“Oh, they came up with something new in prosthetics just last year, it turns out,” his dragon head turned to the bat as they gamed, back to sitting side by side in his apartment facing his screen, just as they’d been before. “Oh, what?” he tilted his head at Ogun. “They came up with a prosthetic hand that can feed sensations directly to the brain,” his ram head continued. The thought of it almost made Rakim’s head spin. “Wow, imagine the possibilities from something like that!” he answered excitedly. “I thought you’d like that,” his snake head smiled. “They’re some of the same people working on video game neural interfaces,” his lion head gestured at the screen in front of them as they played.

The bat shook his head, almost disbelievingly. “Man, imagine being able to just think something, and have the game do it,” he said. “It’d sure make all those really complicated special moves a lot easier, that’s for sure,” Ogun concurred. They were playing a fighting game. “Now all I need is an interface where I could think something and have the *industry* do it,” Rakim smirked. “That’d be nice, wouldn’t it,” the chimera chuckled. “I mean, how many Arabic characters in games can you even think about, without checking?” Ogun strove not to get so distracted thinking about the question as to lose the match to his guest. It proved a challenge.

“Well, the oldest one I can come up with offhand would have to be the Prince of Persia games,” his dragon head said. “Nu-uh! Persians aren’t Arabs, though,” the bat grinned. “No shit? Aw, damn!” He’d just lost the round to Rakim after all. “A lot of people don’t know that, though.” His snake head nodded pensively. “What about the Aladdin games?” he asked while picking a Thai kickboxing character, determined to win this time. “You must be shitting me,” the bat answered, “with that line about the hand-cutting?” he finished. “They took that out!” Rakim gave him a dubious look. “Well, you didn’t say it had to be a *good* game or character,” Ogun replied, tongue firmly in cheek, pulling off a series of knee and elbow strikes.

“The West *loves* Aladdin, though,” Rakim gritted his teeth in frustration as his character took damage in spite of blocking, “that and Ali Baba. Our only two stories where the hero steals something instead of having it bestowed on him, like, ever, and those have to be the only ones people even know,” he stuck out his tongue, having just failed one of those elaborate throwing moves he always failed. Who had thought of those anyway? More to the point, why did he keep trying them, knowing they probably wouldn’t work? “I always wanted to see a silat character in a fighting game! I know I could win if I was fighting with my own style,” he grinned, having just lost to the chimera who *had* picked a character with his own style this time.

“You probably could,” his snake head admitted, “have you ever played Mace?” The look of recognition on his face indicated that he had. “Oh yeah! I liked Namira as a kid. She was a strong female Arabic character in a fighting game, *and* she was one of the good guys.” His lion head raised an eyebrow quizzically. “What changed?” The bat shrugged hesitantly. “Eh, I still can’t hate her, it’s just... you know her ending where she takes power and changes Islam so it’s men who have to wear veils?” His dragon eyes widened. “Oh gosh, that’s right.” He hadn’t been sure what to think about it at the time.

“It’s not that it’d be wrong, it just... makes it seem like this bad thing she’s revisiting on them? It’s not *supposed* to be a bad thing, you know? It makes her seem a bit like a Western mouthpiece. The West loves Arabic women when they take their clothes off, but less with their clothes on. I’m ranting though.” His ram head nodded. “No, I get what you mean.” It occurred to Ogun that he was negotiating contested territory. He hoped he wouldn’t fumble. Rakim seemed an understanding guy, he tried to tell himself. It seemed like simply avoiding these topics would’ve ultimately done them both a disservice. “You know, it’s funny,” the bat went on, “when I was a kid I wished men *did* wear veils. It would’ve made it easier for me to pass.”

He shook his snake head. “I bet it would’ve!” He realized he could go for long periods during which he basically forgot the bat wasn’t cis. It reminded him of their first conversation about his heads, about how sometimes he just forgot, until something reminded him. Rakim was just this guy, you know? It didn’t feel artificial to the chimera to think of him as that. But then his relationship with the artificial was complicated too. “Al-Rashid was sort of cool, in the sense that he was well-done as a character I mean, but he was still a villain and an assassin,” the bat continued, Ogun wincing as his guest landed a vicious-looking kicking strike on his character, “so there’s that. *He* got away with being covered up from head to toe, don’t ask me why that is.”

