

Lifebound – Part 1

1. The Mirror

A palm print, now, is enough to encode you to the lifeclock. One touch and it can map the whole of you. The first tooth, the early signs of dementia. And the ambient *you* in the air, the little cells exhaled and marked by your DNA, these are the small and continuous course-corrections of your life. Sleep in the same room long enough and the tech can pick up on the faintest change in your biometrics. You'll wake the next morning to the whole of it in digital display: line graphs of T-cells over time, scatterplots of heart rates, a calendar of immunizations received and viruses survived. Your life, its map and projection, and the carefully calculated windows where love can take hold and leave – all there, like prophesy.

Not with these old models, though. They needed a bit of you every few years. They labor in comparing *you* to *you*. There's no projection of what may come; just a reflection, and that reflection's echo until the next imprint, all told in that old language of botony. Seedlings planted the day you're born. Fragile leaves pulling the sunlight in to power it: a mainframe hidden in the casing, the mirror grafted into the structure of the house by winding vines, vines that merge your DNA with plant protien and flower accordingly. Roses, lilacs, hyacinth, honeysuckle, jasmine, each its own symbology. One growing in a reflection of you, one blooming when you bloom. But the science of it was old, antiquated and boroque.

The flowering lifepiece looked out of place in this room of rectangles and sleek surfaces. But Aina loved it, a bower to nowhere, framing the wall of her bedroom. She stood up from the chair by the window, walked to the flowering mirror and brushed her hand against it, as she did every morning. This garden arch, was bound in blessing by letters she could not read, words

that wound in a metal corona, like blurred moonstones along the edges of the frame. She tried them aloud anyway, as best she could, making up sounds for the characters that she imagined existed nowhere else. She closed her eyes and saw the wall fading into a passage, a passage that wound down to a sea of light. She put her palms out in front of her and took a step forward. But today, as always, she bumped up against the cool of it. She let out a sigh, and rubbed the sleep from her face. She had an appointment to keep.

In her disappointment and rush she didn't feel her arm scrape against the jagged thorn, didn't see that bit of red on the deep green vine. And she was already gone when the first flower bloomed: hyacinth. She was lifebound.

2. The Hunter

Aina must have seen him at some point earlier that morning. He wasn't there, holding up the wall, when she'd entered the waiting room. But after that, who's to say? She'd been waiting for the clerk to call her number since half past seven. That was four hours ago. Maybe he'd entered in a crowd, become slowly visible. Faded back again. She wouldn't have even noticed herself noticing.

It's all Gestalt, the way your brain makes things familiar against your will. You see a random arrangement of rocks and bushes as you approach from a distance, but you're sure you're staring at a slow moving bear, a mountain lion. Your heart picks up. You start to sweat. This is the same thing. He's a bit of landscape that's not quite right. She'd probably looked at him a dozen times without thinking about it, so preoccupied with the boredom of waiting. Her brain could have cut out his silhouette as she glanced up from *firstname *lastname *dateofbirth and pieced him together in pixels and swatches of Rorschach. *Here's black and white and tones of grey.* Two more people to the window. *Here's a low brimmed hat.* A cough from an old man. *Here's the long coat.* Chatter of children. *Here are his eyes.* Eyes she'd known her whole life.

If you asked her in just that second to tell you their most personal history, she'd have said that when they were younger, (she was still too young to use the words 'when we were younger'), when they were younger, they'd slipped out at dusk and hopped an old wire fence with one suitcase between them. That they'd gotten only a couple of miles before it started to rain. That they'd holed up in some cave. No, not a cave. The trunk of an old tree. Maybe they'd eaten berries or elvenleaf or some other bullshit. She almost laughed out loud. She'd

never hopped a rope let alone a fence, (where would you find a fence, anyway?), and she'd never met this man before. This man, who was probably twice her age. This man with too many buckles.

He was walking right toward her.

