

Charthur took a deep, steady breath.

She was close, now. This was the hard part. This was the delicate part.

She tried to focus on the feeling of "being weightless."

This wasn't easy. She had a lot on her that was trying to weigh her down right now.

There was the weight of her change of clothes in her pack; her "official" outfit. She preferred her travel clothes, even when (as now) they were covered in the effort of travel and in desperate need of a proper laundering. There'd be time for that later, along with a hot bath for herself, once she had reached her destination. For now, she wanted to hold onto every aspect of her experiences.

There was the weight of the plants on her back. There were four now, with only one to go. The weight of the plants carried with them the weight of her mission. There were points in the journey when it felt like carrying a miniature continent around on her back. It was, probably, too much for her; but with any luck, she wouldn't have to bear it much longer.

There was the weight of her compact in her travel pack, and next to it, the weight of its power source. Turning it off didn't seem like enough, not this close to her quarry; she had to silence it entirely. This meant being cut off from her bosses, her resources, her grounding. This was risky. If she was going to be the bridge, she had to cut them out for now. This was a necessary step in reconnecting diseased nodes; you had to obey the quarantine.

The truth was that she didn't know the whole nature of her mission, by design. She knew it involved making contact with a particular node, and from there, they could properly diagnose what was wrong with Eastar. But making contact with a protected node was hard enough normally, and it was far more perilous when...

Charthur took a moment to stare at the massive tree in the distance. It was tall enough to be visible from Wort, despite how much of the upper levels had been lost to the decay. Thick, dark veins of illness could be seen traveling up and down the tree's mighty trunk, obvious even from here...

The traveler rubbed at the bridge of her nose. She could hear her bosses in her head, their voices anxious for status updates they knew better than to ask for. If Charthur had been told the exact nature of her mission, she would've ended up carrying their hopes for a specific outcome, which would have doomed the whole venture from the start. Likewise, if she had reported all her movements back to HQ, her path would have become known, and from there, predictable -- and her quarry would've picked up on it and cut her off.

So they had kept their communication to a minimum during the journey; and now Charthur had cut it off entirely.

Charthur was alone now. She felt the weight, all by herself.

She tried to focus on the feeling of "being weightless."

One by one, she let her mind travel between the weights she felt, the ones set apart from her own weightlessness.

The clothes in her pack. One.

The plants on her back. Two.

The compact in her sack. Three.

The tiles that went clack... Four.

...and then the rice shaker. That'd be where it ended. Five.

Her mind lingered on the tiles.

Secret. Blood. Warm. Familiar. Deep.

"Secret" was the tendril she rescued from the caravan's wheel, as he yelled about lost time. "Blood" was the mushroom she rescued from the puppeteer's trash, as he tried to hide his condition from the world. "Warm" was the bellflower she rescued from the furnace, as the artificer screamed about needing the heat to protect her from the night, each one colder than the last. And then "Familiar" was the sunflower, rescued from the writer who thought gifts would keep his partner happy, and himself safe...

Charthur rubbed her eye with her palm. Fortuna had trained her in many things, but "botany" was not one of them. The conclusion was always the hardest part, and she was feeling stumped on where to go from here. She wished--

She stopped herself. Wishes and hopes were dangerous right now. Carrying something like that inside her would weigh her down right now. She needed to be weightless for this.

She cut off her wish with a joke. "She wished chlorospaces came with a map." No, better: "she wished she had a tour guide to help her." There. The joke cut off the true feeling.

With the feeling quarantined, she examined the thought.

"I wish I didn't have to be following a bunch of [] plants."

Okay.

Maybe there was something else to follow, then.

Her mind went over the trail again.

Secret. Blood. Warm. Familiar. Deep.

Tendril. Mushroom. bellflower. Sunflower. What else...

...there were other trails to follow, when one trail went cold. Another trail could be...

Caravan driver. Puppeteer. Artificer. Writer. What next...

The fur on the back of her neck pricked. She was close. She was very, very close.

She sat in the middle of the road, crossed her legs, and closed her eyes. She was close. She just had to meditate on what she had already seen. She just had to meditate on what she had already felt.

Caravan driver. Puppeteer. Artificer. Writer. Focus.

Weightless.

