a reason."

Lixi — "Don't tell me..."

Paragoria — "Hmm. Went in there, saw what looked like a bar, and simply said hello to who I assumed was the shopkeeper cleaning the floor with a broom, and asked for a carton without missing a beat. Maybe I should have looked around a little more first, would have noticed it wasn't a shop..."

Lixi — "Oh, wow."

Paragoria — "Yeah..."

A few moments later, I couldn't help but burst out laughing. Maybe this silly mistake would encourage the new tenant or owner to get rid of that sign. I'll never know, but that sure is not something I ever thought Pariah would do.

He ended up smiling at his own mishap not long after; maybe my laugh was infectious.

Lixi — "I'm sorry, but I'll have to tell Nekri and Oudis about this... that's a rare one."

Paragoria — "Well... fair enough."

His cheeks are getting a little red. Guess this grizzled veteran isn't immune to feeling like this, after all.

The mood improved inside the car due to this mishap and our response to it: me pointing out the absurdity, and him accepting the aftermath — which is that he'll never hear the end of it, and it will be forever funny.

We don't exchange many words afterwards; after all, we still are who we are, but it matters not. We're still smiling, and to me, that is as loud as words and stories. It doesn't take too long afterwards to finally arrive at our actual destination.

A worn-down metal gate, a single rusted large bar blocking the path, a broken lock holding nothing together except some memory of how things might have been, long ago.

Pariah leaves the car to run as he exits the driver's seat and pushes the gate aside. He comes back without uttering a word. Neither do I, as I silently observe the surrounding nature and human leftovers scattered about: glass and plastic bottles, an old TV set for some reason, a pan, signs of a somewhat recent campfire... toilet paper bits hanging in low branches of bushes and growing young trees.

A hundred meters later, we can make out some sort of structure between the leaves and branches arching around the path itself. It gets a little too narrow for the car to be able to keep going through it, so we stop before it also gets too difficult to turn the car around.

I'm guessing the driver doesn't want to drive in reverse for too long a distance.

Lixi — "That's the place?"

Paragoria — "That's the place."

I look around as we move forward through the trees. Nothing catches my attention.

Now we see the house, or rather, what looks like a house — and probably was a house, without vegetation to block off the view. Surprisingly, nothing big grew that would impede or partly destroy the structure, but I suppose it will happen eventually. Which begs the question...

Lixi — "How long has this place been derelict for?"

Paragoria — "Hm... we last visited with Nekri about two or three years ago. First time we went there was around fifteen years before that. And as I recall... the real estate agent told us — and note that it hasn't changed much since then — that the place was abandoned for around thirty years."

Lixi — "Real estate?"

Paragoria — "Yeah, we were looking for cheap land to buy with Nekri and Oudis."

Lixi — "Wait... how long was Oudis with you for, and why didn't he move out sooner?"

Paragoria — "He's very attached to Nekrichta, and vice-versa, like siblings on friendly terms. He couldn't really bring himself to leave her, and considering the fact that they're probably immortal or something close to it, it didn't bother her or him."

Lixi — "Did it bother you?"

Paragoria — "Not really, we got used to each other pretty quickly. Just some nights with Nekri, we would have preferred for Oudis not to be here, but you know how these things are."

I'm probably supposed to agree or something. I don't really understand that sort of thing, but I can guess having a tall skeleton roam around the house when having an intimate moment is always going to be at least somewhat bothersome, to say the least.

Lixi — "Hmm." Affirmative mumbling. I'm pretty decent at not saying anything, I think.

Paragoria — "Anyway, we ended up buying our current house with the plot of land it was occupying. Light repairs were needed, but nothing too expensive. Compare it to this place, and no one wanted to buy the land because there are just way too many things to do, starting with taking care of this house."

We enter through the nonexistent front door. There, everywhere, lie things and furniture. Lots of

things, actually. Mold and rot on top of most of them. The would-be windows look like the entrance. If you breathe deeply, you can smell the mixture of a light musk smell, decaying flowers and the scent of a dusty, improperly maintained archive room; all cycling through fresh air with the wind going in and out the rectangle-shaped holes in the walls. This place certainly has a flair for screaming adjectives of dejectedness.

Paragoria — "I got to wonder if this place is even for sale anymore."

There indeed is a sign near the gate that read "for sale" with the agency name on it. However, the sign itself is heavily tilted and completely asymmetrical with the horizontal bar-gate, paralleling to the ground right beneath it. With signs of decomposition and discoloration so clear that the green of the grass touching it, it has started to merge with its whites.

As for the agency name itself... a quick glance at it reminds me of the afternoons I spent looking around for a place of my own. I know a lot of agency names because of it; however, this one I do not recall.

Lixi — "The agency that sold it... do they still exist?"

Paragoria — "I believe they renamed the company after selling it. It was a local entity, but they also had some shady dealings with some government officials way back when. Probably why the new owner changed the name: the locals must have known more than what

was kept in records."

Lixi — "You think anything will ever be done with this place?"

Paragoria — "Not as long as no one wants to do anything with it. For now it's just an attraction for trespassers... like you and I, I guess, in this case. No idea how long it will be kept this way. Maybe the agency forgot about it, and it's at the bottom of listings you can only access if you go to them in real life, instead of through websites."

Lixi — "I see."

There isn't much to say. Just guesswork, and even then, it's probably not very interesting.

"It's definitely a curious place, at least. Do you know the story of it?"

In the clutter of things left in piles and in hurries, you can make out general shapes of things that would have belonged to a teaching facility of some kind.

Paragoria — "If I can recall... it was a teaching facility of some kind." That's funny.

"Some association dispensing art classes back whenever this wasn't what it is now, as well as a lodging. All for who? I don't know, but you know how it's been in the countryside over the decades. People leave for towns and cities, as the rest grows an older population and loses all it had over the years, bit by bit..."

Lixi — "You sound a little bitter when you say that."

Paragoria — "Do I? Sorry. Hm... maybe I am a bit bitter. Grew up in a village; we had festivals and community events. It was a real place to live in. By real, I mean... I don't know what I mean by real. Nothing seems real anymore to me. Haha — probably just silly memories."

Pariah stares at a wall, standing proudly, head tilted a tad upwards, with his eyebrows arched; a nostalgic, wistful look. I look at him, or rather at his singular eye.

Lixi — "I don't know if it's not something I should ask, but your eye... what happened to it?"

Paragoria — "Oh... I guess I never told you. Nekri hasn't either?"

Lixi — "No, she speaks of you but rarely for you, and never when it comes to these things."

Paragoria — "She's quite a wonderful person. I try to do the same as she does for me, but sometimes I feel a little... maybe too protective towards her. Even though she could beat anyone up with ease. Drunken grace she has when it comes to fighting. You know how I was in the military?"

Lixi — "Heard mentions of it but the past is the past, and I guess I'm only curious about it now. If you

want to talk about it, of course."

Paragoria — "Certainly. You've been trustworthy and kind to us since we met you. I guess it's no surprise Oudis trusts you, and that's also why I wanted to show you this place. Before I tell you my missing eye's story, what do you think of this ruin?"

Lixi — "It has a charm to it. It's very peaceful; haven't noticed even a bird's nest, or even traces of deer and boars coming through here. Maybe there are, but I didn't catch them. I can understand why people stop by to spend some time here near these... what should they be called... crumbling memories? Or are they really memories, given that they encompass learning times and dreams that were had at nights? Dreams themselves are all forgotten and never remembered anyway, and if they are, it's all corroded so much more heavily by the passage of time. By now, here this place has nothing left, except the scent of the last person looking at it before leaving it to ruin: apathy."

Paragoria stands there, looking at me with widely open pupils.

Paragoria — "Hm. Honestly, didn't expect you to go that deep with your analysis."

Lixi — "Is it surprising?"

Paragoria — "Yes. Pleasantly. Now I understand why Nekri and Oudis like you as much as they do."

It's true I never 'properly' talked with Pariah, ever since we met. Always we were accompanied by Oudis or Nekri, and if we were separated, it was only with one of the two, or alone as we lead our lives. Or at least I decided to live alone here and there for some days. This is then the first time where there's just the two of us, even though it's been many a week since that — ... is it corny to say 'fateful night'? Nothing much really happened since then, let's be honest. We're on a quest to accompany some living or not living things (which is still confusing to me) on their quest to find a way to bring an end to life. Sure is not something you want to tell anyone about, though — which is easy, considering how small my circle of friends is.

Lixi — "That's nice to hear, I think." I unconsciously take out one of my pocket lighters and a small cigarette holder. What time is it? Does my body want a nicotine hit already? Hm. Guess I should ask if Pariah wants any.

"Want a smoke?"

I don't even know if he smokes...

Paragoria — "No, thank you. Stopped smoking."

Lixi — "Oh. Does it bother you if I smoke? I'll just hold off, if so."

Paragoria — "No, I don't mind it. That reminds me that Oudis used to smoke."

Lixi — "He still does, you know?" I take out a cigarette and put away the holder.

Paragoria — "Really? He told me he quit soon before leaving our shared home."

Lixi — "He probably quit quitting after meeting me then."

Paragoria — "Aren't you an influence on him..."

Lixi — "Am I?" I point at my filter-less cancer stick and light it up.

Paragoria softly laughs. He goes to take a chair that was resting diagonally on a wall, places it in the middle of a clutter-free patch on the floor, and sits on it.

Paragoria — "So... the story. I guess... hm... my missing eye first. I'll be honest, it's nothing fancy; just a stupid accident. Although I was in special forces for the military of our country, it's a stupid misfiring incident that made it happen."

As Pariah talks and as I listen, I go to slowly grab another chair, dusting it off with the back of my hand, and sitting on it, facing him. What a scene. Two people talking face-to-face, sitting on old wooden chairs in the middle of a destroyed and rotting industrial-looking forest lodge. What a weird thing for this building to even be here in the first place... It sure fits better when it's like this, at least.

Paragoria — "Simply, I was at the firing range, testing different weapons, and out of complacency, I didn't check the weapon system properly. Took aim, fired... misfired completely, actually. Long story short, the rifle blew up in my face. I don't know if I got blinded instantly, as I couldn't even open my eye properly for a long while. Well, not that it mattered to the administration. 'Chief-Sergeant Erimos had a misfiring incident, blinding him partially. Unable to properly conduct ground operations' or something along those lines."

Lixi — "Wait... your family name is Erimos?"

Paragoria — "It is."

Lixi — "That's a nice name. Anyway, sorry for interrupting."

Paragoria — "No problem. But yeah, couldn't keep on going in the war, and my contract was close to expiring anyway."

Lixi — "The war? Which one were you a part of?"

Paragoria — "Just one operation; I'd rather not disclose where."

Lixi — "'Just'... you don't have to be humble about it."

Paragoria — "Probably. Anyway, yeah. All things considered, I haven't done much during that time, considering my short stay. I do remember one time when I was asked to lead a squad, protecting a reporter with us as we conducted a hostage escorting operation."

Lixi — "Escorting and escorting?"

Paragoria — "Yeah, pretty much. With another squad we rounded up a village because of known insurgents hiding amongst the population there. Our squad was tasked with escorting them to the closest base we had to sort all of this out, so that we could let the actual civilians go as soon as possible. We had this set up this way because... our more 'traditional' method of dealing with such situations wasn't really possible with the added political weight of having a stupid reporter with us."

Lixi — "Was it that bothersome?"

Paragoria — "Yes. Absolutely. We could have been much more efficient instead of threading along and waiting for transport for hours on end. We could have avoided what happened during the wait, and even if it was to happen, we could have dealt with it properly on the spot, and not let the situation fester."

Lixi — "What happened there?"

Paragoria — "Do you really want to know?"

Lixi — "You made me curious, so yes."

Paragoria — "Alright. The insurgents really were in the many dozens of villagers we had in what amounts to... temporary prisoners, I suppose. But with so many, of course we didn't have ways of restraining them. In the middle of it — and we saw it too late, which is probably what you get when so few people have to look after so many others — rape was occurring."

Silence for a brief moment. My arms tense up and my spine jolts with a slow-moving anger. I take a heavy drag off my cigarette in an attempt to relax my tensing body.

Lixi — "What did you do?"

Paragoria — "On the spot? Separated them. Our translator tried to comfort the victim. We told him to translate that we would deal with the situation when we got them all to base, and that because of the reporter there, we couldn't do it then.

Trust me, we really wanted to execute that fucker right then and there. Whether or not he was a terrorist at that point didn't matter. We saw it, everybody saw it, none could do anything but watch because they feared the perpetrator and us as well. Least we could do was help settle the blood debt that right there was created."

Lixi — "A political move to wait, then, I assume."

Paragoria — "Very much so. Putting on

appearances, and now we were stuck between a rock and a hard place. To do what was right and to be stepped on by the pressure of public perception. I'd have shot the reporter too, honestly; that piece of shit was just a snake in wait, with big, oogly eyes and questions only to throw dirt at my brothers-in-arms.

Anyway. Once this mission was over, and the reporter was out of sight — and before delivering the hostages back to their villages after sorting out the insurgents — we dealt with the rapist in front of those villagers."

Lixi — "Execution then?"

Paragoria — "Of course."

Lixi — "Did you pull the trigger?"

Paragoria — "We asked the victim, then her family, and they refused. It was a corporal who shot the perpetrator... which I apologize to the soldier in the wind now, for I forgot his name — but yes. Was it the right thing to do? I don't know. Was it right for us to be there in the first place? I don't know either. It's easy for anyone to argue that it wouldn't have happened if we didn't conduct this mission in the first place. Or to be conducting the operation. Or to have joined the war. Or to have a war at all. But... pawns and politics. Numbers. Something."

Lixi — "Yeah. I think I can understand that sort of thing. Maybe that's why we call it a war theater?"

Paragoria — "Could be. It's certainly entertaining enough to the outside onlooker. Bunch of fuckwits, if you ask me, but that's probably because all this has real consequences. Though they're not consequences for the civilians outside of these war-torn places."

Lixi — "Suppose so. What happened to that corporal anyway?"

Paragoria — "He got blown up by an IED during a mission right before I ended my service. At least he died instantly."

Lixi — "I see."

Paragoria — "Hm."

We look down at each other's feet for a little while. Maybe Pariah isn't at peace with these memories. Yet the atmosphere is not one of regret, or frustration, or anything, really. Something simply matter-of-fact.

The wind gently blows here and there, making any tension quickly dissipate as the sound of songbirds chirping remind us that we are not living stories, but simply living beings, somewhere, nowhere.

Paragoria — "What about your eye, though? I know you have a glass eye, but you never really mentioned anything about it."

Lixi — "I suppose I should tell you about it as well

then."

Paragoria — "If you want to."

Lixi — "Well, it was an accident as well. Stupid one."

Paragoria — "There are no intelligent accidents."

Lixi — "True, very true. Just a coworker in a previous job I had handed me a cutter when I was crouched down, trying to open a cardboard box. You can guess what happened."

Paragoria — "How does this even happen?"

Lixi — "Messy movement, lack of attention, compounding fatigue at the end of a harsh week... just a lot of mistakes piling up and ending up toppling down the security of the mundane."

Paragoria — "It was at a workplace... did you sue them?"

Lixi — "Did you try to get anything out of your own accident?"

Paragoria — "No. Was my fault for not taking the job seriously during that time. I'm sure the higher-ups were happy for me not to say anything."

Lixi — "Same here. Well, that coworker doesn't

talk to me anymore; maybe he feels guilty. But I don't talk to any of my old coworkers anyway, as I just used to jump from workplace to workplace. So, who's to say?"

Paragoria — "Indeed... hm... how much money is daddy government giving you per month?"

Lixi — "A bunch, not as much as others, considering I work on the side. You?"

Paragoria — "Same."

Lixi — "That enough for your bills?"

Paragoria — "Oh, absolutely. Not for you?"

Lixi — "It is too. It's just sometimes you hear of handicapped people not having enough to keep on going."

Paragoria — "Well, I don't know about them. Maybe I'll be extreme but, when you see people not able to do anything except just stay at home and get paid for existing in a lesser state — and let us be honest, this is what a handicap is in my eye — they often get trapped within their own mind or other people's parasitic desires, and just... hm... let's just say I don't trust any of them."

Lixi — "You know many would chastise you for saying something like this."

Paragoria — "Would they? You know these people don't think and just use rhetoric without even knowing they're using it. They get spoon-fed inhumanities while pretending to be compassionate, then they wonder why they got fat and aren't willing to lose the added weight. Or if they start doing, they stop quickly because it's too hard to put in the effort to do right by the world."

I laugh a little at his harsh words. Tapping on my cigarette away from my face, the clumped ash falls down on the ground, bouncing a little and then sitting still to be picked up by the next gust of light wind.

Lixi — "You sound like an old grumpy man."

Paragoria — "Am I not?"

As he finishes his sentence, I cross my arms and legs, analyzing him for a few seconds. Then I answer:

Lixi — "I guess you may be... well, the white hair strands... the eye... the wrinkles... the persistent, wistful look... not very helpful to convey your youthfulness, I guess."

He laughs a little. Getting up from the chair he was sitting on, he puts it back exactly to where it was. I follow suit but leave my chair there, then dust myself off, although there's nothing on my clothing.

Lixi — "So. What was the purpose of bringing me here, really?"

Paragoria — "Do you think there's any?"

Lixi — "Well... one could say it's about what we're doing to help Nekri and Oudis. But..."

Paragoria — "Yeah. It's not that. I just like the feel of the place. Wanted to see it again, thought about asking you to tag along, since I also wanted to speak with you."

Lixi — "The atmosphere of the place..."

I spot near a corner what looks like an old canvas, on top of a wooden furniture. Or rather in the middle of a pile of broken-down wooden furniture. Approaching it, without touching it, I spot spots of colors. Green, blue... blue, green. A little orange... or light brown? Looks shiny enough; probably was varnished. But it's weird, I can't tell anything from what this was supposed to be.

I point at the painting and turn to Paragoria:

Lixi — "Say, do you think someone could have applied varnish after finding this?"

Paragoria — "I don't know why they would, but people have done weirder things. It's kind of nice, actually, if that's the case. Like preserving a dissipating memory in amber."

Lixi — "Hm. The dissolution of the flesh through the passage of overgrown time."

Paragoria — "You spend a lot of time with Nekri, do you not?"

Lixi — "Says the man that sleeps in her bed and goes to poetry nights for her sake."

Paragoria — "Fair enough." A little smiles draws itself on the corner of his mouth.

Curious me, curious me, can't help but ask a question to be...

Lixi — "How is she?"

Paragoria — "Hm?"

Lixi — "Nekri, I mean. As a partner."

Paragoria — "Why do you ask? Do you want to date Oudis or something?"

Lixi — "He wouldn't be a great partner, but he's a great friend...I think. Plus, I'm not into that sort of thing. Him being a skeleton doesn't help; he gets to be pretty cold, although I suppose that makes two of us."

Paragoria — "Really? Not into romance? Would rather be alone?"

Lixi — "Yes. The idea is nice, and I had my time with it, but that's just it: a nice idea. Though when I see

you guys, I wonder about it, if it really is just an idea."

Paragoria — "It's a lot of things to deal with. Duties. You know already, Nekri is a handful. But her heart is pure and so full of hope that it drives me to make her the happiest she could ever be. Problem is... how can you make her happy? The Manifestation of Hope, or well, that's her surname anyway — you can only make her happy if the future is bright, I would assume."

Lixi — "Isn't this at odds with what we're helping them to do?"

Paragoria — "I'm not so sure. I haven't seen her as content as she is now in a long, long time. Last time she was smiling this often was when she wasn't too disenchanted with the age we currently live in. Certainly she always has her melancholic tendencies, but there's nothing that her hopeful nature can't push through."

Lixi — "You think it means anything?"

We stand in the middle of this crumbled dwelling, a few meters away from each other, surrounded by dilapidated marine-colored walls with a bright cyan sky peeking through the holes in the so-called 'roof' and green leaves flowing with the wind, looking at us through the empty window frames.

Paragoria — "I know Oudis and her enough now to

know that they'll succeed in what they want to do, if they want to. But I know Nekri more, and I can tell you that... the future, as short or as long as it may end up being, is the brightest there is. I'm inclined to help her, even if it means what it means. I want to believe in her, and I want to believe it's worth it. All of this."

Lixi — "I see."

Another catchphrase for me... saying 'I see' as I acknowledge an answer that was given, without anything to say after it, as a point to end a conversation that was started. But that's what it is, so is there anything else to be said? It's sweet, soft, and lonely in some strange way.

And maybe that's just it. We're here, meters apart, living lonely lives with beings living their own, somewhat similarly lonely lives. Brought all together just so we can make everything not lonely by simply not being able to be lonely anymore. It's a strange thing, a silly conclusion, but in some way, how could there be pain if there cannot be any pain in the first place? Maybe that's what they're going for. A stupid, simple conclusion like that.

To seek out simplicity after unneeded complexity. The tendency to reverse the tendency to overcomplicate things. The deconstruction of fractals by removing all the dimensions they exist in. Purity in nullity. Peace. Nothing.

The idea is simple, but it makes me deeply uncomfortable in some ways, as much as it makes me desire it immensely. A very strange feeling. Perhaps I

need time to organize my thoughts. But how much time?

Lixi — "Maybe I'll take some time away from all of what we've been doing; all of you, too. Maybe a week or two. Probably two."

Paragoria — "What's up with the sudden withdrawal?"

Lixi — "I just... it's just that I'm not sure I've yet to make my mind about any of this, really."

Pariah ponders for a moment.

Paragoria — "I understand. I would have done the same, were I not caring for Nekri."

Lixi — "Even for a few days, you can't leave?"

Paragoria — "We tried a few times, but when I came back, each time was a complete disaster. In some ways, she's very reliant on company. Although... now that Oudis is back..."

