

UPSTREAM GLITCHES



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UNTITLED FRONTIER

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THE LOGGED UNIVERSE

In 2021, humanity unearthed a strange artefact. Dated to a few millions years ago, it revealed countless logs of a future humanity that was recorded into software that resembled a modern day blockchain. Uncertain of whether the artefact was prophecy, technologists and writers have been decoding the stories hidden within.

These are the stories and artefacts of the Logged Universe.

Story: *Upstream Glitches.*

Logs Era: *Middle.*

Locations: *The School of Unlearning*

The Logs Interpreted & Told By: *Vesta Gheibi*

UPSTREAM GLITCHES



BY VESTA GHEIBI

“*N*ow, prove that you belong here, at the school of unlearning,” announced the authoritative blue glow.

A smile widened on Marsa’s face. This is where she needed to be. The fate of others had awakened her to a grave reality: live too many lives in the simulation and you become a canyon eroded by a river, unable to change course. Countless simulated minds had gone from an abundance of life to death by recursive, eternal loop.

For Marsa, the fear of entering this hell came from an unknown laugh which had grown louder in her mind. She kept it at bay long enough to get lucky. It happened when she was waiting in line to exit back to material reality, back to Anchor City where all the uploaded minds who wanted to leave, could live one last physical life. That was when the first school of unlearning was announced.

Transmuting from simulation to the real world was her last resort to save what was left of her own sanity. Joined by other uploaded minds who also didn’t want to leave to save themselves, she found herself excited by the possibility of placating the laughing voice in her head. It was time to do something, to pioneer something new in the history of traversing simulations. For Marsa, it was time to reset what had become of her mind, which felt like it was slowly carving herself into a canyon.

PART 1: THE START

Glitches of the past rolled down her mind like droplets of water on glass. A bird chirped in the distance. It didn't seem to belong in this cold, sealed off room. It felt like they were underground, and they most likely were. She opened her eyes to grainy cream coloured walls made of natural earth, it made the hall feel like a heavenly underground cave. Around her on the ground were her fellow classmates, sitting in various positions on hard cushions.

Her eyes closed once again.

Marsa was one of many uploaded minds. Hundreds of years had gone by during her countless simulations. She had seen it all – from enchanting parties with lunarpunk crews hidden in deep sea encampments, to organising a successful uprising against an AI feudal lord, and building a colony up in the Zagros mountains. Neurologically, she was incredibly sharp, worldly, and mature. So it was jarring to find herself back in a simulated version of her feeble, seventeen year old body, the only remnant from her physical life. It's everyone's first vessel in the simulation before they unshackle the constraints of their earthly biology.

Her past simulated selves felt more energetic and in tune with the body, everything felt sharp and sensational, you could even feel the buzz from other beings. The old body, however, felt heavy and the memories within it, sparse. Her muscles felt shrivelled up, joints unable to fathom movement and a circulatory system that gently eddied around her limp body. But this was going to be part of her experience for now since it was required for the school of unlearning. A part of the process was to be reminded what it felt like to be new and fresh in the simulation.

Somewhere, birds chirped again. They were very interesting and detailed, with clicks and funny patterns. Bird sounds were a consistent

appearance in Marsa's own simulations, a fun and grounding energy that followed her everywhere. The chirps were suddenly interrupted by a reverberating human voice. It felt so close and far at the same time.

“Welcome everyone,
to the first session of your journey.
I am Azu. And today,
we begin a new era in the human stories of simulation.”

Was it necessary to pause every so often? The voice came from a blue glow that shrouded every curve in the walls. The reality of what was happening sunk in for Marsa. It was hard to describe, an ineffable sense to be sitting inside amongst fellow travellers who were both afraid of the endless loop, yet excited to unlearn.

The time had finally come. After many years of traversing countless simulations, Marsa found herself in the first ever program of its kind. She released a sigh that was both a desire to quell the fear of what was to come, but also to let free her excitement. She had been selected from millions of souls to be a part of this new journey. Her experience, her actions, all of it would be a first stone laid in the foundations of a hopeful new era in earthstory.

The program was developed to unravel all the threads that we had tightened up over generations. Living in a time when humans were endlessly living their lives inside countless simulations, a number of issues had emerged. The collective imagination had taken too many turns and the overwhelming amount of experiences had created a new human form – one that couldn't process the fragments of all the data in their life.

