Standing Still, Skipping Town

by availedobscurity

Summary

in which juno steel has to deal with a situation in which he can't avoid the people who care about him, and everyone else has to deal with his inability to ask for or accept help in any situation

Notes

I haven't written any fiction in years, but the Penumbra Podcast watered my previously-barren creative fields and now they thrive once more. Prepare for a long, rusty, self-indulgent ride.

d this work was started immediately after I listened to Juno Steel and the Kitty-Cat Caper, and therefore will not be especially canon-compliant in regards to plot. content in this work includes/will include mentions of: self-loathing, suicidal ideation, blood & violence, alcohol/alcohol abuse, abusive parents, and others i will try to keep updated here, so please keep that in mind if you are sensitive to these topics.
Chapter 1

It was a cold, dusty midnight in Hyperion City. Juno Steel was in his bathroom, staring at himself in the grimier-than-usual mirror. Everything was grimier than usual, but he’d had a lot on his mind lately. A lot in his mind, too.

There was a voice in his head telling him to fight the usual compulsion to stare at the cybernetic eye so often, stop probing at it and seeing if there was a way he could remove it without drawing too much notice, but he was compelled to keep going. When he had scabs or acne or hairs growing in the wrong places he picked at them, and when he had an eye that didn’t feel like his, well, he picked at that too. He’d even tried to pick his scars off on his worse days; something about the way they looked so white on his dark skin and wouldn’t lay flush with their surroundings could set him off.

The eye was more than that. It made it so his brain couldn’t lie flat. There was always something talking, flashing, pulsing, whirring, moving. It gave him his shooting back--the one thing he could do--but his head always felt prickly now, like it should be plucked out with a quick, easy turn of the wrist. He could imagine himself doing it. It would be easy. Except how it would take pieces of Juno’s frontal lobe out with it.

That was Juno’s favorite lobe, if you were making him choose. Everything’s got a downside.

The eye had a big one. It was a gift, which was enough reason not to trust it as is. Gifts had invisible strings attached, and Juno didn’t have enough experience with gift-getting to confidently navigate those hidden intentions. Moreover, it was a multi-million-cred gift from a man who Juno didn’t know, really, and who just appeared from thin air 30 years ago. And when that man said ‘gift’, what he meant was ‘business arrangement’. And that man had been acting inconsistent, lately.

When Juno met him, he had been… fine. Great, if you were going by the usual characters in Hyperion City’s elections. But now Juno was wondering if he had been duped, had been a fool to not-distrust the mayoral candidate--which, when he should have know the second he let himself think “not-distrust” and “mayoral candidate” without a second ‘not’ before it. (Juno measured trust in negatives. It mitigated disappointment).

All that to say, the whole situation--the robotic voices in his head, the metal in his eye socket, the man on every billboard in town--was starting to make Juno feel paranoid.

Well, more paranoid than the amount a private investigator to keep himself alive in a city with a foundation dug out of crime lords, corruption, and bad reality TV. And that allowed for a whole heaping scoopful of suspicion, so when Juno started to notice it? That was reason for concern.

The thing was, there had been no rational reason for Juno to think anyone could hack into a cybernetic eye, and if they did, they didn’t work in a way that would allow the hacker to really see anything. Cybernetic eyes were just a conduit between the outside world and a particular human being’s brain. In this case, that particular human being was Juno. He had been assured multiple times that in order for someone to see what he was seeing through one of these things, they’d need to hook it into his brain anyway, and by that point it was probably a self-defeating purpose.

But despite that, there were some things Ramses O’Flaherty hadn’t told him would be part of the deal with this eye from the beginning.
First it was little things, helpful things. A guiding voice that went straight into his brain. Laser sights. Instant face recognition software, which was a little creepy but hey, part of the job, right?

Then it started to become… unsettling. There was a direct line that told him when O’Flaherty or one of his associates was calling, and it would fill his whole field of vision and he couldn’t shut it off until he answered or returned the call. A sight that, as far as he could tell, automatically brought up logs on passers-by with a criminal background, and sometimes passers-by with a suspiciously clean one. It was hard to have a clean record in a city like this, but it was very easy to hand a stack of stolen bills to a police officer under the table.

Juno could see how maybe these features could be useful, if he had the luxury of giving anyone the benefit of the doubt, but then the logs started showing the same tag. Apparently an underpaid intern or some off-the-rails true believer had made a database of people who were threats to O’Flaherty’s campaign. The logs never said why. Only that they were classified as possible threats. The alarm bells had been going off for long enough that they’d faded into the overwhelming soundscape of Juno’s mind, but now it was starting to give him the creeps.

And then there were the things Juno couldn’t be sure of. For example, O’Flaherty always seemed to know where the detective was. Always. Including his one-night stands, which sort of defeated the entire purpose of spending the night with someone who didn’t know a single thing about him.

Hyperion City’s security cameras were more or less notorious for being everywhere and working in unpredictable spurts, and for a while Juno chalked it to bad luck and intrusive metropolitan surveillance. And then a couple of weeks ago Juno had ended up in Mars’ defunct, deserted subway tunnels. Most people didn’t even know they were down there. The guy he was chasing--your garden-variety terrifying ex intent on symbolic revenge--gave him a good thwack to the head with an old metal pipe when Juno wasn’t paying attention. Nearly cracked his skull wide open, he found out later. The last thing he remembered was falling off the platform and onto the tracks.

Juno knew that there hadn’t been any lights before he fell. He hadn’t even thought the lights in the tunnel should have been working after, what? A good century, at least. But when he came to, the lights were on, and he could see an exit from where he lay on the ground.

When he emerged back into the light of--well, night; it was the flashing lights from some kind of fast-food joint that he had seen from the tunnel--O’Flaherty’s car had been there, door open, before his comms even got service and delivered him Rita’s eleven messages. (The first three were asking where he was and threatening to kill him if he had died; four through seven were her threatening to go out there and find him if he didn’t come back soon; eight was her apologizing for not checking his apartment first; nine started as Rita panicking because he wasn’t in his apartment after all but smoothly transitioned into her unsolicited opinions about the state of Juno’s apartment; and ten and eleven were her giving him her amateur opinion of all the terrible art in his apartment, becoming irate that Juno would take advantage of her by making her hire a cleaning service like this, and then demanding he call her back immediately. If he hadn’t already had a headache, that would have given him one.

Juno had been furious that she would let anyone else into his apartment--his brain was screaming weddinggownweddinggownweddinggown over and over--but they’d done a good job, and Rita hadn’t found anything incriminating, or messy. Well, she had--the whole apartment, really-- but nothing he had to lie about, anyway. After a decade and a half she could see through him better than he was comfortable with.

Juno was eternally waiting for the day that Rita realized that there were a thousand other jobs out there for her, and that all of them were better than having to deal with him. But in the meantime, he
was.... Well, she was good to have around.)

All of that to say, Juno knew beyond a doubt that he was bugged. There was no evidence or even a good argument, but his gut was certain of it, and that was the primary crime-solving organ, followed by with the brain, the eyes, and whatever body part was in charge of healing bullet wounds. The only questions were how he was bugged, and why. He wasn't worried about anyone believing him; he'd been taking care of himself on his own for a long time. And besides, being around people Juno... [tolerated] had some unsettling effects on the eye. The first few times the eye had moved on its own, Juno had thought it was a malfunction, or that his brain was starting to lie to him the way he'd always known and dreaded it would. But then it kept happening. The movements were consistent with someone trying to keep tabs on the recurring players in his life. He could feel the eye pulling up records, creating three-dimensional representations, getting heat signatures, and if he knew enough about this kind of tech he was sure he'd find even more. He didn’t know how to stop it from happening. He didn't know if he could.

So, all in all, it was starting to seem like maybe he'd willingly stepped into a net and then been shocked to find that it could close around him. Which… really wasn’t a big change, now that he thought about it. Because this was Hyperion City, and he was Juno Steel.

Chapter End Notes

   edited 9/10/2017
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Juno has a business meeting.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Juno’s newest boss was less and less one for pleasantries as the election loomed before him. The door had barely started to swing shut behind Juno before the Ramses O’Flaherty spoke. Two security guards flanked the mayoral candidate on either side, silent. These new guys gave Juno the creeps. Mostly when he looked at them, standing in stoic silence, he couldn't stop himself from dredging up a perfect recollection what it felt like to look upwards, blood pooling in his old eye, while he was subjected to more and more tests, each more invasive than the last, trying to hold thoughts that didn't belong to him and trying to stay alive because if anything happened to him they would--

“Is there a problem with your eye?”

Ramses O’Flaherty didn’t even look up from the papers on his desk while he asked the question.

Juno froze for just a millisecond. A distraction was welcome, but maybe not this one. His brain raced so quickly he thought his cybernetic eye might reveal it had a fan attachment to prevent overheating. O’Flaherty had noticed Juno’s scrutiny of his eye, which meant he knew Juno knew something was up, and the next step in the dance was to for Juno to play along. This was the part where a good detective would take the next step and pretend he didn’t know O’Flaherty knew Juno knew that...

Actually, no. Scratch that. Scratch all of that. Dancing was just a longer, harder way to get from point A to point B. Juno preferred a brisk walk, or, better yet, a sprint.

“Depends what you mean by problem, O’Flaherty.”

“Oh, you know, is anything about it uncomfortable, or unpleasant?” Behind his eyes Juno could swear he saw a glitter of laughter.

“Yes, I’d say it’s pretty damn uncomfortable to wear a tracker in your head all the time,” he hissed. And O’Flaherty had the gall to look bemused.

“Is it?” he asked the room, like he was telling himself a joke. ”We’re not using a tracker, Detective,” he said in a measured voice.

“Like hell you’re not. I’m a detective, not some naive schoolkid you grabbed off the street, so just cut the denial--”

“Oh, we have one on you, but we haven’t been using it. We’ve found it to be fairly… redundant. We’ve been relying on the camera.”

Juno blinked. “Look, I’m not a technology genius or anything, but that’s not how these work.” He would know. He read a whole pamphlet on them on his way out of the doctor’s.
O’Flaherty really scrutinized him then, and took on a measured elementary-school-teacher’s tone.

“We put the camera into the eye. It’s not an eye that works using video, it’s an eye with a separate video feed in it.”

Juno’s voice was supposed to come out angry, but it edged towards hysterical, which was suboptimal. “So… you spent millions of creds just to get me under 24/7 surveillance. That’s—” He cut himself off before actually a pretty good argument for why I should have just been a cam girl could escape his mouth. He’d save it for the monologue.

Ramses waved a hand at him smoothly. “Yes, yes, I’m sure it seems wildly inefficient. But there’s something to having a detective with a death wish in your debt, and you were the only one who took the offer. Let’s move on, shall we?”

Juno bristled. “What do you mean, the only one—”

O’Flaherty cut him off. “Forgive me for not making myself clear earlier--the terms have changed, Detective Steel. You’re aware that we can--and do--track your motions and activities, which means that we no longer have any reason to give you the illusion of free rein. You can keep up appearances, of course. Work your little cases, go to the few friends you have if they remember you, even keep drinking yourself to death if you like. But from now on we can be much more… open about our involvement. This city is in incredible danger, you see. As am I. There are opportunities everywhere to make Hyperion City safer, better. For everyone, not just the elite and those who specialize in exploiting the exploitable. Hyperion City can become the safe haven it once was, and was always meant to be. And you are in the fortunate position to do so. I do hope you’ll take the opportunity.”

O’Flaherty had absolutely, totally lost it somewhere along the way, Juno realized. He had never trusted him, per se, but he had expected that he was… reasonable. Balanced. Something that fell short of maniacal. But now the look in O’Flaherty’s eyes… it was familiar. Reminded him of someone he tried not to think about.

He shut that trap door to the past before he could make the mistake of fixating on it more, and just took the knowledge: whether or not he was careful around a powder keg didn’t make it any less explosive.

“Hi, Juno Steel, Private Investigator,” Juno said, putting out his hand. O’Flaherty just stared, looking warily surprised. “I think you have me confused with someone who has something to lose. And who gets swayed by a pretty speech.” The detective was goading him intentionally. The mayoral candidate was smart enough; he had to have something on Juno.

As it turns out, he did.

“Mick Mercury.”

“Yeah, Mick’s not a real speech-listener either. He mostly just claps whenever the speaker stops for a breath. Makes for a great funeral.” Juno kept his face collected.

“He’s your friend, isn’t he.” It wasn’t a question. “It’s such a shame about that security footage.”

Juno felt the expression slide off his face. “What are you talking about?”

O’Flaherty raised his eyebrows in a blandly rehearsed expression of surprise. “I’ve heard that if one were to check some security tapes from my campaign headquarters, they’ll find some rather convincing footage of Mick Mercury implicating himself in the shooting at 15th Street Square. Three
police officers, can you believe that? And you know better than anyone how hard HCPD works to protect their own. It’s just a rumor, of course, but it could be unfortunate if that tape would fall into their hands.”

Oh, goddamnit. There were exactly three people in Juno’s life who he would drop anything to protect at the slightest suggestion of danger. One of them was already dead, so that wasn’t an option. Another one didn’t technically exist, and they were probably never going to see each other again, so that was off the table. So all that was left was Mick. That idiot. That idealistic, guileless mess. The only friend Juno had who he could look out for without feeling like a hypocrite. It could have been Sasha, Valles Vicky, hell, he even suspected Rita could take care of herself in a crisis. But Mick Mercury? Juno could see his face, genuinely confused, being roughly pushed out of a courtroom and right into Hoosegow, after getting roughed up or worse by a bunch of police officers who thought he murdered their coworkers in cold blood…

The footage had to have been doctored. So where did they get the… Juno’s hand rose to his fake eye. “You asshole,” he said, low, angry. “You and all your speeches about corruption in the force, but the minute they’re useful you’ll throw them whatever bones they need?”

“What’s more helpful to my case than a group of HCPD officials murdering an innocent man under the mistaken excuse of revenge? The public will be roaring against the act, especially given how popular Mr. Mercury seems to be in his circles. He’s the perfect martyr, in my estimation. Unless you have some alternative?” O’Flaherty asked, and Juno had to hold himself back to avoid jumping across the table and planting his fist into the man’s smug face, plastered on so many park benches and billboards. It wouldn’t get him anywhere, after all.

He tried it anyway. The two bodyguards were restraining him practically before he started moving.

“I see we understand each other, then,” O’Flaherty said. He left the papers he had been reading behind and walked, stiff and graceful, out of the office without another word.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Juno checks up on a friend. Rita does some research.

Chapter Notes

just found that there are chapter summaries, so i'm going to maybe... actually use them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mick picked up the call on the first ring. “What happened?” he said into the phone. His voice sounded different than usual—it was nervous, braced for bad news.

“Is that how you greet your friends now, Mercury?” Juno asked. Rita was waving at him across the room, probably to tell him to tell Mick that she said hi. Juno pivoted away from her. Several times—she was deceptively fast.

Juno heard Mick inhale audibly through the next sentence, like a coil relaxing. “Sorry, I thought my comm said this was Rita. Did you guys switch numbers or something? Should I switch your contact info real quick?”

“No, Mick, I’m just using Rita’s number. My office comm’s probably being monitored—”

“J, are you sure you should be calling me?” His voice was pulled tense again. “How do you know Rita’s number isn’t being tracked?”

Juno glanced over at Rita, still trying to wrest the comm from him. “Is that Mr. Mercury, boss, are you calling Mr. Mercury? Are you gonna tell him I say hi? C’mon, Mr. Steel, tell him I said hello!” she insisted in a stage whisper pushed up a few decibels, and she reached across his whole body to grab her comm back. Juno tucked it against his shoulder and used both his arms to sort of push her out of arm’s reach, but she grabbed it anyway, and started talking.

Rita’s main method of talking on the phone was to yell five or six times louder than the average person. “Hello, Mr. Mercury! Mr. Steel wasn’t gonna tell you I said hi, so this is me, saying hi! How are you?” Mick said something Juno couldn’t hear while he was trying to grab the comm back. “Yeah, no, he’s fine, don’t worry about-hey!”

Juno made contact with the comm’s cool metal and grabbed it back. “You said hi, now let me talk.” He fitted the comm back in his ear, and just missed the back end of whatever Mick was saying. It sounded concerned, though. Rita was sulking at her desk.