This seemed to jog Ogun’s memory. “I’m really looking forward to Rashid!” his lion head said. “Oh, you mean from Street Fighter! Yeah, me too!” Rakim grinned, “better late than never, I always say.” The bat had also just mentioned assassins, which had also reminded the chimera of something else. “What do you think of the Assassin’s Creed games? I heard good things about those,” his dragon head asked. “Ah-ha! I win again, Muay Thai man,” Rakim flashed a toothy, victorious smile at him. “Dammit!” his ram head cursed. “Yeah, I heard those had the historical accuracy and attention to detail down at least, Arabic good guys and bad guys, not too bad for what it is. I don’t usually play that kind of game as much myself. But still!”

This time the chimera picked a character with a fighting style that was radically different from his own, just to see what would happen. “The last one I can think about that’s not cannon fodder in some FPS would have to be Sadira,” his snake head said, mentally going over his new, unfamiliar command list. “Oh, her!” The bat had picked the same character as before. “Still a villain and an assassin, but in a game full of cool, villainous characters you’re sort of supposed to like. Mixed bag, I guess. I love the spider thing!” Bugs also kind of got a bad rap. It was a thing. “It works with the dervish spin. I wish there was a moth-based character that did that, but you can’t have everything.” The cocoon that imprisons was there, but not the one that transforms.

“I know what you mean! I feel the same way about Aria,” Ogun scoffed. This time it was Rakim’s turn to raise an eyebrow at him. “You do?” His dragon head nodded. “Yeah, they often demonize cyborg characters, don’t they? Especially those who want to ‘help’ people by making them cyborgs.” Gears seemed to turn in the bat’s mind next to him. “You work with prosthetics!” he put together. “When I’m not plotting the downfall of civilization as we know it, yeah,” the chimera chuckled. “People tell me it’s weird how I fetishize technology. I think it’s weird how they fetishize the ‘pure, authentic body,’ but that’s just me,” his lion head snarked. “If they don’t like it, they don’t have to use it. I’m the one ranting at you now, though,” he apologized.

“No, I get what you mean,” Rakim assured him. “I sorta relate to cyborg characters sometimes.” Ogun tilted his ram head at him. “You do?” The bat nodded. “Yeah! They’re trying to be accepted as counting as a person, as ‘real.’ I’m trying to get people to treat me like a real man, whatever that is. I mean, I know it’s not the same thing, but I sorta relate, I guess.” He felt weird admitting to this. “I guess I’m also trying to get the world to accept I was ‘built for my own reasons,’ the way cyborgs are, but machines usually aren’t,” he elaborated. Was he supposed not to be talking about this? Would the chimera assume that everyone like him felt like this, even though they may not? He liked to give Ogun more credit than that, but he wasn’t sure.

His host smiled. “I get that. That makes sense to me.” How could he not be real to him? “I mean, people are basically machines made of meat, aren’t they?” his lion head asked. “We’re just made of all these parts that connect to all these other parts with wires and electrical impulses. We even talk about how we’re ‘wired’ this way or that way, you know?” Rakim thought about the implications of what the chimera had said. “Do you mean that there aren’t souls?” He was playing completely on auto-pilot by then, having played so many times before, as if he’d been programmed to do it. “No, well, I mean, I don’t know whether there are or not, really. It just seems to me like, if there are, they’re software. The body’s just hardware, you know?”

The bat seemed contemplative for a moment. “Hey, Ogun?” The chimera turned his snake head at him inquisitively. “Do you think, if there’s an afterlife, people with cybernetic body parts take them with them when they die?”

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Rakim got a phone call. His mother was in the hospital. His heart raced at full speed in his chest as he flew there every bit as fast.

“It’s my arm...” She sounded almost ashamed to have been burned. “I’ll live.” Irshad shook her head. “I was trying to pull him out. The beam was more burnt than I thought. It collapsed.” She sighed. “I tried to get it off with my other hand, but I still couldn’t reach!” He wrapped his wing around her protectively, just as she had for me when he’d turned to her about the bullies who’d picked on him as a child. “Oh, mother, how many times have I told you, don’t be a hero...” She looked bitter. “You may get your wish. I don’t know how I can do my job like this. They can’t save the arm. It’d cost me twice my yearly salary just to have it removed, and several thousands more to have it replaced.” He didn’t know what to say to her about that.

