

THE CANON

by Brenna Lemieux

The problem with the Mikra opening is that we don't have enough footage, Fitz keeps explaining, as if Em and I don't already know, as if this is even still up for debate.

"How can we make it canon if we've only got that one clip everyone's seen a million times?" he says.

"Things were different then," I say, even though I know he doesn't need to be convinced, just needs the friction to stay engaged. "She wasn't as big as she is today."

"Yes, but one clip?" he says. "It's so *primitive*."

"When has it ever mattered how much footage we have?" I say. Em's jaw muscles flex—she hates conflict. "If we say it happened, it happened." I remind him of when we set this precedent, early in her career, to place Anagash at the funeral of one of the last great human pop stars (untimely death, possible suicide). No way the dev team could have gotten their holo gear there—tensions were already high, and anyway the roads were flooded—but it was easy enough to say she'd been present, dressed discreetly. That's why our work—the

work of the canon team—is so important. We come in every day to decide what did and did not officially happen in the life of Anagash. If we say so, it is canon.

“Ugh,” he says. “*That* funeral. Don’t get me started.” He has no patience for the analog diehards, who protest Anagash more or less constantly, and who were out in force that day, despite the near-hurricane conditions.

“Enough,” says Em, uncharacteristically sharp.

Fitz blinks a beat, as if slapped.

“Mikra stuck. The funeral worked. They’re both canon. I don’t have time for this right now.”

I cut my eyes to meet his: wide. Then:

“Sorry, Em,” he says, genuine, though I can already tell he’ll want to hash this over later.

“It’s fine,” she says, letting out a long breath. “It’s just—we’re not rewriting the canon.”

“Understood,” says Fitz. “I’m full of rubbish and I know it.”

She smiles. He smiles. Balance restored. I’m relieved—we work in close quarters. And Em’s right: whether we like it or not, the Mikra opening—a no-big-deal event at a Ukranian art gallery—is what, somehow, catapulted Anagash to international fame. The footage from that event launched a thousand commentaries, the renaissance of the tab press. And because, to Em’s point, we were still pretty disorganized—six teams horse-racing their own avastars, which meant just a handful of devs per avastar, trying any stunt that might get views—we didn’t have much footage.

“Meanwhile,” says Em, popping on the wallscreen.

And there she is, our Anagash, sitting in a full lotus backstage, eyes closed, breath steady, a glass bottle of EverQuench Sparkling by her side. Returnable for deposit. When they created the canon team and put me on it, that was my biggest push, getting her off plastic—that and preserving her yoga practice, because every character needs depth.

That’s what the loggies refuse to understand: it’s not just that Anagash’s art is better than theirs; she’s a better citizen, too. She used her fame for the greater good: she managed to make plastic lame—that is, we managed it. Six years ago, that seemed impossible.

We watch her for a moment, awed in spite of ourselves. Though how could we not be? She’s powered by the hundreds of artists and programmers in dev, the best talent around. That’s where all the action is, in dev, and it’s where I want to be, but I haven’t had a breakthrough yet. I need to show I’m worthy.

We know she’ll debut work today, but not what. Music, for sure. Probably some dance moves. Already, her routines have revolutionized cardio; I’ve seen articles in the conspiracist tabs that claim we orchestrated her whole existence to tackle the obesity epidemic, which is pretty dark if you think about what’s happening abroad, drought-wise. Meanwhile, the formalist tabs keep trying to “decode” the message behind her moves, which they usually claim is a call to arms for some oppressed group, depending on her outfit or how she wears her hair. I mean, really. (And then you have the loggie dance protestors, grouching that some of her moves are physiologically impossible for the human body—which, I’m like, of course. Why would we restrict her to what the human body can accomplish?)

“God, we’re lucky,” says Fitz, turning to me, and even though he likes to stir the pot, I love that he gets this, that he understands we have the best job in the world. He turns back to the screen. “Oh my god,” he says, grabbing my arm. “Did she just touch the locket from Math?”

And sure enough, she’s coming out of the pose and running the charm along its chain.

Em winks at us. “Get ready,” she says.

So she knew. No wonder she had no patience for Fitz. She occasionally gets hints, now that dev has finally acknowledged she has to be ahead of the news cycle. The suitors are one of our biggest plotlines right now: this douche-y rich investment type named Blake, a cycle shop owner named Rena Regina (my vote—she’s gorgeous), and Math, who is wealthy but self-made—some kind of software. Touching the locket is big: we’ve been emphasizing her ambivalence.

“On it,” says Fitz, who is the lead for real-time communications.

He attacks his keyboard. I watch the media team—his small army of writers and designers—beyond the glass wall. They handle authorized quotes and images and help tab reporters and podcasters fact-check their stories. As soon as Fitz has sent the message, there’s a collective leaning toward screens, then a flurry of typing and holo-dialing.

“Flora,” says Em.

I turn to her.

“Update for you.” She nods to my deskscreen.

In my inbox, a report on the progress of my latest pilot, a dance class taught by Anagash. I skim the thread: beta users loving the haptic feedback

from their ava-suits. I bite back my smile—I really pushed dev on that, so that you can actually feel Anagash’s hand on your back, straightening your posture. The next step is price sensitivity testing, to see what we charge in various parts of the world. Though really, it doesn’t matter; now that it’s built, the only work we have to do is add a new class now and then, and meanwhile millions of people can sign up and put on their suits and feel like they’re in a class of six, in the same room as Anagash. A potential cash cow. The kind of thing that might convince the Cs to put me in dev. Me, on the seventh floor with the spongy indoor track and the idea showers (haptic, of course. Not actual water).

“Here we go,” says Fitz, pulling me back to real life.

Onscreen, the (very real) crowd roars as Anagash strides onto stage. Thousands of people in the arena, and that’s only a fraction of her audience. Most of the world is seeing the screen version—the better version, in my opinion. Live, you just get the hologram. Just what happens on stage. None of her up-close facial expressions, her backstage prep. Not enough of her, I guess is what I mean. When I see her live, I feel cheated.

She reaches the front of the stage, empty except for sound gear. She picks up her guitar and adjusts the mic—an absurd touch, really. Absurdly detail-oriented. At the arena, the mic is a hologram too, of course, as is the guitar.

“I’m going to perform a new song for you all tonight,” she says in her ambiguously accented contralto, and I know she’s not real and I know she didn’t create whatever we’re about to hear and I know that this performance—that everything she does—will mean some unforeseen headache for me, but I

can't help it. I'm transfixed. She strums and opens her mouth and her voice is so like a human voice it's eerie, beyond human, the essence of voice itself, the essence of emotion. Both reedy and rich. Like a bird bone: strong and hollow. And the lyrics—haunting. The dev team has really outdone itself. I am wildly jealous.

The crowd hushes while she plays, then erupts when she finishes, her face breaking into her trademark half-flushed smile.

I look at Fitz.

“These seasonal allergies!” he says, wiping his eyes.

Em and I laugh—the crowd is exploding. They loved it. Of course.

“Thank you,” says Anagash, over and over. She says it in ASL. In Hindi. In Mandarin. In a few languages I don't recognize. “The lyrics of that song are from a poem called ‘Be with Me Lightyears,’ by the poet Ruma Housman. You should all read her. She is fire!”

I look at Em—she knew.

“Revenue split,” she says, smiling.