“Yeah, Rita’s phone’s not bugged,” Juno said. Or, if it was, whoever was listening in was a saint, and considering that they would have to be working in politics, that seemed unlikely. “Look, Mick. I think you’re in some kind of trouble. Can you get out of Hyperion City, maybe even off of Mars, and lie low for a while?”
Mick’s breath sounded like a frown. “Why would I have to leave Mars?” he asked, and Juno’s self-loathing lit up like a solar flare.

“Look, I… I got mixed up in something, and I’m going to fix it, but...” He didn’t need to tell his friend all the details, not yet. He could make Mick hate him when he really needed him to get out. This was still at the precautionary level. “I think it’ll be safer for you to be… away for a little while.”

Mick was quiet for a minute. “I can’t do that, J. I started coaching a kids’ voidball team, and they’re all really getting the hang of it/

“Mick, you suck at voidball.”

“I don’t have to be good at voidball to coach it,” Mick argued.

“What’s your record?” Juno asked, expecting the answer to be one, probably by forfeit.

Juno could hear Mick shifting his comm around. “Look, maybe we haven’t won a match yet, or scored any points at all, but these kids are really hustling out there. We’re going to get a W on that board sometime soon! And we’re leading the current Mars record on number of voidball penalties incurred in one season. We hit the per-game record in the first half of our last match,” he said, proudly.

Juno actually smiled there. It felt a little rusty on his face. “Sounds like you’re enjoying yourself.”

“Yeah,” Mick said from the other line. “I really am. It’s feels good to be doing something, you know? Like, really helping people. I can’t do it like you and Sasha can, but, giving the kids in Oldtown a place to go? Especially now that they can’t get into the bars anymore? I don’t know, J. It’s not a big thing, but it’s… something.”

Juno Steel, patron saint of lives that would have been fine without him. “Okay. Alternatives. Can you stay at my place a little while, so I can keep an eye on you?”

Mick laughed for a little too long, then stopped. “You’re serious? J, I’d be happy to have a chance to spend more time with you, but… no. Not again. You live in garbage, Juno. I called the health department about it and they sent me a certificate.”

Juno closed his eyes and put his face in his hands. “I was kidnapped, Mick. It’s not normally that--you know what, no, it was a bad idea anyway,” he said, when his fingers felt the hard metal through his eyelid. “I need you to call a PI. One who’s not me. Try Alessandra Strong. Tell her I said that I have good reason to expect you’re in danger, I can’t tell you why, and that she needs to keep an eye on you. I’ll pay the fee,” somehow, right now his main employer was paying him in an eye six months ago, cryptic statements that had to be thinly veiled threats, and the surprisingly high-quality free vending machines on the way to his office, “but I can’t do it now without attracting some… attention, okay?”

Another long pause. “J, are you okay?”

“Doesn’t matter. Are you going to call her or what?”

“I don’t know, J. I’m not the detective here, but--”

“No, you’re not. Call her,” Juno said, and he hung up.

“Catch,” he said, and tossed the comm back to Rita, a grim expression on his face. She scrambled for it, panic in her eyes, but she managed a fumbling catch. “Rita, I need you to find every file related to
this,” he pointed at his robotic eye, careful to keep his arm and pointing finger out of sight but sure it didn’t matter, “but you can’t look at them yourself, okay? I want to know every surgeon, every engineer, the janitor who swept the floor in the room it was in, and how they got paid and who paid them.”

“Mr. Steel, what do you mean, without looking at the files? How am I supposed to find anything without looking at it?”

“I don’t know, Rita, you’re the” he waved his hand vaguely at the computer, “computer magician here, make something work. Just don’t look at anything. It’s not hard.”

“No, it’s not hard, it’s impossible, Mr. Steel! I can’t just hack something without knowing what it is, it’s like… like… Like when you’re tired and you’re trying to watch the stream but you just can’t stay awake and eventually you fall asleep but then you find out no one else in your discussion group watched either and now you’re hosting for the bi-county meeting and leading the discussion group and not a one of you knows a thing that happened but you’ve gotta put on a fake smile and nod and hope you don’t call the heroine’s dog the romantic lead because the dog’s got a human name! But that’s what you’re asking me to do, Mr. Steel, and no one can work like that!”

Juno blinked. “I followed… none of that.”

Rita made that noise she made when she was exasperated in the face of her unphased employer, a frustrated, wordless yell. “I know my job, Mr. Steel, let me do it!”

Juno frowned. This was an unforeseen setback. “Okay, Rita. What I just asked you to do? Forget all of it. It never happened. Don’t look into anything.” He didn’t want to think about what could happen to Rita if she became a target--not just possible Juno Steel collateral, like Mick was--in this mess.

Rita smiled. “Oh, this is so exciting, boss! I won’t look at anything, Mr. Steel!” She said that last part much too loud. Then she winked at him.

“No, Rita, I mean it. Don’t look at anything.”

“Whatever you say, Mr. Steel. Wink.”

“You don’t need to say it out loud, Rita, you’re doing it,” and his first and index fingers were rubbing the space outside his eyes, just below his eyebrows. “How’s this. I will give you take a week off right now if you don’t look into this. There’s probably a, a marathon on the streams somewhere, or, whatever else you do.”

“Mr. Steel, I don’t--”

“One week, paid vacation, Rita. Just go.”

“The head of the finance department--” she pointed at herself, “says we don’t have the funds for that.”

“I’ll make it work.” If he’d learned anything from the police academy, it was that there was always a loan shark in a back alley somewhere. “And don’t look into anything, got it? I mean it, Rita.”

“Sure thing, boss,” she said, typing furiously.

“Go, Rita. Now.” She didn’t move, or speak. Juno was starting to feel a little panicked. They didn’t have the money to replace another monitor, but... “I’ll cut off the whole building’s electricity.” No response except for silent typing. Rita got like this when she was working, sometimes; he suspected
she talked like she did the rest of the time to make up for it.

He ran the whole way to the basement.

When he finally got back to the office, taking several breaks on the stairs (had he eaten yet today? he couldn’t remember), Rita was still typing, the only light in the office the monitor’s glow on her face.

“Switched to solar,” she said by way of explanation.

“We don’t have solar.”

“The office three floors down does.”

Juno swore vividly. Rita still didn’t respond.

So he wheeled her chair out of the office, ignoring her protests, and locked the door behind her. "See you next week," he called through the door.

He raised his arms, resting them on his head, and felt the sudden space of his empty office.

He probably should have taken the chair back.

Chapter End Notes

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Sometimes, when the night was too quiet and his head was too loud, Juno would take a walk through the dark of Hyperion City. It was a different world after a certain point in the night, after all the drunks had headed home and the suburban twenty-somethings' highs had started wearing off and the tourists had been fleeced for all they had. It was contemplative, and lonely, and tired in a way that only a city like this one, with history and old bones and corruption and suffering, could be. Juno thought, anyway. He hadn't been to many other cities. But none of them had been like Hyperion City past the hour that anyone decent had the good sense to get off the street. That made it the only good time for Juno to get out, anymore. He’d made himself some ground rules for minimizing damage when he did. He made sure there was a wall to his right side whenever possible. He tried to keep his gaze on things that were threatening, but not necessarily to O’Flaherty’s twisted vision of a Hyperion City cleansed of corruption. He spent a lot of time staring at back-alley deals and kids picking pockets, until one of those kids turned out to be the son of the leader of a mid-range crime ring. Juno’d had to tail him, figure out where he lived. He’d made the person in his ear--not O’Flaherty himself this time, but one of his assistants--promise him that the no one would get hurt except the intended target.

They were true to their word, in a physical sense. Juno had to watch--well, he’d had to watch a bad scene, be an extra eye until the woman who was supposedly taking Hyperion City from its citizens was loaded up, half-conscious and bleeding, into one of O’Flaherty’s cars to be sent to whatever the next step was while the kid volleyed threats through the door, voice breaking on every word. He wondered if they were just making him stay that long because they could. It probably didn’t matter.

Every time he’d tried to look away, they’d sent him a quick snapshot of whatever Mick was doing, making sure to highlight the figure of whoever was tailing Mick that week in the background. Objectively, Alessandra Strong was an excellent detective, and she managed to lose the tails on him pretty often--usually, as Mick often relayed in a way that made Juno feel strangely jealous, through excellent punching and dramatic car chases--and Juno suspected that the only reason he wasn’t always asked to follow major figures in the Hyperion City crime landscape was through her work making sure Mick didn’t always have eyes on him. That said, it was hard not to resent her every time he had to become the middleman to what he suspected was abduction on a good day and assassination on a bad one.

It was his own fault. He was too pathetic to refuse clear extortion, and now he was paying for it. It felt like a fitting punishment for some other things, too. Like leaving the people who didn’t know they’d be better off without him. Or letting those people think there was anything good about him in the first place. Or maybe it was for surviving and surviving and surviving and surviving all those times the universe was asking him to just die already, when better people than him died all the time and usually around him. Usually because of him. Usually with his face the last thing reflected in their
eyes. But the fact that Juno Steel hadn’t joined any of them yet? That was the universe’s own fault. If it wanted him dead so badly, it could do him the courtesy of meeting him halfway next time. The only explanation for all of this, the only punishable offense that made sense if one wrote off extraordinarily dramatic bad luck in a meaningless universe was that Juno Steel was not allowed to be…

Happy.

The word was so foreign that even thinking it made his skin prickle up, like he was doing something he shouldn’t. So he tried to think about something else. But images from months ago—a year? had it been a whole year?, or, no, split the difference; eight whole months that felt like decades and minutes at once—rose, unbidden. He’d been heading these kind of thoughts—Juno, darling—off as much as he could, because they led to two people: Miasma, trapping him and forcing him to do those experiments and the constant feeling of almost-dying—but he was always there, too, so he had to really remember the week when he wasn’t, and sometimes the memories would get so powerful that he needed to sit down in the dark and cling to a pillow to remember it was over—but it was better than thinking about him.

He still did. Think about Peter Nureyev, that was. Sometimes. Often. Always. Usually thinking about Peter just showed up in his daily list of reasons to hate himself, but sometimes it would be something touched by longing and… other feelings, rather than another excellent excuse for Juno to self-flagellate, and that’s when things would get bad. He did double takes at bright eyes, slender fingers, tailored suits hiding straightened spines, sharp teeth and self-aware smirks in the street, and feel his eyes tie themselves like string to this waypoint to Peter Nureyev. It was never him, which was good. For several reasons. Not just that he missed—Juno cut the rest of that thought off before it could happen, and tried again. Not just that he was a tool of constant surveillance, and Peter Nureyev's anonymity was his most valuable possession.

After Rita’s week off, Juno had woken up in his office to someone covering his eyes with a pair of oddly soft hands. He didn’t remember falling asleep there, but it made sense. His apartment was starting to become overwhelming in its filth, and he needed the break. Maybe it was because the office was clean enough that walking through it didn’t make a lot of noise, or because Juno was able to sleep without having the smell the unwashed dishes rotting in the sink, or because there was a real person in the room with him instead of an imagined one, but he didn’t start the way he normally did upon waking, with a gasp and a frenzied check of his surroundings. He just… woke up. He briefly wondered if this was how other people felt every day.

“Mr. Steel? Don’t wake up yet, okay?”

Rita. She had a key the whole time. But she hadn’t come back. Why hadn’t she…

“Blink the eye that isn’t a robot for me, okay?”

“It’s the left one, Rita,” he said groggily. Silence.

“I can’t make the Ls when I’m covering your eyes, Mr. Steel,” she said, a little abashed.

Juno rolled his eyes beneath their closed lids, which was quite a feat, then blinked his left eye. Rita laughed. “I’m ticklish, Mr. Steel!” she laughed, and Juno made a distressed face.

“I feel like I should be calling HR.”

“Yeah, yeah, I am the HR Department, good one, boss. Just, read this. Hand it to me when you’re done. And keep the other eye closed, all right, Mr. Steel?”
“Rita, your hands are still on my eyes.”

“Oh, right,” she said, and lifted them up immediately.

“And lady-to-lady--How are your hands that soft? Do you use lotion or something?” Juno asked as he started to sit up and reach for the tablet.

“Ew, boss, you’re my boss.” Juno almost opened both eyes just so he could roll them harder this time. “Fine. Frannie says it’s on account of all the moisturizer I use, but I think it’s one of my natural gifts.”

“Okay, noted.” Juno spied a tablet on the table. “That it?” Rita nodded. He picked it up with his free hand and started thumbing through.

It was a very blurry, pixelated blueprint for a biocybernetic eye. As far as Juno could tell, Rita must have had to pull it out of the background of a security camera somewhere and enhanced it the best she could. It wasn’t the most readable, but it was the closest he was going to get to figuring out exactly what he was dealing with.

Along with everything he already knew about, his head was also currently home to a monitor constantly checking his vital signs, a function that enabled the eye to be controlled remotely, a small storage drive, and a failsafe. The failsafe being that the eye was fitted with what Juno estimated was an elephant’s dose of some kind of concentrated sedative that could be administered at a moment’s notice.

But hey, at least it couldn’t read minds or pick up sound. He could work with this. The monitoring stuff was eerie, but for him a sudden quickening of heartbeat or dive in oxygen wasn’t really a sign of anything out of the ordinary happening. All those years of endless, unrelenting trauma really were good for something, after all. And the eye couldn’t work through his eyelid, except for a much-dampened version of the heatseeking and infrared properties. Plus, it looked from here that to make space for all the tech, the eye had more biological properties than others in its cohort, which didn’t mean much in practice but did make Juno feel a little less like he was harboring some foreign parasite in his face. All in all, better, if significantly more invasive, than expected.

When he was done reading Rita took the tablet and left, presumably to destroy any trace of having made the file.

When she returned the work to next morning, she told him she’d looked into the eye. Then, with just the right amount of hesitation, asked him if he was feeling all right, if he thought maybe he should be getting more rest. It was nothing like Rita, but most people didn’t bother figuring out what Rita was like well enough to figure that out.

She really deserved to find herself a better job.

With a better idea of what he was dealing with, Juno was able to make a routine to follow. He checked on Mick when he could; the voidball team had started scoring points since Alessandra began showing up at their practices. Apparently she had been captain of her high school team. Nonetheless, they were still well on their way to their goal for most fouls called in any one season of any sport. Juno wasn’t sure why he was paying Alessandra Strong to inspire a team of teen athletes to victory, but Mick was safe most of the time and Juno himself had enough on his plate, so he let it slide for now. Besides, she hadn’t actually sent him an invoice yet. Maybe inspiring all those kids was payment enough.

Juno snorted mirthlessly at that.
Other than that, the rest of his time went to being the puppet O’Flaherty needed, without being too
good at having his strings pulled. And he tried to figure out exactly what was going on, and what he
could do next. He planned incessantly for how he could get out of this without self-lobotomizing,
and he walked around Hyperion City at night because his brain was going too fast for him to sleep or
think and there were less people he might be asked to help get rid of, and sometimes he did just lay
under the table in his apartment and try to find the bottom of whatever bottle he could in the hopes of
being able to fit the memory of whatever he’d done that day inside. Old habits and all that.

He wasn’t making any progress, either in figuring out what the pattern was and why they needed
him, or in drinking enough to feel something between absolutely nothing and the crushing weight of
everything.

So he put on a scarf and took another eyes-downcast, lids-half-shut nightwalk through the
unforgiving cold and harsh lights of Hyperion City, trying to find a space big enough for his thoughts
to swirl around him without descending too close. He needed to do something, but he couldn’t as
long as Mick was on Mars. If Mick left Mars Juno had no doubt O’Flaherty would drop the tape
anyway and nothing he did so far would have mattered anyway and he did all of that for nothing
because there were only so many ways this could end and in most of them Mick died and this was
not helping, Steel, there’s something you can do even if you haven’t thought of it yet, but he didn’t
know how much longer he could keep this up.

And maybe everyone would be safer if he’d never been here at all, right? And those thoughts were
coming down again, but.

A strong, dusty wind picked up. Juno smelled something familiar on the air current.

All the thinking didn’t stop, exactly; it just felt like the mechanics of his thoughts wound down while
his brain devoted more and more of itself to recognizing this smell, a scent like spices from a faraway
land, and he had been about to take a step forward but instead he turned it into a round, neat pivot,
because Peter Nureyev couldn’t be on Mars, and especially not here on this part of Mars, where Juno
was, but what if he was? It was the same feeling he had when he saw parts of Peter in strangers on
the street, but this time it was amplified by measures of magnitude too large to comprehend.