Maybe she'd seen him on the train. She decided he's the type of guy that would stand the whole way, speaking to no one. Maybe he'd catch her gaze and nod goodbye before stepping out onto the platform. Their twenty-third goodbye. Their one-hundred twenty-third, perhaps. Perhaps they had been parting since their pre-cellular days. She'd heard once that if you spend enough time in proximity of another person, your electric fields become entwined with one another. You may be perpetual strangers, never exchanging names or profiles. You run into each other day after day, bump shoulders or reach for the door at the same time. You're certainly unaware that your atoms are making covenants you'll spend your whole life trying to break. And the electrons, the ones that jump from your valence to his, they never forget you. They're always looking for a way home. That's why it's so hard to quit people, people you've dug into. And why you're sure you've met that friend of a friend before. Your own electrons hitched a ride back to you and suddenly everything feels right. It's quantum.

Only now they were running through an open field hand in hand. Late summer. Dusk. Maybe they were running home. Aina moved awkwardly, the way young children do, her feet out of pace with her body, and he half waited, half pulled her along. The way a barely older brother or cousin can't decide if you're better left or kept, alternatively kind and impatient. Certainly they were running. And laughing, and falling. She could spend her whole life here, the grass scratching against her ankles. This is what family feels like.

Only now they were running. Well, walking really fast. He'd grabbed her by the arm and half pulled, half directed her out of her place in the line she'd finally been called to join.

"Do you still trust me?" He relaxed his grip on her arm. "It's cold out. Zip up."

She did.

He was nodding at people as they passed them, like the man on the train she'd imagined. He looked like he knew where they were going. She thought about telling him that she had to go back. That it hadn't been easy to get an appointment to begin with, that marriage is a detailed process, and someone was depending on her.

For the splitting of a second, they paused, He looked at her as though he was deciding if she was worth the trouble, and resigning himself to some duty. He said only, "There's another way," and pulled her along.

3. The Bridge

They'd been walking for at least an hour when Ranen stopped them abruptly. He turned to look out over the bridge. From where they stood, the city sprawled south and east, and below them, the long course of river wound north through a desert of juniper and sage. To the west, where Ranen was now looking as he rested his arms on the concrete ledge, was a range of low and rocky mountains. As if to shame the city for its concrete and electric arrogance, the sky just then remembered an ancestral darkness, the moon put on an heirloom veil and offered herself as an alternative to the endless, buzzing glow.

Ranen could see Aina behind him, back and elbows to the low retainer of the bridge, and looking at the city they'd just left. He wondered if she realized that she'd never see it again, not like that. He stood back, and turned toward her, held an arm out then dropped it. He turned back to the moon, the river, the rocky hills, grateful for their constancy.

Aina'd played along when he'd pulled her out of the building with one-word commands, "Walk. Left. There." And, she didn't mind this short rest. The January wind was clear and fine against her face, and the relative silence they'd fallen into allowed her ask herself (again) just what the hell she was doing. But every time she tried to counsel herself to better judgement, her feet and her heart beat out in unison, cool and steady: *stay-here, stay-here*.

But he was staring, and his stillness said they'd be here a while.

"What?"

Ranen traced his bottom lip between his thumb and ring finger, then ran his hand over his face quickly a couple of times as if to clear the screen. "Aina –" He paused around the

lowing of an airbrake, and the squeak of tires against asphalt. The door to the transport swung open “—Inside.”

With a little shrug, and with the commitment of a lucid dreamer who’s going to make the most of what’s left of the dream, Aina climbed in.

4. The Activation

An old brick building among brick buildings in a town too old for bullet-trains. A room where metal was a luxury. She sat across from him, on a low trunk. Leaned against the wall, stretched her spine against the cool bricks. Old and peeling paint rustled between the wall and her sweater.

He stood there a moment, examining her face the way you pour over an old photograph of your grandmother's sister, or an unnamed scientist, suddenly staring back at you from the pages of a textbook. A face impossibly familiar. Only he *had* seen her before. A long exhale. He sat on the cot.

"It's been a long time."

