

Syntax, Episode 12: On the Wrong Track

Content Warnings:

- Mentions of: injury, blood, cult rituals, cult worship, death, paranormal entities, religion, ecocide, cryptid creatures, demonic possession, illness, incarceration
- Loud Noises
- Explicit Language
- Physical violence
- Heavy breathing

Description: Silas convalesces while resuming his translation work, now the most critical part of VINCULA's Breach project. The rest of the Breachers attempt to brute force the problem, and a feeling of hopelessness creeps in on them. Alyx reveals a surprise she's been working on which may give the Breachers more information regarding VINCULA and how far they will go to see their mission accomplished.

Silas's Translation Date: May 7th, 2021

[INTRO MUSIC]

CASSIUS

Feels like no matter how hard I try, I'm always on the wrong track...

[WORK MIC OPENS, BREACH HUM, ARCHIVAL AMBIENCE]

SILAS

It matters not how far we run. It matters not how hard we fight. It all matters not. We run, we fight, we scream for mercy — and still the lands we tread will show us none. Where mercy has fled, so too hope follows, and it cannot be found.

I cannot see the difference in the faces of the hollow and the living now. We are all equally void, empty, poured out. Of the few who remain, none now cling to lofty, lost ideals of finding a home for us. We simply sway in the breeze, moving from one calamity to another, as a blade of grass jumping from furnace to furnace.

What is the purpose of our running? We are a doomed people. Our fate was set out for us. We should not be as two people, but one, unified in eternity. But now... those who see not, and hear not, but remain, are numbered as many as the remnant who think and see still. A great multitude, herded about — immune to peril, and blind to the grief that befalls their children.

SILAS

Theirs is the lesser evil, now. We had thought them unfortunate, but behold: it is we who have the greater misfortune, for we teeter on the brink of extinction. None shall remember we struggled for even this bare existence.

If not for a brave few — the cunning and the strong — I should not even be able to make this record. We emerged from our ritual, led on lies of a heavenly place, and swiftly saw our leaders dispatched by unseen assailants. The strong protected us, and we were able to complete our passage. The survivors dealt with bitter cold, the likes of which have not been seen in many journeys — for many *seasons*. We walked upon water, solid deeper than we could dig with our tools, and only found refuge when the cunning *made us* a dwelling, for their practice had made them very wise in the ways of survival in a land of hatred.

I asked my people, after a number of days had passed, why we chose to stay at all. The answer was always the same: at least the sun touches our faces once more. We fight, we freeze, we die... but we do so under a clear sky.

[BREACH HUM FADES]

There's a lot to digest here. The latest *Nabal'kutul* had, apparently, disastrous results, and I find this mention of the "remnant" being as many as the ones who "see not, and hear not, but remain", quite interesting as well. I think there's also something implied in the distinction of "the strong" and "the cunning"... perhaps an attempt to organize groups by their uses.

SILAS

Based on this latest passage, I could easily guess “the strong” to be a warrior caste — but “the cunning” are a little tougher to identify. They seem to be wise men, or artisans of some kind. They could even be hunters or survivalists. Somehow, the two working together were able to preserve the fraction of their people that remained. It seems the author of the last portion died upon arrival, and left behind an embittered people...

There’s also the point of this mention of “clear sky”. In the Akkadian, *Sky* has the same symbol as *Anu*, the Akkadian supreme or highest god. I bring this up because they didn’t hesitate to give Anu the Akkadian symbol, although there is a *different* character for this in the unknown language in the back of the book. If my theory about the other *important* sigils is correct, then those sigils are representing an entirely separate pantheon from the Akkadian deities — given that they likely had some idea of these other gods, but refused to translate them into Akkadian, as a wilful decision on the part of the author.

Perhaps to set them apart? Perhaps, as I increasingly start to suspect, this group had a separate belief system and culture — fully distinct from the Akkadians — and this two language book is simply a way of attempting to preserve the unknown language, using a language that was more commonly known... Indeed, there may be nothing left of these people... save the evidence which rests here, on my very desk, and a few scratches on some *very weird* hunks of rock that keep appearing...

[STATIC]

SILAS

All this, and I still have... a good chunk of the book to go. I thought I would be going faster by now — but *just* when I get in the flow, the author up and dies, and I have to get used to a new morphology, *or* the scene changes, and I go from knowing all the lurid ways to describe a *stinking* pit of hell to finding out all the ways to describe a *freezing* pit of hell. That, and... despite myself, I can't help but feel a bit morose after translating these latest passages. It's always been grim stuff, but I'm feeling... closed off.

Like, in the very tiniest of ways, I'm reliving the desperation of each author. Each one hopes for better things, and instead is delivered into more agony and watches their people dwindling down to... what might be a small number indeed, by now. There's always such high hopes, mingled with fear, around these *Nabal'kutul* rituals, and they never seem to deliver... but they kept trying...

[CHAIR CREAKS]

SILAS

I certainly can't keep trying anymore. I've hit a bit of a mental wall on this next bit. I'll return shortly.

[MIC CLOSES]

[PERSONAL MIC OPENS, SILAS RISES FROM HIS DESK]

SILAS

Time to see what I can scrounge up...

[STEPS, DOOR OPENS, VINCULA INTERIOR AMBIENCE]

SILAS

As usual, not many people about...

Well, where to begin? This is... This is a bit difficult. I don't have a lot to report on... but this is the first time the Breachers have gone on an expedition without me, and I wanted to keep everyone in the loop if they listen to these recordings I make while they're away... It may interest you all to know I was a *little* miffed I couldn't go exploring again. Despite a week of bed rest, I still get a bit winded just from quick jaunts from my office to the cafeteria and back — and you certainly have your legwork cut out for you, as I'm sure you're painfully aware of at this very moment... But I do miss y'all.