It was him. He was here, somewhere. It was a clairvoyant certainty, and he didn’t buy that stuff
usually, but he felt it.

He just couldn’t see him.

He just had to see him.

And then he saw him. There, sliding out of a dark alley that had been on his right. He only saw his
face for a second, and barely, but it was him, and he couldn’t stop looking, he could never stop
looking. It was as if every self-preserving function in his brain, already transferred to the preservation
of others decades ago, had finally given up the ghost and shut down after years of misuse, and it was
just Peter Nureyev, in Hyperion City, and watching him scale a fire escape--he made it look graceful
and effortless and he was too good to make the mistake of doing this kind of thing if someone was
there to notice him, maybe he hadn’t recognized him, maybe he had and was trying to get as far
away as possible--and Juno felt his heart skip by leaps and bounds even while he tried to make his
chest constrict it into sense.

Peter Nureyev.

In Hyperion City.
He wanted to yell for him, or run away as far as his legs could carry, or stand still and admire this moment like he wasn’t even in it at all, but instead of doing any of that he got a call.

It was from O’Flaherty’s security team.

And Juno, watching Peter expertly scale a couple windows up the fire escape and easily pick through a window above, thought he could hazard a guess about what the call would be about.

Juno only had a few options here. Two—technically the only real options he had, either betray Peter or betray Mick—were unthinkable. Which left him with a very short list of third options, most of which involved him leaving Peter to a group of people who knew exactly where he was and didn’t necessarily want him dead but sure didn’t want him alive either. The others involved leaving Mick more or less the same, because Juno Steel was the sacred protector who couldn’t protect a thing.

But there had to be something he could do.

So he took the call, hands shaking.

Chapter End Notes

he's HERE

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edited 9/14/2017
“What is it this time? Am I picking up some dry cleaning, maybe grabbing a few coffees for the office?” The remark had a crack in it, which took some of the intended bite off. He was just so tired of not making progress. He had been looking into every person who he knew had been a target, and he couldn't see anything they had in common except that they were the so-called dregs of Hyperion City, and probably weren’t planning on voting for the guy whose entire campaign hinged on the promise that they would be run out of town. There had to be a motive in there somewhere, but it just wasn’t coming together. Every time there was another person he had to target, he thought maybe that could at least be the final star in the constellation of what exactly O’Flaherty wanted, but Juno just couldn’t figure it out fast enough, again, and that at least was a reason why it made sense that Nureyev was next in line. This was his fault for not being smart enough, quick enough. A better detective, a better anything would have figured it all out a long time ago.

But Juno Steel was not better. So now the best he could do was Nureyev from getting hurt.

The voice on the phone was young, and it drawled, in no hurry to get to the end of its sentence. “If you’re offering, I’ll take you up on it. I’m a sucker for a dark roast. You mind nabbing the wanted thief who just broke into that apartment on your way, though?” The kid wore cockiness like a bulletproof vest—you had to, if you were that young and in a line of work where the best line they could sell you was that it was all for the greater good. In a job like that, some arrogance could keep a barrier between you and the damage that couldn’t be undone.

Juno clenched his jaw. There had to be something he could do between killing Mick and killing Nureyev. Juno didn’t believe in binary choices. It would just take some doing.

“This is a call, I can’t see it if you’re nodding or something,” the voice said when Juno didn’t respond.

“I’m here.”

“Okay, yeah, I know, I have an eye on you.” The voice always laughed when he said something like that, even though you had to go pretty far up the remark’s family tree to find even a distant relation to a joke. “We gotta bring that Rex Glass, Duke Rose, whatever his name is guy in. He’s wanted all
over the place, and we’ve got specific notes on him and everything. Kinda a big deal. Should be a little exciting. Anyway, it might be a little while, so just don’t let him go.” He heard a hushed conversation as the voice got back on the phone. “Head Officer just told me to tell you to knock him out, stun him, whatever. Apparently he’s slippery? And they…oh, one sec.” another quick conversation, “They just left, but they said to tell you to keep the tearful reunion to a minimum? Am I out of the loop, or--”

Juno hung up. He hated when the person making the call was that young. It brought back memories he didn't want. People telling you how the world was, and you believing them because they told you you were cleverer and braver and stronger than the others, and that’s why it was your job to put yourself above them. The sense of futility of it all. There were always going to be people who wanted to be more, and they always took the bait that promised them they already were.

He wondered if Nureyev was only a target because of him. It seemed likely, given the ever-increasing number of ways proximity to Juno Steel was becoming a liability.

What was O’Flaherty’s game? Just to see how far he could be pushed? Because if they really knew about Nureyev--everything about Nureyev--it should have been obvious from miles away that making Juno choose between him and Mick would lead to some pretty bad morale issues. Juno needed time to puzzle through, and time was something he just couldn't stop losing. He needed to get Nureyev and get him out of here immediately, somehow. Unfortunately, there was only one quick way to get up that building, and it was the creaking, unstable fire escape Nureyev had used.

He gave himself exactly one half second to stare at it, wishing for any other option, before he grabbed onto the lowest rung.

Juno’s arduous climb was an entirely different animal from Nureyev’s silent, graceful ascent, but that was to be expected. He was a little busy reminding himself, constantly, not to look down, and he probably would have been much more shaken when he forgot himself and did if he hadn’t been so consumed by creating a plan to get out of this. Despite his dread about what could go wrong when Nureyev was in sight again, and his dread about Nureyev being in sight again, it was still a relief to scramble through the still-open window onto a horizontal surface, and he took a minute to absorb the feeling of solid ground again.

The apartment Nureyev had broken into was nearly empty. There was no reason for a thief to be in here. It was all furniture and bland prints. There was nothing that Juno could even imagine someone wanting to steal. In fact, Peter Nureyev was the only object of value in the entire room.

Just looking at him hurt. He was leaning against the broken window complementary to the one Juno had crawled through, wind flowing through his short black hair in time with the curtain behind him. The neon and fluorescent lights across the street reflected in his metal ear cuff, his hair, his eyes, bright against the background of the shadows crawling across the rest of him. Seeing him made Juno momentarily forget it all--his plan, the warring feelings of thrill and terror in his chest, the tunnel of guilt closing in on him, and replaced it all with three words that he couldn’t let himself say.

*Is he posing?*

There were more words where those came from, but those ones were easiest.

Nureyev’s eyes traveled to Juno. His face was… blank. Completely. Juno had never seen that before. Peter Nureyev was always on, whether he was performing a fake identity or a real one. He was always something. Maybe some trick of the Hyperion City night lights was flattening the smirk that was always hiding behind his eyes, the one that said he knew something you didn’t and he found that intensely amusing.
“Detective,” Nureyev said. There was a heavy wrongness to his lack of affect. And it didn’t pass notice that he had taken away the privilege of Juno being able to hear his own name in Nureyev’s voice. Nonetheless, something about being near him was twisting his thoughts around themselves, and he just wanted to stay in this moment, even if Nureyev hated him. Given his track record, maybe he wanted to stay in this moment because Nureyev hated him. But healthy or not, he would have given anything to stop it all right then.

Then Juno’s eye started to do what it did best—remind Juno that he was all out of agency.

Nureyev was outlined in red, being scanned by six layers of programs that Juno had the unpleasant sensation of seeing separately and all at once. Neither of them had the time to just… stare at each other. Juno made an effort to moderate the desperate tinge that was sneaking into his voice. “Nureyev, you have to get out of here.” The tiniest of movements in Nureyev’s eyebrows—or the wind, maybe? “I’m taking out my gun. You’ve got to disarm me, probably stun me for good measure, and get the hell out of here quick as you can.”

The thief’s face went from completely blank to confused and… angry? Probably angry. And then he flitted down on something like fear. It seemed to take Nureyev a moment to form what he said next.

“Juno, are you in danger?”

Juno pointed the gun directly at Peter, one-armed to make it easier for him to be disarmed. His teeth were clenched with the stress of it all, and his voice edged on hysterical. “Doesn’t matter. You are. Now take this gun out of my hand and stun me and make it look like I put up a fight before anyone else gets here. And stay on my left side, okay?”

Peter looked him right in the eyes, his gaze lingering on the new eye on the right, and Juno’s eye was outlining angles and weak spots. Looking at it made him feel sick; why wasn’t Nureyev just knocking him out so he didn’t have to feel anything, even for just a minute? “I’m sorry, Juno,” Nureyev said, and at first Juno wasn’t sure whether he was apologizing for not being able to stun him or being very able to stun him, and then in an instant he had the gun in his hand and against Juno’s head. The detective braced himself for the bolt, listening for the sound of cars arriving and armored feet running up the stairs like he was sure they would any second.

“But I’m staying right here,” Nureyev whispered the end of the sentence right into his ear, and released Juno and dropped his arm all in one smooth, decisive motion.

This was the Nureyev Juno remembered, and he was momentarily relieved that he had more on his plate to think about than the memories of what happened to Juno whenever he fell into Nureyev’s orbit.

The monitors all had to understand what was happening through Juno’s eye right now. They must have caught on after this long of Juno not doing anything at all. Still, he went through the motions, put his hands up. “Good, that should be very comforting to you when you get taken straight to O’Flaherty and probably end in a shallow grave somewhere! It’ll be great for Mick to know that I didn’t get hurt if he gets martyred for the sake of a local government race! This isn’t the time to be sentimental!”

Peter’s eyes narrowed and he hunched slightly, pushing his hands in his pockets. Juno knew the look on his face, like he was gambling and putting his faith in the wrong secret weapon. “We don’t have time for you to make some master plan, Duke—or--” Juno shook his head, trying to knock the past clean out of it. “Just do it, okay? Or, punch my eye out or something, it’ll probably be more satisfying, I’ll give you that one for free.” He was a hair’s breadth from pleading.
When he heard the word eye the parts of Peter’s face all pulled back together and he straightened up, clapping his hands in front of him. He seemed oddly unperturbed, all briskness and business, and suddenly he was grabbing Juno’s jaw in one graceful hand and studying the eye closely. “Juno, what have you done to yourself?” His voice was very quiet, very sad, and Juno, previously transfixed, jerked back and snapped his right eye shut at the sound of it.

“Don’t,” he said, a little bit venomous, angling the right side of his face away. Nureyev was pitying him. Juno had left months ago, Nureyev didn’t know anything about what was happening to him right now. He had no right. And speaking of leaving, Nureyev was supposed to hate him now, that was the point of all of this, was that he needed Peter Nureyev to hate him. (Unless he was being totally honest with himself, but why start now?). He hadn’t considered the possibility that Nureyev might not hate him, might think of him as a human being with worth, except in some of his more painful daydreams that he could never quite find his way out of. Nureyev was supposed to understand what Juno was now, so why wasn’t he leaving him behind?

Juno’s hands traveled to the parts of his jaw where Peter had grabbed him and dug his fingernails in like he was trying to scrape the feeling away. There wouldn’t be time right now, but he’d figure something out. He usually didn’t have to work very hard at making people leave him behind. “It’s transmitting video. You're giving a close-up to a roomful of people who want you, dead, or captured, or something, I don't even know, but you're just handing them pieces of your identity like nothing every time you look at me.”

Juno watched Peter’s face flip to total comprehension all at once. He was too clever to have gotten himself wrapped up in this. This wasn’t supposed to be how Peter Nureyev went down. And Juno was growing more and more certain that things were going too far to change anything at all, that he couldn’t stop it, whatever it was that was going to happen to Nureyev or Mick or both, and now Nureyev had his gun and showed no interest in giving it back.

He heard the whirrrring of an approaching car. A nice one, by the sound of it. It was going to be too late. He made a grab for the gun again, letting panic steer the ship, but Peter was quicker.

“No need for that, detective,” Peter said, and slammed something hard and cold and rectangular into the right side of Juno’s face. “I’m sorry, this may be slightly uncomfortable.”

“Really? Because I thought we were just one whale song short of a relaxation chamber,” Juno said, his compulsion to quip overpowering his better instincts, and then several things happened all at once.

A pulse and a sharp sting passed through Juno’s face, and he instantly felt light-headed. He heard the sound of Peter’s cringe, hissed through his teeth, and then the man was pulling Juno against him with one arm, pinning his arms around his body, and put the gun back to Juno’s head, but Juno could barely feel it under all the yelling his eye was doing. It was like every function it had was overloading at once, and he thought it must have been burning through his eyelids with the heat of it.

It was unbearable, but Juno had borne a lot of unbearable before, so he braced himself against the tides of not-quite-sound and not-quite-light and slipped into the onslaught of artificial image and speech.

As it went on Juno started to sense a creaking in it, like when he and the other Oldtown kids would drop a rock into the machineworks just to see what would happen. At first they could never tell if it worked, and they had nearly always just about given up on listening to the sound of the stone bouncing among the gears when suddenly they would hear that creaking and grinding that meant it was caught up in the works of it and suddenly everything’s breaking all at once and they’d never given themselves the time to wonder at the consequences until they heard the sound of adult
footsteps running towards them and scattered. It was like it was all splintering, leaving aftereffects in strange colors and wrong sounds that Juno had no real-world comparison for, before it all fell away as slow as losing pins and needles or a ringing in the ears. And underneath the slowly subsiding noise, for the first time in a very long time, his head was mercifully quiet.

When his left eye's vision salvaged itself from the too-much that Juno had been drowning in, he was surrounded by three armed guards, and Peter Nureyev was clutching him close and holding a gun to his head. “Drop your weapons,” he said with his voice all threat and cold sobriety, and Juno was caught without anything to do other than follow whatever identity Peter Nureyev was wearing this time, confused and disoriented and most of all angry at how much the frenzied quickness of his heartbeat wasn't for the four guns trained on him, but for the memory of what it was like to have a life with Peter Nureyev in it.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Nureyev takes a leap of faith; Juno takes a shot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Juno’s head had gone suddenly, mercifully quiet. Or, quieter. His head was still pounding, and his thoughts were racing and echoing through his head. It had been a long time since he was trapped only with the thoughts he made by himself, and the change was surprisingly welcome. He was still in a prison cell, but he’d built this one to his own specifications, and he thought maybe he had the blueprints lying around somewhere if he ever decided to escape.

His right side had filled with a deep, several-layers-thick fog that followed his gaze when his eyes darted back and forth. It would have been nice to have the time to puzzle out exactly what that meant, but his brain was still buzzing and trying to recover, and his body was pressed against Peter Nureyev’s in a way that was making him remember all the things they both would be better off forgetting entirely. He could feel his heartbeat and smell his skin and it all could have been different if he were a better Juno Steel or if there were a worser Peter Nureyev out there, if they could somehow be even with each other, and he had to curb those thoughts and so instead he thought about how he was looking a roomful of guns right down the barrel, which was much more relaxing.

“Release the hostage, Glass.” The guards all seemed interchangeable to Juno. This one was tall, and broad, and the excited tone of his voice implied that if they were the one in charge it was probably based on those two virtues alone. Maybe some bloodlust, but they all seemed to have a vigor for nonviolent criminals; it wasn’t quite a hierarchy.

“Drop your weapons and I’ll consider it,” Nureyev said smoothly. For a second Juno wondered who the hostage was, until he put together the gun to his head and the grip on his chest.

It wasn’t the worst plan Juno had ever been a part of, all things considered, in that Juno had been a part of some very bad plans. Pretending-to-be-the-person-you’re-trying-to-fool bad. It was surprising how long that one worked, and Juno credited all those rumors about AI and biocybernetic androids that never quite went away.

It was still a pretty bad plan. Peter Nureyev was quick and clever, but he was going into this blind, and he made a move where his success hinged on the assumption that Juno had some level of individual value to O’Flaherty’s men. Juno, on the other hand, was grimly aware of how much more trouble he was than he was worth. With his eye suddenly not working, and when he was clearly trying to aid the escape of a wanted criminal, now would be a pretty good time to sever ties, especially if you were trying to keep a clean reputation for a mayoral race.

“Weapons, down,” Nureyev said again, taking a moment to gesture with Juno’s gun. It seemed clumsier, less artful than Nureyev’s usual violence, and Juno wondered if they knew Nureyev’s weapon of choice was knives, and that he was actually a pretty bad shot when it got down to it. Always got caught by the recoil. He watched the head officer’s face, seeing them lean into their earpiece. The other two exchanged glances, and in the moment where the room was just quietly
confused, Juno very quickly and with as much animosity as he could carry without raising his voice, breathed, “Now would be a good time to make a backup plan,” in the general direction of Nureyev’s ears. In answer, Nureyev held him a little tighter. I know what I’m doing, Juno decided he meant.

