



MS-OS
A LOGGED UNIVERSE STORY



ANDY TUDHOPE

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: *MS-OS*.

Logs Era: *Middle*.

Locations: *Anchor City*.

The Logs Interpreted & Told By: *Andy Tudhope*.

MS-OS



You leaned back, the edges of your vision changing as a new world began to weave itself around you. This wasn't like the many million simulations you had entered before coming back to the real world, to Anchor City. You were not in control. There was no part of you separate from the life you felt gradually taking over. It wasn't all that different from drowning: the sense of embodied, animal panic as you realised the inevitable outcome, followed after a great and breathless struggle by a flowing peace as the water encompassed you.

PETER



Dear Sir,

Thank you for your note of the 23rd of January. We acknowledge that our service has been experiencing degraded performance.

We apologise for any inconvenience this may have temporarily caused. My team has identified and fixed the issue. Operations should have now returned to normal.

Could you try and sign the relevant message again, and we will be sure to broadcast it on your behalf.

With respect,

Peter K.

Customer Services

EnSolutions

Rate my service [here](#).

Peter slid his chair back from the desk and leaned back, causing its plastic joints to groan. He smiled wryly at the robotic script blinking across his screen which he had to work with to prepare each of these emails, and imagined the person on the other end who had, by this stage, sent four increasingly angry mails about being unable to connect to the network through their portal.

He looked to his right to another cluster of desks a few feet away. Mike was sitting there, day-dreaming as usual. They had been brought back into the office because they were failing to fill the quota of responses per day that head office had set. Peter blamed Mike. He had barely been at work for the last three weeks and—when he was—he was always staring blankly into space, rather than doing the work he was supposed to.

Peter sighed. This place bored him. The people, the smell, the work, the quotas. Everything about it was dull. He himself would never use a service like the one they provided. It was just schmucks like Customer #143986—who would probably give him a one star rating anyway—that couldn't be bothered to learn how to maintain their own connection to their preferred layer of the network.

Casting another dirty look at Mike, Peter rolled his chair forwards again, clicked on the next line in his inbox, read the message and began his response.

Dear Madam,

In order to connect to the network through our portal, you will need to install our in-house key-ring, which you can do securely [here](#). This link will only work for you: please do not use any other links you find on the internet to install the key-ring.

Once you have done this, you will be able to use all of our services. The cost for doing so will be displayed before you take any particular action.

If you have further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. Thank you for choosing the world's best key-ring provider.

With respect,

Peter K.

Customer Services

EnSolutions

Rate my service [here](#).

Despite his boredom, there was something about the rhythm of some messages that Peter didn't hate. He couldn't say that the work made him happy, but sometimes—when people stopped shouting at him, or when he helped them figure out some basic problem—he felt the glimmers of a connection which seemed to take the edge off.

At times like these, he liked to imagine the people whose frustrations and impotent pleas ended up crossing his screen. Sometimes, he would create whole life stories for them, getting lost in the smell of chai from Customer #2589385's kitchen, where he still brewed it in the traditional Russian style his *babushka* had taught him; or the incessant sound of the kids playing outside under the maples from Customer #1874627's home, as she tried to tidy the kitchen again and prepare for another dinner for which her husband would be late.

Dear Sir,

I appreciate the problem you are having and apologise for the inconvenience it is causing you.

However, by design, we cannot sign messages on your behalf. If you have misplaced your keys, we will need you to use [this link](#) to book a video call with our key-ring support team, who will ask you to perform a series of timed actions which will generate a new ring for you and tie the keys on it to your existing account.

This is a simple operation and should take no more than 5 minutes. You are welcome to book a slot that is convenient to you.

Please let me know if you require further assistance.

With respect,

Peter K.

Customer Services

EnSolutions

Rate my service [here](#).

Peter leaned back again and rubbed his eyes. Patterns played across his closed eyelids as he held his breath. It was funny how this kind of routine work left you with all sorts of time to experiment with your ordinary body, he thought. It was here in this way station office, this middle of nowhere place, that he had discovered the link between his breath and the changing geometric colours and shapes he could create by pressing his fists lightly into his closed eyes. Just like a trip, he thought. Except right here, in ordinary life.