Lixi — "Well, something to talk about with them. I'll do the same. You're still unsure about this whole thing, are you not?"

Paragoria — "Of course. I don't think it right, and I don't feel it right either. But still... I'm also duty-bound to do what I said I would do."

Lixi — "For these sorts of things... I know I'm no one, but can I urge you to consider the possibility of breaking your... 'oath,' for lack of a better word, just this once? You know the gravity of the situation we're in. We could abscond here and now and leave without a trace, which I don't see happening, given who we say we are — or we could be civil about it and talk about our reluctance to keep going at the moment. Or... just keep on going. The goal itself is driving us and giving us some form of purpose, and maybe that's the biggest thing for us. Like a flytrap."

Paragoria — "I know we don't have to see this to its conclusion, that we can stop and leave. I know Nekri is also hesitant, but she's beholden to Oudis. And there's something else... even Oudis, I think he's hesitant about doing this."

Lixi — "The one who wants to do this doesn't really want to?"

Paragoria — "Yes. As much as he suffers, he also doesn't want to offload his only solution to the world. A big part of him wants it to stop, and another part, albeit lesser, wants life to end more... shall we say, naturally."

Lixi — "Hm... do you think Nekrichta is there to stop him from fulfilling his goal?"

Paragoria — "Could be. Also to provide emotional support. Were she completely human, I'd say she would

be one of the greatest people I've ever had the pleasure of knowing. Although she has quite the negative sides to her, but still — even if she's needy, clumsy, and a drunkard, she's really lovely."

Were it any other person, I'd be thinking he's just infatuated with her. But his overly honest and steadfast demeanor makes me believe he just sublimed her more bothersome traits to be something that he gets to love — although, only because it is her. An interesting way to turn around negatives into positives. But it's clearly been working for both of them.

Lixi — "So you're also the emotional support for Nekri, then?"

Paragoria — "Like a partner is supposed to be there for their partner, and vice-versa. Kind of a silly question."

Lixi — "Yeah, it is. Just thought it was funny, like a chain of emotional support." I smile as I say this.

Paragoria — "Hmm." Neutral expression.

Well, at least I tried to make it funny... oh well, noting down that this isn't his type of humor.

The following silence would have been a little awkward if it weren't for the fact that now, Paragoria is pacing around the cyan ruins. I dare not utter a word, as I see his face slightly contorts to that of a worried man. If he trusts me enough, he will speak before long. Until

then, I suppose I should think about some way to accommodate his seemingly building anguish. Well, I should do so, but like an idiot, I stand still and watch him walk back and forth, wondering what he may or may not say.

Eventually, he stops, looks up through the half-collapsed roof, and a moment later, speaks again:

Paragoria — "Time flies by."

Lixi — "There something specific on your mind for you to say that right after your drawn circles?"

Pariah lowers his gaze and looks at me.

Paragoria — "Hm." Affirmative humming.

"Apologies for not saying anything, and also thank you for not saying anything either... and yes. Specific enough."

Lixi — "Guess bringing back memories can hit a little hard in some spots."

Paragoria — "It certainly can."

Lixi — "You wanna sit again?"

Paragoria — "I think I'd like that."

We get back to where we were, take back our chairs, and sit down again.

A dozen or so seconds pass as the man in front of

me tries to find a point to start talking on. Hesitations, face changes — he's not quite sure. But finally, he starts:

Paragoria — "Time flies by... Time slips by, rather. Been many years since we came here first, and as for many memories, it still feels like it wasn't that long ago. I can even recall the real estate agent's face, for some reason... also recalling he wasn't much into fitness. Wonder if he's had health issues since then. Anyway, I'm getting side-tracked. Or maybe not, actually. I'm just confused about the passage of time."

Lixi — "Well... I can't tell you much. You've been alive longer than I, probably something like twice as long. So I don't have the experience to commiserate or encourage you, I don't think; not on this, at least. But maybe no one really can, except perhaps those that lost it all already?"

Paragoria — "If they lost it all, wouldn't they be dead?"

Lixi — "Hm, yeah, but like... tragedy struck and they lost everything except their will to live and start anew."

Paragoria — "Strong folks. Then I'm not sure if they worry about time at all."

Lixi — "Maybe that's the thing."

Paragoria — "Hm... maybe. But not worrying about

that sort of thing, how is it even possible?"

Lixi — "Not sure."

Paragoria — "Maybe they... maybe they plug their ears and put a blindfold on, singing loudly when they realize one day that three years went by in the blink of an eye, and they can't even remember what happened last week."

Lixi — "Sounds like a plan, honestly. If it avoids them the pain of anguish, it's probably a fair plan. What else is there to do anyway?"

Paragoria — "Indeed. What else is there to do... but to have to deal with the knowledge of time passing by without you being able to do anything about it except wail and yelp in the middle of a room cycling between filling and emptying room."

Lixi — "Subtly emptying more and more until there's just you, and if you are lucky, someone else, during the last days in that room before it crumbles."

Paragoria — "Someone else... something else... nothing else."

Lixi — "Pariah."

Paragoria — "Yes?"

Lixi — "You'll always have Nekri."

Paragoria — "Maybe. But she'll be alone, eventually."

Lixi — "That... may be true. Oudis?"

Paragoria — "There's no telling who will disappear first. Him or her. Probably her, I'd imagine"

Lixi — "So she would not necessarily be alone."

Paragoria — "Well... let me put it this way. Friends are friends, they are wonderful and we love them deeply with all our heart. They are one of the strongest bonds one can possess, I believe."

Lixi — "Okay... wouldn't that tick the box?"

Paragoria — "Not exactly if they're not at your side near constantly."

I rub my forehead for a bit, perplexed by his lack of faith in our common friend.

Lixi — "I understand you're worrying for what picture will Nekri be painting after your departure, and while I don't think it's going to be blues, reds, sunshine, happiness, either; please trust Oudis like he trusts you. They've spent millenniums together — why would he suddenly leave if you leave? Be hopeful."

Paragoria slumps his head and silence permeates the

surrounding crumbled structure for a moment.

Paragoria — "You kind of sound like Nekri here. She would say the same thing, though..."

Lixi — "More poetically?" I smile at him.

Paragoria — "Most likely." He looks at me and smiles back.

Lixi — "Look, I don't have much experience with people, as I don't really like going into relationships at all. Again the idea is nice, but the other human I tend to eventually dislike. Not because they are, but because they're here with me. Need solitude, you know? Well, by solitude, I mean distant communication — few messages every other day. So I don't really know how you're supposed to deal with what you're going through exactly, but I figure that both Oudis and Nekri can very much be content without anyone. There's no way they haven't made peace with loneliness in some way."

Paragoria — "You're probably right. I shouldn't be gloomy about that sort of thing. She'll be alright no matter what."

I look through one of the curtainless windows for an instant.

Lixi — "You don't want her to find another person after you, do you?"

Paragoria — "No, not really. That's not the crux of the issue, I believe, but maybe that's also part of it."

Lixi — "How many partners did she have before? You ever asked?"

Paragoria — "Yeah. Perhaps surprisingly, at least it was to me, and even out of my insecurities I asked our friendly skeleton — but she had about one partner every three or four centuries."

Lixi — "Oh, she must take a long time to come to terms with loss."

Paragoria — "It seems that way. One of her friends died early on during our relationship, and it took her a while to make her peace with it. It wasn't until this friend's sister — who also knew her somewhat well — came to her and talked about that friend's dreams, achievements, how she regarded life, and even how she saw Nekri as a friend."

Lixi — "Seems to be the spell to break her free from sorrow."

Paragoria — "And it makes sense for her."

Lixi — "The Manifestation embodying hope... in despair, quickly delivered by hope."

Paragoria — "Yes."

Lixi — "Hmm. Does make sense."

Another moment of silence. A topic to be discussed. A decision to leave. What will we say?

Lixi — "What will we say..."

Paragoria — "Sorry?"

Lixi — "Hm? Oh, was I thinking out loud?"

Paragoria — "You were."

Lixi — "Oh. Yeah... was wondering what should we say next, actually."

Paragoria — "Well... was wondering the same."

I stretch and yawn with a hand in front of my mouth, and my conversational friend does the same after me. Maybe, if a deer were looking through one of the windows' frames, it would yawn too.

Lixi — "What else is there to say?"

Paragoria — "I don't know."

He gets up and goes to the entrance of the inhabitable place and stands outside, back turned, likely waiting for me.

I follow suit and exit as well. Standing next to him, I ask:

Lixi — "What was there to see here, anyway?"

Paragoria — "What we saw, and that's about it. Don't you think it's a nice place?"

Lixi — "Even the memories there started to melt away; I'm not sure I would call it nice. But cool? Yeah, it's a pretty cool place."

Paragoria — "Then that's nice."

I recall the time I spent a night with Nekri in the empty parking lot...

Lixi — "Say, do you take from Nekri? In how you speak, I mean?"

Paragoria — "Probably a bit, and I'd assume vice-versa. Why?"

Lixi — "You just said the exact same thing she said to me a while back."

Paragoria — "Oh! That's more of an inside joke between us, but we use it sometimes because it sounds alright to use outside of that context."

Lixi — "Guess it works. Anyway, ready to leave?"

Paragoria — "Yeah. Let's go."

We walk back the distance, walking through the trees, and get to the car. Nothing new of note in the short time we spent. All this driving for a dozen or so minutes elsewhere, though I guess fuel is of no concern to Pariah.

Paragoria — "Just gotta go take a piss."

Lixi — "Sure, go ahead."

Got no desire to empty the bladder myself, and worst case scenario, we'll just stop by the road.

I realize today is not much of a day where we think about big things. We just swam in memories that were already half-rotten and half-gone, and... I already forgot I was in that crumbling, boarding house.

As I scan the surrounding forest, I notice a colored bump that seems to be buzzing. Blue and orange. I get a little closer to it and realize quickly enough that those are all butterflies. And if they're all clustered together like this, it can only mean there is a corpse there. Perhaps Pariah would be curious to see this? I sure am, now, as morbid as it may be.

I turn back and see him coming my way. He probably noticed that I noticed something.

Lixi — "Hey Pariah, there's something there. Butterflies everywhere."

Paragoria — "Hm... wanna bet?"

Lixi — "On?"

Paragoria — "What's under them."

Lixi — "No."

Paragoria — "Hm, alright. No fun."

Lixi — "Yeah I just want to get to it. Is it not interesting enough as it is? No need to spice it up."

Paragoria — "A little spice for a little life."

Lixi — "Ironic, considering what the butterflies are drinking from."

We walk towards the impromptu nest of colored insect wings. Few meters later, they notice and scare themselves away. The living blanket is gone, and what was hidden beneath is shown again, naked to the world — and to us — for the first time.

Paragoria — "I lost my own bet."

Lixi — "What did you think it was?"

Paragoria — "A deer."

A boar was left there, entrails open, bleeding from every orifice, drying and dried blood splattered around, reflexive and emotional tears under its eyes.

Paragoria — "Of all the beasts that could have been here and be like this, a boar?"

Lixi — "Its death couldn't have been nice."

Paragoria — "I assume it's a recent enough kill. Already torn open, and the butterflies were already here."

Death is always sad to see for me. It's always harsh and difficult when you see a human, especially a child in a coffin; but nevertheless, an animal corpse, or even an insect corpse... it doesn't fly under my radar. I notice them. Of course I don't get as sad for insects as I would for a human, but still. They were alive too. A nest of dead wasps is still saddening to see, in my eyes, even if it's to a lesser extent.

I crouch near the dead boar and just look at it. Paragoria joins me and squats to become another crouching spectator of reality. Neither of us seems troubled by the corpse's smell, perhaps proof enough that we're too used to dealing with death in such a manner.

Paragoria — "Nekri once told me something; it stuck with me."

Lixi — "What did she say?"

Paragoria — "I quote: 'In the morning it feels like coming into a clearing, and the disorientation lingers only for a breath.'"

Lixi — "Hm... did you replace morning with mourning?"

Paragoria — "Yeah. She didn't mean it like that, but I took it like that."

Lixi — "It does smell pretty terrible." I playfully smirk.

Pariah laughs a little. It distances us from the subject matter, even though we were close to it. Makes the weight of the atmosphere lighter.

Paragoria — "Look at the insects. A feast for the ages; always, for them."

Lixi — "You know when I see them just eat and plant their eggs or whatever, I wonder if they have taste buds."

Paragoria — "Fuck I hope not."

Lixi — "Same. Glad we like what we like to eat... a rotting boar corpse doesn't look very appetizing."

Paragoria — "Maybe we were born part of the wrong species. Bet they're having a swell time not knowing what is happening, except that they get to have it all for themselves."

Lixi — "Maybe. I've seen similar things. Human

bodies being eaten by uninvited crawlers. Corpse left there, forgotten for an hour too long."

Paragoria — "Yeah. I get that."

Lixi — "I'm not too surprised. How did you deal with it?"

Paragoria — "I didn't."

Things were as they were; are as they are. Yet again, what else is there to say? A life is a life until it isn't, then nothing can be done.

We keep on looking, onlookers observing, slight changes in our squatting and crouching positions to not be too uncomfortable over time.

There is nothing to add to it. It's a spontaneous meditation on life. When we see this, the dead don't speak, so why should we?

And as such, perhaps the birds see this as well. The chirping surrounding us directly has ceased, and a stillness instilled itself. For however long will this last? Until the spell breaks, an agreement in its silence has been made: a few minutes here, looking at this, wondering how it came to be, what it is, and when will it be no more.

The eventual disappearance of a being that used to live. A mother, as Pariah noticed, pointing out the open belly and unborn squeakers. Flies and maggots were obscuring my view, and I was a little too focused on looking at the agonized face. A mother has died, and her children will never know the pain of life. Perhaps it was

the best that could have happened to them, in this case.

When you see this sort of thing, are you supposed to stay for longer? Be sadder? I do not know. Maybe it's too much at this point, and we default to apathy. I know I do. A defensive mechanism like that, I understand its purpose, but it now makes me unable to fully understand what is in front of me. I wish I could feel this, even if it broke me then and there. I would at least understand. Maybe it's stupid to feel this way from a boar, but when I see this, I can't help but recall the numerous corpses that I've seen in my line of work. For some reason, this boar has more weight to its death than many. Maybe it has to do with its natural find as well? Maybe it's something else. Whatever the case may be, I am affected; that I know for sure.

Some time passes by in silence. A silent goodbye to an animal we never knew, we never cared about, and that some would be told to hate. Valid, I suppose, but I am not a hunter, nor a farmer, nor do I own a forest, so I do not know if I am well-placed to hate them.

The trees themselves seem affected by this loss...and many more that we cannot see from here. The rustling of the leaves by light gusts of winds intruding in the middle of the forest, fitting for this time of the year... and as fittingly, something from the canopy descends upon the skin, reaching us in communion: sorrow permeates the trees.

Nevertheless, we now get up from our lowered position, and without a word, we go back to the car. As I'm pondering things and nothings all at once, time seems to compress itself, and when I come to, we already

are on the road. Not a word has been said; it is as if we are coming back from a burial.

Paragoria — "Do you think we should continue down the path of helping our friends?"

I take a few seconds before answering with a non-answer:

Lixi — "Should we..."

Paragoria — "I understand their aim is not to kill, simply rather to render everything inert."

Lixi — "No more offspring from anything or anyone... sure sounds more peaceful than what that boar and its unborn children went through."

Paragoria — "So?"

Lixi — "Hm? Sorry, I guess I haven't answered yet. Well... I don't know. Maybe."

Paragoria — "Still uncertain as well?"

Lixi — "Yeah."

Paragoria — "And to think it's been months now since we've been on the fence."

Lixi — "Will it ever change?"

Paragoria — "Maybe at the very last minute."

Lixi — "Wouldn't that be funny..."

Paragoria — "Probably. But honestly, we'll most likely hesitate no matter what. Like we don't want to do anything; otherwise we'd be responsible in some way for whatever happens. Even though we already entangled ourselves willingly into all of this."

Lixi — "We're kinda stupid, aren't we?"

Paragoria — "We sure are."

We laugh, as the sound of the road reels under the car wheels. The painting of the forest landscape changes at such speeds that it's hypnotizing. I don't think there's much else to say or to add in this moment. Maybe weather talk, maybe something useless once more. Something to occupy the mind and forget, yet again. Perhaps that's what we'll want soon enough with Pariah, and thus, that's what we'll do. Until then... I guess we'll stay here, floating and sitting on an iron machine, in a silence blurred by a roaring engine.

#

— Derelict Hearts —

VI — Waning Veils

<< Clothed in the skin of the dead,
Memories disguised as brief lights.
Cinders of moments past;
Love letter burial.
Unstrung sentences:
Immobile wanders. >>

May

My fast slumber is broken by noise in the room next to me. Under or to the right, or maybe the left — don't know and don't care — it's noisy and annoying. Thumps and moans, and it's... well, it's not my home after all. What time is it? I look at the window, of which I forgot to close the curtains before getting under covers; it's still night. The stars shine boldly and the actual moon, as well, is no different. A waning moon, full only two nights ago, inviting still the dreamer to stay awake and bask in the sleepless shine of a lightened darkness. As well, late spring, in which the climate is warm enough to not be bothered in the least by stepping outside. And I think that I will take this

invitation, as my neighbors are too busy losing themselves within this season's heat.

Without checking the time, I simply put on a jacket and go downstairs to the kitchen. Noises of the entrance door opening or closing are heard — must be Oudis. He never sleeps, after all.

Now that I've been here in this house enough times, spending days and nights at Pariah's and Nekri's home, I got used to knowing where... a few things are. Namely, as most importantly they would be: coffee, toilets, and the door to leap outside.

I bring them a lot of coffee, at least a tin every time I come, since they're always almost out each time — and I mean, it's the least I can do as a guest, even if they say I don't need to bring anything ever. With that in mind, I don't have an issue with preparing coffee with what I purchased, although I guess it's not exactly mine, since it's for the actual inhabitants of the house? Hm, we never really talked about important coffee boundaries but... well, they'll have to excuse me for being woken up by their night escapade. I'll just buy them one more tin extra next time I go shopping for the place here.

Before I dose the coffee though, I should check outside, see if Oudis is sitting at the front of the house, and if he wants to share a brew.

As I open the door to the half-asleep outside, I am greeted by a gentle gust of wind, strong enough only for its presence to be noticed, as the kind caress of a moment in time... closing my eyes and taking in the air tide, I realize... now only, the uncaring gentleness is

already gone and forgotten.

Opening my eyes, shaking the feeling, I look to my left and see Oudis, simply sitting on the lone stone bench near the entry steps.

Lixi — "Hey. Wanna share some coffee?"

Oudis — "Always."

Lixi — "Alright. Say, before that, I'm curious... I know you don't sleep, but then, does Nekri need sleep?"

Oudis — "Oh, she doesn't. You know how close she can get to people, and especially to one soul in particular. She just prefers to spend her time with said soul, if able. Not that she necessarily dreams every night, but she definitely has the ability to do so. Now, I don't know what she dreams about; I never inquired. But I envy her; sometimes I wish I could dream, so that I wouldn't have to deal with..."

A pause, considering what he wants to say before saying anything. He doesn't need to say anything — I can guess: memories of so many souls, all swirling in a vortex of turmoil and regrets.

"Well, never mind that. So, all in all, Nekri just wants to spend time with Pariah."

Lixi — "Oh, they're spending time together alright."

Oudis — "They're fucking?"

Lixi — "They're fucking."

Oudis — "Blame the...almost-full moon."

Lixi — "Spring too?"

Oudis — "Sure isn't going to help your sleep. I take it you're not planning on sleeping at all tonight then?"

Lixi — "Nah, I'll just nap sometime in the morning quickly. Had at least... *some* rest time. When did we all go to our rooms anyway?"

Oudis — "Sorry, forgot."

Lixi — "Eh, it's alright. The night is certainly nice."

Oudis — "It certainly is."

We look together at the shining moon. Him, sitting down a few stairs on a stone bench, and I, standing on a cement platform leading down to a grassy path.

Lixi — "Alright, be right back with the coffee."

Oudis — "Sure thing."

Closing the door and going in the kitchen again, dosing the coffee... water... button. Wait. And wait. I could wait outside with Oudis, but I'll forget the coffee if I do so. Might as well think for a bit. Or not think at all.

I'm not sure.

Is this a ritual? Guess it is. Wake up and go make coffee. It's a nice way to start a day — or a night, in this instance. I just... I don't know, it's weird. Weird to be having these sorts of things. Maybe they make life more bearable by giving anchor points throughout. A little comfort in the now, before leaving and living — thinking about the future and the past. If only... if only we could all feel alright at all times, maybe it wouldn't be aggravating.

Although, I guess I used to be that way at some point. I wonder when I was led astray from this path. Or maybe I led myself astray. It was somewhat peaceful, or maybe it wasn't that and it was another word, but I wouldn't know a word to describe this part of my life. A momentary peace was not really peace, then, I suppose. Shouldn't it last forever? I'd want peace to last forever.

Anyway... I guess coffee is ready. Get cups... sugar? Oh yeah, one cube for Oudis, one for me. Something to stir the mugs... let's get to the entrance, and let's clumsily open the door.

Lixi — "Hey hey, got the stuff."

Oudis — "Speaking like you're dealing drugs."

Lixi — "I mean, it kind of is one. Anyway, can I bother you to grab your cup before I pour it all over everywhere as I get down the stairs, please?"

Oudis — "Of course."

Oudis gets up and extends his arms diagonally up and towards me. I crouch and give him the cups. The way this is all set up isn't very convenient, but then again, I'm not sure we were supposed to do that sort of thing. Or maybe we were, and it's just a way to taste a better coffee — make it a little harder to get there, so that it's tastier.