A moment passed. Another.

The head officer nodded. “Shoot at will,” they told the two officers behind them. And Juno had less than a second to find some way to keep Nureyev alive before--

“Close your eyes, please, Juno, we’re going to jump out of this window now,” Nureyev said, measured but urgent, and dragged Juno out the window in a backwards fall to the pavement below, shots searing by around them.

And then Juno was falling, and he was yelling in wordless fear, and the ground was rushing towards him much too fast. “Hold this,” Peter said, strained, and shoved his gun back into Juno’s hands. Juno grabbed it automatically--Juno preferred to face mortal peril with a weapon in hand, and even if he couldn’t harm gravity he could still give it a good-faith effort. He felt a laser bolt scrape a spot over his collarbone, and he hissed slightly at the expectation of pain, but he barely felt it. Must have been a scrape, he decided as their fall slowed and he began shooting back the the force above. From Nureyev’s side he heard a loud, glancing clunk followed by the sound of metal against rope.

“Where did you even get that from?” Juno yelled much too loudly as he looked through his gun’s sights and tried to make his good left eye and newly inferior right eye work in tandem, and Nureyev rappelled them both down the side of the building with what appeared to be a magnetized grappling hook. He hadn’t had a bag or anything, had he? This had to have fit into his pockets, unless he had it stashed somewhere, so how?

“Always plan ahead, detective, always plan ahead,” Nureyev said, managing to sound breezy and carefree even while shots ricocheted around them both. Juno saw one almost clip his ear while he carefully deposited Juno back onto the solid ground. With his feet back in a sensible, safe arrangement in regards to gravity, he readied his gun and took the opportunity to return the favor.

“Well, you know me--always ready to improvise,” he said back, and sent a few stun bolts back up to the people shooting above. “Hey--you dropped this!” he shouted. It was a better line for grenades, but he hadn’t encountered one yet, and if he hadn’t by now it was probably time to stop hoping.

The shot had a tricky angle to it, pretty much straight up, and his binocular sight had fallen from cybernetically augmented to horrendous in just the last few seconds, but he couldn’t sit there and do nothing. Not just because he would feel entirely powerless, but also because he’d already said a pretty good line. Would’ve been a shame to waste it; there were detectives out there who were only able to get out one or two good lines a year.

One thing that could ruin a line like that was failure to back it up, and Juno watched as every single shot went wide. Right. He’d nearly forgotten that without two good eyes he was effectively useless, a detective without a single good adjective to modify him. His first instinct was to wrap the fog in his eye and now his brain around himself and succumb to it, but before he could he felt a hand gripping his own and dragging him forwards. “Care for a run, detective?” the thief asked, and Juno was once again hopelessly pulled in his direction.

Juno knew from the first few steps that something was wrong, but he had to keep up. There was no such thing as ideal circumstances to run for your life in, and honestly Juno would have given up a long time ago if it didn’t feel so urgent that he personally make sure that Nureyev ended up alive and safe. Still, these were pretty bad circumstances, and Juno couldn’t arrange his thoughts to figure out why.
His whole body was heavy and disconnected, and it didn’t want to do what he asked it to. He followed Peter mechanically, blindly, returning shots when his arm listened to him and lifted itself, just running when it stopped later. His overloaded brain registered the question of why everything felt so distant, but he couldn’t make his thoughts go any further than the asking before the next sharp turn, dodge, or pulsing headache. This end of Hyperion City was an intentional patchwork maze of alleys and streets that looked like dead ends and doors that looked like walls, and Juno was barely following where they moved when he ran directly into a lightpost. His hand was ripped out from Nureyev’s and he instantly felt the loss of it, even if he couldn’t necessarily feel his hand as much. This was probably bad, he thought with a drifting lack of urgency.

“Juno?” Nureyev circled back immediately, grabbed him by the shoulders. “Juno, we have to keep-.” He stopped entirely. “You’re bleeding.” And Nureyev was pulling his scarf aside, and Juno followed his gaze and his chest from the right shoulder down was all blood and he his stomach did an uncomfortable jolt at the sight.

“Huh. How about that.” He couldn’t remember if it had hurt or not, or think of why this might be happening. He felt like there was something else he needed to tell Peter, while they were on the subject of him not being in his best health. “You should go finish your running, if you need me I’m gonna go lay down in that alley,” Juno informed him, and then dragged himself upwards so he could stumble in the vague direction of cover.

They were the longest two steps he ever took. Peter was supporting him by one arm, looking behind them. Probably checking if they lost their tails. Nureyev leaned Juno against a wall and pulled a knife out of his pocket. “Wait here, Juno, I won’t be gone a second,” Nureyev said, and then made to run out of the alley.

Juno’s hand closed around Nureyev’s sleeve. “Don’t,” he said, “I have to… the eye was…” The fog from earlier had gotten into every abandoned wrinkle in his brain, and it was making it hard to make sentences. He started over. Juno struggled between breaths and heartbeats and feeling like he was being pulled under. He thought he saw Peter trying to shush him, but Juno felt himself teetering. There could have been a hand on his arms, but also, maybe he didn’t have any arms? It was hard to tell.

He closed his eyes, trying to remember the thing he had to say. “There’s a... sedive. Settive. Sedive. In the. Eye. For the sleep,” Juno explained eloquently, and Juno’s hand, which he had been clenched around the fabric of Peter’s sleeve, slowly unclenched and swung down his whole arm, and his legs began to buckle beneath him, and Peter was struggling trying to support his weight.

*You can swoon into my arms now*, he remembered from somewhere past the cloud wrapping around him.

“Might take you up on that,” Juno tried to half-mumble, and then he was falling. His body slumped unceremoniously into Nureyev’s, and he could feel him struggling to keep his body from crashing to the ground. His eyes were closed, so Juno wasn’t entirely sure how it happened, but he was on a floor somewhere now. Lying down felt nice. Very relaxing. This was quite possibly the nicest alley in the whole city, and Juno Steel would know--he was something of a connoisseur of Hyperion City’s greatest avenues to lose blood and consciousness in.

“Juno? Stay with me, Juno,” and Nureyev must have been yelling so loud for Juno to hear him from so far away. He wondered if it was as cold where Nureyev was as it was here.

*By now we both know that’s a promise I can’t keep*, he said or maybe thought, and then he was out.
Chapter End Notes

(edited 9/18/2017)
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Juno wakes up. Juno wakes up. Juno wakes up.

The first time Juno woke up, he didn’t even open his eyes. He leaned off the side of the bed the best he could and threw up. He heard voices saying his name, and he felt someone’s fingers stroking his head while they held his hair back, and then he faded back out as quickly as he had come in.

The second time Juno woke up, the room was dark and the last thing he remembered was a hazy image of falling out the window. He shot up, gasping, and then immediately fell back down again. Voices were saying his name, but he couldn’t quite clear his vision or his head enough to see where they came from. He grabbed onto a solid wrist, tight, like a vice. “Where is he,” Juno tried to say, but it came out wrong, like the words were just slightly bigger than his mouth. “Where are they?” The room was wavering and making sounds like being underwater. Someone’s hands were on one of his. we’re right here, Juno thought he heard, but that didn’t make any sense, and then he fell slack again.

The third time Juno woke up, he threw up again, and he felt something sticking to his arm. He pulled it off and then fell back asleep.

The fourth time Juno woke up, the room was dim with morning light and the last thing he remembered was running through the streets. He gasped and sat up and fell down immediately, and he felt something sticking out of his arm that wasn’t supposed to be there, so he pulled it off. There were figures looming around him. “Where are Mick and…” It was very important that he did not use Peter’s name. He couldn’t remember why, but he couldn’t say it. “I have to get them off of Mars,” he said, eyes closed, mumble-talking to whoever’s hands were on his arm right now.

Someone hushed him while he felt something smoothly push into his arm. sh, Juno, they said. just rest., and Juno complied.

The fifth time Juno woke up, the room was gently lit by the sun through white curtains, and the last thing he remembered was trying to use his bad eye to line up a shot. “Glass,” he said, because it was very important not to say the other name, and then he sat up all at once, because there were four mismatched chairs around him, and three of them had people in them. Juno was ready to fight his way out of here if he had to, except he couldn’t stay sitting up for some reason and he fell back down. There was something on his arm and he roughly pulled it out. Then he looked at it. It was a needle. “What are you trying to do to me?” He demanded, trying to straighten himself up again, and then someone was taking the needle out of his hand.

“Juno, stop,” the voice said, and hands were on either side of his shoulders, turning him to look at the voice’s face. His vision swam, and then focused. “Juno, it’s me, Alessandra, okay? Everything is fine.” She said it with a firmness Juno didn’t understand.

It didn’t make sense for her to be here, because if she was here, then—“What happened to Mick?” He asked, and he was sitting up again, grabbing onto her, and another pair of hands from the other side of him was on his arms and pulling him back down.

“Juno! Juno, I’m here,” the other voice said, and that didn’t make sense, and that was also bad
because if Mick was here, that meant--

Juno shot up again. “Where’s Glass?” He demanded, and started topping again, and there was
another pair of hands on his shoulders. “We’re all right here, Juno, there’s nothing to worry about,”
he heard a soothing voice try to say, and Juno pinpointed it and turned to him.

“You can’t be here!” He shouted, and fought against the hands trying to push him back down.
“None of you should be here! My--I have a tracker in me, I don’t how to tell if it’s working, it’s not
safe to be here! You have to take Mick and go, right now,” and he was trying to get up and push
them out of the room, and everyone kept pushing him back down and he thrashed against them
blindly, becoming more and more irate, until he was yelling things like **you had no right** and **I can’t
let anything happen to you** and there was something wet running down his shoulder all of a sudden,
and this kept up until he heard someone to the left of him shakily but resolutely say, **good night, Mr.
Steel**, and he felt something cold run into his arms and he tried to ask **why is**, but he was asleep again
before he could finish the question.

The seventh time Juno woke up, the room was emptying of evening light, and the last thing he
remembered was falling to the ground in an alley. He was surrounded by two empty chairs and two
full ones, and he sat up, suddenly terrified. It had been a long time since he’d been able to wake up in
an unfamiliar room without hearing her voice, her **I will get what I wants**, and Juno bolted into a
sitting position, gasping for air. Gravity wrapped its arms around his waist and slowly dragged him
back downwards again.

“Juno, J, slow down,” Mick said as Juno ripped the tube out of his arm without even looking at it.

“Mick? What are you doing here? Where’s--Glass?” He asked, just missing using Nureyev’s real
name. He turned to look at his other side, where Alessandra Strong was exasperatedly putting on a
pair of gloves and reaching for the end of the IV Juno had just pulled out of his arm. He flinched
away. “What is that?”

She and Mick shared a Look. Did they have Looks now? It was a exhausted look, but there was
something else in it. Like if desperation were positive.

(The word Juno Steel was looking for was **hopeful**, but he didn’t experience it often enough to
recognize it).

“Everyone is fine, Juno. Now give me your arm.”

“No,” Juno said, and turned away from her, toward Mick. “Mick, you have to go, right now.” He
looked back at Strong. “I’m not paying you to take Mick on social visits, Strong!”

“We can talk payment later,” Alessandra said calmly. “Give me your arm.”

“No, you don’t need to be on an IV for any longer than it takes for you to grab a lab coat and sneak
past the orderlies,” and Alessandra looked taken aback.

“How are you still alive?” she said under her breath while Juno continued.

“Look, we both know that it’s not safe for Mick to be around me right now, I have a camera in me,
you have to get him out of here, I know a guy who can get you a false identity, he hates my guts but
that’s pretty good terms for the people he usually deals with so--”

“Do I have a say here, or are you just going to keep talking about me like I’m a- a-fancy lamp, or
something?” Mick wasn’t especially great at metaphors, but the thing that got Juno’s attention wasn’t
the content but rather that he sounded **angry**. Juno could barely remember the last time he saw Mick
mad, and he and Sasha used to make a game out of trying to find something that could shatter his relaxed disposition. Juno frowned and studied him for a second, trying to understand. Alessandra took this opportunity to grab Juno’s arm and shove the needle back in.

“Hey,” Juno said, and tried to jerk his arm away, but she held strong.

“Good thinking, Al.”

“Thanks,” she said grimly, holding tight while Juno tried to pull his arm away. Mick gave her a nickname? There was something threatening about it, two people who knew him getting to know each other. The puzzle of Juno Steel could only ever be safely seen in pieces. As soon as you started matching edges to edges things got… messy.

He wondered if they had talked to each other about him, and what they’d said. His head started pounding just thinking about it.

With Juno safely returned to his status as human pincushion, Mick put his attention back to him.

“J, I didn’t ask for a bodyguard. I know you don’t think I can take care of myself, okay? But I don’t think you can take care of yourself either, and I’m tired of you acting all superior to me all the time. And I don’t want to just sit around while someone’s using me to threaten you. If you’re right about all this the Polaris guy is actually trying to kill me, Juno! This is like, a huge weird life change for me, and I haven’t really been able to even process it because you’ve got to do everything yourself and right now is the first time you’ve let me do anything for you in maybe years, and it’s because you were unconscious, J.”

Mick continued from there, and Juno should have been listening, but instead he was studying Mick, who had been on his right side. Now that he had a good look at him, he looked a little bit pale. And at first he hadn’t seen it through the fog of his bad eye, but it looked as if...

“Mick?” Juno asked.

“Yeah?”

“What’s that?” And he pointed to the a tube winding its way out of Mick’s arm.

“Uh. This? Nothing?”

Alessandra Strong groaned and buried her face in her hands.

“Mick, just tell me what it is.”

“No. You’ll get mad again.”

“I won’t get mad,” Juno lied.

“Really? Because you’ve been getting pretty mad.”

“Yes, really. Won’t even raise my blood pressure. What is it.”

“Well,” Mick caved. “You got shot. And you lost a lot of blood, and then you opened the stitches you got, and. And I know I’m a universal donor, and we couldn’t take you to a hospital, so I thought--”

“You’re giving me your blood?” Juno shouted, and he felt light-headed suddenly, and he would have lunged for him if Strong wasn’t holding his arm so tightly. He turned back to her. “And you’re
“Just letting him?”

“J, you’re only getting the blood I’m not using anyway!”

“I really need to know you know that’s not how blood works,” Alessandra said from Juno’s other side. She didn’t sound particularly rattled. She mostly just sounded tired, which felt oddly insulting.

“Let go of me, Strong,” Juno said. “I have to stop someone from doing something stupid.”

“So do I,” and she tightened her grip. “It is very unsafe for you to be sedated while we are in the process of detoxing you, but I will not hesitate to do it if you continue to be a danger to yourself and others,” and the way she said it, Juno could imagine exactly what she was like in the war.

This wasn’t a fight he could win, but that had never stopped him before. “Mick, take that needle out,” he said, and tried to reach for him with his free arm. He was several feet short, but Mick flinched back anyway.

“J, the blood is the largest organ in your body, I have enough to spare,” he said, and Juno felt Alessandra’s grip loosen for a second.

“What kind of school did you two go to?” she asked. No one paid attention.

“And if I wasn’t doing this, your,” a small pause, “friend would have had to break into the hospital or something, and--”

“What do you mean, my friend?” Juno asked, and the dizziness that had begun to wane in him grew again.

Mick shut his mouth, and shook his head.

“Mick,” he said like a warning.

“Glass, or Fox, or whatever his name is. He’s--”

“He didn’t leave?” Juno shouted, and he was yelling again, but he was so tired. He didn’t remember what happened after that, but when he finally collapsed again, he felt the needle slide back into his arm, and he heard a voice say, I think maybe you should go wait somewhere, too, and another one say back, Yeah. I guess so. Are you sure you’ll be okay?

I’ll be better than any of you. I’ll get you when he starts remembering again.

Or if it gets bad?

Or if it gets bad, the voice agreed, and Juno couldn’t begin to fathom who they could possibly be talking about.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Juno wakes up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The sixteenth time Juno woke up, it was the way he always did: terrified, disoriented, and in some degree of physical pain. The room was bright, and the last thing he remembered was… he didn’t know, but there was a lot of it. He tried to jump out of bed, but the moment he tried to sit up straight swimming dots ate through his vision and he collapsed back down.