It's almost more horrifying being stuck here at VINCULA with... basically no friendly faces left. That's a good trivia question for today, if anyone *does* care to listen to this: Would you rather be going into the Breach with the full squad, or be alone at VINCULA with only Miss Vaux to contend with? Come to me with your answers so I know you're all staying up to date on the latest *riveting* translation newsletter.

[STEPS APPROACHING AS SILAS CONTINUES STEPPING]

SILAS

Ahh, a rare co-worker sighting. I shall attempt to make contact.

[STEPS BECOME EQUAL]

SILAS

Good afternoon!

[STEPS FADE]

SILAS

... And, as per usual, a nod and a shallow smile. That looked like one of the lab technicians with a federal agent... wonder if she's having to make a demonstration of secrecy. Granted, I never get much in the way of words from anyone outside of the Breachers here. The few times I *did* try to corner someone, they gave me an exasperated lecture about what Miss Vaux would do if they were caught procrastinating and hurried away.

That, coupled with our continuing lack of contact with the outside world really makes me feel like I'm living on a different planet. I wonder if the pandemic is still going on out there. That's how *little* I've been able to hear about anything going on beyond here at VINCULA. I should ask Alyx if she's had any luck with her... escapades...

[DOOR OPENS, CAFETERIA AMBIENCE]

SILAS

Oh, good, it's not too busy, once again, so I can head straight to the *source* of that wondrous odor... I do believe I catch, through a heady waft of cooking oil and cleaning products, a faint sniff of... God's own elixir of wakefulness!

[STEPS ECHO IN CAFETERIA, A BIT FASTER, DOOR PUSH]

SILAS

Hmm, is anyone... here... No? Ahh, too bad... I suppose I shall... avail myself then.

[CUP SLIDES OFF SHELF]

SILAS

Vessel acquired... mere *moments* away from blissful!...

[DOOR SWINGS OPEN]

JUNE

Y'here for a pick-me-up, Silas?

SILAS

Mrs. Dawson! Yes, I was just helping myself... Do you need any help with that?!

JUNE

You don't worry your little head about me! You've got a few more weeks at *least* before you can go trusting those arms of yours!

[HEAVY CLANG OF KITCHEN EQUIPMENT]

JUNE

Shew! There we go... Now then! Let's get you something refreshing... something J won't be climbing up one side and down the other of us for!

SILAS

Mrs. Dawson, please... I have observed the proper way to eat and drink these seven days without fail. That's not even counting the first day I was basically nurtured by a needle in my arm! I have behaved *very well* and I *need* caffeine.

JUNE

You *need* to listen to doctor's orders, Silas!

[FRIDGE OPENING, BOTTLES RATTLE]

JUNE

Fruit juice, water — I can even whip up one of those green shakes that taste like lawn shavings that Cassius likes so much. But you've got at least a few more weeks to fully recover!

SILAS

But... Mrs. Dawson... I'm afraid I won't make it... it's getting so dark... I can see the light at the end of the tunnel... for the second time... why is this becoming a familiar sight...

JUNE

You stop that, now! You're lucky enough as it is I didn't get a chance to see you before the doctors cleaned you up. Cassius said you were a *sight* to see on top of that tree — and you still barely have any color in your cheeks, young man! Now drink your cranberry juice and be happy!

[JUICE POURS]

SILAS

Yes, Mrs. Dawson...

JUNE

Not so bad, is it? Other than dying of coffee withdrawal, how are you holding up?

SILAS

My head hurts... and I don't think it's purely from the lack of caffeine. I'm getting back into the swing of translation, but there's a few factors that are making it even more complicated than usual... author changes, new words, that sort of thing.

JUNE

You're swinging at the translation and the translation is swinging back, hmm?

SILAS

Certainly feels that way... I'm grateful for the chance to do some heavy lifting with my brain rather than my body, but I almost — *almost*, mind you — wish I was out with the Breachers again, right now. Mostly so I could be keeping an eye on them...

JUNE

Aww, don't you fret, Silas. They're in capable hands out there. You oughta know!

SILAS

Oh, don't I... Not a day has gone by that I haven't been reminded of this fact.

JUNE

Good! Usually I'd do a bit of scolding on someone for being so boastful, but I'm pleased as punch y'all were able to make it back in one piece after *that* trip! You must've had Cassius workin' overtime!

SILAS

Don't we all... Between Vaux and the Breachers, Cassius never gets a dull moment.

JUNE

They sure seem to enjoy it, though! I /love hearing about the wild creatures and crazy sights y'all see out there! Maybe one day, if we start to understand how it all works, I might get to take a peek myself! Though, maybe I'd be just as happy watchin' it on TV. Always enjoyed seeing nature films, but never cared much to be in fightin' distance!

SILAS

That makes the two of us. Nature can happily *stay* in nature, and I'll stay in my corner. Though, like Cassius always worries about, there's a good chance VINCULA will be looking to make all corners their own...

JUNE

I certainly hope not! I think it's wonderful we're gettin' to see and understand all these things, but we've got enough strip malls and interstates to last anyone a lifetime. Hopefully the government sees it the same way... Though that's probably too much to hope for as well, ain't it?

SILAS

In cases like this, I feel the best way to advocate is to educate. We must document carefully and, eventually, let others know about this strange, new world, and see what we stand to lose if it's not preserved and left to its own devices. But that's... a lot of work... for someone as light-headed as me...

JUNE

Oh my *goodness!* You are not gonna leave this *alone*, are you, you scoundrel!

SILAS

What if I... promised to drink *two* glasses of juice?

JUNE

Two glasses? *And* you'll still get some rest later?

SILAS

On my life, I swear!

JUNE

Hmm... Alright. I'll relent... Just this once! One cup of coffee, coming up.

