## The Boy Detective of Oz: An Otherland Story

## Tad Williams

It was hard to imagine anything was actually wrong here.

It was the nicest Kansas spring anyone could imagine, the broad prairie sky patched with cottony white clouds. Redbuds cheeky as schoolchildren waved their pink blooms in a momentary breeze, and a huge white oak spread an umbrella of shade over the road and for quite a distance on each side.

As he crossed a little wooden bridge, Orlando Gardiner saw the birches rustling along the edge of the stream, exchanging secrets with the murmuring water. The stream itself was bright and clear, flowing over large, smooth rocks of many colors and festooned with long tendrils of moss that undulated in the current. Fish swam below him and birds flew above him and it seemed like it would be May in this spot forever.

But if everything was as nice as it looked, why was he here?

To: HK [Hideki Kunohara]

From: OG [Orlando Gardiner, System Ranger!]

RE: field dispatch, kansas simworld

i’m sub-vocalizing this while i’m actually onsite investigating, so sorry for any confusion. i know you think the kansas world was hopelessly corrupted from the first, and if it really has gone bad you’ll utterly have my vote to de-rez it, but first impressions are that everything looks pretty good here, so let me finish checking it out before we make any moves. Like you said, I’m “the one who’ll have to deal with the bullshit if it goes wrong,” and that’s what I’m doing.

He could see the modest roofs and central spire of Emerald in the distance, everything as neat and well kept as a town in a model railroad. The first time he had seen this place, it had looked like something out of a medieval painting of Hell: dry, blasted, cratered as if it had been bombed, and populated with creatures so wretched and freakish they might have been the suffering damned. But it was the only Oz simulation in the Otherland network, and Orlando had fought hard to keep it running; it was good to see it thriving. Oz had meant a lot to him when he was a kid confined to a sickbed. When he had been alive.

But that still didn’t answer the main question: If everything was good in Kansas, why had he been summoned?

Whatever the reason, someone seemed to be waiting for him. She would have sparkled if the sun had been on her, but since the Glass Cat was sitting in the shade grooming, Orlando didn’t see her until he was almost on top of her. She looked up at Orlando but didn’t stop until she had finished licking her glass paw and smoothing down the fur on her glass face. The Glass Cat might be a sim of a cat—and a see-through cat at that—but she was every inch a feline. The only things that kept her from looking like a cheap glass paperweight were her beautiful ruby heart, her emerald eyes, and the pink, pearl-like spheres that were her brains (and also her own favorite attribute).

“I expected you to show up,” said the Glass Cat. “But not this quickly.”

“I was in the area.” Which was both true and nonsensical, since there really was no distance for Orlando to travel. He existed only as information on the massive network and could visit any world he wanted whenever he chose. But as far as the Glass Cat and the others were concerned, there was only one world—this one. The sims didn’t even realize they were no longer connected to the Oz part of the simulation, although they remembered it as if they were. “I hear there’s a problem,” he said. “Do you know what it is?”

She rose, swirling her tail in the air as gracefully as if it had not been solid glass, and sauntered off the path, heading down toward the stream. “Am I supposed to follow you?” he asked.

She tossed him an emerald glance of reproach. “You’re so very clever, man from Oz. What do you think?”

Following a snippy, transparent cat, he thought: Just another day in my new and unfailingly weird life. Orlando’s body had died from a wasting disease as he and others had struggled against the Grail Brotherhood, the network’s creators, a cartel of rich monsters and other greedy bastards all looking for eternal life in worlds they made for themselves. But now they were all gone, and this was Orlando’s forever instead.

“I hope this is important, Cat,” he said as he followed her down the embankment, into the rustle of the birch trees. “I’ve got plenty of other things to do.” And he did. Major glitches had looped Dodge City—the simulated outlaws had been robbing the same simulated train for days—and the gravity had unexpectedly reverted to Earth-normal in one of the flying worlds, leaving bodies all over the ground. He planned to fob at least one of the problems off on Kunohara, who, like most scientists, loved fiddling with that sort of programming problem.

“There,” the Cat said, stopping so suddenly he nearly tripped over her. “What do you think of that?”

Orlando was so irritated by her tone that for a moment he didn’t see what she was talking about, but then he noticed a leg and the long, curled toe of a boot lying half-hidden in the tall wheatgrass. “Ho Dzang,” he said softly. “Who is it? Do you know?”

“I think it’s Omby Amby.”

“The Soldier with Green Whiskers? The Royal Army of Oz?”

“If you mean the Royal Policeman of Kansas, then yes,” the Cat said. “You know we don’t use those titles and such from the Old Country.” She yawned. “I found him this morning.”

“What were you doing way out here?” Orlando bent down. The top half of the body was still hidden by grasses, but he could see enough of the man’s slender torso and green uniform to be sadly certain the Cat was right.

“I get around.” She rose and writhed herself in and out of Orlando’s legs. “I travel, you know. I see things. I learn things. I’m curious by nature—isn’t that why you chose me to help you?”

“I suppose.” As far as he was concerned, she was merely an informant, but of course the Glass Cat would see herself as more important than that. He bent lower to pull back the grasses. “But if you really want to help me, you’d stop bumping m—”

He never finished his sentence. As he exposed the rest of the green-clad figure, Orlando Gardiner was arrested by the sudden realization that while this might indeed be the body of Omby Amby, Royal Policeman of Kansas, that was all it was; his neck ended in a cut as neat and bloodless as if someone had chopped a potato in half with a surgical knife. His head and famous long whiskers were nowhere to be seen.

okay, it’s a little worse than I first thought, mr. k—there’s a body. but it’s a minor character, and it might just be an ordinary glitch. My cover story (about being sent by ozma from oz) still holds up though, so give me a little time with this one. i promise I’ll get to the other fenfen soon. Maybe you should check out dodge city in the meantime—i think that one has some major programming screwups, because the bridge there fell down and then put itself back up a few months ago, and the native americans are kind of blue-colored. looks hopeless to me, but you might notice something in the numbers I missed.

“Most disturbing!” declared Scarecrow. The Mayor of Emerald shifted in his chair, but his legs wouldn’t stay where he left them and kept getting in his way. His friend the Patchwork Girl leaped forward and helped push them into place. “And where is the body of poor Omby Amby now?”

“Being examined by Professor Wogglebug,” said Orlando. “Well, all of it that we have, since the head’s missing. Amby worked for you, didn’t he?”

“Of course!” Scarecrow said. “I’m the mayor, aren’t I?” But although he sounded indignant, Scarecrow seemed to lack the spirit to back it up, slumping in his chair like a bag of old washing. His lethargy worried Orlando, reminding him unpleasantly of the bloated, monstrous version of the Scarecrow that had ruled Emerald in the bad old simulation. “And his head’s gone, you say?”

