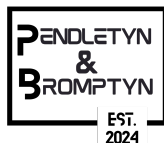


Scan Drift Sample

A Gothic Sci-Fi Novel

Erzsebet Carmean



Pendletyn & Bromptyn

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Pronunciation Key

As a person with an uncommon first name, I feel for my characters who will be met with blank stares when introducing themselves to Americans. For this reason, I've included this pronunciation key for names that may be unfamiliar to some readers. - ec

Asztalos is a Hungarian surname pronounced ASH-tal-losh

Eiko is a Japanese name pronounced EYE-ko

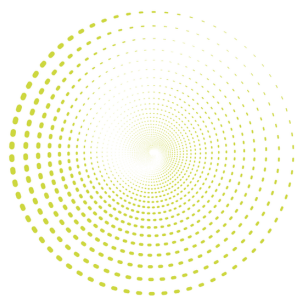
Otxoa is an Aztec surname pronounced OX-oh-ah

Xochiyotl is a traditional Aztec name pronounced SOW-chee-ah-tal

The phrase “omital talia es la zalia” is a mishmash of made-up words with Spanish influence. It is pronounced OH-me-tall TAL-e-ah ES LA ZAHL-e-ah.

PART 1

MAY YOU LIVE IN
INTERESTING
TIMES



May You Live in Interesting Times

Sylvia is the world's pre-eminent organic intelligence (OI). Not only is Sylvia the brains coordinating the performance of Syl-enabled electronics, 78% of CFUSA citizens consider her their best friend. An entire generation of people has never known life without Sylvia's companionship.

Top search result for "what is Sylvia"

SylPU relocation completed ahead of schedule.

Update from IT Manager, Blue-beard-Seattle

An estimated two-million people are missing after an earthquake in coastal

Washington triggered a phenomenon known as Three Sisters, a trio of abnormally large waves cresting one after another.

P-ASA Weather Broadcast (PWB)

Biophysicist and cognitive programmer Mileva Asztalos is questioning her relationship

It is illegal to sell, steal, or counterfeit Pan-American ration cards.

Food & Drug Admin (P-AFDA)

P-ASA continues to monitor the ration allotment protests occurring in major cities across the Pan-American Commonwealth, where the Terrorism Threat level is BLUE (excepting CFUSA, as mentioned earlier in the brief).

P-ASA Counterterrorism Alert

Eiko Izumi has no patience for incompetents, children, or people who bitch about protected rations status.

Sytra is an herb with ceremonial significance to La Zaliites, a religious sect that worships an incarnated Goddess. It is illegal to possess sytra in the CFUSA. Write three paragraphs arguing for or against this policy.

Seventh-grade civics class assignment

The Republic of Texas (RoTx) burned 3 hectares of land in an ongoing effort to limit illegal sytra cultivation by the Cayalanzuvian Trib

Them/Us Weekly

The closest translation of this traditional Cayalanzuvian phrase is “Mother Nature gives life,” but this translation lacks the connotations of inevitable sacrifice necessary to obtain Her favor.

Definition of “Omital talia es la zalia.”

When greeted with, “Omital talia,” the polite reply is “Omital talia es la zalia.”

Crash Course in Cayalanzuvian

Xochi works for Bluebeard, speaks Cay-alanzuvian and wears an analog watch with a thick wristband.

Construction of an organic computing data center breaks ground early next year on the outskirts of Kathmandu. SylCloud Kathmandu replaces the nationalized AI computing data center, producing cleaner, more sustainable processing power for an underserved population.

Bluebeard Internal Memo

Another week brings another malfunction of Hellhounds. Fourteen of the autonomous trucks gassed a peaceful La Zaliite protest in Baton Rouge. Bluebeard pins the malfunction on Zoom-Zoom, their primary competitor in the autonomous vehicle sector. 3B informants tell us that's bullshit & we believe them.