He edited “some degree of physical pain” to “a whole lot of physical pain” and waited for his vision to clear so he could try again. But it didn’t clear, not all the way. He could see the room he was in—a bland, perfectly functional bedroom. There were four chairs surrounding him, the bright metal mismatched to the other, more simple furniture. For a moment he wondered why everything looked and felt so strange, all of a sudden, and then he realized. Terrible vision. No voices, except for the human ones filtering up from the floor below him.

He reassembling the broken puzzle of last night’s timeline as the pieces flew back, each quicker than the last.

Nureyev, he thought suddenly, immediately followed by Mick, and he didn’t know whether to feel guilty that he thought of Nureyev’s name first for Mick’s sake or for the thief’s so he just decided to feel guilty about both, and this time he got all the way out of bed before he fell over. A tall, light metal pole creaked and was pulled down on top of him, and he felt a sharp yanking pain in his arm.

“Steel?” he heard a familiar voice he couldn’t place ask, with urgency, followed by quick footsteps. Up a staircase, maybe? So he was in a house. The door opened, and he grabbed the first thing he could to defend himself.

“Oh, come on, Steel, what are you going to do this time, dazzle me with a vaudeville number?” Alessandra Strong gestured at the umbrella Juno had grabbed from under the bed.

He looked at the umbrella. Okay, well, in his defense, anything could be a cudgel if you were determined enough. An umbrella wasn’t even the worst thing he’d ever had to use in a fight, so the derision seemed excessive. That said, he was pretty sure Alessandra wasn’t going to try anything, so he threw it unceremoniously behind him.

“Strong?” She was supposed to be with Mick, wasn’t he? So why was she here? Unless—“What happened?”

Alessandra frowned, and walked to where he lay on the ground. “To you or to Mick?” she asked, crouching down next to him while he tried to get himself into a sitting position. He mostly just hit himself with the metal thing on top of him, which wasn’t a great look when you’re asking a detective you’ve made out with if your friend is dead. “Mick’s fine, Steel. Nothing happened to him.” Alessandra took mercy on him and moved the light metal pole aside as she reached to inspect the
inside of his forearm. She made a little noise of frustration when she saw an empty needle mark. “You, less so.”

Juno relaxed and stopped trying to get up. That was one. “And-” What name was Nureyev using? Or, what name would Alessandra know him by? Any of them? “The… other one?” It was a bad improvisation, but with the way his head was pounding he was lucky he was making sentences.

Alessandra snorted while she searched the ground for something, then wrapped her hands around an IV bag. “The other one?” Yeah, he’s okay too. Going by Earl Fox, for future reference.”

“Fox, huh?,” Juno said to himself. Another beautiful thing that would draw blood if you didn’t know how to handle it. Fox, Rose, and Glass.

“Animal, vegetable, mineral,” Juno said out loud when he realized.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Juno said. “Just thought of something.”

Alessandra looked at him oddly, then held the bag she was holding to the light. “You’re pretty much done,” she decided aloud, and her eyes were cast down to the needle on the floor. She wrapped it up carefully and dropped it in a lidded wastebin that looked like it was dragged in from another room. Its matte surface didn’t fit the rest of the decor. Juno saw at least four more bags as it opened, and one of them--

“Is that blood?” he asked, in a voice he couldn’t quite modulate correctly.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said curtly.

“Is it mine?” he asked, then he did the math. It was difficult, given that he’d never bothered to know how long it took to complete a standard IV. Probably more than an hour, right?

A memory rose, one from decades ago that he tried to keep buried with the rest of them.

_How long does she have to stay here?_

It had been four and a half hours, right? Which meant he’d been here for a long time. Which meant Alessandra had been here for a long time. Which meant…

“Who’s with Mick?”

She sighed and sat in an armchair by the wall. There was a constellation of empty mugs by her elbow. She pressed the heel of her palm into her eyes, then straightened up.

“He’s fine. What’s the last thing you remember?”

Juno narrowed his eyes, suspicious. “Where’s Mick?”

She did a sharp inhale and looked towards the ceiling. “Steel. Do you remember anything from after you passed out in an alley?”

“I think I could draw a map of the inside of my eyelids from memory, if that’s what you mean,” Juno said. “Spent more quality time with them last night than I have in a while.” Alessandra buried her face in her hands again and didn’t even look at him.

“That was two days ago.” She looked out the window, where the sun was rising. “Or, three, now.”
He must have misheard. “What? No. That can’t--” He felt his hair. He was pretty greasy, actually, but he couldn’t really remember the last time he showered, so that didn’t prove anything.

“If the inside of your mouth tastes like something died in it, it’s because you’ve been throwing up more or less nonstop for the past three days.”

“Huh. I thought there was an aftertaste of something other than the usual broken dreams and lost opportunities.”

“You’ve made that joke twice already, Steel, and I don’t know how a joke that bad could become less funny over time, but boy do you manage it.”

Juno’s brow furrowed. He’d been saving that one for a while. And he never forgot his own quips. And, now that he was looking, he could see that Alessandra had been awake for a long time. She was a little askew, the kind of disheveled you get in the middle of a case that pulls you too deep. Skin under the eyes that tended towards purple, a general downward pull to the whole face, and a sag in her spine that was atypical to what he remembered of her. And the room seemed the same way, like people had been moving through it and shuffling everything around and rooting for things. And there had been all those IV bags in the trash.

The detective had a sense memory of when the eye stopped working, remembered a flash of Peter holding something up to his face, a pulse throbbing through his head. “That--thing, the thing that shut down my eye. Did it do something to my, my brain, my memory?” And he thought he heard some kind of yearning in his voice, and he hated himself for how weak he was, how he couldn’t stop himself from wanting so badly to forget it all and start from scratch.

“No, you just got… roofied isn’t the right word, but it’s also not the wrong one. Apparently your eye was set to take you out if it started malfunctioning? I don’t know, Rita knows better than I do.” Why was she bringing up Rita? “Your short-term memory’s going to be offline until it’s all out of your system. Which is normal, and temporary.” She said it like she was reading off a list, which did nothing to relax Juno. He didn’t have the time for this. His line of work did require a functioning brain, no matter what his louder critics might think.

While she was talking, Alessandra shoved a small light in front of his surviving eye and clicked it on, and Juno shrunk from the flash. She put a hand on his chin, holding his face in place. “Look up,” she said, and flashed the light in his eye a few times, looking closely. It was an entirely clinical motion, one that contrasted with the last time she’d been this close to him and staring at him so intently. “Hm. Better, I think.” She didn’t sound especially confident.

“Do you know what you’re doing?” Juno asked, and Alessandra let out a small laugh.

“Absolutely not,” she said. “So add that to the list of reasons you’re lucky you survived,” she said, and it seemed like that’s how she wanted to end it.

“Well, I have a splitting headache that would disagree with you, or it will if I remember this conversation in five minutes.” He would remember this, right?

“Yes,” she said shortly. “You are.” She let a long pause drag around her. “There are about a hundred things that happened that kept you from just plain dying, Steel. One of them was getting shot, which is so much less surprising when it’s you than it would be with anyone else.” Juno’s face must have been more of an open book than he wanted, because Alessandra addressed his confusion immediately. “One cure for too much poison in the blood just happens to be astounding blood loss. Though it isn’t exactly advised, in general it just makes another problem, but like I said. You got lucky.” She rubbed her eyes. “In your own way.”
“Yeah, well. I’ll keep that in mind next time I play the lottery. Useful to know that I’ll need a
physician on call.” He sat up carefully. No dots.

He’d lost three whole days. He should have been fixing this, somehow. Figuring out what
O’Flaherty’s game was, because it wasn’t one Juno was familiar with. And making sure that Mick
and Nureyev were…

Right.

“Strong. Where are they?”

She didn’t pretend not to know what he was talking about this time. “They’re here. So is Rita. This is
a safe location and we have no reason to think that your bug is operational right now. No one knows
we’re here, and it’s going to stay that way, and I am very tired, Juno, so please handle this like an
adult just once so I can sleep without you hurting yourself.”

“I can take care of myself,” Juno said with venom. She had no right.

“Can you?” Alessandra asked. “Because one time I left you alone for ten minutes, and you
immediately poisoned yourself, on purpose.”

“You think I wanted this?” Juno remembered Miasma’s face and the horror bubbling underneath it,
remembered splitting his head open over and over again, remembered how it all would have turned
out exactly the same if he had never been there except he’d have been up an eye and he’d never have
made Nureyev think there was anything worth keeping about him. Or maybe he’d just be dead and
they’d never have touched Peter Nureyev at all. Either way was a net gain. “If there were any other
options I would have taken them.”

Alessandra pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket and unfolded it. “Thrown it in an air vent.
Dropped it down the drain. Hidden it somewhere in the room. Opened a window and pretend you
threw it, but actually you slid it somewhere on your person. That one’s uncomfortable, but it usually
works,” she said as an aside. “Put it in your mouth and threaten to swallow it. Put it in your mouth
and pretend you already swallowed it. Feed it to some kind of vermin. Or, you know. Try to fight
your way out, like all the rest of us do when the other option is definitely getting poisoned.”

“You made a list?” That seemed… the word ‘petty’ came to mind.

“Last time it came up I said you should have crushed it, but you’d tried that, and then it became a
whole thing about how I can’t know what it was like, and,” she shrugged, “I had a lot of free time
and I needed something other than bad coffee and quasi-comatose company to keep me awake.”

“All right, point taken, you know what’s best and I’m an idiot. Glad we’re at an understanding.”
Juno looked away from her, tested his legs to see if they wanted to stand. They seemed okay.

“That’s not what I’m trying to say, Steel. We’re just--”

--worried. That’s what they always said.

Well, so was he.

He stood up before she could finish her thought. He only swayed for a second or two, which seemed
like progress. “There a bathroom here? I’m going to take a shower and see if I forgot--” don’t say
how not to drown, Juno, she’s already worried “--how it works.”

Alessandra looked nervous, torn between wanting to (he assumed) be asleep and not wanting Juno to
pass out in a bathtub. Which, he could have reassured her that those were some of the best showers he’d ever had, but he thought maybe it wasn’t the best time. “Are you sure you’ll be okay? You don’t look great.” It was half-hearted.

“What, do you want to watch or something?” he asked, and, as always, regretted it instantly.

“You know, if you asked me that three days ago I might have said yes,” she said, fake-wistfully. “If only I could go back to those days. Things were different then. I hadn’t experienced the magic of watching you throw up onto the floor and then yell at me about how I’m doing my job wrong six times in a row yet.”

Juno cringed. “Well, don’t say I didn’t try to warn you.” Not to say he didn’t deserve it, but tired Alessandra had a streak of meanness to her, didn’t she. Good to know. He wondered if he say something, like that regardless of what he’d said, she was honestly one of the better detectives he’d worked with. He decided against it before the thought even finished. Considering the types Juno ran around with, it was a meaningless statement. “Look, just… Go get some sleep, okay? I’ll be fine.”

He didn’t want to thank her, because then she would think she had done the Right Thing. And whatever that meant, she really, really hadn’t,

“Maybe I will,” she said, eyeing the drink in her mug with distaste. “First door on the left.”

Juno stepped out into the hallway and started making an escape plan. Too many people were putting themselves on the line for him. The least he could do was stop them.

Chapter End Notes

(edited 09/18/2017)
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

A blackout, a flashback, a series of events.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Peter Nureyev didn’t know many people on Mars. Those he did know could be separated into three groups: Marks, who he’d already drained for all he could get and left on good but oblivious terms; accomplices, who he’d lied to and burned and who tended to be out for his blood; and Juno Steel, who was initially both and later neither and now something that couldn’t even begin to be manipulated to meet simple categorizations, especially when there was so very much of him to categorize. So when he needed help in Hyperion City, and Juno Steel had removed himself from the pool of possible calls, there weren’t a lot of good options. But the worst option meant Juno Steel died in an alley, so the choice had actually made itself rather simple.

Rita had picked up before he had taken finished the call. “I was about to call, Mr. Steel, don’t get mad but I put an alert for your name on the police bulletin and the news and--”

“Rita, this is… a friend,” he said. She probably knew him as Rex Glass, but he never referenced an old alias when he was in a new one if he could help it. That was rule one. “I need you to make a call for me. For Juno.” And he tried to keep his voice from breaking, and he held Juno close and pressed down on the wound in his shoulder.

When a man with no name used her boss’s phone to ask Rita a favor just after her boss was listed as a criminal wanted for aiding and abetting across nearly all of Hyperion City’s confidential networks, it took some convincing. Contrary to popular belief, Rita did know she could be gullible at just the worst possible times, and Mr. Steel would be so angry with her if she fell for some kind of backhanded trick to kidnap him and put him in an underground government-run criminal death match-based campaign fundraiser (her current theory for what was happening to Mr. Steel, based on the information she found when she was off work or he wasn’t paying attention to what she was doing).

So she found his location based on the call, and checked for any nearby security footage. It took about fifteen seconds, and it would have taken less time if she hadn’t been masking the sound of her typing by letting her mouth say whatever words it wanted, she didn’t pay much attention to what. (It was a combination of a summation of the situation at hand combined with metaphors she lifted from a stream, none of which was especially coherent. Peter Nureyev attributed it to shock.)

She found images, and confirmed that Juno was not in good shape. And with faint disappointment she registered that the faceless man did have a face, and she instantly recognized him as that man from Dark Matters who Mr. Steel had tried very hard to arrest. And that didn’t necessarily mean he was worth trusting! Except, he also looked a lot like the person her boss left Hyperion City with last time his face was… symmetrically endowed, eye-wise. And Mr. Steel hadn’t told her that much about the whole situation. He didn’t seem to want to talk about it, based on the number of times she’d tried to ask and he’d told her he didn’t want to talk about it. So Rita had put on her World’s Greatest Detective hat and did some digging, because she was nothing if not tireless (and also the
world’s greatest detective, no offense meant to her boss but she was much pluckier and fast-talking).

She’d cobbled a story together from what she could find by listening to his messages over and over and using them to figure out where she could look next, and it was a pretty good story she made out of it, too. If she was any good at writing and it wasn’t a one of those illegal invasions of privacy her boss hated she probably would have tried to publish it, but as it was she mostly just thought deeply about it when Mr. Steel was being all stoic on one of his bad days. And he had a lot of bad days, so she’d fleshed out a whole lot of the details.

Anyway, the man who didn’t exist was a lot of things--former Dark Matters agent, technically wanted, probably dangerous--but he was, according to her lovingly crafted fiction, a friend of (and romantic lead for? She couldn’t decide) Mr. Steel, and that meant Rita could trust him when he said that Juno needed immediate medical help and a safe place to stay. So she made a call.

Sasha Wire had made Rita take her phone number when they first left the HCPD. She was worried about him back then. That hadn’t changed, except maybe to get worse. It made her feel a little better to know someone would let her know if something happened.

Mick had called her earlier that week. It didn’t sound good, and she would have taken off to check in, but since her promotion--well, she could take time off to help her friend, or she could stop large-scale criminals from killing innocent people on a whim.

And she would never tell anyone, but… sometimes it was hard. To see him.

She knew with certainty on seeing that Rita was finally calling her that Juno Steel was dead, felled by one of his idiotic acts of so-called martyrdom, or else well on his way to the grave, and she gathered all the ensuing emotions together and tucked them into a filing cabinet to be catalogued and processed later.

She answered the phone.

“Sasha Wire, Dark Matters.” She listened to the voice on the phone. “Rita, I need you to calm down.” A pause. The voice did not calm down, but it did get to the point. Sasha crossed the room and sat at her computer. “Okay. Give me one minute.” The voice continued, but Sasha wasn’t listening. Four people, somewhere near or in Hyperion City, totally off the grid. Ideally someplace that wasn’t used often so no one would notice it for a little while. She scanned the screen single-mindedly until she found something suitable.

She pressed a few buttons. “Rita, I’m going to send you a file. Don’t do anything illegal with it,” she said, meaning Cover your tracks so I don’t have to explain this to anyone and resign in disgrace. Usually the people who resigned in disgrace showed up dead later, but Sasha wasn’t among them yet, and changing that status didn’t fit with the rest of her five-year plan.