“Yes. Professor Wogglebug says he’s never seen anything like it.”

“He would say that,” declared the Patchwork Girl, turning cartwheels around the mayoral office. “He’s got a terrible memory!” She was not the most focused personality in the simworld, but her heart was good, so Orlando did his best to be patient. That was why he had taken the job instead of leaving it to short-tempered Hideki Kunohara—you had to be very, very patient, because the inhabitants were like weird children frozen in the manners of the early twentieth century.

“Scraps, your foolishness is making my head hurt,” Scarecrow complained. “Please stop revolving like a Catherine wheel. This is serious. Omby Amby is dead! Murdered!”

“Hah!” shouted the Patchwork Girl. “Now you’re the one who’s being foolish, Scarecrow. Nobody dies here in Kansas, just like nobody dies in Oz! Right, Orlando?”

The question caught him by surprise. “I’m not sure, Scraps,” he said. “I’ve certainly never heard of anything like this happening since...” He had almost said since the simulation was restarted, which would have only confused his listeners. “Well, since forever, I guess. Was he on some kind of mission for you, Mayor Scarecrow?”

“Mission?” Scarecrow gave him an odd look. “What would make you ask such a thing?”

“Well, he’s your police chief. In fact he’s your only policeman. He was found on the road that leads to Forest. I thought you might have sent him to Lion about something.”

The Scarecrow wrinkled his feed-sack brow and shook his head. “No. Though I did send him to Tinman a few days ago to ask him to stop making such a pounding in his factory at night. The people of Emerald are having trouble sleeping!”

For the second time in a few moments, Orlando felt a tingle of unease. What was Tinman building, working his machines at such hours? The metal man had been one of the worst parts of the corrupted simulation. But this wasn’t the same Tinman, he reminded himself; the Kansas world had been restarted and returned to its original specs months ago.

“I suppose I’d better talk to Tinman,” Orlando said out loud. “Lion, too.”

“I’ll come along,” the Glass Cat announced. “I like a little excitement, you know.”

Orlando wanted to check in at the Wogglebug’s Scientific University and Knowledge Emporium, so he and the Cat made their way through the quaint streets of Emerald, a strange hybrid of Oz and an early twentieth-century Kansas town, full of cheerful people and animals and stolid little houses decorated with all kinds of fantastic trim and paint.

The Wogglebug was bending over the soldier’s headless body, which had been laid out on a table in his laboratory, but the man-sized bug (although there was never a real insect who looked anything like him) turned to greet them as they entered. Professor Wogglebug was wearing his usual top hat but also a pair of magnifiers that made his eyes seem huge, as well a lab apron to protect his fancy waistcoat and tails.

“Goodness!” said the bug. “I can make nothing of it, Orlando! Look, he is completely de-headed. Not be-headed, though, which would have been much messier. The head has come off as neat as a whistle.”

The Cat leaped onto the table and walked once around the body, sniffing. “Is he really dead?”

“Hard to say.” The Wogglebug wiped his magnifiers on his coat. “He does not breathe. He does not move. He certainly cannot speak or think. It seems an awkward way to continue living, if by choice.”

man, how do we figure out something like this if we can’t even figure out whether a sim’s really dead or not? i mean simworld-dead, of course—he’s not really dead since his patterns are still in the system, and we could just restart him.

by the way, working a possible murder in oz/kansas is like trying to solve an embezzlement at a daycare by questioning the kids. you’ll get lots of answers, but none of them will help much.

After leaving the lab, Orlando and the Glass Cat walked back across Emerald, dodging in and out of the Henrys and Emilys now heading home from work to have lunch in their quaint houses. In the corrupted, dystopian version of the world, all the human men and women had been little more than beasts of burden of which the most obvious proof was that they had all been given the same name: all the men named after Dorothy’s Uncle Henry, all the women named after her Aunt Em. But in this new version, they seemed happy and prosperous, dressed in an amalgam of Oz and American fashions from a hundred and fifty years earlier in many shades of green. It was hard to look at their smiling faces and believe something could be truly wrong with this world. But there was that headless policeman.

“Are we going out to visit Lion first?” asked the Cat as they reached Emerald’s outer limits. “It would have been quicker to go to the Works. That’s right next to town.”

“I don’t want to wander around in Forest after dark, Glass Cat, so we’re going there now.” As in the original Oz, the Kansas animals didn’t tend to be dangerous, but it was easy to get lost in the deep trees. Orlando might not have a real body anymore, but he still needed to sleep, and he had no urge to spend the night bedded down on the cold, damp ground of the woods.

They passed the spot where the soldier’s body had been found, but Orlando didn’t bother to examine the crime scene again. The Scarecrow had sent a dozen Henrys to search for the head, but they had come back empty-handed, and any traces of the original crime had doubtless been trampled many times over. Only the stream remained undisturbed, plashing and playing its way between the pale birches.

The current version of the Cowardly Lion was still impressively scary but nowhere near as grotesquely human as the previous corrupted version. If it weren’t for a sort of hyperreality, which covered him like a coat of varnish—his magnificent mane all whorls and golden curlicues, his expression just a tiny bit too much like a person’s—he would have looked like the biggest, most impressive lion any nature documentary ever showed. As it was, though, he looked a little too styled—more like a celebrity lion tamer himself than the creature to be tamed.

Not that he isn’t pretty tame already, Orlando thought. Luckily for everybody.

The protector of the woods listened to Orlando’s news with grave concern, nodding his huge head sadly. “But I just saw Omby Amby last night,” he growled. “He was right here in Forest.”

“Do you know why, exactly?” Orlando asked.

“He had been to see Tinman and brought a message for me. Scarecrow asked the Works not to make so much noise at night, so Tinman wanted to know if he could expand some of his factories into land on the edge of Forest.”

“And what did you say?”

“About that idea? That I’d have to think about it. I wanted to talk to Scarecrow, too. I don’t see why my people should give up their territory without getting anything back, and we don’t like noisy machines, either.”

“And it was Omby Amby who you gave that message to?”

Lion frowned, his furry brow wrinkling like crumpled velvet. “I told him what I thought—that it was a serious issue and nothing to rush into.” He raised his head and sniffed the wind. “Why do you ask? Did Omby Amby talk to Tinman? Did he tell him what I said?”

“We have no way of knowing,” said Orlando. “I haven’t spoken to Tinman yet.”

“Ah. Then you came to me first?” Lion seemed to like that. “Well, if he didn’t get the message already, tell my tin friend I won’t be hurried into a decision. I have my subjects’ welfare to think of, you know.”

“Of course.” Orlando suspected there wasn’t going to be much more to be gained here. “Thanks for your help.”