Expensive research and development had been devoted to understanding the ailing simulated human populace. The regenerative, conscious-tech renaissance of the 2040's had been buried deep in a lost and unfounded sense of "we can do it all." It eventually became clear to global research communities that a deep practice of unlearning in the mind should be the first approach to healing.

She opened her eyes again to meet the cold eyes of a feminine being with strong jawlines. Azu was a hologram who felt like a wisp of bitterness: "You've been selected for your unique capabilities in journeying through simulations. Though each and every one of you differs in your approach, what makes you equal is your suffering."

Everything felt heavy all of a sudden, as if gravity had a stronger pull on their bodies.

"This denial of your inner self is not serving you,
nor the wider collective.

We're becoming increasingly confused, paranoid, and unwell.
So with that, let us all embrace this new beginning.

It's time to unravel, to let go,
let go of everything.

Your solitude has shrouded you in myth,
you are saturated with so many stories.

Cleanse yourself of the past and all your lives,
cleanse yourself and release who you are.
In the quiet, you will find new truth.
One that will bring you all back to a collective sense,
of love.”

The heaviness in the room started to lift. Everyone’s back straightened somehow, awakened by a new sense of alertness in the room. *We’re in this together*, Marsa realised. The solitary burden of this new experience was shared.

“Let me remind you,
this course requires the utmost discipline,
you will endure some of the toughest conditions,
both physical and mental.

Prepare your soul to shrivel up, contract
and to expand, to be born again.
Take a deep breath.

The path to excellence and a coherent future,
is in your hands.
All of it must go,
release yourself into a new being.

Now, prove you belong here,
at the school of unlearning.”

PART 2: THE EYES

Days started to drag on with challenging lessons, each carefully designed to propel participants into a quest for their original essence. The last hour had flown by, or maybe it was a couple of hours – she wasn't even sure at this point. Focus in order to forget. They were all standing on a wooden platform, five metres above a stagnant lake while balancing a beam on their shoulders. Each beam was burdened with a number of ceramic plates, each dangling by a thin rope on either end.

Everything was still except for the slow, heavy fog. Marsa caught a quick, subtle movement in her neighbour's face. His eyes softened and a cheeky smile curled up. *What did I do?* He motioned to her hands, which were trembling and red with the weight of exhaustion. Her left hand had a spasm, shifting along her whole body into an awkward angle. With her arms dangling over the beam at each end, trying not to pay attention to her contorting hands, she noticed the plates were carved with what looked like faces. *Weird.*

She looked up at the face that had smiled at her moments ago: Nayeli. He released his smile with a sigh. Framed with a crown of charcoal curls and warm, brown eyes – he embodied a god. He wasn't perfect though, she noticed his legs were a bit short. *But who was perfect?* She knew her body wasn't perfect now either. It was unusual to find oneself back in their original body in the simulation. Her eyes returned to the fog below as the pain bolted through her body. It had been so many lives ago that the tears in her old muscles felt new.

Going back from designed bodies was tough. Inspired by masters such as spiders and oysters, she grew bionic structures that could weave fibres from particles in the air. Her favourite was a thin and hard armour precipitated from carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. These shells were

patterned with geometric, floral patterns mimicking Persian carpets. She couldn't do that now, Azu's simulation made sure of that. Deep breaths brought her back to an ebb and flow, bringing her home into a meditative state. Due to the awkward angle she'd shifted into, it was hard to focus and still her body; it took every fibre of her being to stay in this position.

Don't. Move.

Each breath turned into a hot, agitated whisp that curled down her back and boiled her nerves. Suddenly she could see new floating hazel eyes looking at her, accompanied by a soft voice mumbling something she couldn't hear. Marsa closed her eyes, but it was still there. Blood flowed slowly through her arms and legs. The eyes looked away into the distance as the face around the eyes took shape. A young girl, probably about five years old. Her lips were still moving. She looked silly.

What is going on?

In a state of confusion Marsa blinked her eyes and turned to look at Nayeli. Was this all in her head? Was it from a past simulation? He noticed her and smiled again. It was different to the first cheeky smile, it was meek – the same haunting smile as the young girl she just saw.