Now that my hands are free, I close the entrance, walk back the short flight of stairs, and sit down next to Oudis — and also right beside my coffee mug he put where I would theoretically be sitting. I guess we've been living together for long enough that he's thoughtlessly thoughtful; I didn't even see or hear him do it.

I grab the mug with both of my hands, warming them, and looking into the horizon. Oudis hasn't really moved his gaze from looking at nowhere, as usual.

Lixi — "How long has it been since we sat together like this?"

Oudis — "Quite a while, certainly."

Lixi — "I should have been here more often with you. Sorry."

Oudis — "Don't be. You need to rest, so you shouldn't apologize for sleeping. It would be like if you were to apologize for drinking water after not drinking any for two days."

Lixi — "No way, I'd be dead after two days."

Oudis — "Isn't the limit three?"

Lixi — "Yeah, I think, but you know how much I drink? Screw that."

Oudis — "Heh, fair enough."

We take a sip at the same time, although I quickly recoil while trying not to spill any liquid on me.

Oudis — "Scathing?"

Lixi — "Still yeah, a bit."

Oudis — "I'll wait for you then."

Lixi — "No need, but thanks. Say, what do you think about when no one's here?"

Oudis — "I just... sit still and remember things from the lives that inhabit me. There's a lot of turmoil in many souls that passed away, and simply sitting to reminisce helps them to calm down, I find."

Lixi — "Have they ever been... I dunno... overbearing? On you?"

Oudis — "Overbearing?"

Lixi — "Like they kind of took over you or something. Don't know how to put it."

Oudis — "I get what you're saying. No, never. But their voices grow louder if I don't give them the time of day, so to say."

Lixi — "Is it annoying?"

Oudis – "Annoying enough. I can't really sleep, so imagine this is a bit like dreaming for me, though I'm very much awake during that time."

Lixi — "And can you feel the time pass by?"

Oudis — "After millenniums of doing this, time flies by incredibly fast at night."

Lixi — "Hm... at night? And during the day?"

Oudis — "Not as fast, but pretty fast. Well, I don't remember most days once they're done and gone, I'll be honest with you."

Lixi — "Same as I."

Oudis — "How do you feel about it?"

I ponder the question for a moment. As I do, I take a sip; not too hot now. I can drink. Oudis does the same soon after. The brown liquid enters his jaw then disappears. I asked him once where everything he ate or drank or smoked went; he said to imagine he had 'living tissue' all around him but that it was invisible. I guess

he forgot to mention he doesn't have to deal with that pesky body maintenance we all have to deal with.

Lixi — "There was a song... I liked the beginning of it; I think it describes how I feel about it perfectly."

Oudis — "Oh? Lyrics?"

Lixi — "It's not gonna be a perfect recall but it goes something like so: "I wish there was something between today and tomorrow, but I don't know what I wish that would be. The days just keep running into one another.'"

Oudis — "Never checked the actual lyrics for it online?"

Lixi — "Never took you for someone to know you could do that. I've never even seen you use the internet before. Also, no, never. Keep the dream alive and all that, you know?"

Oudis — "I get that. By the by, I don't really use the internet. I mean, can kind of do that if needed. And considering my position as a living entity, I don't really exist, even though I do. As well, most of the souls I carry were here before any high technology things happened, so they're not used to it, therefore I'm not used to it."

Lixi — "Hm... would that be why you stick to people?"

Oudis — "Yes. You also act as a guide for the

present, which is rather... forlorn, I guess would be the word — to me."

Lixi — "You got a bunch of sad souls in you."

Oudis — "I sure do."

We each emit a small laugh and sip our coffee under moonwarmth, with crickets singing their never-ending rhythm. Feels like an early July night, yet it's only May.

A short minute of a comfortable silence passes by, euthanized by Oudis' voice flowing through the wind's veins:

Oudis — "Say, got a smoke?"

Lixi — "At this hour?"

Oudis — "Are you going to go sleep again?"

Lixi — "Fair point. I should have a pack of cigs in my coat, wait a second."

I take a lightly crumpled pack of cigarettes and give a cancer stick it to my friend with a lighter. As he lights it, I take one out for my mortality. Oudis extends back the lighter; I grab it back and slowly light my tobacco.

We inhale and exhale at the same time... mostly for effect. It's just kind of neat to do that at the same time.

Lixi — "Usually when you ask for a smoke, you got something on your mind you'd like to discuss."

Oudis — "I guess that's true. Just wondering about anything that is new."

Lixi — "As in... ? "

Oudis — "As in a newly born life, a new tool, a new project, a new piece of art, a new product, a new what-have-you. Just all these things, when you hear about them or see them at first, I guess you kind of just look at it for what it is within the present moment. Maybe you give it a little context for its origins, and a little projection for the near future."

Lixi — "I would think most people simply see something for what it is in the current moment, regardless of its past or future."

Oudis — "Yes, most would. We do that often as well; it's just easy and to-the-point. And an existing thing in the present moment often does not consider its position in regards to the past and future as well, so why should we?"

Lixi — "What's your thought on all of this? It's leading somewhere, isn't it?"

Oudis — "It's just that... well, considering what I may be, I see and acknowledge the past, both near and far, much more than would be normal. Even if I should be used to it after all these many centuries — and perhaps I was for the longest time — now I take a little

from Nekri, and acknowledge the future near and far much more than normal, just as well."

I ponder for a few seconds, inhaling and exhaling smoke to emphasize the inner monologue into an external distinction.

Lixi — "I wonder what's going on there. On your level, I mean — that of Manifestations, to be clear. Since Nekrichta has been losing her grip on the world and slowly disappearing, I wonder if that's how it affects you."

Oudis — "Frankly, that may be why. Ironically perhaps, as she could choose to lose her memories to keep her grip on reality, but instead she chooses to slowly lose her hope for the future. You saw and felt all of it, so you know it quite well already."

Lixi — "The world's upside down, man."

The skeleton laughs for a moment. A laugh that is both humorous and contemplative in its cause.

Oudis — "And so, I've also been choosing to slowly remove myself from the past of the souls within me. I have been feeling... lighter. Although now, I do not recall my origins, and millennium ago... forever gone."

A wistful and distant tone; his head slowly drops to stare at the green ground, shined upon by a clear moon.

His melancholy is infectious, and I do not want to

stand idly by his side this time. We both are not used to me reacting this way, but...

Placing a hand upon his back, I simply caress it, with lightened up-and-down motions.

One can feel the bumps of his spine, but the fabric of his robe softens what should have been a rugged ambulation.

His reaction is subtle: Oudis relaxes slowly, without saying a word.

Lixi — "When you look... when you look at a newborn, what do you think?"

Oudis — "Questioning first if it will survive into its childhood, then if it will survive that, then if tragedy will not strike it before adulthood, and then what path will it take until its death. How many crossroads would a vessel to suffering take? All for the sake of survival drives disguised as 'better tomorrows,' without knowing what such qualitative adjectives mean. It's more or less the same story for every soul, after all. Humans have the capacity to sublime states into moments that now are simply a form of permanence."

Lixi — "Kind of want to make a rhyme out of this..."

Oudis — "Go ahead."

Lixi — "A form of permanence as penance."

Oudis — "That's a nice one."

Lixi — "Thanks. Tailored expressly just for you."

Oudis — "That is appreciated."

Perhaps I could just now make out a tone of thankfulness, but my thoughts are a little too occupied by trying to conceive of what he's going through. The sudden rhyme was here as well for me, to try to put some sort of a something — anything, really — into starting an understanding of his thinking.

A moment passes by as we drink our night coffee for a sleepless night, as my hand now rests on his shoulder. Thoughts pass through our heads, and the mellow night shines somberly in front of our faces. Eventually, near the end of our drink, I speak:

Lixi — "It's been about two weeks now since I quit my work at the crematorium. I'm not really sure what has been going on, but I realize the stillness of our situation. I thought doing this would maybe help me understand better what you and Nekri are going through — you especially. But I... how do I put this..."

Oudis — "Take your time. We've been doing a lot of that already, after all."

Lixi — "Earlier today — and many days across the year, for that matter — I catch myself staring somewhere, nowhere, letting my eyes wander off, as I let my pupils close down. I lose myself first in a daydream that I did not anticipate, and climb back up from

another that I fell into by accident... an accident I let happen, one that is always difficult to wake up from. And I wonder, a foot in each realm of consciousness... why should I be here or there? What is clear, I count my fingers both inside and outside dreams, and here we are, as I am. And I am real."

Oudis — "For your sake, I told you quitting your job wasn't going to be great for your mental health. Especially if you keep being around us. In a way, I'm happy that you did, but in another, I am deeply concerned about your well-being. Of course, it was your choice. Perhaps I ought to hope for you to not regret what you left behind."

Lixi — "Do not worry about it. It was going to happen eventually. I'll just move on sooner than later, is all. I never wanted to be married to work. I think I cared... maybe too much."

Oudis — "Why?"

Lixi — "Just too much on my mind at most times. At some point I did not want it to be that way, but I felt like I had a duty to my peers and fellows. Sometimes I wonder if I didn't betray them."

Oudis — "Betrayal is a big word. You didn't quit suddenly. Gave your notice way in advance and little by little made sure the transition would be the best it could be. I recall your colleagues were very understanding. Do you not remember?"

Lixi — "Of course I do... but you know how silly guilt can be. Even if it has no place, it still appears. It will take time for it to go away, even if I justify it all perfectly well to myself. Anyway, that is that. Didn't really want to talk much about work; we should go back to what we were on about."

Oudis — "If you want. I don't think talking about existential matters will resolve or advance anything."

Lixi — "Probably not. I guess I'd just like to understand you more."

Oudis — "Why?"

Lixi — "Because you're my friend?"

Oudis — "I appreciate you, Lixi, but you really... I don't know if you should question things too much. Again, it's not great for your well-being."

Lixi — "Probably not. But if I can't understand deeply why you're doing this, I can't help you with honesty. And between you and me... Pariah and Nekri may not want to."

Oudis — "I know. But they're also my friends, or rather now, our friends. I need to say that I didn't expect you to sacrifice what you have just to be here, trying to help."

Lixi — "I wasn't going to, but... well."

Oudis — "Looking for something to pursue?"

Lixi — "Most likely. I'm also very curious."

Oudis — "I know. But you still surprise me: doing all this is not something many would do. It's a painful road to take, and at the end of it, the peak of your hill will be inert, and all around it will be a desert."

Lixi — "Hm."

A hum of consideration for what he said. I do not know if I should keep doing this; at least the way I am. Trying to understand this mass of souls crying out in anguish by merely walking. I suppose he's right in warning me.

What I'm surprised about, however, is that I was not able to see his inner turmoil until recently. I'm not entirely sure what made him comfortable enough to share all of this with me in the first place. He's said things, sure. Things I already forgot, of course... but there had to be more to it. He still acts as he usually does, albeit now he seems to be more often staring nowhere. This whole thing becoming a reality, I guess he tries to understand it himself.

Lixi — "How long has it been?"

Oudis — "How long has what been?"

Lixi — "You, wanting to die."

Oudis — "Am I not already dead?"

Lixi — "Oudis, by now we know each other enough... your appearance is just that: an appearance. As far as I know, you and I are both very much alive."

Oudis — "Then, it's been long. Long enough that I can't remember when, and long enough that I don't really care. When you live, you're only accustomed to living. But it gets tiring eventually, and you just want to rest eternally, more into eternity than you've been living in its mortality. Or disappear; I don't know which is which. I will tell you this: all Manifestations deal with this fake immortality however they can. For Nekri, she simply loves a human as much as she can allow herself to. She knows that whichever human she chooses will die, and it will hurt. Hurt so much that she will not be able to talk for many a month. But she knows she is as much a prisoner to time as you and I are, and that her open wounds will eventually become another scar. Personally, I do not know why she subjects herself to this kind of suffering, but I suppose that the beauty she finds in between is what gives her hope to keep on doing this. And I can't really blame her either. She's a radiant individual, and she chooses radiance to light her long life, despite the spots of darkness she has to endure between crossing luminous streams."

Lixi — "And you? What do you choose?"

Oudis — "The souls within me keep company. I look after Nekrichta during moments where she is most vulnerable, so that she doesn't become too destructive... or self-destructive. She can't die like I cannot die, but it doesn't stop her from trying. So I make sure she just doesn't hurt herself too much, since ultimately, I can't stop her from hurting herself. Ah, but anyway, she's doing quite well since meeting Paragoria, so I'm not worrying too much for her at the moment."

Lixi — "So you choose to be friend and family both."

Oudis — "I suppose so. It puts emptiness at bay."

Lixi — "Does it, though? You're lying, Oudis. The mere fact that you put in motion this plan of yours... it's enough."

Oudis — "Not lying. I haven't given myself entirely to emptiness, or else I would be like another Manifestation... and I'm not interested in being like this one. I'd rather wonder and care at least a little, rather than wonder and wander until all is gone."

Lixi — "I see. If I may, what is that Manifestation's name?"

Oudis — "The name... it was a very long time ago since last I saw it. I remember its representation, however. Is that fine?"

Lixi — "Sure. For you and Nekri anyway, the name is... not the primary focus. Should it be?"

Oudis — "No, you're right. Anyway, that one is the Manifestation of Mayflies — or Consciousness, if you prefer."

Lixi — "Mayflies?"

Oudis — "You know those butterflies, right? Those that live for less than a day and die out? Well, this Manifestation was originally personifying consciousness, but someone someday dubbed them as a personification of Mayflies, and that stuck instead. Much like I'm memories, and Nekri is the Moon, eventually we inhabit this designation and very much become it, in appearance."

Lixi — "Does it have... wings?" I gesture flapping wings with my elbows tucked in.

Oudis — "It's been so long. I guess so long that I haven't been able to see its changes."

Lixi — "Hm. Can't help but wonder, do you know where this one is?"

Oudis — "No. Nekri might, however. Are you curious?"

Lixi — "Of course."

Oudis — "Hm. Perhaps we ought to find them. They were the one that made me start to doubt our existence in the first place."

Lixi — "Could put to rest my doubts about this whole... 'end of life' thing."

Oudis — "Mine as well."

Lixi — "You? Although... with what you said, I guess it makes sense now."

Oudis — "Sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have asked you and Pariah for your help."

Lixi — "Maybe. But... maybe you're right as well. I'd like to know for sure, ask around more, think more on this. You said it wasn't a great idea to quit my job, but if I did not do so, I would not be able to come to terms with this whole thing — I don't think."

Oudis — "Just take care of yourself. If you need to go see a sea of stars by yourself or with someone more in-line with the present moment, you ought to do so. Go enjoy life a little if you can do so still, and go take a break from this whole existential thing if you need. Turn away from this encroaching dread we try to avoid day to day, the one we forget about forgetting. It's like looking behind the sun: you need to look away from time to time to not blind yourself."

Lixi — "Thank you, but don't worry: I'll take care of

myself like I've been for years. I'm just... you know. This whole... pondering thing; it was bound to happen I think, whether or not you showed up."

Oudis — "Perhaps it was. Perhaps that's also why we're friends."

Lixi — "Perhaps."

I take another two cigarettes from my coat and offer him one. He takes it, and we do the same as earlier — except this time I light his cigarette and give him the lighter, inviting him to light mine, which he does. This time, however, instead of talking, we simply smoke in silence, where only the sound of crickets and exhales are heard until we're done. And then we simply sit as mutes, contemplating next to each other, alone but never lonely.

The night sky moves in the stillness of the lightless emptiness, separating light spheres in inconceivable metrics, and we move alongside as if the infinite was finite. We got so used to it, the world did too, and now dawn will break as if the sun never left.

VII — Holding

<< I was resting safely,
Back arched and arms upwards,
Legs and feet hanging backwards,
Wondering about living.

I saw these two while daydreaming,
On a yellow road of rocks and dirt:
Dust across the horizon —
Deep dark green in trees near ponds.

They were wailing about life,
Flailing as we are.
The sky was beholding them,
As it bore witness to no one's fate.

They found solace in themselves,
One of them down the line,
The other, bending, holding them tight,
An embrace in this empty hell.

I could not see their face,
I could not hear their cries,
But I assume the wind blinded them
As the rain was there as well.

The sight of it: I thought of.
The raindrops flowed;
Didn't sense it come,
But they stopped.

Their hells were not that:
Merely a paradise
That ended up upside down,
For most of what was seen was a gray sky. >>

July

Lucidity hits me in a dream. Here I stand in an orange corridor, closed doors around, curtains closed. I recall its memory up until this time dreaming: curiosity made me stand here. A family reunion this should have been, yet there seems to be no one here. I take steps towards the fire exit door. As I attempt to walk through it, I notice that the escapes are not up to code: the exit is blocked by vegetation, and the door can only be opened slightly. Something that would have bothered me some time back. I still am able to pass my head through it, just enough to take a quick glance. A parking lot is shown through the trees, seemingly empty, or maybe there are a few cars there; it is hard to tell. There's not much that can be seen at all, except that this corridor also is a corner to this building.

It is now again the present. A quick thought, but what is the 'now' in a dream, and how does time flow through its happenings?

Back in, the way back is hasty, and I'm walking fast as if danger is hiding in the dark. And really, the only danger here is tripping on something that can't be seen. The windows are closed, with very little light coming through the solid plastic curtains; the brightness is obscured by the line of dense trees outside, hugging and hiding the wall of this part of the building.

Under the hazy gleam of the last meters I seem to instinctively recognize a figure, probably from earlier in this dream, as I can't place neither name nor face, just that I know them. The figure stops in their tracks and makes eye contact. Seems like a talk is in order.

I wave at it — or them, I suppose, would be more proper for a human being, even if it's a dream phantasm — from however far away, all the while slowing my pace. We both approach to meet at a middle point, where the light glowing around us feels more like a nighttime lantern showing the path in greenhouses, hiding complexities that bright shapes would otherwise reveal, transforming them into an elegant and warm simplicity that emanates during warmer evenings; a phantom tittering between a feeling of joyous tranquility and animating passivity.

Our faces are shown clearly enough; however, my mind registers and processes some details. Their facial symmetry, looking as soft and sweet as caramel, is still hinted at through this vapor's sheen.

I am unaware of exactly what I may look like. Only that I am me, and that is that. Wonder if they think the same about themselves in that moment?
Perhaps there should have been something before walking here, where I dust myself off, then put on a posture of confidence or whatever... but I am already there, for it is my natural state. And theirs seems to be quite the same.

Talking about everything from the most menial of events to the whys of life, something clicks. We do not move from here, standing between two points, in the middle of a roundabout where drivers pay little mind to the inner decorations of what is forcing them to go around. That is, if drivers were here at all.

Sincerity takes the reigns of the conversation, exchanges of sentences in a waltz of words conveyed on a score for ghostly saxophones and flutes. This harmonic confabulation forms a kinship between the spaces of our silences, dotting vowels with the lightest of tonal inks.

Two conclusions are soon reached: iterations of an overarching idea, enabling us to reach a felt macrocosm.

First: that the purest form of love towards the world is honesty.

Second: that whoever speaks and writes about things inevitably believes them, and develops, consciously or unconsciously, a sense of an ever-increasing self-righteousness.

Life is spoken as and broken down from a point-of-view detached somewhat from the ego — insofar as to hide our own in a hypocritical smirk between amoral analyses of our fellows and all else that breathes — until

we finally include ourselves in this woeful circle, after recounting our personal histories — as real or invented as they may be — all summed up in mere sentences that are as heavy as air blown lightly by a passing breeze. It humbles.

<< I had a dream that someone came to find me again
Wonder if you're the old ship that landed here
The howling night will pass by
Oh we'll steal the verse
Calling on shadows
And calling on shadows
Be there
Oh let us stay, don't let our small dresses get rose
We move in circles of light
Carry your shape in the light of the cold
Let us return to the edge of the storm
Give us a way to bring all our bodies home
Let us return to the edge of the light
In circles >>
— *Lighthouse, by Liz Harris*

However much time has passed by now, without the realization that it happened at all, I find myself looking at the top of a shoulder. A second later, my body registers the sweet and light physical intimacy of being held in the arms of someone who has formed from a dream, staying here, as if a mirror reflection

stepped from its realm and came to visit dreams. I cannot avoid but wonder: what prompted this action?

My arms are limp; they do not know what to do. I have rejected intimacy in any form for so long that I have forgotten what any of it might have felt like, inevitably inducing this fleshy analogue paralysis. The furthest length I've gone to in recent years was trying to awkwardly rub someone's back, because I remembered that this is what friends are expected to do when one is in need of comfort. It is a little concerning that my dreams have waved off any form of deeper intimacy, as if I wholly accepted to be cold. And perhaps I have, as it's getting difficult to recall what much of anything felt like, as the calendar bulldozes.

What I do remember, though, is that none of it ever felt like anything — never while I was in relationships, never while I was with dearest friends, and never with family. So why, here, does something feel like it is changing?

A feeling forms from behind the bottom of my lungs: a subtle, soft and tender sphere, emanating a soothing feeling, diluting what already feels so quiet, transferring its charming silk-like kindness throughout my shape.

I do not know how many seconds pass, how long it takes for them to realize that I am still in awe, as I have not returned this, I assume, show of affection.

All the while, there is silence between us; all the while, the outside moving forms have disappeared from the registry of my mind.

Hugs, as far as I can remember, have never felt comfortable to me. Always sensed as if they weren't anything except some sort of a fake honesty given to

the recipient, or the sender, in whatever context they were held, from a simple greeting to the aftermath of coition.
So why, this time, does it feel light like the caress of thornless, blooming flowers?

Consciously, I command my arms to rise slowly, gently grasping their shoulder and torso from the back, mirroring the position of their arms without thinking much of it, making it a reflex instead of a complex decision.

