

Syntax, Episode 6: All for One

Content Warnings:

- Mentions of: death, ritual burial, sacrifice, apocalypse, uncanny valley, corporate manipulation, anxiety, ecoterrorism, tranced state, war, paranormal entities, firearms, PTSD, grief, skinning, psychoactive effects, hallucinations
- Cryptid creatures
- Alcohol consumption
- Explicit language
- Loud noises
- Scopophobia
- Fainting
- Off-putting noises

Description: Silas recuperates in his quarters, and makes a few conclusions about VINCULA's methods with Greg and J. The Breachers receive a new assignment, and plunge deeper into Gaia than ever before.

Silas's Translation Date: April 26th, 2021

CASSIUS (INTRO)

So much lost in that void... but I'd give it all for one...

...

SILAS

Ahh, finally... A little time to unwind. I told you things would calm down eventually, didn't I?

Mmhmm... I'm just glad VINCULA was so pleased with Cassius' efforts they decided to give us something approximating a weekend. My feet are finally starting to not ache so bad after a trip out, but I'm grateful for the break, all the same.

Oh! And VINCULA has finally cleared the document we pulled from Specimen One for the archival lab! Not a lot to do around here, so I'll be starting my copying and researching while we recuperate. I'm eager to find out if that sad little pile of sheets has more of the unknown language isolate on it... We don't have the results back from carbon dating yet, and Miss Vaux was *almost* too pleased with the sample Cassius retrieved to remind me, once again, to be utterly careful with the book... Almost.

I already confirmed the symbols on the sarcophagus I photographed are closely related to those in the Akkadian dual-language original book. Obviously, there are differences in the script, and the medium is unlike the book as well... Stone chiseled letters look quite different after untold centuries, maybe *millenia* eroding away – especially as compared to a well-kept book that is “only” a thousand years old or so ... But I *think* the sarcophagus script is an older form of the same language isolate as the one I'm still trying to fully crack.

Unfortunately, I don't have a handy set of Akkadian to go alongside – and at first glance, a lot of the symbols used on the tomb are *new* to me. Given

the circumstances, I'd wager the tomb script carries one of two things: something negative, like a description of crimes leading to the ritual burial of Specimen One – or perhaps, even, a warning not to open the lid at any cost... for fear of unleashing unspeakable evil on the world.

[MEOW]

SILAS

Yeeees, you know I've given a lot of thought to what on earth could have happened to Specimen One. Even amongst the strange creatures of Gaia, Specimen One is still... somehow a standout in my mind – in its unnerving behavior *and* physiology.

I still can't *unsee* the mental image of a skull on what we thought was the head area of that thing. Cassius agreed with me, though – definitely *not* a skull, and definitely *not* human... Hmph, best not to dwell on it, eh, Vox?

...The other thing that could be on the rim of the tomb is the proper name of the occupant and things like where they lived, what titles they held, what deeds were done in their name... The more proper nouns used, the harder it is for me to get any translation done. I have no vocal representation of the language, no other examples of writing save the two books now in VINCULA's possession, and no known culture from which to derive clues from. Just my own repertoire of linguistic tools and what I can pull from the Akkadian text...

[MREOW]

SILAS

... Something else has been bothering me about that, Vox. VINCULA claimed early on they were complying with authorities and protocols on encountering a new, potentially sentient species. I'm sure these were designed with space-faring entities in mind, but instead, we have a funny little tube that takes us back and forth with relative ease. And while we've yet to encounter the rest of Specimen One's people – if indeed any exist

and there's not a batch of humans on Gaia going around burying these things in ziggurats as a hobby – I can't help but notice how... lackluster and unexcited the overall response has felt, I guess.

The most scrutiny I've noticed was – what I presumed to be a few federal agents in sharp black ties heading to and from Miss Vaux's office and the VINCULA meeting rooms. As far as I know, no one on the Breach team has been directly addressed by any of them. Miss Vaux says the recordings we're making are enough for them to analyze, and that we should just keep being rigorous in our field notes.

I... have trouble believing the federal government is happy to pore over accounts of our journeys second hand. What's more – again, to my knowledge – we are the only ones entering the Breach and Gaia itself on a regular basis. I'm sure there could be covert missions, but they would most likely be happening during darkness hours on Gaia... which is supposed to be a fatal thing to do. So aside from Greg's security detail attached to the Breachers... it's just us going to and fro.

I've even sent requests to Miss Vaux to get assistance in translating the language isolate. She just – assures me I will have access to other research and researchers once it's been cleared... But there's no way *I* am the most qualified to be *the* first contact translator. Sure, I take pride in my work and have credentials for this, but... Why *just* me, for now? And why is it taking so long to get any help?

[BIG MEOW]

SILAS

Sorry, sorry... I'm spending too much time wringing my hands and not petting the baby. Alyx told me again I was just worrying too much. It's not like the president was going to come strolling in – as if to add a kind of weight to all the proceedings. And the lack of traffic around VINCULA must be preferred over being swamped by the press or by masses of people

trying to get souvenirs from Gaia. A few agency men taking meticulous notes is definitely more the government's style, anyway.

It's just – I feel inadequate to the task on my own. And I'm still very suspicious of VINCULA. I let it cloud my perception of events, sometimes. Now that I take a moment here, just to kind of – breathe and take it all in – it all feels so *breathtaking* in its scale once more. Translating the bulk of a language can be the work of a lifetime, and I should be feeling things like gratitude for the opportunity, or maybe... like a creative frustration – something like an artist feels before making a masterpiece. Instead I'm simply... overwhelmingly nervous.