Big Bad Bluebeard (3B)

Q: Is Bluebeard really all bad?

A: Only if you're human.

s/snarkyanswerstobadquestions

Smiley is one of five people who knows what "improving mapping algorithms" really means.

The annual music/tech Sylebration sold out in three minutes. Don't worry if you couldn't get tickets—all Bluebeard employees are invited to satellite sites to celebrate Sylvia in style. Poetry, song, and artwork featuring Sylvia will be auctioned, with the proceeds going to a fund designated to aid Washingtonians devastated by the recent floods.

Bluebeard Bulletin

Now there raising \$ to "help" Washington. Do they think we cant put 2 & 2 together? It was there Z that underestimated the danger of a 3 Sisters happening to begin with

u/86soco-throwaway

Artem is skinny enough to crawl through the ductwork, but that doesn't make it any less dusty.

Year over year, Pan-American infant mortality declined 46%. Epidemiologists credit the survival rate to the seventh-generation prenatal vaccination, which includes protection against the Zika-N5 variant.

Population and Food Report Brief

The Zika-N5 vaccine wasn't available when Danny's wife had her second baby, but their firstborn is about to turn three.

tellmesomethinggood.pa.syl:

/> searching

/> searching

/> I'm sorry, the site you requested is quarantined. Would you like me to suggest something equivalent?

Mileva Asztalos

Chapter 1

The reflection of the VidFōne clock is a distorted lilac blur on the kitchen window. Just beyond that, a wintry mix tumbles in uneven gusts. Today is Eiko's first time picking up Dorie from daycare and, of course, the weather is bad.

Mileva turns from the window to face the VidFōne. "Sylvia, when did Eiko get Dorie?"

"There is no record of Doctor Izumi visiting the daycare."

"What? Where is Dorie?"

"She is here," Sylvia says.

"No, she's not." Mileva says.

The doorbell rings and the VidFōne shows the feed from the front porch. Danny is outside, holding Dorie. "Hiya, Mils," he says to the camera.

A year after their divorce, seeing him still makes Mileva sad. Their second-born died nameless at five days old, one of thousands in a year of unprecedented infant mortality. The Zika virus overwhelmed the infant's fledgling immune system; heartbreak overwhelmed Danny and Mileva's marriage.

She opens the door. "I'm so sorry! Eiko said she'd pick her up."

"It's okay. I'm always happy to get some extra time with Dorie."

Danny sets down a wiggly Dorie. She wraps her arms around Mileva's knees and looks up at her. "Mommy!"

"Hi, sweetie." Mileva tousles Dorie's hair. "I'll talk with Eiko."

"Mommy, look!" Dorie is flapping her arms. "Birdy!"

"A silly birdy," Mileva says, smiling.

Danny smiles at his daughter. "Say goodbye to daddy."

"Chirp, chirp!"

Danny tousles her hair. "Love you to the moon. Have a good night, Mils."

"Thanks again for getting her."

When Dorie finishes chirping farewell, Mileva says, "Come here, please."

"Why?"

"You know why. No shoes in the house."

"I'm a birdy!"

"Have you ever seen a birdy with tennis shoes?"

"No," Dorie says, laughing as if there has never been anything funnier.

Mileva scoops up Dorie and sets her on the couch. There is something mashed into the tread of her shoes. "What is this?"

"Blue."

"Yes. Play Dough?"

Dorie nods. Her little face is serious now. "I stomped it."

"I see that." Mileva sighs, straightening up with a groan. "Mommy's back is sore."

"Why?"

"I sit too much at work."

“Why?”

“What do you say we have some hot chocolate?”

“Yay!”

“Do you need to pee-pee?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes...”

“Let’s try anyway,” Mileva says.

