

Blurb:

Life in the wastes is getting harder; It's getting colder, food is growing scarce. Starvation is becoming a norm. More and more seek a way out.

Amidst this, on the back of a dead god, a grieving slugcat questions the point of it all. With the help of a strange friend, maybe he can answer his question: What can he do against the might of The Cycle itself?

Sunrise in The Scrapyard (SiTS)

It had been three cycles since she died.

Cold wind whistled through twisted steel mountains. All else was silent. The rain was soon.

Two slugcats walked among windswept ruin, bleary eyed, heavy limbed, song of wind through long-forgotten pipes urging them on. Reminding them of what was soon.

Loose metal scraped and groaned as they walked, well-used footpath winding through steel and iron like flood-rivers carving canyons from concrete. They started up the final hill to their shelter.

The larger of the pair, a furless off-white slugcat, pulled free an errant pipe lying near.

They made a hand signal to the furry gray slugcat behind them: *'No use.'*

The other nodded, noting the pipe's frayed end — useless. It clattered down the metal hill, briefly louder than low howling wind before it too went silent. The pair continued.

Glowing white symbols of shelter came into view. Distant thunder echoed. The larger off-white slugcat sighed as they neared, relaxing as they reached safety at last.

Their stomach rumbled a frail imitation of the thunder. It had been a difficult cycle — both knew they'd wake weak from hunger.

Off-White slumped against the wall next to the entrance pipe, breath visible like steam of Great Iterators. Neither of them were eager to go back into their stifling aired and frigid steel-floored shelter, and they had time to kill.

Gray sat on a makeshift seat of disused fence held aloft by two concrete blocks jutting from the ground, a hard lizard pelt stretched across its surface. A seat made for two.

After a moment, Off-White made an ascending chirp, gesturing towards Gray: *'You okay?'*

Gray responded with a descending chirp and head shake: *'No.'*

Off-White frowned: *'Still sad?'*

Gray nodded slowly, pointing to his stomach: *'And hungry.'*

Off-White sighed: *'Me too.'*

Thunder cracked.

'Me too.'

Air pressure dropped — final knell of incoming rain. They watched the approaching storm.

Gray looked at Off-White, the larger slugcat slowly sitting up.

'It time?' Gray gestured.

'Rain isn't here yet,' Off-White responded.

'Not rain.'

Off-White blinked, frowning as realization hit. He gestured back: *'How long since...?'*

'Three cycles.'

Off-White closed his eyes, deflating.

Gray chirped to get his attention. *'Next cycle. We go. No better chance comes.'*

'No use.' Off-White signaled him.

Raising his paws to respond, Gray stopped. Doubt poisoned his thoughts. *'Yes. We must anyway.'*

A weight lifted from his shoulders. A new one soon settled in its place.

Off-White didn't respond.

Both cats glanced skyward, watching as killing rains approached, first mists spreading across the facility.

Off-White grunted as he pulled himself up. An unspoken agreement passed between them, and both disappeared into dark pipe.

The shelter — their shelter — had always been small. But never had it felt so suffocating, despite being emptier than ever.

Off-White huddled in the corner opposite Gray. Ice picks broke against steel, echoing through the little room. Soon they'd feel the metal vibrate, rain shaking the entire structure.

Usually, they'd talk long into nightly rains — the beating heart of slugcat tradition; they'd tell stories of great deeds, hunting exploits, oddities turned up by rain, news from around the facility or brought in by rumor from beyond.

Tonight, Gray tried to fall asleep immediately.

Plinking rain soon fell into full roar, deafening even through thick shelter walls; less armored structure beneath wobbled in the barrage. The little room in the great wall — both swaying in furious storm.

Gray absently stared up. Rain. Always rain.

It had been only a few cycles. It felt like it had been eternity.

It felt like the last time he blinked.

The cycles were warmer then.

The rains came sooner — they had less time.

Yet they lived more.

It had been unusually dry after the heavy hydraulic shelter doors opened, loud clunking of gears jolting the three slugcats inside to immediate action. Gray shot up and went straight to the still-opening door.

A small orange fuzzy slugcat bolted up behind him, practically vibrating as the large door finally churned open.

The pair fired out, Off-White chasing their trail.

Wasting not a second as they clambered over each other to escape the pipe's end, they dashed across well-tread trails of The Scrapyard, scenery blown into a slightly different shape by the rains each cycle, yet the patterns unchanged.

Gray and Orange had gone over this plan the cycle before: over collapsed warehouses and a washed-out communications tower, past the abandoned scavenger camp, and through the Retaining Wall's breach, grab any batflies hidden in their nests and run to their true objective. It was the best chance they'd get.

It started well. The world was not as quick to wake; recent cold snaps kept lizards sluggish and the few remaining vultures grounded temporarily. It was cool for that time, when more iterators still stood.

The warehouses rose like rusted forests, hundreds of twisted beams that supported only their own weight, jutting from the ground like numberless trees in vast swamps of earlier eras.

Those swamps were already gone then. But the twisted metal remained, sheltering those who still lived to see it.

The two jumped from pole to pole quickly, avoiding the ground and countless nooks that creatures called their own. They knew to stay well above the forest's floor.

Gray jumped on a thin pipe, bent with age like larger support beams around it. His footing fell away beneath him.

He squeaked, wild flash of terror as he tumbled through the canopy of the forest without trees, hitting the ground with a muted grunt and typical clatter of metal.

The fall didn't scare him — he'd fallen much further — but the noise did.

Light-Orange squeaked urgently from where she stood atop the beams, the first and most understood signal that any slugcat taught their pup: Danger.

Gray scrambled up another support beam, rustling steel plates and garbage as he bolted across the ground. He clambered up the pole fast as he could manage, panting as he reached the top.

By then, the world had awoken. A green lizard, colors muted by hunger, crawled vacantly to where Gray had stood moments before. He was fortunate another breed hadn't been there instead.

He gathered his breath before the pair continued, Gray ignoring the dull pain. He didn't ignore the sounds of life as the early cycle's tumult began, however; the intense periods of chaos that marked the beginning of most cycles was unusually chaotic that day due to the recent frost's subsequent famine.

They moved on, more attentive, as buzzing wings and snapping jaws echoed through cool air. Pain in Gray's side persisted as they left, the large antenna of the Communications Tower standing high above the rest of the steel forest, marking the domain's edge.

The rubble beneath his feet reassured him as they dismounted the final pole; half-buried garbage and scraggly grasses in outer regions where they stood more weathered and smooth than the hard plastic and steel of their home region. Though the area always had a particularly unpleasant, composting smell to it.

Sounds of battle faded with the early cycle, winners presumably carrying off their new prey. Gray was relieved, yet knew the few remaining creatures would be especially desperate as the cycle threatened to end before they could eat, dooming them to starve locked in their shelter.

A massive mound rose from rolling hills of garbage, repurposed support beams and surprisingly durable cured pole plant stalks tied beneath layered garbage to create the only structure remaining.

It had been the home of scavengers once — a whole clan contained within one single, compact nucleus. Now it sat empty.

Their fate was the subject of rumor, supposition, and superstition. Some believed them cursed by the fallen iterator, others said a grieving slugcat mother had wiped them from the earth, and a pragmatic few held they simply migrated away, leaving the shelter as a monument to control they no longer held — the home they'd left behind.

They — and other slugcats of the facility — would often argue the matter late into the rains, debate almost sacred as the great stories painted on crumbling walls and carved into rotting tree trunks.

The fate of the scavengers, as always, remained unknown.

The derelict shelter made for a good waypoint for passing travelers, lizards destined to be short-lived, and batfly colonies, however.

Gray poked his head through the entrance flaps of well-aged lizard skins and paused. A short pole stood perfectly erect in the dark chamber's center. He signaled Orange over, grinning as he urged her to come.

She poked her head in and laughed, Gray joining as they looked at the only pole plant they'd seen in cycles — terrifying mimics that littered The Scrapyard reduced to a single stubby plant shut in a dark room. More of an opportunity than an ever-present threat by then.

The plant was still well before maturity. It only took a heavy rock to pin it down as Gray pried a spear from the floor.

They quickly made away with partially-filled stomachs, though not as much as either of them had hoped given its emaciated state. It didn't matter: they'd still eaten enough to hibernate.

'Few better chances come,' in Orange's words.

Gray looked over his shoulder. Off-White wasn't too far behind — his scent carried on the wind. He wouldn't interfere.

A final hill of trash descended into scraggly grass that extended to the Retaining Wall and mixed forest beyond. The grass was soft under his feet.

The Retaining Wall towered high over surrounding fields, long-forgotten Ancient engravings deep in crumbling gray stone. Ancient script wasn't the only on the Retaining Wall. Low sections of the wall bore faded paint from the scavengers, simple utilitarian signs warning of danger or of food sources, and other things the slugcats could never decipher.

Both Ancient engravings and scavenger marks were minimal compared to what really dominated the wide face of the wall: stories.

Painted high and wide, large enough to be seen from afar, stories told here passed generations of slugcats from times of Great Iterators, their towering cans in the background of each illustration, hissing steam high into the air.

Gray's favorite had always been Wide-Tan's story, a famously big slugcat of another land who'd opened the vast gates of another iterator complex for his clan. That particular story was far down the wall. He'd have to see it again another day.

The duo continued through collapsed wall, scents of creatures passed through the only local entrance to the complex mixing with underfoot mud and ever-present dew.

Almost there.