That was the key.

She took the idea of focusing on what she had already seen, and turned it around. If she wanted to achieve alignment, she had to focus on what *they* had seen, what *they* had felt. She herself had to be weightless for this; she had to erase herself, and feel only their emotional weight.

She followed the trail.

She saw herself through the caravan driver's eyes: an obstacle, a threat that needed to be destroyed immediately. She named the feeling: *rage*.

She herself through the puppeteer's eyes: a bully, a mocking, leering presence that made him feel lesser, made him want to hide. She named the feeling: *shame*.

She saw herself through the artificer's eyes: an inevitability, a manifestation of the night's cold that would sap the heat from her bones until she had nothing left to give. She named the feeling: *despair*.

She saw herself through the writer's eyes: a false smile, the same friendly front hiding the same scorn, ready to lash out the moment he faltered. She named the feeling: *fear*.

Secret. Blood. Warm. Familiar. Deep.

Rage. Shame. Despair. Fear.

One more. One more to lead her back to the source. She just needed--

--Charthur found herself in a new place.

She stood in front of a closed door, to a labyrinth with huge, towering, sleek black walls. On the walls she could see engravings of various lines and shapes. She felt a pull, urging her towards the door.

Charthur followed the urge. Carefully.

She walked up to the door. It didn't open for her.

She placed her hand on it.

Careful.

She listened to herself.

Her muscles felt relaxed. Her breathing was calm, and clear. Her mind felt at ease, and that ease filled her body with a warm glow. This was a safe place.

The door remained closed.

It was a safe place... it was also a place that wasn't expecting her.

That was fine. She had her training.

Breaking and entering wasn't her style. "Entering" alone would have to do.

She closed her eyes, and focused on the sensation of her hand, barely in contact with the door. She let herself wonder if the wall was still there; was it still sleek, black, polished, imposing? Or was it merely the illusion of a door?

She ignored the thickness of the walls. She ignored the obsidian material they appeared to be made of. She ignored how solid it seemed to be. She ignored herself. She trusted only in her doubt.

She was empty. The universe was empty. All there was, was feelings.

Feelings are connections.

Everything is feelings.

Everything is connected.

Atoms in the void. Stars throughout space. Souls throughout time. Sending out their energy, vibrating across the same fabric, all made from one stuff. Being and non-being create each other. We are empty. We are one.

She aligned her emptiness with the emptiness of the universe.

She followed her feeling.

She stepped forward.

She was through.

She opened her eyes.

The labyrinth sprawled before her, infinite and comfortable. Protected from the world, a low thrum like a gentle heartbeat emanating from its walls. The warm glow in her body leading her forward, towards a destination her subconscious had already pathed out, as if she had been walking these corridors all her life.

Secret. Blood. Warm. Familiar.

She proceeded towards the center of the labyrinth, allowing herself to fall further into her relaxed, easy state.

Deep.

There were levers and switches on the walls around her. She didn't need to look at them. These were the levers and switches she had been setting all this time, with every action she had taken. Each decision in her journey, a toggle, opening or closing a path, guiding her further and further inside.

Deep.

She let everything go. All she needed her was her intuition. Everything had been arranged perfectly. Everything was in alignment. Her feet carried her where she needed to go, as sure as a stream flowing down to the ocean.

Deep.

She was close now. Close to the source. Close to the end of her journey.

Deep.

She turned a corner, and arrived at the place that was waiting for her.

Deep.

There were two levers before her.

She recognized them instantly, the memory rushing into her head all at once--

"--audio recording equipment on. Beginning of log. This is remote viewing experiment #121, trial 3," Charthur's bosses stated, flicking a row of switches one-by-one, gauges and meters coming to life. "Viewer Nim, are you alert and prepared to undergo the experiment?"

The squirrel-ish tiger sat in the chair in the center of the room, his blindgoggles pulled down over his eyes. The electrodes on his body were connected by cables to monitors all around the room, measuring his vitals and tracking his mental activity. He nodded. "I am alert and prepared," he confirmed.

Charthur's bosses ticked a box on the paper attached to their clipboard. "Viewer Nim, please confirm the target of today's viewing."