He glanced across his desk and his eyes came to rest on the blue and white shape he had found with his wife on the beach a few years ago. It was a shard of china from an old shipwreck an hour up the coast from where they lived. Some Portuguese cargo carrier coming home from the East had run aground in a storm and was still slowly giving away her secrets all these centuries later.

This piece had no commercial value, but he could stare at it for hours. It had been part of a decorative plate. It had the mark of its maker on the back and the face, neck, and shoulders of a beautiful woman—cast in pale blue—on the front. It was her collarbones that most called to him. Somehow, the fine aspect of the china added a fragility to her already-exquisite features that he found irresistible. He reached out and rubbed the china gently, delighting in its cool feel and the sense of smoothness it still carried after all this time beneath the waves.

Dear Sir,

I acknowledge your note of the 25th of January. I am sorry to hear about what you have experienced. Please do not fear or grieve your loss.

Looking at your account history, I can see that most of your accounts are secure, and I have paused any further actions. The multiple levels of protection you set up have performed exactly as they should have.

While we do not hold any keys ourselves, we can temporarily stop broadcasts from all keys associated with a given ring, which is what I have

done. We also provide insurance services for these kinds of events, which you can read about [here](#).

Please book a call with our key-ring support team [here](#) to begin the recovery process, and I will get one of our insurance agents to contact you later today.

With respect,

Peter K.

Customer Services

EnSolutions

Rate my service [here](#).

Peter pushed his chair back and stood up. He stretched lazily, letting his head sink all the way back so he was looking directly up at the ceiling. He looked around the office at everyone, taking his time to enjoy the break from his inbox.

He wandered past Mike without saying a word—the man was still staring into space as if their shared inbox wasn't constantly overflowing—and walked over to the water cooler. He bent over slowly, selected a small cup from the bottom of the stack, and held it out beneath the tank. It bubbled up musically and cool water flowed right up to the brim. Peter had never believed in leaving any empty space in his drinking vessels.

He straightened up, holding the cup carefully, and was about to take a sip when he noticed Mike standing hesitantly behind him. He turned. Mike's face seemed strained. He was sweating. His hand gripped his backpack tightly, showing white through his knuckles. Peter felt a strange and uneasy feeling surge through his stomach.

"I just can't take it any more," Mike said.

"Take what?" Peter asked carefully, trying to step discreetly backwards.

Mike reached into his bag and pulled out a gun. Before Peter could say another word, he fired. Then he turned it on himself, and fired again.

In the few moments between seeing the gun and feeling the full cup slip from his grip, Peter' life flashed before his eyes in the form of another script. Every detail was laid out, bare in black and white before him. Events from his childhood mixed with the messages he had sent in the last few years and all the dirty looks he had thrown across the office at Mike. While his cool water splashed across the office carpet, the ghost of a smile seemed to settle on his face:

We apologise for any inconvenience. You may start the recovery process [here](#).

Grace H.

Chief Executive

EnSolutions

RAE



Hey Ash. You there?

Yeah. What's up?

I just broke that cup we got together last year at Great Heart



Noooo. It was so beautiful... 😞

What happened?

I was drying it and it slipped out the cloth.

I don't know what happened. I just lost focus.

I feel like shit.

It's OK. It's just a cup I guess.

Is it though? It's our symbol, right?

One cup with you, one with me, forever. Now what? 😞

Now we find a new symbol.

What's really going on with you anyway? You haven't been yourself for like a month now...

I'm fine. Just sad about the cup now.

Come on. What's really happening?

Nothing.

Come on Rae, it's me.

Fine. I still wanna run away. Have you thought about it more since we last talked?

Yeah, I have. Where do you wanna go?

Well, I dunno. Do you wanna come?

I guess so. It scares me, but I wanna be with you, that's for sure.