Full of dread and anxiety for what each new revelation in Gaia will bring. Lacking all faith in VINCULA and maybe even the government to do what's right – culturally, scientifically, *morally* in regard to this discovery. Hell, I'm not even sure *we* can be trusted, whether by incompetence or simple, well-meaning mistakes. To say nothing of my life potentially being cut tragically short any day now...

[MEOW):]

SILAS

Yes, I know... Your father is being melodramatic again. I'm doing my best to stay alive out there... I wish others would do the same. Damned water sample... I lost my composure a bit, I must admit, Vox, when Cassius decided to do the most tomfool thing I've ever seen with my own eyes. They marched right out to the water's edge while some 30 meter monstrosity snapped voraciously at a drone overhead. If it had taken its eyes off that drone for even a minute, they would've been a goner – no question.

You... should have *seen* the look of triumph on their face, though, Vox. Cassius stumped back in that clunky, slow hazmat suit, and put the bottle in Elizabeth's hand like a knight bringing the heart of a dragon back to the queen... I have to admit – after it felt like my heart rate was back under

control, that was one of the coolest things I had ever seen, too. I hope that wasn't the moth doing things to my head again.

Oh, yes! There was the strange airborne creature again, and *this time* we got a good look at it through the drone camera. It looked like a giant moth, and it took off with the drone, too! Cassius and Elizabeth aren't even sure it *is* mothlike, but they told me I said something about a moth while I was – entranced, so that's what we're going with for now. The same feeling got Alyx, too – we both just kind of babbled for a bit, and then were feeling ourselves again moments later. Alyx agrees with me now, though – it feels like only a fraction of time, and you're not particularly *aware* of what you might be blathering about while under the effect. Once again, there was no direct contact, and the tox screens from my last encounter revealed nothing untoward... So its mechanism for psychoactivity remains a mystery.

I hope... I wasn't *too* open while under its sway? Wouldn't want to make things awkward. Cassius was looking at me with an odd expression the whole way back to the Breach, though...

...

SILAS

Hello? Cassius, is that you again? Knocking at my door at all hours...

GREG

Nobody here but us cowboys!

JEREMIAH

Wait, why would it be Cassius?

SILAS

Greg! J!... I – come in, come in! Cassius just... Cassius has been over a time or two after our expeditions already, I just thought...

GREG AND JEREMIAH

Ooooooooooh!

GREG

Oh, is *that* all?

JEREMIAH

Damn, Greg, if only *we'd* learned to read and write all fancy, like they told us before we'd joined the Army. We wouldn't be kickin' it bachelor style like we are now!

SILAS

I... what are you... I assure you both, I am still very much “kicking it bachelor style”...

JEREMIAH

I'm kidding, I'm kidding!

GREG

Alright, alright – we didn't come to make pot shots, we came to hang out! We've got some time off, let's pop a few brewskis and just be glad we're still breathin'!

JEREMIAH

You don't gotta drink if you don't wanna, Silas. Greg's just being friendly, in his own Texan way.

GREG

I brought some goodies from June, too. Damn, that woman can bake like nobody's business. You gotta try these little divinity cookies, Silas, the ones with the cherry on top? So good...

SILAS

I love when she makes those! They taste just like back home... Almost...

GREG

She does try her best, don't she? This whole isolation and hikin' around Gaia thing would be feelin' mighty reminiscent of Army life if it weren't for her ministrations. At least with her around, the food is phenomenally better! I might wrastle a bear or two if I knew she was making fried chicken back here at VINCULA. Hell, I might even take on another unilope warren.

JEREMIAH

Yeah, look at you poking fun at the poor linguist while you got June making eyes at you all day! I know you were eyeing retirement on VINCULA wages, Greg, but you look like you're going for the whole "settling down" package all at once!

SILAS

Mrs. Dawson does speak rather fondly of you when she does speak of you, Greg – which is with notable regularity.

GREG

Hey, a fella can dream, can't he?! I thought I'd burned up all my luck when I got this job with VINCULA. Well, maybe I did, so no sense in relying on luck. Anything or anybody worth having is worth spending a great deal of time on... so it's slow and steady, boys. I'm content to just be as sweet as pie and see where things may go – and let that be a lesson to the both of you younguns! You've got your whole lives ahead of you, so no rushing into things!

JEREMIAH

Yeah, yeah, sure thing Pops.

SILAS

I'm certainly not condoning brash actions of any kind, but technically the rest of our lives *could* be measured in days, depending on how things go in the Breach...

JEREMIAH

Oh, *now* you done it...

GREG

Nah, Silas is right! This ain't a combat zone, but it's dangerous. You gotta admit, I knew with the money VINCULA was offering it was probably gonna be a bit heated out here but this... *safari* has been another thing entirely. But I been shot at before, and I've made my peace with it... And I still think now as I did then – never a reason to live like today's your last day, cause even if it is, you ought to be savoring each moment and living the best you can anyway! That can be laid back... that can be patient... you don't gotta be living a fast life to be enjoying it.

JEREMIAH

You got Pops harping full time now, Silas! Good going.

GREG

Happiness and fulfillment can be a glass of cold sweet tea on a porch swing on a hot summer day! Or... maybe like a brand new book, with that new book smell – I don't know, I'm reaching here. I was never one for academia, so I don't know what y'all academics like.

JEREMIAH

You don't feel smarter just being near Silas? I swear my IQ's going up a few points just from the music choice.