I hop to Anagash's page, and sure enough there's a brand-new buy button for the poetry collection and I hop into our analytics dash and traffic is spiking. My heart catches—this is what gets me about Anagash, more than anything. Her generosity. The way she's constantly using her platform to promote other artists she admires (though to hear the loggies tell it, her work has made it impossible to compete, which I feel for, I do, but maybe they shouldn't be trying to sell faster horses now that we have the infrastructure for green cars).

“All right, team,” says Em. “Let’s get to work.”

On the wallscreen, Anagash plays for her London fans. Fitz half-watches and fields messages from his minions. I take notes and monitor the tabs.

Some days I can hardly believe this job exists. Three or four years ago, when I joined UberCorp and avastars were first branching into music, the big debate was whether avastars could even be on pop charts. Back then, the Cs were thrilled by tab reports—“organic mentions,” we used to call them.

But pretty soon, competing narratives emerged. People were clicking and reading and ad dollars were flowing to the tabs. The Cs realized we needed a strategy. You can’t have *Buzz* or *OMG* be the place people go to for Anagash news—once you lose control of the narrative, you lose control of the star. Still, they didn’t actually create the canon team until the New Year’s Eve when hack footage surfaced of Anagash at three simultaneous parties—on three continents. We needed an official record.

Of course, nobody got her quite *right* in these videos, which made me pity the hackers almost as much as I do the loggies. She’s the best for a reason, which is the artists behind her. I mean, the hologram tech, sure. That, you can replicate. It’s the creativity no one can touch—the genius of her dance moves, the songwriting. Her voice. I don’t know how our devs dreamed it up, but it’s wild—something like the old analog phone signals, two simultaneous tones, so that her voice sounds not quite mellow, but both very high and very low—and really, it’s neither. It’s both.

But it's tricky hanging onto that many creative people. Em says they struggle—not with the work, but adjusting to the collective. Letting Anagash have all the glory. And then there's the Old News, which publishes an op-ed about once a week about the evils of working for an avastar brand, how it amounts to selling out, how artists are being bought off to flood the market with monoculture, how they're complicit in the death of human art and therefore the downfall of modern society. It's frustrating. They themselves acknowledge that our artists make great money. And how is it bad that they're collaborating to produce something amazing rather than grinding away in silos? I mean, if you love art, do you want better art or recognition for more artists?

They're the kind of self-serving arguments you could ignore, except that a few loggies have penetrated. The biggest deal was Lux Loren, at Alphabet. She was apparently a genius—brilliant coder, brilliant musician—and she was the driving force behind their avastar Lurie, who was Anagash's only real competition. I cringe remembering this now, but I actually floated the idea of a collaboration track at one point, the way human pop stars used to do.

Because it turns out Lux Loren was a hardcore loggie. Her whole time at Alphabet, she was plotting a coup. And during Lurie's Super Bowl halftime show last year—in Baltimore's brand-new stadium-on-stilts—she had him set down his (holographic) guitar and say, very clearly into the microphone, that he believed himself superior to flesh-growers. And then deliver a searing three-minute tirade about how disgusting the human body was, with its exhaustion and excretions and decay. She was so trusted it took them that long to bring

him offline, and people flipped. Even our numbers slid a little, everyone was so shocked.

She's in prison now, a martyr. Alphabet still hasn't recovered.

And our new-hire background checks are more intense than ever.

Anyway, Em and Fitz and I are the canon team. Plus Speer, who's usually in the field, getting a sense of what people think of the latest dance moves, of which tab threads are taking off. For example, *Eden* has been going bonkers about the suitor stuff, harping on how Anagash is emasculating men and needs to be taught a lesson. But (thank god) nobody reads *Eden* outside the rural US, and even though most of them still have guns, Speer says literally zero percent know how to code, so there's not much chance they'll find their way in here. And anyway, the building's bonkers-level secure.

So. We do our best. We write the life of our Anagash, our Ana-G, our Gashie, child of the world and beloved by all—or anyway, closely followed by all. In reality, prototyped by three MIT grad students for a final and immediately acquired (and refined) by UberCorp, along with a few other promising avatars who have since fizzled.

“Hang on,” says Fitz, staring at the wallscreen. He pops up the volume.

I look up from my deskscreen.

“Thank you all so much,” says Anagash in her dial-tone purr. “I'd love to play all night, but I've got plans.” And the face she makes is so undeniably giddy, so love-struck, that there is no question these plans involve one of her suitors.

The crowd goes crazy.

She waves and makes her way offstage, leaving the guitar, because apparently it's hard to get the holograms just right if she carries it.

"Plans?!" says Fitz.

"You're kidding," says Em. "Someone ping Speer."

"On it," I say, tapping a quick message.

"Why do they do this to us?" says Fitz catching his head in his hands. "I was going to sleep this weekend."

"Best way to make the devs laugh is making plans," I say, repeating our old joke.

Speer is holo-dialing me.

"Hello," I say, popping him across from me at the table, next to Em.

"Plans?" he says.

"Right?" says Fitz.

"I was going to sleep this weekend," says Speer.

"Yeah, yeah," says Em. "What's our strategy?"

"No word from dev?" says Speer.

Em checks her deskscreen. "Not yet," she says. "I'll ping them."

"I get that they're secretive," says Speer, "But we are on the same side here."

"And I thought I was so on top of it this time," says Em.

"The concert was in Kensington," I say, hashing it out. "And usually, 'plans' means dinner." I pull up a map of the area, highlight vegetarian restaurants—Anagash won't eat anywhere that serves meat. Again, one of my adds.

“But Math has a jet,” says Speer.

“She’s off private jets,” I remind him. “Too much carbon.”

“Hang on,” says Em, and pops up a holo from Lamar, our head coder, who also happens to be her long-term partner. “Thanks so much for the warning,” she says, flicking him to the seat next to Speer.

“I told you about the poems,” says Lamar, who always sounds relaxed, which boggles my mind.

“Plans, though?” says Em, a touch of performance in her voice.

“Honey,” he says.

“Fine,” she says, mock-annoyed. “What should we expect?”

“Dinner at Kiva’s,” says Lamar. “Excellent window cover there, so all we have to do is shadows.”

“Pre-recorded?”

“You bet,” he says.

“Then I guess you’ll be bringing us food?”

He laughs. “Indian sound good?”

“You get us,” says Em.

Fitz and I cheer. Nights Lamar brings dinner are always fun because Em seems more relaxed, more energized. And once we’ve got a handle on breaking stories—as long as there are no crises—he fills us in on dev gossip: who’s sharing nap pods, who’s being a diva. It feels like something from a generation ago, chatting with your coworkers in person, looking at their faces. It makes me nostalgic even though I know there was more to the story, that it was a lot of single-use plastic and racism and bad coffee. Sometimes I wonder if the Cs ever

watch this. They must be aware, at least, must have determined that it doesn't actively harm our productivity, or they would have said something.

Last time he was here, right after the Winter Solstice concert, he thanked us for our quick work over the summer, giving Anagash the summerflu to cover for her introducing a totally weird dance move that set off wild speculation in the tabs. As it turned out, he told us, the move might not have been a glitch (which is what we'd been led to believe) but some kind of inside job. Someone trying to manipulate her code. We were shocked. Scared. If a loggie could get through UberCorp's background checks (and who would want to sabotage Anagash but a loggie?) we could be in serious trouble. I mean, I'm not dumb. I'm still connected with my college friends who became loggies. I see the shit they post: coding for painters. Coding for musicians. Though it has been a while, come to think, which maybe means they've blocked me. Which is actually scarier, because it means they're getting organized.