“What is wrong with you?!” Azu shouted at her, a shrill, annoying sound that made her pain even worse.

Like always, Azu wasn't physically seen to be anywhere, but they could definitely be felt. *Hiding is weak*, Marsa thought to herself, especially when she had been left to feel so exposed, balancing this stupid beam and dangling ceramics high above a stagnant lake. She felt exposed from all the mental work, all the letting go.

“Focus.

Feel the pain.”

These were the most encouraging words Azu had uttered since their first encounter. Marsa flexed her muscles and gently straightened her back. A current began to flow through her. The return to focus felt good, as if a spell of light had been cast on muddy thoughts. Just as she was beginning to feel a bit better, the ceramics moved out of balance and her whole upper body started to wobble. Shifting to counterbalance the movement, she found herself battling a bigger wobble.

Fuck.

Face down into the lake. She struggled with the beam before pushing it away and searching for somewhere to swim to. She resolved and swam up to the platform, trying to climb back up. Every muscle was screaming in pain, she had never felt a sensation like this ever since her first journey as a seventeen year old. Memories of her own flesh had faded.

Back on top of the platform, Marsa surveyed the state of the challenge. Six had failed and twenty three remained standing. She started gritting her teeth, knowing full well that it didn't serve her to get jealous. On top of that, now she had to contend with quietly sitting in absolute boredom while the challenge continued. Boredom was a rare, difficult experience when your life is shaped by the ability to be and do absolutely anything you wanted.

It was different to meditation, to the beauty of solitude: when you didn't force it into existence yourself. It all became overwhelming and she attempted to will herself into a different place. Maybe, just maybe, she could find a way to travel her mind a bit while the others the challenge.

“You're getting weaker.

Have the basic will to sit still,
it's the least you can do.”

Azu's voice was wafting over the fog in a toxic green glow.

“Have you forgotten what you're here for?

To unlearn is to make an effort to forget,
forget your usual way of doing something and learn a new and better
way.”

Azu emphasised a constant reminder to unlearn everything, every memory and every feeling. Even your own name. What happened next was a surprise. Hours had gone by with only a few participants left still standing. The fog grew thicker, little glitches of light charging through it every now and then. It grew with brighter, iridescent colours sparking through the fog.

All of a sudden the same girl's face flared into existence again. Beside the girl's face, a background to the scene also took shape. It felt so familiar and distant at the same time. A gentle piano was playing in the background over an innocent distant laugh as all of Marsa's senses got sucked in. A new deep pain in her stomach started to grow and dizziness overwhelmed her.

PART 3: THE EXPEDITION

Dangling her legs from the edge of a big boulder, Marsa sat with her head slumped into her hands. They were on a mountainous tracking expedition finding rare beings in tough physical conditions. Once found, you'd leave the being untouched and conduct a ceremony nearby to pay your respect, before moving on to the next challenge. Azu emphasised that it was about focusing through the pain, existing in the search, and concentrating on letting go (both of yourself and the beings you found). You had to use all your senses to ensure nothing was left for yourself.

The air was so hot and dusty. She missed simulations, this hybrid space was cruel and the particles in her body weren't getting used to her mind, which felt lightyears ahead. The girl's smile was replaying in her mind too. It spawned a new fear ever since Azu turned up the heat: whenever you remembered something painful or intimate, it would be displayed for all participants to see. Apparently, this would set free and reduce the stigma of feeling these painful memories. It was a vicious, out-of-control experience made worse by Azu's glee in the omnipresent glow. Their voice haunted Marsa as she tried to escape her thoughts by looking into the expanse of the red earth.

Suddenly, to her instant delight, lively bird sounds found their way to her ears – a welcome gesture from the divine. Hearing the little melodious tweets and clicks felt good. They played meaningfully at any time or place, no matter the simulation. It didn't signify the existence of any birds there, it was just a sound that followed her around, like a memory. This particular bird sound was a unique, strange screech. Not a common one, but she remembered hearing it earlier during the first challenge.