GREG

Oh, you finally ready to break into double digits now just cause you heard some dusty old classical?

SILAS

As a matter of fact, the music choice was another of Mrs. Dawson's suggestions for me on how to unwind...

JEREMIAH

Ooh! Just some dusty old classical relaxation, I guess, Greg?!

GREG

Jeremiah, you know you really *could* gain some IQ points from listening to this. Feels like real music of the *soul*, you know?

JEREMIAH

I knew you were gonna say some shit like that, you old fart.

GREG

I just really feel *at peace*, right now, you know?

...

SILAS

Greg... I've been meaning to ask you something.

GREG

Fire away.

SILAS

I've noticed something of an... oddity amongst our little troop...

GREG

I mean, there's probably at least three or four of 'em, walking around with their notebooks all day long in Gaia... I'm sorry, I'm bein' dumb again. Go on, now, Silas – I'll shut my big mouth till you're finished.

JEREMIAH

Now there's an opportunity you don't get but once in a blue moon. Better go for it while you can, Silas.

SILAS

When I applied for the position here, I remember there was a very *strange* question that stood out on their application. One of the last ones – regarding, uhh...

JEREMIAH

Paranormal experiences?

SILAS

The very same. I don't mind volunteering that... I said yes to the question, myself. Well, a little more ambivalent on it – but enough of a yes that VINCULA – or rather, Miss Vaux in particular was satisfied. I've gone through a metamorphosis on my train of thought about why they needed that information. At first, I thought it would help color the nature of the linguistic work they were hiring me for. Then, when I saw the Breach, I thought they were asking because they wanted people to have a healthy skepticism in general, so that they could work with the Breach with an open mind.

But... Now that I've had a chance to ask around, it seems like they went out of their way to hire... literally *everyone* I've spoken to, with the same question on the line, regardless of whether you're a scientist or a residence manager or what have you. If it's not too much to ask... Did they?...

GREG

You hear that, Jeremiah? Dadgummit, It's like I was saying, I told you I was suspicious about it!

JEREMIAH

Yeah, you were right again, as usual, I guess... I'm not any happier for it, though.

GREG

Hmph! Yeah, to answer your question, Silas, they asked me much the same. Wanted to know if I at least had an "open mind" about it, as you said. Had to go a bit in depth about it too, just to get the job, or at least that was the strong inclination I got from my interview. That wasn't the only thing that set me off about the whole hiring process, though...

I don't know what your experience was like, but they had a bunch of us there trying to get on security detail. Kind of a bulk interview process, I guess – they wanted to know if we were physically fit, combat trained, all that, of course... but there were some interesting hopefuls there too. I was chatting with the guy next to me – just trying to be friendly, as usual – and he had loads of wildlife experience. I was gettin' intimidated, cuz dealing with wildlife had been one of the criteria, but it wasn't as important as survival skills – or that's what the advertisement I found had said – but this guy was making me sweat. I was starting to think "Hell, Why am I doing this at all, I haven't got a chance, might as well pack it up", and then he went in and I just kinda figured I'd stick it out at least, since I was next in line. This dude comes back out, real quick, though! Lookin' mad as hell, and then he tells me outright, "Might as well not bother, they're wackos!" Says this kinda loud to everyone and walks out. Well, then I had my interview, and of course I must have impressed them enough that they put me in charge of security...

But I been thinkin', they must have told that guy no on the spot – and given his reaction, it was probably the issue of paranormal belief. Shit, they had already checked my references and determined my skill set was up to par... All they really wanted to know was my experience...

SILAS

As I said, everyone I've spoken to has had a similar experience with VINCULA. I thought there was a rationale for it, given how... the Breach *is*, you know... But they were ubiquitous in their hiring process about it. Feels – extreme, especially for those with no plans to go into the Breach at all. Surely that wouldn't require a belief in the paranormal, to do things like analyze samples or tidy around the offices?

GREG

You'd think so, wouldn't ya? I can't fathom a reason for needing that as a prerequisite for hire. Other than just to make sure their staff were at least strong skeptics... But what purpose does *that* serve...

...

SILAS

Since I'm already being nosy... Do you mind if I ask about your own experience? Only if it's something you're willing to share... As you can see here...

You noticed it on your first day here, when we were suiting up to go inside the Breach, and I've kept it up. I'm recording what I can, out of – mistrust for VINCULA? And a desire to keep a personal log. I'm not sure which of the two of those weigh more, but... I think this information will be important later – in helping us deepen our understanding of the Breach, and of finding motives for VINCULA. I've recorded a few other stories, and – again, if you're okay with that – I'd like to get yours...

JEREMIAH

Oh, shit, smile for the camera! That's a brave move, considering how high up this whole shindig has gone. We got feds crawling around that might take exception to your methods, Silas...

SILAS

I had thought about that, but so far no one unaffiliated with VINCULA has bothered approaching me, and I figured I'd volunteer the information that I was keeping a recorder if anyone bothered *asking me*. I might get a proverbial smack on the wrist but what could they do to a researcher doing research?

GREG

An awful lot, Silas. A helluva lot.

...

GREG

I agree with J. Yeah, you might have a plausible case in your defense, but we're dealing with extremely sensitive information. Even if you didn't suffer immediate consequences, you're painting a target on your ass with this. You might not have any dirt on them, but you've been caught with a shovel in your hand... For some agencies, that's all it takes. But for now – you don't think anybody's the wiser? Outside the Breachers?