[JUNE GRABS CARAFE, COFFEE POURS]

JUNE

Oh, if it isn't Miss Ray of Sunshine coming down the hall! Here to make a nuisance of herself again.

SILAS

Oop, better put this away, then...

MISS VAUX

We must be processing these samples on a 24 hour basis! We can ill afford any slack on turnarounds; the Breachers have to continue their Linkstone experiments on Breach Two! While we wait for our linguist to make a breakthrough, this brute force approach must suffice! I will accept—

[MIC CLOSES]

[WORK MIC OPENS, BREACHWOOD AMBIENCE]

CASSIUS

Breacher team lead Cassius with an update for Miss Vaux... I don't know *whose* bright idea it was to send us to Breach Two twice a week, but I'm kicking their ass as soon as I can feel my feet again!

GREG

Somewhere between 5 and 10 miles one way. At least it *is* every other day... I don't mind the flower pickin' and picture takin' days, but this mountain hiking reminds me too much of basic for my liking...

CASSIUS

We're at the halfway point on the return route, and we were unsuccessful in opening Breach Two. I used the... *strangely familiar* water sample VINCULA provided us on the Linkstone, and did not get any sign of activation. Yes, we walked around the loop to be sure. None of the other samples worked, either.

CASSIUS

That checks off... let's see, water from the acid springs, water from the Lullaby Forest River, saltwater from Earth, a handful of mushroom spores from the dead Breachwood, scales from the Giant Moth, and various other plant materials including shed bark from a Breachwood tree. I can even write off human blood, cuz Lizzy, like an absolute madwoman, cut herself when she stumbled and fell as we climbed the mountain, and *she* decided to test it for herself.

ELIZABETH

Not my brightest idea...

CASSIUS

I'm not gonna lie, I half expected to hear from some elder god when you poured your own *goddamn blood* on the pedestal. You sure you're still Lizzy and not some demon that took over our friend's skin?

ELIZABETH

I still feel like myself... but how would I know that for sure? Wait... And why would I tell you if I was?

ALYX

Quick, tell us something only Lizzy would know!

JEREMIAH

But then how would we know if it's true?!

ALYX

Oh, that's a good point... Maybe... tell us about your weird dreams again! We'd know about that!

ELIZABETH

I'd... really rather not...

ALYX

Ooh! Ooh! Tell us... your *true name*.

ELIZABETH

My *what*?

ALYX

All demons have a true name — and once spoken, they must obey the commands of whoever said it!

ELIZABETH

Again... Why would I just *tell* you that?...

ALYX AND JEREMIAH

The power of Christ compels you!

ALYX

Hey, maybe we should try holy water next time! We might have to cleanse the Breach pedestal anyway.

CASSIUS

Do you see what I have to deal with here?! People with bad ideas on all fronts! You have us spending every other day scrambling around Gaia collecting whatever odds and ends we can find, and the rest of the days are spent making these *stupid long* trips out to the mountains. Did I mention it's still *very dangerous* on that last leg? We've noticed our friendly neighborhood Thunder Bird making a few rounds — but as long as we get to cover under a Lullaby Tree in time, it doesn't bother us. We've also been keeping an eye out for the weird snake-bear hybrid...

ALYX

The Cobrear! The Cobra Bear!

ELIZABETH

Please no.

CASSIUS

Not the working title for this creature. We'll have to have some more naming sessions if we get any time to catch our breath in the future. Anyway, about those plans to try and speed up the time it takes to get to Breach Two and back...

CASSIUS

While both Breaches are *technically* able to be moved, Breach One is lodged under the roots of a Breachwood Tree, and Breach Two is partially buried in a cave. The amount of work required to dislodge either Breach would be *enormous*, and would come with a lot of destruction caused to their surroundings. The oh-so-valuable Breaches might be broken, too. I'm sure VINCULA understands how much of a no-go that much environmental damage is, so it's up to us to find every shortcut we can while avoiding the worst that Gaia has to offer.

ALYX

The Breaches seem pretty tough, though. Not that VINCULA would let me try, but I can't seem to get a "souvenir" from the Breach's stonework...

CASSIUS

So it's out of the question, then! We'll keep making this little trip, and after we get Breach Two open, maybe we can go back to the *real* job of exploring more of Gaia. Who am I kidding? I think I have a pretty clear idea of what's coming next... Cassius out!

[MIC CLOSES]

[PERSONAL MIC OPENS, APARTMENT AMBIENCE, NO MUSIC]

SILAS

Damn it, damn it, damn it! I overslept. It's already light out, the Breachers should be back by now...

[JACKET NOISES, APARTMENT DOOR OPENS, STEPS ON STAIRS THEN OUTSIDE]

SILAS

Going to keep this up — just in case anything *e/se* has gone awry...

[STEPS, OUTSIDE VINCULA AMBIENCE]

SILAS

Hopefully, if there was trouble, someone would have bothered to reach out to me by now. Here goes nothing...

[STEPS CONTINUE, VINCULA'S DOOR OPENS, VINCULA INTERIOR AMBIENCE]

SILAS

Oddly quiet... as usual. Good sign...

I'll check the Breach lab first. If I'm not too late, I might see if the closing team is still around...

[STEPS, BREACH LAB DOOR OPENS, BREACH LAB AMBIENCE]

JEREMIAH

Hey, Silas! What are you doing up?

SILAS

Just woke up, actually — I was trying to stay awake but lost the battle against sleep. Is everyone alright?

JEREMIAH

Yeah, for the most part. Lizzy cut her hand and then put some of her blood on the Linkstone, and she might be demon possessed now. No biggie.

SILAS

W... What?

ALYX

She's *fiiiiine!* At least until you start hearing her chant in Latin or something... then we might need you to decipher it. We may need to know who she wants to eat first.