Warmth is shared — conveying information as inaudible words — transmitted only as light touches through the most subtle pressure of immobile arms, hands, and fingers.
Comfort in the vastness of our shared souls, entrapped in this moment with the freedom of an exchange in ephemeral sands of our times. The immediate understanding between two souls should have been expected. Similarities that neither complement nor clash — the perfect symmetry of parallel experiences and existences. Our way of life is not meant to coexist for longer than sometimes a lifetime, or the inherent knowledge of one.

Our choice of solitude is, for a moment, something we gently put to deeper cycles of sleep. And together, souls joined, our dreams dance as one, and our nightmares are quiet. Familiar mountain winds slow down and moonwarmth cradles us.

It is said that "Comfort comes for no one." But perhaps, sometimes, on the rarest of days at the oddest of times, meaning takes the form of a phantasm that

desires to stay forever as a real memory that comes along, attaching itself to whomever, and, eternally within our mortality, nourishes the tethered with a warmth that they might otherwise never have known. Something bordering a utopian feeling, so indescribable with words, perhaps even in songs. It would then be a music without melody, a state of existence akin to what could be described as pure and graceful bliss — a love detached from any that was known before, and perhaps any that will come after. A form of love that will exist only once, all within the ticks of seconds, for those who can experience it, but that nevertheless shall engrave itself in something beyond memories themselves — a love that becomes part of the self, a love that transcends love itself.

An understanding still so cryptic that only pure existence holds its key. Something that is lived, something that never allows itself to understand or be understood. The inherent pessimism in the absurdism of lives well-traveled, or well-spent, or well-wasted, or beautiful, or ugly, or simple, or complex, or mysterious, or bland, or saintly, or odd, or sacrificial, or kept, or shared — simply, of lives lived.

It is through a tear of thankfulness that I come to understand for a brief moment what all this means. Silence screams as a sewn mute, its voids folding themselves into an origami of infinite contemplation, calling to the anamnesis of when we were that what wept for the sea.

Whatever might have been understood just now is already forgotten, and what it already meant in the past

just passed by like a comet. A wish that saw itself granted without asking any star. All of this, the tiny core deep inside the shell of a melancholic grief to which we have bound ourselves after seeking an understanding of what it means to live, forgetting our journey, leading ourselves astray from one suffering to then suffocate in artificial dreams made by some of our fellows that wished for us not be in pain, and who, unbeknownst to them, manufacture new kinds of woes for us to lament.

And so, in this cocoon of the eternal regret of a formerly suicidal, now-and-since-forever dead God, we allowed each other — perhaps by wearing His entropic skin in an omnipotent derealization — to briefly grasp at the significance of what it all means, what it all meant, and its eventuality.

Moments of love — for whichever form they may take, and for however rare they may be — fade into sentimental memory, depicting a lukewarm evening, sitting on a chair with a lightened spirit, where the sky is the color of warmth and in which the sun acts as a sorrowful sentinel, unwilling yet bound to harm.

These take place in a field where all are equal in more than their sum within the material realm. Perhaps that is what some would call "perfection," though the idea of it certainly is more realistic than its realization. It is a memory that transforms into an abstract, a moment happening in the now that transcends itself to show its meaning for those that may allow themselves to take a moment of silence. And in this lull, I wonder: how long until the now is past? How long until the past

is gone?

Words in thoughts all morph together, culminating in a rhythmic arrest to the already irregular cardiac pulse of contemplations, with leftover feelings joining in to make whole a newly formed vortex of colliding ghosts.

We cannot wish for more, only for less, in an attempt to keep on going with a smile on our face, and appreciation of what something like life might be in our hearts. Maybe we are wrong, maybe we are only hoping, maybe we know nothing. A feeling is just that, after all... but something like this, something so foreign, something so discreet that it gently claws at the self to whisper in its ear:

"This is it," it said. "The sky! Have you noticed it?" I close my eyes; I say nothing now. There's a ringing in my ears that's faint and high, and when I listen closely to it, it says: — .

I come to. By the breaking of dusk, still here I am, appeased and still half-asleep in the tent. I don't recall what that dream was about exactly, but it felt almost otherworldly, that I'd want to go back to sleep now and just keep on dreaming about the same thing over and over. But that can't be done, can it?

I can hear a soft snoring coming from the tent next to me, or more accurately from below the tarp shaped like a roof. Pariah must be soundly dreaming still; I suppose he hasn't been that tired in a long time.

I slowly open my eyes and ears to the distant songbird awake early under the disappearing moon of

the day. My brain coming to check on the real, I now hear the voices of things that aren't real to many a soul. The voices of Nekrichta and Oudis reach my ears, their softness engulfing me. I listen in, unmoving.

Nekrichta — "Of everyone that we could go to, you would really want it to be him?"

Oudis — "Nekri, even we have our doubts about this whole thing. When it comes to the final hour, we will hesitate, and most likely not do it. As much as we went on the road with our friends with the hope that they could do it, you know as much as I that they too would not be able to. It was just an excuse to all be together for a while, live with people we like for a while, just be with them."

Nekrichta — "Sure, I know that. I'd still want this to happen, I think, but you put it well enough. Maybe that, when it will come time to do it, we would not, and they definitely will not. They're still struggling with the idea.

I'm just not sure it's fair to give the task and all that's needed to complete it to him."

Oudis — "Would you rather give him just the task?"

Nekrichta — "Maybe."

Oudis — "You know how much he's been changing over the centuries."

Nekrichta — "And it's been at least a century since we last saw him."

Oudis — "That is true. I guess in some ways we're here because of him."

Nekrichta — "Well... maybe I... I don't know if I should be here, but I can't see myself not here. But if you weren't here, and then I wouldn't be here, but overall I'm sure something would come crashing down and end life in a worse way than you planned."

Oudis — "Define 'worse' in this case?"

Nekrichta — "Ours is peaceful, yes?"

Oudis — "I see."

Nekrichta — "Peace gives them hope, even though the futility of it will become clear. I'm sure they could find humor in the alternative, but a yellow laugh would be stained with crimson and opened sinews in their throats."

Oudis — "Not something worth remembering, I would assume."

Nekrichta — "You'd know that more than I. Alright. Let's go... seek him out."

Oudis — "Do you remember how far we still have

to go from here?"

Nekrichta — "About an hour or two through the trees, I think. Just keep following the stream. Do you not remember any of this?"

Oudis — "It's been four decades since we last located him. No, I do not remember much, even though perhaps I should."

Nekrichta — "For you not to remember, there's something wrong."

Oudis — "It's as if all my souls want nothing to do with him, except maybe very few."

Nekrichta — "Guess you'll have to channel them."

Oudis — "That's not how it works, Nekri."

Nekrichta — "I know. Was trying to make a joke."

Oudis — "Sorry. I'm apprehensive."

Nekrichta — "I know that too."

Oudis — "You're not?"

Nekrichta — "I'm sure it'll go fine, so no."

Oudis — "Very much a you thing to say."

I think I've heard enough. Some more of the reasons as to why we're doing this, justifications and their fear of doing this at all. I figured it wasn't really just about their suffering, but now I wonder what it really is all about. And now I'm getting secondhand stress from Oudis' words. Haven't even had my coffee yet... well, time to wake up anyway.

I sit in my bedroll, shake my hair, put on my shoes, get out of the tent, and go greet the never-asleep Manifestations.

Lixi — "Hey."

Nekrichta — "Hi, Lixi!"

Oudis — "Hello, Lixi. Slept well?"

Lixi — "Surprisingly very well, yes."

Oudis — "Told you some foam in between you and the ground mattress was gonna work."

Lixi — "I thought the sleeping bag would be enough... but yeah, you were right. Thanks for the advice. So, we staying here for a while?"

Nekrichta — "Not much longer; we'll get where we need to be in the middle of the morning. Now come sit with us, freshen up."

She slide away from Oudis and taps on the makeshift log bench we put there last night. The fire is

still crackling and emitting flames, albeit small ones. It's still quite warm.

I comply and sit in between the two beings. Oudis reacts and grabs the moka pot. I look at it and at him. He nods at me, asking if I want any coffee without uttering a word. I nod back, agreeing to request a request.

As he's preparing a brew, I ask:

Lixi — "So what did you guys talk about all night?"

Nekrichta — "Things and silence."

Lixi — "Lots of waiting... Did the night come by fast for you?"

Oudis — "Already forgot most of the waiting time."

Lixi — "I guess it's nice then."

Oudis — "I don't know, but it happened, so what is there to say?"

Lixi — "Hmm."

I pause for a moment. Didn't realize Nekrichta left my side after she answered my question. Guess I'm still not quite awake yet. Where is she, anyway?

I look around, then turn my head back to where Pariah is sleeping. She's at his side, waking him up gently. I turn back to Oudis.

Lixi — "So, I want to be honest: I woke up a little bit before walking here. Kind of heard what you guys were saying, about giving all the stuff we're doing to a... violent person? And also you not really wanting to go through with the plan, after all."

Oudis looks at the pot, already boiling, water flowing to the top due to pressure. I thought he would react to my words, but he does not. He simply speaks as if it weren't a big deal:

Oudis — "Yes. We speak big words, me especially, but the truth of the matter is that we're as scared of doing this whole thing as you are. You could say, now that we are here, that we're at the end of this journey. We can always turn back now and simply not do any of this. I'm starting to hesitate."

Lixi — "Can I ask you a question?"

Oudis — "Of course."

Lixi — "Is it because you truly are hesitating, or is it because something scares you about this person we're supposed to meet?"

Oudis — "He's a Manifestation, not as much a person. You couldn't even consider him a person anymore these days, anyway... well, maybe. But to answer your question, both."

As he finishes his sentence, he slowly grabs an

aluminum cup and the coffee pot, pouring the contents in another recipient and handing it over to me.

Lixi — "Thanks."

I grab it and warm my hands with the rising temperature of the cup.

"So... maybe we should talk about it with Pariah and Nekri when they're back here."

Oudis — "Hm. Yes, let's do that."

I look at the skeleton, ever always adorned in simple robes, now sitting, hunched like a worried individual. A mass of bones and thoughts, not knowing where to go next.

It is unlike me to do something like this, so it will most likely surprise Oudis, but I can't bring myself to let him feel too alone in this moment. I free a hand from the cup and start to caress my friend's back, putting my head on his shoulder. Never did this before. That's a decent headrest, a little hard, though. Must be plenty of calcium going through him.

He sits, unmoving, but I sense shivers coming from him.

Lixi — "I've never seen you like this before."

Oudis — "I've never seen you do this before."

We laugh. There's nothing much to say in this circumstance, but smile and try to comfort him.

What he said was true. I realize that, were we given the decision to bring an end to life, we would hesitate right up until the final act. Maybe none of us can do it, and maybe, after all is said and done, we should not do it. But then, why give the responsibility to something or someone else, that theoretically would do this without missing a beat?

Lixi — "Do you think people can be... what's a word... mean, or rather cruel, just because?"

Oudis — "Of course, though cruelty was more common back some odd centuries ago. It probably had more to do with how things were, rather than how people are."

Lixi — "But as much as people are products of their environments, they still make the said environment, no?"

Oudis — "Mantles are adorned when the cold becomes too much to bear. Do you think yourself to be above that?"

Lixi — "I don't know. I've never been in situations that would require... 'cruel conformity,' I guess would be the words."

Oudis — "If all is well enough, you never will have to — although if it happens, what things are where you are, a witch could be found in you.

All that said, cruelty lays dormant in the heart of

all, despite how much they would proclaim to not be, then, in their own words, 'evil.' They forgot that they were a child, once, and that it's still there somewhere."

Lixi — "Cruelty as a form of innocence?"

Oudis — "Do children not scare you? Curiosity killed the cat, but it wasn't this animal that was curious."

Lixi — "Interesting point. But aren't the little ones simply discovering the world? How could they not make mistakes and cause pains?"

Oudis — "It is inevitable, which is why it scares me."

Lixi — "I thought you someone who leans into fatalism and the unavoidable."

Oudis — "That doesn't mean I don't fear it."

Lixi — "Fair enough. I think I can understand that, given you never were a child once."

Oudis — "You'd think memories of childhoods would be held by the souls I carry, but it's never much of a point they like to make. Anyway, why were you asking?"

Lixi — "Trying to find... justifications, as to why we're doing this, still."

Oudis — "Maybe we'll never know if that's really the way things should be. But there's no path that does not end in extinction, whatever happens."

Lixi — "I'll never really get used to how gloomy your words can be, but they resonate somewhere in me still."

Oudis — "Tell me, what do you know of darkness?"

Lixi — "As in what we just spoke about? Or the night? The shade? The recesses of the mind?"

Oudis — "There is another. Long ago, whenever that was, I had a discussion with a friend. Dead now, as it must have been a century or two ago. He... or she? Oh, never the matter. They hinted at their idea of a true darkness, something that normally would only be attributed to survival."

I remain silent for a moment, as if asking for an example.

Oudis — "Imagine a village, a river going behind the households. Inside one house, a family of three, where nothing special is: parents living a life that satisfies them enough, and a teenager growing as healthily as one can, none of them causing harm, at least directly.

Inside another house, a couple lives, one of them deeply abusive towards the other. In what way hardly

matters here; just know that pain and anguish is part of their daily routine.

Then, obscured by the night, the river hides a corpse: a bloated child stranded on stuck branches, insects inside and outside, devouring."

Before the weight of what he speaks of hits, I can't help but ask myself, did he channel his inner Nekrichta right now? He rarely ever speaks in rhymes. Though I guess if it were her speaking, she would be using more abstractions.

Oudis — "Humans would never apply morals and values to insects, as they are seen unworthy of them, unconscious of their deeds — survival drive being all that they know. There is an underlying empathy towards such things, but if you distill everything to the same baseline, then everything becomes a horror. It is still surprising to me that complexity can take forms like this, where what is real is waved off, all the while hearing that we are stardust made manifest. What magic does the cosmos hold to humans, that they would attribute to it values that the inanimate cannot possess under any circumstance?"

Lixi — "I don't know. Maybe that's the thing? It sounds magical; it is unknown but distant enough that there is no real fear behind it, just hopes and dreams."

Oudis — "Nekri doesn't really speak of this, even if she reflects the Moon in many ways."

Lixi — "I like her a lot, but I admit I do not understand her well sometimes. Or a lot of times? At least sometimes, yeah."

Oudis — "She's an answer to this idea of a true darkness my old friend spoke of — certainly she must be, as it is her nature to be this — but still, something is missing."

Lixi — "I've noticed you Manifestations all are missing something, going the other way opposite to what you originally were... meant to be? I don't even know if that's true. Didn't you tell me that months ago?"

Oudis — "I might have, yes."

We stay silent, looking in front of us as if staring at a wall, letting the conversion dry out like paint.

The blanks fill once Nekrichta and Paragoria are back from their tent. Guess now is time to speak a little about sweet nothings, as if we were clear of fear. We'll pack up and go to our destination soon enough anyway, so let's just find a little joy here among all four of us, even if we maybe never did find it exactly.

I have a feeling that this might be the last time we could try to laugh together.

VIII — Behind the Sun

<< They dig and batter the same mounds of dirt,
Cut hands and open back old wounds in hurt.
Sighing at the end of the day,
Dreamless in the middle of the night.
I'll never understand their shape;
The one that powers yet blots out the light. >>

It takes a long hour still for us to reach the place where the "Manifestation of Mayflies" — which is still an odd name to me — is supposedly situated. Going around many trees, avoiding bushes made of thorns, scaring wildlife. Not much ground covered, but just enough to eventually find ourselves in a broken-down clearing. Branches, leaves, bumps and all sorts of cut-down things laying down on the ground. Sounds of machines growling can be heard in an undefined distance from where we stand.

Right before we take our steps outside the forest, Pariah stops us briefly. He comes to me and hands me a yellow vest without a word. Assuming I need to wear this, I simply put it on, and he does as well. I suppose

Manifestations don't need one, especially if they cannot be seen. And it's not like they're at risk of any physical danger.
Pariah also takes off his backpack, urging me to do the same. We put them at a visible location right at the border, so that we won't have to go look for hours for them once we're done here. I only take my coat, attaching it to my waist, and Pariah takes a leather pouch. I think that's the one Oudis wants to give to Apoviosi.

Before moving on, I spot a washed-off lavender-colored flower close to me. A passing thought comes through — its transient beauty reels me in briefly — the care of noticing, and now already is time to forget about it.

As I head first under the cloud-covered sun, the wind blows in, making the sweat on my body more bearable, and even welcomed. I breathe in deeply, assuming this is the destination where we were supposed to arrive. I look around, mainly to see where my friends are positioned. Paragoria is only a few meters next to me, while Oudis and Nekri are a strong ten meters behind us. Pariah notices this as well, as he looks at me and back at them. He asks:

Paragoria — "What are you two doing way in the back like this? We're here, aren't we?"

Nekrichta — "Y-Yes..."

The strange hesitation coming from Nekri surprises

us two. She looks down at the ground as Oudis shows signs of unrest. He looks left and right, as if apprehensive.

Lixi — "Oudis? What is going on?"

Oudis — "Go on farther if you want. We two would rather stay here for now. Apoviosi should be close by."

Pariah and I look at each other, unsure of what to do exactly. However odd it may seem to us, I guess there's something about that whole thing putting them at unease. If it were dangerous, we wouldn't be here, I suppose.

Lixi — "Should we go, then?" I ask my human friend.

Paragoria — "I'll try to convince them to at least stay in our field of vision, even if they want to stay far away. Give me a minute."

Lixi — "Sure."

Never have been one for this sort of thing, and I guess that's not gonna change today. As I await for Pariah's words to convince our accompanying Manifestations, in the distance I see a few silhouettes move. Must be who we're looking for.

A minute later, Pariah yells my name and nods when I look at him. Understanding the signal, I start to lead these three to the silhouettes in the distance.

Advancing through the remains of a place that used to be brimming with all manners of life, I spot three moving human-looking shadows covered by the glimmer of a now-cloudless sun. Closing in farther, one of them spots us and walks our way, most definitely to meet us. I quickly glance behind me and notice Pariah speeding up to meet me. Oudis and Nekri are indeed staying farther back.

The stranger asks from meters away, audibly clear as if yelling effortlessly:

Stranger — "Hey! You guys own the forest parcel? You the buyers?"

Two quick questions. I've got no idea what any of this means. Thought this was a public forest. Are we trespassing? While I debate whether to be honest or not, Pariah takes a few step in front of me as we keep getting closer to meeting with this person. He's taking the lead.

And instead of answering directly, Pariah comes up to the individual to give an answer, probably not wanting to yell. He starts the conversation by offering a handshake, before I stop my tracks to join the conversation physically.

Paragoria — "Hey. Owner's friends; asked us to come just to see what's going on."

The stranger shakes his hand as a first reply.

Stranger — "Yeah? Well, the clean cut is going along well enough. Did he tell you who's gonna come

pick up the wood? We're not even hearing anything from the market guys, and bossman, as usual, isn't telling us much. Didn't even tell us who to mark the logs for."

Pariah pauses before answering, likely processing. Didn't take him to be able to morph in situations like this. I guess that's the best thing to do if we want to avoid running into any trouble or getting chased away.

Paragoria — "No, we've not been told much at all either. 'Surprise,' he said; not sure why. It sure is weird to see forests around and a big empty in the middle."

In between answers, I come to extend my hand and nod at the man in front of us, a silent greetings that's now fine to do. A firm handshake. Quickly as well, I spot another person coming up to us.

Stranger — "I get that. Years later I'm still taken aback by the contrast, personally. Anyway, if you wanna stay here and look around, just stay clear of where we are, and watch for branches. Bossman would tell you to leave, but I'm not him. If something happens, we're not responsible. Clear?"

Paragoria — "Roger."

The rough man in front of us pauses for a moment, seemingly surprised.

Stranger — "Uh. Military?"

Paragoria — "Half a career."

Stranger — "Which regiment?"

Paragoria — "Third artillery regiment in the western parts of the country. You served?"

Stranger — "Four years. Cavalry, twenty-sixth regiment."

Paragoria — "You look young enough. How long ago was it?"

Stranger — "Ten... fifteen? Been a while."

As they start to talk about their past, my interest and myself skirt around the two, and I go to give a handshake to the person who just arrived. Greetings are exchanged. I ask if it would be possible to see their so-called 'bossman.' Something tells me that's the person who knows what we're looking for.
Without any point of contention, perhaps this one is assuming that any of us two are in some position of authority over this place. I am pointed to a specific direction, leading to the limit of this cut forest, in the shade a few dozen meters away. Mechanical gear, bags, bottles, a plastic table and chairs are all scattered around under the shade of trees. And a man, from which small clouds of smoke emanate, is sitting at that table.

He sees me approaching, mug in his right hand,

drinking. Tobacco in his left hand, pinching. Putting down his drink, he rises from his seat and extends his hand.

As I come to exchange the usual greetings, my brain jolts at the oddity of his figure. Not that he is in any strange shape; he and the other two looked to be strong, not unusual for this type of work, I assume. But it is his face... I cannot see his eyes. A trick of the light tricks the brain well, I suppose.

Lixi — "Greetings. I'm Lixi. We're just friends of the owner here; told us to come visit, see for ourselves, that type of thing."

I parrot Pariah's lie like it's the most natural thing to do; didn't even need to think about it.

Bossman — "Hi. Folks here call me Bossman. Not sure why the name came about, but you can call me that too. Suppose it fits. Need anything?"

I contemplate for a moment. Would that person know of Manifestations? Would he know of who or what I'm looking for?

Lixi — "Well, maybe. Maybe a bit of a strange question..."

Bossman — "Ask anyway. Won't know if you stay silent, and that's even stranger."

Lixi — "You know of Manifestations?"

Bossman — "Hm."

Consideration. He sits back down on his chair... or his stump, rather. Now I realize it's a wooden stool.