"Okay," says Speer, tonight, post "plans" announcement. He pulls something up on his palmscreen. "You want me by the venue or the restaurant?"

"Follow the crowd," says Em. "Weather permitting."

"No worries," says Speer, waving his hand. "I've got my gear." He fishes a high-tech poncho from his backpack and shakes it out for us, then pops out.

The next couple hours are busy: I write the official story of Anagash's night (public version: dinner, then leaving in the same car as Math; private

version: she sleeps over, then walks to her hotel in the early morning), then shoot it to Em for review. Fitz and his team deal with speculative accounts.

Em looks over my draft.

“Walking home?” she says. We’re still in the conference room—some days, we never leave.

“Carbon,” I remind her, though I shouldn’t have to: I keep the graph by my desk. For the last thirty-five months—since the canon team has existed—atmospheric carbon has inched steadily down.

“Will this be a liability, though?” she says. “Down the road? Will we have to set up random sidewalk holos in every city she’s visiting? And what about the rain?”

But I remind her that our Gashie loves balance, that she craves motion, finds it meditative. We’ve established that song ideas come to her when she walks. And besides all that, she’s reclusive. She prizes her alone time. She would naturally find a time to walk when people weren’t likely to see her.

“It’s Anagash, though,” says Em.

“So we say she does what celebrities have always done,” I say. “Sunglasses. Hats. Fake mustaches. We’ll say it happened and it will have happened. There doesn’t always have to be footage.”

Em gives me a look, but I can see she’s caving.

“This used to be an actual thing, you know,” I say, pulling up an article about it on my deskscreen and flicking it to the wallscreen. “When celebrities were real people, they had no choice but to be out in the world sometimes.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she says, waving her hand. “And Miami used to be on land.”

“So yes?” Hope swells in me like a fever.

“Yes,” she says.

A rush of victory. The feeling I live for.

Her face brightens, looking past me.

I turn: Lamar, heavy-looking totebags on his arms. I smile. We all adore him, even if he does listen to analog jazz.

While they scoop chana masala and dal and sag paneer onto plates, I convince dev to allow one potential Anagash sighting at six a.m. local time, which means having them set up their holo-infrastructure near a café I’m trying to boost—organic, vegan, all compostable materials. They don’t need much convincing—a night of pre-recorded footage is boring for them. You’d think they’d want a break, but the technical devs are all constantly trying to prove how amazing they are, so it’s actually pretty easy to get them to do extra work, even in a city like London where it’s almost always raining.

After dinner, Lamar checks his wristscreen and then looks up at Em.

“What?” she says.

“I’ve got to get back,” he says and is out the door before we can ask for details.

“Whoa,” says Fitz, turning his head to follow Lamar. “What was that about?”

“No idea,” says Em, also looking out the wall. She turns to Fitz.

“Things winding down yet?”

“More or less,” he says. “Everyone’s got their angle, at least.” And he warns us that *OMG* will run a story floating the case that Math is a spy for Alphabet intent on taking Anagash down.

“Wait,” I say. “I thought Math was also an avatar?”

“He is,” says Fitz. “But will that stop them?”

“It will not,” I say, from experience, and he confirms this on his way back to the media team’s desk pool.

But before the *OMG* story breaks, we find out what spurred Lamar’s departure: a leak. To the Old News, which almost never covers Anagash, at least not in the way the tabs and the talk shows and the influencers do. They refer to her as “Anagash, ‘avastar’ owned by UberCorp,” like she’s a software program, and then only if something she does intersects with politics or the weather. The Old News pretends the world hasn’t changed in the last fifty years except to get hotter and flood more, but Em says it can be useful. She’s right, too: we were the first to have an avastar endorse a political candidate, which the Old News covered endlessly, and now that candidate is a senator from New Washington.

But tonight the Old News isn’t a curiosity. It’s a bombshell. The *New York Times* headline reads, “UberCorp Insider: Pivotal Mikra Event Was Work of Hackers.”

“What?” I say, my heart thudding.

Fitz is in the doorway a second later. “What on earth,” he says.

I try to read the article but the words fishtail.

“Fuck,” says Em, scanning the story on her deskscreen. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

I squeeze my eyes shut to focus. The Mikra opening established so much. Before Mikra, we experimented with Anagash as athlete, Anagash as yogi. But that launch made it clear: people loved Anagash the artist and champion of the arts. The environmentalist. The lover of animals. They loved her above all other avastars. They make it easy for us to launch partnerships to further her causes.

And now we find out it wasn't ours.

“I don't get it,” I say, after reading the first sentence six times. “If Mikra was a hack job, why didn't dev know? Why didn't *Lamar* know?”

Em's hands are pressed together in front of her mouth. “He must have known,” she says, staring at her screen.

“But why didn't he....” But I don't bother finishing because the answer is obvious: it got too big. He must have realized that leveraging the event's momentum was smarter than trying to undermine it. Maybe he even told the Cs. And for three years, he was right. But now someone has leaked. Someone who still works here, if the headline is right.

“We've got a mole,” I say, under my breath, the word surfacing from some spy movie I must have seen. I look at Em and Fitz, who has slumped into the chair beside me. It seems so unlikely. We've all signed a million NDAs, starting with our first interview. Anyone leaking to the Old News would face a serious lawsuit—will face a serious lawsuit. Immediate termination. If the Cs

can figure out who it is. I force myself to focus on the article, which offers excruciating detail to support its claim—video meta data and slight variations in Anagash’s skin tone and hair. The loggies must be ecstatic right now—emboldened.

Speer appears on my wristscreen. I pop open his holo-call.

“Okay,” says Em, looking at us. “We need a plan.”

The thing to understand about canon work is that people want a fixed narrative. There’s too much footage these days. Much easier to read a recap and then decide whether you want to watch the original. And more than that: people want commentary, want to see who gets charged with racism and sexism before they admit to loving something. They want someone to tell them which things matter, what things mean—my god, do they want meaning. They want meaning more than they want logic or sense.

So that’s what we give them. Interpretations. And because that’s our reality, that we can interpret but not decide, we made the first rule of our training manual simple: there are no mistakes, only gifts. It helps to remember that when dev refuses to give us a heads-up. It helps when every one of her four billion verified fans has an internet-connected camera and keyboard, when anyone can get more clicks by writing about our Ana-G.

“There are no mistakes,” I remind the team, Fitz staring at his palmscreen, holo-Speer typing on his deskscreen somewhere in Greater Britain, Em reading and typing and looking kind of green. “Only gifts.”

They look at me.

“She came from hacking,” I say. “Why not embrace it?”

“Flora,” says Em.

“I mean it,” I say. “Act like this was the plan all along.” A thrill is flutter-building in my stomach but I can see from faces that no one’s convinced. “Anagash is an outsider,” I say. “Remember? Before she was a superstar, she was an immigrant, an artist, a progressive.”

Em’s got her measured look: she’ll hear me out, but she’s skeptical.

“She fights for important but unpopular causes.” I pull up two-year-old footage of her showing up at a café with her own mug and blast it on the wallscreen. “People used to think that was too much trouble,” I say. “Remember? And now you can barely find a paper coffee cup anywhere, except in rural holdouts where they ask for ID to use the bathroom.”