The squirrel spoke with practiced assuredness. "I am to attempt to view the site designated as 'Destination' according to the codewords listed in the test protocols I reviewed prior to beginning this experiment."

Another box was ticked. "Excellent. Viewer Nim, please proceed to attempt the viewing whenever you are ready."

Nim nodded. And then there was silence.

Charthur observed him curiously, wondering if she could perceive any external change to accompany his mental departure. Presently, she thought she detected the slightest tension of the muscles in his neck; the tiniest twitch of his lip. She observed carefully as his breathing slowed and the tension dissipated -- and then, for no reason she could name, it felt to her as if he were elsewhere.

Minutes passed in perfect silence. Charthur's bosses's pencil hovered over the paper, most of its surface left blank for note-taking.

When Nim finally spoke, there was a distant hollowness in his voice. "I see something," he said quietly." Charthur heard the tip of the pencil alight on the paper. "I see... two levers," he went on. "On the wall in front of me."

Her bosses made a quick note on the paper pinned to their clipboard. "Can you describe the levers?"

Nim's mouth twisted in concentration. "There's... two of them," he explained, sounding miles away. "Two levers. On the wall ahead of me."

Another note for the clipboard. "Are they connected to any kind of machinery? What's the wall like?"

Nim shook his head, loose and floaty, like a marionette on a string. "No machinery. They're just on the wall. The wall is... black, and sleek. Tall."

Charthur's bosses leaned in. "Where are you right now? Can you describe your surroundings?"

"Uh." Nim stared into the darkness of his goggles, his head turning this way and that. "It's... some kind of maze? A huge one. Too huge to comprehend. The walls are really, really tall. There's, uh, lines all over them. Pathways."

The pencil scritchings its way across the paper paused. "Pathways? Like circuitry?"

"Yes," Nim confirmed. "Er, no," he clarified. "They're... like circuitry. For carrying energy. But it's different. It's, more abstract?"

Charthur leaned over, curious to see what her bosses were writing. She caught the words, "Clear Watching?" scribbled down near the bottom of the page. Her bosses asked, cautiously, "How... do you feel? Can you describe the nature of your location?"

Nim breathed out, slowly. "Safe," he said. "Relaxed. Familiar." A smile appeared at the corners of his mouth. "I feel... like... I have perfect knowledge of this place. It's a warm feeling."

Charthur watched as the pencil put a heavy line through those words, crossing out "~~Clear Watching?~~" in one stroke. "What else can you tell me about your location?"

"Not much," Nim shrugged. He looked straight up, straining his neck. "You want me to try to get a better look? Should I use my 'I, in the Sky' trick?"

"Negative, too risky," her bosses instructed. "Tell us more about the levers."

Nim looked back down. "I don't know what you want me to say. I already described them to you."

"What color are they?" her bosses urged. "What material are they made of? What shape are they?"

"I..." Nim hesitated. "They're... there's two of them. On the wall in front of me. I already told you."

Charthur sat peacefully as the scritchings of the pencil's writing grew harsher, annoyance mounting. "Do... the levers have any significance that you're aware of? Any meaning? What would using the levers do?"

"I--" Nim's voice caught in his throat. And then, uncharacteristically, he snarled. "I-- I told you already. There's two levers. I don't know what else you want from me."

"Focus on the left lever," her bosses urged, trying to speak soothingly. "If there's anything you can observe about the left lever, or any feeling you get from the thought of touching it--"

Nim snapped, his teeth clicking harshly against each other. "Oh, *you* want to tell *me* how remote viewing works now, huh?? Is that it??" His hands gripped the armrests of his chair, fingers digging deeply into the padding, sending a shudder that traveled down into the floor. "You want to argue with me over who's the expert here??"

"Viewer Nim," they warned. "You are experiencing an ungrounded emotion. Please remember your centering training. Take awareness of your current state, as we will need you to report on this feeling--"

"I don't know!" he snarled. "I don't know what you want from me! But I'm not wrong, I'm *not* wrong--"

"Experimenter Nim," his bosses repeated, trying to get through to him. "If you are not well enough to continue the experiment, recite the early termination phrase now. Otherwise--"

Charthur finally spoke, now that she was sure. "I know what this feeling's for," she stated in a calm voice, her clarity carrying her words over the conflict in front of her. Her bosses turned to her, but she focused on Nim. "Nim's not one to declare WAR?."