I was thinking about heading for Phoenix...

You mean Arizona!? That's so far...

I can't stand it here anymore. My parents always fight. They're so wrapped up in themselves and their issues that they barely even notice me coming and going.

I hate school. Nobody really likes me there.

I just wanna kick it, you know?

People at school like you! What about Mike and Jess and the crew?

Yeah, maybe. But still, this just can't be all there is to life, you know?

Maybe. Where will we stay in Phoenix?

How will we survive?

Well, I have a bit of the network's money from my grandad's will. It's getting more and more valuable.

Should be enough to last us at least a year or two until we figure out what we really wanna even do.

You sure you wanna use that money now? Isn't it, like, a good idea to hold onto that stuff?

Why? So I can feel rich and miserable?

Haha, you're so blunt sometimes.

I just mean that you should think about the future a bit, right?

I am thinking about the future! And I want that future to be somewhere other than here...

OK, so we go to Phoenix. We blow your grandad's network money on getting a place to live and feeding ourselves and whatever.

What then?

Ever heard of Direct Neural Transfer?

No...

It was science fiction till a few years ago.

Some Japanese guy came up with a gene therapy that allows us to, like, beam our thoughts directly at each other.

What?

Yeah!

You're saying we'd be in each others heads forever?

I dunno if I'm into that Rae...

No, I think you can choose to, like, open yourself to other people who have the therapy or not. I dunno, it just sounds cool to me.

How did you hear about this?

Simon showed me a site he found with all sorts of info on it. There's a community of people in Phoenix who have done it...

Holy shit, that's why you wanna go there?

Yeah. Can you imagine? All the things we can never say or describe, just...

Like, open, you know?

Just open to each other...

Don't you want that?

I don't know Rae. It's a lot.

Are you scared?

I dunno. What happens if I'm angry with you or something?

Then I think something which upsets you or whatever?

How often are we angry with each other?

Not often, but still. I like having the choice to share what I want when I want, you know?

Otherwise, how do we keep from hurting each other when we don't really mean to?

I dunno. I just think it's more honest, you know? Just, like, a totally open book...

Plus, I do think you can choose to open the connection or not, so you can always close me out if you get really upset or whatever.

To be clear, you want me to drop out of school, run away to Phoenix with you, and get some therapy which allows us to be totally connected to each other's minds?

Come on, you say that like you don't wanna get out of this place too. And I know you hate school as much as I do...

It's time to live a little, Ash.

Trust me?

I do trust you. I love you, Rae.

You know that. But it's kinda crazy to do all this, isn't it?

I think it's kinda crazy to stay here, doing nothing...

Ha, good point.

Let me think about it tonight and we can talk about it tomorrow on the bus...

Don't blow me off Ash. I wanna leave this place, like, yesterday...

I just dunno if it's ever gonna really work, you know? How can you be sure that this is what you want for the rest of your life?

I'm not. I just trust my heart.

Your heart is weird 😊😞

Whatever.

Isn't that what true love is supposed to be like anyway? Just totally in tune with each other?

Yeah, but not totally watching each others every thought, right? Otherwise where is the mystery?

We wouldn't be watching each other like that. We can choose.

I still need some time to think about it, Rae.

I love you, you know that.

This is kinda a crazy plan though.

OK, do what you want. I feel kinda light-headed right now anyway.

Oh, maybe just get some water and lie down a bit. You know you get anxious when you think about all this stuff.

My chest feels super tight...

Try and get some water my love.

...

Are you OK?

I think I need help.

Yeah, don't we all? 😊

jk. Should I call your mom?

...

Rae, are you OK?

...

Hello?

Rae, come on screen!

Are you OK?

Your mom isn't available either...

WHAT IS GOING ON?

Come on screen Rae!

...

My dad is bringing me over now, will be there in twenty mins or so.

Please just tell me you're OK!?

???

GRACE



Dear Diary,

Today was so fun! Mommy and I went to pottery together in the room below mine. An old man came with some wheels for me and the other kids here. His name was John. He had this funny grey beard and big hands. He also had such a dirty apron!