JEREMIAH

Hey! Quit chattin' and hop in the Breach! We still gotta pop out the Linkstone!

ALYX

I'm workin' on it!

JEREMIAH

I'll be right behind you, don't worry!

[STEPS FADE]

JEREMIAH

Cass and Lizzy went ahead to the sample lab, if you wanna check on 'em. Greg took our data over to Vaux — till no closer to opening Breach Two, by the way. Now I gotta hop along and keep Alyx company and get ready for tomorrow's journey before we hit the hay.

SILAS

Sounds good.

[TWO SETS OF STEPS, BREACH LAB DOOR OPENS]

JEREMIAH

Good luck handling Cass, by the way! They were *hopping* mad about some plans VINCULA has to make the trip "easier"...

SILAS

Lovely.

ALYX

Hurry up! It's dark in here!

[BREACH DOOR LAB CLOSES, VINCULA INTERIOR AMBIENCE
AND STEPS; SECOND PAIR OF STEPS]

SILAS

Hey, Greg! Are you looking for something?

GREG

Hey, Silas. You ain't seen Lizzy round here, have ya?

SILAS

Not yet. I just caught J and Alyx in the Breach Lab. What's up?

GREG

Well, she was supposed to drop some stuff off with Cassius in the specimen lab, but they said they ain't seen her yet. And she cut herself on the way up the mountain, so I was gonna check up on her.

SILAS

Oh. Maybe she made her way down to medical?...

GREG

Yeah, I thought the same, but I just came from there. I'm headed outside to check her trailer. Cassius is still back in the lab, if you're lookin' for them.

SILAS

Thanks. Good luck finding Lizzy; hope she's alright!

GREG

I'm sure she is, probably just feelin' a bit poorly... At least I *hope* that's what's happening... Her trailer is the one on the left, yeah?

SILAS

Yes, next to mine.

GREG

Let's see what's up, then...

[STEPS CONTINUE, DOOR OPEN, SAMPLE LAB AMBIENCE]

SILAS

Uhm... anybody home?!

Did they leave already? I'll just have a seat, then...

[CHAIR SQUEAKS & ROLLS]

SILAS

Uhh... Cassius?

[CASSIUS SNORES]

SILAS

Cassius? My God, I think this is the first time I've seen them when they're not moving at ninety miles an hour. They must be exhausted...

Cassius, are you alright –

[PAPERS SHUFFLE, CHAIR ROLL AND SHAKE, CAN RATTLES]

CASSIUS

(awakens with a start)

SILAS

(gasps back)

CASSIUS

Hey, what's the big idea? Can't you see I'm working here?

SILAS

Yes, I see that. Planted firmly into your specimen log. Facefirst, no less.

CASSIUS

Ugh, I'm so *tired*. I don't *wanna* make Linkstone notes today. I have to keep careful track about everything we use on the Linkstone — and sure enough, there's *still* gonna be some stuffed shirt VINCULA tech at the pre-mission brief with a dozen more suggestions. This is so *booooooring*.

[ARMS COLLAPSE TO TABLE]

CASSIUS

I didn't come here to stick plants on a glowing rock like some kind of witch doctor! I'm only getting to do *half* the job I thought I was hired for.

SILAS

They're serious? About the plan to brute force their way through Breach Two?

CASSIUS

Yep. At least until *you* make some kind of breakthrough. Speaking of which, how's that coming? Please tell me there's some relief in sight...

SILAS

Unfortunately, no.

CASSIUS

Ahh, crap...

SILAS

The sigil used for Breach Two and its matching Linkstone aren't found in the text at all. Well — there are *closely matching* symbols, but no perfect fits. I'm afraid this might be referring to something specific — but without further context, my efforts are at a standstill until I can get a better handle on the language. I may be able to guess it soon, though!

CASSIUS

Not soon enough for me. Tomorrow's another easy day of collecting, but unless you get that breakthrough soon, it's twice a week to Breach Two — *on top* of having to make these gathering trips. It's a long walk to Breach Two, by the way. You're the only one on the team that hasn't made a full trek.

SILAS

I'm sure I'll get the pleasure eventually. VINCULA never lets me miss out for long.

CASSIUS

I *hope* we're not still making the trip by the time you're able to join us again... but who am I kidding — even after we open the damn thing, they're not gonna let us go back to just exploring Gaia again.

CASSIUS

It'll be off to wherever the *next* destination is, and if my luck keeps up, there'll be *another* Breach over there, too. But, I don't know how we're gonna keep walking past a certain point. It's already about half a day to *get to* Breach Two — that doesn't leave any wiggle room to be exploring other areas.

SILAS

Maybe we *will* get lucky and the next Breach will lead into the cold void of space. Although somehow, I doubt even a solid dead end would interrupt VINCULA's plans...

CASSIUS

Oh! Speaking of which... I got a job for you.

SILAS

Another job, you mean?

CASSIUS

Whining already? I promise this one's easy... but not here. I'm completely wiped for the day, clearly — I'm calling it quits for now. Let's go.

[CASSIUS RISES, CHAIR MOVES, STEPS BEGIN

SILAS

Oh, one of *those* kinds of jobs... You know, unlike Greg, I'm not very well suited for stealth missions?

CASSIUS

And you won't ever be if you keep blathering on about it!

SILAS

(heaved sigh)

[SAMPLE LAB DOORS OPEN, VINCULA INT AMB AND STEPS]

CASSIUS

You seen Lizzy by the way?

SILAS

No, I bumped into Greg as he went looking, but she's the only Breacher I haven't seen yet.

CASSIUS

Goody. One more thing to worry about.

SILAS

What happened, anyway? Greg says she got injured?

CASSIUS

Yeah – that's not the only thing, though.

SILAS

Aaaaand?