"WAR?" her bosses remarked. "Viewer Nim, can you confirm this? Were your reactions in preparation to declare WAR? on us just now?"

"I..." the squirrel shifted in his seat, a blush coming to his cheeks. "That's... oh, that's what this is. I've never... I'm so sorry, I didn't mean--"

"No apology is required," her bosses stated, matter-of-fact. "Now, focus. Is that what's happening around you? Is there a WAR? building up in your area? Can you confirm?"

"I..." Nim squirmed, filled with nervous energy. He turned in Charthur's general direction, staring just past her with his blackened goggles. "That's what this is, right? This tingle?"

"This urge, this need: desire to fight," Charthur quoted. "With fist and fang to set things right."

"Y-yeah," Nim nodded. "I can confirm."

"A WAR?... " Charthur's bosses were scribbling furiously now, filling out the rest of the page with their notes. Their voice changed seamlessly, suddenly bursting with excitement. "If it's really a WAR?, that's a fantastic opportunity!!" They paused, shaking their fists with too much eager, nervous energy to write legibly. "The emotional focus on a WAR? could be just the catalyst we need to... "

They turned to Charthur, grinning their insatiable grin. "This is it! If we can get you the glimpse you need, you can follow--" They rushed over to a piece of equipment. "Wait, wait, don't speak until we turn off the recording, we can't risk--"

--Charthur mentally returned to the Labyrinth. Here were the levers, just as Nim had described them. This was what he had seen. This was the destination. She was here.

She observed the levers in front of her. One was made of steel, straight and functional. Despite the warmth of the Labyrinth, she observed a fine frost covering its surface. The material may have been sturdy at one point... but veins of ice running along its length made the lever look brittle, now. Charthur got the impression that one sharp pull would be enough to snap the lever off.

The other, in contrast, radiated a brutal heat. The curved lever, made of wood and carved with facsimiles of buttons all over, ended in a covered grip, made for her hand. A precisely-placed thorn grew right where her palm would naturally rest, pricking her as she threw the lever, allowing the wood to drink.

The levers beckoned to her. Pick one or the other, they said. Choose a side.

Charthur couldn't help but smirk, just a little. It might as well have been a trap for her tiger nature, but it wasn't one she was going to fall for. That wasn't her role -- not here, not now. She was supposed to be empty, after all. *She was empty.*

She took a deep breath in, extremely thankful that Nim had taught her his "I, in the Sky" trick before she left. She spread her feet, planting them at the width of her shoulders.

She was a bridge.

She bent her knees slightly, preparing herself.

She was a connection between nodes.

She looked upward, craning her neck skyward. She prepared herself to get a better look.

She was weightless. She was weightless. She was weightless.

She leapt.

The ground shot away beneath her, zooming away as she pushed off of it. She effortlessly passed the heights of the towering black walls and continued upwards, rocketing into the sky.

She passed the top of the maze, leaving behind the feelings of safety and warmth. She soared her way into the cold upper reaches of the node. The cold pierced her skin immediately, but she didn't let it bother her.

She rose, mile after mile, no need to slow down. The air grew thin and the chill flowed through her, but still she rose. Her lungs ached from the lack of air, and her muscles threatened to seize from the lack of heat, but still she soared, infinite miles above an infinite maze.

She waited until she was confident she could get a good look at the entirety of the maze.

Then she looked down.

She had made a terrible mistake.

The whole of the Labyrinth pressed its way into her mind. The whole of its shape, every twist and turn, every corridor, every lever and switch and button, every corner and junction and dead-end, every wall and door and pathway pressed its way into her mind.

She closed her eyes, too late.

Fool, she chided herself, already far past the point of no return.

She knew in an instant that Labyrinth had been built over thousands, tens of thousands of years, if not. Every inch of its construction, slow and deliberate; every element forged with excruciating patience. She felt the weight of it all, all at once; and it was crushing.

The Labyrinth was the product of a mind unfathomably ancient; and what it was built on top of was older still, perhaps as old as minds themselves. Perhaps older.

And she had tried to take all of it in with just a glance.