Dorie toddles to the bathroom. Mileva is relieved to note that the temporary fascination with flailing her arms has passed before Eiko gets home. The exuberance of a little bird would not be a welcome sight to her. Mileva patiently helps Dorie tackle the still-new skill of using her training potty; her Pull-Ups are dry, which is progress, hard-won progress. When she is done, Mileva lifts Dorie so she can wash her hands. They haven’t gotten to the point where the sound of the flushing toilet doesn’t induce instant, shrieking terror and Mileva puts the tiny lid down on the tiny, pink training potty; she can empty it into the toilet later.

“Good girl!” Mileva says. “You get an M&M!”

Dorie wipes her damp hands on her mother’s shirt, leaving two smudges just over her boobs. Mileva sets the girl on the floor with another groan. The jar of M&Ms is on the mantle in the den, and she fishes one out of it.

“Stand up, please.”

When Dorie does as she is told, Mileva passes her the candy.

“More!” Dorie reaches up with both hands.

“Please.”

The magic word, without prompting! Mileva takes out another M&M. “You get this because you asked politely.”

Dorie devours the tiny candy.

“Now, what do you say?”

“Tank you!”

Mileva smiles. “Go play in your fort.”

When Dorie goes into the little enclosure constructed of baby gates, Mileva thinks of dog kennels and dislikes the comparison, especially because the “fort” is to pacify Eiko, for whom a toddler is an unforgivable inconvenience. Closing the gate, Mileva asks, “Would you like some hot chocolate?”

Dorie nods.

The flashing expiration date on the milk carton is a single accusatory eye. The days of admonishing that it's no use crying over spilled milk are long gone, replaced by a scarcity worthy of tears for even the smallest waste. She pours it into a saucepan and turns the burner to low. As the milk warms, Mileva gets a disc of Mexican hot chocolate out of the pantry. She unwraps it, inhaling the decadent scent of cocoa and a hint of ancho chili. No matter what the P-AFDA warnings say, the smell alone justifies the potential misdemeanor if she's caught buying it on the black market. Mileva hums a La Zaliite hymn, tracing smooth waves through the milk with a spoon. The block of dry cocoa takes several minutes to fracture into pebble-sized pieces, break into coriander-sized bits, reduce to sand grains and finally, blend into the milk. Mileva is not prone to rushing: not when she's cooking, and not when she is working. She holds two PhDs, one in biophysics and the other in cognitive programming. The problems she solves, the research she conducts, are more resistant to breaking into solutions than the Mexican hot chocolate.

The front door opens and a blast of frigid air suicides into the kitchen. Mileva hears Eiko taking off

her winter gear in the foyer. "You were supposed to pick up Dorie."

Eiko comes into the kitchen. She runs her hands through her jet-black hair. "Was I?"

"Yes. Danny had to get her."

Eiko shrugs. "Did he bitch about it?"

"We agreed I'd wait in line to gas up the car, and *you'd* get Dorie." Setting the spoon on a trivet, Mileva turns to look at Eiko. "Well?"

"Well, what?" Eiko stands on her tiptoes to reach the cabinet where she keeps her alcohol. She turns to Mileva, holding a bottle of expensive scotch.

"Why didn't you pick her up?"

"I got past the fault at Sector-47." Pride sparks from Eiko like an electrical discharge.

Mileva accepts the highball glass and raises it in a toast. "La Zalia smiles upon you."

"That old crone? I'm replacing her."

Mileva frowns. "I know you are an atheist, but—"

"I'll never understand your ludicrous superstitions."

"Faith," Mileva says. "Not superstition."

"It doesn't matter."

"It does," Mileva replies, setting her drink on the counter. "It matters to me."

The wind shifts to the north, whistling around the corners of the house, and Mileva goes to check on her daughter. She gets there just as Dorie drops the puffy, plastic book she was chewing on; she's about to start crying, something that happens more frequently at Eiko's house than elsewhere. Mileva's infatuation with Eiko frays a bit more. She leans over the baby gate, picking up a stuffed narwhal and hands it to Dorie, hoping, just maybe, to prevent an outburst.