SILAS

I don't think so. I showed Cassius, and I don't think they'll let anyone know about it...

JEREMIAH

Highly doubtful. Cassius has no love of either of the two suits that have decided to take up residence here, federal or corporate.

GREG

At any rate, I wouldn't go trusting too many others. I understand if the Breachers get wind of it – we spend so much time together it's bound to get spotted or come up in conversation, most likely. Might have to put our heads together and have a chat about it next time we're out and about on Gaia, just so we're all clear on keeping it to ourselves. Still, I think it's a good thing you're doing, and info like this could be real valuable if there's any mishandling going on. I'm none too keen on trusting the suits either. VINCULA's been acting like a lot of this has been pre-planned, but it's unclear how.

Which brings me to... my experience. It's not all that – enticing, or convincing, I guess you could say. Hell, I damn near got diagnosed with PTSD and the doc was ready to call it a day and move on after that, and I was all set to believe him. Felt better to give it a label as a condition rather than think, for even a *second*, it might have some kind of reality attached to it. I still dread thinking about... how it might be *real* – how it could be true, what happened to my squad mates.

Let's take the clock back a few years, yeah? Quite a few years actually – and not a peep outta you, J! I know I'm old now, but I was just a runt back in Desert Shield – younger than anyone on the Breach team is currently! Fresh outta basic and barely had the sense to know which end was the lead dispensing part of the gun. I spent most of the war being shuffled from place to place, marching in desert heat, get outta this truck, march some more, get in that truck, whole lotta hurrying up and waiting around... in other words, the quintessential Army experience. We only got hit bad once... but we lost three of our guys that day. Young'uns, too, just like me.

I don't know about you two, but I know we all felt invincible, right up until we weren't. Probably were just young and dumb – but that day rocked our world. We all keenly felt the absence of our comrades – our friends. It was real quiet in the platoon for awhile... and that's when I started seein' 'em.

Maybe the heat had baked my brain a bit. Maybe I was coping, conjuring mirages in my brain to keep the despair at bay – I don't know, I don't have a solid answer for it even now. I'm just gonna tell ya as best I can. I got up one night and left the tent behind – just had to get out of the enclosed space. I sat down and just kinda let myself wander, enjoying the cold blankness of the desert night... Was kinda hopin' some of that frigid emptiness would sink inside of me. Internally, I was still reeling with fear, regret, anger... Had no idea what to latch onto, just felt like I was treading water while a storm raged in my mind. That's when I heard a still, small voice beside me.

I ain't much of one for religion. Never hated it – I just knew what my momma taught me, and that was all. But I figured, if God was gonna start talking to me, I guess it *would* go something like a faint whisper I heard. So I just tried to clear my head and really listen, thinking maybe I'd get some divine revelation after all... would've pleased Momma something fierce, you know?

... But I didn't get the word of the Lord – no, what I got was... the worst feeling of loss I'd ever felt... like everything I'd felt up till then was child's play. This was true anguish – despair, cloying and all-encompassing. I felt swallowed up by it, drowning, pulled under by the waves and watching the dying light fade away above me while I was crushed by the weight of hopelessness I felt being poured out over me.

I didn't hear the words. The voice spoke, and I just got these mental images – pictures of things playing out like a movie. I saw what must have been – fathers? Someone's sons and daughters? Even some wives and girlfriends. I somehow knew who they were, without knowing their names, but they had – It's real hard to describe, I just knew who they were to me – their relationship to me – without knowing who they were at all. A whole bunch of 'em, each with a feeling attached to 'em.

In one place I'd see a lady, and I'd know we were lovers – but I could feel the bitterness of loss, knowing she'd never see me again. But I was still

here, right? I was seeing all this, and still breathin'. Where was that pang of grief coming from? I saw a gruff old geezer, and thought of him as a father. I saw how he frowned at me, and instantly felt shame and wrath like a hot geyser in my chest. I couldn't make no sense of it, but I tell you, sure as I stand here, I was – shook. I ain't got the words to describe what all I was feelin' – I just know there was a lot of regret there... A lot of pain and suffering.

It stopped after a while, but by that time the sun was already startin' to rise. Felt like I was finally allowed to come up for air and the storm had subsided. I didn't talk about it to my squad mates – didn't talk to anyone about it at all until I was back home after. I finally went to visit a shrink. I couldn't get the power of those feelings out of my head... They helped me a little, but I was still so overwhelmed. I might've just been content to get some meds and therapy... But I decided to pursue things.

I looked up the details on the fellas who had died, and started trying to communicate with their family members. Told 'em I was in the same platoon, and just wanted to talk, if they were willing.

I knew them all on sight, Silas. I'd shake their hands, see their eyes past the tears, and I knew each and every one. I had never met them before in my life, but I knew who they all were – these children, these spouses, these parents. They were family members of my fallen comrades, but I saw them as I did in that desert nightmare... as if I was seein' them through the eyes of each lost soldier.

I barely knew what to say, but I knew the feelings left behind. I couldn't say much but how sorry I was, and sometimes I'd just say somethin' like how much they were valued and adored by the dead, if it felt right. I didn't get an answer or words to say, but it felt like I was doing what was right. And it helped, man, it helped. It was painful, but I felt the immense suffering lessen just a hint with each visit – like I was leavin' a little bundle behind every time.

God, it ripped my soul apart every time – but I didn't stop, between deployments and even another war. I kept visiting until I'd visited every single one, or it felt like I had. Some of 'em just sobbed, some of 'em were thankful, some didn't want to talk to me outright or cussed me out... but I stuck to it.