She looked away from the waterspot on the ceiling. Looked at him, waiting.

"A long time since I –" He knew she had no idea – nothing more than echoes of impressions of dreams, anyway. And the years he'd been working up to this moment, rehearsing the words like an old prayer – they were gone. Pointless. He could count the syllables to his heartbeat, conjure a low hum at the base of his skull, but there was little language for this. She was staring at her hands now. He stood up. Adjusted his hat, removed it, turned it by the rim through his fingertips. And when he couldn't hold it any more, he tossed it on the cot and squatted in front of her. Eye level. He cupped his hands toward hers, and she let him. *There's a weight to this.* He let her hands settle in his, then worked them free of each other, fixed his attention on the right palm, now open. Fuck it.

He stroked the inside of her wrist. In another world, she'd smell geraniums, and he'd say, *there's a spot just here...* She relaxed a bit, opened her hand to him. He met her eyes. And

with the full of his strength, leaning forward into that trained and terrible grip, he bore down on the small cyst, willing it to be quick about its business.

Her face brightened, as if she'd been startled by some familiar joy. Then a scream and millisecond of struggle. He held on, placed his free palm to her cheek. Her eyes closed and he released her hands to intercept that slow slump that gravity insists upon.

He lifted her, turned. Placed her on the cot, bumping his hat to the floor as he made room for her. He fixed her with a nurse's efficient tenderness: femurs resting loosely in their crests, scapula tucked to hold the lungs open, loose hair traced behind her ear. He covered her with a light blanket and stood back to look at his work.

A small blue light was flashing through the blanket from where he'd freed the tech from its casing. A silent siren in an abandoned warehouse. But this was just an old storeroom off a bar and sirens were just another bit of antiquity.

From the color of it, he had about twenty-seven or -eight minutes before she'd be awake and very, very confused. He could stay, watch her sleep. Or he could get a drink.

Like a man who doesn't want to disturb his lover with the noise of recurrent insomnia, he retrieved his hat from where it had fallen and made his way to the hallway. He held the door handle as it clicked silently into place.

He walked toward the noise at the bar. Pulled himself to his full height, stretched his arms low and shook them. It was going to be a long night. Just short of the public ruckus, he stepped out instead into the open alley. He lit a bit of cigar, took a couple of puffs and one long pull before pinching it out and returning it to the inside pocket of his coat.

This was useless. He exhaled the smoke and stepped up the small steps leading back to the hallway and the bar. He wanted a to harbor a cold drink. And to put his fists through a bit of drywall. Twenty-two minutes left. He rubbed his face on the sleeve of his coat, adjusted his hat, the way men in stories like this do, and went back inside.

5. The Cathedral

The door of the transport lifted, and now in so many days of this, Aina instinctively turned her face away from the intrusion of the incoming light. Her eyes watered even after the bright hand lamp had been lowered. How long had they been traveling by the glow of the lunatubes, that portable nightlight of sleeping children and wildworkers? In the seconds it took for Aina's vision to clear, Ranen had hopped lightly to the ground and turned to help her down. She waved his hand away and somewhat awkwardly joined him.

Now, there was handshaking with a man of indiscriminant age, and talking in low tones. From what she could catch of it, they were as welcomed as they were going to be, and the comfort (comfort!) of the transport, like the too-thin cot of the bar storeroom, was a luxury of the past.

Aina dug the toe of her boot into the ground. A clump of grass went bellyup for the effort, its shadow long and wild in the artificial light.

"Let's go."

She grabbed the canvas bag that had been tasked to her to carry, and followed the two men along the narrow path that carved out a clear, if lopsided, route directly into the hills. The point of intersection between the path and the large rockface ahead was bisected by a warm frame of light insisting its way through the boulders as though through the crevice of a door not quite closed.

It took them less than an hour to reach the illuminated pass, and less than five minutes through it. Aina had traced her hand along the rockface. It was warm to the touch and vibrating.