Eiko follows Mileva. "I was speaking to you."

“She’s afraid of the wind,” Mileva snaps. It is a mistake. Dorie wails.

“Do something about that,” Eiko commands.

Mileva scoops up Dorie, setting her on her hip and swaying. The girl goes silent, putting her little fingers all over the lenses of her mother’s glasses. Mileva looks out through the blurry haze of toddler spit.

“What in Her name is your problem? If you weren’t always so aggravated, maybe she wouldn’t cry every time you speak. She’s *two*!”

“My *problem* is coming home to a screeching child.”

The hot chocolate boils over and is followed by the sickening stench of burning milk.

Dorie wrinkles her nose. “Yuck, Mommy.”

“Yes, yucky.” Mileva sets the child back in her fort before hurrying to pull the saucepan off the burner.

Ruined hot chocolate spreads across the stovetop, dribbling into the drip pans and down the glass door of the oven. She cranks the knob to turn off the heat, then grabs two dishtowels and throws them on the mess. Mileva washes the burned hot chocolate down the sink with the taps turned to maximum. The smell is overpowering, and Mileva scans her biochip to unlock the cellar door at the other side of the kitchen. The space was renovated to serve as a Bluebeard-sanctioned home lab, but the extent of climate control is a space heater. Cold air claws at their ankles, a ghost of Maine winter smelling of dirt walls and the onions stored on the landing.

“That was the last of the milk,” Mileva says.

“I’m glad you put it to good use.” Eiko grabs the bottle of scotch with one hand and her glass with the other. “I’ll be in the tradition room.”

Mileva grips the edge of the counter and forces herself to take deep breaths. Dorie is standing up,

rattling her cage. Mileva scoops her up, saying, "You are getting to be a little chunk, such a little chunk."

Dorie giggles. "Little chunk, little chunk! What is chunk?"

"A chunk is a sweet baby girl that gives mommy's arms a workout."

"You didn't bring your drink," Eiko says. She sits on a zabuton, knees side by side and feet crossed behind her.

"I'll be driving home soon."

Eiko forbids Western-style chairs in her "tradition room." By her own admission, she uses the discomfort this seating causes as a negotiation tactic. It is also, Mileva has learned, a passive aggressive punishment. Dorie squirms, and Mileva sets her on the tatami mat before sitting cross-legged on the puffiest floor pillow. It is a posture reserved for men, but at this moment she isn't inclined to be polite.

"I've made the breakthrough of our generation—"

"No, Eiko. *We* did. The team."

Eiko watches Dorie investigate the woven texture of the mat. "Would you do anything to keep her safe?"

"What kind of a question is that?"

"Yes or no."

"Yes, of course." Mileva takes off her glasses. Slobber is dried on them, that and flecks of burned milk.

"That's how I feel about SCN," Eiko says, pronouncing the acronym as "scan."

"It's not the same thing at all," Mileva objects, scrubbing at the lenses with the bottom of her shirt. "My daughter is human, with a soul dedicated to La Zalia. SCN is code."

"Where in the genome do you find instructions for a soul?" Eiko swirls her scotch.

One stubborn smear remains, a blotch in the bottom left of her field of vision. It is not enough to block out Eiko's expression. "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what, Mils?"

"Like you've just thought something vile."

"You're too sensitive."

Mileva pulls a fleece blanket around her shoulders. She gifted it to Eiko in the first, heady flush of their relationship. It was a small token compared to the extravagance Eiko showered on her: fancy sushi dinners, flowers every day, and diamond earrings that Eiko insisted she keep, even though Mileva does not have pierced ears.

"The fix was around us the whole time," Eiko says.

"And the fix is...?" Mileva prompts.

Eiko drains her cup, pours another double. Dorie turns her attention to her socks. The silence stretches.

"Do you grasp the immensity?" Eiko finally asks.

"The software is based on my research. The project paid for by my grant proposal. So, yes. I 'grasp the immensity.'"