Like I said, I might have been conjurin' the whole thing... Maybe I was just seeing what I wanted to see, lessening my own feelin' of guilt and depression while leaving it all with of these family members. I wonder if I did the right thing after all, if I wasn't just helping myself and causing more of a problem for all of 'em. I don't rightly know, Silas – I can't say I'll ever know. But I just did my best, like I always try to do.

JEREMIAH

I can't vouch for the actual occurrence, but I've known Greg since he was my First Sergeant in the Iraq War. I knew he was watching out for us, every single man in the company – and afterwards, I went with him on a few of the trips he made to the bereaved families. He's playing it down, but he seemed to always know what to say... like the ghosts were leaning on his shoulder and whispering what to say to him.

GREG

Shit... I don't like to think about it like that at all. But as I don't rightly know what's exactly going on with me... I got nothin' to say against it.

SILAS

Even amongst the stories I've heard so far, this one is a standout. I've... not heard one like this before. My condolences on your losses, Greg.

GREG

Hmm... Here, raise your glasses – to fallen comrades.

JEREMIAH

To fallen comrades.

SILAS

Hear, hear.

GREG

Welp, guess it's time for your spooky tale now, J. Don't think you're gettin' away *that* easy, heh!

JEREMIAH

Yeah, I figured my time was coming. Aight, well, I don't have a war story like Greg... Mine goes to my youth, in the Florida Everglades. I'm part of a big family, see, and...

...

MISS VAUX

—ce again, VINCULA is quite pleased with the Breacher's progress in charting Gaia's terrain and logging flora and fauna species. We hope you have received ample time to rest and recover, as this week promises to be an exciting one! There are several new points to discuss, and we have information coming from every department with progress in their fields. Let's start with our linguistics update. Mr. Caldwell, if you please?...

SILAS

Certainly. I've had a chance to briefly peruse the document pulled from Specimen One's limb. It is, indeed, a collection of parchment, dried animal skin with ink lettering. The symbols closely match that of the unknown

language isolate contained in the Akkadian dual language book, and, furthermore, the parchment bundle has been carbon dated between six and eight *thousand* years old. I am not an expert in that field, but I have been advised this may be an inaccurate dating, as we are reliant on atmospheric carbon data pulled from an exceedingly short window on Gaia, so further study may be needed – but that is our current estimate.

CASSIUS

Holy shit, that's *ancient*. Sorry, quick interjection, is there any trace evidence left by Specimen One on the parchment?

SILAS

While not my specialty, I can report from the lab that there was nothing to indicate the presence of foreign material on the parchment. So, unless the animal skin used to form the parchment was from Specimen One, no, there was not so much as a hair that didn't match the parchment composition itself.

ELIZABETH

Oh my God, they may have skinned part of Specimen One to make the parchment?!

CASSIUS

As disturbing as that sounds, the alternative is that Specimen One somehow managed to leave no trace of its existence, despite us pulling that bundle right off its arm. While I'm still unsure if Specimen One had hair, there should have been some, even *microscopic* evidence of it left behind differing from the parchment. Occam's razor dictates the former assumption to be more likely, in this case.

SILAS

It's grisly, but a civilization practicing live burial could also be practicing the use of animals – even live ones – for economic purposes like the crafting of writing materials. I cannot state unequivocally that the parchment is from Specimen One's own tissue, but I digress.

What I do know is that translation will be significantly harder for this parchment as I now have a much older variation of the language to work with. Because it appears handwritten without the benefit of a machine press or serialized lettering, there's a great deal of variation even in characters I *think* I recognize from the latter half of the Akkadian book. I will report back with any segments I *do* get translated.

CASSIUS

At least we can guess that whoever wrote the books had some kind of inkling how the Breach works – or had a hand in its creation, given that the symbols on the linkstones and the Breach, they all match up with the language on the artifacts recovered so far.

MISS VAUX

I will leave further conjecture for later. For now, we also have an interesting update from Alyx regarding the drone *she* lost.

ALYX

Yeeeeaaaah, sorry about that... I did my best, promise! Anyway, after that *huge* moth creature flew off with the drone, we obviously couldn't remote control it anymore. It didn't have the necessary power to escape, either, so we kinda chalked it up to a lost cause. We *do* have a passive radio emitter attached to the drone, but we figured like all the items left behind overnight, it would be rendered inoperable and unable to be detected... Well, we sent a team in during our break – just to the Breach entrance – with a powerful radio detector. And we're still getting a faint signal from the drone!

CASSIUS

Wait, really?!

ELIZABETH

Yay, the drone didn't get eaten! Yet...

GREG

What are we getting from that drone?

ALYX

Not much – in fact, no data at all other than direction, really. The passive radio emitter was designed to be as easy on the battery as possible, and just send a ping every now and again that could be picked up with our detectors. We can't get things like camera images or even local temps, but at least the battery will last a while longer. We've got time to try and find the drone, and *maybe* find the habitat of the moth critter. The only thing I can comment on is, based on the weakness of the signal we're getting back, it's a long way off. It might be out of reach for a day's travel, but is it worth a shot, at least?

CASSIUS

I think so...

MISS VAUX

VINCULA certainly thinks so. Before the drone signal gives out completely, your next few forays into the Breach will be directed at attempting to relocate and recover our lost drone. Even if the drone itself is replaceable, it could provide valuable data for our analysis teams... and helpful for our

science teams, as well. The psychoactive effects of the moth, while currently anecdotal, are worth inspecting and finding countermeasures for. On that note, do you and Elizabeth have any details to share on the drone's captor, Cassius?