Fitz straightens somewhat in his seat; I can feel him softening.

This is the part of my job I love, working something out in real time, as the story unfolds around us. Building the bridge as we cross it—the bridge of truth. Making something up so that it can be true. I switch the wallscreen to show the Old TV News, where they talk all day and night about whatever was recently published in the Old Print News. I bump up the volume.

“It’s the wakeup call these people need,” says a well-coiffed talking head, a white man of about fifty with fashionably silver hair. “I mean, hello. This is a software program you’re going crazy about. This is not a human person.”

The chyron reads “American Idolatry,” with a scrolling summary of the story.

“So you think this revelation will hurt Anagash’s popularity?” says the host, an impeccably made-up dark-skinned woman. An animated chart representing Anagash’s rise appears, showing her dominance of worldwide pop charts.

“Absolutely, Blaire,” says the man. “Nobody in their right mind could ignore hard evidence like this.”

And then I switch that out for my tab feed.

Jezebel has published an opinion piece on “why we let ourselves be hacked—and how to fight back.”

OMG has a slideshow history lesson of women who have risen to prominence and been undermined.

Buzz has a frame-by-frame breakdown of Anagash’s movements at the Mikra opening, with an analysis of how much her stride and posture have evolved, how that footage today would never pass muster. I don’t bother looking at *Eden*.

“See?” I say, flicking off the wallscreen and turning back to my team, very aware of the cameras, that any of the Cs could right now be tuning in to see how we’ll handle this. “The tabs don’t care. Only the Old News still thinks her legitimacy is up for debate.”

Even as I’m talking, the truth settles into focus. The leaker must be a loggie—only a loggie would think the Old News worth leaking to. Only a loggie would think a story in the Old News would have any impact on Anagash fans. And that’s what really gets me about loggies: they pride themselves on being more educated than the masses, better educated. But they can’t seem to

understand that if they want to convince people who don't already agree with them, they have to make their arguments in places those people actually go. And more important: they have to at least try to understand these people's point of view, why Anagash's non-existence as a physical being doesn't matter. But they don't. They don't deign to.

"It's true," says Fitz, unfolding his deskscreen. "A leak to the Old News is the kind of thing her fans will roll their eyes at—if they even notice."

"We have a choice here," I say, very aware of the cameras. "We could try to discredit the leaker, which puts UberCorp in a defensive position and amounts to playing the leaker's game—which our base is clearly not doing." I look around—all eyes on me. "Or we can act like this was part of the narrative all along. Anagash belongs to everyone," I say, quoting her official internal bio (which I wrote). "Remember?"

"Okay," says Em, slowly, glancing up at East Camera, which means she probably got a ping that the Cs are, indeed, watching. "What does that look like?"

And this is the moment: this is the kind of move that could finally get me transferred to dev, where I could help shape Anagash in a much more meaningful way, where I could influence what she actually does instead of just writing the official record.

"We update everything," I say. "Immediately." I turn to East Camera, facing it full on. "We release a statement acknowledging that Anagash was someone UberCorp took a chance on when no one else would." I hear Fitz typing beside me, which is good because the audio transcripator in this room is

trash. “We say that security around her wasn’t as robust in the early days as we later learned it had to be, and, as a young struggling artist, she was occasionally manipulated into doing events other than those officially sanctioned by UberCorp.” I make eye contact with Em, Speer, Fitz. “And then we say we’re proud that Anagash now has the most robust security detail in the world and that we’re honored to have the privilege of supporting her career.”

Fitz looks up from his deskscreen.

“We take the language back and we refocus,” I say. “Remind everyone that she is Anagash. She is their hero. She is not some software program that can be hacked.”

Em is nodding now, though still biting her lips.

“UberCorp is an easy target, but we’re also what makes Anagash possible—we are Anagash.” I can feel the rising excitement of pieces clicking into place. “And we’re finally ready to let the world know that Anagash is even more *of* the people and *by* the people than they thought. That her rise was like any artist’s rise—as much about being great as about luck. That this is her manifest destiny.”

Fitz raises an eyebrow. A good sign.

“We get that message out,” I say, turning back to East Camera. “And then we figure out who the mole is and destroy them.”

There’s a half-beat of silence in the room. I catch Em’s face just as she’s composing it.

“Excellent, Flora,” she says, which means she must be getting positive feedback from the Cs. My adrenaline floods: Yes. This is my chance. “Go ahead and start writing.”

It’s another all-nighter, and I don’t take more than two power naps in the pods. I know my limits, and for something like this, I can stretch. We push the first response just a few hours after the *Times* piece, and spend the rest of the night updating bios and monitoring sentiment in the tabs and on social. It’s amazing to see how people defend Anagash, how unflappable they are: “If your music was as good as hers, we’d listen to it,” they tweet at the loggies. It’s refreshing to know how much they love her, how much easier that makes our job.

I’m not crazy about the crueller language, but it’s hard to disagree with the premise: the loggies are backward and anti-progress. Who among their human stars made any headway fighting climate change? It wasn’t possible; the people with superstar personalities were prone to excess. Human pop stars could have never been role models for the moderation that led to a leveling-off and—yes, finally—a steady decrease in our carbon creation.

Anyway, by ten a.m. Saturday, things are handled enough that Em says we can go home for a few hours. We all live nearby, all have our wristscreens and palmscreens and portable deskscreens. A few of Fitz’s deputies will stay on. There’s never a good time to leave, but the Cs have determined that we must take occasional breaks or we risk burning out. I leave the building feeling satisfied, stout—a problem well handled at my back. More protestors than usual, even though it’s cold and overcast, and there’s a party air around them.

But the guards have them in check. I nod to Ernesto, who offers an escort. I don't take it, though. The protestors never suspect I'm high-level enough to be a real target.

Even though I'm completely exhausted, I have trouble sleeping when I'm finally in bed. It's full daylight, for one thing. My brain won't turn off. It's like I've got a popcorn kernel between my synapses that won't leave me alone. So I get up and dress and pull up Anagash's page on my palmscreen, click the link to the Ruma Housman collection. Sold at a store nearby, one I've passed a million times without going in. I enjoy poetry, I do, but reading it makes me sleepy. Which is perfect. I walk the six blocks through the thick rainy cold and push open the shop's door.

"Hello," says a woman behind the counter of the cramped, slightly sunken shop. "Here for the Housman collection?"

Half the space is taken up with a Ruma Housman display, title rippling across the space— *Light / Years* —flashing with the starburst in the upper-right corner that mentions Anagash's endorsement.

"Thanks," I say when she hands me a copy. I stand dripping before the old-fashioned register, the setup for cards and even cash. I hold up my palmscreen to pay.

"Would you like a bookmark?" says the woman, tucking it into the book, and suddenly I'm so tired I don't know how I'll make it home and I thank her and stumble out, back to my room, and fall asleep fully clothed, without even opening the book.

In the morning, clouds linger but the sleet has stopped. I'm surprised by the poetry collection on my nightstand a minute before yesterday comes back to me—the last two days, really, what a sine graph it's been. I dress and tuck the collection into my bag. Sundays can be slow—good reading time—and I'm sure everyone will be talking about it.

Fewer protestors outside UberCorp this morning—only the diehards, doing their best to avoid the slush. I greet the sparse Sunday media crew and grab coffee, then settle at my desk. An email from Em—working from home today. Fitz, too, it looks like.