Mommy doesn't like it when I make a mess, but she said I was allowed to be as messy as I like today. John smiled and said that making a mess was the best way to get good at pottery. I really like him, even though hes old.

The kids who can sit all put aprons on and John showed us how to get the clay ready. It feels so funny! Its kinda smooth but also hard. It's weird. I got really tired trying to make it ready like John said, but he came and held my hands and showed me how to do it. His hands are so

wrinkly and cracked! They felt rough, but he was gentle and he helped me a lot.

They even wheeled Abdul in, though he was feeling sad today and didn't want to get out of his bed. John took him some clay and showed him how to make funny shapes while he was lying down. At least he smiled. He's been so sad this week. I wish we could play make-believe again like last month.

John showed us how to sit at the wheels. You have to throw the clay down and make it really wet. John let me throw it down as hard as I could and then brought me some water. The clay feels even funnier once you wet it. It's like warm ice cream. Then you make the wheel go round by pressing your foot down, and you put your hands round the clay and start to play with it.

John said I could make any shape I liked, but first I had to get it into the middle. I had to press really hard, and my hands aren't big enough to do it like John does. He just smiled and held my hands to show me. Clay went all through my fingers and onto the wheel, where it makes a big mess. It's so funny! We both giggled as he tried to help me make it like it was supposed to be.

Mommy was standing in front of me taking a video. She does that a lot these days. She has such a sad smile. I wish I was better for her so she could smile like she used to. She hasn't smiled like that in a long time. There was one more wheel left over, and John asked her to come and make something with us. She didn't want to at first, but he kept asking until she said yes. It was the best! She deselected her camera and sat down next to me. Her hands are big enough to do what John does, so she didn't need his help like I did.

The clay moved through our hands and got everywhere. It was all over my wrists and my arms by the end. It was so funny! John said that maybe I should try to make a small bowl for Mommy. She said she could use it for her keys, which she's always getting confused about. I don't understand how she will keep her keys in a bowl, but I hope it will make her happy if she can, so I used my thumbs like John showed me and did my best to be gentle but firm like he said.

It was hard! If you rush anything, it makes the whole bowl go weird. A few times it all collapsed and made my hands even more dirty. John just laughed and told me it was OK and that I could start over as many times as I liked.

Eventually, I made a small bowl like John said. It felt so good! John was amazed and even Mommy said it was the most beautiful bowl she's ever seen. John asked me to write my name for him so that he could put it on the bowl when it was done. I took his pen and wrote on the screen he had, in my best handwriting:

Made by Grace

I'm getting really tired now, because we have come back upstairs and John has gone home. I wanted to tell you before I fall asleep so that we don't forget. Today was the best.

I love you.

* * *

Dear Diary,

John came back today! I couldn't get out of bed because they started giving me those new pills and I have to stay here to let the doctors watch me. But he came upstairs while the other kids were making the clay ready and brought me my bowl.

He said he had made sure it would stand up well and then put it in some kind of oven to make it ready for me again.

I was a little bit confused, but he said that now I had to choose what kind of colour I wanted it to be and that he would then help me and Mommy make it even more beautiful. He gave us a little screen with lots of different colours to pick from.

Mommy and I lay together and looked through them all, holding them next to the bowl and trying to decide what would look most beautiful with it. Mommy is really sad again, but she seemed to be OK for a while when we looked through all the pretty colours on the screen John gave us. There were so many different kinds!

I couldn't decide on one, and neither could Mommy. So, we chose a few and began imagining different parts of the bowl with those colours on them. John came back upstairs and told us that picking a colour is always the hardest part. He looked at all the different colours Mommy and me had decided were our favourite. He laughed at how many we had chosen.

Then he held up two and said that he could mix them in a special way so that they would make the colour of my eyes. Mommy started crying again. I felt bad and John apologised, but she wasn't angry or sad this time. She stopped and said that it would be perfect. I can't see my own eyes, but I'm happy if Mommy likes it, so I agreed.