“I hope you find out what’s going on,” said Lion. “I know Ozma will be very upset. She was very fond of the Soldier with Green Whiskers.”

Princess Ozma, like Oz itself, was now unused strings of code sleeping in the original specs of the simworld, but Orlando certainly wasn’t going to mention that.

He called to the Glass Cat, who had disappeared somewhere. When she finally sauntered back into the clearing, Lion said, “Say, Glass Cat, you get around. Do you know anything about what happened?”

“I found the body,” she said. “Nobody else did. Just me. It’s because of my superior brains. You’ve noticed them, of course.”

Lion shared a look with Orlando. “We’ve all admired them, Cat. How did you find him? Were you out searching?”

The Glass Cat looked irritated, her version of embarrassment. “Actually it was sort of an accident. I was on my way back from a trip when I saw him.”

The Lion shook his head again. “Someone has done a very bad thing.”

As he and the Cat made their way out from beneath the pleasant insect-humming shade of Forest, Orlando said, “You couldn’t have seen Omby Amby’s body from the road.”

The Cat was silent for a moment. “Very well, I didn’t notice it right away. I heard a noise in the bushes. I thought it might be a mouse. I went to look.”

“Was it Omby Amby? Was the noise from him? Or did you see someone else?”

“How should I know who made the noise?” Now the Glass Cat was genuinely annoyed. “Is it important? I didn’t see anyone else or I would have told you, and when I found him, he certainly wasn’t moving.”

The number of things that could have been rustling through the grasses by the side of a Kansas stream, even in this simulated version, was effectively endless. “You said a trip. Where?”

“Just to see some friends. I’ve been very busy lately, running errands for Scarecrow and the others, and I wanted a little time to myself. I’m very important, you know—they need me for lots of things because Omby Amby was just too slow sometimes.”

“Has there been a lot going on here lately?” Orlando asked as innocently as possible. “Lots of activity? Messages going back and forth?”

“Goodness, yes.” The Cat stopped to smooth her already smooth glass fur with her tongue. “I’ve hardly had time to catch my breath, if I had breath in the first place. Go tell Scarecrow this! Go ask Tinman that! Sometimes it’s quite overwhelming.”

“And are any of the messages...strange?”

The Cat gave him an odd look. “As far as I’m concerned, man from Oz, they’re all strange. But that’s just me. Because I have a much better than average set of brains.” She leaned her head forward to better display the cluster of pink pearls glistening in her transparent head. “You already know that, of course.”

“I’m sure everybody knows that by now,” Orlando assured her.

Of all that had changed since Kansas had been rebooted, the Works was the most striking example. The final corruption had been a nightmare of massive gears and steam and dripping oil, with so many wires strung overhead that they blocked out the sky and plunged the place into permanent, sodium-lit twilight. The inhabitants had been either semi-sentient tin toys or mindless human Henrys and Emilys, most with cruel mechanical devices surgically implanted into their bodies. Now the Works looked like something out of one of the real-world Disneylands, all bright, shiny colors and smiling mechanical people marching in and out of cheerful little metal houses. Of course Orlando could not help remembering that those smiles were painted onto their faces.

Not fair, he told himself. Everybody in Kansas is a sim, even the most human-looking of them. All the faces in this world have been painted on—by programming, if nothing else.

Still, after experiencing the horrible previous version of the Works, Orlando had never felt quite the same about Nick Chopper again.

man, what was with those grail brotherhood people screwing up perfectly good children’s stories, mr. k? I mean, you knew some of those people—what was their scan?

Kunohara himself had been an early member of the Grail Brotherhood, but only because he wanted access to the powerful simulation engine to pursue his scientific interests. That was how he told it, anyway. But he had helped Orlando and the others take down the Grail Brotherhood, so Orlando trusted him. Didn’t always like him, but trusted him.

i mean, dzang! those old scanners turned the first version of kansas into a nightmare, ruined alice’s wonderland and pooh corner—remember pigzilla?—and a bunch of other stuff besides. didn’t those fenhead bastards ever hear of innocent childlike wonder?

that’s a joke, case you didn’t know. sort of.

“Tell me a bit about Omby Amby,” said Orlando as he and the Glass Cat walked down the main street, past clean, bright tin-fringe lawns and polished mailboxes, toward the Shop, the unofficial city hall of the Works. “Did he have family? Friends—or more importantly, enemies? What did he like to do?”

The Cat shook her head. “No family, but I didn’t know him very well—to be honest, we do not travel in the same circles. If you’ll remember, I am intimate with many of the leading citizens of Kansas and was present to see several of them come to life—like Scraps the Patchwork Girl, for instance. The Policeman with Green Whiskers...well, he was a policeman. A civil servant. You would have to ask around in the workingman’s taverns in Emerald.”

“Taverns?” That didn’t sound very much like the Oz that L. Frank Baum had written about, and it didn’t sound like it belonged in this rebooted version of Kansas either. “There are taverns here?”

“Of course,” said the Cat. “Where else can that sort of people drink ginger beer, play darts, and generally be loud and not half as amusing as they think they are?”

“Ah,” said Orlando. “Ginger beer.”

“Although,” said the Cat with a little frown of disdain, “I hear that nowadays the younger men are drinking sarsaparilla instead. Straight out of the barrel!”

“Goodness,” said Orlando, trying not to smile. “These places sound desperate and dangerous.”

“I wouldn’t know,” the Cat said. “My superior intellect doesn’t permit me to visit such low establishments.”

Tinman was in the barn-like building known as the Shop, standing beside a large drafting table, surrounded by tin toys of various descriptions—a bear on a ball, a monkey with cymbals, a car with an expressive, smiling face. Tinman stared as Orlando explained why he had come, his brightly polished face devoid of any discernible emotion, although his eyebrows had been welded on in such a way that he always seemed surprised, an effect amplified somewhat by the gaping grill of his mouth, as though he were perpetually hearing news as unusual as Orlando’s. Tinman was less human than the drawings in the ancient books, but still a great deal friendlier-looking than the thing that had ruled the Works before the restart, a creature more like a greasy piston with crude arms and legs than anything with thoughts and feelings.

As Orlando finished his recitation of the facts to date, the tin toys standing around the table began to make quiet ratcheting noises and move in place.

“My friends here are upset by your news,” Tinman said tonelessly. “As am I. Poor Omby Amby! He was kind to everybody. He lived to help, and although he was a soldier, he would not have hurt a flea.” He paused for a moment. “Nor would he flee from hurt, evidently.”

The other tin creatures gave little whirring laughs. “Very clever,” the rolling bear said. “Your workings are as droll as ever, Tinman.”