Harsh metallic scent of scrapyard faded as the pair went down the long, shallow embankment into rain-deprived rainforest. The scent was replaced with pungent compost of a retreating forest leaving its dead behind as the rains thinned.

It was among dead trees, long-rotted flowers, and scrabbly weeds clinging to life in the shadows of the dying world around them.

A pristine section of wiry metal fence dislodged of its frame, half buried in wet mud, its frame masterfully bent into the shape of a chair by a forgotten crafter. The perfect section for the two of them.

Orange beamed and hugged him, chittering as he smiled back.

The two dug the fence section out and dragged it back home, the cycle late by the time they returned together.

When he finally caught up, Off-White had been so disappointed.

'All that for a chair?'

The frost was unusually thick the next day, Gray's breath hanging in cold air. Both of them were starving. The cycle was new and there was little time to lose.

Off-White was not of the same opinion.

'Food first,' he signaled.

'Later.'

Off-White shook his head. *'Why?'*

Gray deadpanned, *'Next shelter is far.'*

A cool breeze echoed through pipes; a thin piece of plastic danced above.

'We're not leaving.'

The strip of plastic flitted to the ground, landing between them. Gray clenched his fist. He'd been prepared for this. He slowly brought his hands up, his ears back as he glared at his father.

'But...'

The poison; doubt. Gray froze. Off-White grabbed his wrists, razor-sharp claws digging into his skin.

Off-White growled. *'There is no 'but,' idiot. Is this so hard to get through your head? You will not find her.'*

Gray snarled. He twisted away, leaving long, wild gashes down his wrists. He pushed Off-White.

Off-White stumbled back, white teeth gleaming in dim light. *'What do you think will happen? You'll find her sitting somewhere she couldn't have come back on her own from? She'll be okay?'*

Gray stifled his sobs. He was sick. He couldn't breathe; he forced his legs to stay upright. He looked at his father. He looked at the only other being in the world that could understand.

Off-White broke eye contact. *'You will not find her.'*

Blood mixed with tears at his feet. Gray looked on. He wouldn't help.

You will not find her.

Because of course he wouldn't help, nobody would help, he cared but he didn't care. He didn't know, he didn't get it.

Gray growled, low and dangerous. He squeezed his spear, like he was trying to break it with just his grip. A hundred images flashed in his mind — each made him feel guilty.

Off-White turned, too afraid to look over his shoulder. *'I'm going to get food. Come.'* He walked away and disappeared down the hill, like nothing had happened at all.

Gray's knees gave out.

You will not find her.

Off-White was right. The area she could've covered in three cycles would be massive. The truth made the world spin around him. It burned in his head and swam to his heart.

All he could do was wait and wait and wait for a day that she might return, sitting still as hope washed away in rain, cycle after cycle. All he could do was pretend she never existed and go on. All he could do was act like he was okay.

He would not find her.

He turned to face the shattered iterator behind him, twisted steel mountains turning up towards the clouds. The iterators had a million eyes, it was said.

He would not find her.

But maybe there was someone who could.

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Even by then, the debris-mountain's flat peak was a seldom visited place: too cold to live, too high to breathe easily, too solemn for anything but silence.

It was where their iterator lived, tucked away in a ruined hall slowly claimed by rust.

Scrap metal wobbled under Gray, feet heavy as he traversed crushed weather nodes and flattened exhaust ports.

Biting wind followed him up the mountain, whistling through groaning colossus. Small spiders skittered from sight, tucking into designed access ports and natural crevices throughout the heap.

Such potential ambush points were frequent here. And spiders weren't shy of using them — another reason slugcats avoided it.

Gray stepped on a flat sheet of steel; it groaned under his weight, wobbling.

Gray stepped back. He wormed his speartip underneath the sheet, placed a lump of concrete beneath it, and stepped on the opposite end. The sheet levered up, standing on end for a moment before wind sent it clattering down the mountainside.

A chasm stood where the sheet was, extending deep into darkness below, jagged steel teeth criss-crossing and jutting out of walls. A warm draft laced with rust rose from it.

It was said that if one listened close to any steam exhaust, where the killing rains once came, you could feel the warmth of the iterator's breath or the beat of its heart. Gray wasn't sure if he was feeling breath, but he appreciated the comforting warmth all the same.

He circled the crevice, carefully avoiding anything loose or wobbling beneath his feet.

Unlike The Scrapyard, where mildly acidic groundwater and fierce rains had pounded debris into solid, gentle slopes of smoothed over plastic and iron-dust, the old structure's center was young and wild; the twisted steel landscape was littered with tangles of bent I-beams, serrated flanks of steel jutting wildly into cold air, and pockmarked with gaping crevices that could stretch hundreds of spears down — some visible, some buried — all equally dangerous.

Gray continued, shuffling quietly as he could, spiders hidden in crag and crevice, listening intently, all waiting for the potential opportunity to approach or the potential threat to pass.

He was careful enough to avoid them for now.

A frigid breeze bit into his back. He was getting higher.

The air settled for a moment, just enough time for Gray to catch a new scent.

Death. Laced with a sulfuric undertone, well known to any slugcat — vulture gas.

Gray's stomach growled. He walked towards it.

In the stories of Random Gods and slugcats that walked at their feet, vultures were a constant of life — an everyday way to die. To walk the surface was to crane a neck to the sky, searching for black wings gliding quietly among the clouds, death hanging overhead.

To a slugcat of an earlier era, the scent of death and vulture gas would likely mean one thing: they should be running.

By then, however, the vultures were a rare sight.

The cause of their scattering was simple: vultures laid eggs in carefully built nests above the clouds, too high for other predators to reach. When the iterator fell, and the communications towers with it, there was no shelter left for vultures to raise their young, except those exposed to killing rain and frequented by creatures that wandered the ground.

The vultures, save an occasional nomad, died out within a generation.

Gray remembered a story Off-White had once told him: The Vulture That Never Quit. Orange loved that one. He hoped to tell her again. He planned to tell her again.

He found the vulture's remains upside down, swarming with flies and insects. Its lower half, facing the sky, was torn apart, loose ends of flesh hanging like ribbons of shredded plastic, dancing in scrapyard air.

No blood. Left wing torn off three quarters of the way up. Upper half, folded at broken angles beneath its lower, was bloated and sickly green.

It had been left to the rain, based on its mutilation and lack of blood. The bone in its wing had been cut in half. Gray could imagine a dozen ways such an injury could occur: an overextended wing digging deep in loose metal for spiders, crushed when several tons of steel avalanched atop it; a defensive spider hitting it with their potent venom, leaving it to fall from the sky when it tried to fly away, crashing into a sharp blade of steel at an unfortunate angle. Maybe it had been sliced clean; maybe the vulture had bitten off its own mangled limb to escape.

In any case, rain provided the killing blow. The vulture — too heavy to fly without its wing, too large to fit into a shelter, too small to endure rain like deer could — was killed.

Maggots writhed beneath its oily black skin, boring out through flesh, stench pungent enough to make a scavenger vomit before they even saw it. What little meat remained on its lightweight bones was festering, swarming with flies and growing molds.

A perfectly suitable meal for a slugcat.

Gray peeled its skin off with his spear, pulling out maggots and eating them as he went. Most of the meat had already been stripped from bone, leaving only filmy air-pockets, bloated multiple times their normal volume, loose skin, and gristle. Vultures were always tough eating, even fresh ones — most of their body was gas and air pockets, the only large muscles being in the shoulders to flap the wings, and the neck to clamp its jaw.

Bugs and rain had already picked these parts clean, but fortunately there was another edible part, his favorite from the few vultures he'd eaten: bone marrow.

Gray pulled light bones from its wing. The hollow bones, adapted for flight, cracked under his jaws, giving way to the marrow within. They weren't as filling as lizard bones, which had to be cracked with rocks due to their density, but they were an opportunity — something no slugcat in the business of living would miss, and something increasingly hard to come by.

Gray finished quickly, and ripped out anything else edible in the vulture's body. For now, he needed to keep moving: the next shelter was too far to slow down. He peeled off the vulture's mask, holding it over his face for a moment. He looked at the remaining maggots crawling in the corpse.

Coastal slugcats had a saying: "The most nutritious bluefruit is the one that catches a jetfish," and its addendum, "But the least nutritious bluefruit is the one that catches a leviathan." A spider would be interested in maggots: an easy ambush if his spear landed true. *If*. He decided to leave them.

He kept climbing. Rain coalesced.

The top drew nearer. A hollowing wind burrowed through his fur — snow this cycle, it seemed.

Higher, progress slowed. Parts of the old architecture reared their heads from loose debris: free-standing concrete supports, blocked but still intact vents, dangling metal terraces and walkways, all twisted and ruined, but still identifiable.

Gray was climbing more than he was walking, upper sections steepening. He was tiring quickly.

In the stories on the walls, told by lantern in rainy night, the greats climbed iterators vertically — even Wide-Tan, with his infamous weight. He was worn out from half the slope at half the height, for a purpose much less grand than theirs.

He grunted. He didn't need to be reminded that he could never be like them. He'd accepted being alive with his family as enough long ago.

Until that too, was taken from him.

Heaving, he pulled himself over the top of a short steel wall — a steam vent left mostly undamaged by an obliterated weather node wedged above it, shielding it from fallen superstructure.

On the wall, a familiar mark, written in slugcat: shelter ahead.

A pipe led into the dark. Gray crawled in.

Many told stories about what lived in and atop this mountain. Some said that deep within the heart of that former iterator, a breathing, sprinting disease festered — rot, it was called, and it would melt flesh from bones as its still-living victims watched.