"Yeah. Know. Never been asked that before."

Lixi — "Really?"

Bossman — "Really. Say, what's the owner's name?"

Sensing the jig is up, for however short it might have been, it seems there's no reason to lie anymore — and if anything, not being honest would not be appreciated, I would assume.

Lixi — "Honestly, I don't know. We're not his friends, or anything at all. I'm here... and my friend over there, talking with your colleagues, is here with me. We're looking for one that we've been told might be here."

The rough man in front of me chuckles, maybe out of satisfaction for discovering that we're actually trespassing, and also maybe just to distance himself from the fact that he should be throwing us out. Perhaps he's curious about me bringing up Manifestations.

Bossman — "You assume I know one?"

Lixi — "Yes. Do you?"

Bossman — "Hmm. Do you know what they're like?"

Lixi — "My friend and I do. Very much so. In fact, there are two Manifestations accompanying us, over yonder in the back far over there."

I point to their direction, realizing, as far as they are now, they're hardly noticeable.

The man that is sat calmly looks toward where my hand indicates.

Bossman — "Can't see anything."

I'm a little surprised. Maybe they're a bit hard to see, but they're not invisible... or are they to him?

Lixi — "Excuse me, sir, but... don't know how to ask this. If I give you the name... 'Apoviosi'. Does that ring a bell?"

He looks straight at me, and I can almost make out the contour of his eyes. A loud sigh is heard.

Bossman — "Guess you know. What about... It?"

Lixi — "Would it be possible to meet?"

Bossman — "Would it be? I don't know. He should be pondering somewhere near here, I suspect at the border of the forest."

I look around for a little while, trying to find a humanoid silhouette near, or something. After a while

of staring at waving patterns in the rising heat of summer, noticing the trio of folks I just left, now having moved to the shade, I hear the sound of rolled leaves being burnt. Looking back at my orator, I ask:

Lixi — "May I sit for a bit?"

He simply gestures with an open palm to do so. And so I sit down. I take out a smoke of my own, naturally so. Socially so. Taking out a lighter and lighting up my cancer stick... blowing smoke.

Bossman — "You know, we're not supposed to smoke in this heat around here."

Lixi — "Oh? Then why..."

He laughs.

Bossman — "Well, we're right at the border between regions. Don't know which part you came from, seeing as the main road through the forests cuts through the East. Would have assumed you just walked around when we weren't looking, if it wasn't for you stating what you were actually here for.
Anyway, all that to say, the region right next to where we're at is prohibiting fires due to summer temperatures... can't even work with machines, actually. But we're fifty meters away from the limit, the forest here bordering. Funny thing, normally it should be accounted for, but no one cares. If a fire starts, who was there? Not us, that's for sure."

I get what he's saying. A smile draws itself on my face, as does one on his.

The obscured man next to me gestures to the thermos container, asking without words. I nod. Taking out a cup from his bag, he pours me a strong-looking and smelling coffee, handing it over.

As I take it, words reach my ears anew:

Bossman — "So... you said you had Manifestations with you..."

He turns around on his wooden stump and looks at something as if there were a thing there. And then, looks in another direction, drawing a line between where his eyes were looking at a second ago.

Bossman — "I see. Although you said two, I see one only."

Whether or not he is talking to me or an apparition... the result is the same. But at least he noticed one. Maybe he had trouble with his vision?

Bossman — "Do they not want to come meet here?"

That one is clearly directed at me, however, as he looks my way.

Lixi — "No. I am unsure why exactly — though I could guess — but they want to stay back. I assume that

is also why my friend over there with the other two folks are in the middle of the... wreck."

The man laughs.

Bossman — "Wreck? I guess it can be named one. Don't worry about it, actually. Here we cut mostly chestnut. The owner wants to plant new, stronger trees... and also more valuable ones. For now, anyway. Who will plant the trees, though? No idea. Won't be us; we're not even registered for that type of work.

All of the local seed sellers went out of business years ago, and the few left are not big enough to accommodate everyone. I don't know who sold him the dream — probably one of the private forest agencies that thrive on obfuscating the truth of the situation — but he'll have to wait years for someone to stock up on whatever he wants, if they don't close up shop by then... maybe he can import other seeds outside of the country, if push comes to shove.

But then no one will want to plant all these trees, anyway. Would the owner himself want to?
Even if they or he did, bet you the ground here would reject it, or that it would be eaten by the wildlife before someone can apply protections to it.
Bet you even further the owner is cheap and thinks it's gonna be fine. It's never fine. But whatever, hear me rambling again. My guys tell me I'm doing it too often."

Pessimism permeates his words. *That man has a bone to pick with the industry he's in.*

Lixi — "No, no, that's fine. I don't know anything about the forest here. Outside of the prettiness of it, I guess."

He scoffs. Have I said something wrong?

Bossman — "Most people see only this. Then the rest see only money. It's neither, but it doesn't matter, does it? We see what we want and that's fine with what we believe the world to be."

Lixi — "It's neither?"

Bossman — "Neither pretty nor money growing on trees. Only ones making money are those in the market for it, like anywhere, really. Only ones thinking it's pretty never slept inside a forest alone in a shrouded night, hearing yelps and yells, smelling rot, falling branches, devouring insects... lucky them, I guess."

Lixi — "I see."

I don't see. But whatever he's saying probably has truth to it.
I don't know how much of it is real, and how much of it is not. Like anyone, any that claim to behold truth probably has part of it somewhere. I just wonder how much of it is real, and how much of it is not. And what is real to him? What is truth to him? I don't know.

A minute of silence passes by as we smoke and drink coffee and light gusts of wind pass by.

Lixi — "Can I ask you a personal question?"

Bossman — "What kind of personal?"

Lixi — "History, guess you could say."

Bossman — "Alright."

Lixi — "Why this? This work, I mean."

Bossman — "Why do this? An easy answer would be to pay the bills, but I don't have many bills to pay, personally. Business-wise it's another story, but even that is fine with our small operation. You can probably tell it doesn't pay well."

Lixi — "Really? I remember some documentaries and such on your line of work; it looks dangerous enough. Are you not compensated enough?"

Bossman — "Documentaries... tell a story. Don't know how accurate they are. Either way, maybe in other countries forestry folks are paid fairly contractually, but here, hardly. I do make sure my employees are at least somewhat happy with their pay, but they know they could be earning more if they went elsewhere, though... there's not much of that either in our field, and if others are not full, then they're either alone or closed down."

Lixi — "Oh? Do they just get fed up and stop?"

Bossman — "Depends. Some don't have enough

money to keep going, some do get fed up, some get gravely injured or die."

Lixi — "Hm. I've heard complacency is what kills in jobs like this."

Bossman — "That, but not just. Sometimes you can do everything right, but it doesn't matter. I remember a story, to illustrate my point:
That was many a year ago now; was getting started working for someone else in forest care. I started working as a logger some odd years later."

I nod and sip on my drink and as he takes a drag before continuing.

Bossman — "Anyway, there was a kid that just started to work with his father, who used to work alone until then. Fresh out of high school, the son just wanted to go work straight away once he was done with basic education. Word was he was talented and already had more experience than most. It must have been a few months into his new activity — if I recall, it was around early autumn, and all up until then was going fairly well.

Kid was in a forest not far from home one day, just working, and didn't come back at night — didn't answer the phone, just kind of disappeared. Father was worried and went to check on where he was working early the next day. Maybe there was no real cause for concern, but it certainly was very unusual. Sure enough, he was right to be worried: his son was dead.

An investigation was conducted, and it didn't take long at all to get all the clues together: the son was felling a dead tree, did everything as cleanly and properly as a pro could do it. Now, I wanna ask you: what do you think did him in?"

Lixi — "Um. So I'm guessing it wasn't that tree he was cutting down?"

Bossman — "That's correct."

I wonder for a bit, but can only manage a rather uneducated guess:

Lixi — "Am not sure, but could it be another tree that was uprooted when the other fell?"

Bossman — "No. I'll give you the answer: a branch."

Lixi — "He didn't see it?"

Bossman — "Came from behind. When the tree fell, its weight forcefully removed its head from the other trees it was locked in with at that height. Some heavy shaking later, a branch could have snapped off, or maybe it already did, but whatever the case, a branch fell and hit him behind the head."

Lixi — "Sounds violent. Did the death occur on the spot?"

Bossman — "No, but the work inspection guy that told me the story said it didn't take very long for the kid to die, so we assume he didn't suffer much. Or maybe he did, and it's just easier to think he didn't."

Lixi — "And the father?"

Bossman — "My guess is that he's still suffering in another way to this day."

Lixi — "I would suppose that too. Say, you mentioned work inspection."

Bossman — "Yes, when that man told me the story, by then it was already a story, but a recent one: two months old."

Lixi — "That wasn't a deterrent to you to work in that field?"

Bossman — "Already knew the risks."

Lixi — "I see. That kind of pertains to my question, then, I suppose. Why this job, really? If it doesn't pay well, and the risk-reward incentives are completely off?"

The man lies back a little, now taking a sip and setting aside his cig that he forgot to smoke, its tip now extinguished.

Bossman — "To this day, I'm still unsure. I could commiserate or tell you stories all day, though I know

you're not here for that — but I don't know exactly. Maybe in some way it's a death wish? That's all I can come up with."

Lixi — "You don't have anyone that would rather you be alive?"

Bossman — "I'm sure there are — same as for most people — but then would you say it's suicide if you get killed by nature accidentally?"

Lixi — "If you kind of wish it would happen, then it's kind of a yes, I would think. But even then, I didn't speak about suicide and its impact on people around you, just of your hypothetical passing."

Bossman — "It's not hypothetical; it's the same bucket list for anyone. That's why I don't really care that much, I'd say. If it happens then it happens."

Lixi — "I understand."

Somewhat was expecting a deeper answer, something maybe more introspective, I don't know. Probably assumed it would come since this man knows who the Manifestation of Mayflies is, and seemingly hangs around him. But... maybe he's more talkative about this sort of thing outside of work?
As well, we've been talking for a while it feels like, so maybe he's ready to go back to it.
Or maybe it's the heat, or a combination of everything; I'm not sure entirely.

My inner questioning stops abruptly, as the man now speaks again to me:

Bossman — "So, you want to see Apoviosi. Why?"

Lixi — "I just... we want... or they want... something. They don't want to come, though; I guess I have to speak for them."

Bossman — "What do they represent anyway?"

Lixi — "Simply? Past and Future."

Bossman — "Ah. I recall Apoviosi telling me about them here and there. I can understand why the distance."

Lixi — "Why?"

Bossman — "Fear, mainly, it seems. I'm sure Apoviosi wouldn't mind talking to them again, but at the same time, I'm not sure he cares that much. Whatever you need to transmit, I can be the middle man, if you're unsure about communication. I can't promise he would agree to anything, though."

Lixi — "That is fine. Thank you for the offer. But you also got me curious. Will he come by here before the end of the day?"

Bossman — "Yes, but I can't tell you when. If you're willing to wait or go look for him, you're welcome to go.

Just stay near our... um... man-made clearing, I guess. He's likely not too far off inside the forest if he's in there at all, and not unmoving at its limits."

Lixi — "Thanks. Think I'll do that."

After spending a couple more minutes in silence and drinking coffee in preparation for a searching party of one — or maybe two — I stand up, shake the man's hand, and slightly bow my head for some odd reason.

And so there we move to be moved, I go walking to Pariah to explain the situation. As I get close, the trio of friendly chatter starts to break apart with joyful words and waving of hands. I join in, waving back to them as they notice me. The more talkative one from before asks me what I thought of their boss. Simply, I say:

Lixi — "He has a lot of things to say, does he not? Interesting fellow."

In my mind, that sort of thing says positive or negative things, the truth of it only beholding to the listener. And as such, the one who questioned me laughs with glee: he agrees in a positive manner. Although with such a small talk, I cannot tell what their boss really is like; he certainly doesn't seem like someone I'd despise. But would I really despise anyone, anyway?

Never mind such a question. After briefly explaining who we're looking for to Pariah, he simply nods, says he'll go and report back to Nekri and Oudis, and will stay with them until I come back; that I probably need

to take my time. Perhaps he has a feeling it will not be a short encounter.
And so I walk around, wandering at the limits of the forest, in the great circle between green and brown, with birds circling around and moving from tree to tree. I wonder if they find this place interesting? I wonder if I find this interesting... but my mind is not on the possible beauty of what surrounds me. A singular goal deflecting all other rays of light that could warm my heart — although in this summer heat, it probably doesn't need to be warmed up.

As I walk, I spot another bird wandering around the sky, and behind it, a grey group of clouds. Are they coming here? Will it rain? I cannot see trails blurring the horizon beneath them. If it does rain, it probably won't be much.

Eventually, after many a minute of walking around, there I spot an unfamiliar figure a few dozen meters away.
Now I must be at the opposite place from where we emerged when all four of us arrived here, on the edge and in between the clearing and farmland with what seems to be a small road in the distance... hm, we really could have arrived here by car; not sure why Nekri made us walk all this way. But I guess camping was nice.

I approach the unfamiliar figure to its side. It sits straight, wearing teared robes, hood on, a pair of arms and hands grasping themselves in front, covering its belly. And as well, there exists another pair of arms, although it looks to be unmoving, covering its face...

and upon closer inspection, only its eyes. Four arms? I cannot see where those come from. I suppose that's how it came to be, how it adapted to the "mayflies" designation. But was it what people expected it to be? Or maybe that was what this Manifestation came to adapt its newly found form to fit itself? I wonder... Still, this is most definitely Apoviosi.

As I keep on approaching, before I can verbally announce my presence, it notices.

IX — Beneath the Moon

<< Prisoners of the past
Dreamers of nightmares
Torturers of the present
There is light still somewhere
But what does any of this mean? >>

Apoviosi — "Greetings. May you be here to talk?"

Its voice catches me off-guard. What an oddity by its very nature: multiple voices, layered and intertwined with each other. Who... what is it? The others said "he," but now I can't tell with two alternating voices. I'll just... be neutral, out of confusion.

A few seconds pass as I try to process the voice. Apoviosi has its head turned to the side, waiting for an answer with patience in its stature.

Lixi — "Hello, you must be Apoviosi. If so, then yes, I would like to talk. Name's Lixi, by the way. We've been looking for you."

Apoviosi — "We?"

Lixi — "Just a couple of folks you might know. Oudis and Nekrichta, if that rings a bell."

Apoviosi — "Ah. Yes, it does. Are they well? But if they are here, one could suppose they are not. It's been... centuries? Most certainly, it has been at least a while. Has Oudis heeded my words in the end? I take it he found a way to end himself. Is he unwilling to come talk like old times?"

I have a feeling that there is no need to lie or hide. As if there were an aura that compelled honesty and truth.

Lixi — "Yes, it seems that way."

Apoviosi — "There is no need to blame either one of them. Do you know of their past?"

Lixi — "Not really. They say as much as they want to share and that's fine by me. Maybe something worthwhile: just that, seemingly recently — or so they say — they've started to change, as if reversing their roles."

Apoviosi — "Hm. Unsurprising; I would say I'm feeling the same way."

Lixi — "Excuse my curiosity, and I know we just met, but how so?"

Apoviosi — "As they may be doing, I flee what I supposedly represent: the present moment, the existence of the now, unencumbered by fears and hopes of the future, or cherished and scarred memories of the past."

Lixi — "How can you flee the present moment?"

Apoviosi — "Fear and cherish it at the same time. Where both qualities we feel from what was and what will be come together to blur the line, and a haze is all that is left — where memories cannot be made and dreams cannot become nightmares — where all becomes apathetic and automatic."

Then... does it remember where it was a year ago? A decade ago? If the last meeting with Oudis was over a century ago... what does it remember?

Lixi — "What do you recall of the past years?"

Apoviosi — "Escaping the encroaching loneliness that came from running in solitude by meeting a mortal, that shared strings of my heart and mind. You met him, I reckon? You likely wouldn't be here otherwise."

Lixi — "Yes. He had some things to talk about."

Apoviosi — "That's how he deals with his days when the sun is out. But all this is a façade: when the night falls and only the two of us are left, the chilling

wind silences his superficial woes. Sadness draws itself on his face, and his brows furrow into an arch that pleads for mercy."

There is an odd question that appears in my mind, something Nekri would have wanted to ask, if she were here. I can perhaps ask in her stead.

Lixi — "Mercy... and behind your hands, what is shown?"

Apoviosi — "The same. Perhaps that is why we get along, for however much one can get along when all that's in their heart is a crying eye grasping for the meaning of their sorrowful fear, a cruelty born from existing."

I attempt to contemplate what they said. What sadness is this? They speak with vitality, yet wailing is present in the vowels they do not say.

But there is seemingly no time for thinking about this, as the few seconds of silence are broken, before they become a handful:

Apoviosi — "Tell. You must be here not just to hear me talk. What is it, really?"

Lixi — "There is... something we brought. Something a long-deceased friend of Oudis worked on for his sake. I believe that, even though he finished this work, he simply left it for someone else to decide whether to use it or not."

I grab the satchel, open it, and show the vial that's inside it before putting it back.

Apoviosi — "This sounds like a rather grim creation."

Lixi — "A creation to end all of creation, you could say. Fits the grim bill."

Apoviosi — "Hm. It should go without saying, but still: the cowardly intent of creating such a thing while fearing its use, wiping your hands clean of the consequences of what it would be, simply because you are unwilling to use it yourself. Yet he was the one who made this all in the first place... or was it Oudis? Or was it something that came before? The one that implanted the idea? Could it be you, carrying this seed?"

Lixi — "Oudis said that you were the one that first came around the distress of your continuous existence. Would you, then, be one to blame?"

Apoviosi — "An idea is merely that: an idea. A seed that has no weight until it becomes a flower to be pollinated. That, where for many, the seed does not really exist and is simply an illusion; a passing thought without gravity. But the object of the idea itself could not exist without the ability to idealize the original thought for it. Do you believe this to be different?"

Lixi — "I do not believe."

A few seconds pass by.

Apoviosi — "Is this why you are here then, and not Oudis nor Nekrichta?"

I look to the side of the Manifestation in front of me, through the trees across the ridge of the blue horizon. Some more seconds pass, and my mind seemingly shifts to a contemplative state. Body and face relax, and my eye opens wide.

Lixi — "Perhaps. I can say that I wonder, but it is difficult for me to believe anything when everything and nothing feels real."

Apoviosi — "I could see why a Manifestation like Oudis would take a liking to you."

Lixi — "How can you tell?"

My vision fixates back to the near entity.

Apoviosi — "You somewhat remind me of him. Of us three relating to Time, Oudis always had doubts and questions ever since he came to be. Always he held the souls of the departed like great ghosts on his shoulders, where all of them would reflect back their inner hearts through Oudis', and he inevitably became a refracting entity that could only be lost in its inability to gauge the now."

Lixi — "And... about Nekri... sorry, Nekrichta. And you?"

Apoviosi — "Her hope is what made him hold onto a semblance of sanity all across the millenniums we have been in existence. Adapting to our surroundings, they adapted together to hopes and dreams, even though Oudis could never relate to his best mate. And none of them could relate to me, while I could never relate to them exactly. All I have and had is an idea of what was and what could be, but never anything except phantasmal fragments of things I could never understand.

Except that is a lie. As I exist, the moment is a conclusion of past days and future nights, condensed into hours, into minutes, into seconds, into liquid misunderstandings of fluidity through elastic perceptions of time. Wholly incomprehensible, vigorously frivolous, yet accepted into all of their woes and joyful tears."

What is there to answer back? What is there to think about? I can only stand there silently, waiting. There is a tree stump next to Apoviosi... I shall wait, sitting here, staring silently, somewhere, nowhere.

But this silence is broken, too. I did not track however long that took. Minutes, I would suppose.

Apoviosi — "What do you think?"

Lixi — "Nothing."

Immediately answered.

Apoviosi — "Nothing?"

Lixi — "What is there to think about? I can't process all this."

Apoviosi — "Yet you sit here looking at the horizon. A daydream?"

Lixi — "That would be nice. But I just... don't know what to think about."

I turn my head right to look at who or what is speaking to me. Although I could attribute a human quality to both Oudis and Nekri, this one I cannot precisely. I don't understand what it is exactly, aside from being a humanoid.

Its name though: Apoviosi. It stares at me through hands. It doesn't need to be seen.

Its mouth opens, its throat relieves voices intertwined ephemerally; it starts to 'sing':

Apoviosi — "Sadness entails.
Child of Man, cursed that you are, cursed that we are —
Ever to wonder and wander in beliefs of your next-of-kin, of dream phantasms —
Complexions of changing faces and decaying ideals, apathetic conclusions to all of these.
So fearful that we all became unaware in between us being forgetful, hiding what is beneath a seemingly bottomless abyss.
Where meaning could never be, and purpose is a

sacrifice in the name of sovereign lives: a graceful wail to capture echoes of life.
A desire to Be, never to truly exist, ever were we to be in illusions of fears to disappear.
What is it that you seek, but comfort in your hardships? It comes and flees, cycling."

I look at the entity, my eye's gaze piercing through. I know already, somewhere I understand what it means, but still:

Lixi — "What are you saying?"

Maybe it's a gut reaction to deflect, or a way to shrug off what was said, or it could be a snarky, pitiful way to talk back. Something stirred up inside, and it seems that I did not like it.

Apoviosi — "Perhaps some things are better said when no one is left to hear them. Still, a Manifestation carries the guilt of its pure existence and what it represents, or rather what it is.
All are a refraction of a side from nature, most commonly from humans. It goes without saying as to why that would be, but we do predate your kind. I existed earlier than all, though my memories are a haze."

Lixi — "Hm. Maybe I get it. I'm not sure."

Apoviosi — "You have been following behind Oudis, that which represents an ever-growing History.