CASSIUS

So Elizabeth and I talked for a bit, and we have nothing super solid, *yet*, given how little evidence we have of the creature so far. We saw it, and while far off, it did have the appearance of a large moth, and was able to easily grasp the drone underneath it with its appendages. That'd give it a wingspan of something between three to five meters, roughly. It had bright green and white coloration, though any patterns were indistinguishable from our viewing point. Closest Earth relative might be a Luna Moth? But now there's this question of the psychoactive effects it always seems to bring with it – first affecting Silas when it flew so far above our heads we could barely make it out in the sky, and then again affecting Alyx and Silas when it swept the drone. Elizabeth, could you share the theory we have?

ELIZABETH

I don't have a lot of data on a moth that could be causing out of body experiences, but it *may* be that the moth itself isn't toxic. It could be carrying pollen or other material from a hallucinogenic plant. The hawkmoth on Earth is known for pollinating species of plants which contain potent deliriants. It's possible, then, that the moth is gently sprinkling some of these compounds wherever it flies. How it only affects a few of us so far... I don't – I have no additional guesses on that. Maybe Silas is just really unlucky?

SILAS

Can confirm.

CASSIUS

Finding the drone might give us more clues about the moth. I don't like the idea of our team all tripping out, though, so we'll have to be careful in our approach – but finding plant samples near the moth's habitat could give us an idea of what is causing the psychoactive effects. Because of that, and the drone recovery mission, on our next trip we're beelining for the drone's signal.

MISS VAUX

Excellent! That concludes our meeting today, and I'm sure Cassius will have you embarking shortly. Once again, VINCULA wishes you the best of luck, and safe travels!

SILAS

Beelining away from the Breach and headed straight for a moth that robs you of your senses – also, it might live in a hallucinogenic jungle. Sure, what could go wrong with that?

...

SILAS

Silas Caldwell, specimen log for VINCULA, sixth expedition on Gaia. On our way to recover the drone lost on the previous expedition, the Breachers have discovered a new, seemingly docile species. Cassius has a description...

CASSIUS

What we're seeing are small, bird-like creatures closely resembling Earth chickens. In place of feathers, however, they are covered in scales from

head to toe, ranging in shades of green and blue to bright reds and oranges. Other than that, they are behaving quite similarly to their...

... Earth counterparts, crowing and all.

ELIZABETH

Beautiful coloration! They even have four-toed feet, short beaks, and... I think you can spot the males by the addition of spiked growths on the top of their heads?

CASSIUS

Yeah, that's probably the most metal looking mohawk I've seen on a chicken. Some of them – again, like Elizabeth said, presumably males, due to their larger size and brighter colouration mimicking those of Earth chickens – have a set of spikes growing above their eyes in a single row. Let's count... five, six, seven spikes on that one. The largest is in the middle and they get smaller as they curve outward around its skull. They could be for self defense or sparring with other males? You wanna take a chance on 'em Greg?

GREG

Nope, I'm fine over here, thanks! Just sweeping the perimeter. I'll let y'all take one for the team, if you'd like!

CASSIUS

Joking aside, I'm not getting near them for now. We can't afford *any* slowdowns today – our signal to the drone is barely gaining any strength. Still, I wanted to make a quick note about this creature and we've got most of the day remaining to us. Anyway, that's all for now. Let's get moving again!

...

CASSIUS

–nyway, that’s all for now. Let’s get moving again!

SILAS

Good, I got all that. Uhh, Cassius, if I could mention something to you and the Breachers, for just a moment...

CASSIUS

Yeah, what’s up? Was that not fancy enough for VINCULA or something?

SILAS

No, nothing like that, sorry. I wanted to mention something unrelated, now that we’re a respectable distance from the Breach. I’ve completed my recordings – for the Breachers, at least – and I confirmed that everyone was asked by VINCULA to provide proof of paranormal activity or belief, in some capacity. I don’t have everyone’s specifics, but we can peruse the stories later to see if we find any common threads among them.

CASSIUS

Hmm... So we’re all a bit dysfunctional, huh? Oh, joy... Well, just to be clear, I don’t think that even gives me pause anymore. I wanted to play at being skeptical for a bit longer, but the events of the last week or so have... *broadened* my horizons. So far, this has been a good group to travel with. But it’s VINCULA that has been playing too shystie for my liking. They’ve

had a definite plan for all this, and now they want to act like there was nothing strange about their line of questioning... I straight up asked Miss Vaux about it, and all I got was the canned “finding individuals with open minds” spiel. So what gives?

JEREMIAH

Well, where does that leave us? It’s suspicious, but there’s nothing to report anyone *for*, other than strange business practices. And if we *wanted* to make a report, we can’t exactly fly in the face of the lockdown – and who are we gonna talk to anyway, the press? They could easily call us crackpots and dismiss any claims we make outright.

GREG

That’s true, and I don’t recommend it myself. I don’t think we really *can* report this any higher – if the feds are in on it, then it’s already a matter of national security, and there’s nothing much we can do about it.

ELIZABETH

Surely this can’t stay hidden forever, though? If we go back to the theory that VINCULA is mostly just looking to turn a profit, like any company, someone’s bound to start asking questions about where all this real estate and these new biological samples are coming from. They can’t really expect to turn a profit any other way, without eventually going public? Unless the government is just paying them to explore Gaia for its own sake – But that can’t stay the case for long, right? Someone’s going to start getting greedy.