CASSIUS

Ugh, there's no way to put this delicately. Listen, don't freak out...

[STEPS PAUSE]

SILAS

What do you *mean* don't freak out??

CASSIUS

What did I just say?!

[STEPS BEGIN

SILAS

Fine, fine! Just tell me what happened!

CASSIUS

Yes, Lizzy injured herself going up the mountain. Nothing serious at all – uh, she cut her hand scraping some rocks when she fell down on the ascent. J bandaged her up, and we moved on, but when we got to the Linkstone site, she popped that bad boy back open and smeared some of her own blood on it.

SILAS

Well then. Still didn't work, I assume?

CASSIUS

No, and I'm not sure I would've been thrilled even if it did. Kinda grateful about it, for once.

SILAS

I am... comforted and disquieted, all at once. And now she's missing?!

CASSIUS

I mean, we all came out of the Breach together just fine – she was a bit sullen but fairly typical otherwise. Pretty much the same since we lost Fred, really. Then we parted ways to do our post expedition chores, and I never saw her turn up at the sample lab.

SILAS

I'm glad you sent Greg after her. That's... That's pretty crazy. For once, I'm at a loss for words...

CASSIUS

You and me both. Well, I was, for most of the trip here. Now I've got *plenty* to say. Forget what VINCULA thinks – that could've gone wrong in so many ways. Still could! We don't *understand* the Breach. We *use* it, we have some ideas of its properties, but *no idea* how it does its thing. I'm not into hocus pocus bullshit, but I'm not playing around with it either.

[DOORS OPEN, OUTSIDE AMBIENCE, STEP OUTDOORS]

CASSIUS

Alright, time to chill here for a sec...

SILAS

Catch some fresh air?

CASSIUS

Yeah, that. Sure. No conspiracies here.

SILAS

Ahh, I see...

CASSIUS

Should be able to get a *little* break from suspicious eyes out here. I need one more thing before I can tell you about your little chore.

SILAS

Very mysterious!

CASSIUS

Oh, here comes Greg. He... He looks worried.

SILAS

But not in a rush, at least.

[FOOTSTEPS GRADUALLY APPROACH]

CASSIUS

Any luck?

GREG

Yeah, I found her.

CASSIUS

That's – good. You don't sound thrilled about it.

GREG

Yeah, I mean... I knocked on her door and she talked to me a bit from the other side. Wouldn't open up, just said she needed some space and that she was fine.

SILAS

Hmm...

CASSIUS

Let's see how she feels after some sleep. Thanks, Greg.

GREG

Anytime. Gotta keep an eye on all the kiddos, you know. Might see if June's still up and if she wants to check on her – those two been gettin' along real well.

SILAS

Good idea!

CASSIUS

Best of luck.

[DOOR OPENS, FOOTSTEPS FADE]

CASSIUS

I was gonna pick on him, but didn't seem like the right time. Lizzy's not the *only* one June's been getting along with!

SILAS

Mrs. Dawson could make sparkling conversation with a brick wall...
Greg should count himself lucky.

CASSIUS

We all should! I'd probably be in lockup right now if she didn't stop me that day...

SILAS

Good for you June was there. I don't know what I would have done.

CASSIUS

Uh, would you have snitched on me?!

SILAS

No – but I probably wouldn't have stopped you, either. If it's any consolation, I would have written to you in prison. Might have a hard time getting the letters to you, but I'd try.

CASSIUS

Good thing it didn't come to that, then.

SILAS

You don't want to read what I have to say?

CASSIUS

No, no – that's not what I meant. It's just, you know, better to hear it in person. Long distance sucks.

SILAS

Hmm, fair enough.

So how are you holding up?

CASSIUS

Ugh.

SILAS

What?

CASSIUS

You're saying that like I'm under observation.

SILAS

No, I just...

CASSIUS

Sorry, I'm sorry. I'm fine. I've been thinking a lot lately, and had a lot to do, but I'm fine. I didn't mean to bite back.

SILAS

I understand. I'm glad to hear it.

CASSIUS

What about you, bookworm?

SILAS

Still very much a worm in a book. Progressing slowly and no end in sight.

CASSIUS

Hmm...

SILAS

Just have to... do what I usually do with a difficult translation. Take it one day at a time, and be happy for the little breakthroughs, the tiny moments of triumph.

CASSIUS

Sappy.

SILAS

It's true, though!

CASSIUS

That makes it *sappier*! What happened to you, anyway? Where's the doom and gloom, we're-all-gonna-die part?

SILAS

It didn't feel right, at that moment. We've all been hanging our heads low for the past week or so, and Mrs. Dawson told me to try and look at the bright side of things.

CASSIUS

Feels *wrong*, coming from you – like you're speaking with June's mouth.

SILAS

Would you rather I say it's all a bit pointless and we're just doing our best to scratch our names on something hard enough to last the test of time, while entropy breaks it all down to stardust anyway?

CASSIUS

Nah, now it's *too* dark. Maybe find a happy gray area?

SILAS

Let's see...

Maybe it does fade, but it can be nice while it lasts. I... I thought it might all be over, that day with the Thunderbird – and I really didn't want it to end. Even if my feet hurt, and there's danger at every corner, and the company is... *tolerable*, at best...

CASSIUS

Pffft! Speak for yourself!

SILAS

Of all the things I missed, I couldn't help but think chief among them was this whole venture. That I wouldn't get to see more, see the *end* – Like getting halfway through a series and never getting to read the finale. There's *no* worse feeling!

CASSIUS

What's the *end* to you, though? It's looking like we could explore Gaia for a lifetime by itself, and now we've got a whole other Breach to contend with.) Is the *end* the translation of the book?