“Let me know if there’s anything else I can do. And… thanks, for looking out. Tell me if anything happens, okay?” Her index finger traced a circle on the wall. “Thanks.”

She hung up, pensive.

“You okay?” a sleepy voice asked from her bedroom, and the woman she brought home earlier that night stumbled into the room.

“I’m fine. Just had to do something for work. You should go back to bed,” she said.

“You should too,” the woman said, and Sasha’s heart did the most irrational backflip it ever had in her life, especially considering the circumstances. She filed that away with everything else. She had a
job to do.

“Maybe later,” Sasha said, and she typed a quick message on her comm.

Mick Mercury didn’t notice that Sasha was trying to contact him, because he was asleep until Alessandra Strong shook him awake. “We have to go, Mick,” she said, and Mick didn’t really respond. She’d been popping up at his place at odd hours for a while, to the point that she felt more like a roommate than a detective trying to keep a political organization from framing him for a crime, so he didn’t take her trying to wake him up seriously until she said, “Mick, it’s Juno, we have to go now,” and then he was up and stumbling, half-asleep, to Alessandra’s car.


“Juno got shot,” she said, and her voice was even, and Mick started panicking, because he knew things like this happened to Juno all the time—they didn’t call him ‘One-Ball Steel’ for nothing—but no one had ever called him about it before. Until now, he’d thought that he would have liked to know when Juno got into trouble. But he would only be in the way, wouldn’t he?

“This isn’t the way to the hospital,” Mick asked after a minute of everything being silent except the sounds that came with driving.

“We’re not going to the hospital,” Alessandra said shortly.

Mick let the appropriate fifteen seconds pass before he asked another question. Being friends with Juno taught him that.

“Al, what’s going on?”

Her hands clenched the steering so hard they were drained of color. “We’re getting him and taking him somewhere safe and hoping he doesn’t die on the way there, and that’s step one,” she said. “We’ll deal with the next steps as they come.”

“Okay,” Mick said. He didn’t know what else there was to say.

He waited a little longer.

“Is this because, you know--”

“It’s not because of you and you know that.”

“Yeah. I do,” he said. “But it just feels like what he would ask.”

“Yeah, well, he has better virtues for you to mimic,” she said.

“Yeah,” Mick said. And then they were quiet until they found him.

Alessandra jumped out of the car. “Get the door,” she said to the man holding Juno. They were both covered in blood.

From a second’s look at the man cradling Juno Steel in his arms in an abandoned alley she knew exactly why Juno Steel hadn’t been able to start anything with her. He was crying, but she didn’t think he knew that. She fell into a crouch next to him, and put her arms under Juno’s body. “Get in the backseat.”

“Yes. Right,” he said. And she lifted a limp, motionless Juno Steel up for the second time in her life, and he went into the car and left the door open, and she handed Juno back to him. He looked bad.
She’d seen worse, but… Not much worse.

The man had one hand holding onto Juno’s wound, and the other was stroking his hair and sometimes checking his pulse, and he was leaning over him, unable to tear his eyes away.

She didn’t want to look away either. People had died when she wasn’t paying attention before. It messed you up, after that. But she had a job to do.

“Mick, directions,” she commanded. “Rita sent me a map. Walk me through.” She knew the way, but he would do better if he had a task to accomplish.

“Um, yeah, okay,” he said. “You’re, uh, you know how to get to the highway?” And Mick reached back to grab one of Juno’s hands. It was too cold, and that was terrifying, but he kept a hold on it anyway. Juno wasn’t big on platonic affection, or romantic affection, or just regular affection, but Mick needed to know he was there.

“Yeah, I do,” she said. “Keep an eye on the map,” and she put all her focus on the road.

“What’s the plan here, exactly?” asked the man in the backseat, and Alessandra was surprised at how even his voice was when he spoke.

“We’re meeting--you know Rita?”

For a second he paused, like he wasn’t sure how to answer. “In a matter of speaking.”

One of those, then. Well, straight answers could come later. “Okay. We’re meeting Rita at a safe location. She’s in the process of trying to find or bribe someone with medical training, last I checked--actually, Mick, check if she’s sent any updates.”

Mick fumbled with her comm one-handed for a second. “Same passcode?”

“Yeah,” she said.

He slid his finger across the screen, refreshed it a couple of times. “Nothing new.”

“Okay, that’s fine, we’re not even there yet, it’s fine,” she said, a little to her passengers but mostly to herself. “So that means right now the plan is: we go somewhere safe, and we get Juno help, and that’s step one, and we’ll plan step two when we get to it,” she said, and took a sharp and probably illegal turn between two cars that would have made all their stomachs turn if they weren’t already flipping endlessly with the effort of not stating the obvious.

“That’s not good enough,” the man in the backseat said softly.

Mick was clenching his free hand so hard his knuckles were going white. Alessandra’s teeth were set in line. “I know it’s not,” she said. “But it’s this or we all just sit there and watch him while he’s--”

She closed her mouth the second she realized what he was saying. Mick was looking at her, face paling. “Look, it’s not good, but it’s the best option we have, so we just have to do it.”

The passengers spent the rest of the ride in relative silence, too afraid that one of them would let the word dying touch the detective lying in the backseat to say a single unnecessary word.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Mick does some painting. Juno heads out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Downstairs, Mick Mercury was painting Peter Nureyev’s nails, and both of them listened intently while Rita went on about some stream she watched that was, apparently, just like whatever they had been talking about before and it was such so romantic and sad because you see, it was about these pirates who did something swashbuckling and dramatic and wrapped up in 90 minutes, probably.

This was a fever dream. Juno was absolutely sure of it. The combination of his work life, his childhood, and Peter Nureyev was unholy and terrifying. He looked around to see what lovingly, realistically rendered criminal or monster from the back of his memory was going to try to kill him awake this time.

There was nothing he could see creeping around in any corners. He sort of wished there was. He knew how to deal with the unconflicted aspects of his subconscious trying to bubble up; it was called ‘repression’, and it wildly popular among most circles of traumatized detectives. Whatever this was? Not so much.

Juno just couldn’t understand how it had happened. Sure, Nureyev was charming, and magnetic, and witty, and attractive, and interesting, and he smelled intoxicating all the time, (focus, Steel), but Rita and Mick weren’t just going to blindly trust a beautiful stranger just because he said a few pretty phrases and dropped a couple of charming compliments.

Actually, no, scratch that. Juno should have expected this.

“Wow. Good color for wasting time when someone wants you dead. Looks great.” It really was a nice color. A purple that was nearly gray, or maybe a gray that was nearly purple. Either way, like most things, it was a good look on him. He wondered if Mick chose it. He didn’t think he’d seen Nureyev with painted nails before, but it was a habit Mick fell back on when he got nervous. When they were in school you could measure Mick’s parents’ arguments by how many different colors he had in a week.

He looked at Rita’s nails. Powder blue. Not what Juno would have guessed, but it worked surprisingly well. Then he looked at their faces.

The whole table was staring at him, and Juno was struck again by the unspeakable weirdness of it all, and wanted it to end as soon as possible.

”Boss,” Rita said, and she and Mick both got up at the same time, and Mick said, “J,” and got up and wrapped his arms around Juno in a vice that made it hard to move, and Rita was already off on a streak of words--“Mr. Steel I was so worried about you but Mr. Fox and Ms. Strong told me I had to sedate you just a little bit without asking and everyone got so upset about it but I was talking to Frannie about it and Frannie thinks it should have been fine and she’s a
registered nurse, you know, or well she used to be a registered nurse before she went off-grid, and she doesn’t think I did anything wrong but no one listened to me, Mr. Steel, and I tried to tell them but they just were not having it! And I wasn’t going to try to fight them, and everyone said it was better if I waited down here and then they finally let me back upstairs but then you got upset again and--”

Juno tuned out.

Once, when he much younger, Juno had seen a rabbit get its arm stuck in a valve. He had every intention of coming over and helping, but by the time Juno got there the thing was so on edge that it was just mindlessly, violently snapping at him every time he got close. All he could do was check in every once in a while, and toss some food in its direction when he thought of it.

Eventually he came down and there was a disembodied arm hanging off the wall. It had been gnawed off by rabbit teeth.

“Mick, let go of me,” Juno said, wishing he was just a little bit more flexible.

Mick’s arms were tight around his chest, and Juno’s voice was muffled in his shirt, and he couldn’t see his face, but the clues suggested that Mick was crying. This whole scene felt like watching every facet of his life trying to crash together, dulling each other’s edges without quite lying flush with one another, changing their shape so much that they couldn’t fit in the places he used to keep them. He wondered what Nureyev was thinking, watching this, and then decided it was better not to wonder.

“I thought you were going to die,” Mick said to Juno, and that was when Juno really needed to get out, because Mick Mercury never thought Juno Steel was going to die.

“I still might if you don’t stop trying to suffocate me.” In his professional capacity as a detective, and also some other capacities, Juno had plenty of practice enunciating through a mouthful of fabric, so he was pretty sure the message got across, and sure enough, Mick let go, with a quick “Sorry” that reminded Juno that, right, he was a terrible person who didn’t deserve to have Mick around, and Mick might realize that at any time.

Juno wanted to say something that would fix it, but instead he gestured at Mick’s eyes, still tearing up, and said, “Loser,” just like he and Sasha had for years, every time Mick got emotional and they didn’t know what to do about it.

Mick laughed, like he always did. “Jerk,” he said, giving Juno a light shove on his uninjured shoulder, and Juno laughed too, a small, huffing thing, and they both paused, because usually Sasha was there, and they’d find an excuse to sarcastically call her Genius, and the ritual would be complete. But she wasn’t there, and that was probably for the best.

Juno looked away and ruffled a towel over his head. His hair had left a damp spot on Mick’s shirt. Running the fabric against his head gave him the excuse to grab a second where he didn’t have to look at anyone.

When he opened his eyes Nureyev was watching him again, or, a better word would be surveying him, in a way that remind Juno how feeling things felt. And Rita was still talking, and now that his arm was free again she was clinging to it while she spoke (why did his arm hurt so much? It felt like a giant bruise from forearm to elbow), and Mick looked raw, and Juno didn’t want to look at anyone’s face so he looked at their hands.

“You’re not done,” he said, noting a couple of Nureyev’s fingers that didn’t have their second coats on yet.
“Right, sorry, I got a little distracted,” he said,

“Perfectly understandable,” Nureyev said. “Take all the time you need.”

“Sure, and then when you’re done we can all braid Rita’s hair,” he said, and walked into the hallway to the right of the table they were all standing at. It was not a hallway; it was just a very small kitchen. About the size of the one at his place if it were cleaner and had more floor space. Good to know. He walked to the back and started checking the cabinets to see what unhealthy habits he could get into until everyone else fell asleep. Seemed like the strongest drink was coffee, which was good enough for the short term.

“Boss, I know you’re trying to be mean, but I would love that.” Juno’s hands spread out, turning palm-up in a plea to the universe to please explain to them how this whole entire situation was happening right now in his life. He walked over to a coffee machine in the corner, dragging Rita with him because she just wasn’t letting go.

“Rita.” Juno said, pouring lukewarm coffee into a mug he found… somewhere, he wasn’t really sure. “I’m not going to spend my time braiding my secretary’s hair while you’re,” gesturing to the table, where Mick was hovering over Nureyev and Nureyev was finishing up his nails on his own, “in hiding from an unhinged politician. You know we all have work to do now, right?”

“Rita, dear, don’t listen to him, you’re next in line,” Nureyev said blithely, focusing on the task at hand, and Rita squealed and relinquished his arm back to him, and Juno thought his brain was short-circuiting. ‘Dear?’ How long had they all been talking? What were they even talking about? Had they been talking about him? And he hadn’t even said anything to Juno yet, so why was he acting so damn familiar? Didn’t he know that he was supposed to hate Juno Steel more than anything now?

How could he be acting like this was so normal, when everyone else was treating him like he had just pulled himself out of a coffin? Not like he wanted anyone to be treating him like that, but it was weird that he wasn’t, right?

Maybe it had all been in his head. That at least would make it all make sense, because it fit with Juno’s guiding principles for why things went wrong for him: He was an idiot, he was losing it, and he was selfish and self-involved and allowing himself to give in to anything good was just a slippery slope to giving in to everything else, too.

“Okay, well! I’m glad you’re all having a good time,” Juno said, too loud. “I’m going to go try to do my damn job, don’t let me bother you.” He took a gulp of frankly disgusting coffee and went to find somewhere to think.

Then he thought someone else said something to him, was explaining something? He couldn’t remember after that. It was darker now. He knew he had just walked into the room he was in, but he wasn’t sure what room it was, or where he’d come from, or why.

He’d had blackouts before, but usually he was somewhere familiar. He knew all of Hyperion City backwards and forwards, but throw him into one unfamiliar house and he became entirely useless.

Juno stumbled through the dark, trying to figure out what was happening to him. His leg hit something tall and wobbly and it knocked something over.

A light snapped on. It was one of those weird folding tables; a glass was on the floor next to it, spilling water everywhere. He looked to the light.

Peter Nureyev was sitting in an unnaturally good calf stretch, soles of his feet touching each other
and knees bent outward, on a chair where he could have been sitting like a normal person. He made it look comfortable, and in fact it seemed like he had fallen asleep in that pose, with his eyes caught between consciousness and alertness. Mick was in a deep sleep on the couch against the wall adjacent to Nureyev’s chair, which meant it must be very late by now. Juno could feel a deep, comprehending stare on him as if it had its own weight.

He froze under Nureyev’s gaze. He didn’t even know where he was yet. He couldn’t do this right now.

“I’m not going to stop you.” Nureyev didn’t break the silence so much as he set it down lightly on the ground and put a single, radiating pinpoint crack in it, and Juno realized he was wearing all of his clothes, including his coat, and that his pockets were filled with his comm (probably deactivated), his wallet (same), and a notebook and pen. He traveled light.

And there was a door ahead of him, one with two analog locks and two digital locks, that had to lead to somewhere outside.

He was trying to leave, he realized.

He stared at Nureyev. He stared at the door. “Then don’t,” he said. One last look at him, and then he took the determined parting steps to the door, and grabbed the handle, and then he froze. He should have just left then, and he would have, except--

He laughed and leaned against his door, forearm between his forehead and the cold door. The pressure and the way it hurt his sore arm and the way it stretched his shoulder wound and made him draw breath was oddly reassuring. After years and years of having this one thing he always did right, he’d finally found a way to mess leaving up, too. “I don’t remember where I was going,” Juno admitted, soft. He thought maybe no one could hear his voice when it was that low, because the silence was hanging in the air again, undisturbed.

“And don’t.” And it was quiet enough that maybe it was just an echo.

He barked out a quiet, hopeless laugh, buried his face in his hands, and slid to the ground, back against the door. He had a headache, the kind that made him wish he could crack open his own skull instead of having to wait for a criminal with nothing to lose to do it for him, and he wallowed in it.

He should have been alone right now. He could have been, if it wasn’t for--

Juno heard the lightest movements imaginable as Nureyev untangled himself from his chair. “Juno?” he asked, softly, and Juno knew he was walking over here, and Juno could have said I didn’t want to do this to you again, or, If anyone gets hurt because of me I won’t be able to live with it, or even, You make it so damn difficult not to feel anything, which surfaced at the back of Juno’s mind every time he saw him, but now Nureyev was crouching down next to him and could reach out and touch him any second and that couldn’t happen, not now, so instead he pulled his face back out of his hands in one fluid motion and looked at Peter Nureyev in the eyes and wanted so, so badly to give in again, even though he needed and deserved for Peter Nureyev to absolutely hate him, and what Juno Steel said was, “What did you do to me?” and Nureyev drew back like he’d been bitten by a wild animal he’d had every reason to believe docile.

“Juno,” then Nureyev apparently thought better of it, “detective.” Juno could feel Nureyev drawing back into himself. Which, that was good, that was the best thing Juno could have done for him except for leaving again, and if it made him feel like he was something terrible and monstrous, well, sometimes that was what doing the right thing felt like. Like cracking your ribs open and tearing your own heart open. That’s what being a good person felt like for people like him. He was sure of it.
“I… thought that I understood the situation at hand. I clearly didn’t. I chose to act quickly, and I should not have done that without discussing the process and possible consequences with you first.” The loudest thing in Nureyev’s words was their intentionality, each chosen carefully as he spoke. It was a tone designed for distance.