“But now my heart shames me for making light at such a time,” he replied, though Orlando could see no evidence of it on his inscrutable metal face. “What has Scarecrow said? Will he draft another policeman? The whiskered fellow was very useful dealing with small problems and matters of everyday...friction.” It was impossible to tell if Tinman was making another joke or talking about something of particular concern to folk whose internal workings were composed of oiled gears. The tin toys began to whisper among themselves, a noise not much louder or different than the sound of their clockwork, until the monkey became excited and clapped his cymbals together with a loud crash, which startled the Glass Cat so badly that she jumped off the table.

“Careful,” said Orlando.

“You are right,” said the Cat. “Scarecrow was right, too—there are too many hard edges around here for me.”

Tinman swiveled his head toward her. “What does that mean, Glass Cat? Has Scarecrow said something unkind about the Works? That would be very disappointing.”

“No, no,” said the Cat. “Only that he told me I must be careful when I am visiting you here. That all this metal is a threat to my delicate, beautiful glass body.”

“Nonsense,” said Tinman. “No more so than the brick sidewalks of Emerald or the stone-scattered paths of Forest. It is too bad to hear my old friend speak about my part of Kansas that way.”

Orlando was going to say something conciliatory but instead found himself wondering what was going on behind Tinman’s shiny face. Was this exchange really as innocent as it seemed, or had the rivalry, treachery, and ultimately destructive conflict that had ruined the previous version already started again between the leading characters of this simworld?

Orlando asked about Omby Amby’s last mission.

“Yes, he took a message to Lion for me,” said Tinman.

“And you wanted Lion to let you use some of the Forest land?”

Tinman gave the closest thing he could to a shrug, a brief up-and-down pump of his shoulders. “He has a great deal, and there is much of it going to waste, but here in the Works, we are cramped between Emerald on one side and Lion’s domain on the other, with nowhere to grow.”

Lebensraum, Orlando thought. Isn’t that what the Nazis called it? Out loud he said, “Was there anything else to your message? Anything besides the request to use some of his land?”

“I can remember nothing else,” said Tinman. “Now if you will excuse me, my associates and I must discuss an addition to one of our factories. We would like to complete it during the dry season. Many of our laborers are Henrys and Emilys, and unlike my own people, they do not enjoy working in bad weather.”

“Of course,” said Orlando. “We’ll find our own way out.”

As he led the Glass Cat from the Shop, he considered what Tinman had said. On the surface all was as Orlando would have expected, so why did he feel as though something just as important—perhaps many important things—had gone unsaid?

just checked in on tinman. he’s still a little weird, but he always was, even in the nicest versions. something about that voice—like a robot with a bucket over its head. can we just redo the way he talks? that’s probably most of the problem with the simulation right there—that voice is utterly creepy. if sims can dream, I bet he’s giving the others nightmares.

Is this whole world just doomed to go wrong? Orlando wondered. Maybe the whole network? Something in the original programming that keeps tipping it back toward chaos? Or am I seeing ghosts where there aren’t any? Maybe Omby Amby just...tripped or something. And his head fell off. Shit, this is Oz, more or less. Stuff like that happens in Oz all the time.

But unless he could prove it, it didn’t solve the current problem. “I guess we’re off to see the Wizard,” he told the Cat.

The Wizard, known in the present version of the simworld as Senator Wizard of Kansas, lived in a stately white house on top of a hill between Emerald and Forest, overlooking the city. He was semiretired, leaving the business of governing mostly to Scarecrow and the others.

Orlando had discovered Oz early, first in various vids, then later in the books themselves. For a very sick child who spent most of his short life in bed, the Land of Oz had been the best childhood dream, a place where even someone as prematurely aged as little Orlando would have been just different, not a freak.

Another big part of its appeal: nobody died in Oz.

It was not surprising he had a soft spot for this place, but Orlando had also seen the horror that could be produced here firsthand, and knew that leaving its sims to such a fate would be far more cruel than simply pulling the plug.

A riddle like this was so much more difficult to solve than something like the endless train robbery, which Kunohara and whatever programmers had signed his penalties-worse-than-death nondisclosure agreement could solve just by fixing a few command lines. This Kansas thing was a people problem, at least so far. They might just be code, too, but every single bloodless algorithm had been through the black box of the Otherland network’s strange origin, had been effected by its living operating system and its many Grail Brotherhood manipulators, and had evolved and changed even since Kansas had been restarted. They were nearly as complex as real human beings, and although he knew it wasn’t that simple, Orlando couldn’t stop thinking of them that way. Shutting down the previous version of Oz had been a mercy killing, and it might come to the same thing this time, but it was a lot harder to think about euthanizing a patient who was smiling and happy and enjoying being alive.

“Princess Langwidere of Ev once told me,” the Cat said suddenly, “that if everyone had brains like mine, the world would be a less boring place.”

Orlando had only the vaguest recollection of Langwidere, a minor royal who lived somewhere on the fringes of Oz, or in this case, obviously, sim-Kansas. “Ah? Did she?”

“She most certainly did. She said that at least it was something to see, interesting enough to make her look away from her mirror every now and then.”

“She sounds charming.”

“She is. Most regal and discerning. When I visited, she took special trouble to show me her lovely things, her whole collection. She understands my true uniqueness.” They had reached the front porch of the Wizard’s big white house. The Cat vaulted up and waited for Orlando to open the door. “It is a shame there aren’t more people of her...and my...quality.”

The Cat was a useful informant, but she wasn’t his favorite sim by any means.

The Wizard came down the stairs as they entered the cluttered front parlor.

“Orlando!” he said with obvious pleasure. “Come in, young man, come in! A privilege to see your shining visage—and you, too, Glass Cat! You are even shinier! Hmmm, there was something I wanted to ask you, but I can’t think of it just now. Anyway, come in, both of you. May I offer you some lemonade?”

When they were comfortable, Orlando began to explain what had happened, but the Wizard held up his hand. “I have already heard this terrible news. Scarecrow sent me a letter this morning—although I had a devil of a time reading it. I suspect the actual hand was the Patchwork Girl’s.” He held up a sheet of paper daubed in several different colors, with no hint of sentences or even individual words holding themselves to straight lines. “Her enthusiasm somewhat outstrips her patience.” He put on his glasses and squinted at the page. “Scarecrow says that he’s keeping up the search for the unfortunate Mr. Amby’s head but that he thinks he must nominate another policeman.”

“Makes sense.” Orlando looked around for the Cat, who seemed to have gone missing again, but she had only crossed the room to admire herself in the polished sheen of the Wizard’s fireplace fender.

“I suppose, yes,” said the Wizard thoughtfully. “In any case, he says he thinks the Shaggy Man would be the best choice, because he is such a great traveler and will be happy to go back and forth wherever he is needed...”

“Piffle,” pronounced the Cat in a ringing tone.