The shape of the Labyrinth overlaid itself on her reality. She could feel her head splitting open, the shapes in her head crushing and contorting themselves to try to make it all fit. It was impossible, it was too much, it--

It was an ending. One of her endings. It was here. She was herself, a doomed self. And she was going to die. And this Labyrinth would be what killed her.

In an instant, Charthur wished she could destroy every wall, see them all torn to ruin, every pathway and lever shredded and sundered.

In an instant, Charthur wished she could bury herself in that rubble, never to be seen again.

In an instant, Charthur knew that this was the fate of all things. To be built was to be destroyed. To flourish was to rot. To be born was to be buried. There was no escape.

In an instant, Charthur wished for a safety it seemed she had never been allowed to have. She wished to know what "safety" felt like, having abandoned and buried the concept since before she could remember.

She remembered.

She remembered the hours spent standing by the bed. She remembered the interminable visits, having to stare into the face of death and again and again. She remembered the rage at a world that could let this happen; and the shame of being useless. She remembered the despair of knowing there was nothing she could do; the fear of the day, the hour, the minute, when it would finally be too late.

And in an instant, Charthur hated.

She hated having to swallow the panic. She hated having to be strong. She hated seeing the joy in the carefree faces of those without disease in their life. She hated how the words tangled themselves into knots in her head, and hated how her tongue would trip and stumble over even the simplest expression.

She hated it. Every conversation. Every desperate effort to connect. Her sympathy and care was just another vulnerability for the disease to feed off of. She started to hate feeling anything about the situation; and far deeper than that, she hated herself for not wanting to feel anything.

The disease would win. The illness would win. The decay would win. The rot would win. A body, a continent, a childhood, a feeling. The sickness always won in the end. No barrier ever managed to hold it at bay; no cut managed to sever the diseased from the healthy, no matter how deep.

She remembered the intrusive thought.

Just die already.

It was the solution to everything. The ruined plans, the pointless struggle, the ignored effort, the misery over everything that had been stolen from her.

Just die already.

What was disease anyway, but failure? A system, a community, a continent, an organ. Failure, failure, failure, failure. Let it fail. Let it shut down. No more being trapped by failure, being followed by failure, being led into failure, having to face her failures. Let it fail. Shut it down.

With each failure, the infection spread. Every moment of weakness made it worse.

How could she forgive herself, for letting her care falter? How could she pretend to be anything other than the ice-cold cruelty that simply desired an ending? How could she forget how she had gotten so tired of facing death, she longed for its arrival?

Just die already.

This was hate. She remembered what it meant to hate herself.

...

Which is when she felt the presence.

It had been there the entire time, she realized. It simply hadn't observed her before now. It hadn't noticed her. It had been distracted. That was the only reason she had been able to find this place, been able to exist in it for more than a fraction of a second. It loomed over her, taking

over the sky, fixing her in place with its gaze like a butterfly pinned through its heart. She had been able to sneak past its defenses because it had been distracted. She had been able to survive in its Labyrinth because it had been distracted.

It wasn't distracted now.

It turned to her, fixing its gaze on her.

Deep.

She faced it.

She faced her death.

Hate.

She faced it. This presence, which could crush her like a bug. This entity, which could annihilate her. This mind, which she had evaded the notice of -- until now.

She stared into its eyes. She felt what it felt, just for an instant.

Deep.

So deep, the roots of the feeling burrowing down into her core.

Hate.

The depth of the hate, made twisted and wretched by having to endure it for so long.

The entity observed her, in her final moments.

The entity would destroy her, just as she deserved.

The entity would bring about the doom she must have always longed for.

The entity reached out, hand and mind... and made its decision.

...

It could have crushed her.

Instead, it gently, carefully removed her. With a delicacy and care beyond measure, the entity reached out, and applied just enough force to push Charthur to out of the node, push her to safety; to nudge her--

"--hey," someone barked.

Something buried itself between Charthur's ribs, just below her armpit. She squawked and, entirely off-guard, tumbled forward, going face-first into the dirt. She spluttered, eyes wild, mind exploding, to turn towards her "assailant".

She saw... "dog". A lot of dog. Most of everything she saw was dog.