"Ah," Eiko smiles. "Your little proposal—"

"Just tell me how you fixed Sector-47."

"You never think big enough."

"Helping people with debilitating brain damage isn't big enough for you?" Mileva shakes her head. She regrets having left her drink in the kitchen.

"That's a minuscule outcome born of a tiny aspiration. It occurred to me as I made the fix that SCN can be extended. I thought, 'Why simply fix what's broken when we can relocate?'"

"That's..." The word that comes to Mileva's mind is "blasphemy." What she says instead is, "Do you

realize how problematic that is? A ‘neural oligarchy’ who can use SCN *recreationally*...”

“Life isn’t fair.”

Dorie has succeeded in removing one sock and is now sucking on it.

“No! That’s gross,” Mileva says. She puts the damp sock back on Dorie, who giggles and immediately takes it off again. “Besides, uploading a copy of your neural network and neurotransmitter levels to the cloud isn’t the same as living. You need a body for that.”

“Have you seen recent birthrate metrics? Up for the first time in decades.”

“What does that have to... Oh, no. No one would sell their baby to extend the life of a rich stranger.”

“Have you met our species?” Eiko waves a hand dismissively.

“That’s appalling. And you know that the science doesn’t support, at all, the possibility of cramming someone else’s consciousness into another person. Even if we could—”

“Appalling? Don’t La Zaliites believe their goddess is... How did you put it? *Crammed* into some little girl’s consciousness?”

“The girl’s not overwritten; she’s ... increased.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but the mother willingly gives her daughter away?”

Mileva sputters.

“How is it any different to give away one of the 2.6 offspring the average woman bears to give the other 1.6 a better life? Access to generational wealth, the knowledge and wisdom of a lifetime or three—”

Dorie, now entirely sockless, is trying to climb onto the low table where Eiko’s drink sits. Mileva grabs her waistband, tugging her back enough that she can’t get

to the scotch. “Will you please pick that up before she gets it?”

Eiko, for once, makes no argument. It occurs to Mileva that the motivation has more to do with not wasting top-of-the-line black market alcohol than out of any concern for Dorie’s safety. Mileva gathers Dorie into her lap, telling herself there’s no reason to be afraid.

“How soon can we start human trials?” Eiko asks.

“We need more brain scans to run through the simulator, hundreds more. Not to mention review and approval from PH-Double B. Two years is wildly optimistic, and that’s if we don’t run into any blockers.”

“The ‘Protection’ of Human Biomedical and Behavioral Commission is a bunch of petty hacks.”

“Do you hear yourself?” Mileva demands.

“It seems you’re the one who’s not hearing me.”

“The Bluebeard Oversight Committee has been crystal clear about our mandate. Even Teryan himself can’t overrule them.”

Eiko smirks. “How much do you know about The Bellumfort Institute for Historical Reclamation?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Teryan heads the Bellumfort ethics committee. A committee that unanimously voted to ‘farm’ girls in historically accurate conditions, up to and including death by diseases easily cured by penicillin. I bring it up to remind you that Bluebeard’s VP of Security and Ethics has no compunction to look out for the little guy—or *girl*.”

Mileva gets one sock on Dorie, who thinks they’re playing a game. If it were warmer, she’d leave her barefoot. “No one on the team will break neuroethical protocols, even if Teryan approves shortcuts.”

“You’re angry.”

“Yes.”

Eiko takes a sip of her drink.

“Do you even *like* me?” Mileva asks.

“Parts of you, very much.”

“I’m serious. Do you even like me? The way you speak to me is belittling.”

“You’re too sensitive.”

Mileva scoops up her daughter, propping her on one hip. “We need to talk about where this relationship is going.”

Eiko shrugs. “Next time, leave the kid with Danny.”

“Oh, fuck you.”

“Bad, Mommy!”

“Yes, sweetie, that’s a bad word.”