SILAS

No, I don't think so... You're right, it's all quite vast and beyond me, and probably beyond my lifetime. The people who got humanity into space won't get a chance to see us explore the rest of the cosmos, if we ever make it. That's a sobering thought.

SILAS

I guess, to me, the end would be at least having an *inkling* of what's going on. Feels very much like we are just at the beginning... and I really didn't want it to end, without even knowing anything else about the Breaches... the ziggurat... the strange species, the whole world of Gaia, this language – all of it! I want to try and understand it, and hear the *story* behind it.

I guess it all fades, but it can shine brightly, in the short time it lasts.

CASSIUS

Well, let's blind some people, then – or at least VINCULA. I'm sure I can outshine them.

SILAS

Of that, I'm strangely certain.

CASSIUS

Ahh, here's our fellow rebel...

[DOOR OPENS, STEPS]

CASSIUS

Psst! Over here!

[STEPS]

ALYX

Hey Cass! Si!

SILAS

Oh, this is nothing but trouble, indeed...

CASSIUS

You thought it was gonna be something easy and safe? Do you even *know* me? You got it, Alyx?

ALYX

Yep! As much as I could. It's a few days worth of recordings, but I don't have anything from the most recent experiments – probably missing the last day or two... I'll have to get those later.

CASSIUS

Perrrrrfect. Good job.

ALYX

Anytime!

SILAS

What's this about?

CASSIUS

So, I know we were a bit crushed after the trip when you got hurt and Fred died, Silas – but I started to get curious what VINCULA was up to with Specimen One.

SILAS

Up to?

CASSIUS

Wanna bring him up to speed, Alyx?

ALYX

So, you know how I've been *oh so helpful* around the VINCULA offices?

SILAS

I recall, yes.

ALYX

Well, Cassius wanted to learn more about what VINCULA has been doing with Specimen One...

SILAS

Wait, they aren't sharing that information? I assumed Cassius would be helping study the creature at some point...

CASSIUS

Nope! I gave it a rest for a bit – had a lot on my mind after we came back with it, you know... but I started poking about and asking too many questions, and I finally got the “It’s being *handled*, Cassius”, from Vaux. “Matter of national *security*, Cassius.” Well, I wasn’t gonna let that slide.

ALYX

I was helping some of the folks down in sample processing – they’ve got *tons* of notes and logs about the specimens we’ve been bringing back, from material scientists to epidemiologists... trying to make sure we’re not about to start another outbreak with something we bring back from Gaia. Well, I found out that they have a *whole other* department handling Specimen One. Seems to be a lot more federal agents than scientists, but I guess that makes sense. If Specimen One really *is* sentient, we’ve basically brought a real alien back to Earth.

CASSIUS

Yeah, yeah – so what’d you find?

ALYX

I don’t have anything juicy like direct notes from anyone in that department, but I *did* find something useful while I was helping security out with their data storage. Turns out the cams that watch that department are on the same closed circuit as the cams in the rest of the building. All that footage stored on a server I had access to. It’s a *looooot* of recording, so I’ve had to make a few trips and be careful about downloading it, but here... I finally have it!

[POCKET ZIPS, FABRIC SLIDES, JOSTLES]

SILAS

A hard drive with security footage?! That's very dangerous, Alyx...

ALYX

I was careful! No one's gonna know.

CASSIUS

And this is where *you* come in. You've got a bit more time to yourself than the rest of us, and I really wanna know what kinds of things they're doing to the poor critter. I'll try to go over some of it when I can, but I suspect it's literal hours of boredom with a few events sprinkled in. Seems right up your alley, yeah?

SILAS

I resent this notion, but I begrudgingly agree. I'll take a look when I can. I'm curious to know as well...

CASSIUS

Good. Something else to keep ahold of, if we ever do make it out of this mess and want *anyone* to believe us. I'm gonna see VINCULA held accountable for their actions here, whatever those may be. For now, I wanna check on Lizzy myself before I turn in. I'm headed out to the trailers. You coming with?

SILAS

No, I'm going to grab something to eat before I call it. I can make some headway on this tonight – I'm not very tired yet.

CASSIUS

Lookit Mr. Night Owl here! Well, some of us have been walking all day, so I might not see you till tomorrow. Catch ya later.

[STEPS DEPART]

SILAS

Get some rest, you two! I'll see you at the briefing tomorrow.

ALYX

Night, Si! I hope Lizzy's OK...

CASSIUS

Greg said he found her at her trailer. We'll just see if she's alright – she might not be very talkative.

[DOOR OPENS, VINCULA INTERIOR AMBIENCE, STEPS]

SILAS

Out of the frying pan... This went from corporate espionage to spying on the damn government. Still, I'm not gonna let Cassius down...

[STEPS APPROACH]

SILAS

Who could that be, wandering around at this hour?...

[FOOTSTEPS STOP]

SILAS

Elizabeth?!

ELIZABETH

Oh, hey, Silas! Where are you headed?

SILAS

Uhh, I was... I was headed to the cafeteria to grab something to eat before retiring for the evening. Did you... Did you sneak back in?

ELIZABETH

Sneak back in? What do you mean?

SILAS

Cassius and I were standing outside VINCULA's door chatting for a while, we didn't see you come in...

ELIZABETH

What are you talking about? Why would I be coming in? I've been in the briefing room getting grilled by Miss Vaux since we got back. They wanted to know all about what happened at Breach Two today. I went to the labs afterwards but everyone was already gone.

SILAS

Oh... Oh, I see... Well, Cassius and Alyx went out to your trailer to look for you. Are you feeling well?

ELIZABETH

Oh, Cassius told you all about it already, then? Yes, I'm *quite* fine, thank you. Now if you don't mind, I don't need anymore pop quizzes today.

SILAS

Sorry! I just...

[STEPS FADE AWAY]

SILAS

What the *hell* is going on?! I... I need to...