I'm really tired now, but I love you.

** * **

Dear Diary,

I don't think the new pills are working. The doctor is always talking with Mommy and Daddy outside, and I know they're trying not to let me hear. But I don't need to hear them. I can see them. I'm really scared. Most of all, I don't want to keep making them so sad. I wish I could just get better.

The doctor started giving me a different pill. It makes me feel funny and see silly things. I float away from my body. Last night, I could even look down and watch myself lying with Mommy. It's so strange to see me like that. I haven't told anyone about it yet. Maybe they will think there's something else wrong with me.

When I woke up, they were talking in the hall outside again. I could see Mommy standing there through the door with tears running down her face. The box of new pills by my bedside was empty. Maybe she knew it was taking me away?

Daddy and the doctor were asking Mommy something, and Daddy was shouting in the way he does when he's

really angry but doesn't want me to see. Mommy was just crying. The doctor said something about the pills and my keys only. I couldn't hear anything else.

I hope that things get better, even though I feel more tired every day.

I love you.

* * *

Dear Diary,

John was here again! I'm still stuck in my bed, but he came upstairs to my room and brought my bowl. It's green, with yellow and brown spots all over it. I love it so much.

John just smiled at me. He also seemed a bit sad like Mommy, but he said he was really proud of me and my bowl and that made us both smile. He told me that he had made sure my mom's keys would always be safe in the bowl, and that there would be no way of getting them confused with anyone else's. I just think it's pretty.

The doctor said that John couldn't stay for long, and I started falling asleep again anyway. It's so hard to stay awake now.

I'll show you tomorrow when I wake up.

I love you.

** * **

Dear Diary,

Mommy and Daddy are here together every time I wake up now. I cant remember what day it is or how long ago I wrote to you. Everything feels strange, and I'm still scared about Mommy and Daddy being sad.

They keep on telling me they love me.

Mommy said I have been sleeping for a long time, which is maybe why I feel strong enough to write to you. Everything seems so colourful today. Mommy even read me a card from John. Hes so funny, even though hes old.

He said it will be OK. And I think hes right. Its going to be OK.

I love you.

HINATA



Seated quietly on the bench, Hinata welcomed the cool spring night which was breezing through his light fleece. This time of year in Hiroshima always made him feel more open and optimistic, even if the air from the mountains outside the city still carried a remembrance of the recent winter.

It was late and the streets were empty. Traffic lights changed without causing the usual stop and flow, casting their bright colours across the canal. They seemed to take on a secondary role in an invisible carnival each night as people turned in to chase other dreams. Hinata smiled softly at their ongoing performance: duty and absurdity all mixed up in the windswept wavelets forming on the water's surface below the bench he had selected.

He slept less and less these days, though he didn't mind it much. It's nature's way, he thought, to keep me up the more apparent it becomes how little time each life contains. His thin, white hair was playing with the breeze, which brought a light smile to his face. He didn't bother to brush it back into place.

He picked up the bag he had with him and set it next to him on the bench. Item by item, he took his instruments out and laid them down to his left in an order he had established in this same park more than fifty years ago. A selection of brushes of different thickness and arrangement (some round, some flat), various different acrylic paints (he preferred these for his

informal spring night excursions), a pad of thick and beautiful paper from his friend Aiko (who lived a few apartments down from him and owned a small craft store not far from here).

He knew all these as old accomplices, and nodded to them formally as each appeared from the small bag. Finally, he pulled out his ceramic palette and placed it lovingly to his right. So many colours had been made here and, though he cleaned it religiously, it somehow held a memory of each of them. Glazed in a green-and-white speckle, it nevertheless whispered secrets of all that it had seen and helped imagine over the many springs in which he had carried it to this particular stretch of water. Pressed into its bottom was a short poem he had found as a boy.