You have been side-by-side with Nekrichta, that which represents a History that has yet to come, that which is the hope that humans hold. Or held, depending on the age. Have you been following yourself?"

Strange that this would get on my nerves. What's said is not wrong. In fact, it's very much true. So why do I feel like I should display this inexistent angst?

Lixi — "As I said earlier, I don't know what to think about."

Apoviosi — "Is that so?"

But I am not upset. It senses it. I don't know what my voice is conveying, but the fibers of my being are not tense, and I am not angry. It's all an idea of what I should react like. I surrender and break this odd, flimsy barrier.

Lixi — "So much for trying to walk my own path."
I scoff after saying this.

A slight pause takes a hold of the air. Particles reacting.

Apoviosi — "Where were you going in the first place? Before any of this?"

Lixi — "I..."
Consideration... *lost answers.*
"Don't know either."

I slowly rise from my wooden seat.

Apoviosi — "And now, here you are, messenger to those that want to euthanize existence as a whole. Maybe there's no better pick than someone like you to do so, after all."

After hearing this, I scratch the side of my head a little.

Lixi — "It's a little difficult to hold on when there's nothing to glue everything together. But I guess someone would say you'd have to make the glue yourself and get all those pieces to fit yourself."

Apoviosi — "But you know that is not it. Your heart shivers; it does not beat. Only when you are able to let go of your clarity does the blood of derision warm your form.
Your missing eye tells a story you hide, one you never told, memories whenever you close eyelids. As such, I must ask you: when did you stop blinking?"

Lixi — "Why are you making this about me? I'm only here to give you the choice to end it. I can't take that choice."

Apoviosi — "What makes you think I can make it?"

Lixi — "Do you not want it to end?"

Apoviosi — "Do you?"

Lixi — "You're deflecting. I'm here for you, not for therapy."

Apoviosi — "Lixi, were that your name... apologies, my memory is not great. If it eases your mind, I can hold onto what you have. But I will not make that choice for anyone or anything."

I suppose it's, in some way, asking me to calm down. Then I'll sit back down for that, taking a smoke out of my... where are they...

Apoviosi — "Let the breeze ease you instead. It's a rare occurrence in these warmer months."

I look briefly at the figure next to me, half-surprised, and acquiesce to his suggestion by letting go of seeking out my tobacco.

A breath is taken. As I exhale, I can sense a chill wind come through the trees, drying the skin.

The tone is changing; the voice sounds more welcoming, urging me to sit and talk.

There really shouldn't be any reason for me to get upset about whatever it is that is being said. But maybe the heat is not helping with that either, if I can offload part of the responsibility to a biological response. Which... fairly, I suppose I cannot really, but I'll pretend for now.

Lixi — "Apologies. What did you ask earlier?"

Apoviosi — "Where were you going?"

Lixi — "I answered, though I guess you sensed it wasn't really one."

It awaits, saying nothing back. It's silly to think I'd be sitting here like it's a therapy session, but if one is to go through something like starting a worldwide extinction event... they most likely first should have their thoughts in order.

Something permeates the air; my skin filters it and let it swim in my sinews. This seem now to be a time where I must meet my orator at its stand.

I look up at the foliage and wonder for a while before starting my monologue. The start is the hardest part... then all should fall into place as I talk.

Lixi — "'Is life worth living?' This is a question I asked myself some time before I met Oudis for the first time. I would go along days, seeing all manners of faces, with hidden amounts of happiness and grief both. Mostly grief is what I would see, in more folks than I would have liked to notice. Yet they would keep on walking, but I never dared to ask them why they kept on going. Maybe it's because it went without saying: hope drove them. Or maybe cowardliness. Maybe both. Or maybe they didn't think at all, maybe they just lived without thinking much about anything except wants and earthly concepts that satiated them.

I would hop on from goal to goal, place to place, thing to thing, person to person. Never being able to

connect truly, except on distant letters sent to what amounts to faceless folks on the other side of oceans. But, whenever the time was right, I would keep on laughing with genuine honesty, yet never really giving in, still. Maybe it became an issue at some point, when I could no longer feel a need to be with others, when I wanted to be left alone away from anyone, or even away from anything alive, really.

After all, an observer can only see, talk, and record somewhere what it sees of life. Is this what cowards do to determine if life is worth living? But that would not fit, I keep on diving, all or nothing, anywhere I'd want to go. It's just that... over time, less and less do I find lakes I would like to jump in, any trail I would want to walk on, any calm forest to rest within.

Maybe there used to be somewhere where I wanted to only exist alongside someone like me. Accidents of life, violence and tragedies felt and lived, heard and seen... But that's strange in itself, isn't it? To be that way, wondering and wandering, filling most days with emptiness. The part of me that lingers and longs to share a life, a comforting warmth in the face of nothingness, as ephemeral as all this is. I understand its futility, its paradoxical nature. I used to crave such a thing, but now... nothing.

Back then, I wondered: can love bloom in inert places? To be living for someone other than yourself seemed charming. I had my doubts. Honest hearts are always wounded, and keep on hiding in hopes of

recovery, but time for them stops ticking before they can muster the will to try again.

I left these ideals behind to rot because my heart healed with something more permanent, and perhaps one could argue more real, than humans or anything of the sort."

As I finish the sentence and focus back on my physical situation, I sense my hand on my neck, fingers instinctively checking for pulse. *Why?*

Apoviosi — "Running and limping from one day to the next month. Emptiness felt in the moment, where all you see in your mind are naked mountains for the future, and your past is a plain hill drained of wilted green colors, gray rocks shown.

Constance is not a habit of existence, especially the human one, and still there exists an unending need for perpetual motion that is ingrained within.

To keep going with hope in your heart, despite you knowing the truth of the whole. Where does it end?"

Lixi — "Simply with death, I reckon."

Apoviosi — "What of the question of life being worth living?"

Lixi — "Even though some days — or even some weeks — are full of a desperate emptiness, or when there used to be a seemingly infinite longing; even if some days or weeks are lived through as if they never were here, there are — used to be — days or weeks that drove me forward — wherever that was — wanting to grasp at

every branch of life to find the beauty intrinsic to suffering, to find the why of it, and to drink wholly to the chance to be alive. That is what I wanted to achieve eventually: contentment in the beauty of being alive. But I needed to know first if existence was deserving of such a treatment."

Apoviosi — "Your intention should have dictated a path to take. Things seem to have a tendency to make themselves known in honesty. And your curiosity must ring true to the world, otherwise I could not understand why you would be here; why you would see, I assume, all of us Manifestations. Perhaps there is no need for you to find an answer either, but I do not know if this is fact or phantasm."

Lixi — "I'll find an answer, eventually. Hopefully before my own demise."

Apoviosi — "Yet you are here, by Oudis' side, wanting to spell an earlier doom for existence itself."

Lixi — "And yet here I am."

A minute of silence flows through the wind, making the leaves flutter.

Apoviosi — "I understand your suffering. All Manifestations do, of course, given what we are.

The world deserves itself, but it nevertheless does not deserve to suffer.

Its inexplicable tangibility to persevere amidst an

infinite ocean of Nothing cannot be anything but painful. To combat this dichotomy of existing, we all seek comfort in each other as beings, and in things that are and can be. All in what we see and what we create, sometimes what we destroy as well, even if the warmth it produces is as intense as it is brief, with the coldest of nights following, and sometimes so cold that more than one life is extinguished."

Lixi — "So, going back to the subject of my visit, why not make the choice? It would be slowest, kindest extinction to life one could give it."

Apoviosi — "While I did say that earlier in some ways, now who? You, or Oudis?"

Lixi — "I was asking you again, flimsy hope that you would take the burden away, but I understand.

I walk with a semblance of pride and order in my steps, yet with fear and entropic musings in my heart. My mind, when it can, dreams oddly every night, and I cannot tell anymore if waking up is something I do because I want to, or because my body has to."

Apoviosi — "The middle part is certainly familiar; something I would say. Maybe you have spent too much time with us, after all."

Lixi — "Maybe. But Pariah — Nekri's husband, I guess — is doing well. Both are doing well when together, actually."

Apoviosi — "There is light in people, for however bright they may be, for however bright you may be. Their radiance must match yours, otherwise dissonance occurs and cruelty awaits further down as the clocks tick down every decision made. Misunderstandings of what life is, what life could be, the unwillingness to share past a point, the closed-down truths that are held under false pretenses. So many are as such — more than most, really — but perhaps they are this way because they are unwilling to seek out a light that matches their hue.

You have been walking for a long time, looking at lights from afar, haven't you?"

Lixi — "Yes. I tried to be near them. But they are distant too. I can't be a lighthouse if the boats drift away. But maybe that's what they should do, too. The coast of my soul has wind blowing through, and I cut down most of the trees here. Now they've been replaced, but the vegetation is probably too dense for anyone to walk around in there."

Apoviosi — "Have you not made a house with their bark?"

Lixi — "A house... I don't know. My visage seem to be marked by a wistful expression I can't seem to get rid of. It saps the will to be a warm shelter.

Say, do you think the beauty of it — life, I guess — makes it worth it?"

Apoviosi — "Could I ever answer that... unsure. Time is what none of us grasp because we can only

understand one aspect of it. But because it only is one, we also do not understand that one, simply due to the fact that all is a constant working on an axis that cannot be simply one thing cohesive by its lonesome. That is why only things with the ability to understand and experience the whole of time can answer this question."

Lixi — "So... why did we all do this, and why did we end up here?"

Apoviosi — "I'm sure you heard it before: we suffer and want it to end. Much as you used to want to stop walking alone, much as you wanted to hold and be held onto. Now you say you went past a point where this past is not the you of now, and you talk like it never will be again."

Lixi — "Okay. So all this... I'm not sure what to do, now."

Apoviosi — "I could tell you to keep on walking. I could tell you to use the vial. I could tell you to end your life."

Silence befalls for another while.

Lixi — "I don't know. Walking is becoming exhausting, though perhaps it could just be a natural disenchantment with life as we walk through it, and I can't act like a self-righteous saint and administer a lack of procreation to every single thing. Nor can I kill

myself today, for I am too cowardly."

Apoviosi — "All of righteousness is self-righteous, despite what both saints and sinners would tell you. To make one 'right' is to incur at least one other 'wrong,' despite the 'best' of intentions — although I do not understand what 'best' means. Positive and negative connotations anywhere in the realm of life seem so fluid; they stretch through time to attempt to make sense.
Maybe it has to do with the never-ending brutality of an existence where nonexistence is how it's always been, and how it will be again. But, within this knowledge, there is something else that is untouched by the paradox of life:

You could sit here, just contemplating, suffering softly, apathetically looking at mourning purple flowers. Mimic nonexistence as much as you can. You can call that meditation if you want, but to give a term to something that isn't a thing is certainly weird. Another semantic paradox.

In between bouts of neither hopefulness nor hopelessness, you could be receiving old friends every now and then, smiling in fallow memories, until the door is overgrown and no one can come in anymore — until you willingly trap yourself inside."

Lixi — "Are you telling me to keep going?"

Apoviosi — "I am giving you options, nothing else."

Lixi — "More like heavy suggestions, really."

Apoviosi — "I'll not say it's not that."

I smirk. What else is there to say? I don't understand why things are like this, and why we have to act and think like everything somehow is sensible and that it will all click eventually. I have a feeling that, if it does click at some point, what will make sense is not what I hoped for, but instead what I feared.

In such an event... to trust my instinct... what does it say?

Lixi — "I have a feeling nothing will ever make sense to itself."

Apoviosi — "No more than it does not already. There is a longing that stays within us all, perhaps luckily — or unluckily — only to all that are conscious: that which is stillness of the moment. Time is cruel in that it forces all to move forward no matter what, all at the same pace, though our perception of this movement might differ from person to situation, but still all is the same. This, compounded by the human drive to always crave more, and the tragedy of those that stand as eroding monoliths against the tides of time, all only to be swallowed to an Ouroboros of twisted denial."

Lixi — "Do you believe giving back silence to the universe is something worth doing?"

Apoviosi — "I ought to remind you, and be clear on it this time, that it will happen whether or not we will it.
Remember that what you are here to decide on is to pull down the curtains earlier than what would otherwise happen later, whenever that 'later' is. The universe will not thank you, and will not thank life for having existed. The only thing that cared for life was itself, since only life could care in the first place.

But given all that was said, you at least should know what to do, were you to choose to follow through with Oudis' plan. But do know that it must be yours, too. Even if you followed until now like it was simply a curious thing to do, a journey to take yourself on, do not be selfish or foolishly ignorant of your actions, and understand what it is that you are doing."

What happens now... whatever is done, the world will keep on churning until its fuel runs out.

Whatever is done... they'll keep on living, I'll keep on... hiding, walking, consuming, looking through the trees.

Lixi — "I got a question."

Apoviosi — "What might it be?"

Lixi — "Do you believe there is an answer in solitude?"

Apoviosi — "Part of the answer you seek is held there. But I would believe you already know of this

place. Perhaps you should stay longer, even if you may very well find what you fear at the end of this road."

Lixi — "I hear what you're saying; maybe the question was silly."

Apoviosi — "You're in doubt, so don't worry, it was not."

Lixi — "Thank you."

Apoviosi — "As for the other part to the answer, I think that is not my place to be certain. Not any longer, anyway. If you ignore the incongruence of existence and if you are decided on keeping on living, there's definitely something unique to a solitary life, and maybe even being lonely every now and then is something desirable when choosing such a way to exist in."

Lixi — "It's not like one would be able to escape it, anyway."

Apoviosi — "Maybe. Walking around, thinking, creating, doing... all unrestricted most times by the whims of other beings. With the tradeoff of not meddling in with others, something difficult, especially for us Manifestations these days."

Lixi — "Not to mention Nekrichta... Time took its toll on you all?"

Apoviosi — "Time did what Time does. If it takes a toll on the living around the world, then we can only reflect this disposition towards the passage of time. Perhaps you forgot, so remember that we only can process and exist within the confines of what living things believe in overwhelmingly. How is someone — since we then can only be someone — supposed to embody and handle such concepts?"

Lixi — "I guess I should have figured that was why you all were acting the way you were. I suppose it makes sense, why you all act as opposites of your labels."

Apoviosi — "I can only agree with Oudis, as I am the one that put him on this path in the first place. But life — only I can be certain of it for us — is a tragedy. Perhaps, however, as I have seen over the years and of the little I can remember, life is a tragedy in itself for every living beings that were, are, and will be."

Lixi — "So... why not... use that vial I gave you? You sound like you would be in the best spot to choose whether or not to do it."

Apoviosi — "Did you not understand what I've been saying?"

Lixi — "I suppose... maybe not. I apologize."

Apoviosi turns its head silently back to gaze at the horizon without making a sound. I sit there, following its gaze, and do the same. Maybe it's an invitation to

think on what was said.

This one... the personification of the present moment, finds the present too painful to bear and sticks its head in the sand of memories, or tries simply to not think; that is the gist of it.

Oudis, personification of the past, can only look to the future, most specifically his own end, as it seems all days for him are agonizing. Easy to say that is a selfish wish, but perhaps it is difficult to blame him when he's gone through as much suffering as he says he is.
I guess that, if he had a face, he would be wincing most times, brows arched in a line leading to an infinite pit of melancholy. Yet, still, he laughs sometimes. I guess he has to.

Nekrichta, personification of hope — and so, of the future — is stuck in the present moment, unwilling to look forward to tomorrow, as then all her love will be stripped and crushed again. As well, she is unwilling to look into her past for all she has there is the pain of the departed in flashes of dreams. Even if she says she hardly remembers it... I remember when we first met: the ghosts of her past cry with her.

All three... contingent on the absurdity of what it means to exist, all unwilling to accept it. I see why... maybe the Being next to me does not want to decide.

Lixi — "You can't make a decision."

Apoviosi — "I could. But I have no desire to do so. Perhaps, then, you're right: I cannot. And knowing the

others, they share the same idea. Again, why would you be here otherwise?"

Lixi — "There is someone else with us... maybe he could."

Apoviosi — "The current life partner to Nekrichta, right?"

Lixi — "Yes."

Apoviosi — "I spent a few lifetimes with Nekrichta and Oudis. I will tell you that she always stuck with the same type of person: the same as her to their core. As much as she might be hopeless now, her core remains the same. You may understand that she will be the first to disappear, as she was the last to appear. She's very human in that sense, because she came to exist around the same time as your species. Your lot gave us our appearances now, but Oudis and I used to look... very different, shall we say. One of us, I cannot recall exactly who, used to look a lot like a beaver, believe it or not. Since then, we've seen the rise of beliefs, followed by the structural edifice of religions... all that to say, this man you speak of only exists to love and care for our common acquaintance."

Lixi — "Hm, I see. Say, about her — it's a little on the nose, isn't it? Her moonlit aura surrounding her sometimes, especially when the night is out."

Apoviosi — "She's a 'holy lady' through and

through, or at least the places around here would deem her to be so. Others would have different connotations, but the heart of their meaning would be the same."

Lixi — "Okay. But what I don't understand is why Oudis enrolled me into this plan. Why choose a human to make a choice that will end all of existence in this world?"

Apoviosi — "Was he going to ask a crow to do it?"

Lixi — "Wouldn't it be a better choice?"

The robed one chuckles.

Apoviosi — "Perhaps. If you're not sure, maybe you should ask. Us two can communicate with other animals, so it's not out of the question. Granted, it's been a long time since then, so I assume the dialectics of species changed as yours changed. Though it wouldn't surprise me if when you don't see Oudis, he would go and speak with crows."

Lixi — "A crow to bring about the end of life... there's something a little romantic and picturesque in that idea, isn't there?"

Apoviosi — "If you believe in a cultural consciousness where crows are harbingers of what is deemed 'sinister,' then a little, yes."

Silence falls once more, for another moment.

A crow having cognitive abilities of a toddler is not going to make for a great moral debate, but it sure was a funny thought.

I contemplate a while longer. Why should *I* be the one to do this? Why choose *me*? It makes no sense.

Apoviosi — "If you're wondering why you, of all living things, has to carry on this so-called duty, then you should ask Oudis. But you have already, have you not? Again, I can carry this vial for you until you're ready to make a decision. Or until someone else is ready."

Lixi — "What about the man accompanying you? Could he not do so himself?"

Apoviosi — "Knowing him, he would wrestle with the idea until he dies from the stress."

Lixi — "I understand."

Apoviosi — "Maybe you will perish, too."

Lixi — "I don't know stress... anymore. Probably."

Apoviosi — "People like you... rare enough. May I recommend something? It will certainly not please Oudis, but it may ease your mind."

Lixi — "Please, I'm all ears."

Apoviosi — "Go on and live your life in solitude,

without anyone around on a day-to-day basis, for however long — perhaps forever. Then, if and whenever you are ready, go back to your next-of-kin, and be curious about the world and its people. Or maybe do all of these at the same time.

Observe it all still, and come back to me once you're ready, whatever the answer may be. Maybe you won't know where to find me, but if you keep in touch with the others, they will know."

Lixi — "I could also give the vial back to Oudis."

Apoviosi — "You could, of course. So far it seems that he still is sane enough to carry his suffering with perseverance, but for how long?"

Lixi — "Why would you be the best choice to carry this, then?"

Apoviosi — "Stuck in a haze of fragmented memories, I recall the beauty of this life and that of others I may have met. I recall the suffering they endured and the love they shared. I am indifferent on this whole ordeal, and so I will not choose for myself. And if you are Oudis' messenger today, then I cannot see why I would not respect the choice you make for the future of all life."

Lixi — "I am no judge, jury, or executioner."

Apoviosi — "You seem to have been appointed to be that, and already accepted the titles."

Lixi — "There was no contract. I do not want the responsibility. No one except all that I came here with today know of this."

Apoviosi — "And no one else will know what will happen. But you forgot again the train of thought that lead you and the three in your company here: no matter what happens, the outcome of Time is the end of life, of existence. You are only bringing this faster — and again, quite possibly in a much softer, perhaps kinder way."

Lixi — "Right... that's right... I forgot. I keep forgetting."

Apoviosi — "Not to worry. Then, do not take the decision today, and only come back when you know. But if I may, even if you decide not to, please tell me. I want to see you do what you will."

Slowly, I breathe in... and out.

Lixi — "Sure. Thank you. I'll be back, then."

Apoviosi — "Take care of yourself. We are glad it's you."

As the Manifestation turns its head back to the field, I was able to spot what looked like a slight smile.

Lixi — "Be well."

I rise from my seat and leave the place, leaving the satchel with the vial inside. I trust it will be safe here. Now, to go back to the trio waiting for me and deliver them the news of this newfound stagnation of curious indecisiveness.
Still, I can't and likely will never be able to shake the feeling of doubt: why me? Guilt will inhabit me no matter what I choose. How cruel can you be, Oudis? But it was my fault for accepting this in the first place, wasn't it?

I look up at the canopy and close my eye for a bit. I guess... it doesn't matter what is chosen in the end. But still... it matters in the now, does it not? But the now will not be, and be forgotten eventually, as if nothing ever were... as if nothing ever was. And I do not understand.

X — A Fleeting Life

<< A droplet forms
To perfection, it must be said.
Then,
A droplet falls
And the swan dive:
It has grace.
We watch, and breath in,
And then we breath out —
Awaiting our own turn;
For what else can we do?
Some paint pictures of what happens next:
Blues, reds, sunshine, happiness...
But what would they know, really?
A droplet forms
And a droplet falls
And if we are lucky
We have grace. >>

— *A Fleeting Life, by Max Cooper and James Yorkston*

November

I woke up today again. I don't remember when was the last time I didn't state such an obvious fact. It's not that I fear my health will fail or anything, it's just that... there's something that saddens me in a strange way about seeing the sun rise after the moon took her turn to drive her shine into the night sky.