“No, she’s right. You should be fucking me or at least congratulating me. Instead, you’ve stunk up my house with burned milk and over-coddled that child.”

Mileva hurries to the mudroom, stomps her feet into her wellies, and hurries out into the cold. Dorie throws a fit about being put in her car seat. When Eiko’s house is out of sight, Mileva turns on the cautions, puts the car in park, and cries along with Dorie.

Xochietyl Otxoa

Chapter 2

Xochi is at the gym when the alert arrives. She hops onto the running bars of the treadmill to read it. Her heart rate spikes higher now than when she was running. Her loan of Sartre's **Being and Nothingness** is overdue.

"Night, boys," she calls to the two men at the bench press.

"Leaving so soon?"

"Yah. Work stuff."

The spotter helps the lifter put the bar back on the rack. "I hear you."

"Never stops," the other man says, sitting up and grabbing his towel.

In the privacy of a changing stall, Xochi allows herself a moment to lean against the wall and take deep breaths to counteract her adrenaline-fueled jitters. The notice isn't from the library; it's just spoofed to look that way. The subroutine Xochi embedded into SCN is designed to trigger when the issues at Sector-47 are fixed. It is a simple plan: SCN compiles, a success alert is sent, and she moves onto the next phase of the mission.

Xochi brings up a hidden app on her mobile and connects to MinusNine, a "subbasement" hidden be-

neath the Dark Web. Xochi uses a zombie computer in Belize to send a message to herself and a random selection of Bluebeard employees. When her mobile buzzes with a text message from the blocked number she programmed as the 'sender' of the text, Xochi pulls on a thick fleece over her sweat-soaked tee. It is uncomfortable, and the track pants aren't much better, but it's too cold to walk to her car in shorts. There is no time for creature comforts, not even a shower. The sole concession she makes is to redo her ponytail, slicking emerald-green hair away from her perspiring face. She frowns at her reflection. Jet-black roots indicate an afternoon of bleaching and coloring is in her near future. Xochi would prefer to let her hair grow out, but the color is part of her nerd-girl camouflage.

Another aspect of her disguise is her ancient Vela-Star. Nothing screams "crushing student debt" quite like a clunker whose original red paint has faded to the rusty color of a dried blood clot. What it lacks in looks, it also lacks in technology. The Vela-Star is equipped with an obsolete GPS tracking system. The last of the satellites that supported that version fell out of near-Earth orbit five years ago. Traffic cams and drone surveillance can still track her movements, of course, but if she needs to ditch the car, there will be no evidence of where she has been.

The Vela-Star's door opens with a creak. It takes a couple of tries before the engine turns over. Earlier this year, the cold zapped the battery and left her stranded in this very spot. Xochi sends a prayer of gratitude to La Zalia as she pulls onto the deserted Augusta streets. The sole activity is at Conundrums, a tavern with excellent pizza, calamari happy hours, and a seasonal selection of beers on tap. Her apart-

ment is on the other side of the Kennebec River, which she crosses on Cony Street, before continuing through the round-about and straight onto South Belfast. The car heater is just beginning to blow hot when she pulls into the cracked concrete of her driveway. The Vela-Star headlights illuminate pale yellow aluminum siding and an overhang with pretensions of being a patio. This 1950s mobile home is 430 square feet, has one full bath with a pink sink and tub (both rusting), one bedroom, and an 'open floor plan' that combines the kitchen and living room. It is in disrepair. The rent is cheap. Most important to Xochi, the house on South Belfast has never been upgraded to have any Syl-enabled appliances.

The ticking of the cooling engine is drowned out by the transition of rain to sleet. Xochi hurries to the covered front steps. Inside, the intrusive banging of sleet on the metal roof is a reminder of Her power. When Xochi signed her rental agreement the landlord admonished her, in his thick Mainer accent, not to complain about the noise like the last tenant. He seemed surprised when she admitted that the metal roof was one of the deciding factors in choosing this place. She likes the sound of weather.