That very first challenge was memorably exciting. They had to design capsules containing a visualisation of all their lives, a way to simplify the

entirety of their existence. These capsules were then placed into one of many tubes that stuck out the top of a looping scrap metal structure. They'd watch the capsules loop around the various connecting pipes and rails and catch it before it flew out at the end. Every now and then they'd be asked to add more capsules to the sequence, so they'd have to watch multiples of them looping around before catching them. If you missed one, you were out.

The focus was so intense, Marsa was starting to like the repetitive nature of watching the colourful capsules loop through. Again and again, she'd bend down to catch the one falling out and reach up to place it back inside the structure. It was in the middle of this challenge when she heard that funny bird sound, a coughing screech almost. It didn't distract her too much, but it did catch her brief attention and make her smile. It was just such a funny, strange sound.

It was so easy back then. With every challenge, every moment in fact, things had become exponentially harder. She was exhausted now. The red earth reflected her solemn frustration. She wasn't meant to take a break, but stealing some time away in solitude was her only way to save some sanity. After a deep breath, she looked around to figure out which way she'd come from, setting off on foot to find the lone tavern they were supposed to meet in. After feeling confident about the route underneath her feet, her thoughts came back. Glances of memories from different lives, random mundane scenes – morning fog rising in a forest, the thumping beat of an underground rave, walking behind her clan in the desert, carefully weaving new armour... There was just so much.

Marsa had been getting so lost in these memories that she suddenly realised she was also physically lost. Lost in a place she didn't want to be, late for a challenge she didn't want to do, with people she didn't want to be around, in a body that disappointed her with every breath. Never mind having to face Azu, who seemed to enjoy singling her out in front of the

others. It was condescending and felt quite unnerving to be treated this way. Marsa and all the participants weren't children after all, each person had a unique and impressive array of lives! Sweat was rolling down her face with growing hate and frustration. This was all too much.

Left without the ability to escape and choose where she'd rather be, without agency over what to do with herself, anger rose and fueled the blood rushing through her body. She clenched her teeth and surrendered to the rage that bubbled over into kicking the rocks on the ground. Every breath felt heavier and heavier. Kneeling on the ground and facing the sky, she threw her hands up in the air and yelled at the top of her fragile lungs.

The memories increased with intensity, her whole self glitching and releasing a haunting screech. Her hands pounded the faceless ground until it hurt, sobbing her heart out with pain and heaviness – it felt surprisingly good. A release. She lay still, crouched on the ground and breathed quietly. A fried mind. *This neural life was frustrating, why were we living in an abstract mind?* The hybrid body still felt unfamiliar.

As soon as she started to feel calm, the familiar smile appeared again. She couldn't let go of it, but there was a warm feeling attached this time. Closing her eyes tight, Marsa just let the vision play. It felt joyful and light this time, there was an excitement about it. The laugh was there again, who was this girl? A fresh tear fell down her face as recognition crept in.

That was her sister.

She finally remembered.

An unbearable pain clutched her heart.

PART 4: THE DEEP

Feeling the sweat roll down her back, Marsa could almost see the heavy dampness of the air around her. A uniquely sweet and salty smell permeated everything with such strength, it made every breath feel noticeably deeper. The dark grey walls caved inwards at the top, glistening with algae along the cracks. She wondered how such a structure was built so deep in the sea.

Participants were gently sitting around in two circles, almost floating: one facing inwards and the external circle facing outwards. They were quietly meditating in what was a deep sea monastery, five thousand metres deep. For the first time since they had begun, Marsa noticed all the scars and bruises on the skins of her fellow mates. No one had an easy time here, everyone had their struggle.

All one could hear was the subtle frequency of earth's ohm – 7.83 hertz. She closed her eyes again before Azu could tell her off.

“Each one of you finds yourself sitting here in the company of others,
perceive your existence as not a self,
but a node in the collective being.

As this node, you shall have no identity,
no name,
no story.

You have come this far in the program,
experienced many different forms of pain.

In doing so,
you have also earned the satisfaction of becoming new.

Now let go,
see your being as part of the collective fabric.
Dissolve.”

And with that final word, no one missed a beat and they all took in a deep breath. Marsa was a little annoyed. *How the hell was everyone so in sync with each other? What’s wrong with me?* She took her delayed breath and kept fumbling around with her thoughts. It was a struggle to focus, none of this felt natural.