She just didn’t have that much put away to fall back on. She was tired from everything that what had happened had taken out of her, drifting in and out of consciousness now and then, he got the impression. He texted Ogun frantically about what had just happened a few times, cursing himself for not knowing what to do to fix the situation they were trapped in. ‘I might know someone who can help,’ he texted back, ‘if you’re open to it, I mean.’ It seemed like an opportunity that they couldn’t afford to dismiss. ‘He’d probably do it for free. Well, he owes me a favor, and I’d owe him another one after this, but he’d trust I’d do him one when he’d need me to, I think.’

‘Do you think he’d do a good enough job?’ Beggars couldn’t be choosers, but he still didn’t want his mother to suffer because of what they lacked more than she needed to. ‘He’s operated on me before, if that means anything. Eventually, I made it up to him. Now he’s the one who owes me one, for now.’ The bat hesitated. ‘Do you feel ready to meet her, though?’ The truth was, Rakim hadn’t even admitted to Irshad that he’d been dating the chimera for the past couple of months. He’d been worried about what she’d think of Ogun as a prospect for him, of what she’d think of the bat for dating him, that she’d worry that Ogun wouldn’t be good enough for him, even though Rakim believed that he was. ‘Desperate times call for desperate measures.’

“Hey, mom?” She groggily opened her sensitive eyes at him. “Yes, my son?” They kept the lights so bright, too bright for a bat, they did. She didn’t complain. “If I told you I knew a way we could get your procedure done without having to have all that money we don’t have, would you be willing to consider it?” It felt awkward for him to ask, but he had to push through it somehow. The stakes were too high. “Would it involve hurting other people in any way for it?” She didn’t like having to ask – she thought better of Rakim in general. Still, she didn’t know just how much he’d be willing to do for her. Sometimes it scared her. She didn’t want him yanking someone’s arm off on the street for her, whatever it was that kids were up to these days.

“No, of course not,” he reassured her. He was sure that Ogun wouldn’t have offered him anything like that, and expected him to go along with it. He knew him better than that. “What do you have in mind?” He texted the chimera, asking him to join them. “You’ll see.” He waited anxiously until the man he was dating finally showed up at the hospital after moments that felt like an eternity. “Hi, Mrs. Zahed.” She looked him up and down, a four-headed giant who seemed hesitant to meet her eyes like a schoolboy. “Are you my son’s friend?” Even in a weakened state, her eyes seemed as though they could stare right into his soul, he couldn’t help but think. “My name’s Ogun.” It seemed important for him to introduce himself. He didn’t want to seem rude.

“You’re here to help me?” She half-turned to her son as they spoke, seeking him out for a clue as to how she should best approach this person, whoever he was, but Rakim also seemed hesitant to meet her gaze. “Not me as such, but yeah, I know someone who can.” The things she had to do because of the life she led, she thought. “They couldn’t come here themselves, though?” she asked him. Rakim idly wondered if he should’ve asked Ogun more about who his associate was before referring Irshad to him, but what was done was done. “Not really, no. He can’t leave where he lives ever, for any reason. It’s kind of a long story. I can take you there, though.” She tilted her head at him, regretting that it sent a shooting pain through her shoulder.

“Where does he live?”

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The first thing that hit you when you walked into Soma’s grove was the smell. At first it was mostly something somewhere between the smell of freshly cut grass, the smell of dried leaves on the ground in the fall, and the smell of the dampness of earth after rain, a gripping, natural scent that commanded attention as much as any visual or auditory input would have. If you stayed longer, though, and really paid attention, there was something else underneath it, something almost like a version of the smell of ether in hospitals that wouldn’t have been quite as sickening, if that was even possible, with a hint of the smell of burning firewood through it.

As bats, Irshad and Rakim could hear more of what was going on in the woods than Soma’s average visitors could’ve. They heard crickets, dragonflies, rats, snakes, birds and squirrels in the trees, the croaking of frogs near and in the ponds and streams, the babbling of their waters, the rustling in the leaves as the wind and light filtered through them, an entire ecosystem teeming with life mapping itself out in their minds through their ears. It reminded the bat of the forest he’d hidden in from bullies as a child, only *more so*. Rakim wondered if Ogun would’ve taken him there for any other reason. If the bat had ever gotten hurt at the Bolgia or in a street fight, this would definitely have been where Ogun would’ve taken him as well.