“I’m sorry?” The Wizard turned to her with an indulgent smile.

“The Shaggy Man! I’m sorry, Senator Wizard, but I have spent time with the Shaggy Man, and the man is far too irresponsible for such a job. He simply does not care a feather for anything. How could such a man carry out important tasks?”

“Perhaps you’re right,” said the Wizard. “In any case, you should bring up your objections with Scarecrow, who says he has not made the decision yet. Perhaps you have some preferred candidate...?”

The Cat snorted, a delicate noise like a tiny chime. “Hah. Who needs a policeman anyway, in a place that has no crime?”

“Except for what seems to have happened to Mr. Amby himself,” the Wizard pointed out.

The reproof had been a gentle one, but still it was a silent, perhaps even chastened, Glass Cat who accompanied Orlando back across the fading afternoon into the heart of Emerald.

note to hk for later: we need to start a serious categorization census, because policing this network is getting a lot more complicated than just me and a bunch of glitchy sims. in the year or so since we took over the system, we’ve run into simuloids with personalities and memories stolen from real people like my friends that came into the network with me, others that are probably based on real people we don’t know, some ghosts created from just a few aspects of real people, and some that are regular sims but seem to be turning into something else all on their own. even if this oz has gone bad, i’m not 100% sure we should get rid of it. i mean, this is evolution in action! okay, it’s not the normal kind, but who said it had to be? but these simworlds, these sims, they’re definitely changing over time—is that just the complexity of the programs, or is it something else? i know they’re supposed to seem real, but sometimes I think it goes a lot deeper than that. yeah, that probably makes you even more certain we should erase kansas and the oz folk, but I don’t want to if we can avoid it.

Of course Orlando had to admit his feelings might change when he learned what was really going on here.

When they reached City Hall, they were told the Scarecrow was having a private conference with the local balloon-maker’s guild. The Cat wandered off on some idleness of her own, so while Orlando waited for Scarecrow’s meeting to finish, he went out to wander the gardens and orchard behind City Hall. Every shapely trunk had a great spread of branches, and each branch was heavy with fruit—apples, pears, and sunset-colored oranges—all so lovely and enticing that it reminded Orlando all over again of why he had fallen in love with Oz and its simple but dreamlike pleasures. He wandered a long time, but enchanting as the place was, he could not really enjoy it, too busy picking at the problem of the murdered, or at least dead, soldier from every angle he could conceive.

Perhaps it was simply an isolated glitch. That was the simplest explanation. The old Kansas had been like Pol Pot’s Cambodia, but that version was gone; as someone had pointed out, nobody was supposed to die in Oz, and those rules applied in this rebooted version. If it had been an accident, one of the searchers should have stumbled across Omby Amby’s head by now. If it was an actual murder—why? The Policeman had no enemies, no job that anyone else coveted—Hell, the Glass Cat didn’t even think they should replace him. And while Orlando might be full of nagging worries about the simworld turning feral, other than the soldier’s surprising fate and a little minor squabbling between the three principal rulers, he hadn’t seen any evidence of it happening. The people seemed free, happy, and prosperous.

A blare of trumpets in the distance startled him. The loud call didn’t quite sound shrill enough to be an alarm—more like the herald of something official, perhaps an announcement. It might be nothing more exciting than a breakthrough in the balloon negotiations, but Orlando thought he should check it out anyway.

He followed the noises out of the gardens and around the front of City Hall, where he found a crowd had gathered: an assortment of Henrys, Emilys, and less human-looking Emerald citizens milling in the lamplit square before the building. As the horns blared again, he saw people standing on tiptoes and heard them oohing and ahhing. He worked his way to the front just in time to see what looked like a circus parade passing into City Hall—antelope, bears, porcupines, all manner of woodland creature. No, he decided as he saw the beasts’ expressions, it was not a circus parade but something more serious, more somber. He was about to follow the last of the animals into the building when he heard people begin to shout behind him. He turned in time to see a solitary figure making its way through the crowd, headed toward the entrance.

“The Wizard!” someone called. “He’ll sort things out!”

“Help us!” cried another.

“Ah!” the Wizard said to Orlando, seemingly oblivious of the onlookers. “Do you know where the Glass Cat is? I remembered what I wanted to speak to her about. She carried a message from me to the King and Queen of Ev on her last trip, and I forgot to ask if they had sent back any reply.”

“You sent the Cat all the way to Ev?”

“Because it is on the far side of the Deadly Prairie,” said the Wizard. “The Cat is nearly the only person who can cross that burning expanse without harm.”

“I’m not sure where she is, to be honest,” said Orlando, anxious to find out what was going on inside. “She’s somewhere on the grounds, though, I’m pretty certain.”

The Wizard excused himself and hurried off, apparently completely disinterested (or, more likely, completely oblivious) to whatever had brought a protest march of forest animals into the center of Emerald. Those of the throng who had not yet made their way into City Hall cheered him as he passed.

Inside, the Forest animals—and many others, Orlando could now see, including a large contingent of tin people from the Works—had gathered in the rotunda at the base of the large ceremonial staircase. Orlando saw a sparkle above him: the Glass Cat was perched on a railing above his head, watching the crowd with grave interest. But before Orlando could ask her if she knew what was going on, the Scarecrow appeared at the top of the stairs with the Shaggy Man and a few of his other advisors. The Scarecrow stopped short, apparently surprised by the size of the waiting crowd and the presence of Lion and Tinman.

“Here, now—hey! What are you all doing here?” Scarecrow’s mismatched eyes seemed even wider than usual. “Is it time for a council meeting? Did I forget?”

Scraps came spinning dizzily out onto the landing beside him, whirling like a top. “No!” she shouted as she stumbled to a halt. “It’s a revolution! Round and round and round!” She didn’t sound too concerned.

The noises from the rotunda floor grew louder; Orlando could hear some of the animals and tin people shouting “Cheat!” and “Liar!” They seemed to be shouting it at Scarecrow.

“I cannot make heads nor tails of any of this,” Scarecrow said.

“It doesn’t work that way, either!” cried the Patchwork Girl, who was now standing on her head.

“Quiet, please, Scraps,” said Scarecrow. “Tinman, Lion, can either of you tell me what is going on here?”

“We know about your plan to seize the Works, brother!” Tinman cried in his harsh, echoing voice. “Is that fair? Is it right?”

“What plan?” said Scarecrow. He seemed honestly confused, although his lumpy face often looked that way because of the slapdash work of the farmer who had painted it.

“Don’t listen to his gibble-gabble,” rumbled Lion. “Tinman plans to annex part of Forest so he can build more tin people and be the leader of the largest group of citizens!” Lion’s animal supporters growled loudly at this. Some of them, like the bears and wolves, were actually quite large and frightening. Orlando was seriously beginning to worry that things might get out of hand.