[MIC CLOSES]

[WORK MIC OPENS, ARCHIVAL AMBIENCE, BREACH HUM]

SILAS

The caverns of darkness and fire reminded the old ones too much of what befell our people, and the worms ever gnawed at us and our homes. This new land is harsh, but it is bearable. Here in the shelter of our own creation, the work of our hands and minds shields us from what lies beyond. We learned the lessons well, and applied ourselves to the task of carving a home out of the... rocks. Rocks of water.

Translator's note: I believe this to mean ice, based on context and other clues... Fairly simple use of two words combined where none exists in the original language. There are other ways to translate things like this, but... It looks like the author took a shortcut and slammed the symbols for water and rocks together. Just making a note of it here, in case that isn't quite right... Resuming translation.

Warmth arrives from out of the earth, borne on great, hollow trunks set deep in the ice. Where there is warmth, water pools below, and we fish for our sustenance. Few creatures live outside the safety of the trunks... The stalks? Another odd way of saying this... I wonder if they meant more like "tree trunks". I'll save this symbol for later study... Feels like I'm back to barely making headway. Let's see what I have for the rest...

Our greatest danger now lies beyond. While we set about bringing all our people through, and making homes for those who remain, we are confined to this place. Creatures roam the white plains beyond, which cast no shadow and are seen not by the eyes.

SILAS

Woe befalls any who cross their paths, and already we have watched, helpless, while some of our warrior brethren are carried off screaming, until the wind and the howling become as one. None have returned, and we know not how to seek them, nor stop these dread monsters from stealing us away. It is as if the very air has turned against us, and spits on us for our sorrows.

I dread the days to come... already, I have heard the people talk of what is to be done. Many are afraid of this world, but neither can we return. We have food enough, but it may not last. There is nothing to grow here, no soil for cultivating, and no seed to be planted even if there were. Slowly, their thoughts dare to turn to the future once more. They say this is no world for children or empires. We are sore in our hearts still from the last journey, but already they speak of another passage... another Nabal'kutul...

CASSIUS

Nabal *what?*

[BREACH HUM FADES]

SILAS

Uhh... Nabal... Nabal'kutul. That's the closest pronunciation I have. It's a word that means... like "crossing over" – but it has quite a few meanings, actually. It can mean going over terrain, usually a river, or it can mean going to a place, even abstractly – like entering someone's thoughts because you're thinking of them. It carries the idea of transitioning to something or somewhere else, or being in revolt or opposition to something and moving on from it.

CASSIUS

Interesting... Sorry, go on.

SILAS

It's quite alright – sometimes going over things I think I have a grasp on is just what I need... Let's see, where was I...

Ahh, here's another annoying "bridge" moment.

CASSIUS

What's that?

SILAS

There are no indicators in the text for changes of authorship or passage of time, but I've gotten the gist that there are gaps in the narrative where time passes or the narrator changes. Usually I realize that based on how the sentence structures morph, and the use of new words that the previous author never resorted to. But there's a symbol *this* author in particular uses that's just a series of these curved lines.

I think they were trying to indicate this was supposed to be a break, but it all just gets lumped together on the page, and it goes on without context *for* the break. The curved line made me think of a bridge, so that's what I call it.

CASSIUS

Hmm... I'm kind of following this so far. Kind of. Still just a bunch of scribbles to me. This looks *nuts* hard to piece together...

SILAS

Hmm... *C'est simple comme bonjour*, I suppose.

CASSIUS

Oh, *hell*, no. Even if it was, I'd be saying *au revoir*.

SILAS

(laughs)

CASSIUS

What's so funny?!

SILAS

You... Sorry, you caught me off guard, there. You know the phrase, then? "Easy as saying hello"?

CASSIUS

I know just the teeniest bit of French, and you saying it dredged up some memories. Parents made me take lessons, said it would make me more "*classy*".

SILAS

Not a great reason, but a reason all the same. Time spent learning a language is time well spent. I only dabbled in it myself... I hope it wasn't all pain and suffering for you?

CASSIUS

Not really. I got to go to Paris for a bit. Was nice not being under their roof, right up until they found out I was... doing extracurricular activities.

SILAS

Mmhmm. A little trysting by the Eiffel Tower?

CASSIUS

Sailor never kisses and tells!

SILAS

No, that's not your style. You were probably there for some riot or other.

CASSIUS

Oh, yeah, like you can't get *those* in the states!... but yes, you're right. Let's just say I got quite a bit of free thinking done there.

SILAS

Perhaps one day, I'll get to go.

CASSIUS

You've never been?!

SILAS

No, I... never really had the time. Or money, for that matter. All of that went into education, and books.

CASSIUS

Is it possible I *am* more cultured than you, after all? Mr. "Gaia's a great name", "wow, how do you know French, strange biologist person?", has never even seen Versailles or gone cruising on the Seine? I'm in shock.

SILAS

I... didn't think this was a point that was up for debate. Yes, I know some history and know some language things, but I've rarely left my hometown, let alone my home *state*, before now – except for college.

CASSIUS

Really now? Man, I got dragged everywhere. Mostly unwillingly. To be fair, the company I had was *awful*, but some of the scenery was nice.

SILAS

Hmm... Maybe when this is all said and done, I should take the opportunity, and travel more.

CASSIUS

I don't know if you could trust yourself to do it. You already get lost enough on Gaia.

SILAS

That's!... a bit of an exaggeration!

CASSIUS

Not by much!

SILAS

Anyway, I thought you said you weren't going to be distracting me.

CASSIUS

Oop, finally stepped on his toes! This book work is just as dry as I predicted, anyway. Fine, I'll leave you to your mad ramblings about Ice and Paris and nabble cuttlefishes. Us dirty peasants will be in the cafeteria; we have to plan Greg's birthday party soon. It's a surprise party, don't tell anyone!