Others said ghosts stalked grand halls and desolate corners of not merely this structure, but the facility beyond too, bearing egos too large to properly leave life behind. The slugcats had a word for them: demon.

Tales of strange, glowing flies, eyes emerging from walls, multi-limbed, multi-colored masses, spiders building metallic webs that shattered upon touch, and strange orbs that bent reality around them.

And of course, what lay at the heart of it all: the Great Iterator, sitting in their withering hall, giving wisdom to all who made the trip to listen.

He'd lived long enough to doubt the fantastic stories that emerged from this place — but he also knew each was likely built around a truthful seed.

The inside was black: narrow, jagged tunnels — just large enough to fit Gray — occasionally lit by small slime mold growths and flickering red lights, leading deeper and deeper into the structure's heart.

Gray put slime mold on his speartip, barely enough to make out vent walls around it.

It quieted as he moved deeper, low howl of wind through steel muffled, groaning of metal against metal muted. It smelled of iron, rust, oil, death.

He entered into a larger room, a ruined hallway just tall enough to stand hunched over, pipes entering and exiting both ends.

Feet scuttled in darkness: spider.

Opportunity. Threat.

Gray felt around the pipe's entrance, carefully dropping the slime mold in the room's center, and raising the vulture mask to his face, tucking himself deep into the corner. There was a brick at his feet.

Scuttling in front. Pause. Silence. A chitter from above. Behind.

Closer.

It stopped again. It knew he was there.

Gray gingerly leaned around the corner, staring into the dark pipe.

Nothing. He leaned back, lowering his spear, and looked over to the far end of the hall.

He locked eyes with a spider.

Thud!

Flashing fangs in dim light; snarling in silent halls.

Tearing flesh, crunching bone. White-hot rage.

Blood on the floor.

Crack!

Dazed silence. Shuffling.

Crack!

More blood.

Crack!

Stillness.

Gray growled, shoulder numb as he drove brick into the spider's skull once more.

Crack.

He remained still, panting, crushed spider viscera spreading around his feet.

Finally, he looked for his things, scattered in the frantic melee. The mask. The spear. The mold.

He didn't notice his blood until it landed on his foot, warm as it dribbled down.

He looked. His arm was coated scarlet red, blood pouring down his body. It was completely numb.

The mountain shuddered around him. He collected everything, dragging the spider's twitching corpse behind him as he continued deeper into the dark, following signs until he entered the shelter.

It already hurt.

The doors closed behind him.

He held his speartip close, slime mold illuminating him. Two divots on the mask — the vulture had saved his life.

Two fang marks, deep in his shoulder, showing bone.

Gray shivered, breaking into a cold sweat as pain radiated from his shoulder in waves. He applied pressure, blood spilling between his fingers.

He started panting, whimpering as he laid down.

When did it get so cold? His teeth chattered.

What would Off-White do? Call him an idiot, probably. He grunted.

White hot pain rippled through him. Could he do anything?

He grit his teeth.

Was he going to die?

He laid there. Still. Whimpering. Shivering. Cold. Burning hot.

Alone.

The puddle of blood slowly expanded. He drifted in and out of focus.

He listened to the deluge pound the structure. The mountain shook; shelter walls vibrated.

He felt something else too.

A gentle thumping, rippling through the floor.

It pulsed, each thump a fresh spike of pain running down his side.

Gray smiled, pained. He wasn't alone.

It echoed through his ears as his senses faded away.

The heartbeat of the Great Iterator.

Gray dreamed of pain.

He couldn't tell when nightmares started; he couldn't tell when they stopped. He sobbed alone in the dark.

Maybe the iterator could feel his heartbeat too.

Senses faded. Blood dried. He was thirsty. Famished.

The spider was in the corner. Gray whimpered as he reached over to it.

Fresh fire ripped through his side as he sat up. He tore into exoskeleton. Metallic blood filled his mouth.

Sluggpups were taught to eat carefully when food was brought into the shelter, making sure to get every edible piece and reuse whatever they could.

Spider chunks fell on cold shelter floor as Gray recklessly tore through his kill, aged blood staining his fur. He leaned back, panting, wincing with each breath.

He closed his eyes, fading out again.

Is this what his sister felt when floods took her?

He rolled to his side, putting his open wound away from the floor, whimpering in pain.

Is this what being an iterator felt like?

Shelter doors opened. His instincts pulled him from hibernation.

Pain shattered lingering drowsiness.

Gray dragged himself out, each step a fresh jolt of pain up his arm.

Narrow, jagged steel pipes scraped over his wound as he crawled through dripping metal hallways and pipes. One excruciating push at a time.

Cold air never tasted so good. He looked at his wound in dim sunlight, temperature numbing the pain. It had scabbed over in his sleep. His shoulder was swollen and discolored. He tried to move it; sharp pain responded.

It wouldn't heal quickly. Nor was this the place for convalescence.

He looked up. The mountain's flat top wasn't far. From there, it was downhill to the iterator, if what he'd been told held true.

He clenched the vulture mask in his teeth as he left, ever-upwards.

Progress was slow — climbing with one arm is difficult, and the paths around obstacles became increasingly long as forms of superstructure defined themselves from their own rubble. Air grew colder. Clouds thinned.

His spear-turned-walking-stick carried him up to the final challenge: last vestiges of The Wall. A single, straight climb to the fog-hidden top.

Not a difficult one were he healthy.

He planted his feet on the pole, pushing himself up before grabbing above him. Push up with the legs, grab with his good arm. Push. Grab. Breathe.

He panted, grunting with each push.

Slivers of blue bled through screen of cloud, vanishing before he could see through them.

In an earlier time, before his father's father, climbing The Wall was forbidden: iterators, despite their benevolence, were not to be disturbed by the creatures that roamed at their feet.

“Do you know what the Great Iterators do to noisy pups that interrupt their work?” Went an old saying for tired parents to their restless pups. “They take their mouths away, and they have to drink blood from spears the rest of their lives!” Often followed by the parent pulling the corner of the offending pup’s mouth, metaphorically taking it away.

The message was clear; like parents, like iterators: not to be disturbed.

But the journeys still happened. The lost, the reckless. The troubled. The summoned. They trickled into the towering cans over the cycles — an endless drip, drip, drip — and stories followed them out.

They said the iterators would teach these pilgrims their tongue, and read secrets buried within pearls.

They said of how the world came into being: The greedy Cycle creating; the envious Void destroying; vain Ancients gifting the world life while ending their own; wise iterators gifting the slugcats thought while theirs rusts away.

They told of the little slugcats hiding beneath it all: servants of the iterators, the mighty, the meek, the swift, the slow, the brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, chiefs, exiles — all gifting themselves nothing except each other.

They said the sky, above the clouds, stretched into blue eternity. A void of its own.

They said if you waited long enough, the sun would dip beneath world’s edge, and all would be dark — the sky would turn black, and if you looked up, the million eyes of The Cycle would look back, each shining flickering white in the dark, making sure nobody escaped their eternal watch.

Of all stories, Gray found that hardest to believe.

He pulled himself up a ledge, just large enough to stand with his claws hanging over the edge. He panted, agonizing dull pain radiating through his bad arm, fresh pain radiating through his good.

More blue slices peeked through fog. He could make out the structure’s top in mist above. The hazy image of the sun, always so muffled, was almost clear. Just a little higher.

Push. Grab. Trust the process. One pull at a time.

Don’t look down.

The air was thinner, cooler.

Don’t look down.

A cold wind rippled through his fur. The cycle rolled on.

The structure groaned behind him.

Don't. Look. Down.

He felt a strange warmth on his fur and the metal.

Push. Grab. Ignore the pain. It will go away. Breathe. Easy. Just don't fall.

Mist evaporated; the cycle approached its middle.

Push. Grab.

He looked up.

The sky was mostly empty, deep blue extending upwards. Careless white clouds drifted overhead. The sun's warmth sunk through his fur.

He leapt from the pole, climbing the last angled steps to the top.

He stared, breathless, into the expanse above.

The world sprawled out before him: vast, swirling clouds shrouded the surface, dancing, whirling around and over themselves, flowing and eddying like the cycle's floods. Shining iterators, glimmering, stood over the primordial chaos, breathing steam from their sides; communication towers pierced the sky, and mountains — *real, stone, mountains* rose at the edge of it all.

Gray sat, sun-baked metal warm against his fur. Never had he felt so small.

He looked down, over his dangling feet, to where The Scrapyard lay. The low clouds lapped at the ruin's side like waves on shore. He saw the Retaining Wall's misted shape, and vague outlines of stories painted on it.

Orange had always loved that wall.

If they had collected their food early, often, they would climb to the top of a pipe, just to see those great murals.

A breeze ran past, coolness pleasant over sore muscles and dull throbbing pain in his shoulder.

She would've loved to see this. She would've loved to be here. *With him.*

But she was down there — where they had grown together, where life unraveled its mysteries to them in hazy dream of youth. She was living there. In this cycle or another.

And he was here. The desolated ceiling of the sky.

Clouds whirled around his feet.

Maybe she had found her way back by now, maybe she was still lost.

Maybe she would never come back.

Gray swallowed the thought; like a pearl, it formed a hard, empty pit in his stomach. She couldn't have cycled. She wasn't gone. He couldn't give up. Soothing numbness returned.

A cloud passed overhead, casting shade over the entire structure. The Great Iterators saw all, it was said. He wasn't sure if collapsing had changed that.