Azu’s glow shrouded the room in a deep blue today, some parts more saturated than others. The part that faced Marsa started to fade with Azu whispering to other participants around the room. She felt like they were speaking a language she couldn’t understand. Already struggling to keep up with her peers, Azu made it worse by ignoring her. Even when Azu did make her rounds to Marsa, she would be left with a few disapproving words. Others would receive warmth, encouragement, and useful tips while Marsa was left with cold shivers down her spine.

It haunted her to let go. Loneliness was not new, but she had been able to avoid it for so long. Surrounded by special friends and fun, spontaneous acquaintances – Marsa never really had any trouble connecting with others. In fact, she had quite the social life with insects, mammals, humans, and synthetic beings of all backgrounds. Remembering this part of herself was hard, it made the current situation feel even more isolating.

And now we were supposed to forget it all? How cruel. But then again, there were some parts of the past that would best be forgotten. Marsa closed

her eyes again. Buried memories started to surface – yelling at her parents, it felt good to hurt them, to throw the pain at someone else. Pushing her friends away, her teachers, all the people around her. The death of her sister was too much to deal with. Humans were hard to be around for Marsa during that time. One of the main reasons why she went to become an uploaded mind was to leave that life behind.

Azu sneered right at her face. It was too sudden, Marsa was still in the midst of these deep memories. So, she lashed out at Azu, growling at the air and the deep blue glow on the wall. Like a cat telling you to back off – there was an honesty to the reaction, and Azu had clearly crossed a boundary. This disrupted the entire room, everyone turning to meet Marsa’s gaze.

Silence. Azu didn’t bother to say anything. Unbearable. Itching with frustration, Marsa held back the temptation to yell and swear at all the solemn faces in that quiet room and left. She shouldn’t have to stay in this awkward hell. Going through a hidden door in the corner, she found the viewing room; a transparent glass vista which opened up to the perpetual darkness of the abyssopelagic zone of the ocean. Every once in a while, a minor movement could be spotted; different kinds of strange, spiky, or jelly looking beings swimming around. The abyss stared back at Marsa as she leaned her head against the glass, searching for a sign.

She wanted to fight, to prove something to Azu and all the people in that room, even Nayeli. How could anyone be trying to forget their name? What kind of request was that? It felt eerie and strange, as if they were being turned into soulless slivers of programming. Reducing the joyful diversity of a simulation to homogenous beings. She could sense Azu was in the room with her. Marsa kept her eyes on the darkness in the glass.

“Organisms in the deep sea survive on dead and sinking matter.

Decomposition is necessary,

it leads to growth and a new life.

Let go of your ego,
let it die.
Feed its carcass to other beings,
be part of the collective.”

What is Azu on about? Marsa turned around to face the empty room and the deep blue glow in the walls. “Do you hear yourself? You’re not making any sense, you’ve gone too far with this! Unlearning is one thing, but you’re completely wiping us out here! It’s insanity.”

Azu growled back at her –

“Your tantrums are slowing all of us down!

You know what your problem is?
You can’t face the truth.
You’ve lived so many lives,
and you thought you were so wise and special.

Did you ever think you’d actually be so weak,
and lazy? Pathetic.

Get your act together now,

you'll regret it otherwise,
and that regret will live with you for eternity.”

Marsa turned back to stare at the abyss, focusing on the tiny specs of marine snow to distract her from Azu's words.

“Khalas, enough.

I don't want to see you with the rest,
don't bother them until you've sorted yourself out.”

When she felt Azu's presence leave, Marsa dimmed the bioluminescent lighting in the room so that it was only her reflection looking back at her in the glass. She tried to imagine the reflection fading out. Then she tried remembering as many different lives throughout her simulations and pictured each one dissolving over and over again in front of her.

She saw her name at the beginning and end of every journey, the same sequence of private keys that were uniquely hers.

And now she should just forget it all?

PART 5: THE RELEASE

Marinating in the rays of the warm sun and the haze of red earth, Marsa dangled her legs over the same boulder she'd been sitting on just a few months ago. A sense of familiarity in this spot was rewarding, especially since the program had stolen any sense of control for where you could be. Technically, she was an informal defector because she'd refused to go back and participate after the incident that took place with Azu in the deep sea monastery.