I scan the tabs and see my words—the canonical words—repeated verbatim and in sloppily rewritten incarnations, with the various shades of voiceover each outlet promises: *Jezebel* with listicles of signs people are trying to “hack” you, *OMG* now equating hacking to what the patriarchy does to women's conceptions of themselves more broadly. Straining credulity, of course, but the tabs do not exist to engage their readers in critical discussion. They exist to sell ads, and you can't do that if you don't have eyeballs and you can't get those unless you cover Anagash. Even the Old News has a take: an editorial suggesting UberCorp was brilliant to let this story leak, simultaneously positioning itself as the victim of malicious hackers and reinforcing the popular roots of its biggest star. Counterintuitive. Highly effective. The Amazon *Post* has already published an op-ed questioning whether Alphabet will survive (though of course it has).

So really, everything's fine. We managed it—we recovered. I compose a post-mortem for Em and the Cs and am about to send it when Mel, our COO, appears beside my desk.

“Flora,” she says, reaching out a hand. “So glad you’re in.”

“Sorry,” I say, hitting “send.” “Just sent the post.”

“The what?” says Mel, and then, “Oh. Oh, great. Thank you.”

My stomach plummets in the way it does when I remember I’ve forgotten an important meeting, but before I can check my calendar, Mel says,

“Do you have a few minutes?” which is not really a question. She gestures for me to follow her.

“That story yesterday really took us off guard,” she says, striding toward the elevator, spreading “off guard” with inches of irony—a massive understatement. “We thought we’d check in with a few people.”

A mole hunt, then. What I suggested. I should feel an easing, but something in her manner makes me nervous.

She punches us into the elevator and then out to the old-school conference room on twenty, with rolling chairs and a vase of branches. The Cs are seated around the table.

“Flora,” says Adam, the CEO, without standing. “Thanks for taking the time.”

I sit on the wall side of the room, facing city-view windows and the three Cs: Adam, Mel, and Marv, the CFO.

“I gather Mel has told you why you’re here,” says Marv, who wears half-collar shirts under his suit jackets. His hands are tented on the table.

“From what I—”

“We’ve had an eye on you for a while,” says Adam, popping on the wallscreen to my right. “You’ve done some remarkable things for UberCorp.”

But then why is he saying “remarkable” like there’s an asterisk next to it?

“You caught my eye early on,” says Mel. “And of course we admire the presence of mind you showed Friday night.”

Still, though, it feels like an interrogation.

“What we’re trying to understand,” says Marv, as Adam flicks something to the wallscreen, “Is who could have gotten past our screeners?”

“It would have to be someone very smart,” says Adam. “Someone very creative.” He looks to the list he’s projected on the wallscreen—every project I’ve initiated or led. Robust evidence of intelligence and creativity, if they want to paint it that way.

“Dance classes,” reads Adam, and before I have a chance to mention how well they’ve tested: “Training the next generation of analog dancers.”

My gut sinks.

“Sidewalk holo setups for early-morning walks home,” he reads. “Making easy, dispersed targets of our technology and field dev teams.”

“Wait,” I say.

“Vegetarianism,” says Marv. “When it’s common knowledge that vegetarian eateries are fifty percent less likely to be on the holo network.”

“Which means a lot of locations where UberCorp devs can talk without observation,” says Adam.

“No,” I say. “It’s the carbon.” But my voice has gone raspy.

“The proposed collaboration with Lurie,” says Mel, and they all exchange a look.

I’m having trouble focusing. I feel as if I’m watching the scene from beyond the room’s glass walls.

“Wait,” I say again, scrambling to return to the moment, to my body. Nobody knew about Lurie back then, but of course if anyone did it would have been the mole. And anyway, they don’t wait. They go on, listing ideas I’ve brought up since I’ve been here. They mention my repeated requests to be moved to dev. None of it looks good.

Finally, they turn to me.

“So,” says Adam. “What would you think if you were in our shoes?”

But I don’t know where to start. There’s a blizzardy numbness in my brain; individual thoughts are fuzzed. Too much silence accumulates; I wipe sweat beads from my forehead. I hold my eyes closed a minute, willing my thoughts to settle. And then, finally, I manage:

“It’s not me.” Which is, of course, what a mole would say.

They watch me the way you’d watch a toddler trying to put on her own socks.

I breathe. I steady myself. “I can’t—I don’t know what else to say.” My voice is higher than usual. My throat is tight, as if I could tip into sobbing at any moment.

Adam looks for a moment at his deskscreen, then back to me. “What about the rest of the canon team?”

“You mean Fitz and Speer?”

“And Em,” says Marv. “Have you noticed anything suspicious about them? Pushing a loggie-friendly narrative, for example? Handing out offline propaganda?”

Mel shoots him a look.

“Or anything,” she says. “Even if it’s not quite so blatant.” A rod of tension tightens between them.

“I haven’t noticed,” I say, in that same small, scared voice.

“But you’ll keep us posted,” says Adam.

I nod.

“Wonderful.” He flattens his deskscreen and passes it to me. “We’ll also need you to sign this document, which outlines a few additional security measures we’ll be implementing moving forward.”

I look at Mel but her face is wood. I scan the document: UberCorp reserves the right to monitor, scan, track. I scroll and scroll, registering “constant” and “at random.” I am deeply uneasy. Of course I don’t mind, I want to say. I have nothing to hide! But it still feels oppressive. I accept Adam’s stylus and sign. I push the screen back.

“Thank you so much for your time, Flora,” he says. “We look forward to hearing from you.”

Normally, what I’d do is talk to Em. But first, she’s not in, and second, that feels off-limits. Something about the way Marv said “and Em.” His tone. I step off the elevator and scroll my palmscreen—who else might I call? But my dial

history is embarrassing. Only work people for weeks and weeks, and then only my mom a handful of times. I used to talk to my college friends all the time, used to get brunch with them on Saturdays. But then I got moved to the canon team and had to work most Saturdays. Almost every day, in fact.

Isn't that the dream, though, to love your job? To get paid to do a thing you enjoy doing? Except something shifts after that meeting. We don't chat like we used to—I'm filtering everything I say now to see if it sounds like something a loggie spy would say. Listening, too, to Fitz and Speer differently. And Em. Mel emails daily to check in.

Anagash visits a refugee camp, a mega-school. I have an idea for a reading-with-Anagash series but don't pitch it for fear it sounds too analog. Paper books, potentially. The wrong look. I go to the UberCorp bar most nights now in the evening—I need something to cut the tension. One night, lonely after two glasses of wine, I write in the official canon that Anagash has drinks with Rena Regina, even though nobody but us will ever see it. When I get in the next morning, Em comes to my desk to ask if I'm okay.

"A girl can dream, right?" I say, in my best nothing-to-see-here voice.

She considers me a moment. "When's the last time you took a vacation?" she says.

I set down my purse. I'm pretty sure I went home over Christmas the year before last, but I'd have to check the calendar. And before that....

"Think about it," she says, concern in her voice. "Even a few days."

And at first I wonder if she's trying to get me out of the way to snoop in my files or something, but then I remember it's Em, who thinks I'm brilliant

but never lets a first draft skate. Em who talks me up to the Cs so I can be in dev one day.

“Okay,” I say, on the brink of tears as I was in the meeting with the Cs. “Thanks.”

She squeezes my shoulder. “Of course,” she says.