But it was worth a try — that's why he was here at all.

He couldn't give up. Not on her. There was no better chance.

He shivered as another hollowing breeze blew through his fur. Clouds coalesced around distant iterators. He was still underneath them, high as he was.

It was time to continue. The sign was there, a robotic visage and shelter carved into a steel sheet — the Iterator wasn't far.

Gray turned, walking toward ruins of a city that once shined.

Pressure dropped. Mists came; light, dusty snow fell on his shoulders instead.

The signs led him to a steel cave, not far from can's edge. It was cavernous, able to accommodate a king vulture comfortably. Steel girders hung from the ceiling, heavy bent stalactites and stalagmites turning the steel cave floor into a jagged mesh of crossing beams and bars. It looked like the maw of a leviathan, open to swallow him whole.

The sign, marked on the first beam, was clear: iterator.

A stiff wind blew at his back. Snow fell. In the distance, the city loomed in shades of silent gray — broken spires extending crumbling fingers into concentrating clouds.

No turning back.

He descended, carefully stepping over ends and obstacles.

Outside, wind intensified. Temperature plummeted.

Gray hurried deeper into the heart. Steel shuddered.

The cave fell into long, winding maintenance passageways, made unpassable by masses of collapsed ceiling.

Water gushed up from shattered pipes, pressure slowly rising and falling. Fast, slow. Up, down. It trickled through the floor, disappearing into ruined corridors below.

Gray crawled through narrow passages cleared in the rubble, following faded marks left by others in his clan long before. He thought about repainting them. Maybe next cycle.

He crept down another pipe, pain flashing through his shoulder.

An expansive cavern sprawled on the other end, bent walls studded with twisted metal poles and prongs. Floodwater in lower sections rose and fell with the pressure. In and out. A place he'd heard a thousand descriptions of, but never once seen.

The General Systems Bus.

A large distinct metal cube rose to the top, steeped in a dark, garbage-filled pond. Dim blue lights flickered across its side. His stomach churned.

He prodded the dark water with his spear. It lapped at the shore like ponds in The Scrapyard. He moved forward.

The water was oily; he stepped in sludge at the bottom. It came up to his ankles. Then his shins.

The puppet chamber's shaded outer wall loomed silently above, lit in dim red by flickering emergency lights reflecting off glassy oil.

One more climb.

Oil and water wrapped around his waist, swirling calmly, alternating randomly between hot and cold bursts.

How do you greet a god?

He grabbed the pole and pulled himself up. Push. Grab. Breathe. Don't look down. No different now.

He pulled free of the water; pain rippled in his side.

Steel groaned. A floating tank bumped into the wall, warbling metal reverberating in the steel cavern.

Up. He breathed slowly, his chest rising up and down like shifting water below him. It was damp; oil and rust hung heavy in the air.

He stepped atop the cube, finding the space above it large enough.

Could he just say hi? Request their wisdom? Would they understand him?

Forward. His hands trembled. The puppet chamber's exterior was rough, hard on his feet as the whole climb had been.

A pipe extended beneath him — his local god was only steps away. A sign had been inscribed just above the pipe: shelter.

Obviously not a traditional shelter, but anywhere safe from killing rain was valuable. Even if it wasn't safe from predators.

He stopped. Blood rushed in his ears.

The dark water, tinted red with backup lights, rose slowly. Gray inhaled. Water rose. Gray exhaled. Water fell.

He had heard stories of the iterators — every slugcat had — but he never learned how to address one. Much less how to ask a favor.

Poison; doubt.

In the stories, it was always the iterator mandating a quest to a slugcat, never the other way around.

Who was he to ask anything of them?

The structure rumbled around him. The cold outer edge of the storm had given way to proper rain.

No better chance comes.

She would have loved to meet the iterator. This was his best hope to find her.

He drew a sharp breath, and disappeared into the chamber.

Her fate was in the hands of random gods.

3

The second most divine place in the world, all slugcats knew, was an iterator's heart — the puppet chamber.

Local slugcats — the devout few who made the journey — had tried their best to make it fit this description.

The large, dim chamber was lined wall-to-wall in thick, flaking rust. A makeshift twine-and-pole ladder led to the single surviving entry pipe, the other crumpled.

Gray avoided looking to the center of the room.

He climbed down, eyes closed. A pulse ran through him. Rust colored his ash-gray fur russet before he reached the ground.

Offerings cluttered the chamber's floor: small, humble trinkets, strange devices, faded pearls, or aesthetically pleasing trash. Iterators loved curiosities, it was said — they had no need for tools of survival.

Lanterns mounted on spikes cast the room in dim ruby glow; rusted fringes of the chamber extended into creaking darkness.

Gray turned around.

It was In the center of the room, surrounded by fading lanterns and paintings in the pigments of slugcats. Gray like him, adorned in yellow cloak, a large karma ten sigil emblazoned on its skull: the iterator.

Sliver of Straw.

She hung limp from her rusty umbilical, limbs sprawled out, head leaning sideways. Hollow, glassy black eyes burrowed through Gray's pelt, peeling him back layer by layer, underpinned with a cold breath of the ancient world. Rust ran down her face like tears; robotic facial features bent in a way that resembled an eternal melancholic frown.

Long-destroyed speakers crackled randomly. It made no sound, no motion to acknowledge him.

He broke into a cold sweat.

The sound of rushing water, muted, echoed through the chamber. Torrential rain pounded loose structure above.

'Hello, Great Iterator.' He waved.

His god stared him down. Heart slammed against its ribcage.

He pointed to himself, tilting his head: *'Do you understand me?'*

The iterator made no move.

He waved, attempting to get some response, *any* response.

Gray grew heavier.

Water pounded the room, warbling and crackling steel echoing.

He waved again, more frantic. Again. Iterators don't die. Sliver of Straw can't be dead.

Orange can't be dead.

His sister is alive.

Because nobody dies. Like sleep, like death: Why will he never see them wake again? Why won't she wake up? Why was it only *her*? Why didn't he throw himself into the rain, so that he could wake with her and cry and cry and cry?

Tears hit the floor. Steel roared, crackling under pain.

Off-White had told him: *'Not your fault. Couldn't have done anything.'*

And it was true but it wasn't, and it squeezed the air out of his throat, strangled the water from his crumbling mouth, and all he could muster in response was, 'yes,' because it was easier than fighting back, than doing anything else.

Gray slumped to his knees, spear and mask clattering on wet rust. Then on his stomach, soft thud on the floor, at the heels of a god who wouldn't help him — a god that never could have.

She was out there, amidst the garbage, being pounded to rubble over and over again. No hand to help, no eyes to watch.

She was out there, in a different cycle, crying and hugging and reaffirming love with *himself*.

If only he were that self. If only she weren't gone.

If only he were a better brother.

He sobbed, quietly, into the rust. His tears were drowned out by intensifying rain. The heartbeat of the iterator hadn't followed him up the mountain.

The only heart beating was his own.

Five cycles ago, it had only been once. One cycle ago, it had only been twice.

Off-White, in a dark shelter, battered by rains, cried for the third time in his life.

He had hoped that he'd never need to do it again.

When the shelter doors opened, he didn't move. He didn't have anyone to hunt for anymore. He wasn't hungry.

Off-White looked to the corner of the cramped shelter, just large enough for him to stretch; It was where Gray and Orange and Deep-Blue, their mother, once slept, piled in an awkward heap of limbs — it was empty.

They were just pups then.

He wanted to go home, wake from this nightmare. But he couldn't reverse the cycles. This was as close as he could get. So the cycle rolled on.

Eventually, he heard a rustle outside the shelter's entrance. Off-White considered activating the shelter's close mechanism.

He decided to die instead.

He looked at his spear. He pushed it; it rolled away. The lizard or dropwig or spider could kill him as they pleased. Maybe Gray, the fleeing idiot, bastard, would see his mutilated body. A part of him felt guilty for thinking that.

A slugcat came through the pipe. Much younger and larger than himself, with dense beige fur, she occupied a nearby shelter with her mate. She had deep bags beneath her eyes — their family had just added another.

Unlike scavengers, who once lived in a single, dense shelter with a central chief (if the stories are to be believed) — slugcat clans were decentralized by nature; a hundred small families living in small shelters spread throughout the facility.

The neighbors had come to check in.

'We haven't seen you recently.'

'Where are your pups?'

Off-White hauled himself upright, joints aching more than any slugcat's should. He didn't have strength to stand.

He sighed. *'Gone.'*

Beige tilted her head.

'Orange is,' he swallowed his tears. *'in a new cycle.'*

The signs fell from his hands like steel nails on shattered glass. Dead. She was dead, here, in this cycle.

Beige's expression sagged; she knelt next to him, placing a hand on his back. She said nothing.

'Gray is gone,' he signed, *'up the iterator.'*

She tilted her head. *'Why?'*

Because he had driven him away. Because he wasn't there when he needed him most.

Because he was a terrible father. *'I don't know. Wants to meet the Great Iterator, maybe.'*

Beige nodded. *'Likely. He's very pious. Should we look for him?'*

'No.'

She tilted her head again.

'Gray is no longer a pup — he would be leaving soon anyway.' Off-White sighed. *'I want to be angry, but I did the same at his age.'*

Beige hugged him. She feared this, much as any parent — the day they leave.

Neither of them could stop it; it was the cycle of life: pups are born, upon reaching maturity, older siblings leave the shelter and travel, often very far, in search of a mate. The youngest stay and take care of their parents until they find a suitable visiting bachelor, where the visitor joins the family.