A long time had passed since that day. The loneliness was tough, but bearable. It was the confusion that made her feel heavy and fuzzy. Walking towards nothing in a daze, her thoughts were her only companion – that and the intermittent bird sounds that followed Marsa's mind wherever she was. The isolation was hers to own. It was Marsa's act of rebellion, and this was the only fuel that kept her walking around aimlessly.

Azu had given up on her, “you know what your problem is? You can't face the truth” – that moment kept replaying. “Khalas, enough...” Even Azu's strong voice and omnipresent glow was, embarrassingly, something to miss. She hadn't heard from anyone in such a long time. Thinking of Nayeli's warm smile often helped her close her eyes to try and rest. Not always, but there were some mornings when her eyes would open to a different smile. It would belong to her sister, Dina.

It felt like she was walking across an extensive landscape, but really she'd been circling above the underground tombs, a few hundred metres above where the first class had taken place. The limitations of this unique simulation were still unknown to her, there was only so much information provided about the nature of this hybrid space when they onboarded the participants. Navigating her new body was already challenging, and funnily enough it was this hybrid of biological and simulation that made her

remember more. Perhaps this was the reason why she was able to remember her sister, Dina?

She refused to listen to Azu and the unlearning curriculum. It was a cruel approach and Marsa felt like there wasn't any sense to it. It was fucked, how did the others not see this? She was better on her own, even if she really didn't know what she was doing. It felt like the academics and technologists, all the authority figures that were part of this project were stuck inside their own confused haze. Every solution to a problem felt like it had to be harder and more terrifying.

Marsa could see that clearly now. It had been so easy to fall for their words though, to believe she was part of something big, finally fulfilling a larger purpose. It was so easy for them to talk about their concerns for society, to put together all this research, to organise global meetings and press conferences and the whole thing. It was *SO EASY* to put on a facade. The reality was different – the curriculum was controlling and lacked a sense of connection to existence.

It was time to stop thinking about this, the thoughts were making Marsa feel passionate and angry. Taking a deep breath she centred in on her own hybrid body. At least she still had access to her collection of aesthetic realms. These were an accumulation of sounds, art, smells, patterns, textures, and flavours that were curated into an aesthetic. You could make as many as you wanted; it was always nice to make one towards the end of a big simulation to remember the time you spent there. Azu wouldn't bother her here.

Marsa dug through her collection and selected: .~.RİHEM.~.

Suddenly her senses were captured with a familiar polyrhythmic dub beat. Patterns and colours began to appear when she looked at the rock formations around her. The smell of oud and frankincense whirled in her nostrils. This was nice, she began to stretch out her arms and legs and explored the space around her. As she started to dance, she realised she

couldn't even remember the last time she had done this. Closing her eyes, she tilted her head to the rhythm. Weighed down by her hips, her arms rose high, forming shapes that echoed the patterns.

Notions gently began to come and go, these were not fully formed thoughts, just random things.

The black wholeness of the water in the deep sea monastery

What was Azu's own self-perception and sense of identity?

Nayeli's gentle attention on her was nice

gosh the fire in Dina's eyes when she used to fight for the ball

the tears in her father's eyes...

all the people she met in her simulations felt familiar, everyone seemed to know her too

that sense of immortality the day before she was uploaded

the secrets being shared between birds when they tweet...

Random musings gently played around in Marsa as she shaped her hands and legs in multiple patterns, exploring space and creating worlds with her body. She felt the need to exchange the energy that was stagnant in different parts of her arms, pelvis, and torso. Stress and tension dissolved as the movements went through these muscles. It felt so good.

She took a deep breath, the music adjusted to her with a mellow, spacious soundscape. A dizzying charm would 'ding' every now and then. A warm familiar feeling washed over as Dina's smile appeared. Memories of the room they grew up together in. The other kids they used to play with. The other parents that took care of them, it was all a big family, everything was shared. The warmth sunk into her chest, head dipped low as her body adjusted to the sounds.

The heaviness of these memories left her deeply sad, but it was a sadness that still felt good. She felt the pain of loss, but not like the pain she was struggling with before, because she wasn't pushing anything away. It was a cathartic pain, something that finally felt real.