ALYX

I... guess I still don't understand what there is to be upset about yet. It's weird, but like J said, there's nothing that's been done yet and nothing much for us to do about it anyway.

CASSIUS

You're rarely, if ever, going to hear me say something like this again, but... I think our best option is... *patience*. I've scrapped with a government official or two before, and you never make headway getting uppity with them. Instead, our best bet is to document everything thoroughly, and *protect* what evidence is being made. When VINCULA decides to make their move and play their hand, we just gotta be sure some word of it gets out *somewhere* down the line.

I have to believe there are people that would want to see these natural resources protected. We're screwing up one planet – there's no need whatsoever for another to suffer under our stewardship. While we *might* be able to scientifically observe Gaia, I flat out don't trust VINCULA to be the ones in charge of it. But... like it's been mentioned before, there's not a lot we can do *now*. So, let's watch, and wait, keep our eyes and *ears* open, and just – do our best to look out for each other. It might be a bit foolish, but I want to trust you guys here. We've known each other for a short time, but we're all we've got, so let's watch each other's backs, alright?

JEREMIAH

I'm in, mostly because it's less work for me if nobody is making trouble in the first place. They'd expect me to scrape up whatever was left after anyone's "unfortunate workplace accident", and I'm not about that life!

ALYX

That sounds easy enough, just watching out for each other. We're basically doing that now, aren't we?

GREG

It's what I signed up for, so it's what I'll be doing. Hell, this'll make for some fine stories when – and if – it does make headline news. Fred, El – I ain't draggin' y'all into this, all I'm askin' is you keep doing what you're doing.

FRED

I'm just here for a paycheck, man. If I just keep doing what I'm doing, it's alright with me.

ELORA

I think you know what you're doing, Greg. I trust you.

ELIZABETH

Ooooh, it's time to do a little corporate espionage! I'm probably no good at keeping secrets, but I can always keep busy with the scientific side of things. I wouldn't want anyone getting hurt, either. So count me in!

SILAS

I suppose I'm in too, if only because I don't trust myself to win a five on one fight. The pen is mightier than the sword, but any one of you is stronger than the linguist.

CASSIUS

Alright, negative Nancy – you say that like you weren't the one to start recording right under “the man's” nose in the first place! Shit, *you* got us in this mess, and now you gotta keep up with those recordings. If anyone needs to save face, those will be *invaluable* in getting the truth out there.

SILAS

Right, well... And here I was worried you were going to recommend outright sedition. Instead, I think you're doing the right thing. Did that close call with Titan Plesiosaur make you start thinking before dashing in?

CASSIUS

This is *peaceful* sedition. I wouldn't put it past them to try and silence us... but what can they do if we're compliant in the meantime? I'm only on this expedition until they start bulldozing breachwood trees to make room for condos, *then* they might have to send me to sleep with the acid nessie, if they can catch me before I can rope up a few thousand people to storm the facility. At least, that's my working plan. Hopefully it won't come to that, hah!

Alright, we've wasted enough time. It's Breachers for life now, but we still gotta find that drone! Let's get moving.

...

SILAS

Silas Caldwell, sixth expedition, specimen log for VINCULA. We've found another clearing in the breachwoods, and there's another fallen breachwood tree. This one landed in a dip in the terrain, and partly sits in a small pond of water. We haven't seen rainfall since our first incursions into the Breach, but it may rain overnight – or there may be extended periods without rain, but the shade provided by the fallen tree may protect it from evaporating in the sun too quickly.

ALYX

Honestly, I wouldn't mind some rain now. It's so hot marching all day, even in the shade...

ELIZABETH

Sorry, lemme just... make a few more notes here...

SILAS

Oh, sure, here you go.

ELIZABETH

Thanks. Okay, so! There is... what appears to be fungal growths that have overtaken the fallen trees almost entirely. Obviously, I'll have to get samples back to the analysis team to be sure about the fungal nature of this specimen, but the trees appear to have been dead for some time, and this particular shroom is *thriving* in the shade that has since been created by the canopy overhead, not to mention the damp conditions surrounding the tree. This whole scene of decay is *perfect* for fungus!

This specimen is a bit strange looking... It's bright orange, like really *bad* iron rust orange, and what I assume to be the fruiting bodies of fungus are formed in large, brain-like pods, filled with nooks and crannies on its surface. Each pod is a little bigger than a bowling ball – around half a meter in diameter, with some variance. The grooves along the surface are quite dark, almost blackened, and I can see structures that look like gills within – that's probably where the mushroom spores are growing and...

CASSIUS

Lizzy...

ELIZABETH

Uhh, yes, Cassius?

CASSIUS

I think it's... looking at me. C'mere – don't get too close, I don't want you inhaling any spores – but take a close look at the gills again.

ELIZABETH

Okay... I'm looking. What do you mean, it's looking at you? Like there's something living in there, or...

It's... the grooves, they're... they're lined with little structures that look... they look like stenciled eyes. Wow!...

CASSIUS

I thought I was dreaming it up, but every time the sun peeks through the tree canopy, the eyes open and reveal themselves. There's a little flap that makes them almost invisible until they open up. I wonder if the flap is meant to protect the gills from sunlight?

JEREMIAH

That's... really creepy looking. There's dozens of them, all opening and closing in sync with the movement of the sunlight across the pod.