I guess... it's been months now since last Oudis or Nekri saw me. Pariah... he hasn't paid me a visit in a few weeks but... what day of the month is it? Sometime in autumn... I guess if we're at the end, he'll come by soon enough. Not sure entirely why he keeps checking on me in person, he could just call, but I don't mind his old-fashioned way of doing things.
Though, thinking of that... Oudis is even more old-fashioned — he doesn't even want to speak on the phone. Hm... actually, I wonder if that's because he's a Manifestation and does not exactly produce soundwaves that can be translated through the phone. That would be pretty interesting if that were the case. Although Nekri can... sometimes I do get her on the phone whenever she calls from Pariah's phone because he's been out of the house for hours and left his stuff at home... at least it's not as difficult for her as the first time we met. Or at least she says, and maybe that's because now I'm here if she needs an ear... but still. It's something.

I go to the kitchen, taking coffee from the thermos

prepared yesterday. I keep making way too much coffee for one person. Habits die hard.

And of course, the coffee is at room temperature; not sure what I expected. I can't be bothered to brew another batch, so I'll just... put the brown liquid in a mug and pop that in the microwave for a few. It'll be that.

'Wake up, wake up, morning self. Wake up, wake up, the feathered bipeds say.' Probably, anyway. I guess I should at least open the windows around here.

Oh, thinking of them... there is a bird chirping at my door. I wonder if it is just curious, or if it wants to be warmer. Does it know it is warm inside? But it isn't warm here. I guess it must be nice, having feathers, flying under the sun.

All these... oddities of poetry, probably remnants of Nekri. All that I'm saying and all that I said, all that I've done and all that was thought — now I spend day to day in a blindingly comforting, pleasantly thoughtless limbo. Sometimes I spend some minutes thinking about whatever I used to think about, understanding a little thing about the world that perhaps I would not have if I still were hanging around with the others... but these understandings, do they matter at all?

A little bit of civics here, a little bit of economics there, maybe even a bit of mathematics or strategy, things so self-satisfying and useless in my case that this is akin to someone knowing trivia, except probably more for what many would consider "boring people".

And maybe I'm boring, waking and walking in the same whatever square meters of living space, sleeping

and dreaming of things I don't ever remember anymore in a bed I hardly find the fatigue to fall asleep in anymore. I'm tired without being tired, no matter what I do, even if I go to exert and stay healthy in this daydream paralysis; it's all quite strange, but at least I guess I don't fear the next day, or the next year, or the next decade, or even my end.
I just go and live day by day as if, many would say I'm certain, 'wasting my life away'. Burdens of abstract expectations from a collective I want very little to do with anymore, yet I suppose these whispers should still be heard as long as I live alongside them all, as removed as I may be from them — for a link still exists.

All this done just so I don't have to think about what I 'should' be doing:
I don't want to think about the pros and cons of ending the whole of existence before its more natural hour. However, I guess it could be said that, if a creation from nature births its own end, then it is as natural as time passing by. If that is true, then why do I still hesitate, and why do I avoid it like the plague?

To think all this was started out of both curiosity and a willingness to help a friend, no matter what it meant. It played out differently in my mind... guess I didn't expect to have this dutiful burden placed upon my shoulders. Wish I could just... not care. Just forget. Just be dishonorable, at least this once. But I can't bring myself to do so fully. Betrayal of a friend, even if they have such ideas... but maybe that's not it. Maybe there's a part of me that agrees with it all, as much as I would like to be convinced that it's all wrong. A hopeful,

desperate attempt to cradle life back to nonexistence.
I do wonder, however, when life will disappear, could it appear again somewhere? That sounds... atrocious.

Oh.

A few minutes after this found understanding, a time in which my mind blanked out and did not want to process further, a knock at the door is heard. It must be Paragoria. And I don't want to hear it; in some ways, I'd like to be alone for weeks on end, maybe months, or even years if possible. Just to forget and be forgotten in this cocoon of a gray peace.
Yet, I know I will enjoy the light this man brings, even if his is shrouded in doubt and fear, as there is a reason why he and Nekri are lovers.

Going to open the door, I straighten up my posture and quickly fix whatever my hair may be like, to at least look a little presentable. Maybe I do this unconsciously normally, but now I got to be conscious because... it's probably better to not let him know I'm in a weird place at the moment.

And indeed, it is him. Wearing an eyepatch today, he looks to be rather happy as well, and it is nice to see.

Lixi — "Pariah!"
A genuine smile is drawn upon my face.

Paragoria — "Hey. How are you doing?"
And one there on his, as well.

Lixi — "I'm doing... fairly well, I'd say. And you?"

Paragoria — "Nothing new since last week, so it's been rather fine."

Lixi — "Really? I guess that's nice then. How's Nekri?"

Paragoria — "She's doing alright. Might come by next week if you wanna see her."

Lixi — "Hm? Why would I not?"

Paragoria — "I'm not sure, as you're the one who left."

Lixi — "That's true... I guess it's hard to explain, at least a little... maybe I was too hasty. Anyway, come on in."

Pariah takes a step in, his worn-down coat on, an old checker-pattern vest underneath, and gray jeans on with unwashable painting spots. As he takes off his jacket and hangs it up, I close the door behind him. Luckily, I do not have to remind him to take his shoes off.

Lixi — "I never noticed before, but you wear your past on you."

Paragoria — "Hm?"

He's always been a man of rather few words, and I appreciate that, as communication is simple most times with him. No need to adorn every step with a hum,

though I do like that too... I guess he does as well.

Lixi — "I mean your clothes. They're all coming from different places you were in your life, it seems."

Paragoria looks down and up on what he's wearing, as if he didn't pay attention when he put them on in the morning.

Paragoria — "You're correct. Pants were from construction jobs; I recall being asked to paint in white some... ceiling? Whatever, can't even remember, that was a while back.
Vest must be from when I used to help my folks with firewood. It's a gift from my late mother actually; she thought it would fit."

Lixi — "She thought well."

Paragoria — "Didn't she? And the vest is the one I've been using since meeting Nekri."

He's patting his vest, mimicking a dusting off motion, even if it's already as clean as it could be. *Pride is present in owning this, the joy and respect of wearing it: he loved the person who gifted it to him.*

Lixi — "I guess that's unsurprising. You're wearing this for her, I'm guessing?"

Paragoria — "Some of that, and some of I don't need to replace it. It keeps warm inside and rain outside. Why change?"

I squint at it, trying to find something that's off with it, which shouldn't be too hard, given the coat's age. While he looks at me with a strange look, I end up fairly quickly finding faults on the fabric, and I point to the multitude of sewed lines to the tall man in front of me, without saying a word.

The sewed lines are all disorderly, not efficient, of different neutral colors, none of them clashing with the rest of the vest. I only know one 'person' who would do something like this.

Paragoria — "That's..."

Lixi — "You don't need to say anything. I'm still amazed by your bond with her. Maybe I said it at some point in the past, I can't remember, but if so then I'll just say it again: I've never seen people like you two, and it's... incredible."

Paragoria — "Thank you. You know, at this point, I don't think I'd be able to live without her. I've been with her longer than half my life."

It's odd, this feels like déjà-vu, but maybe that's just what I expected him to say.

Lixi — "That's beautiful. Inspired that I now am, I'll go brew you some coffee. Sugar?"

I hope I didn't say this with a hint of sarcasm, but I think it came off that way. Oh well.

Paragoria — "A bit, thanks."

Lixi — "I don't know what 'a bit' means, so I'll just bring you sugar cubes."

Paragoria — "Fair enough."

As he takes his eases around the house again, he moves to the living room. The kitchen here is a little space with a counter to separate it from the rest of the place. I guess it's set up kind of like an apartment in some town somewhere, except here the previous owners decided to just destroy over half the wall to have this little thing here. They did a pretty neat job, too. Couldn't tell it wasn't made like this initially, since they redid the flooring too.
The little History of the place, it makes me wonder why the choice was made in the first place, and what did it bring to the house. Did it make it special? Did working on it make it more homely to those that lived here before me?

As I grind the coffee beans to pour it in a cheap, pale, beige-colored, filter-based brewer, Pariah looks around my place, as he usually does whenever he comes. I guess he's trying to gauge if I'm doing well by analyzing if there's anything out of order.

Paragoria — "There's more dust than usual around here." He slides his finger over the table, looks at it, rubs it, then flicks his hand.

Lixi — "Your military days are over... could do without the reminder. I'll clean that at the beginning of next month, don't you worry."

Paragoria — "I do worry, though. Noticed your place has been getting a little more messy each time I came around. How are you doing, mentally?"

Lixi — "Wow, didn't know I opened my door to a free therapy session."

Already had one that upset all we were doing together, but I guess that was unavoidable. This? Not sure. Maybe another day, someday, but leave me be; let me figure things out for now.

Paragoria — "Not so free, you're bringing me coffee."

Lixi — "Hm. Guess I'll get some tea for me as well, then."

He smirks.

I transfer the ground beans into the coffee machine for brewing, pour water in its tank and turn it on. I move to prepare myself some black tea. Nothing fancy, just a thing I like to get that I forgot the name of. Can't even bother to read the label; I know it's in rough shape already.

Lixi — "Guess I've been more or less fine. Just not really doing a lot or thinking a lot, you know?"

Paragoria — "A little unlike you."

Lixi — "I don't think so. I've always had my long moments where I would do things, and long moments where I would do nothing. You've only known one part of me: the not-lazy self."

Paragoria — "Are you really not doing much of your days?"

Lixi — "I couldn't tell you what I did three days ago. Can't even think properly."

Paragoria — "Maybe you don't want to think properly."

Lixi — "Honestly, I don't think I want to, yeah."

Paragoria — "Can’t blame you. I've been trying to ignore the whole thing, and truth be told, Nekri has as well."

Lixi — "Or maybe she knows it's heavy for you too, and doesn't want to talk to you about it because of it."

Paragoria — "Possibly that, yes. As for Oudis, he's been in and out of the place, his usual self."

I feel a tinge of guilt forming in the back of my throat, my eyes naturally shifting to the lower right.

Lixi — "I see."

What is there to say? Nothing. I can't admit this feeling in front of my guest.

Paragoria — "As he would do before, checking on Nekri and caring for her if I were to be away for a bit. Though these days, I'm more at home compared to before. Figure I should be spending more time with her, you know."

Lixi — "I get that."

I'll always remember when we first met, how desperate in her temporary loss she was; it's as if she was grieving a loved one that died some days ago. Maybe Pariah realized after working for too long and earning money that it wasn't in his own or her best interest, when all Nekri wanted was him, and I'm guessing, all he wanted was her, too.

It's hard to get over how romantic these two are; I can't help it. And yet... now I'm not sure I would desire something like this in my life. Maybe it's too late; maybe I've been living by my lonesome for too long to accept another human close to my life. And maybe that's for the best as well. Holding the secret of the fate of life in my hand... or so I've been told. Although maybe it's no secret.

Either way, nothing stops any of the Manifestations from enacting the dissolution of life, except for their self-righteousness and odd moral standards. Or maybe it's not self-righteousness; maybe it's just the righteous conclusion to existence, given who they are.

Paragoria — "I won't blame you if you never want to make the choice. If you ever want to just live your life this way until your passing."

Lixi — "Man, even Oudis is getting to you with how you speak."

Paragoria — "Haha, he probably is, yes. But really, I'm not joking. I'll keep on visiting you if you want."

Lixi — "You're making me feel like a grandma. Not sure many a woman would like that."

Paragoria — "You know that's not my intention."

I smile and gesture a dismissing hand wave.

Pouring coffee in a mug, hot water in another filled with loose tea in a tea filter, I grab both recipients and carry them to the living room. Sitting down to discuss this time of the month again, I begin by turning my head to the open window and staring at the landscape beyond the glass separating us two from the world outside.

Lixi — "Does it not scare you?"

Paragoria — "What?"

Lixi — "When you think outside your immediate self. When you look from a vantage point and see so much. Does it not scare you?"

Paragoria — "I try not to think about it, so no."

Lixi — "Ah."

I'm a little saddened by his answer, but I am not surprised. Who would want to stare at the ground from the sky for longer than curiosity allows?

Paragoria — "Is that why you're locking yourself up in this... safe haven?"

Lixi — "I suppose so."

There's nothing scarier and more grandiose than mountains, real or metaphorical. Maybe the idea of Time and the countdown to nonexistence is scarier, but couple that with the former, and those two just create terror... so maybe that's that, really.

Lixi — "Actually, I'm terrified."

Paragoria — "What scares you that much?"

I look back at my conversational partner. He's drinking his coffee, looking at me. Or one of my eyes? The fake one or the real one?

Lixi — "The whole of everything. The significance of insignificance, how simultaneously everything is big and small. That sort of dichotomy, its implications to life and meaning — they all scare me. All that just

forms... a sphere, something so bright that swallows you and you can't look from inside back to the outside unless you untether yourself from the shackles you were given.

Maybe those you gave yourself... I guess like you did... and I guess like I used to have. Or maybe I still have them. I guess I still have them, otherwise maybe I wouldn't be hiding. Or rather, could it not be the point of being scared and to be "unshackled" per say?

How can anyone live when every waking moment is a wide-eyed walk of existential angst and scare?
I don't know."

Pariah is silent in response. I guess I overshared, but... didn't he ask?

Paragoria — "Damn, Lixi."

Lixi — "It's just... I look at people doing whatever they're doing, and I wonder why they do so, what pushes them, and so on and so forth. I find it incredibly difficult these days to find the drive to do anything, even breathing seems absurd when I think about it. I'd ask you how you do it if I didn't already know."

Paragoria — "But you still did all these things in your past, and went to spend months with us, trying to help Oudis, caring for Nekri, going above and beyond what would have been expected for anyone else."

Lixi — "Yes. I hoped there would be something there, and you do have to try things to know for certain

if they're worth doing. That itself sounds ironic, probably because it is. I'm not really sure what to do next, except for just... being kind of here."

Paragoria — "That's not really a side of you I knew of. Why did you keep it hidden for so long?"

Lixi — "Wasn't that hidden, I'm sure. But even if it were hidden, would you not have kept it that way if you were trying to figure things out?
People keep to themselves even when they're out and about, do they not?
What secrets do you keep from other people?
Nekri being Nekri, she doesn't count. I know you can't keep secrets from her."

Paragoria — "Hm. You're not wrong."

Lixi — "And it's all so many little nothings. Sometimes big nothings, too. Accurately, I guess it would be small and big things that become nothings by virtue of being things.

Eventually death happens, but those that are still alive have to deal with departure, and sometimes not, just to go on living and trying to remember what used to be. Many can't really let go of the past, and perhaps most can't. I don't know about that for sure, but experience tells me that's how it is."

Paragoria — "So what do you do all day then? Just sit and do nothing?"

Lixi — "Sometimes, yeah. But a bored brain is an active brain, so I don't even get the chance to sit still often. Gotta do something, not think about the meaninglessness of it. It's dumb, I think, but that's also comforting. And that's dumb too, yet I can't blame it. There's joy I find in these distractions. Like we all find the same little things in so many different clumps of clay."

Paragoria — "What about the future, and the legacy of your achievements?"

Lixi — "If I cared enough, I would do a little more than I do for future beings on this planet. At least, cared enough for them to maybe try to live peacefully for eons to come until the universe comes to an entropic inert."

Paragoria — "I understand you don't talk about your family much, and I don't want to push you to answer that. However, you wouldn't even want for your friend's families to be happy?"

Lixi — "We all would want that."

Paragoria — "I don't understand you."

Lixi — "Sometimes I find myself hard to understand as well."

A moment of silence fills the room as the wind blows through autumn leaves. But I'm not done with

my tirade.

Lixi — "I wish living wasn't so painful all the time. Trying to mask everything, distort reality to make it an anodyne moment at most times... even the brain tends to erase distressing events, less our chemistry... well, that's another can of worms entirely."

I scratch my eye and look at the ceiling, wondering for a moment if I should at least mention what I think. Paragoria seems to expect me to follow up, so I might as well.

Lixi — "Maybe it's a little much of me to give as an example, but that's kind of why I don't take birth control pills. Considering I don't even care about that sort of thing, I sure was glad when I learned about all these side effects it had. Makes me think about all these people that were on it their whole life, never knowing about all these alterations that happened to them, how they grew dependent on something that distorted their beings so wholly they never could be who they were again; just a remnant of human's cruelty that can't ever exist wholly. But that's not the first time it happened, and it won't be the last."

Paragoria — "Many things like this. We all find ourselves ensnared in one trap or the other at some point; it's a whole other story to get out and stay out. We both know how it's like, but haven't you found yourself in another trap?"

I sigh. Not out exasperation, but more out of an obvious reflection that I should have realized. A little sigh of disappointment towards myself, perhaps.

Lixi — "Probably. Maybe. I don't know, actually. I don't see a way out of this."

Paragoria — "I shouldn't be the one to say this sort of thing — it should be Oudis' role — but consider what you said you would do."

Lixi — "What I might do, I never promised anyone."

Paragoria — "Look, I don't know whether or not you did — I'm just assuming, considering how far you went. I still don't blame you for backing down; none of us do. But if this brings you some answers, perhaps you should reflect on it again."

Lixi — "I might. I'd just like to be a ghost for a while, though. Wonder without wondering exactly, and just somehow find a strange contentment within this... er. Waste."

Paragoria — "It's not a waste."

Lixi — "It feels like it, no matter what you say."

Paragoria — "Based off what I'd assume to be your definition? Everything is a waste."

Lixi — "My definition is one of existence; anything below that is of no consequence."

Paragoria — "Then why not just end it?"

Lixi — "Because I'm a coward."

Paragoria — "I didn't mean that end. The other we've been working towards."

Lixi — "I still hold the belief that none of this should be a decision I can or should make. There's deep cruelty in this, and I don't think I can stomach it."

Paragoria — "Odd, I thought that everything was a waste. It shouldn't really matter, should it?"

Lixi — "Pariah, I'm not sure what you're trying to do. Even Oudis would not stoop so low as to try to use my words outside of their context and portray me as someone I am not."

I look at him side-eyed, then break eye contact. Didn't expect him to do that sort of thing.

Paragoria — "You're right. I apologize, I'm just upset you're in the state you're in. The Lixi I know would do whatever it took to achieve whatever it is she wanted, and she would care for other people with compassion and empathy."

I go grab a smoke from my tobacco stash and just

light it up. The whole thing takes around thirty seconds, during which no words are uttered.

Lixi — "What the fuck are you talking about? Who's that 'Lixi you know'? I'd like to meet her, give her this pep talk like you're giving it straight out of a movie or some corny line people say without believing in them."

Pariah says nothing back. I take a deep sigh and breathe in slowly.

"Sorry about my outburst. Let's assume this person was real. That person would still care enough to know of people's lives — never out of compassion, however.

Now, that said, if it really is me, then it's just not my calling. Nothing is. I just observe and try to lessen the suffering of the people I may encounter sometimes... somewhat. Sometimes it fails, but that's probably because I get involved improperly. Not sure."

Paragoria — "Isn't all that you do about lessening suffering. And, I guess, yours as well?"

Lixi — "Yeah. I know what you're trying to say, but just, no."

Paragoria — "Alright. I'll stop talking about that then."

Lixi — "Appreciated."

Paragoria — "So... what kind of things do you do now that you got, I guess, nothing much going on?"

Lixi — "Nothing much. Still same answer as before."

Paragoria — "Meaning..?"

Lixi — "Look, again, I already forgot what I did last week. I kind of go and maybe create some things, maybe draw a bit, write whatever, listen to music, watch random things online, do whatever and work outside in the garden. Just overall, letting time pass by however I feel like letting it pass.

Does it really matter how I spend all this time? Actually, why is it called spending time? I'm not spending anything; I'm just being."

Paragoria — "You could go and finish working on your bathroom."

Lixi — "Can't be bothered. It works as it does; it's just aesthetically unappealing. Which I don't care for, and it's not much of a bother for the people that come here anyway. Besides you, no one here is regularly or even irregularly. Hell, really, you're the only one that comes by."

Paragoria — "You don't seem to care much about meeting people, either."

Lixi — "Why should I? How can I explain why it's

safer just to be alone?"

I would have said 'I trust you' before he pulled all this weird pep talk from earlier. I probably still do, realistically, but this rubbed me the wrong way.

Odd, usually nothing like this ever bothers me. Oh well, I assume this upset will be going away in a few minutes.

Paragoria — "You don't strike me as one to care much for her own safety."

Lixi — "Got me wrong. The world scares me, and as much as I enjoy being in the middle of nowhere, nature scares me too. I'm just... I'd rather stay somewhat warm in here. I don't know."

Paragoria — "I see."

Both of us look at our drinks. Or the container that used to host a warm liquid inside. Usually our chats were more friendly than that, more nonsense being spewed for some time. Just nice things you could forget about two days down the line, holding a positive image of a friend or an acquaintance. Same thing in this case.

Lixi — "Maybe I should sell my stuff and go live off in a more secluded area. What do you think?"

Paragoria — "How are you going to pay for everything once you've moved in wherever? You can't just stay there without getting money in some way.

You've got a plan?"

Lixi — "I could just go back into the work force. But... I don't know."

Paragoria — "You'll have to find some way anyway. I'm happy to help you out some months when you make a financial mistake, but your unemployment benefits and savings can't last you for much longer. I'd think selling your things will just leave you what... a few months more, at most?"

Lixi — "I'd like to stay that way until I die — I think that sometimes."

Paragoria — "Hm... just sometimes?"

Lixi — "Okay, most of the time. You know, it's nice — not having to really worry about anything."

Paragoria — "I won't be telling you how humans are social creatures — I'm sure you already know of this, and at this point, it's clear enough to me that you're not quite well in your mind. Or at least, not well compared to most people I know. Do you even have a vice, besides smoking?"