“That is an untruth!” Tinman’s voice grew higher in pitch, like a giant tin whistle. “It is you, Lion, who plots with the Scarecrow to absorb my beloved Works and divide it between yourselves. You would make my people your servants, and that is most unfair.”

“Never!” cried Tinman’s supporters in voices as inhuman as New Year’s noisemakers. “Never slaves!” The din made the great room seem even more crowded and dangerous.

Orlando looked up to the landing, where the Wizard had found the Glass Cat and was talking animatedly to her, still seemingly unaware of the angry crowd of animals, toys, and people. Orlando wondered what could be keeping him so busy with the Cat during all this? The slightly absent-minded Wizard was certainly capable of overlooking a revolution in the making, but was a message from the royal family in Ev really more important than the growing chaos right below their noses...? Couldn’t the two of them do anything to help?

Then somebody threw something at the Scarecrow—an oil can, Orlando thought. It missed the Mayor of Emerald by a wide margin and clattered across the landing at the top of the stairs, but it shocked the Scarecrow; even fearless Scraps looked a bit taken aback. As Orlando turned back to the confrontation, an idea, or rather a fragment of memory, drifted up from the back of his mind. Wait a minute. Ev. The royal family. Princess Langwidere and her collection...

Krrrunch! One of Scarecrow’s anxious supporters, perhaps the Shaggy Man—who was originally from America and not one to ignore an insult—had pushed a large vase off the landing. Orlando didn’t believe he meant to hit anyone, only to startle the troublemaker who threw the oil can, but pieces of the vase flew in all directions and bruised more than a few of the animals and people gathered below him. One of Tinman’s toy subjects received a large scratch across the shiny paint of his suit coat and let out a ratcheting noise of protest. The entire crowd began to push in closer in an attempt to climb the stairs, which brought the Forest contingent and the Works party together, not always smoothly. Shoving and arguing spread throughout the bottom floor of City Hall, and Scarecrow huddled on the landing with his face between two of the rails, watching it happen. As the first of the Works folk reached the stairs, the mayor tried to stand up again, but his padded head was now caught between the railings. Scraps and the Shaggy Man couldn’t get him loose, and Scarecrow began to shout in dismay, which only made the crowd more excited, more certain that somebody was being hurt and that one of them might be next.

Orlando sent out a quick dispatch.

okay, worse than I thought—some serious shit is going down here. i’ll finish this later, but please stay on call. hate to say it, but maybe you were right about this one all along.

“Who killed Omby Amby?” someone on the rotunda floor shouted. “Who killed the Policeman with Green Whiskers?”

Others picked up the cry, although the different sections of the crowd seemed to have different ideas of who had removed Omby’s head, and why. Orlando shoved his way onto the bottom of the stairs, but one of the larger tin toys took exception and tried to obstruct him with a large tin rake. He ducked under the half-hearted swipe, stepped slowly and carefully over a large and very angry porcupine, then turned to the crowd from the steps of the great staircase, raised his arms, and shouted, “STOP!”

It took a moment, but the mob quieted and the shoving lessened; at last something like silence fell over the City Hall rotunda. Everyone turned to look at Orlando, and there were suddenly so many painted eyes, shiny button orbs, and outlandish cracked glass eyeballs staring up at him that he felt a moment of real unease, even though he was the only one in the room who was in no actual danger. “Thank you,” he said in a loud but more normal tone. “I know you’re all upset, but you don’t know the entire story. Senator Wizard, can you hear me? Come down, will you? And bring the Glass Cat. These people need explanations.”

The Wizard crossed the upper landing, stopping for a moment to help unstick Scarecrow’s head from the bars before he descended the stairs. The Cat hesitated before following him.

It was only as he reached Orlando’s side that the Wizard finally seemed to notice what was going on around him. His bushy eyebrows rose. “Goodness,” he said. “What’s happening here?”

“Confusion. But we’re about to resolve it. Did you find out what you needed from the Glass Cat?”

“She forgot to give them the message, for some reason.” The Wizard shook his head. “I don’t know why, after she traveled all the way across the Deadly Prairie to see them.”

“Because the message wasn’t what interested her.” Orlando turned to the Cat, who was watching him with something like alarm. He bent and picked her up. She struggled, but he held her firmly until she stopped fighting. “Let me go!” she demanded. Orlando ignored her.

“I have a few other questions,” he said. “Tinman—who told you that Scarecrow and Lion were planning to take your land?”

“It was the Woozy!”

The animal named Woozy was a strange boxlike creature, an old friend of the Patchwork Girl and others. He frequently helped out in the forges of the Works, keeping them roaring hot with his magical fire-eyes. “I heard it from the Glass Cat,” Woozy called from the middle of the throng. “She told me it was a secret.”

Orlando felt the Cat grow tense in his arms. He tightened his grip. “Ah,” he said. “And Lion, perhaps you could let us know who told you about Tinman’s plans for your forest.”

“Easy,” the king of the beasts replied. “It was Kik-a-Bray the Donkey.”

The donkey stepped forward, embarrassed to be the center of attention. “But I didn’t make it up!” the beast protested. “I heard it from Bullfinch!”

The little bird seemed a bit reluctant to speak up in front of an angry crowd, but after some coaxing from Orlando it fluttered up to a railing and announced, “As for me, I heard it directly from the Glass Cat herself.”

This time the Cat really tried to get away. Orlando held on as tightly as he could, but it was hard to manage without cutting himself, so he borrowed the Wizard’s coat and wrapped it around her until she again stopped struggling. “You’re not going anywhere,” he said. “You have a lot to answer for.”

“I did nothing wrong!” she said. “I was just trying to help!”

“Trying to help start a fight.”

“Goodness,” said the Wizard. “Goodness! Why would she do such a thing?”

“I’ll get to that,” said Orlando. “But first I think we should fetch Omby Amby’s body and head out to the bridge over the stream on the way into Emerald. I need to show you something.” It was a bit of a risk if he hadn’t figured everything out correctly, but at least it would get the unhappy mob out of City Hall. “Come on, everybody. Follow me.”

Kik-a-Bray the Donkey, perhaps ashamed for his unwitting part in things, allowed himself to be hitched to a cart, and Omby Amby’s motionless, headless body was gently loaded onto it. The large party set off, with Orlando walking in front, still holding the angry but temporarily resigned Glass Cat. The Forest animals and Works workers, along with dozens of curious Emerald Citizens, all fell in behind them. Scarecrow, Lion, and Tinman joined the procession too, muttering grumpily among themselves. The Wizard, in his waistcoat and shirtsleeves as though going to a summer picnic, walked with them to forestall any more arguments.