Soma had an unofficial arrangement with the Bolgia about fighters who got hurt there. Soma was a snake, with arms, legs, and a few vaguely spidery characteristics. He was another kind of hybrid, just like the chimera was, but lived secluded from the city, not in it. “You must be the healer,” she deduced. “What animal do you see on every hospital?” he smiled. “This looks nasty, though.” This time he furrowed his brow. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to save this arm, Miss,” he hissed, looking at it dejectedly. “They already told me it couldn’t be salvaged,” she explained, “so I’m here to have it removed, if you can do that.” He nodded. “That should be doable, at least.”

She looked around. “Where’s your equipment? How are you going to do it, I mean?” He also looked at the forest around him as he spoke. “This is my equipment,” he said. “Most of the chemicals, materials and substances that are used in medicine today are taken from the plants and animals in places just like this,” he went on. “Everything comes from somewhere. I just get it a bit nearer to the source that it comes from than most, and modify it for my use myself.” She turned what he’d said over in her mind a few times. “And it’s served you well?” The snake gestured at Ogun with his head. “It was good enough for him, in any case. I have several clients. Not too many. My means and needs are both limited, by necessity.”

She looked at Rakim. He seemed to trust Ogun. Ogun seemed to trust Soma. “Proceed, then.” So he bit her other arm, and she passed out in his arms. “Hey! What do you think you’re doing?” The bat had grabbed one of the snake’s arms and was raising another hand near his head, dismayed and unsure of what to do next. “Relax,” Soma patiently explained through gritted teeth, “I merely anesthetized her so I could operate on her without causing her unnecessary pain.” Rakim took a breath and a step back, embarrassed at his reaction. “Sorry. I appreciate what you’re doing, really! I was just surprised because I didn’t expect that.” The snake strove to show him a bit of understanding. “Of course. I’d like to get started now, if you don’t mind.”

Soma used various unexpected implements – sewing thread made from vines and spider thread, pine needles, cutting implements made from sharpened wood, bone and rock, all disinfected with his diluted serpentine saliva – to amputate Irshad’s burnt up arm as safely as possible. The bat started by wanting to watch to make sure that he was doing the best job that could be done, but became squeamish partway through the procedure, looking away but asking Ogun to make sure to keep an eye on what he was doing, with the chimera doing his best to take Rakim’s concerns seriously without insulting his friend who was helping them. When he was done, they waited, the bat most anxiously of all but not by much, for his mother to wake up.

“What... What do I owe you for your trouble?” she asked him groggily as she finally came to. “Nothing,” he looked at her simply, “I owed him one. This goes a bit over that, but Ogun will compensate me later in a manner we’ll agree on.” She was struggling to speak, but seemed determined to do so. “If I... can cover for him somehow, let me know, won’t you?” He nodded, surprised at her generosity, even though she had so little. “If I think of anything, I will,” he assured her. “You should be focusing on recovering for now.” Rakim hoped that she’d take the healer’s advice. “In the meantime, make sure to help her with anything you can.” The bat nodded. “Thank you. I intend to.” She’d resist being cared for – he’d have to be persistent...

She tried to adjust to life with only one arm, but it wasn’t easy. She was used to doing a lot of things by herself, and this had a way of putting a crimp in that. “Sometimes, Rakim,” she’d say, “when I stop thinking about it for a while, it feels almost as if my arm is still there. I try to move it, only to remember that it’s no longer there for me to move after that. I guess that’s what they mean by having a ‘ghost limb,’ isn’t it?” She’d shake her head. “It’s almost as if my arm’s soul is still there, but it no longer has somewhere to live. It probably sounds kind of stupid like this, but I just don’t know how to put it better than that.” He was grimly reminded of his earlier conversation with Ogun about it, and shuddered at the perspective that this had put it in for him.