When the hills gave way to the valley, they did so with a terrifying commitment. It was a steep descent from the ledge where the three travelers were standing. And the rooftops of rough structures seemed to be carried in the rolling waves of a smoky sea, now peeking out, now completely gone. And all of it held in that same warm glow that she'd seen from the transport. It was hard to imagine that such a place would be willing to face the daylight. How jarring for it. How out of place.

The small company began their descent down a looping footpath. They'd circumvent the entire valley three times before hitting ground level. Aina couldn't help thinking that a chute or sledway would have been a simpler route to negotiate travel into the town. But a direct cut along a z-vector wouldn't have afforded their hosts a long look at the soon-to-be visitors.

The village was unlike anything Aina had seen before. The smoke she'd noted from above was not a surrounding fog, but a cover suspended about over their heads. Ranen could run his hands through it, if he wanted (she was pretty sure he hadn't wanted), but it was out of her reach, and comfortably out of the way for anyone who wasn't looking at it for the first time.

Aina tried to orient herself by searching again for the opening in the hills, the pass that they'd used to enter the valley. Despite the constant movement of the smoke above, she could trace the looping foot road around and around again. But no matter how many times she checked back, she found no indication of a pass or tunnel. Instead, what she noted as their entrypoint looked like a bit of misengineering, a carefully tended cobblestone road disappearing right into the mountainside. Whoever'd been holding that door open for them had shut it tight.

Ranen, with precision, removed the glove from his right hand. He reached down and took her left in his, a practiced gesture that he hadn't been practicing on her. But effective, with its interlacing of fingers and pressing of palms. The eyes that had been focused on her now redirected themselves to him. Redirected, and turned away.

They walked toward a small building, uncommon among its sisters. Where the others stood jaunty and ready in tilting wooden frames, this one was corseted by intricate pipeworks.

Copper pipes and iron pipes, dainty bronze pipes, tenor pipes and baritone, they all wound in and among themselves, in and up and out.

“That’s the place.”

6. Tethered

It was easy to forgive himself the small things. Dragging her impatiently and without consent from the genetprepare clinic. Dropping her hundreds of miles and an entire psychology away from the ceremonial and mechanized doings of her family, her friends, from every familiarity that had stepped in to fill the shell of his absence. Even for releasing the tech that was already colonizing her limbic system.

Soon she'd remember every aspect of him, of them. She would wake and see the eyes that had drawn her to Sean. Eyes that were blue, and grey, and so like the winter. Not Sean's eyes, but his. One substitution among many. His laugh in the children she dreamed of raising. His hands in the hands of the man who'd taught her to paint. And she would remember, as though it had been her practice for so many lifetimes, what it was to stretch her love against him. She'd remember his gait in old age and how it felt to survive him. He forgave himself this intrusion, because it was necessary. Because a gentle introduction would not have been convincing enough, and he needed her convinced.

And he forgave himself the forced and theatrical intimacy of their walk through the thoroughfare up to the cathedral, for how each step had said *mine*, to the villagers who needed to see it, and to her. He forgave himself for what that contact ensured. Even now, her skin was hungrily soaking in his coding, resequencing bits of protein, just as his cells were integrating fragments of her, comparing key to keyhole and humming in the homecoming. This, while it could have been delayed, was equally necessary. That final bioconfirmation would ensure that their harmonics were again completely aligned, that now, never, not in the fullness of her life, nor the years he may still carve out of his, could she register any other resonance. The

variation in her genome, the one that had escaped the antiquated lifeclock in her early years, that had led her to be classified unbonded until the hyacinth bloomed, could not be mistaken again or undone. It was binding. Even if her people could find the right door to this event, and create the hole in the fabric necessary to go back, they would return empty handed. She would not leave him. And even if she would, no doctor at any stop along the world line of Aina's life could separate her biowaves from his. His own commitment was an inevitability, and for a hunter, what's inevitable, like what's necessary, is easily forgiven.

