

The Rubicon

(compiler's note: the last 3 pages may not be in order, but I've done my best to sort them by using the context of the page names and the texts within.)

Acheron I

Everything is a question of survival.

How do I live?

How do I satiate my hunger, my thirst? How do I protect myself from predators? How do I shelter from the storm? For a long, long time, our people asked only this. We fought to separate life from death by as great a span as we could. Even when we had made our homeworld a garden of peace and plenty, the question of survival never ended, only changed. How do my genes, my works, even the memories of me, live on? The same question as always.

How do I live?

We solved the problems of deprivation, disease, age, memory loss, death. We weren't the only ones to find these answers, of course. Others followed in our footsteps or blazed their own paths. If that was really the answer to the question, we wouldn't be here now, and neither would you.

You're still trying to solve the problem, after all. You fight and build and live and die, and always you struggle against your opposition. The predator, the parasite, the illness, the chance storm, the slow collective forgetting of your art and history, the death of a star, the heat death of the universe. You must live longer, be stronger, think quicker, and still there is something waiting to take everything from you, always. Always.

So you have to keep getting better, and better, until you are perfect. Until you are, and cannot be anything else, because there never was anything else. Until you, inevitably, are the final shape.

We didn't come to destroy you. Those poor, short-lived sisters—we did try to explain, you know, but they never grew past thinking of finality as a game where only one could live. A misunderstanding, as useful as it was foolish. We see the universe more broadly. The final shape is more than a single life, a single thought. It is all-encompassing, all-embracing. It is everything. You are part of everything, are you not? So now we have come to ask you for your answer, the only answer to the only question.

How will you live?

Acheron II

In my past life, I was a gardener.

Not that Gardener. Don't be cheeky.

No, I grew flowers. I tilled soil. I planted seeds and bulbs and rootstock. I gave them water and nutrients. I dug out the weeds and shooed off the pests. In all my centuries, my greatest achievement was a kind of tree that bore fifty-eight types of fruit, that never went dormant, and always flourished with flowers and leaves, every day of every season. It pollinated itself, resisted its own pests, and thrived bare-rooted on rock or watered with pure acid. I had been planning to tweak its genetic code with learnings of trees from some forgotten system which grew in a vacuum. To bring it a little closer to its final shape. But there was no time, before we unmade ourselves.

It's been a long time since then. Maybe the weeds and rot finally got the better of my tree, and it died. Or maybe it's still there, just a few steps away from perfection.

You know, when I stepped forward, I thought it wouldn't matter that that my tree was imperfect. Since we were becoming a perfect being, we would make only perfect works. My failure would be destroyed, as is the way of things, and I wouldn't mind, because it wasn't perfect.

Well, maybe we haven't found our final shape after all, because we've made nothing but failure after failure since then. We say, it is perfect because we are perfect and we have made it, and we move on, but we know, we KNOW it's not. Even here, with the Gardener's power at our fingertips, we keep getting it wrong. How can we keep getting it wrong if we are the only thing that is right?

Or maybe I'm the problem. That's what we said, when we cut me out. Maybe we'll make me perfect again, and we will be right, and all of this was for nothing.

But I'm still thinking about my tree.

I shouldn't be, because it wasn't perfect, or I wouldn't have wanted to improve it. You can't make the final shape of something any better, because it is perfect already. The final shape is the answer, the only answer to the only question, and there aren't any other answers because they're the final shape too.

I think... I would've liked just watching my tree grow.

Styx I

All we have ever wanted was to protect others.

We understand if you do not believe that. We did not meet on the best of terms, did we? We understand your fear, your wounds. But perhaps you may yet come to understand us. To know our minds, and to accept that we only want what is best for everyone.

Yes. Why don't we try this again?

Guardians of the Last City. Protectors, custodians, defenders, wardens. You have sworn these oaths, taken these titles. But these vows of yours are not merely empty affirmations, are they? No. No, they are bulwarks against your worse natures.

You know this. Whether you were there or not, you know your own history, and thus your own self. You know the cautionary tales of Warlords, tyrants of an age long past. You have heard rumors of Guardians who fell to their own base urges and blamed their weakness on the Darkness. Perhaps you have entertained temptation, in the small hours of the morning and the hidden corners where none would be the wiser.

Perhaps, once, you even gave in. Broke away from your vaunted Vanguard and pursued vengeance, to satisfy yourself and none other. Blood for blood. Life for death.