When they reached the bridge, Orlando had them set Omby Amby’s body down on the ground before he led the party of onlookers down the bank to the stream. He waded out into the gentle, singing current, the Glass Cat struggling mightily now because although she was made of glass, she still hated water (as most cats do), but Orlando retained his grim grip.

“Put me down!” she spat.

“This is your fault, and I don’t want to hear any nonsense from you,” he said in his sternest voice. He knew from experience that the best way to talk to Oz folk in times of crisis was in a firm, parental tone. When Orlando stood thigh-deep in the rushing, burbling stream, he began looking carefully into the water while the Kansas sims lined up along the bank to watch him. At last he found what he was looking for—the longest streamer of wiggling, wavering moss at the bottom of the stream. He leaned over and grabbed it, and when he lifted the dripping green mass from the water, the head of Omby Amby hung upside down at the end of it.

“I should have realized that stuff wasn’t all moss,” said Orlando. “This one was so long! Because it was your beard.”

The eyes of the Policeman with Green Whiskers popped open. “Dear me, many thanks!” he said after he had spat out a great deal of water. “It was terribly boring down there on the bottom of the stream. I slept most of the time. If I’d known you were looking for me, I would have tried to make bubbles for you.”

“I wasn’t looking for you until just now,” Orlando said, wading out of the water with the squirming Cat still clutched securely under one arm and the Policeman’s bearded head cradled in the other. When he reached the spot where Omby Amby’s body lay stretched on the ground, Orlando set the head on top of the neck, and the two parts immediately joined together. The Policeman stood up, unharmed except for the water drizzling from his long, green beard. “Goodness, it’s nice to be back,” he said, rubbing his throat. “I’m not sure what happened. One moment I was kneeling down having a drink; the next I was lying face down in the stones on the bottom of the stream and unable to move. What happened to me?”

“Curiosity,” explained Orlando shortly. “But let’s get you back to Emerald and into a warm bed. Your beard should dry by the time we get back.”

“But I’m not cold!” Omby Amby protested, but then paused to consider. “Well, my body isn’t, but I suppose I do feel a bit of a damp chill on my head...”

Relieved to find it had all been a mistake, or at least that their accusations against each other had been untrue, Tinman and Lion led their charges back to the Works and Forest. Orlando and Scarecrow returned to the Wizard’s white house on the hill to talk things over, the Cat still wrapped firmly in the Wizard’s coat.

“You wanted things to be exciting, didn’t you?” Orlando asked the Cat. “You liked being the center of things.”

“What if I did?” She turned her head away. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“There is if you manufacture a quarrel so things will become even more exciting,” said Orlando.

“I am very disappointed in you, Glass Cat,” Scarecrow added as they entered the Wizard’s parlor. The Mayor of Emerald was doing his best to make his painted smile turn downward but without much success. “I always thought your good intentions were crystal clear.”

“But what about Omby Amby?” asked the Wizard. “What did she do to him?”

After the doors and windows were locked so she couldn’t escape, Orlando set the Cat down in a chair and let her wriggle free of the imprisoning coat. She wouldn’t even look at him and groomed her long glass tail as if she hadn’t a care in the world.

“The Glass Cat had just come back from Ev, where she had forgotten to give your message to the King and Queen. The reason she’d forgotten, I suspect, is because she had been visiting with Princess Langwidere.”

“Oh, goodness, of course!” said the Wizard.

“What do you mean? I don’t understand.” Scarecrow still couldn’t make his mouth do anything other than smile, so he was doing his best to squeeze his painted cloth face into an expression of incomprehension. “What does Princess Langwidere have to do with any of this?”

“You might or might not remember, but Langwidere has a collection of heads she likes to wear, one for every day of the month. She simply takes one off and puts another on. She keeps them in glass cabinets—she even once threatened to take Dorothy’s, although Dorothy wasn’t having it.”

“No, I dare say she wasn’t,” said the Wizard with a chuckle.

“I suspect that the Glass Cat begged Langwidere to teach her the trick, because she thought it would be an entertaining mischief. On her way back to Emerald, she came across Omby Amby having a drink at the stream and decided to play the head-off trick on him that she’d learned from the Princess. But when Omby Amby’s head came loose, it rolled into the water. Even though she’s made of glass, she wouldn’t have wanted to go in after it. Am I right, Cat?”

The Cat looked up long enough to let out a tinkling sniff, then returned to her grooming.

“But that wasn’t enough for her, I suspect. She realized that with Omby Amby unable to perform his duties, she’d have a lot more to do. She likes being in the center of things. And if there was going to be a fight, and arguing, and people upset with each other—well, she’d have even more to do.”

“Is this true, Glass Cat?” asked the Wizard. “If so, it was very wicked of you.”

“You people are silly,” she said. “You simply don’t have the sense of humor to appreciate a clever prank.”

“A clever prank that almost started a war.” Scarecrow was obviously troubled and stared carefully at the Cat for a long time. Meanwhile Orlando was beginning to worry all over again. At first he had been relieved just to have solved the mystery, but the Glass Cat had proven that things could go wrong in the simulation, even if she hadn’t meant to cause as much harm as had resulted. How could they deal with her here? What if she decided to cause more trouble as soon as Orlando left? And even if Orlando simply removed the Glass Cat from the Kansas simworld—something he was seriously considering—who was to say someone else wouldn’t just start in where she’d left off? The simple-minded, simple-hearted characters could easily be led astray again.

“Ha! My excellent brains, which you gave to me, Senator Wizard, have thought of a possible solution,” the Scarecrow said abruptly. “Do you still have that gift that the Shaggy Man brought back to you from the shores of Nonestic Lake?”

The Wizard looked puzzled for a moment. Then he brightened and nodded. “Yes, yes!” he said. “I do indeed. But before we do anything else, I want the Cat to prove she can actually do what she claims, because I am not sure I believe her.”

“What are you talking about?” the Cat demanded. “Are you calling me a liar?”

“Well, I’ve never seen such a thing—making someone’s head come off with no harm to them.” The Wizard shook his head in wonder. “I find it hard to believe such a thing is even possible.”

“I’ll show you,” the Cat said, jumping abruptly from the chair to his desk. “I’ll have your head off in a flash.”

“No, no, I am too old for such tricks,” said the Wizard. “And everyone knows it is no difficulty to get the Scarecrow’s head off, as it is barely sewn on.”

“Comes off all the time,” agreed Scarecrow cheerfully. “Frightened one of my council members quite badly just the other day.”

Orlando was beginning to get the drift. “And it won’t work on me,” he said. “Because...um...Ozma put a spell on me to protect me against such things.”