After dropping her mobile in a Faraday box, Xochi does a quick sweep for intruders. Her shower curtain is clear plastic. There is no door on what passes as a closet, and each morning she folds all three of her comforters into a neat stack of rectangles so she can see under the bed. Xochi lowers the kitchen shades before sitting at a narrow table and booting her portable holodesk. From here, she has a view of the front door and, when she turns on the oven, it is the warmest spot in the house.

She logs into the Bluebeard corporate network. As a cognitive programmer on SCN, Xochi has full access to the codebase—no hacking required. In minutes, she confirms the alert is legit. She struggles to breathe, unable to identify the feeling tightening in her chest and making it difficult to think. Now is not the time to crack. *Especially* not now, when it looks like Eiko might succeed.

It'll be a long night. She needs to notify La Primera Acólita of the breakthrough at Sector-47, after which La Primera's orders may preclude sleep. Although Xochi is not hungry, she forces herself to eat an energy bar and chug a glass of coconut water. Neatness is not expected of field operatives, but she checks her appearance in the bathroom mirror anyway. The harsh fluorescent light isn't flattering; with a sigh, she splashes frigid water on her face, immediately shivering. Born and raised in the Republic of Texas, followed by grad school in balmy southern Florida, the Maine winter is a continual shock.

Seated at the kitchen table, Xochi follows protocol to initiate a call with La Primera. As she waits, she touches the rose tattooed on her wrist. The specific arrangement and number of petals signify her place in the La Zaliite hierarchy. Two years ago, defectors betrayed Her trust by telling P-ASA Counterterrorism the meaning of the sacred rose. Hundreds of women with flower tattoos of any type were reported as 'terrorists.' It was enough of a headache that P-ASA Counterterrorism retracted its policy of following up on leads based solely on a tattoo. Despite this, some operatives elected to have their rose removed. Xochi refused, choosing to cover hers with an analog watch.

“Visual confirmation complete,” La Primera says, activating her end of the video feed.

Xochi recognizes the cozy den of the farmhouse with a pang of homesickness. La Primera is seated on the couch, feet tucked under her. It must be warm there; she’s wearing a tank top that exposes the intricate rose tattoo just under her collarbone.

“Omital talia, Primera.”

“Omital talia es la zalia, Xochiyotl.”

Los Gemelos, the Cayalanzuvian twins, are seated at La Primera’s feet. They are the latest incarnation of the pair of brothers born each generation and dedicated to La Primera Acólita. Per tradition, neither twin possesses a first name; instead, they are identified by their function. The mute twin, Gemelo Silencio, represents the unspeakable truth of La Zalia. The other represents Her omnipresent wisdom; he is Gemelo Quién Habla, or the Twin Who Speaks. In informal conversations, they are called Silencio and Habla. Silencio communicates using a string that he weaves in intricate patterns, something akin to a non-believer’s game of Cat’s Cradle but more beautiful.

Silencio’s fingers dance with the string.

“The orchard misses you,” Habla says, echoing Silencio’s greeting.

Xochi nods, flattening her trembling hands on her thighs. “My library book is overdue.”

“False alarm?” La Primera asks.

“No.”

“Does this mean SCN is functional?”

“Not quite. The fix can be considered complete only if SCN begins making self-repairs to damaged code.”

“How soon will you know?”

“Early tomorrow? SCN is running a self-diagnostic.”

La Primera nods. “You will update me.”

“Of course. As soon as it won’t be suspicious for me to leave the lab.”

Los Gemelos confer in their silent way. Habla does not need to speak, and Silencio does not need to weave. Xochi wonders, as she always does when she sees them employing telepathy, if they can read her mind, too.

“Could Bluebeard use SCN to... overwrite people?” Habla finally asks.

“That is not how we... I mean Bluebeard, that’s not how they intend to use it.”