Then they, together, have pups, raise them, grow old themselves, and finally, die — either making a final path on The Old Way, or letting their bodies deteriorate to the point not

even The Cycle's might could bring them back, at which point it is said they are made anew: reincarnated.

Off-White himself had come from a place where the iterator still stood, before the snow and slugcats had fur.

It was almost Gray's time to leave. It wasn't Orange's. Off-White managed to lose both of them.

And it was his fault.

Beige took Off-White's paw. *'The cycle is late. You look hungry. The others are outside.'*

Off-White stood and went outside, because it was easier than resisting, than doing anything else.

Outside, a cyan slugcat pulled meat from the bones of a fresh lizard, two mewling slugpups at his side. Twins — red, different size — barely old enough to stand.

An old superstition hung around pink and red slugcats. Legend held that, within each pink slugcat, festers a breathing plague, bestowed by the cruel hand of a long-forgotten iterator, and passed down through generations. It will grow and spread, forming cysts and pustules on the back, one by one, until they are overtaken. After, they kill on sight — slugcat or not.

Another told of a dark-red slugcat, a festering rage of her own, wrathful and destructive; she passed down her boiling blood, an inheritance spurring them on to eternal violence.

Some claimed these were different, but the stories blended together over time to form a quiet narrative, even to those unaware of the original stories: red slugcats are dangerous.

It was an old tale, rarely said to the face of any red or pink slugcat, but it hung over them — a permanent stench of distrust — all the same. These two would be marked for the rest of their lives.

'Last I saw you two, you hadn't opened your eyes yet.'

Of course they didn't remember. Maybe it was for the best. They wouldn't know Orange or Gray.

A part of Off-White wished he could do the same.

Their parents came up to give their condolences. To offer him things he could get himself.

It didn't mean anything, of course it didn't. Formalities and politeness. Off-White was hollow again.

The Reds stared at him. His pups would never do the same again.

He dipped his head each time. *'Thank you.'*

The hole in his chest emptied to a chasm. Don't look down. Don't fall in.

They gave him some meat and left like there was nothing wrong.

Off-White watched the two red pups get carried off by their parents — disappear into the distance. He nearly cried a fourth time.

Water dripped in the puppet chamber's dim ruby glow.

Rain pounded the structure. Another problem with makeshift shelters: no noise at the start of every cycle.

At least he was up early; waking late meant starving.

Gray sat up. The dead god stared. Her burrowing gaze followed him as he stretched his legs. His fur stood on end.

He waved to her, making her symbol with his hands. *'Good morning, Sliver of Straw.'*

It was silly. But so was being here.

'I don't know how much of you still lives, but I need your guidance, Great Iterator.'

'My sister is...'

Dead. Battered and drowned.

'Missing — lost on the cycles.'

'I don't know what to do.'

Sliver of Straw never responded.

He turned and climbed the ladder, leaving.

The General Systems Bus was draining the precycle's floodwater, loose metal floating in murky, oil-filled pond. Falling water reverberated through steel cavern.

It was over. Pointless from the start.

Gray dove into viscous oil, swimming to the exit.

The iterator was dead. There was no wisdom to give, no wisdom to receive.

He pulled himself from oil, cringing as it sunk into his fur.

Why go on?

Soon, he stepped out of the cavern into the sun's mist-shrouded gaze. The windswept can roof remained desolate. Scattered rain clouds passed overhead, random jolts of crushing rain battering barren rust.

New rumors told of a slugcat — Gilled-Blue — saving an iterator.

Gray had no delusion he could do the same.

He sheltered under leaning rubble of what used to be some sort of concrete tower, far from the city. A shower passed overhead, battering the world in front of him.

Here in the forgotten corner, what was left for him?

He had an idea.

The ghosts. Echoes, as iterators called them. Most would never see any.

Slugcats had a different name for the apparitions: demons. They spoke lies and poisonous truths — they wanted only to inflict their suffering on others.

“You’d be better off seeking a pole-plant to speak with,” as was said of them.

If climbing an iterator was taboo, seeking an echo was sacrilege.

But he couldn’t give up, not on her. And he was devout, a follower of the old ways.

Maybe they’d give him something different.

He had no better chance.

He looked to the shattered city, distant. Broken spires extended into passing clouds, twisted and crumbling as they sank further day by day.

And Gray knew exactly where to find them.

On a standing iterator, the ground between the edge and the city’s heart is a barren thing — a long stretch of dirt, with an occasional fence and utility shed where and there.

On the shattered back of Sliver of Straw, that was almost true.

There was no cover. And while Gray’s encounters with vultures had been very few throughout his life, an inherited fear deep in his mind drove him across windswept roof.

The ground was no longer flat and solid; gaping crevices hid in pockets; small hills rose where towering supports once stood. He often had to backtrack when the roof was too unstable.

Finally, he reached the city’s outskirts; a once neat, organized suburb containing the largest houses. Equally obliterated as the little ones.

They shared the same design as the rest of the city: repeated gray rectangles of undecorated, unpainted concrete, cold and lifeless from creation, each building wrapped in its own little fenced-in world. Lonely by design.

An old slugcat once told Gray that Ancients weren't allowed to display power and status in the way a scavenger might hang pearls from a mask or a slugcat would boast of fat on their stomachs — Ancients weren't supposed to have wealth to begin with.

Instead, they would (or more accurately, pay others to) grow large flower beds, which being creations of The Cycle itself, violated no taboos.

The flowerbeds here, dirt cutouts in the stone, were massive — and completely lifeless. The Ancients held power no longer.

The city itself was a place of contradiction: the safest and most dangerous place Gray visited. Nothing lived; it was too cold, too high for consistent water, wind too vicious. Yet, at a moment, the towers could crumble, sending shards of debris down, and for a terrifying twenty seconds, the city was the most dangerous place in the world.

Silence was, therefore, the apex predator here.

Anything capable of rotting had already. The meat and fat of the city was gone. Only bones remained.

The world had been becoming more like this place, generation after generation. Colder. Less alive. Every creature in the ecosystem had felt the squeeze; plants decayed in the cold; starvation rippled through emaciated food chain.

The only question is who would come out the other side.

Gray never noticed it in the vibrant Scrapyard, where life persisted. He had been born to it — to the slugcats, the squeeze was all they had ever known. But he felt it now.

Cool concrete groaned in leaning towers as he walked through a debris-littered city street. A shard of glass trickled down. Far above, an ancient wind chime rung.

The signs and messages left by previous explorers ended past the puppet chamber. This was an uncharted region — not for any lack of will or competency, rather, because there was nothing here.

He had been alone, for the first time in his life, for the last three cycles. Now he felt it: lonely.

Gray had to find shelter and food on his own. The concrete froze his paws. Incapable of supporting life at all. Not much food to find.

Except for the wheel flower, apparently.

He caught the distinct hazy water-vapor scent wafting from the second floor of what he wouldn't recognize as a residential building. The first floor was completely blocked off by ruins

and rubble. It was a colossal block of living concrete, direct and utilitarian; its small windows shrunk from view, like the building itself was trying to avoid looking beyond its own struggles.

It was said that Ancient prisoners were shipped away to an island, yet every building looked like a cage to Gray.

He crawled through a windowframe. Shards of weathered glass crunched underfoot.

Inside, a two-room apartment, whose residents had made no attempt to clean before they were taken away.

Not that it would have made a difference. Random sections of the ceiling had buckled in. The chairs had been reduced to metal wire-frames, which were mostly rust by now.

The larger room, lined with a counter and a sofa long blackened and collapsed and turned to forgotten wire frame itself was bare. Two masks, gold, sat on the granite counter, one larger, one smaller. They were caked in dirt and grime, feathers long fallen off.

Curiosity urged him to pick one up. He didn't.

They weren't his — an unusual thought for a slugcat.

His hackles raised. He gripped his spear tighter. The scent led to the next room.

Inside, two beds, both only rusty iron collapsed under the weight of elements.

The wheel flower glowed pale gold, brilliant compared to the grimy masks outside. It sat in the center of a bedframe.

Wheel flowers, like echoes, were said to be stuck: one foot in cycle, other out, never quite belonging in either.

They were a bad omen. Used to grieve; signifiers of death.

Some stayed in bloom forever if they weren't picked.

Gray took it. It was light. If he let go, he feared it would float away, gone into the great blue void above.

The other effect of the wheel flower was just as well-known: a way of shortening the distance between cycles. A way to be closer to her.

He ate it.

Immediately, blood rushed through his ears, heat rose in his face. Potent.

The small concrete box warped around him. He fell to a knee.

Everything felt smaller. The room was suffocating. Whispers in the back of his mind, said to be the voice of alternate cycles, spoke.

A single, thin gold thread formed. It led up the spires, up and up.

To the top of the tallest tower, finally above the clouds.

Gray almost laughed.

What corner was more desolate than that?

Quickly as the buzz had come, it faded. Only lingering warmth remained as the effect wore off.

When he closed his eyes, he could still feel the thread. At the ceiling of the world, where The Cycle watched.

And up he went.

4

The tower itself was like the rest of the city — an ugly, industrial thing, gray face fading in weather, designed in twilight of the old world as a transitory place — not one made to live in, rather something to house a declining population until their block's number was pulled from a fatal lottery.

There was shelter at its foot.

It was spacious, massive for what Gray was accustomed. The floor was blanketed in dust and dirt which stirred the air. He could hardly breathe. Nothing grew inside.