Lixi — "Smoking isn't a vice."

Paragoria — "What do you mean, it's... oh. I think I get it."

Lixi — "What?"

Paragoria — "You want to get something from smoking, and not cure it. It's your escape card, isn't it?"

Lixi — "Wouldn't call it an escape card, but sure. Yeah. It's not surprising, is it?"

Paragoria — "Kind of, honestly. You didn't strike me as the suicidal type."

Lixi — "I'm full of surprises like that."

Paragoria — "I guess you are. Makes more sense now, why you are the way you are."

Lixi — "That a negative?"

Paragoria — "You are who you are and I'm not gonna try to change that. More because I'm guessing you've been that way for a long time, and I don't really want to try to change you."

Should I be grateful or offended at this? On one hand, he's kind enough to not want to make me who I am not — or at least, not anymore. On the other hand, he says he doesn't care enough to try. I'm just confused and I don't understand what his true intention is here.

Lixi — "Alright. I think... thank you? Not sure."

Paragoria — "It's difficult to help anyone besides

some general life advice and on specific things I have direct experience with. What you're dealing with and the questions you wrestle with, I'm familiar with them, but I choose to see the world differently than you, it seems. And I don't think you'd accept my viewpoint, is all."

Lixi — "Okay. I guess your viewpoint is about how life is worth living, beautiful, and all that?"

Paragoria — "Kind of. Once you see what the world has to offer, you realize it's not that terrible of a place. People make the world, and they're beautiful. Not all of them, of course; it should go without saying. But those you meet and keep close, they make a world of your own, and you become part of their own world, and I think that's just what life is about."

Lixi — "So... you have to ignore the parts of life and the world that are terrible for it to say "it's beautiful"? That doesn't sound like facing reality."

On second thought, doesn't this feel like running a roundabout? Didn't I already have this kind of talk with Oudis before? I can't remember. Was it in my dreams, then? Maybe a refresher isn't that terrible. Better than staying confused, at least.

Paragoria — "Never said this was reality. Just that this is the world I choose to see. If I have to lie to myself, then so be it. You know how my life went — I already know how horrid it can get."

Lixi — "But that's like... repressing memories. Like you don't want to see what you saw. Doesn't sound like it's the right call."

Paragoria — "The right call? There's no right or wrong way to see life, I don't think. Nor the world, for that matter. Even if there were, moral judgments on them are not really ours to make."

I stay silent while going to prepare more tea. Grabbing the kettle and gently shaking it at him while he looks. He nods, although I didn't ask him what kind of tea he'd like. Probably wiser to just make green or white tea at the moment. Or maybe... why not red tea? That would be nice.

Paragoria — "So, what do you think?"

Lixi — "While I maintain that to believe the world is beautiful is to blind yourself to the world, I don't blame you for doing so. Maybe it's one of the few ways to live at peace, or be happy, or I don't know what. Something positive towards the spirit and body, some would say."

Paragoria — "I take it you're not going to go the same route."

Lixi — "I'm already too far gone my own."

Paragoria — "You say that now, but later..."

Lixi — "You sound like a dad, or a mentor, or something like that. Although before, you sounded like Oudis, so there's that as well."

Paragoria — "I tend to get that first comparison every now and then."

Lixi — "Hm... not interested in having kids?"

Paragoria — "I'd like to."

Lixi — "I take it you can't."
Maybe both of them can't.

Paragoria — "That's about it, yeah."

Lixi — "You must have thought about it long enough, so I won't bother you with suggestions. But... have you made your peace with it? Sorry if it's a little weird; not sure what else to say. Don't want to say 'sorry to hear that'; sounds fake."

Paragoria — "No problem. I've yet to completely be fine with it, truth be told, but I reckon eventually I will be. I must be, really; otherwise I'll go to the grave with regrets, which I don't really want."

Lixi — "Fair enough. Hope you'll get there, then."

Paragoria — "Thanks."

Seems that I was able to go further into the topic of my descent or ascent into whatever – whichever way it is seen, wherever I may be going. I sincerely hope Paragoria gets to die happy, just so that he can say on his deathbed that he had a lovely life, something that was worth living.

I know I may not have that, though even now I still have doubts on whether or not life is worth it. In some ways, I guess life can only be worth it, given that it's the only thing that exists consciously; or at all organically, really.

Paragoria – "Got a question for you."

Lixi – "Guess it's your turn. What's up?"

Paragoria – "Was thinking about why we go and hang around mostly with our common friends instead of anyone else, and how they chose us more than the other way around."

Lixi – "They were easy to like though, so it's hardly one-sided."

Paragoria – "True, but that's not the point."

Lixi – "Sorry for interrupting."

He waves his hand dismissively with a side nod. 'No problem,' he mimes.

Paragoria – "Point is, we never really talk much

about culture, do we? Or even the people we intimately know. Never really of our friends or families."

Lixi — "We don't, that is true. Family? We both have that, that much I know. Never heard you call them or anything though."

Paragoria — "Yeah, not my thing."

Lixi — "Not your thing? Did they reject you, or was it the other way around?"

Paragoria — "Could have been both."

A little surprised, I finish preparing the teas and get ready to bring them. Lots of drinking today...

Lixi — "I see. And as for the culture thing... are you talking about growing up, being part of a cultural heritage, consumption as culture, or something else?"

Paragoria — "All at once."

I glance at the ceiling for a moment, quickly analyzing past and present: how I always ended up somehow a misfit, no matter how much I tried, even if I 'bettered' myself — whatever that means — and lead on to greener pastures sometimes. How nothing really felt warm or homely among the people surrounding me, anywhere I went — even if I was looked up to, liked, or rarely even loved.

'Home is people' they say, but I guess my home

never really had foundations to begin with. Perhaps that's also why I was able to depart so suddenly and without issues from my friends.

Lixi — "Yeah."

That's all there is to say. He said it, he knows it, he knows that I know, so there's nothing else to say. Plus, he probably won't want to talk much about it anyway, knowing him.

Does that mean I'd like to talk about it?

Hm. Maybe something to ask Oudis next time we talk... but I'll likely forget about it by then, if we ever even talk again.

Lixi — "Say, you think Nekri or even Oudis will end up getting a phone at some point?"

Paragoria — "Tough luck, ask again in a decade or something. They got to get used to the idea of it."

Lixi — "Guess so. That reminds me, you ever saw Oudis use a computer?

He's slower than a grandma, though at least he kinda knows what does what."

Pariah laughs, likely at the mental image of a tall skeleton hunched over, typing slowly on a keyboard.

Right as he regains composure, though he never really lost it, the tea is served again.

Paragoria — "I'd like to see that, must be pretty

funny."

Lixi — "It is. I don't watch what he does on the rare occasions he's on those machines; it's a little infuriating, but maybe that's just me being young and impatient, not sure."

Paragoria — "For something that demands efficiency and is efficiency, it's not something you can hold against yourself."

Lixi — "Yeah, that's probably true."

Paragoria — "You ever looked up his search history?"

Lixi — "Like once or twice. He doesn't know about private browsing or deleting his browsing data, so yeah."

Paragoria — "And...?"

Lixi — "History."

Paragoria — "Oh."

Lixi — "Our bony friend does not, in fact, want to bone out."

I smile idiotically at my own joke, looking at Pariah to have a reaction.

Paragoria — "But searching History-related things... he must be zone out."

That's a funny reaction.

Lixi — "Half the day he's here and half the day he's not quite there anyway — um, sleeping aside."

Paragoria — "True enough."

We go on to crack a few observations we had about Oudis, then Nekri, then ourselves. We go from topics to tangents to forgetting what we were originally on about, things and nothings said, with nothing remembered, except for the pleasant time being engraved as an additional idea of an aspect that is this friend of mine, and him of me. Or so, for the latter, I hope so.

Funnily, already an hour that felt like half had gone by. It's been a little while since a conversation like this made the time fly by.

It's nice, like being under a warm little sun in spring, as birds chirp under blue, kind and clear weather.

Paragoria — "Lixi, I gotta go back to the house soon. Next time I'll grab you some coffee or tea, whichever you prefer. Still never paid you back for that coffee you brought us, remember?"

Lixi — "Oooh, wow. Yeah, I remember — that was a while back! Thank you, but don't feel obliged."

Pariah gets up, puts his cup in the sink and gets ready to walk to the bathroom. Guess I should go soon too; we've been holding it for a while. Feeling it now... sudden discomfort.

Paragoria — "Then see it as a gift."

Lixi — "Hmpf. Fine, just take whatever you usually take for coffee, or for tea you can just... take whatever seems nice to you. Nothing expensive though, you hear me? I know you don't have that much money and you got to take care of Nekri."

Paragoria — "Don't worry about it."

Lixi — "Whatever you say."

I never worry much about him, but I do care about what he does. I don't understand why he goes the lengths he does for me; I don't think he goes on to hang out with me on request of anyone, but I don't quite get why he enjoys my company. Though I do enjoy his.

Hm, I'm now reminded of the times people have come to spend time willingly with me, just chatting and doing whatever. I guess when we were kids it makes sense, but even into adulthood, there were folks like that. Never really did I consider that they genuinely liked me, because... well, I guess I didn't care. Rarely called back, and if I did, it was just to get news but never to go do things, even eat together. Or go to drinks or parties, like I used to do, even if it was rare.

Things aren't the way they used to be, looking to be who I was not, and maybe I'm not who I am now, but I don't know that. Will I ever know that?
Hm. Another question without an answer. Would be

odd, if only I weren't so familiar with them.

The question reverberates for a little bit in my mind and then disappears, only to be asked again sometime later whenever, like I never asked it before. A subtle déjà-vu that does not feel like one, yet unconsciously, I know it was asked — until I consciously know it, but by that point, it becomes an inside joke to myself.

Paragoria comes back from the bathroom, hands wet, flicking his wrists and dropping drops around the place like nobody's business. He never uses towels or papers to dry his hands, for some reason. Don't really care, personally; the water on the floor will dry up in a few.

We are making our way to the entrance. I forgot what time it was, but the sun is still up; quite high up still, actually. Is it normal? Whatever.

Lixi — "So, same time next time?"

Paragoria — "Sure. Just might be early or late by twelve hours or so."

Lixi — "Okay, funny man, just send me a text or give me a call. Got no plans for a while, anyway."

As I open the door for him, he grabs his coat around his arm.

Paragoria — "If you ever need some money for food, just tell me."

Lixi — "I appreciate the gesture, but the earlier gift was enough. Keep your money here; I think you'll need it more than me. Plus, don't you already donate to a charity on the regular?"

Paragoria — "How did you know?"

Lixi — "Come on..."

Paragoria — "Right."

For a moment, he seemed shocked that I knew this. I guess he never told anyone but Nekri. Usually folks would gloat about helping others, even by proxy, like donating to a charity.

We say our goodbyes for the day, or week, or month. And that is that. A smile on both our faces, and mine doesn't seem to be going away even a minute after he left.

What a nice day. I wonder what the next one will be like? Oh, but shouldn't I just stay on the now of today? Let's just keep smiling for now — it'll be gone soon enough, after all is said and done.

Epilogue — Remaining Routine

To: Paragoria Erimos
1 Hillroad
230300 Ingen

From: Lixi [redacted]
5 Flynt Impasse
235800 Glemme

<< The sun flickers when I refuse to be looking at it,
The dusk disappears when I avoid staring at the sky.
The moon dreams of sorrows at all times.
I sit still, legs moving, eyes watering:
The wind is weeping with me.
But I am no one — all is uncaring, nothings pretending,
Selfishly I wish we would simply be something,
Yet only Time is, and knows solely It. >>

Dear Oudis,

Joined with this is a poem, even though I don't recall if you're into them. If anything, I guess Nekrichta still is.
Maybe pass it to her, if you can? Thank you.
The liquor bottle that you should have received with this package is also a gift for her. Maybe this is enabling her, so it's your call to do what you will with it. Also, do tell her and Pariah that I think about them (*since he'll be the one receiving the letter first, and in case he reads this far: hello Pariah! Hope you're doing well. Call me sometime!*).

But I'm not sending this just for that, obviously. You already saw how long this is, though I don't know how long it's going to get quite yet, just that it will be.

Took me years to finally write you a letter. I know you still live with Pariah and Nekri... or at least, I hope you do. But maybe you'll find this letter eventually, like you found that letter from your old friend back when we visited that port town.

It's been however long now since last we saw each other? Even Paragoria, last time we saw each other was... ah, I don't remember anymore. But still. I moved out to a more peaceful place. Though where I was already was relatively very much peaceful, this is something else entirely. Maybe Pariah told you. There's less and less to worry about, and sometimes more, but it doesn't feel as strange as it used to. It feels like there's just the dirt and me, sometimes the animals, though only the birds come

around here.

I didn't give you the address because I didn't want you or our friends to find me. I still consider you all three friends, of course, but you know how I see this whole thing by now. All was a confusing mess, and when curiosity took the better of me, well... considering all that transpired, however much I talked (*which wasn't a lot at all*), the confusion only grew.

I still don't understand why you want (*or maybe wanted*) me to carry out your wish, why it should be me that decides on the fate..."earlier, inevitable" fate of existence. At this point, I don't think I want that. If there's a heaven or a hell — and I'm no believer, by any stretch of the imagination, though perhaps some fragment of the old world still lingers in my mind (*it is quite compelling, isn't it?*) — then I would rather be forgotten entirely and be cast away. Anesthesia on my death, unaware ever of my corpse and soul drifting across an eternal obsidian ocean.

Now, Nekri-like imagery aside, I must also apologize for this. I hope you do not see it as betrayal. I know you kept saying that "it is your choice," and that you will "not go against my wish," but we lived through enough together that it makes me wonder if you meant all that you said. I think you did not. I often wonder about you and your state, but I can't bring myself to talk to you again. I would like to assume that you have come to tame your inner turmoil, but I know that is not the case, and likely will never be. Perhaps if you stopped carrying souls and harboring new ones, it would, but I

guess you would not exist either, then.

I will assume, however, that the further humanity progresses through time, the less you will suffer. Not necessarily because we will be less and less, but because in modernity — and you must know it well, History and memories become mere data, their weight becomes like that of the air, and generations of ideas and proof of existence are left adrift to become dust near the ash of a forest fire.

I used to have hope, even though I was somewhat of a dreamless dreamer. Now I don't even dream anymore. Only look at the sky at night, wondering where the day went, and forgetting where I was last week. Probably, I didn't leave this place:

There's no suffering here, just me aging alongside the trees outside my windows.

The wind scares me sometimes too, now; I'm not sure why. The rain is not as welcoming, and the fireplace lit during winters I don't really fire up anymore, as the flames look like they want to sear my flesh. For some reason I still move around, taking care at least somewhat of my health, cutting in the earth and violating it with seeds to grow vegetables, but I don't want to care for more than that. Sometimes I go to the market in a village near here.

Funny, there used to be one that was buzzing around with people in the nearest village here, and then as the people aged and the younger ones left, that market became less and less popular, until most merchants decided to simply ditch it and go to another place that seemingly had more people there during the

same time slot they were allowed to set up shop in. Outside markets and regulations... that's funny too.

Sorry, I'm not really sure what I'm writing about now. What was the point of this paragraph? I guess I just wanted to tell you about whatever, like we used to talk about. Or did we? I can't remember, maybe it was more with Nekri, but you could talk about anything with her and she would be just engaging with you, honestly and gleefully. I do miss her, and you, and Pariah. That tall, strong man, ever so serious, ever so loving towards his wife. Well, not wife, but you know how we joked about that.

Say, did you ever go to meet Apoviosi again? I know I didn't talk to you much about my encounter with him, but still, he did ask how you were doing. I don't know how much it's worth, but the image you produced of him before I met him was very different from his actual character. I guess he changed, or maybe the present has changed so much that he did, too. I never really wondered about that, but maybe he's one of the most confused beings out there. Do you think that could be the case as well? Well, maybe not. Maybe you three Manifestations are the most confused out of anyone — or anything — that exists. Maybe I'm as confused as you all now; I don't know.

The days pass by one by one; aging comes by drop by drop, escaping twofold night after night, and I'm not seeing how much time I have left. When the time comes, I wonder if I'll regret anything in my life. All I

know now is that I simply regret being alive. Maybe I have you to thank for that, or maybe you just helped me realize what I was wondering about before we met. But I can't say your impact was so minimal. All this I've now become, you were the catalyst. I made these decisions, of course, and so the cause cannot be put on you for my abandonment of life, but I still can't help but attribute part of why I weep at the clouds to you.

You know, I still sometimes shed singular tears without any reason, seemingly out of nowhere, anywhere, even inside this house. I wonder if that's a tear of contentment towards this peace I found or built — I'm not sure which is which, exactly — or if it's a tear of sorrow, or possibly even joy, although I would not be sure why it would be that... I can't seem to be able to distinguish what it is that I feel anymore, quite honestly. At least I still feel, I suppose.

Do you remember when we had that talk about finding something to work towards? A dream to grasp, ambitions, or what have you? And also that I wanted to find work again. I never really did, except working at my old job at the crematorium for a bit, just so I could have enough to buy this cheap place in the middle of nowhere.

We don't really fit in anywhere, do we? It's like nature mourns itself around here, and people are grieving with it. Maybe that's why I tear up sometimes; maybe the soul had something to express, meaning I must be pretty efficient at bottling things up.
But maybe there's nothing to bottle up anyway, and it's all just a free-flow of absurdity that comes through. I

don't know. I know less and less the more I learn about the world, it feels like — as I still do learn.

Curiosity still is here — and meaningless, perhaps — but the brain wants to entertain itself, to find things and to satiate itself. That part of the brain that writes to you seems apathetic to it all. Maybe it's the soul that speaks here, when the road is clear for clarity. The other that just wants to consume is here to act human. But when does it ever feel alive? Maybe you don't know what it feels like, the dopamine rush of doing things, of learning, of entertainment. But it's all just entertainment, no? Learning for the sake of *x* or of *y*, where all goals are spelled in the same alphabet: something that exists, something real, yet something that doesn't mean anything. It's all meaningless meaningfulness, a complete dichotomy that ends up pairing to be so sensibly attractive to feast upon.

Perhaps that's what you, Nekri, Apoviosi, and maybe even Pariah imparted onto me. Though... more you and Apoviosi. The other two seem to live despite all this, fully embracing this absurdity and wanting to feel at least the joy of existing together.

It's weird then, I think, that I find them beautiful and even cute, and somewhere my mind says it seems like an ideal to pursue. Maybe the ideal to pursue is not that, but rather the strength to ignore the truth in front of us, the pierced veil we insist on looking through every few nights... or rather, every night for you, I reckon.

Does it ever scare you less? You know you won't be living in eternity already, that your existence will cease

once life ceases. But what if death for the living is just a sublimation of the soul?
Ah, but hear me spouting nonsense. Sorry, my brain seems to be trying to cling onto something.

I wanted truth and I found it below the bottom of a lake, the infinite hidden and lifeless. I think it scared me so much that it scarred me. Terror engorged my whole being so that it broke it entirely. Retaining parts of who I might have been, living every hour that my brain was not otherwise engaged in survival or entertainment that it could not stop but think and wonder about what it saw... what you know and what you desire.

After writing all this... feels like a meditation. Thoughts I hadn't had for a long time.
Maybe I'll go seek out Apoviosi. I don't know if he's still around that forest guy we met. I did some research alongside Nekri soon after we left the place back then, kept all the info in a notebook somewhere in an old box I never opened after I moved in here. I should look up the info here and make sure the man is still alive.

Perhaps you were right. I wanted you to be wrong but... Hm, whatever. If I do go seek him out and finally do what you desired after such a long time, I'll send you a letter. I don't know if we'll see each other again, even then, but at least you should be informed. If I don't before my death, you can assume it was not done. Also, I am assuming you'll know of my death; I have an inkling you keep tabs on what I'm doing in some way, as you've been keeping tabs "occasionally" (*so, I guess once every few decades*) on folks you've met. I suspect as well you

may try to check up on me more often than that, but still, maybe it's just silly of me to believe in such things. I'm sure one day you'll find out where I am.

Still unsure as to why I think as much about you, and why I care still about your well-being. Part of me says I should have burned bridges, but we both know there's something odd about me. Do you think me rational? Sometimes I wonder if I don't confound being emotionless for rationality and logic.

All these questions I ask feel like they are given to the wind. Were you to address me a letter, I don't know if I would had the guts to read it. By the way, where this was sent from is not my address, just so we're clear. I'll receive whatever you send, if you want to; it'll be forwarded to where I actually live, but still. I would appreciate if you did not seek me out, at least for now. Letters are enough.

That's it. Mumbled thoughts and wonders. I hope it wasn't too confusing. And I wish you to stop suffering. Maybe I'm still the key to that, or maybe you'll finally get enough calcium to get a backbone and do it yourself... hah. Is it a funny joke?

Still, it's appreciated that you would let humans choose. I'm still honored that you would select me out of anyone, and there is a bit of shame still inhabiting me from this entire distancing thing, and the inaction of choice I still am taking to this day. Maybe it's not confusion, in the end; part of me could be thinking that it's a way for you to not seek out someone else that would actually make a choice...

Wish it was that; it would be clear-cut. Confusion and fear seem to be what it really is – even if all other hypotheticals want to be convincing, you know and I know that's not true. "Curiosity killed the cat"; in this case, curiosity just terrorized it when it saw what was real.

Be well as much as you can,
Yours truly,
Lixi

 # # End # #

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Relecture : Dakota Reed
Correction : Dakota Reed
Illustration : Marlies B.
Couverture : Stefano Buro

Distribution du livre digital : Draft2Digital LLC

ISBN : 978-2-9597806-1-5
Prix : 5,00€