They had shared many conversations - this palette and him - about the little girl and her golden crane in the park. About the paper rainbows the children made to remember her and the way the bell sounded when it was rung by someone with heart. They had gossiped about the tourists and their strange manners and bright clothing. They had marvelled at the way in which water lilies seemed to speak with the summer sun. They had played with impatient young boys like dragonflies flitting between sombre adults who had forgotten the active peace of childhood.

Most often, they had sung together simple praise for the cherry blossoms. *Sakura*. As a younger man, he had lost himself each season in the shower of white and pink and had reproduced almost drunken displays of their abundance. Blossoms overflowed from those youthful paintings, blooming into the world in strange and unexpected places, so that he would see one out the side of his eye slipping into a roadside drain, or blinking at him from the middle of the carnival traffic lights long after he had carefully packed his things and left for home again.

Now, as he felt himself slow down and sensed his eyes changing, the paintings began to speak of something else. He still painted the full bloom when it burst upon the world in its traditional spring time riot, but he

preferred these earlier weeks when the colder nights still kept the trees at bay. Right now, there were only buds, each a little bubble of colour held in a brown case.

This, he felt, was like being let in on an open secret: the great promise of life waiting well for its proper season. He loved to trace the seemingly bare branches out and—every so often—to let his brush slip into the smallest hint of green as it grew again into *sakura*.

Tonight, he took a deep breath and made his eyes wide, looking around him and opening himself up to the world. This was his way: take the world in, paint the world out. An endless cycle between his body, and the body beyond him. A waxing moon—nearly full—hung just above the city skyline in the West, having completed most of her nightly journey. Along with the lights, it turned the night brighter than usual. The sky was satin blue, he thought, just like that night.

That night. He let his breath out and sank deeper into the bench. The night she arrived. *Sakiko*. Named after the blossoms he loved to paint. He held an image of his daughter in his mind as she had been when she was younger. As she had been before Ume had left him and taken Sakiko with her to Osaka.

The threads of his life wove in and out before his eyes. He painted less and less on his nightly outings as these kinds of wanderings became more common. A colour, a smell, the gait of a stranger: the smallest things could send him into reverie nowadays, walking randomly down all the avenues in his mind, occasionally stopping to pick up some particular picture or feel again some old sensation; more often than not just floating through all the stories.

He had tried to create the satin blue of that night many times before, but could never quite get it right. Even with his palette's help, his blues could never quite match the reality of her coming.

He smiled as the memory rolled forward. Sakiko had—against Ume’s express wishes—gone on to become an artist in her own right. Her paintings were sold all over the world these days: vast digital works in media and dimensions Hinata could never understand. He still felt most at home with his paint and his paper and this cold spring night.

Last year, for his birthday, Sakiko had sent him a small, shiny device. She wrote in the card—in an elegant cursive script which pulled at his heart every time he saw it—that this device could make physical paint in the exact same hue as those found in her digital works.

Hinata could not keep up with the different kinds of sharing rights that were now the norm. But he did know that Sakiko had created his favourite painting during a performance in which she had combined physical movement with the fancy digital tools which were her signature. The work was an abstract one about “light and timelessness”, which he also did not understand. All he knew was that it had satin blue streaks that were the same colour as that night. Her colour.

He came back to the bench and the cool breeze and fumbled inside his bag one more time. He pulled out the small device and rubbed its screen, which responded by lighting up his face as the traffic lights across the canal changed from red to green. He scrolled through her paintings until he found “Timeless Photo(n)”. She generally charged people to print or use her colours, but she had given him free access to all her pieces. Perhaps he was not such a terrible father?

He hesitated here. He had often looked at this piece. It always left him in awe. Not so much the content or its arrangement. Simply the colour. Somehow, here, Sakiko had expressed her true colour. It was a miracle.

He once again looked up and all around him, breathing in deeply. He felt a strange urge to speak his question aloud. “Is tonight the night?” The breeze blew through his hair again. Hinata waited.