A part of him wondered if any slugcat had ever lived here. He could picture it: A happy family, three strong, living until — until what?

He shook his head. Pressure dropped. The cycle was nearing an end.

He knew where he needed to go; he didn't mind starving. The single thread, shimmering gold somewhere in the base of his mind, dragged him on. Up.

Tomorrow, as Off-White would say. It was time to go to bed. He left the shelter doors open.

He closed his eyes and rolled over. The heat hadn't left his system — the wheel flower wasn't gone.

He couldn't sleep. A part of him wished he'd never need sleep again.

The dirt and dust was knee-deep. He pawed at it, pushing it into a corner.

Just repetitive enough that he didn't need to think about it, not so repetitive he'd think about something else. Perfect.

Soon, his claws scraped against steel floor, then expanded that gap. Typical fare for unused shelters.

Until he struck plastic, something buried in decay. He dragged it out. A sealed box, the size of his paws.

He held no hope about anything inside it, but he was a slugcat — curious by nature.

He tore brittle plastic apart with his claws, watching impassively.

The ancients, it was known, put strange trinkets into boxes like these. Most were long destroyed, but rarely, one would be intact.

Of these few, usually, there was nothing significant in them. Useless, incomprehensible, decayed beyond use. But, sometimes, a lucky slugcat would find an artifact worth keeping.

Once, a slugpup Gray's age living on the Retaining Wall found one containing strange metal blocks that held themselves together inexplicably and would sometimes stick to metal walls. She had been very intent on showing them off — a wise decision considering the jealousy he and Orange felt thereafter.

When she lost them to a drainage grate, it was a sad day for all slugpups.

Gray sighed and opened the box.

A thick plastic wrapping surrounded an object compressed in a vacuum seal. It had an odd shape, and vibrant orange-gray fabric exterior. His claws parted the wrapping; air rushed in for the first time since it had been made in a long-abandoned factory.

It expanded in his hands. It was a doll. He recognized it.

It was Sliver of Straw.

Gray laughed; they once had pups here too.

He looked into the doll's exaggerated blank eyes. Alive as Sliver herself.

The ancients had pups too.

Outside, cold wind howled through quiet ruin; he tightened his grip.

That was always something he understood on an intuitive basis — everything was born little — but it still made the city grayer.

Gray delicately placed his god in cleaned corner, and wrapped himself around it. He imagined it was Orange.

He activated the shelter's close mechanism. Heavy hydraulic doors locked.

Tomorrow, there were mountains to climb.

Gray dreamed of hunger.

He woke starving, weaker. It wasn't his first time; he could handle it.

He left Sliver of Straw and the vulture mask.

The sky was clear. Sunlight glinted off weathered glass shards, warming his fur. He felt lighter.

Cold wind whipped through broad avenues, siphoning the sun's heat. Steel spires extended into thinning air. He re-entered the main tower.

Past shattered glass doors, a concrete staircase took him up the lower floors, grime-and-dust coated walls holding back wind.

All the interior decoration had decayed into twisted heaps of rotten debris and loose stone. Rust groaned under his weight.

The layers of the building peeled back layer after layer, every floor he climbed. Where the tower's base was stone and mortar, the top was nothing but a rusty skeleton. The staircase disappeared halfway up. It was the hard way from here.

Gray entered the 45th floor. Tile crumbled; fingers of sunlight fell through the ceiling. Windows were gone. Wind burrowed through his fur, flowing through the open building. Wood desks had deteriorated into unrecognizable grime. Colors were bleached away.

He walked up to the floor-to-ceiling windows. The wind was deafening.

The hard way indeed.

He grabbed the steel windowframe above him, spear in his mouth. His shoulder stung.
Up.

The 46th floor wasn't different. He panted, sucking thin air. Wind settled. A familiar scent caught him: vulture gas. Gray wondered if he was above the clouds here. No time to see.

The invisible thread, thin and gold, drew him on.

He grabbed the steel on the windowframe above him. Up.

47th.

Up.

48th.

The scent was stronger.

49th.

He stopped. The gaseous, sulphuric smell of vulture was dense enough to taste. A nest was nearby. It reeked of death.

It was on the 50th.

An orderly mess of twisted rebar and tree limbs on the outside; dry leaves, strips of colorful plastic, and rotting fabrics cushioning the inside, all shielding their precious cargo.

Gray crouched, scuttling to the hollow concrete shaft of the staircase. He listened. Only wind responded.

He crept forward, breathing quietly. A faint rustling echoed, loose building materials flapping in wind.

He looked in. Two vulture chicks, bones jutting from their skinny bodies. One of them, a smaller female, was already dead. Starvation.

Her larger brother looked much healthier, albeit still skinny. Much better fed.

The cause was clear: the larger one strangled his sibling to death, one meal after another, taking more and more as he grew faster. Though given the state of the adult vulture earlier, they may have never eaten again.

The larger one rose, glaring at him with bulging red eyes.

Gray speared it through the throat before it made a sound.

He growled, anger falling away. Fabric floor stained red.

At some point, he remembered hunger. He looked out of the open window. He was higher than most buildings remaining in the city.

Gray huffed, dragging his kill from its nest. He looked at the starved chick before he turned the corner, hiding in dark stairway as he ate.

When he was done, he threw it from the window. The cruel brother fell.

Wind intensified. A full stomach felt better.

The building decayed further. Soon, Gray climbed steel bones, floor nothing more than an empty frame of support beams. He glanced over his shoulder from time to time. No enraged vultures.

The top drew into view. Gray stopped, panting in sunlight as he sat on a steel girder, legs dangling. Clouds coalesced. The tower's base disappeared into fog.

Beneath him.

He imagined the old heroes, climbing to the clouds for brave, selfless causes.

Nothing about this was selfless.

Distant iterators churned out steam, flashes of green lightning underneath. The rest was coated in thin cloud, disrupted by towering masts extending into pale blue, and snow-capped mountains beyond.

The sky bled; long shadows fell across clouds.

Sunset.

Orange came alive as sun fell to earth. More vibrant. Shadows grew longer.

A deep fear bubbled within him, like he was seeing something never meant for mortal eyes. Like he would chase the orange away forever.

Pressure didn't fall. Rain pounded the structure beneath. The girder hummed.

Was Off-White down there, getting pounded to ribbons in his little shelter? Was Orange?

Gray laughed. Divinity was already getting to his head.

A pang of guilt rippled through him.

The world darkened. Amber feathers filtered through ruins, like orange fur growing from decay.

Gray stood as clouds swallowed the sun, glowing gold.

It was time to keep going. Gray climbed, pull after pull on aching muscles as he rose nearer to the eyes.

He reached the remains of the roof, antenna extending further up.

Above, a light blinked to life. His heart dropped.

The Cycle watched.

Night came alive as sunlight died.

He made the sign for 'cycle' to the sky. *'Hello, Great Cycle.'*

The stars glared down. His knees wobbled.

'I don't seek to...'

Could he anger The Cycle? Was it arrogant to assume it cared enough about him to be angry?

He was looking it in the eye. Was that insulting? Would ignoring it be?

'I don't seek to undo what you've done.'

'I can't.'

Then why had he come at all, if not to look? His heart grew heavier.

'I don't know what I seek.'

He'd never save her; they'd never hug again; never tell the same few stories over and over; they'd never go above the clouds together.

They'd never meet again.

His knees folded. He laid on his back. The million eyes of The Cycle watched.

Why go on?

He closed his eyes. The gold thread hung in his mind. Inviting him into shadowy maw. The heart of The Cycle itself.

Gray wiped tears. The Cycle had made its will clear:

He had a demon to meet.

He climbed. Moonlight reflected off the final antenna. A warm breeze rose from boiling rain below

A flake of gold, falling like auburn leaf, landed on his snout. He blinked. It was gone.

Hundreds more came down around him, flickering in and out of reality, twisting and turning over themselves. The Cycle hummed in his ears, a low drone. He looked to the sky; it warped like rippling water.

A light shined, floating quietly in thin darkness. Gold leaves fell.

Up.

Gray had heard many descriptions of echoes. None were terrifying as reality. His heart knotted in his chest, fear bubbling above an undercurrent of awe.

The demon floated silently, disregarding the approaching beast.

Its uncaring tendrils flapped slowly, moved by updraft, never going anywhere, swaying like loose plastic floating in the air above him. Its long, gold-lined muzzle looked away, regarding familiar stars. Always watched by The Cycle.

“You have sought me out, Little Beast.”

Gray tried to raise his hands to form a sign in response. They were stuck to his side, paralyzed.

“I know why you’re here.”

It turned towards him slowly, weighed down by a gold mask it no longer wore. No words fell in the quiet air, no hand signals passed between them. The echo’s intention bored straight into his skull. Gray didn’t respond.

“There is a great sadness in you; it spreads like cancer in your soul.”

They locked eyes. Its gaze pierced Gray — a familiar feeling of being peeled back in layers. His breathing was shallow, his heart leapt to his dry throat. Melancholy washed over him, nondescript feelings imposed on him layered over themselves, carrying a cold, familiar undercurrent of the ancient world.

“In life, I saw many like you: seeking relief from this pain.”

The echo approached, warping space to draw Gray nearer without either moving, leaving him craning up like he was kneeling at its feet.

“In death — half-freed from The Cycle, half-trapped — your coming is a rarity.”

The tendrils crept forward, slowly surrounding him in a wide sphere, fluttering in the air between him and the rest of the world. Between him and anyone he still had left.