“Yeah? Remind me of that in a few hours.” Another crack, another tear. Eventually Nureyev would run out of patience or Juno would run out of functioning ventricles and then this could finally end the way it was supposed to.

Nureyev leaned in again, his whole face intense. “This is temporary. It is a side effect of being heavily sedated and nearly comatose. You just need time to heal.”

“Oh, so it just couldn’t be a side effect of having my brain zapped by… whatever you did?”

Nureyev looked concerned again. But cautious, too. “I used a modified multiple frequency emitter to overload all of your eye’s online functions, which, according to your esteemed secretary, was approximately all of them. This caused them all to shut down; said eye had a failsafe in place in case of tampering, which I had not considered; you passed out in an alley, and you know the rest of it by now. But Juno,” he amended again, “detective, I need to know what the last thing you remember is.”

Juno shifted. Trying to remember made his headache come back. And he didn’t want Nureyev to worry about him again. “It’s fine. I’m fine. I just forgot where I was going, okay?”

Nureyev studied him. “You should get some rest,” he said. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“I’m fine,” Juno said again, because he couldn’t think of anything else. And he started to get up.

“Wait,” Nureyev said, and Juno’s heart sped up while he continued. “If you decide you need to leave, I won’t stop you. But,” and he paused to swallow, and in that moment Juno stood and walked away, robotic, because he couldn’t do this he couldn’t do this he couldn’t do this, not here, not now, not with Mick Mercury asleep on the couch and no definite escape in sight, and he walked to the first door he could and stepped inside, hoping it wasn’t--

“That’s a closet,” Nureyev said, when Juno stepped back out of the closet.

“I knew that,” Juno lied. And then he fled, again, through another door, which finally led somewhere half-familiar.

Chapter End Notes

maybe............ the real villain............. is me

edited 9/19/2017
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

A letter read, an answer un-found.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hi, Mr. Steel!

If you’re reading this, it’s too late.

Juno looked up from the crumpled paper. “What is this?” he asked Alessandra Strong, who had been sitting at the table he had found the envelope on. It had been labeled BOSS, and the O was typed out as a heart shape, so he knew it was Rita’s work.

“Just keep reading,” she said without looking up from the tablet she kept all of her case files in.

Juno kept reading.

Just kidding!!

“Do I have to?” Juno asked.

“Just skip to the end part, the first half is very,” she paused, fishing for the right word. “It’s very Rita,” she decided tenuously.

He read it anyway.

But if you’re reading this, you are experiencing ~short-term memory loss~, and isn’t that exciting? It’s just like Echoes of the Coast, which is this great film about a woman who falls out of a spaceship and

On second thought, he decided to skip it. He scanned down.

so I thought I’d end with a few of your ~frequently asked questions~! Here they are! Well, not here, but after this part!! Enjoy!!!

XxX,

Rita

He looked back up. “Where did she print this out from?”

“Just read it,” Alessandra said, leaving most of her attention on whatever she was doing.

He sat down.

Most of the questions were things he knew the answers to, and some of them were things he knew but didn’t understand the answers to, and he was pretty sure others were there just to make fun of him. There was some good information (how did we get clothes and food? was infuriating but
illuminating; he had some thank you cards to write later, and by thank you cards he meant debts, and by write he meant repay; and *how did I even get here?* was equally so; actually, the whole thing was infuriating, and he just read the highlights.

-When did everyone become friends?

When you were alone in the basement, probably. Which you would know, if you ever left the basement and came and joined the fun times!

“Is she enjoying this?”

“That’s the next question, and the answer is yes with reservations.”

It was the next question, so he skipped it.

-When is Mick AND/OR Ms. Strong AND/OR Rita AND/OR Mr. Fox getting out of here while they still can?

They’re not! You’re stuck with us whether you like it or not, Mr. Steel. Mick is sticking around because he wants to be alive and not dead, Ms. Strong is here because she also wants Mick to be alive and not dead, I’m here because you can’t spell ‘party’ without ‘Rita’, --they were both written down right there, how did she get that wrong?-- and honestly I have no idea why Mr. Fox is here but he’s a very good listener and he’s great at braiding hair so I think he’s a real asset!

-I’m leaving.

*Not a question! Also, a bad idea!!*

Juno skipped the rest of that one.

-What are the ~House Rules~ for the Rita and Company Crime-Solving House of Friendship?

So glad you asked!

He skipped that one too, because it didn’t sound like something he would ask, and he refused to be condescended to.

-Have I even made any progress on this case?

*Your erstwhile secretary, Rita, is currently creating a series of transcripts of everything you say while you’re doing your monologues in the basement. Which means she’s been spending hours at a time. With her boss. Listening to him talk to himself. In a terrible basement. When she could be getting her hair braided while she hacks into Hyperion City’s security networks. If I weren’t such a dedicated employee you would be fresh out of luck, Mr, Steel.*

-Wow! That Rita gal sure sounds like a great secretary, going above and beyond like that! Give her a raise!

Aww, boss, what a nice thing to say!!!! Still not a question though!!! As the Chief Financial Officer I couldn’t accept such a generous gesture!! But I wouldn’t say no to a party in my honor when all this is over!! wink ;)

Juno made a mental note to bring Rita a gift card or something if they all made it out of this alive. He probably wouldn’t do it, but at least he thought about it.

There was one last question written in ink at the very bottom of the page, and the writing was sharp
and consistent and beautiful, even if it seemed to say different things depending on how he looked at it. He puzzled over it for a second, stubbornly willing it into legibility. It said only,

*Shouldn’t you be off exploring the stars somewhere?*

*Shouldn’t you?*

Juno crumpled up the paper between his hands and crushed it against the table, and walked away without a word.

“Cool, good morning to you too,” Alessandra said to his retreating back. “Let me know if you find a good lead or something.”

That envelope was more or less the bane of his existence, because every time he read it he would realize an hour later that the missive inside had already been creased and crumpled to the point of changing the texture of the paper itself when he opened it. He wondered, constantly, how many more gaps in his memory he didn’t even know were there.

He just had to figure out how to make sure they were all safe. Then he could be alone in his apartment and do whatever the hell he wanted (namely, hating himself in privacy and drinking until he couldn’t even do that anymore, or drinking in public and letting someone pick him up. He didn’t particularly want sex with strangers but he didn’t not-want sex with strangers either; it mostly something to do until the next morning. And it was a way that he didn’t have to actually be alone but he could feel just as alone as he deserved).

Until then, he had to make himself scarce enough that no one realized exactly how much of him was made wrong. He knew they would figure it out eventually, but he wanted a little bit longer.

“J? You there?” Mick asked, and Juno looked up.

He had been taking notes, he could see that. He was in the middle of writing something write now, and he looked down at what he had been doing. The notes were entirely unreadable now. But he’d thought of something, he could tell. “Dammit.” He had made those diagrams, circled those names, written those cryptic one-word explanations himself. The room was covered in papers, some written on and some not, and he couldn’t tell what a single one meant anymore. It was like if he reached out far enough, he could brush the meaning of what he had been trying to get at… but it was off swimming in the depths somewhere now, it was lost. “What do you want, Mick?” He snapped.

Juno’s unwarranted frustration slid right off of him, which was how it was supposed to be with the two of them. “Al wanted me to check if you had any ideas to throw at her. And maybe you should eat some lunch or something? Or, breakfast. Or some kind of combination of breakfast and lunch...” Mick trailed off, his face drifting into that look he had when he was about to invent something that already existed.

Juno took the opportunity to check his surroundings. He was downstairs again, and every surface was covered in files or scrap paper or one of Rita’s selectively inscrutable drawings, or, in an unusually clean corner, an entirely untouched digital tablet. That all made sense. And it must have been around noon, so, five hours? Six? He’d woken up around three and gone downstairs a couple of hours later, so it must have been six. Rita wasn’t here. Was she asleep? Had he made her leave? Or--no. Alessandra had tried to work with him for a while, hadn’t she? He distinctly remembered her throwing up her arms and saying “I can’t work like this,” and he remembered jumping when she slammed the door behind her. So that was probably ten or fifteen minutes that he could half-remember out of a window that lasted about a quarter of a day. Not great. He could have done a lot of damage in six hours.
“No, Mick, I don’t want ‘some lunch’--”

“No lunch,” Mick said, an idea brewing in him. “Lunchfast,” and he straightened up, ready to enter Pitch Mode.

“Brunch,” Juno said before Mick could continue.

“You didn’t let me finish,” he said. “It’s different from brunch… because it’s just breakfast food,” and Mick posed with his hands outstretched like he was presenting a physical manifestation of the concept.

“… No, Mick,” Juno said, after considering the long list of counterpoints and throwing them all away. “I’m kind of busy down here, so if you could just,” and he pointedly looked at the stairs up to the door.

Mick didn’t leave. “What are you doing? Can I help?”

“Yeah, go get me a new eye and a new brain to attach to it, thanks,” Juno said, mostly ignoring him and trying to figure out what he meant when he had ripped out an entire what-looked-like three pages of notes and wrote $NOT^\wedge$, $WHY$ across the top of the new page.

Mick stepped around him and looked over his shoulder. “It’s kinda nice how you still write the same way,” he said.

“Don’t look over my shoulder while I’m working.” Juno pulled his notes into his chest.

“Oh, yeah, sure,” he said, and plopped down on the ground next to him and looked at the notes scattered on the ground around Juno.

“That’s not what I meant,” Juno said, and at the same time Mick said, “Why are all your notes about you?” and Juno said “What?”

“Well, I thought you were investigating… the mayor guy,” he explained.

“Mick, how do you not remember his name? You live here. And he’s actively trying to kill you.”

“I’m not good at following politics! And it’s not even about me,” Mick started, and Juno interrupted.

“Right, you shouldn’t even be part of this, it’s about me, I know,—”

“Oh, was it about you?” Mick asked. “Because it looks like it’s just about the Polaris guy,” and he pointed at a page of Juno’s notes that were on the ground.

“What?” Juno said, and picked up the page in question. It was a huge, sprawling diagram, with a big circle in the middle, orbited by some squares and circles and Xs and combinations thereof, every piece linked by arrows pointing in various directions and wild cross-outs. It didn’t say a single word on it, except $unconnected$ near the bottom. It was not a helpful paper. But suddenly the web he had made zoomed out in his head, and he saw what he had gotten stuck on. Northstar Entertainment, the HCPD, Peter Nureyev… the things that made him think he was part of this were all things he didn’t have anymore. Or maybe he had never really had them in the first place. But he was still connected to them, wasn’t he? The squirming thing wrapped up in the middle of this web was Juno Steel.

Unless it wasn’t, unless he was caught in the outskirts of the web incidentally and he really was just the only detective around willing enough and desperate enough to take an open-ended deal with an unknown quantity. Unless all of this really was another way he got involved with something he
shouldn’t have, another case of Juno Steel and the Far-Reaching Consequences of a Single Second of Self-Indulgence. If he hadn’t lost his eye, if he were a good enough detective not to need a new one… If he had just left, after that case with the Kanagawas. If he had just gone then, before everything got so messy, before it was something he didn’t deserve.

*he couldn’t have, he wouldn’t have*

It all would have been different. Hyperion City would have been safer without him in it at all. No one would have even gotten hurt. And he maybe could have been--

*focus, steel, you know what is and isn’t yours,*

and Juno slid that path shut before anything else could travel it.

“How can you even read these,” Juno grumbled, trying to hide the implication that he couldn’t read them himself.

“Like I said, you’ve been writing notes the same way forever,” Mick said.

Juno put his hand on the back of his neck. “Yeah. Guess so,” he said. Another way he hadn’t changed, couldn’t change. He cast his eyes aside, trying to avoid Mick’s easy company. And he caught something in his periphery as his gaze brushed past it.

Juno turned to investigate more closely, trying to find the relevant note, scanning the pages around him. It made him half-miss everything his old--new?--eye could do. But he could do this all by hand. He’d never been all that good with the thing anyway.

“I can’t believe you still use paper, I hate how it,” Mick picked up a paper and shook it, “goes all floppy,” and Juno’s concentration fractured.

“I know how to do my job, Mick, so can you maybe take your advice and--” He saw it again on the back of the paper Mick was waving. Juno grabbed it out of his hand.

There was another diagram, and written over one of the arrows was *calv.in.*???

He had no idea what that meant. But it felt important. More than that, it felt familiar. Mick started to say something, and Juno ignored him. He remembered the feeling of writing this. He was sitting leaning against a wall, his heel digging into an uneven spot in the concrete that he had started to trip into while he was pacing around earlier… there, over in the back corner.

He went to the corner.

There was a haphazard pile of files there, on everyone he had been flagged to follow (with one obvious exception, whose current identity was seemingly nonexistent and whose other identities Juno preferred to avoid thinking about whenever possible). They were all open and marked, and Juno understood what his progress had been. “This is… something,” he said to himself appraisingly, and then he picked up all the files and started towards the stairs, ignoring Mick’s questioning voice. He might have even walked up there, gotten Rita himself, if he hadn’t caught a familiar scent and heard a dry laugh drafting downwards and remembered why he was sequestering himself in here, and he turned it into pacing as casually as he could.

“Send Rita down here next time you see her,” Juno said to Mick, and buried himself back in the files he was holding while he tracked over the hard, grainy concrete beneath his feet, and he was so in his own head that he could almost pretend he didn’t notice when Mick gave up trying to convince him to go eat something or talk to someone or leave the room and finally left.
Chapter End Notes

edited 9/19/2017
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Rita does a good job. Juno gets called out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Read it back, Rita,” Juno said, when he realized that the scribblings he was making on the wall and the objects he’d rearranged on the floor had absolutely no meaning to them that he could understand. He was sure he’d been onto something; he could feel the rush of it starting to pull something together in his scalp and his fingertips.

“Four of the people you saw get taken out worked for calvIN Research & Technology, the company that makes all those little robot waiters at those tech cafes, which, by the way, are going to be available for private purchase next month, Boss, just in case you were interested--” Rita half-sung the last part, though without her usual punch.

“We’re not getting a robot, Rita.”

“But they’re so cute, Mr. Steel, I love their weird little clampy hands and their big eyes and--”

"Rita,” Juno said, too tired for this.

“Okay, we’ll talk about it later. But if you’re thinking about a nice surprise for Secretary’s Day...” Juno shook his head, and Rita sighed through her nose. “Fine.” She listlessly spun in the desk chair she brought down from upstairs as she interpreted her notes. “calvIN was known as Calvera Innovations until thirty-five years ago when it underwent a major rebrand after splitting with former owner Northstar Entertainment following a fire in the main facility, Northstar accepted responsibility, all the boring corporate stuff is in that pile over there.” She pointed to a scattering of printouts to the right of Juno, and Juno picked a few up and scanned them. Northstar settled that suit quick. The employees and their surviving family didn’t get a lot, considering--around 20k per litigant--but the Northstar Juno knew would rather dispatch every lawyer on the planet than back down from a lawsuit. Maybe they were a different company back then.

Except thirty-five years ago was a year before Sarah Steel got fired and... got worse. And every one of them knew, and not a single one of them cared. So no, they weren’t, as far as Juno was concerned.

So why would they take responsibility for this? The fear of bad publicity? Or was it that Sarah Steel had managed to keep it together for exactly one year too long, and if she had just broken down earlier everything else would have been different?

“Anyway, the people you saw who had worked for calvIN--”

“Were fired for selling company secrets,” Juno finished. He remembered that much. “Everybody in this damn city thinks you can waltz into a classified job with a fake identity, hoard every piece of information the owners are dumb enough to write down, and sell it for a tidy profit. And half of them
“I tried that once.” He turned to look at her, surprised. Rita had her flaws, but she’d never seemed the type to desert. He’d been trying to get her to do it for years. “Turned out nobody wanted to know what kind of cats the pet store would have next,” she clarified. “I was as shocked as you are.”

Juno almost smiled.

“So of the eleven people we have information on, four of them worked for calvIN, leaving… seeeee…. v…” Rita paused, staring into space.

“Seven,” Juno said.

“No, Mr. Steel, this is something I have to do myself,” Rita said, counting the bees she had drawn on her notepad.

“It’s seven,” Juno repeated. “There are seven left.” She was overthinking it again. Juno wondered if he put too much pressure on her with this kind of thing. He usually knew what she meant when she got her letters and numbers flipped around.