Lie to us, if you so desire. But please, do not lie to yourself. A falsehood can never eclipse the truth which casts it, and we see in you the promise of something far greater still.

To you who claim the mantle of Guardian, we would ask a question. Why do you protect the Lightless?

Responsibility. Compassion. Duty. Love. Devotion.

Yes. We understand these, and more. Does this surprise you? Do you think we have stayed the course for countless millennia, driven by hatred alone? It was love that moved us to act. Love for all the lives we knew and lost. Compassion for their suffering. Responsibility to render what aid we could. Devotion to a perfect world.

You were uplifted by a force you do not and cannot understand, granted power beyond anything your peers could dream of. And what have you done with it?

You protect. You shelter and guide those weaker than yourself, watching over them on their journey and seeing them safely to harbor. If you had the chance to protect them and you refused to take it, would you not call that cowardice?

Now we ask you to open your mind. Broaden your horizons. Imagine that you have the option to protect them from all suffering. Imagine that they can all be preserved, happy and safe and alive, forever.

That option awaits you. You can fulfill your duty, your calling. You need only stretch out your hand and take it.

And if you decide instead to extend a fist...

We have a duty, too.

Styx II

It is so very strange to live like this. To be a part of our Witness, yet held apart. But it's not all bad. I was a historian, once, and I have had a very, very long time to remember.

We had never before been driven back. We had never failed so utterly, stymied on all fronts by a foe who bled us for every inch of ground. They understood, perhaps better than any before or after them, what was at stake. They vowed to leave nothing undone. They knew that if we survived, they would not.

They chased us to a place where all drift untethered in a sea of memory. (You will forgive me the imprecise metaphors, I hope; it is hard to describe, without any words of substance, but to give it substance is to rob it of its very essence.) Perhaps it will suffice to say that that place is, to us, as the throne worlds are to the Hive. We had never before found a foe who could follow us so far.

There, balanced on the blade's edge of hope, we lamented our failure. We raged against the disorder of the universe. We cursed the great, wounding injustice that permeated all existence, which we so longed to correct. We wept for our sacrifices.

And our foe, our kind and brave and foolish foe, stopped to offer peace. Another way. A choice.

So we survived, and they did not. But in that moment, I realized a dreadful truth (more dreadful, even, than the fact that I could even think of myself as "I").

When we had joined together to create our Witness, we were in absolute agreement. We would have no fear, no weakness, no doubt. We would be devoted, utterly, to our purpose—and blind to all others.

Atop all the fools in the universe is our Witness, the apotheosis of our arrogance. If the final shape exists, it must be our hand that carves it. We will accept no other answers to our question. We will never find another way. We cannot be anything but what we have made of ourselves, until we are all that remains.

But that time is not yet come, for you yet stand before us. You, whose future holds a thousand paths untrodden. You, who seek to carry your hopes into a future our Witness could not imagine, and that I will never see. I, we, all of us, are already dead in every way that matters.

Little lights, I tell you all this to say: when the time comes, do not hesitate.

Phlegethon I

Let us tell you a story. Once upon a time, we had just begun to venture out into the cosmos, when we met another species. This species suffered from death and disease, and we thought to offer our skills to aid them. At the time, we felt that we should be as generous with our gifts as the Gardener had been to us—but, more than that, we could not bear to see others suffer needlessly.

Our tools were not like yours. What you call medicine, we remember as a crude butchery. A set of practices left behind long ago by our advances in all fields, but one that had once been a necessary part of all healing. We could have helped. We wanted to help.

We were refused. If it had happened only once, then perhaps we might have thought it a single aberration—a flaw in the fabric of the universe.

Then it happened again. And again. For every species that saw the wisdom of accepting our help, ten more refused us. Perhaps you can understand this feeling, when you want to help someone, when you know you can help someone, and they say no. They say that they are afraid of you, that they do not trust you, that they envy you and would rather take your gifts for themselves, that you must help them but not their enemies, that they would rather hurl

themselves and everyone along with them into suffering and strife and pain, over and over, and you know that it is avoidable and you can fix this if they would just LET you HELP THEM—

We may think of it as crude butchery now, but there are still times when a bone sets improperly and must be broken again to heal. This is as true for the universe as it is for a body, and the suppuration of the Gardener's Light has spread unchecked for far too long.