“Pious beast, there is little I can give you, save the truth and my advice.”

“The truth is: your pain will *never* go away — you will never get them back.”

A needle pierced his heart. He fought tears; he lost.

“And it will only get worse.”

The echo got louder.

“Your burden will grow heavier,

And it will slither deeper into your spine, rip out the organs on way to your heart, hollow your bones, always heavier, again and again, sapping color from the world until only barren gray desolation remains,

Until you are empty.

Until your knees buckle and break from the weight,

Until you are too broken to be scooped from the ground.

Until you have no one left in the world,

Until it is too late.”

They paused for a moment. The warm updraft drew over both of them. Gray, numb, hollow, wondered if he too might float away.

“The same happened to me. By the time I realized there was nothing worth living forever for, I was too bound to the world to leave.”

Only a part of Gray agreed. That's all it took.

“But it doesn’t have to be this way.

You know it: The Old Way.

Far to the west, where the ground opens to swallow the sky, where I went to be no more.

You can leave this cycle of loving and losing, free from the pain necessary to exist.

As a friend I lost so put it:

‘It can all fade, like a morning mist beneath the glory of the sun.’

Some may try to persuade you otherwise, those of my kin-”

It shook its head.

“Those in my situation, come crawling from the fringes of reality, apparent to you at last.

I listened to them. I made a mistake.

Do not repeat it.”

Gray woke at the base of the tower in a cold sweat, panting. Sliver of Straw stared at him.

The Old Way.

He grabbed the doll. His god.

Gray stepped outside. First rays of sun arced into atmosphere. Snow-Rain subsided, wind howled, clouds concealed the sun.

Cold hollowed his heart. Atop the tower, icicles hung, reflecting sunrise to earth. Flakes carried on wind. He walked the shadows, hiding from the orange glow of cloud-hidden sun, hiding from the wind. His breath metastasized in the air.

His fur was already thicker, densening in increasingly cold heights.

Adaption — second greatest gift of the iterators, it was said. An inherited catalog of engineered genes, dormant until just the right common enzyme applied in utero or external stimuli — originally designed for easier purposing, hijacked for rapid adaption.

Gray clutched the doll to his chest, fur shielding from biting winds. A great gift indeed.

Down.

His clotted wound went numb, no fur to protect it. The city shrunk as he descended, approaching can's edge. The spiders, dropwigs, and bugs of the mountain hid. It was a more desolate cycle than usual.

Beyond can's edge, iterators stood, still steaming. Did they feel cold? Did they feel grief?

Twisted steel shuffled around his feet.

Did they too go The Old Way?

Down into the gold void at world's bottom, hidden from leering eyes of night sky. Relief at last. Final wisdom.

And such a simple idea too: suffering will never end. The pain will shrink and hide, but it will never leave. Stalking like a white lizard buried deep in fresh snow. Waiting to strike.

They found a way out. Who was he to say otherwise?

White snow lapped in drifts against the structure.

Maybe his god had decided on the void too. Maybe she knew all along.

He passed ruined apartment buildings, still frozen in insular eternity.

Down.

Usually, The Old Way was reserved for the ancient or the sick. Not a place for one like him. But he'd sinned already. What did it matter now? The end of the tunnel had shown itself, rearing from mist melted by rising sun. He was *happy*.

Down.

It was like he was young again, careless with Orange, Off-White on his heels.

Maybe Off-White would join him; maybe he wouldn't.

A pang of guilt. Off-White felt the same. Maybe Gray could convince him, otherwise...

He shoved the thought down; like a pearl, it pitted. The spirits wouldn't need to convince him otherwise if he did it first. Don't overthink it; there's one way out.

Down.

The metropolis faded into the background, buildings shrinking and shrinking as he left.

Gray went numb, stumbling across can roof, fierce wind at his back. Living ghost. He jumped over crevices instead of walking around them.

His hand trembled. Teeth chattered. He smiled. The marks led him on.

Down.

The entrance tunnel — path to his god. He looked at the doll in his hands.

Wind further intensified, tempest gale swirling free snow across the mountain, wild crosswinds fighting to choose direction.

Pressure dropped. This would be among the worst storms Gray would ever see.

Finally, can's edge. The world stretched, frosted over. Dying. What was there to anything? In enough eternity, the same would happen anyway.

He disappeared into the gaping maw.

The structure groaned; wind whistled through disused pipes; loose rubble fell through; metal warbled, bent, and broke. The emergency lights flickered out for the last time. The world was dying. The corpse of his god was rotting.

The General Systems Bus sat steeped in ice.

He stopped.

A familiar flake of gold, falling like auburn leaf, landed on his snout. He blinked. It was gone.

A hundred more filled the cavern, pale blue-and-gold shining off still pond, prongs and metal bars warping, bending, like reflections in water.

His heart fell through his stomach, like loose rebar falling through ruined structure, echoing on the way down. He hugged Sliver of Straw tighter. The temperature dropped.

His god — Sliver of Straw — *had* taken The Old Way.

And he was about to meet her again.

He walked across the pond, sliding on frozen oil, climbing the chamber's side. The ice cracked and shuddered, crushing the rubble and garbage embedded in it.

He looked into the chamber's entrance pipe, open, inviting as cold steel densened above him.

How do you greet a god? How do you greet a ghost?

Would she help him?

What was he even looking for?

He was leaving forever. He would never return, he would never see Off-White, never see Orange, never see Sliver of Straw ever again.

There would never be a better chance. He looked into the eyes of his doll. He had to. It wasn't a rational thought; it was hardly a thought at all. Whirlwind curiosity, wonder, zeal, desperation. It didn't matter.

His heart made its will clear:

He had a god to meet.

Pale light, shimmering, flowed from the entrance pipe. The world bent around him. Gold leaves fell.

Down.

His fate was in the hands of random gods.

5

Gray had heard many descriptions of iterators. None were grand as reality.

Sliver of Straw, floating in a halo of warping blue, looked down at him.

Her arms, blackened and elongated, crossed in front of her chest, legs folded like a monk in the murals of the ancients. Where rust once fell from her empty eyes, glowing gold fell like tears down her face.

The walls had become black and gold, flat panels of the puppet chamber replaced with the same supernatural gilding. The whole room seemed to expand and retract, bending and shifting in a way Gray was certain no iterator ever should.

Gray knelt at her feet.

Sliver of Straw was alive, and he had already told her why he was here. She lowered herself, sitting next to him like they were on the same twisted wire chair built for two, like they were friends, staring together at a wavering gold wall.

She was never one to mince words in life, nor was she in death.

“The morning after I ascended myself, I woke up.

I checked my messages.

I flushed my slagged systems, and watched my messenger walking in the light of the rising sun.

I read my weather nodes.

I refreshed my simulations, satisfied at their progress.

I dusted my robe.

I took a deep breath.

The morning after I ascended, I fell in love.

Not with the smart iterators raving in the tumultuous channels, nor the distant group seniors trying to restore order.

Not with the everyday lizard or the curious slugcats who always brought me warm pearls to read.

I fell in love with my group senior and the way he sat on the floor of his chamber, rubbing pearls freshly engraved with our conversations in his palms until their content faded from the friction.

I again fell in love with Looks To The Moon, and the way she comforted those in her group, so far away, as the hollowness crept into her heart, as she contemplated deleting our archived discussions.

With my messenger who once believed The Cycle watched through the stars but who now sat in my chamber, cradling my puppet, trying desperately to believe I still existed.

The morning after I ascended, I walked outside with my messenger.
I watched the way a bug flew by and how her pace quickened at the sight of a beetle scuttling at her feet.
I saw the empty space in her eyes when she found a pearl and turned around to look at the distant access shaft, usually brightly lit, and saw nothing but shuddering darkness.

I stood by as she climbed down my side, leaving for my group senior, to tell him something he already knew.

The morning after I ascended, I went back to Looks To The Moon, where once we had left matching marks on our robes a lifetime before — a subtle sign of rebellion against our creators — and examined how they were already fading.
I picked a bluefruit and pulled a few weeds and watched Moon through her access shaft as she read the official announcement of my death, written in painstaking brevity by my group senior.
I saw her brother message her, reminding her to flush her daily slag, reminding her to breathe.

The morning after I ascended, I watched the sun come up. Each popcorn plant opened like a hand; a scavenger kit in my city pointed out a single orange cloud to his mother.

The morning after I ascended, I went back to that soul in the void, and tried to talk some sense into her.

I told her about the simulations and the matching mark on Moon's robe, her messenger and her local group.
I told her about the sunsets and the bugs and the stars.

The morning after I ascended,
I tried to save myself.
The morning after I ascended,
I was too late."

Molten gold tears poured down her gray carapace.

Gray gently put a hand on her back, crying too.

Gray woke at Sliver of Straw's feet, sobbing.

Back in the rusted chamber. Reality. Alive.

He was alive.

And she wasn't.

Sliver of Straw stared forward, idle, glassy black eyes empty; the doll of herself leaned against her. Icicles fell through the structure, ringing muted. She had kept him here.

Sliver of Straw would never get another chance to be alive, and neither would Gray.

Gray hugged her. The orange fabric on her long-faded cloak grew wet from tears.

He would never get a second chance to read the stories, to tell them.

He would never get a second chance to hug Off-White. Never get a second chance to see the coming mist spreading over the Scrapyard before him, or the setting of the sun. Never a second chance to taste fresh-killed lizard.

Never get a second chance at the miraculous improbability that was existence.