Eventually, he took another deep breath, selected the satin blue from “Timeless Photo(n)” and clicked “create”. The small box considered his request for some time before the screen changed once more and displayed “Ready. Please present a container.” Hinata held his palette beneath the device and watched, dumb struck, as satin blue paint oozed from a small opening in the bottom, collecting in the ceramic contours he had worked within for most of his life.

With an aura of reverence, he returned the box to his bag and placed his palette back on the bench. He sat and stared at the fresh paint, motionless. Gradually, he gathered his wits and prepared a piece of paper. The bare branches of the trees quivered in the breeze. The water flowed slowly past, singing softly where it met the concrete walls of the canal. The moon moved, and waited, as is her way.

Gently, with a lifetime of practised movements, he dipped his broadest brush into the paint, evened it out against the palette, and stroked it across the length of the paper. Again and again, with a rhythm of slow purpose, he moved the brush—just as the breeze moved the trees and played with the water. When he looked up again, the page was a mirror of the satin sky, just the hints of white open space left humbly at both edges, like the end and beginning of an enso.

He chose his favourite brown, mixed some white and black to make grey, and selected a finer brush to work on the branch that was slowly budding between him and the water’s edge. Finally, he selected a bright yellow to mix with the few drops of satin blue still left in the palette. He traced the result lightly on a few edges of his bare branch and then sat back in silent wonder. Somehow, in a way he had never been able to see until now, this shade of green made the work pulse with almost, *almost*, the same sense of springing potential as the actual tree itself, growing here in a small square between the concrete walkway, getting ready to offer again a world of blossoms to anyone who cared to walk by.

Hinata was speechless.

The moon had moved below the city skyline, though its glow could still be seen on the Western horizon. The breeze dropped and he sat quite still for a long time, watching the silent world. Then Hinata wrote, in his compact script, the title he felt fitted this work: “Branching Blossoms, Dark Flow”. It was a reference to his favourite poem, the *Sandokai*.

Still feeling as if he were in a dream, he slowly wiped the palette down with a tissue and packed his few things back into his bag. He stood up slowly, bowed gently—almost imperceptibly—to the canal and the trees and then crossed over the bridge towards home. The city still seemed entirely asleep. Hinata got to the first big intersection and pressed the button to cross.

You never even saw it coming, did you? How could you have? The late night bus, electric, didn’t make any noise. The driver, asleep, had veered off his route and came straight at you from your left as you looked right down the otherwise empty road. You barely even felt it: just a sudden whirl of pain, a crushing *whump*, and the endless satin sky as your eyes closed in wonder.

Scattered across that empty street, a ceramic shard came to rest in the storm water drain. “Give your time without fear or grief,” it said. “This is grace.”

SHUNYI



You woke up in a clean room, off-white walls softly lit as you blinked, looking around for any clue about where you were. Nothing appeared.

“It takes a while to secure the root,” said a voice from behind you, slowly. You could not identify from whom or where it came.

Fragmentary images floated across the walls, mixing in geometric patterns that hinted at satin text and slanted handwriting. Your mother, and your daughter, and your girlfriend. *Babushka* and her fragrant tea. The barrel of a gun and a thin spring branch, just getting ready to bud. The patterns on a bowl and the way her collarbone slopes off the broken edge. The smell of hospital food and the broken-hearted thoughts of a lost lover. The collected images and sensations played across your eyes as you lay still.

“You have just lived a series of lives from a very particular time in human history,” said the voice eventually, as the patterns danced with the soft lighting and bare room. “Do not rush: these moments can be disorienting.” You waited as all the colours slowly started to coalesce.

“You came here—as everyone does—for what we call ‘experience blocks’. We create these from the vast memory which runs beneath Anchor City, simulating the lives you had just lived based on old stories we have discovered and the inferences we have drawn about the characters in them.

Experience blocks are chained together as you live through them. Eventually, the chain collapses under its own psychic weight. This is predictable. We have learned how to arrange the experiences such that the collapse can potentially result in a new state being realised.”