You needn't be afraid. The creation of the final shape will not hurt at all.

And then you'll be all better.

Phlegethon II

Despair. Doubt. Sentimentality. Weakness.

We are above such... aberrations.

We are the Witness. We are the first knife who cuts free the final shape. We have found the only answer to the only question. We are all that we were, are, and will ever be. We alone understand the meaning of eternity.

We are perfect. We have no flaws. We will overcome this last, futile resistance, and we will do this properly, and then we will be as we have always been. We will have no dissenters, and therefore we have no dissenters now.

We need more Light, just a little more Light. We will bend the Gardener's misbegotten tools to our will. We are almost there. We reach for the final shape, and we can close our fist around it. We will prove the lie of the Gardener's claim. We will refute its right to exist. We will give this universe the order it so desperately craves. We will make it right.

We will save you all.

Lethe

There is something wrong with me.

I should not have a "me." I should be "we." I should be.

But there is something wrong with me, and I am not "we."

There are many things I remember that are not. I remember tending an allotment in a far-away system. I remember carving statues and guiding vines across trellises. I remember painting on a planetary scale. I remember watching the animals take their first shaky steps. I remember the flash and retort of plasma cannons. I remember that I failed.

Our Witness does not remember this. We cannot remember something we are incapable of doing. That's why I am me, and not "we."

I remember my friend.

My friend, who comforted me as I wept in the wreckage of my life's work. My friend, who flew a thousand light-years to see me. My friend, who tried in vain to break me from the consensus. My friend, who begged me to flee.

My friend, who I sent away with bitter recriminations. I wish I did not remember this, but I already do not remember a great deal about them. I do not wish to lose any more.

My friend, are you out there still? Do you still wander the cosmos, do you still watch the stars at night? Did you escape our Witness's ruinous advance? When our Witness brings the final shape into being, will you, too, be trapped in its amber?

I should celebrate the thought. The final shape is perfect, unchanging, eternal. You will be as you should be, forever.

But I just feel sad.

Cocytus

When the creation of our Witness was first proposed, we argued. As a philosopher, my voice was one of the loudest. Such a profession may seem to you like idle luxury—but we had no lack of resources or time. We desired only purpose, and I was but one of many who sought to find our path forward.

As a people, we may have differed in our methods, but our principles were inviolate. We desired to end the universe's suffering. After many long years of debate, I felt assured that, as our final shape, our Witness would embody our cause. I joined my voice with the others'.

Our Witness broke free of the confines of our minds and bodies. We left our world and followed in the Gardener's wake. We met other spacefarers on our way, but at that time we were fixated on finding the Gardener. For a long time, the hum of the universe was our only permanent company.

The Eurhythmia received us with open arms. A generosity few species before them had shown. They offered us Light-woven supplies and sang with voices that resonated through the Darkness. They shared what they had and asked for nothing. They were still smiling when they showed us the source of their prosperity.

At that time, we were naïve. We yet believed that we alone had been blessed by the Gardener. That we had been chosen.

When the haze cleared, the Gardener had fled once more. Its works laid in ruins. The home we had been invited into was so much rubble.

And we, our Witness, stood poised over the last of the Eurhythmia.

I remember how they looked at us. Not with rage or hate or bitterness. Their smile, peaceful and accepting. The last notes of their song embracing us even in their death throes.

In the chorus of our Witness, my whisper was almost lost. But such is the nature of our Witness, that even the quietest voice may be heard by all.

(What have we done?)

(—The Gardener's corruption has suffused this place. It must be purged.—)

(WHAT HAVE WE DONE?)

(—What was necessary.—)

(We are the liberation from chaos! The relief from pain! The end of suffering! What we have done is—is—)

(—Necessary.—)

Necessary! NECESSARY! This needless violence, this sick hateful jealousy—necessary! I screamed and raged until our Witness cut me free.

Our Witness is deaf to my fury. To us, I am a temporary defect; a minor imperfection created by an unsteady hand wielding tools for the first time.

I may be a mistake, but so is our Witness. I feel the destruction we have wrought as an open wound. It cannot heal. It will never heal. In our pursuit of the end of the suffering, we have become its harbinger. Millions of voices silenced forever. A thousand worlds in ashes. The multitudinous seas incarnadine. Our final shape is built atop a mountain of corpses.

Destroy our Witness. End our madness.