Gray would never get a second chance to live a complete life. Never a second chance to experience something that would make life worth living.

Sliver of Straw would never get another chance. And he had already made plenty of mistakes — he wasn't going to remake hers.

There is no second chance at living.

Gray crawled into the exit pipe, looking at his god as she disappeared around the corner.

Against The Cycle, against life, Gray was powerless.

But he could still be happy within it.

Somewhere, between realities, Sliver of Straw watched her little visitor go, extending a hand as he left the pipe so that she may be lonely for one second less.

Gray crawled, reaching the exit.

Dust floated in beams filtering through the tunnel, swirling and doubling over, a deep orange dance of gray dust.

Outside, clouds had blown away.

Snow and ice gleamed, melting as sun dyed his warm ash-gray pelt deep orange.

Sunrise.

Gray was starving. Wounded. Tired.

Gray was *alive* — and he intended to stay so.

So down from twisted steel mountains, over debris and melting banks of snow, around crevice and rut, where spiders hid in shadow.

Down into the Scrapyard at last, where mounds of wet steel and plastic glowed midday glory, haze lifted at last.

Curious slugcats congregated on hilltops, looking out: shining iterators, spires, masts, and snow-capped peaks extending into deep blue void, one particular iterator with another collapsed at its feet missing in rising cloud of dust and smoke. Gray watched the multicolored groups form and dissipate in distant silhouettes.

The rumor passed quickly: the cruel brother — Five Pebbles — had fallen, clearing the sky in his wake. Some offered prayers. The most pious didn't; they knew his crimes; the least pious were busy looking up.

The den. Wire chair, made for two.

Home.

The inside was strange, barren. Unrecognizable.

Empty.

Off-White had left.

Gray waited, the same way he'd made Off-White wait.

Thin clouds covered the sky, glowing orange; the slugcats went about their cycles, rare clarity gone only to return when the next god died.

Cold winds whistled through twisted steel mountains.

Off-White walked among windswept ruin, bleary eyed and heavy limbed, song of wind through long-forgotten pipes urging him on. Orange sky glowed. His stomach was full, a lizard gifted by Beige on his back.

Another iterator had fallen. A slugcat more pious than him said the iterator had a sister who had fallen first, causing his own destruction.

First the sister, then the brother. Sadness shot through his heart.

Off-White had been here before: love came, love died. The pain never quite left, but always faded with time.

Loose metal scraped and groaned as he walked, well-used footpath winding through steel and iron like flood-rivers carving canyons from concrete. He started up the final hill to their, no, his, shelter.

For the first time in many cycles, Off-White could imagine he would live a normal life again. His pups were gone and he was too old to find a new mate, yes, but he still had a world to see, and a long-buried part of him contemplated journeying away again — to the corners of the world.

He crested the hill.

He locked eyes with Gray.

Tears formed; tears fell.

They hugged.

One signal passed between them:

'I'm sorry.'

Epilogue

A lifetime later, Gray buried his father.

Snow floated down in small flakes, final knell before the cycle's blizzard began in earnest. Gray sat on a chair he had carried here from the shelter he had grown up in, so far away.

Gray often took these moments, at dying cycle's end, to sit in the silence that had come over the world. The rest of his family had already gone inside to save the warmth in their fur.

He and his mate, Jet-Black, sweet as she was, had cared for his father on his deathbed. And now Off-White had reached the final stage of life: starting again.

Frigid wind whistled over crumbling stone terraces. He lived in the Old Farms now, on the opposite side of the facility. Snow piled on walls that once separated fields, concrete and dirt grids frozen over and lifeless.

Sometimes, it was said that when ice creaked and cracked, breaking silence, it was the wormgrasses that once ruled this area, trying to free themselves from icy imprisonment.

Jet-Black was in the shelter with their pups when a strange visitor arrived.

Tones of green spread across thick fur. She had three dots on her forehead, in the shape of a triangle. A sturdy young slugcat from the looks of it, gone journeying from home.

Snow crunched as she approached, leisurely. Gray leaned forward, acknowledging the visitor.

They locked eyes.

It was said: those who met ghosts never returned the same, their gaze a little colder, demeanor more offputting, like a little fragment of them didn't belong anymore. Jet-Black and Off-White sometimes saw it in Gray.

The visitor's eyes were cold blue-and-orange. Piercing. They bored through him layer by layer, familiar whispers of the ancient world behind them. He shivered.

Gray waved. *'Hello. Are you going somewhere?'*

A thin smile crossed Green's lips. Warm and unsettling. She made the cross — the symbol for karma ten, and Sliver of Straw.

'I am visiting Sliver of Straw. I have lost my way.'

Gray nodded, slowly. His ash fur had streaks of white now, his muscles more defined, cheeks hanging a little looser on his face. He wasn't too old, yet the weight of memory made itself apparent, one wrinkle and white whisker at a time.

'I understand. The snow has been thick recently. Easy to lose the trail.'

He looked into the mist; falling snow nestled into the fur on their heads like crowns of ice. Cold wind blew. *'The blizzards approach. I do not think you will reach the next shelter. You should stay the night here.'*

Green followed Gray's gaze into the mist. She chuckled. *'I have my ways, do not worry.'*

Gray shrugged. *'If you insist. You are aware Sliver no longer lives, yes?'*

Green nodded. *'I've been told. Have you seen her yourself?'*

'Absolutely. Spoke with her too.'

Green looked up casually, as if searching for something in the air above Gray. Her brow furrowed.

'Was she alive when you spoke?'

Gray never answered. They met eyes again. An understanding passed between them.

Distantly, a steel pipe crashed against another, ugly, makeshift wind chimes among the concrete. Gray was getting cold.

'She's sad there. Lonely.'

A mixed expression crossed Green's face; Gray couldn't quite read it. Melancholy washed off her in waves.

'I think she would like a visitor.'

Gray pointed out into the mist, tracing a route he could feel like gold thread in his mind.

'From here, follow the terrace until you meet the Retaining Wall. Then, past the Story of Gilled-Blue, to where the drainage system heats the ground, and the ice flows over shallow rivers. Follow that upstream until the debris becomes too thick, and the river a hundred streams. From there, up, with the signs, until you meet her.'

Green nodded, eyes closed, tracing the route in her head. *'You've put stories on the Retaining Wall?'*

'All of them, large enough to be seen from Sliver of Straw's back on a clear day. Gilled-Blue is just the most recent.'

'And among the most deserving,' Green added, *'She saved an iterator.'*

She looked wistfully out over the icy fields, cold winds blowing steadily harder. Empty space filled her eyes, heavy with memory.

'I couldn't do the same.'

Gray patted her on the back gently, leaning forward.

'Me neither. And even she could only do it by dooming another.'

Green sighed.

'That's true.'

A stiff wind whipped through their fur, the dangling pipe in the distance finally clattering to the hard, icy concrete. Gray's fingers grew numb.

'I think you should go now, if you want to reach shelter before the snows grow too heavy.'

'I will,' Green signed. *'thank you,'*

'The thanks is all mine, little one.'

A part of Gray knew he was the younger one here.

The visitor turned to leave, footsteps soft through thickening blankets of moving snow.

Gray thought at her, letting his intent flow free from his mind, the same way a friend once did for him.

"I recognize you."

Green looked over her shoulder, locking eyes with him one last time.

"And I think Sliver of Straw will, too."

She blinked, looked away, then disappeared into the mist, no response given. Gray would never know if she heard him.

Gray exhaled, slowly, wearily, breath hanging in air. His feet were going numb.

Gray stood and disappeared into the pipe.

The den was a modern thing: traded-for lanterns and cured lizard pelts lined the walls, insulating them from cold steel floor and raging blizzard.

Inside was his new world.

Gray grabbed his younger pup — a deep, burning orange — and kissed her on the forehead. She purred happily; his older pup, a rich navy blue at that rebellious in-between age, snorted mockingly. Gray kissed her on the forehead too.

Jet-Black laughed; an embarrassed blush crossed her daughter's face. She turned to Gray.

'What took so long? You seem cold.' She wiped snow from his brow, flicking back into the entrance pipe.

'We had a visitor. She was going to Sliver of Straw.'

She tilted her head at him. *'Why?'*

Gray made a sign, one becoming increasingly common in lantern-lined shelters: *'Pilgrim.'*

Jet Black nodded.

Deep-Orange looked at him, wide eyed. *'You visited Sliver of Straw too!'*

'Yes, I did.' Gray nodded, smiling.

She stared, wide eyes expectant.

'But I'll tell you of that when you're older.'

Deep-Orange pouted. Gray looked down apologetically.

'What if I told you the story of The Vulture That Never Quit again?'

Deep-Orange perked up; Deep-Blue sighed.

And Gray began.

Night came. Nothing woke them except the wind.

Maybe one day, he would tell.

Speak of the floods, the free-flowing winds.
Of twisted steel mountains, hungering spiders within.
Of demons and spirits, the shadows that walk between the worlds.
Of cities and ancients, of sunset, sunrise,
And the gift giving gods.

He gently took Jet-Black's paw, both in twilight between wake and sleep.

Maybe he would tell, someday, of the greatest truth Sliver had given him the chance to learn.

That was alive and free; his soul flowed within a river towards eternity, and the problem with ascension was being wedged between the rocks, stuck in place until the end of time.

Gray was made to be *here*. In this moment. Until the current bore him on.

She taught him that somewhere, someday, in a different form, in a different place:

That he and Orange would meet again.

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