Not so long after what had happened, the chimera asked him if he still wanted to come meet him for a date sometime soon. The bat explained that at that point he didn’t want to have to leave Irshad’s side for anything, if he could avoid it, but that he’d really like to see Ogun again when he could. He was grateful for the help he’d given them, and still attracted to the same things about the chimera that he’d already liked about him before any of this had happened, at that. Ogun offered to come over to Rakim’s place instead. The bat was nervous, but figured that, after what had happened, it would’ve been weirder for him to refuse to let him see his mother again than not to, so he agreed.

“I brought you something, Mrs. Zahed. If you want, I mean! You don’t have to accept it, of course,” the chimera pushed himself through his anxiety to say. “I hope you didn’t feel obligated to,” she raised her eyebrow at him. “You already did quite a bit.” Even with her mouth concealed, so much of her expressiveness passed through her eyes, he thought, seeing her look at him again. “Well, you can look at it before deciding whether you want it or not,” he specified, handing her a box under Rakim’s curious gaze. “Uh, do you need help opening that?” he offered. “I can open a box, Rakim,” she said smarmily. “Now let’s see what in the world this is...” she wondered as she began tearing it open with her arm. She gasped.

It was a prosthetic arm.

“Where did you get this?” Her eyes widened. “I made it for you, Mrs. Zahed. It might not be as good as what you’d get for top dollar,” he almost apologized, “but if it works right, it should still be able to get the job done, at least.” Rakim was speechless. “You *made* this? But *how*?” Ogun shrugged. “That’s what I get for collecting trash and playing with it my whole life, I guess,” he brought his hand behind him to scratch the back of his lion head. “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure, it seems,” she euphemized.

“Well, you should try it on and make sure it works before being sure it’s going to, but I should be able to help you do that. I should be able to without Soma’s help, but I can afford to owe him another one if I can’t, and he will for sure. The key is to get the right parts of your shoulder and the right parts of the arm to recognize each other’s electrical impulses as valid. Once we ‘translate’ that, they should be able to ‘talk’ to each other, just like computers that are connected to each other can.”

It was a weird adjustment for her at first but, with time, she became more and more used to her new arm. It wasn’t quite the same as the previous one, and there were situations in particular in which she was forced to confront just how different it was, just as most people in her situation ended up having to. Still, once she’d gotten used to it, she found that there were increasingly fewer of the things that she’d been able to do before that she was no longer able to do. It was only a stand-in for her other arm, not a real replacement, but it was still far better than nothing by a long shot. In most ways, she was finally able to feel independent again. She returned to her old job as a firefighter, where she was welcomed with open arms.

Sometimes, she even became so lost in what she was doing she forgot it wasn’t a real arm. He found her training again in the living room one morning, performing some of the same *jurus* that she had taught him as a child with her new, metal arm substituting for her old one, almost looking like an ancient silat weapon grafted right onto her body. “I saved a child with this arm earlier today, Rakim,” she smiled at him. She looked so happy! “You can tell your boyfriend he did some good work.” He blushed. “Mo-o-om, he’s not my boyfriend!” She chuckled. “Whatever you kids are calling it these days. You know what I mean.” Irshad was no one’s fool.

It did beg the question – was Ogun, in fact, his boyfriend by then? They’d never really talked about it as that. They went on dates. They fooled around a couple of times. That was as far as he knew what they were doing. “Hey, Ogun, can I ask you something?” He was nervous about Irshad being back to work, but while she was out of their apartment anyway, he may as well have been back out at the chimera’s place, he figured. At least it gave him something to do. “Shoot,” his dragon head had responded. “Are we boyfriends? Is that what this is?” The chimera paused the game that they were playing. It seemed to be an important enough conversation for that, so he wanted to be able to focus on it. “Hmm! That’s a good question. I guess that depends!”

He’d been trying to see how things would evolve on their own, but he was glad that the bat had brought it up. He figured that was part of how that happened. “On what?” Ogun put down his controller for then, half-turning toward his guest. “What does being boyfriends mean to you? Is that something you’d see yourself doing with me?” Rakim strove to think carefully about the implications of his response before answering. “I guess first of all I should say I don’t want to lose this, what we have right now, whatever this is. So if one of us wanted to be boyfriends but the other one didn’t, I hope we could still keep hanging out like this regardless, you know?”