A massive green dog was standing over her. The dog's foot still hovered in the air, where its big toe had poked her in the ribs.

"Hey," the dog barked again. "You okay?"

Charthur whipped her head around from side-to-side. Okay?? She had just been--

She clutched at her skull. Ow. She... couldn't remember what she had just been thinking about. She had sat down to meditate and...

Her eyes went wide. She couldn't remember a single thing about it. It was like something had nudged the entire session out of her head. The absence of the memory had left behind a gaping sore spot in her head, an aching void. She groaned, the pain so intense it made her feel like she was trying to speedrun a hangover.

The dog prodded her with a large toe again, jabbing it into her hip. More like *someone* had nudged the session out of her head. "You're sitting in the road," the dog mentioned unhelpfully. "Are you alright?"

"I..." the weary tiger rubbed at her eyes, willing her headache to subside. "Your interruption, and what it cost..." There was no way. The feelings were slipping away. The meditation, everything -- it was out of her head. She wouldn't be able to repeat it. The journey was over. The trail had gone cold. It took all her willpower not to snarl, as she said, "...I can't even measure what I just lost."

"Lost?" the dog said, giving her a weird look. "Yeah. You do kinda look lost..."

Charthur flopped down onto her side. She couldn't deal with this annoying dog right now. She felt weird, messed up. There was a hostile, hateful feeling in her heart, and it was draining her concentration not to apply to the thick-furred dog prodding at her with her words and her toe, both.

Charthur stared at nothing. Reflexively, as if of its own accord, Charthur's hand ran its fingers through the dirt of the road she lay in. Dirt. Her fingers ran through the dirt. Her finger. Dirt. Her head felt weird, disconnected, empty. It felt like she had to reconnect everything, had to piece together words and feelings and actions once again. Just existing took effort right now. She tried to remember why it was worth it. She ran her fingers through the dirt. Dirt.

The dog huffed. "You shouldn't just lie there," she complained. "You're gonna get run over. Like, by a caravan or something. There's been a TON more traffic recently, ya'know-- Er, I guess maybe you don't."

Charthur slowly shook her head at the thought of getting run over. "No, we already did that part. We did that already, right at the start."

"Huh?" the dog barked. "Did whatnot? Are you, a tourist?"

Charthur stared at her fingers, idly rubbing a chunk of dirt between her thumb and pointer. Did she really save the sprout from being run over by that caravan? Did she actually convince Poushe to not discard the bloodcap? Did she really rescue the bellflower from the furnace, or the sunflower from being given away?

The dog was rambling, possibly to herself. "Lots of tourists these days. Lots of weirdos. You seem like one of them. Er, a tourist, I mean. Not, uh, a weirdo." She scratched the back of her head. "Laying in the road is kinda weird, but I won't hold that against you, I mean."

Did she save any of them? If she did, did it matter? Maybe the whole thing was just ridiculous from the start. Maybe it was nonsense to think it was ever going to lead anywhere.

She sighed, slowly, feeling herself deflate. "I'm not a tourist. It's as you say. Just a traveler who's lost her way."

"Oh," the dog said. "Well, if you're lost, I guess I do tours," she offered.

Charthur flicked the speck of dirt away. "Tours," she repeated.

"Yeh. I'm a tour guide. Uh, part-time, anyway." She put one hand on her hip, and adopted a faux-haughty tone. "I'm pretty great. I think."

"That's--" Charthur started.

She froze, mouth wide open.

It couldn't be.

The dog leaned down towards her. "Huh? Wait, are you okay?"

"Aa--" Charthur started. She swallowed, her throat dry, as she turned to face the looking dog. "Aa... strangled feeling, I want to yelp." Not daring to hope, she finished: "I wished before, for tour guide's help."

"Oh," the dog replied, standing up straight. "Then that's me, then!"

"I--" Charthur's thoughts were racing, too fast for her to keep up. "I-- I didn't mean it, I said it in jest," she whispered to herself. "But it binds then to now, this full-filled request. And if they're connected, if I'm still on the trail... could that mean, is it true, that I *didn't* fail...?"

It wasn't clear the dog was listening to her. "Just did a big official tour," she was saying. "Up in the city! Showed off the Morel Highground. After that big WAR?"