“Very well,” said the Cat, “since you are all such scaredy-people, I’ll demonstrate on myself.” And without so much as a word of a magical spell or the hint of a magical gesture (although she might have whispered something to herself), the Glass Cat turned her head all the way around once on her neck, and it fell off like the lid of an unscrewed jar. Her body slumped down onto the desk, but her head shot them a look of superior self-satisfaction from where it now lay, bloodless and quite alive, on the Wizard’s blotter. “See?” she said. “Easy as pie.”

The Wizard lifted her head and examined it. Then he turned it neck-side-down and shook it (the head complaining loudly all the while) until the Glass Cat’s pink brains rolled out of it and onto the desk. She immediately stopped speaking, and her emerald eyes closed; even her pretty little ruby heart seemed to stop beating. Then the Wizard opened a drawer in his desk and removed a small jar of what looked like transparent glass marbles.

“Shaggy Man brought back these beautiful crystal pearls from the salty shallows of Nonestic Lake,” the Wizard said. “They are made by the very cultured oysters who live there. The oysters are happy in the warm waters, so their pearls are lovely and clear, and I doubt there is an evil or even mischievous thought in them.” He cupped the pearls in his hand and poured them into the Cat’s head in place of the pink brains. The old brains went into the jar and back in his desk. Then he set the Cat’s head back on its neck. “There,” said the Wizard. “How do you feel now, Glass Cat?”

She blinked and looked around. “I feel...good. Thank you for asking. It has suddenly occurred to me that I owe a number of apologies, including one to you, Senator Wizard, and one to you, Mayor Scarecrow. But I have upset others, too, and I must get right to work telling them that I’m sorry.” She turned to Orlando before jumping down. “Nice to see you again, Orlando. Please give Ozma my love and best wishes.”

“What will you do when you’ve finished apologizing?” the Wizard asked.

“Something useful, I expect,” she said. “Something that will make others happy.” She jumped down, landed lightly, and walked out the door without a trace of her former swagger.

“But is it real?” Orlando asked. “Has she really changed, just like that?”

“Oh, no need to worry,” said the Wizard. “Those pearls will let only the clear light of Truth into her head, which everyone knows makes it impossible to be wicked. I doubt we will have any more trouble from her.”

“It is miraculous what brains can do to improve things,” said Scarecrow. “Even if they are hand-me-downs.”

A little while later, as Orlando was preparing to leave not just the Wizard’s white house but the entire simulation, his host stopped him. “Just one more question, if you don’t mind.”

Orlando smiled. “Of course, Senator Wizard.”

“We were wondering how you knew that something was wrong here in the first place? Did the Glass Cat call for you?”

“No—in fact, she seemed a bit surprised to see me.” But as soon as he said it he wished he hadn’t. How could he tell them about all the ways he was monitoring Kansas and the other simworlds? He fell back instead on an old catchall. “Princess Ozma saw it in her magic mirror, of course, and sent me to help straighten things out. She sees everything that happens.”

Scarecrow scratched at his head with an understuffed finger. “But if Ozma saw it in her mirror, why didn’t she tell you before you left what had really transpired? Why would she keep the Cat’s trick a secret from you?” He seemed genuinely puzzled.

Orlando had been formulating another lie, but the deception was beginning to make him feel shabby. “You know, I don’t actually know the answer to that. I’ll try to find out from Ozma herself. I’ll let you know what she says.”

“Ah,” said the Wizard. “Ah.” He exchanged a glance with Scarecrow. “Of course, Orlando. We shall be...interested to hear.”

“Is something wrong?” Orlando suddenly felt himself on shaky ground and wasn’t sure why.

Scarecrow cleared his throat with a rustling noise. “It’s just...well, we are very grateful for your help, Orlando. You’ve always been a good friend to Emerald and the other counties of Kansas...”

He heard the unspoken. “But?”

“But...” Scarecrow looked embarrassed, or at least as much so as a painted feed sack could. “Well, we...we wondered...”

“We wondered why we never see anyone else from Oz,” said the Wizard. His familiar face was kindly, but there was something behind the eyes Orlando hadn’t seen before, or perhaps hadn’t noticed: a glint of keen intelligence. “Only you. Not that we’re unhappy with that, but, well...it does seem strange.”

The two best thinkers in Oz had been thinking; that was clear. Orlando wasn’t too sure he liked what they’d been thinking about. “I’m sure that will change one day, Senator Wizard. Surely you don’t think that Ozma has forgotten about you?”

“No,” said the Wizard. “Of course not. Whether in Oz or Kansas, we’re all Ozma’s subjects, and our lives are good.” But something still lurked beneath his words—perhaps doubt, perhaps something more complex. “We miss her, though. We miss our Princess. And all our other friends who don’t visit any more, like Jellia Jamb and Sawhorse and Tiktok...”

“And Trot and Button-Bright,” finished the Scarecrow sadly. “I cannot remember the last time I saw them. We wonder why they don’t come to visit us.”

“I’ll be sure to mention it to Ozma.” Now Orlando wanted only to get out as quickly as he could, before these uppity Turing machines began to ask him to prove his own existence. “I’m sure she’ll find a way for your friends to come see you.” At the very least, Orlando thought he could reanimate a few more characters from the original simulation without causing any real continuity problems. Which reminded him...

false alarm, mr. k—it was something that came completely out of the system itself, not a murder at all. the character wasn’t even really dead. no repeat of the kansas war, you’ll be glad to hear. (or maybe you won’t.) no need to shut it down—it’s doing all right. really. nothing to worry about. i’ll finish the official report after i get some sleep.

your obedient ranger,

o.

Nothing wrong with a half-truth every now and then, right? For a good cause?

Scarecrow and the Wizard came out onto the veranda of the Wizard’s white house to wave good-bye to him, but Orlando couldn’t help feeling they would be discussing what he’d said for days, pulling it apart, trying to tease out hidden meanings. Perhaps the Oz folk weren’t quite as childlike as he’d assumed.

So was there a moral to this story? Orlando headed down the hill from the Wizard’s house and into the outskirts of Forest. Every Eden, he supposed, even the most blissful, was likely to have a snake—in this case the curious, manipulative, and self-absorbed Glass Cat. But Orlando had been so worried that this particular snake would ruin things that he had been willing to consider shutting down the whole garden. Instead the peculiar logic of the place had absorbed the conflict and—with a little assist from Orlando Gardiner, Dead Boy Detective— had resolved the mystery without any drastic remedies. But Orlando had also learned that these sims were not always going to take his word for everything, at least not the cleverest of them. Was that good? Bad? Or just the way things were going to be in this brave, new world?

Oh, well, he thought. Plenty of time for Orlando Gardiner, the only Dead Boy Detective in existence, to think about such things later, after a little well-deserved rest.

Plenty of time. Maybe even an eternity.