[CASSIUS RISES, STEPS BEGIN]

SILAS

Why do you burden me with such *secrets* all the time!

CASSIUS

(laughter)

[DOOR OPENS, CLOSES]

SILAS

I'm the *worst* secret keeper! Ugh... and just like that, they're gone.
Alright, let's see here...

[PAPERS SHUFFLE]

SILAS

Where was I...

[MORE SHUFFLING]

SILAS

I had this... bit here about the water rocks... and then there's these stalks... whatever those are...

[SHUFFLING CALMS]

SILAS

Great. Now all I can think about is a trip to Paris.

I've been staying up late anyway. I'm going to come back to this and hang out with the Breachers while they have their day off. I'll finish this next segment without fail, then. That's all for now.

[MIC CLOSES]

[PERSONAL MIC OPENS, APARTMENT AMBIENCE]

SILAS

Right, time for the nightly Specimen One viewing. I'll just have this up and playing on my laptop while I continue translating for a bit... Vaux finally relented and let me bring materials back to my trailer. Not everything, but at least I have the notes I've transcribed, and photocopies. Not like I can go anywhere with all this anyway, but at least I can make more progress from the comfort of this sofa...

[VIDEO PLAYS, STATIC AMBIENCE OF LAB]

SILAS

Doesn't look like anything's happening right now... Must have been a break in their experiments. So far they've been disappointed trying to get samples from Specimen One. I keep seeing medical teams come and go, each with sets of needles and scalpels, and they keep emerging looking frustrated.

SILAS

I think they're having trouble getting anything from Specimen One, but it's hard to say for sure. The way it... *undulates* did make me think less of an animal and more a plant. I wonder if it's bloodless... Or maybe it's just being uncooperative. I'll just leave it playing for now, I don't want to miss anything...

[VIDEO AMBIENCE CONTINUES, PAPERS SHUFFLE]

SILAS

Alright... looks like some time has passed since the last passage, and it ended with a mention of Nabal'kutul. I wonder if they decided to pack up and go again. Seems to be the running theme, here...

[BREACH HUM]

SILAS

We strictly forbade it, but we found some of our people had begged for a *pilsu*. They can bear it no longer. Every few nights, the whispering ones steal into our abode, and pluck another out from our fold. Still they cast no shadow, and still we can only stop them every now and then. We have saved a few, but they are changed, fearful and speaking only of death and cold. They hide themselves away, refusing to go out and starving themselves nigh unto death. They will do no work, nor go anywhere.

SILAS

Instead, they have brought this upon us – a *pilsu* – after we swore an oath not to do so anymore. We cannot be rid of it. We know already – no cave is too deep, no lock is too strong, and now it is a temptation to us. (*mournful*) So quickly they have forgotten. We do not *know* anything. How can we bear to bring another sacrifice upon ourselves? The gods do not *listen*. The gods do not heed us. They deliver plague upon plague, calamity upon calamity upon our heads. We cannot stay here, and we cannot go from here. We cannot do anything. It is pointless to try.

Now they gather together, and prepare the ritual. A small group has become most of the village. A few of us understand, and simply wish to live out in peace here. We will watch who remain, in this city that has become a tomb. They have become a burden too great to bear, and so we will watch, until we can watch no more. There is nothing on the other side. There is *nothing* on the other side, I say. I will remain, and let the sun shine upon me. I would bid you a safe journey, and a restful place, but there is none of these things anywhere now for us. There is nothing on the other side, but more wanderings and death. Now I will remain, with those who remain. Farewell, and take this with you, and forget, while you may...

[BREACH HUM FADES]

SILAS

Hmm... And so ends that little segment. On such a dire note, too. Whoever wrote this portion certainly sounds like they'd given up.

SILAS

There's another bridge notation here, that seems to have become the standard for putting a boundary between one segment and the next. I wonder what sorts of things they got up to this time...

[SOUNDS OF DOOR OPENING ON VIDEO]

SILAS

Oh! Looks like we have a development. Let's pay attention to this for a moment...

[INDISTINCT CONVERSATION]

SILAS

The medical team is back, and they've brought some more gadgetoonery with them... What have they got this time? The lead tech has a bundle in his arms...

[CONVERSATION CONTINUES, CONTAINMENT DOOR OPENS]

SILAS

They're opening up the containment cell... Looks like it's more hands on work today. Lead tech is putting the bundle on the examination table and unwrapping it... What are they going to do this... Uhh... Are those... Are those *Linkstones*? What on *earth* are they doing?...

SILAS

They've taken one of the stones into the cell. Specimen One is writhing in the corner, paying no one any heed, as usual.

[SOUNDS OF SOMEONE SPEAKING DIRECTLY, STATIC]

SILAS

One of the techs is... *talking* to Specimen One, or trying to, I think. Can't understand what he's saying on the surveillance audio... Is that English? I'm not even sure... I wonder if they're trying to communicate with it, using the sigil on the Linkstone.

The men in suits are getting frustrated. The techs look helpless. And through it all, bendy boy just continues to bend... Oh, the tech is approaching now. He's still got the stone.

SILAS

Yeah, you tell him! How dare he not say a word to anyone, while you've got him locked up in a cell and test him with every conceivable thing. I don't think I'd be very conversational either...

[SOMETHING HEAVY STRIKES]

SILAS

Did he just?...

[HOWLING ERUPTS, PEOPLE SCREAM, ALARM STARTS]

SILAS

What the?....

[HOWLING PEAKS, KEYBOARD PRESS]

SILAS

That tech just... *hit* Specimen One with the Linkstone, and... it went... crazy... What the *fuck* is going on here? I need to go let Cassius know...

[MIC CLOSES]