The chimera couldn’t tell whether the bat wanted to be his boyfriend but was afraid that he wouldn’t want to, or if he didn’t want to be Ogun’s boyfriend, but was afraid that his host would be offended that he didn’t. Unfortunately this was exactly the kind of uncertainty that Rakim was trying to maintain. He didn’t want to seem like he was coming on too strong and push Ogun away if things weren’t supposed to be that serious, yet at the same time, if the chimera did want to be with him in that way, he didn’t want to seem disinterested and miss the opportunity to be with him either. He didn’t want to project or impose either way, but the stalemate could only last so long. Sooner or later it had to break.

“Deal,” his lion head smiled.

He could at least rely on this much, he was relieved to find out. “So, what would that mean to you?” Things must have been so much simpler for straight people, the bat thought. ‘Maybe that’s what they think about *us*, for all I know.’ “I’m not sure. I’ve never been boyfriends before.” He felt it was a good start to admit this. “I guess it’s someone who wants to spend the rest of his life with you, unless for some reason something eventually happens where he can’t?” Ogun was resting his hand on Rakim’s thigh as they spoke. “I guess it’s not easy because sometimes they live together, sometimes they don’t, some of them still fool around with other people, but for some of them it’s really important that they don’t... What about you?”

He hoped the chimera would have an easier time answering than he was having. “Oh gosh,” his ram head said, “was I your... first?” The bat looked down, embarrassed, and nodded. “No, there’s nothing wrong with that!” his lion head tried to reassure his guest. “Gosh,” he shook his dragon head. He’d suspected as much, but he hadn’t been sure. It was a lot to live up to, in a way. “Well, I haven’t seen anyone else in that way since we started seeing each other, if that’s what you’re worried about.” Rakim raised his head back up at him to answer. “No, it’s nothing like that. I just don’t have much of a point of reference, so I was hoping you could give me one.” This seemed reasonable enough.

“Oh, I see. Well, let’s see... I’ve never done the closed relationship thing before, since you’re asking. I’ve always kind of had guys who were my friends but who I also fooled around with. It wasn’t the main reason I knew most of my friends or anything but it was just sort of this extra thing we did together for fun, you know?” The bat nodded. “But you haven’t since we met?” Ogun shrugged. “Well, no. I guess I wanted to see where things went. I’d have been okay with either, but I figured maybe you’d end up wanting something exclusive, so I wanted to leave the door open for that. I didn’t want to risk hurting you if that was what you were looking for. Besides... If I was going to try that, you didn’t seem like the worst person to try it with.”

Rakim appreciated this wasn’t easy to talk about. “So do you see me as boyfriend material, now that you know me?” He was grateful to the chimera for making it just a little easier. He thought it spoke well of Ogun that he’d been willing to reconsider his way of life for someone like him, whether that was how things turned out or not. “Well, yeah! If you’d be into that, I mean.” It was difficult to inconspicuously look away in shyness when you had four heads to look away with, he found out. “I think I would,” the bat smiled, putting his own hand on the chimera’s thigh. “Are you sure you want to do the exclusive thing at first, though? I don’t want you to find out it’s not for you because it doesn’t feel right to you, and lose you because of that.”

Ogun thought about it. “I’m kind of weighing the pros and cons right now. I mean, if you’ve never been in a relationship, and you’ve been in situations that made it hard for you to believe that people could care about you a lot, I wouldn’t want to do anything to play into that. I don’t ever want to make you feel like I need someone else because you’re not good enough for me, or that you’re worth spending time with on your own, you know? So far I’ve liked the time we’ve spent together better than the time I’ve spent with anybody else, to be honest. I don’t want you to feel, if something exclusive is what feels right to you, that you have to pick between me and that either. Between it and you, if I had to pick, I’d pick you.” That did feel good to hear.

“But we don’t technically *have* to pick, do we?” Rakim asked him. “Not if you don’t want us to, no. You’re a young man, and like you said you’re pretty new at all this. So if you want to have me as kind of someone safe, that you know will be here for you to be able to turn to no matter what, but still explore around a bit to figure out what you’re into around that, to find out things about yourself that you couldn’t possibly know about yet because you’ve never had the right experiences to figure them out with... I’d be okay with that too. If you ended up wanting to change your mind later, we could always talk about it and figure out what we do then.” This seemed like a compelling prospect. The bat finally decided that he liked the sound of it after all.