Now, Charthur didn't dare to *breathe*. "M-Morel Highground? In the tree??" She tried to sit up, her muscles refusing to cooperate with her as she struggled to remember how her body and gravity worked. "Are you serious?? Can it be??"

"Yeah," the dog confirmed. "The Librarian was there and everything, and they *never* leave the Library." The dog smiled at her, her tail wagging eagerly from side-to-side. "Do you, like, want a tour?" She pointed at the horizon, her stature making the otherwise casual movement still manage to feel momentous. "That's the Clearing Tree right over there." She paused. "Uh, that wasn't the tour. That was just me pointing."

Charthur finally managed to wrench herself upright, gawking at the horizon.

There it stood -- the healthy Clearing Tree. She had found it. She had found it!! She had arrived!!

She sat and stared, stared, mouth hanging open. After all this time hunting for it, she felt scarcely able to move, as if the tiniest twitch might cause her to slip back into her own diseased frequency.

"Hey, though. Really." The dog gave her a curious poke to the ear. "Are you okay?" The dog pointed to where Charthur's rice shaker lay, a few feet away, having escaped from her pouch when she first fell over. "Also. You dropped that... uh..." She cocked her head to one side. "...that thing."

Charthur didn't know how to respond. All this time, she had had nothing but confidence that her plan would work; but that did nothing to prepare her for seeing that her plan had actually *worked*.

She glanced down at the rice shaker. The contents had gotten mixed as the shaker had first bounced and then rolled away. But instead of the perfectly intermixing you might expect from perturbing the contents in such a way, a pattern had emerged. There were clusters, equally-sized and alternating, as the rice arranged itself in a harmonious pattern. Charthur's stare shot back and forth -- from the healthy Clearing Tree, to the checkerboard pattern formed by the orderly rice, back to the healthy Clearing Tree.

"I... I'm as good as I can be," Charthur finally whispered quietly. "I... think I just beat entropy."

The dog snorted at this. "Tigers," she teased. "Always fighting something or other."

Charthur wasn't listening, though. She was frantically digging in her pack for her compact. She grabbed what she was thought was her compact and began excitedly shouting her status report into its power source instead. As soon as she realized her mistake, she discarded the power cell and began shouting her status report into the de-powered compact instead. She followed that with a brief effort to cram the power source back into the device, before deciding her hands were trembling far too much to possibly manage right now and resigned herself to collapsing backwards into the dirt, laughing hysterically.

She had made it. She had actually, truly made it. It had *worked*.

"Just to be clear," the dog said, looking down at her. "This is tourist behavior. Just saying."

Charthur's eyes shot open, and she grinned at the dog with all her might. "I have a request!!" she shouted. She caught the look on the tour guide's face. "Nothing strange!" she promised. "A bed, a bath, a place to change!"

"Oh, a hotel or something?" the dog translated. "Well not to, like, be presumptuous but I do have a spare room. Like if you want."

Charthur scrambled to her feet, extending a trembling hand to the massive dog. "She/her, Charthur; I'll be your guest! I'm in need of good grub, and good place to rest!"

The dog took Charthur's hand in a mighty paw. "Holly! Uh, she/her!" she yelped back, infected by the tourist's enthusiasm. "Let's get you some good grub. Or good grubs." She waited a beat. "That was a joke. Grubs, like bugs. Because." The tour guide waved a paw in the air. "We have those here. So... never mind." She paused, waiting for Charthur to appreciate the pun. "Tourists are supposed to laugh at the jokes," she grumbled.

It was then that Charthur laughed, unable to contain herself. It didn't matter if the joke was funny; she was delighted and exhausted enough to laugh at *anything* at this point.

As the tour guide led the weary, giddy traveler into the woods, plans flashed through Charthur's mind. A day spent recovering and coordinating with HQ about their next steps (after she was finished bragging about her success, naturally) was in order. Her *everything*, clothing and fur alike, was overdue for a good scrubbing, to shed the stress and sweat of the previous adventure and prepare for a new one. Then a hot meal and a long sleep, (and this was the important part) on no one's schedule but her own. And after that...

She grinned.

After that... it would be time to meet The Librarian. Finally.

She couldn't *wait* for that. She couldn't wait.