I wouldn’t have thought of a vacation on my own, but once Em says it, I’m obsessed with the idea. I book a long weekend in Door County and she approves the time.

“I’m jealous,” she says, when I show her the holo tour of my cabin in the confirmation email. “Can you forward that? Those views might convince Lamar to take a break.”

“Not only that,” I say, sending her the message. “I’ll let you know if there’s a better cabin across the street.”

“And where the good coffee is,” she adds, and Fitz barrels over demanding to know what’s going on, demanding a forward of the reservation as well, teasing that we’re “mean girls” because we always leave him out of things, which makes us laugh, and for a moment things return to normal—my shoulders soften when I didn’t realize I’d been hunching them—and he congratulates me on sneaking in the drinks with Rena Regina and I laugh again—I haven’t laughed in days—and then Em gets a ping on her wristscreen.

“What?” says Fitz, and I turn and see her face has clouded over.

She swallows. Breathes out. “Another leak,” she says.

Like the light was sucked out of the building.

“Conference room,” she says, and we follow her there.

This time, it's the text of that contract I signed—that we all signed, I guess—in the meeting with the Cs. And actually reading it, I have to admit it looks bad. UberCorp requiring “essential personnel” to have one company screen on us at all times, reserving the right to track our whereabouts. And the leaker went straight to the Old News again.

“These analog people,” says Em. “Haven't they learned?”

My neck hair stands up. Nobody says “analog people” but loggies.

I dart a glance at Fitz and see he's thinking the same thing: why would she say that?

I check East Camera, but there's no way to tell if someone's watching. My heart thuds. Do I report it? Because what if it's nothing and Em's suddenly under suspicion? But what if it's not nothing, is the thing. What if it's not nothing.

“What've we got from the press?” says Em, still staring at her deskscreen, apparently unaware of what I'm now already thinking of as her slip.

Really, this leak concerns PR, not canon. The *Times* and *Post* drum up modest outrage: an affront on privacy. Infantilization. Possibly not enforceable. But the tabs are either ignoring the leak entirely or reframing it, as they so often do. *Jezabel* demands to know whether loggies would prefer that UberCorp employed a much more controllable workforce—say, robots? And *OMG* runs a headline about how the loggies still can't stand that there's a woman on top.

Still, I draft a brief reinforcing Anagash's support for the living wage legislation proposed by the New Washington senator she helped elect.

Em approves the copy as is. “Nice needle threading, Flora,” she says. I’m surprised by how much I miss her line edits.

I email Mel that evening, though it takes me about six drafts. Because what if Fitz emails. And what if the cameras were on. My stomach is churning again but I don’t even want wine anymore, more like a sedative, what doctors gave to women whose husbands were murdered in the old mysteries. Days and days of sleep, and when I came to, someone packing me off on a vacation to recover. Taking care of things.

In the morning, Fitz and I go for coffee together downstairs.

“Do you guys have that new lychee milk?” he says to the UberCorp coffee bar manager.

“Lychee?” says the guy, whose main job is to make sure the robo-ristas don’t jam.

“Oh my god, it’s delicious,” says Fitz. He turns to me. “This place around the corner has it. You have to try it.”

I look at my wristscreen. No urgent messages. “Why not,” I say, and Fitz asks the guy if he can put in an order.

“Lychee milk, huh?” I say, walking east in Fitz’s wake.

“Just say it,” he says. “You think I’m a diva.”

Before I know it, we’re in front of Sip, a known loggie café. My gut sinks.

“Sip?” I say, frozen outside the door.

“I know,” he says. “Bad look, but you have to try this latte.”

“Fitz,” I say, my feet rooted. “I don’t know about this.”

“Trust me,” he says. “If the Cs have questions, we’ll make them try the drink!”

And something in his voice pulls my gaze from the shop’s façade to his eyes, which say very clearly: “Trust me. Please.”

I swallow. “All right,” I say, my tone reluctant but my pulse faster. “This better be good.”

And we push through the door, where we’re stopped by a hardcore loggie in old-fiber clothes, hair long and shiny the way only old-style shampoo makes it, sudsing out the oils and mucking up the rivers.

“No-screen Wednesday,” he says, by way of greeting. “I’ll hang onto your digital gear while you enjoy your beverages.” He holds out his hands.

I glance at Fitz.

“We’re just getting a drink,” he says. “We’ll be five minutes.”

“That’s cool, man,” says the loggie. “But it’s our policy.”

Fitz rolls his eyes at me and makes a show of tugging off his wristscreen and slipping his palmscreen from his back pocket. The loggie thanks him and locks them in a small chamber, handing Fitz a key.

I do the same, very aware of my heartbeat.

We weave to the counter through the loggies on MacBooks (MacBooks! When the new generation uses one-sixth the power and all recycled materials!) to the human barista.

“Two lychee lattes,” he says.

“That’ll take a few minutes,” says the barista. “We have to squeeze the juice here.”

“Ugh,” says Fitz, handing over our mugs. “Fine.”

The barista gives us a dirty look—it’s pretty clear we don’t belong—and Fitz pulls me to the end of the counter.

“Okay, look,” he says. “Did you email the Cs yesterday?”

“Yes,” I say, scanning the plate window behind him, sure one of them will walk by at any minute.

“Me too,” he says. “It’s completely fucked but I had to.” He glances over my head. “I think they suspect her.”

“But why?” I said.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “But after yesterday....”

“I know.”

“Should we do something?”

“What, though?” I say. “Warn her?”

“If she’s a loggie, she must know the risks.”

I turn to check the progress of our drinks. Not much. “But what if she’s a loggie but not the mole?” I say. “Like, what if she’s a sympathizer but not actually undermining us?”

Fitz looks to the door, then back at me. “I mean, I like her, too,” he says. “But we have to be realistic.”

I watch the loggies sipping their to-stay cups, probably surfing job boards. “So do you think she did Mikra?” I say, turning to Fitz. “Like, do you think she has the technical chops?”

“Maybe not to create it,” says Fitz.

And at first I think he’s conceding that the Em we know certainly couldn’t have been behind the hack—none of us could. It’s pretty advanced stuff. But then I realize his implication.

“But she could have leaked about it,” I say, and see immediately that this is what he’s worried about.

“Two lychee lattes?” says the barista.

“Finally,” says Fitz, and grabs the mugs and snaps on their lids. “Let’s get out of here.” And then, almost threatening: “You’d better like this.”

Back at the office, he drags us immediately to the coffee bar and forces the manager to try his drink, then declares he had to go to a *loggie* café to get it and they tried to put him in *screen jail* (and here he looks up at the café’s camera) and he loves this drink but is this what the Cs want? And I realize that I have underestimated him. The drink, by the way, is disgusting.

Our daily check-ins with Em, which used to be a highlight, are now almost unbearable. I can’t tell whether she knows the Cs suspect, whether she knows we suspect. Everything she says sends me spinning, trying to suss out whether there’s some nefarious underlying motivation. For the first time, I’m looking forward to my vacation the way people do in old books and movies. It’s two weeks away and then a week and then it’s the Thursday I leave, with a three-day weekend ahead of me.

“We need something definitive to happen with the suitors,” says Em at our check-in (and I flip through possible ways this might lead to a leak or a hack). “Who’s winning right now?”

“Not Blake,” says Fitz. “People think it’s inconsistent that she would date a billionaire while advocating for a living wage.”