“Sure!” he chirped.

Rakim wondered about the spiritual implications of having more than one partner at a time for a moment. Looking up ancient facts about his belief system, he found out that some men, such as him, traditionally used to have up to all of four wives within it, without being told that they were doing anything wrong by it. The bat told himself that, as long as he restricted himself to four partners or less, he was probably in the clear.

He was curious about how Soma and Ogun knew each other. He’d been intimidated by the snake at first, and the situation had been too dire for him to have really been thinking about this kind of thing when they’d been in his grove the first time, but with their new arrangement, he decided that a date with the healer may have been a good way to get to know what kind of person the chimera was through some of his friends who knew him. Soma and Ogun had a platonic friendship themselves, but Rakim had found the snake weirdly attractive in spite of how odd he’d been, or perhaps precisely because of it. Hopefully it wouldn’t ruin the chimera’s friendship with Soma if he and the bat didn’t really hit it off after all. That was just life.

The first time Rakim visited him at his grove for no medical reason whatsoever, Ogun went out with a weasel called Shinai, each of them having told each other that they’d tell each other how their dates would have went when they’d reconvene after they’d be over. At first the snake was a bit weirded out to see the bat arrive unhurt – he didn’t get a lot of visitors who weren’t either about to ask for a favor from him or pay one back to him because of something that he’d done for them before, ‘just because.’ Rakim learned that Soma also had a boyfriend who he was in a more serious relationship with, but that they were still allowed to see people on the side here and there, just like he and the chimera were, an otter called Mandrake.

“So how was your date with Shinai?” Ogun shrugged. “Eh, mostly good. He’s good company, really.” It almost sounded like there was something behind that. “Anything wrong?” The chimera smiled, realizing he must’ve seemed even more lost in thought than he was. “Well, it’s not the first time I see him. He’s always trying to keep one foot out of every relationship, you know? He’s always talking about how he’s going to join the army someday and he says he needs to keep people at arm’s length so they won’t miss him too much when he’ll be gone, which is a lot simpler on paper.” Rakim nodded. “You’ll miss him, won’t you?” Ogun sighed.

“Well, I’m grateful to have *you*, for one thing. To be fair there was always going to be some distance between he and I anyway. Klein’s hopelessly in love with him, though. Shinai keeps saying if things were different he might, but with things being the way they are, he won’t. It’s kinda hard to watch, really,” his ram head stuck its tongue out. “Oh, you talk to him about *his* other dates, too!” the bat noticed. “Well, yeah,” his snake head answered, “why not? People are just people, you know?” Rakim realized he hadn’t felt that weird talking about Mandrake with Soma either after all. He hadn’t even thought about it. It was just a part of their lives.

Soma was interesting. Rakim’s dates with him were nothing like his dates with Ogun at all. The chimera usually organized their dates around a neat spot in the city that he knew about, or around various forms of technology in his apartment, but those options weren’t available to the snake, who couldn’t leave his grove for any reason, the bat learned. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to – he literally couldn’t. Soma loved the natural world in all its forms, and never seemed to get bored of it. He’d take Rakim on these protracted forest walks, and just talked. One thing that Ogun and Soma did have in common was that, even though they were both reserved offhand, they loved to talk, when someone was actually listening, and the bat loved listening to them.

He’d spot as many of the small animals who skittered around them as they walked and tell Rakim everything he knew about them, their foraging habits, their life cycles, what they did in winter, how they strove to avoid predators, how they interacted with others of their own kind, their personalities around different other kinds of animals that he also knew about. He told the bat about the many different kinds of trees and plants that grew everywhere around them, in which conditions they flourished or perished, which ones needed more care and which ones it was best not to mess with, how people had used them to heal and harm others throughout history all over the world. His grove was like this improbable cornucopia of so many living things.

Soma was very dedicated to protecting where he lived. He was a passionate environmentalist, with a very direct stake in the outcome – the natural world was the only place he could live, so it gave him quite a horse in the race. He’d talk about how much fewer trees there were than there used to be, about how much more intelligent and emotional most animals could be than most people gave them credit for, about the web of life, and how interconnected everything in the ecosystem was. He showed Rakim how to tie and untie various kinds of knots from vines, what they could be used for, and even shared some of his medical knowledge with him, explaining to him how he was able to use materials from the world around him to heal.