ELIZABETH

Might be a decent way of warding off creatures that want to graze on the pods, too. The suddenness of the movement is striking enough to act as a warning sign, and the eyes are a ghostly blue color under the lids. Blue is

one of the colors that means danger in the natural world... Although, I don't know if that holds true for Gaia.

SILAS

It's working on me – I've had quite enough of things that want to mess with my brain for a week, let alone a lifetime. Last thing I'd like to interact with is a potentially highly toxic mushroom...

CASSIUS

Alright, that's enough notes for now, we gotta get moving again. The drone's signal is finally gaining strength, but we're approaching the halfway mark where we gotta turn back for the day. If we don't find it on this trip, we can try and go faster on the next round, but let's get as far as we can. Here, Alyx, gimme that mask and specimen bag – I'll grab one of these smaller pods for analysis and we'll be on our way.

ELIZABETH

Oh, how do you turn this off? This button he–

...

SILAS

Silas Caldwell, sixth expedition into Gaia, biome log for VINCULA. We're a short distance – only half an hour's walk or so – from the fallen breachwood and the fungus growing on it, and we're starting to encounter a new biome. The Breachwoods are giving way to a smaller set of trees, more akin to weeping willows in size and shape, which now dot the landscape. Also, now that the breachwood canopy is no longer covering the horizon in all directions, the newly opened skyline has offered us a glimpse of what's ahead of us. I can see the tops of mountains on the horizon, and the terrain

is gradually filling with hills... There's a large number of ridges and dips between us and the peaks. Our drone signal is pointing us at the mountains, though it may be somewhere between here and there. We are ill-equipped for mountain hiking, and Cassius says we only have a few short hours left before we've made it to the halfway point of our allotted time in the Breach...

CASSIUS

Not gonna lie, the Breachwoods are really exciting and all, but a change of scenery is most welcome. These new trees have long, drooping branches forming domes very similar to earthly weeping willow trees. The leaves are bright citrus colors, though – not green. I can't see green *anywhere*. I'm not sure if this is an indication that they're in a fall stage or that they're naturally colored wild hues of yellow, orange, and red. Every time the wind blows, the trees rustle and a bunch of – what look like seed pods take flight on the breeze. It's *gorgeous* to look at, and I can just barely tell the wind is a few degrees cooler since it's coming from the mountain range. *God*, that is a welcome feeling...

ALYX

I could... very happily... sit right here alllll day.

GREG

Not having another one of them trances, are ya, Alyx?

ALYX

Nope! That's just exactly what I could do, right now. This stunning view, with the mountains way off in the distance, a field of trees that look like

technicolor bubbles, and *finally* some clear sky... and that gust is a breath of fresh air. You guys head on back, I'll just be putting a cabin right about here. Oh, right, the nocturnal creatures still wanna eat us all. Drat!

JEREMIAH

Aaaand linguist mode activated just in time, before anybody got hurt. Your infectious morbidity saved the day again, Silas.

SILAS

I didn't... even say anything that time?? I mean, I was just about to, but still!...

ELIZABETH

Ooh, ooh! One of them's drifting this way! C'mon, just a little closer... C'MON, drift down already! Yes, yes, that's right just a little closer...

JEREMIAH

How many times am I gonna ask myself if my teammates are suffering from delusions or just trying to catch a specimen? I'm gonna bet on at least a hundred times, minimum.

GREG

Hey, you're on – the first round of drinks after lockdown is on you if it's less!

CASSIUS

That seed pod is blowing closer! Get ready, Lizzy!

ELIZABETH

Little closer... That's right, c'moon... there! Right in the palm of my hand. Oh, it's beautiful! There's an itty bitty seed pod attached to what looks like a dandelion puffball. That must be how it floats on the wind...

...

CASSIUS

The fuck... Elizabeth?!

JEREMIAH

What the hell?!

Hey, Elizabeth, can you hear me? Elizabeth!? Stay back, all of you!

ALYX

What happened!?

SILAS

I don't know! I don't know... I heard a sound, and I think the seed pod exploded, and she just collapsed.

JEREMIAH

Okay, she's still breathing and has a pulse – but she's out cold, man.

CASSIUS

Did it... blow up in her face?

JEREMIAH

I think so, but... there's no trauma to her face. She must have inhaled something. Here, I'm going to drag her clear of the seed. Then we gotta get her back to the Breach...

ALYX

Oh, no... no, no, no...

JEREMIAH

Ok, Alyx, I've got a job for you – keep talking to her, ok? If she comes to, let us know immediately. I have to get this stretcher assembled. Greg, gimme a hand.

GREG

On it!

ALYX

Elizabeth? Elizabeth, can you hear me?... She's not saying anything!...

JEREMIAH

That's okay! It's okay, just keep talking to her. You're helping her, I promise.

CASSIUS

C'mon, Lizzy, say something to us. You can't clock out yet, we're barely gettin' started out here...

SILAS

Do you guys need help?

JEREMIAH

We're gonna have to take turns carrying the stretcher so we can go as fast as possible. I don't know if we've got a clock ticking or if she's just knocked out for a while, but no sense taking chances. I'll keep an eye on her vitals, but if we don't stop and we do a brisk jog all the way, we can be back in just a few hours. I just hope she keeps stable... Someone get a mask on and bag that seed pod – they might need it for analysis of her condition back at VINCULA.

ELORA

On it!

GREG

Alright, I got the first haul. Fred, get over here and grab the other end. Cassius, hope you were taking notes, you gotta get us the hell outta dodge and fast!

CASSIUS

Right! Follow me! Back to the Breach!

FRED

I got it, let's g–