“Fine by me,” I say, which feels like safe ground. “You know who I’m rooting for.”

“Alas,” says Fitz. “The straights outnumber us.”

I make a face.

“So Math,” says Em, flicking footage of him onto the wallscreen.

“He’s got a jet,” I say. “Shouldn’t that disqualify him?”

“He stopped using it, though,” says Fitz. “Remember?”

Of course I do: it was my add, after she refused to ride in it, though that feels like a long time ago.

“All right, then,” says Em. “What? A proposal?”

“A proposal?!” Fitz and I say together. We meet eyes: alarm.

“Em, dev would kill us,” I say.

“The Cs would kill us,” says Fitz. “Can you imagine what kind of viewership an event like that would get?”

“Please,” I say. “Anagash would never marry someone who proposed to her in public.”

“I’m not talking like at a baseball stadium.”

“What, then?” I say. “The zoo?”

And for some reason—the tension, maybe—Fitz and I get the giggles at this and we’re soon gripping each others’ arms, bent over, trying to catch our breath.

“You guys,” says Em.

And we try to stop, we do, but just as we’re calming down, Fitz says, “Anagash getting engaged at the zoo,” and it sets us off again.

“Come on,” says Em, after a minute. “She’s an avatar, for crying out loud.”

Like instant sobriety. I feel heat drain from my face.

Fitz, eyes wide, wipes at a tear.

We do not acknowledge this at UberCorp. Ever.

“Right,” I say, immediately regretting my word choice. “So, but we can’t create major life events without consulting dev.” I clear my throat, which is totally frogged. “And I think a proposal counts as a major life event.”

Em drums her fingers on the table. She looks out the room’s glass wall.

I turn to Fitz. What the literal fuck, I hope my eyes are saying. I hope the Cs are watching us through East Camera, have even now sent someone to bring Em in for questioning.

“What if we ask for a dedicated song?” says Fitz, and I am grateful to him as I’ve never been before.

“For Math,” I say, already knowing this will work.

Em looks at us.

“She could sing it to him at her next show,” says Fitz.

“Which is tomorrow night,” I say. “In Detroit.” Scheduled after I booked my vacation, but Em said I should go anyway. And yes, part of me was suspicious of that, but the larger part doesn’t care because I really do need a break.

“I like it,” says Em, pulling her deskscreen toward her.

“I’ll ping dev,” I say.

“You’re welcome,” says Fitz, resting his head in his knitted-together palms, leaning back in his chair.

I dash off a message, trying not to feel jealous of the creative frenzy it will set off, the dev musicians clustering in their preferred constellations to dream up a new hit.

“And tell them to send us lyrics,” says Fitz. “So we know what we’re working with.”

“You think this is my first day on the job?” I say.

And Em teases that now I’ll have a reason to watch the concert, which actually makes us laugh because we all know I’m the biggest Anagash fan of all and the only way I would miss a concert is if I were in a coma.

The last thing I write before catching my train is the song’s origin story: I conjure a sleepless night for Anagash, following a post-dinner walk with Math along the water. Back to her room, a glass of EverQuench sparkling. I sit her down with her guitar, curtains blowing toward her from the half-open window. Teasing the song all night, recording a version just as the sun rises. Jubilant at dawn, despite the lack of sleep. Another walk along the water, this one with a

mug of coffee. Sitting on a bench (dressed discreetly) to watch people heading to work.

And I decide that's what I'll do tomorrow morning in Door County, get coffee and find a place to watch the real world, the people moving through it. It sounds like exactly what I need. But before I can get lost in the reverie, Em appears at my desk with feedback, and Fitz identifies the exact head covering Anagash will have worn to blend in—a simple jersey hijab, which is still great camouflage. There's a brand he loves; he leaves to tell the founder to prepare for a crush of orders. I incorporate Em's edits and head out for the train.

Friday night, I'm already better rested than I've been in years. I settle on the cabin's sofa and fire up its wallscreen to tune in to the pre-concert footage. My girl backstage meditating. Drinking her EverQuench. It's weird not to be in the same room as Fitz and Em, to know they're watching from the office. But here, alone, I can actually enjoy her, actually appreciate how beautiful and calm she is. Actually listen to the whole performance.

She takes the stage. Fitz messages me, "Buckle up, biotch," and I laugh—it's good to be here, to be alone with Anagash, to know I'll sleep in again tomorrow and accomplish nothing all day. She sings. I'm lost in her hypnotic voice, which rises and falls through some gorgeous lyrics—a love song for sure, but not the same rehashed love song you've heard six million times. Something truly original. She lilts through the last chorus and I realize I'm holding my breath, leaning forward to catch every inflection.

And then she disappears.

She is on the stage with her guitar and then she is not. Where she stood, blank space. Not even a shadow.

“What?” I say aloud. I stand.

From the screen, a rising din of crowd noise.

“What the fuck?” I say, and then text Fitz. But the message fails to send.

I look back at the screen, back at my palmscreen. I try holo-dialing him but nothing. Failure. I try email.

“What the FUCK!” I shout, my heartbeat wild, out of control, unlike anything I’ve ever felt.

I stare at my screens but there is nothing—nothing. At first I think the whole internet must be out, but then I come to: the concert is still on. The crowd louder and louder. And then a holo-dial—from Speer.

“Thank god,” he says when I pop him in. “What’s going on there?”

“I’m not in the office,” I say, pacing. “I can’t get anyone.”

“Jesus,” he says.

I can hear the crowd through his call.

“Why didn’t she fail over?” I say, thoughts now rushing to my head at top speed. We have multiple layers of live backup, to prevent exactly this type of thing. “Why didn’t she—?”

But then Speer and I meet eyes: the mole.

“Shit,” he says. “You think the whole UberCorp system is down?”

“I hope not,” I say.

The noise around him spikes. He looks behind him. “I have to go,” he says. “Keep me posted if you hear anything.” And he pops out.

My bag is already half packed. I throw the rest of my stuff in, pull on my shoes. I'm out the door and running to the train station, even though I have no idea what the schedule is. Maybe I can take a cab the whole way back. When I get there, I'm exhausted and have a stitch in my side. Nobody at UberCorp has answered. I manage to get on the last train to Chicago and collapse into my seat. Still no answer from Fitz. And then I make the mistake of checking the tabs, where conspiracy theories are spinning out of control. This is the worst-case scenario. The canon team powerless to set the record straight. And in the Old News, it's even worse: blatant Schadenfreude. Self-assured commentary about how Anagash's fans will surely, confronted with this evidence of her unreality, realize the error of their ways. It's too much. I try Fitz one more time, then shove my screens in my bag. I can't handle that right now.

I dig in my bag for something to distract me, to pass the unbearable rest of the ride, and see the Housman collection, which I forgot I packed. I pull it out. I open to the middle, where the shop-owner put the bookmark. On it, a line drawing of a girl reading under a tree and the words "Like paper books? Visit ALFresco.com." I look up. A-L Fresco, as in Analog Life. The main loggie lobbying group.

I look out the dark window, see my own pale face reflected back at me. Em's network of local shops to sell Anagash goods. And then the rest of it hits me: analog jazz. Lamar. The Mikra footage. I close my eyes against the onslaught: Lamar. Of course. He was at UberCorp back then—he should have been able to prevent the hack. And that would explain Em. I try again to message Fitz, though only half-heartedly. The network is still down.