Soon it seemed normal to the bat not only that Ogun and he would talk to each other about their dates with other people, but that he and Soma would talk about Rakim’s dates with the chimera and about the snake’s dates with Mandrake as well. As he kept going to the Bolgia on his dates with Ogun, getting to know more people than he ever had, he began to think about the community that he was beginning to exist in as another kind of ecosystem itself, with its own set of rules, checks and balances, and its own kind of interconnections between everything. Klein affected Shinai affected Ogun affected Rakim affected Soma affected Mandrake, and vice-versa. Everything affected everything else far enough down the line, like the wings of a butterfly.

Rakim had never dared to walk into a mosque. He’d always wanted to, but he’d always been afraid that he couldn’t pass, that someone would notice that something was ‘off’ and expect him to put on a veil, which he would’ve been determinedly against, not because he thought any less of his mother for it, but because it was this symbol of him not being a man that he’d always reject. When he’d tried to join a trans group for support, without even asking about his beliefs, the other members of the group had congratulated him on having thankfully abandoned the old superstitions of his homeland to dedicate himself to assimilating into their new, superior, rational Western society instead. He said nothing and, feeling terrible, had to leave. He never went back.

All of this added up to the fact that he’d never felt like he’d really belonged anywhere. But the more ensconced he became in the community that gathered at the Bolgia, the more he finally felt like he belonged somewhere, as fully part of an ecosystem of his own, just like any other lifeform. Like Ogun, the Bolgia welcomed people who were made of maybe too many different parts that didn’t always fit together as well as they could’ve. It proved tremendously validating to him, and he wanted more of it.

The shark girl he met there turned out to be the first trans friend he made in real life, he was almost shocked to admit to himself. Neither of them really saw it coming – she was practically a lesbian and he was almost completely gay – yet they ended up experimenting with each other a couple of times after all, more out of scientific curiosity than anything else, or at least that was what they called it. Since they were both pre-op, they were each in just the kind of body that the other one wanted, yet didn’t want it for themselves. They talked about how they wished they could switch places, and compared each other to an air-breather drowning next to a fish gasping for air on the shore. It was enlightening to compare notes about these things.

Things went well for what they were, but ended up not going very far between them. Rakim felt weirdly guilty to be attracted to her for traits that he knew that she wanted to get rid of, and wondered if he’d be able to maintain the same level of engagement with her after she’d have transitioned. Similarly, he could tell that she was more interested in aspects of him that would be gone if he finally made the plunge himself. He’d always thought the mind should be the most defining factor in such things, and it was the first time he had to navigate things being messier than that as far as that went. He knew he’d have resented holding back transitioning out of fear that someone would lose interest. It seemed fair to accept that she’d have felt the same.

Sometimes, when Shinai wasn’t available while Rakim would be going out with the shark or Soma, Ogun would go out with Bridges instead. Bridges could be kind of a handful when he got out of hand, but the chimera found him relatively easy to deal with, provided he kept the otter as far away from his apartment as he could. Bridges wouldn’t have hurt a fly, but he was a kleptomaniac. He’d been around the block at the Bolgia more than a couple of times and, being a sailor, had a guy he’d stay with in this or that city when he travelled. Ogun and he always had good conversations, which went a long way as far as he was concerned. Bridges also went out with Klein. Shinai would say it was only a matter of time before Bridges ended up in jail.

Aside from the Bolgia, Rakim also met someone online, someone who knew people from the Bolgia but never went either, but for different reasons than Soma did. When the bat got to their place – they went by the singular ‘they’ – he discovered that it was completely dark. At first he wondered if they were simply blind, but he soon understood that he was dealing with no ordinary creature. He thought himself fortunate to still be able to tell where they and almost everything in their apartment were, thanks to his echolocation. When he moved to run his fingers through their hair, it erupted into a mess of hissing, and he finally understood why they’d invited him to meet in the dark, where a bat could still appreciate their beauty without becoming stone.

Everything always came back to sound.

He wasn’t sure, but he was beginning to suspect that his mother had started to lip-read...