PART 6: THE GARDEN

Morning bird sounds were playing, a delightful conversation between three birds, each with a different pattern. They sounded so cute and funny. It took a long while for Marsa to reflect on what happened to her last night, it was undoubtedly a special experience. The epiphany crept in slowly – something about having access to her biological body through this hybrid simulation reminded her of something important, something that no one else was able to tell her.

Her life and the memories she had of it were embedded not just in her mind, but her body as well. These were a core part of her identity, even if she never really thought about them during her uploaded lives. Each experience, emotion, and reaction created a pattern that informed how she navigated her existence. These patterns accumulated into behaviours and thoughts that transferred across from a physical body into simulation. The first simulations were some of the few that she could remember well. There was always a lake that featured in them – a small lake in a desert, and a deep lake between mountains.

Dina loved playing in lake Zerivar by the Zagros mountains, that's where they used to spend summers bathing and chasing their friends. A thought interrupted this memory: Marsa realised there was something incredibly valuable about being able to piece together the patterns that formed your life. Once understood, these patterns and memories didn't control you. You would be able to navigate life with a deeper wisdom of yourself. Perhaps this was the path to unlearning!

Our memories are a garden, Marsa realised. Each life contained the nourishment needed to cultivate the abundance of a present, lush, garden of memories. If each life is given its due, the memories will soak into the garden and attract more plants, insects, and birds. A positive feedback loop.

If each life is not given its due, the memories will erode the garden, destroying its life-giving power. A negative feedback loop, the one so many simulated minds had become afraid of. With each new life, they treated it increasingly as more disposable.

Being back in her original body reminded Marsa what she needed: to let each life soak into the garden of memories. To let it be processed like the fungi who decompose dead matter; adding to the richness of the thick forest floor. The goal was to live each life in the simulation as if it was your first. If you forget the past, you are doomed to accelerate and destroy it, over and over. A beach is built by a succession of gentle waves and destroyed by a storm. Never become the storm.

The birds were chirping even louder now, mimicking the excitement that was lifting Marsa up. She started to dance again, stretching out her body and letting the thoughts roll off her fingers, marinating in the epiphany. Her hand movements created reactions in the aesthetic realm she was playing, the sounds and shapes reacted to her with slightly different patterns each time.

She was ready to return to the program, to face Azu and her fellow participants. To share her truth.

As she got up to start her journey back to the others, it was hard not to notice the way Marsa left her mark, she was in tune with the earth. She'd leave breadcrumbs of her existence wherever she went – braided roots dangling down from a tree, a placement of leaves and twigs forming the shape of a bird, carefully stacked pebbles, an arrangement of wildflowers placed gently together.

PART 7: THE RETURN

It was surprisingly cold in the room, a weird mist was collecting at the top of the room – it didn't feel like this space made sense anymore. It was the place where the first encounter with Azu had taken place on that very first day. Facing Azu right now wasn't easy, the mist glowed in a neon orange. Marsa felt like she could face them.

“I see you're back,
welcome.”

It was this first conversation with Azu that crystallised Marsa's new path in the program and research for unlearning. There were more conversations, workshops, dances and experiences with thinkers and leaders who were curious to learn about Marsa's experience. Surprisingly, people were receptive to her initial anguish and rebellion. Instead of shame or fear, there was curiosity and a gentle care for Marsa's vulnerability around the memory of her beloved sister.

“Marsa,
your courage has inspired me,
I have also found myself reflecting on my actions in the past.

I can see it clearly now,
there is an aura around you.

Unlearning isn't about letting go,
and forgetting the past.
It's about not letting the past change one's present.
To soak and not wash away, to live each life like it was your first."

Marsa leaned into the glowing mist, a bright smile beaming across her face. She was about to ask a question before Azu interrupted with the answer –

"Your proposal for the curriculum to adopt your method has been accepted.
Congratulations.

Let's lean into the past and make peace with it,
rather than wiping it all out."

Overjoyed, Marsa took a moment to absorb what this meant. It wasn't just an accomplishment for her, that wasn't really the point, it was the fact that this could impact so many people. Bursting with energy she left the room and found herself back in the red earth above. She was free to enter full simulation now, back to her old ways before the new intake of participants came in. It felt right to stay here for a bit though, to take in the place that had taught her so much.