The thing is, I'm good at my job. Good in a crisis, I mean. So what can I do from the train? I sit and think. I clear my mind, the way Anagash does—officially, in the canon—when she walks places, when she practices yoga. And when I've got fifteen minutes left in my trip, the idea steps into my mind, beautiful and fully formed. Of course.

You don't have to dig too hard to find a tradition of enlightened invisibility. It was one of the higher states yogis hoped to achieve, back in the day. Claimed they could achieve. Who am I to say otherwise? I can pop people into and out of rooms with a finger. I can whisper and be heard across an ocean. Before Anagash was an artist, she was a yogi. The canon says she still practices.

And the thing about yoga is that there's more to it than asanas: vegetarian eating. Simplicity. Consuming only what you need. Meditation. Sometimes you get lucky; sometimes, the work you've been doing every day for three years prepares you for something you didn't know was coming. There are no mistakes, after all, only gifts. And then, too, any storyteller worth her salt can tell you you've got to have a few threads spinning at once. Even more so when you're editing in real time.

I pull out my portable deskscreen and type. The words flow from my fingers easy as blood, easy as data through a high-speed link. After years of intensive meditation, on walks, in dance practice, in singing. Singing: her breath. After years of intensive meditation and breath practice. A state rarely achieved, rarely documented in modern times.

By the time I alight from the train and cross the Loop to our office, the lights are on. The protestors are ten deep, cordoned off, whooping, boozy, still gathering. I scan my badge and leave my luggage with the guards—no time for a search. I burst onto our seventh-floor office to see Fitz pacing frantically among his team.

“Floral!” he says when he sees me. “Thank god!”

Around us, screens flicker to life.

“Thank all the gods,” he says, hurrying to the conference room.

I follow him, unfolding my screen on the table.

“Tell me you have something good,” he says.

I show him. We publish.

The Old News keeps up its haranguing but the tabs nearly convulse to spread the canon report. There’s a rush to interview people who were there, who saw what is being called the Sublimation. Speer, on the line with Fitz, helps coordinate. We work through the night and by morning you can find odds on most betting sites about whether she’ll come back, and when.

Em is gone, of course. I learn in the morning that she left before the concert, saying the Cs asked to talk to her. Lamar was escorted out in handcuffs around the time I got back. He didn’t even try to sneak out, just sat at his desk until they came for him, working hard to keep Anagash gone. And others, too, people I maybe knew to see but not to speak to—a woman from accounting and two of the dev musicians. And Anagash is still offline; the devs are testing and testing to see whether Lamar hid something deep in her code.

Mel escorts me to dev Saturday morning so I can brief them on what should happen, based on the invisibility-through-meditation narrative we spun, and when I walk into their room, I'm floored. It's not a business room at all—it has sofas and coffee tables and plants. The farthest wall is dedicated to a wallscreen of Anagash in repose, Anagash living a normal life, wandering around a nice-but-ordinary apartment, playing her guitar, practicing yoga. That's the level of dedication here. It's deeply moving. There are always devs at their desks, enhancing her personality, keeping her alive. She is all of us. We are her.

I explain about enlightened invisibility, and they leap into action with their marvelous brilliant brains:

“We'll bring her back different,” they say.

“Shorn.”

“With a gold nose ring,” someone suggests—

“No, a stud.”

“Wearing all white.”

And quickly, piece by piece, the new Anagash—Anagash 2.0, they joke—rises before us, the art of many artists collaborating.

They revive her on Sunday—it's not like there isn't precedent—strumming in a gazebo near a lake. She gives a talk. They release an entire collection of her poetry. It sells a million copies the first week.

What the Cs don't understand, though, is that we have to keep innovating. The people don't know what they want until they see it—it's always been that way with art. Even the loggies would agree. And worse, if you give

people exactly what they want too long, they'll get sick of it. Sometimes you have to leave a little money on the table so you can move to the next table.

I go back and forth now, canon to dev. Something I like more than I thought I would. Except we don't have as much freedom. The Cs want to see everything. They're oddly fixated on the Sublimation, on Anagash's yoga and meditation practice. On instructing fans in emulating her.

"It's testing really well right now," is all we get when we push back.

"Of course it's testing well," says Fitz. "She's the biggest star on earth!"

And then the partnerships start: first with meditation retreats in India, because I made the mistake of mentioning that Anagash's yoga practice follows some Indian tradition, and then with the airlines. Flying to India is all anyone who doesn't already live there wants to do. I email and holo-dial the Cs, explaining that there are gurus everywhere, that encouraging international plane travel is against everything Anagash has stood for these last three years, but after the first few messages, they ignore me.

It's depressing—scary. I'm not saying all our carbon improvement was because of Anagash, but this month's numbers just came out. We've plateaued. A terrible sign.

Which isn't to say Anagash is fading. If anything, she's bigger than ever. Attendance at the Sublimation Concert is a mega status symbol—half the audience members are now "thought leaders" somewhere, but not spreading the word we canonized for three years—no less-is-more, no reminders of what's at stake after big storms. All they talk about is the Sublimation itself,

Anagash and her return. How their personal brand of discipleship is the best path to achieving something similar.

They've lost the message, is what I mean to say. I thought bringing her back would preserve it but I was wrong; it's Anagash herself people want, have always wanted—they don't care what she has to say. Or rather: they do, but they'd prefer if she talked about herself, how they can be more like her; they prefer the glossy disposable carefree fantasy to our grim and flooding reality. And now that Marv edits me, that's what they get. Marv, the CFO, who understands the canon as a path to a quarterly revenue number, who sees only the path directly before him and doesn't understand that we built it word by word from the great nothingness all around, that there was never anything more than nothing, that the key to turning nothing into revenue is to create. Marv, who has decreed an engagement and a blowout wedding, who has the next ten quarters' financials planned accordingly.

“Was I naïve?” I say to Fitz, at the coffee bar one morning. We're hoping to bolster ourselves for the wedding planning meeting ahead of us.

He looks at me critically, assessing. Accepts his cold brew. “You're a true believer,” he says. “There's a difference.”

What he doesn't say is “you're delusional,” or “you're lonely,” a kindness I only recognize late that night when I'm trying to sleep. Because who believes in an avatar? Who lets herself ignore the indisputable truth at the core of the loggies' position: let the Cs get control of the art, and you're fucked. Even if you have a thousand artists on payroll. Every artist knows that weddings come at the end of stories. They're how you show the female lead is

finished, fulfilled. Contained. They're how you show that, no matter what else has happened so far, the people who were always in power are still in power.

But what can I do? I get out of bed and look out my window to the billboard of Anagash smiling up at Math, ring sparkling on her hand. I look down at the street, where loggie musicians sometimes play their wooden instruments, too distant for me to hear. It's still shocking to me that Lamar penetrated UberCorp, that he got so deep without anyone noticing. Which means there is hope, I guess. I may be a naïve true believer, but maybe I'm a true believer in the art that powers Anagash, in the artists who create it. And if I'm not completely wrong—if I haven't completely misplaced my trust—that means I can still hope that Lamar did hide something deep in her code, that when everyone least expects it, she'll disappear for good and leave Marv high and dry. And if he didn't, if that hope is futile, I can hope that there's still time. I know the devs a little better now. I have a better understanding of what's at stake. I check the clock—almost five. Maybe I'll swing by that bookstore on the way to work this morning. See if there's any word of Em.



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