But Ranen knew what all hunters know: the laws of physics don't traffic in forgiveness. There is a theology of irrefutable writs, dictates inscribed along the walls of the microcosmos. And it's just a scrap of bioscripture that supplies a hunter's passport: the tethering. One lifer serves as a fixed point along the timeline, and the other, for being bound, can move like a kite on the wind of it all: ahead, behind, but always attached to the hand that holds it. That attachment, the holy grail of old science, is only as strong as the pairing. Break the tether, and the hunter hunts no more. And the anchor does what anchors do: finds a place to bury herself.

He went back for her, before that could happen. Yes. But not for love. Not even in answer to the undeniable imperative that pulls his bones to hers. It was unforgivable. He only went back because they sent him.

7. The Observance

The Observance, with few exceptions, limited their active hunters to a small murder of four or five at a given time, as time is measured locally, by the pipes of the cathedral.

Four hunters means four tethered timelines, each tended and pruned to ensure that the anchor is ever grounded in the forward stream of history and that the tether binding anchor to hunter is braided true. Some tethers, like those anchored in pre-literate societies, could be bound up in myth. A woman believes that her true love is a spirit, and small contaminations of her timeline by her hunter, an ephemeral love that only she can see and touch, are signs of her witchery. These tethers seldom require intervention.

Post-industrial tethers, or more specifically, tethers bookended by industrialization and the information age, offered an opposite, but resultingly similarly simple monitoring: not much need to control for true love when mating is pragmatic and sexual, and love a fiction played out on big screens and in small books.

The truly difficult tethers, were those like Rainen's. The term post-humanist had been thrown around in the literary circles, post-scientific in others. The point being that when science confirms that your soul at its most sub-atomic level has bound itself to another, you expect a physical body. There is no mythos that lets a sane person believe their lover to be a phantom. No mis-informed cynicism that can dismiss your cellular screaming as dime-novel romanticism.

Instead, for a single woman to be told on the eve of her wedding that she's not a free agent, but a lifer, a lifebound soul carrying the faintest mass of another in the electron cloud of her love—it's a bold diagnosis. An exclamatory, "Then who?" and a searching in all the corners

for the missed, but somehow present, other. For a people just generations shy of the tesseract, the tantrum of one heartbroken lover can fracture the entirety of n-dimensional existence.

For this reason, several in the Observance had argued that Rainen never should have been culled to the hunt (though he was), and for this reason, they had sent him to retrieve her.

8. And the Memories

"Why do I remember you?" Aina asked, placing the hairbrush on the dresser and turning to face Rainen, who had just stepped out of the shower. As soon as the question was asked, she wished it wasn't. She sounded like an old woman grumbling over misplaced keys.

Rainen straightened from where he'd bent to rinse his face. Water flowed from a narrow, transparent tube into the sink, and out through a wider, darker one. He spun the tap closed. He stood there, half turned to her, half away, looking in the mirror a long moment.

"Aina."

He sat down next to her on the corner of the bed where she'd folded her feet under her body like a child. He touched her cheek gently. Stopped.

"You don't."

Rainen stood up, took a razor from the case of toiletries laid out by their hosts and returned to the sink.

9. The Hunter's Call

Rainen was four years old when the Observance first slipped him sideways from time. He'd spent the day running in the fields and stood muddy in the doorway of the kitchen, Aina's hand firmly in his.

In the words between his mother's scolding and her laughter, the narrative adjusted itself. And Rainen's mother, giving the neighbor girl a snack, remembered not the parasitic joy of her own pregnancy, but the struggle and childlessness that had brought her to this moment. Her ache, though real, was inconsequential.

It was Aina's reaction, her sudden and inconsolable weeping, that found her being held and rocked on that kitchen floor that confirmed to the Observance that they had again found a true tether, one strong enough to span more than space. So knowing this, they returned the boy to the farmhouse kitchen, just outside the city boundary, with its smartwalls and inferior plumbing. They returned him to his mother and his childhood. They allowed him the discovery of first love, the discovery of his body, and the full knowledge of what he would lose.

They returned for him some dozen years later.