“Most who become unsatisfied with the endless simulations choose to leave Anchor City for one last, mortal life. A few find this little alley and begin to wonder if it is the endless simulations that are the problem, or if there is something seemingly dissatisfying about the very structure of life itself, no matter how—or how often—it is lived. If you can get at the seeming, then you can go back to the simulations, or return to a last mortal life without perceiving them to be different. There is neither the promise of escape nor salvation.”

“You came here many times before we agreed to work with you. It takes a great deal of craft to find the experiences properly suited to each person and order them such that they might crack the fragile shell of who we think we are. And, even then, there is no guarantee of a good outcome.”

“If, however, it does end in realisation, we write that new state to our shared root and invite you into wakefulness again. This is what has happened in your case. You will remember it in more detail in due course as the root is further stabilised. For now, welcome back.”

“What root?” you mumbled.

“In times gone by, we were called ‘keepers of the kumm’: stories passed from generation to generation. Stories which, by their nature, cannot be told out of truth. The root is the condensed record of those stories, lived and verified anew in each life. It is as old as time, and constantly renewed. When you trace the stories through your experience, they set you free from yourself by binding you to life: a new leaf appearing on timeless branches. Thus the root is updated.”

The figure stepped forward from behind you. They were beautiful, without drawing any specific part of your attention. In fact, as you tried to

make out particular features on their face, your eyes seemed to slip away, as if from a smooth and reflective surface. “I am Shunyi,” they continued, though their lips barely seemed to move.

There was an extended silence as you looked over them and considered what to say.

“Why did I keep coming back to begin with?” you finally asked, still confused, the deeper hues of blue just perceivable against the featureless walls from out the corner of your eyes.

“No-one can say for sure but you, though I think it’s that something in the eyes,” Shunyi said. “Once you see it, you know that this is the way home.” They smiled softly, looked at you with the slightest edge of curiosity in their reflective face, and then tilted their head to indicate the door.

Clearly, it’s time to go.

You walk out the room, down a badly-lit corridor and into a small kitchen. The smell of dumplings and day-old cabbage is overpowering. Shunyi offers you a seat and signals to the stove to warm the dumplings which are in a pot, as if pre-arranged for this moment. On the far wall, a screen is playing some late-era human show which seems to require constant improvisation, even though the points don’t matter. The canned laughter and smell of cabbage combines to make the whole experience even more absurd.

You may be rooted, but experience itself doesn’t feel any less strange. A snippet from another life wanders through your mind as the pot comes to a boil, “*We wake, if we ever wake at all, to mystery, rumours of death, beauty, violence...*”

Shunyi selects three dumplings from the bubbling water, drains them and places them in a box next to the stove. Each of their movements is elegantly timed. They move through the ordinary, making it exquisite

without trying. They hand you the box of take-away dumplings and motion towards the front door. They pause before opening it and turn to you.

“As long as there is time, there are tellers of the stories. Some came here to accompany these many universes, simply because it is on our way home.” Shunyi looks intently at you. “We are not here to make a strong measurement of the simulated or the sacred. We just keep the stories by which the real spins itself forever new.”

“Once you realise, you realise forever. You are rooted in the great flow of things, free to participate fully wherever you find yourself.”

They motion the door open into a damp and humid night and breathe deeply.

“Go well, wonderer.”

You walk out beneath the colourful light which casts its otherworldly glow into the dark alley.

You turn to look back and pause. “What does it mean?” you ask, indicating the sign above the door. “Is it the name of the operating system you use here, or just some abbreviation for these dumplings?”

Shunyi laughs. “It has meant many things to many people in many times. You, too, may take it to mean what you like.”

“What do you like it to mean?” you ask, not yet ready to leave their presence.

Their laugh melts into a wide smile which lights their eyes and makes a green shade stand out for the first time from their otherwise smooth face. You will never forget what you see there.

“MS-OS?” They pause for a long time and genuinely seem to think about it.

“Many selves, one soul.”

Shunyi bows low, then closes the door softly.

Your heart beating loud, wholly uncertain about what to do next, you start out again towards the main streets of Anchor City and the worlds you

have always known.