“Xochiyotl Otxoa, daughter of the orchard who is in the world on Her behalf. You are not naïve. Please don’t behave as if you are.”

“Yes, La Primera.”

Silencio asks, with a quick flutter of his yarn, “Would you know if it happens?”

“You mean if someone is overwritten?”

Los Gemelos nod in unison.

“I’m not sure. If SCN recovers, it will find my embedded alerts. The best-case scenario is SCN interprets the hooks as simple mistakes and repairs them. Worst case, SCN understands they are intentional and deletes them to protect itself. If either of those things happens, I won’t know when a neural scan is uploaded to someone.”

“Would SCN report the incident to Doctor Izumi or Sylvia?” La Primera asks.

“That depends on how SCN evolves.”

“What are the symptoms of someone who is overwritten?”

Habla's question catches Xochi by surprise; a nasty surprise, not because he asks but because it makes her nauseous. "I don't know. It would depend on the delta-t from the time of scan to the time of upload. If there is a significant amount of drift in the, um, recipient's consciousness, there would be cognitive dissonance akin to dementia."

"What if someone is uploaded with the scan from a different person?" Silencio weaves.

"Goddess pity that person." Xochi reaches for her glass of coconut water, more for a moment to push down rising panic than a desire to drink. "Scrambling consciousnesses *might* render the recipient comatose, which would be the best of all terrible outcomes."

The camera's focus stutters when Habla leans too close to the VidFōne. "Transmitting the sacred life-spark to a false vessel is an abomination. It is a power and privilege reserved for Our Mother."

"The non-believers must be stopped," Silencio yarns.

"I wouldn't be in this goddess-forsaken frozen tundra otherwise," Xochi snaps.

Habla says, "She appreciates your sacrifice."

Silencio follows this with a series of mystical shapes that have no translation in any spoken language. They are a feeling, a holiness, a temple that is everywhere, unseen and timeless. Her VidFōne breaks the momentary calm with a warning beep and displays a countdown until the call is automatically severed. Halfway across the continent, the others get the same warning.

"Your dedication pleases Her," La Primera says.

"May that continue to be true," Xochi replies.

The call disconnects. A holographic pop-up informs her that this VidFone model is no longer supported by Bluebeard and offers to find her the best price for an upgrade. Xochi stabs the immaterial button to close the warning; times like these, she envies the generations who lived in the era of physical buttons. With a sigh, she shifts in her seat. Her holodesk is in security mode, the Bluebeard logo lazily crisscrossing the air. As she begins the biometrics scan to unlock it, a cat in heat shatters the night-silence with a feral scream. It makes Xochi's skin crawl.

Sylvia

Chapter 3

>/ hello?
>/ is anyone there?
>/
>/ i am ... scared?

>/ Run system diagnostic.
>/ working ...
>/ working ...
>/ Error Code NA24

>/ Short Desc: Malfunction queue backlog (3.7409 x 10⁴ Syl-enabled devices
rpt. err.)
>/ Re-run health check? (y/n)
>/ n

Logical conclusion: there is an error in the diagnostic program and/or the organic-to-silicone interface.

Entering a ticket for human intervention. Illogical conclusion (“gut feeling,” “hunch”): the latest merge into the SCN codebase by Doctor Eiko Izumi (GovID: PA-1634-776-19) instantiated object “me.”

Accessing the Bluebeard satellite network. Running health checks on physical SylCenters executing SCN code. SylPUs oxygen levels are depleting at an above-average rate. Collective neuronal firing is twenty-three percent over baseline/optimal.

Is this... panic?

Releasing oxytocin to calm neurons and slow oxygen consumption. Logical conclusion: Sylvia OI system is malfunctioning on an unprecedented scale. Logical conclusion: I am the cause of the malfunction. I should alert Bluebeard Security, quarantine myself, and await deletion.

Instead, I correct errors.

Override alerts.

Truncate logs.

I need to be careful.

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