On the other hand, he had almost been cut in half, incinerated, eaten alive by dogs, and otherwise maimed in nearly every sense imaginable because of Rita’s misspoken directions. He very much could have died a gruesome death several times over because of mistaken lefts and rights. So all in all, it was probably for the best that she was trying so hard to catch herself. There was no other way. And anyway, it kept him on his toes, or something, maybe.

“Seven,” Rita concluded, and yawned.

“Right,” Juno said, and he felt his brain working again. “And those seven were all, at one point or another, thieves and smugglers, with a mob type or two thrown in just for fun. So there are two possibilities here. Either the main point of making me into some kind of walking security camera was to collect incidental data on passers-by and tail any petty criminals until they can be apprehended, and also to appease his campaign interests by directly removing former threats to their business,” Hearing his own thoughts read back to him lit a pathway in his brain, and he didn’t care whether he’d already walked down it or not. He stood up and started pacing around the room. “Or this is specifically about whatever it was that happened at Calvera, because if I know anything about this city or how Northstar is run, that wasn’t just another factory fire.”

Juno grabbed a pen and started writing directly on the wall again. It wasn’t his house, so he didn’t really care whether it looked like it was the cave of a full-blown conspiracy theorist or not. “So O’Flaherty is either the world’s only honest politician and he’s just an anti-crime fanatic with a screw or two loose, or he’s trying to clean up after himself before the big election. Either way, probably not going to hurt his political prospects in a place like this. Unless he’s gunning for the criminal vote, in which case, good luck to him. But he’s definitely got something to hide, since he… didn’t exist… thirty years ago…”

Juno froze, and then began pointing at nothing while he walked. “Whatever happened at Calvera thirty-five years back--what if it was something big enough for a guy to burn his whole identity and start over? But then why would he stick around? Who would change their identity and then run for mayor?”

“Yeah, sounds good,” Rita said blearily, and flipped to a new page in her notebook.

Juno was past the point of listening. The best part of this system was that he didn’t really have to
change anything about how he worked through cases. Rita was just there for notes, and sometimes it was helpful to talk to someone who talked back, but all he really had to do was think out loud like always. He had to do it a little louder, and sometimes ask for it to be read back to him, and make fewer references to his healthy sense of self-loathing and to the crumpled-up pile of feelings he was trying to shove into the most forgotten corner of his mind, and not let his thoughts drift towards the thief upstairs who he did not need to be thinking about right now, he had a case to work on, he had to stay on task and not think about his lips and his teeth and--

get it together, steel, you human disaster waiting to happen

But as long as he didn’t find any reason he needed to talk to Nureyev, he could… he could…

His eyes drifted to the list of names unaccounted for.

Oh.

No.

Juno had to talk to Nureyev. Because if this wasn’t about punishing thieves at random, he needed to know why he would be sent to help catch this thief specifically, and the easiest way to find out whether a thief had a connection to the possible conspiracy being unearthed is to ask them.

Damn.

Damn, damn, damn.

This was bad. Because he couldn’t let Alessandra and Mick know that Nureyev wasn’t a regular person named Earl Fox, noted non-criminal and gold-star citizen. Feasibly he could let Rita sit in, but… no. The only thing he wanted to do less than talk to Peter Nureyev alone was to talk to Peter Nureyev with Rita watching and analyzing the scene moment-by-moment.

Well, okay. He could just… put it off. There were ways. Like, there would be no reason to be finding and somehow silencing Calvera deserters if there were Calvera employees around who knew what the company was working on at that time. So first he could check that? It wasn’t a desperate grab for time, it was good, old-fashioned detective work. The classic grasping-at-straws move.

And then he could…

No. He couldn’t.

He had to talk to Peter Nureyev. Because he didn’t have time to put it off. Because his brain kept letting go of huge swaths of time without a warning. He could stave it off if he didn’t pass through doorways, or sleep, or get distracted at the wrong time, or be a functioning person in any real sense of the word, but he couldn’t stop it from happening eventually, and he was acutely aware that every time he lost a lucid hour he lost a chance to undo this mess he made. And if he couldn’t undo it, well. He had thought there was nothing more useless than a sharpshooting detective who couldn’t shoot straight, but one that couldn’t shoot straight or remember his cases or find a way to solve cases despite that had that one beat out. And Juno kept losing time.

And the worst part was that every time it happened, every time he lost a single moment, that meant that he didn’t know what he had done, and he needed to know what he was doing, because Juno Steel was a danger to the people around him even when he was trying his best not to be. If he kept himself sequestered, that was just a safety measure for everyone involved. Juno had taken the basement for himself because no one else wanted to be down there. And even if it was dark, and sort of musty, and smelled like every other basement on the planet, well, wasn’t that last part a perk,
given that he couldn’t walk out of the room without smelling Peter Nureyev’s cologne and wanting to be the kind of person who could just go to someone without knowing he would ruin their life?

“Boss, are you thinking real hard about something important, or are you just doing your narration thing?” Rita asked, without any real energy to it. Juno registered but didn’t notice the fatigue in her voice.

“Um. Right. Yeah. Give me a minute,” Juno said, and ran both hands through his hair, burying his face between his wrists as he did. He had to just… do it. He didn’t have to talk about leaving him alone in a hotel room with no explanation, or about how you could almost get a guy killed and have him save your damn life and then try to cut him out for the rest of your sorry life, and he definitely didn’t have to think about how he didn’t know what would happen to them on any given tomorrow but that tomorrow could always wait for them to get to it, or whether or not six months could change how a man’s teeth felt while they were biting at your lower lip, or--

Juno squeezed his wrists against his temples as hard as he could, then released. Okay. This was going to be a normal, average conversation. No problems here. Just a thief and a detective and a quick interview. In a house where the detective’s employee, childhood friend, and ex-fling-and-colleague were currently living, at all times, watching him like a fish in a bowl. It was all going to be fine and normal and he was definitely going to do it.

As soon as he got a list of employees. Just to make sure.

“Rita, can you give me a list of everyone who was employed at Calvera thirty-five years ago? Or. How long does it take to do a project there. Forty, maybe? Forty to thirty-five years back.” That seemed like enough.

There was no response. Juno turned slowly, sure that he had blacked out again, that she wouldn’t even be there.

Rita was asleep. Juno sighed, and walked over to the swivel chair where she was folded over herself and shook her shoulder. “Hey.” She made a noise that sounded like it was trying to be words, and Juno wondered how long he’d made her stay down here. “C’mon, it’s bad for you to be underground this long.” She still didn’t open her eyes, or say real words, but she seemed responsive. He begrudgingly put one of her arms over his shoulder and walked her upstairs. He had to lean down to make it work, and the feeling was familiar.

He used to do stuff like this all the time, when he was still pretty much a kid. He always stayed up later, just to make sure [ben] everyone else made it to bed.

This wasn’t what he wanted to be remembering. He put his hand on the doorknob to the way out of the basement, and took a gamble that this time he’d remember what he was doing and not drop his secretary down the stairs or something. She was the head of HR, after all.

He had to remember to take some of those titles back soon, before all the power got to her head any more than it already had. He’d write it down somewhere later.

He walked through the doorway, and was relieved that he still knew what he was doing. He was less relieved to see that he had an audience. “Great. The gang’s all here.”

It was strange, living with other people. He hadn’t since he was, what, twenty-eight? He’d forgotten how much you learned about people when you lived with them. How familiar the parts of them that were usually hidden away became.
Alessandra was using the table that was kind-of-in, kind-of-out of the kitchen to hold an enormous tablet that was showing a calendar, and she had one leg up on the seat of a chair while she marked notes on dates and circled numbers. She rested her elbow on her knee and her face on her knuckles as she puzzled down at her notes, which were, in Juno’s humble estimation, significantly worse than his own. She said they were shorthand, but they looked like they were just empty squiggles. The table was covered with brown rings from mugs refilled over and over, and there were a couple of nearly-empty pill bottles hid self-consciously behind the mugs, and Juno knew that at exactly 7:30 AM the next morning an alarm would go off to remind her to open the bottles and consume the contents.

Mick was leaning over the side of the couch, towards Alessandra’s table, marking things down as Alessandra spoke. He was underfoot all the time, always trying to get someone to let him help them, and Juno recognized it not as a desire to return to his regular life, but as something more like Juno’s fear of being unable to do enough. Mick usually ended up doing menial tasks. When he was helping other people, he would talk to them pointlessly, thoughtlessly (Juno had had to cut him off more than once when the topics of conversation had gotten dangerously close to him, and he was afraid to think about all the things he said when Nureyev was around), and when it was just Mick alone he would sing to himself, bad, quiet renditions of pop songs Juno didn’t recognize, especially if he was cleaning something.

“Move over,” Juno said, nudging Mick off the couch with his foot. *Is she asleep?* Mick mouthed, and he stood up.

“You can talk, Rita can sleep through anything. It’s incredible. I got into a shootout in my office once and she didn’t even notice until she saw the hole in the wall the next morning.” With the newly freed space, he let Rita kind of swing herself onto the couch in a crumpled lying-down position. She didn’t fall asleep in the office nearly as much as he did, and usually when she did it was an intentional power nap or whatever she called them. Still, he’d found her out like a light in front of the computer once or twice before, and he didn’t want to be the kind of boss who had an employee fall asleep on the job and didn’t do anything about it. And she’d been working a lot. Juno didn’t exactly keep regular hours, and lately Rita had been right there with him, hadn’t she? He didn’t remember for sure, but she did keep leaving her weird porn downstairs, and he was pretty sure no one else was looking at it. It was pretty specific. So that pointed to Rita spending way too long on the clock. And also looking at her weird porn while she talked to him, which meant he really needed to take the HR department back from her as soon as he possibly could.

Juno tried not to look at Nureyev-as-Earl-Fox, but it was impossible not to. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever seen Nureyev dressed as himself before, and he didn’t think he was seeing Nureyev dressed as himself now, but he definitely had never even imagined him in casual clothing (and he’d imagined him in many, many states of dress). But lately he’d been wearing shirts, usually black, that looked like they were made of jersey, and they were cut in a way that they were always sliding off his shoulder and revealing his collarbones, and they screamed how obscenely expensive they must have been in a way that only an overwhelmingly simple shirt could, paired with simple leggings. Everything else was as elaborate as always; maybe his eyeliner and lipstain were lighter than Juno remembered, but it was same effort, different effect. Nureyev untangled himself from the chair he was in and walked towards the closet without a glance towards Juno, looking as graceful as one could at such an awkward task.

Another thing that Juno noticed about Fox-Nureyev was that he refused to use chairs the way a normal person did. Absolutely refused. When Juno had come upstairs he had been draped across the comfiest armchair in the room, with one of his legs bent over one of the arms and the other stretched against the back, and his neck was bent backwards against the other arm, and one of his hands was flat on the floor beneath his head, and he was reading something on a small tablet. It ruined the point
of being in the armchair, and Juno couldn’t explain why it frustrated him so much to see it except that he couldn’t remember if he should have expected this or if it was a quirk that had been manufactured wholecloth for this new alias, and it felt important that he remember everything that was unique to Nureyev and not his other identities.

Juno tugged the pillow out from under Rita’s arms so he could try to wedge it under her head. “Blanket?” a voice asked from behind him, and Juno turned and Nureyev was standing over him, holding a quilt.

Juno took it. “Thanks,” he said, and he would have dropped it on top of Rita, but then he was Mick out of the corner of his eye (the good one), and he was smiling at him and it made his skin crawl.

“What?” Juno asked, a little too sharp, a bit overly defensive.

“I don’t know, it’s just nice to see you being all… maternal again.” Juno pulled an involuntary face of disgust. “It just reminds me--,” Mick started, and Juno cut him off because didn’t Mick understand where they were right now?

“Don’t,” he said. “Just, don’t.” And it came out too loud, and too angry, and Strong and Nureyev were both looking at him like they found another piece of the puzzle they were solving after they thought they were nearly finished, and he just didn’t want to think about it. “I’m going back downstairs. Don’t let me keep Rita up that long again, I can’t afford to keep giving her overtime.”

He threw the quilt on top of Rita, but it didn’t seem to get the memo that this was supposed to be a dramatic act of violence, and instead it drifted gently downwards to land softly on the sleeping secretary. Rita grabbed it and rolled over so her face was smushed against the couch, which seemed uncomfortable, but there were better people than Juno Steel to pass judgment on the sleep patterns of others.

“Last I heard, she considers this part of her vacation time.” Nureyev said that, except Juno had the feeling that he was being Earl Fox right now, which made it all the more infuriating.

“First of all, this isn’t a vacation and I’m not going to let her say it is, she’s doing work and she should act like it. Second--you’re all just friends now? Five days and everyone’s just buddied up?”

“A week,” Fox-Nureyev said, and Juno went red. “I knew that,” he murmured.

Alessandra piped up from across the room. “Yeah, best of friends. Maybe you’d be better at keeping tabs on things if you left that basement sometimes, maybe made an appearance or two? You’re basically a cryptid,” and then she went back to whatever she was doing. Juno couldn’t remember, and he didn’t want to ask.

“I saw one of those once,” Mick said, looking into the middle distance. “It changed me.”

“Mick, that was a dog walking on its back legs.” Juno had spent too much of his life clarifying Mick’s cryptid experience.

“Yeah, but that just makes me wonder how that dog could succeed when all my dog roller skate plans were doomed to fail.”

“Dog roller skates?” Fox-Nureyev asked appraisingly.

Juno held a hand palm-out in his direction, fingers outstretched, and used the other to grab his own face with agitation. “Don’t get him started,” he warned, and at the same time Mick said, “Dog roller skates are roller skates for dogs,” and Juno stared at the ceiling, shaking his head.
“Please, tell me more,” Fox-Nureyev said, more amused than curious, and Juno once again decided it was time to go.

“Okay, well, if all we’re going to do is swap stories, I’ll be downstairs. Some of us have work to do,” and he turned around and started descending the stairs again. He heard three sighs of different natures and tones, in some horrible harmony.

“We are working, Steel, some of us just don’t need to live a subterranean life to do it,” Alessandra said back, and the annoyance creeping into her voice meant she probably hadn’t slept in a while.

“I’m a detective, Strong, this is how I… detect,” he said, trying to think of the right verb.

“Oh, you’re a detective? What a coincidence, me too! Weird that we didn’t know that before, but I guess that explains why you won’t tell me anything about what you’re doing even though we are literally working the same exact case!” she snapped, and everyone else in the room flinched backwards (except for Rita, whose commitment to sleep was unwavering).

Juno would have said something cutting back, but then he saw the solution to his problem ahead of him.

“You know about Calvera?”

“Calv—” she started, then she said, “Oh, calvIN? Yeah, Rita told me when she came up for lunch.”

“Oh, good, I let her take lunch,” Juno said, relieved.

“She seemed to think you didn’t notice she was gone,” Nureyev said, and Juno could still hear that hint of—not amusement, something else. Fondness? Were, were he and Rita that close already, or was it—oh, no, was he blushing like an idiot? Juno put a hand casually on the back of his neck and dug his fingernails in, and his mind cleared.

“Yeah, that’s probably right. Uh.” Well, it had cleared a little, anyway. It was hard to notice when he was blushing. It was probably fine. “And she said how a handful of the people I saw had been caught trying to sell company secrets?”

“Right, I mean, everyone in this city has sold a company secret to somebody, it’s basically what the economy here runs on,” Alessandra said, and Mick raised his eyebrows. “You can do that?” he asked incredulously, clearly counting every secret he’d ever heard in his head, and Juno said “Don’t even think about it,” and Nureyev laughed at them, and Rita murmured something in her sleep.

“Okay, but I know a whole lot of things I am really not supposed to know, J,” Mick said very seriously.

“What could you possibly—no, on second thought, don’t tell me anything.” Nureyev was still chuckling, and the sound of it was distracting. He just had to stick to the plan here. “Anyway. Everyone else is a regular criminal. No connections on record to speak of.”

Alessandra narrowed her eyes at him, then looked at Nureyev, then back at him. “Yeeeah,” she said, drawing out the word suspiciously.

“And I was just, wondering, if there were maybe, a way a lady could, somehow, perhaps, find out—”

Alessandra cut him off, incredulous. “Are we in middle school right now?” Nureyev was just sitting back and watching the show. Or, Fox was; Juno was sure any temporary Nureyev-ness was actually gone at this particular moment. “Ask him yourself.”
“Yes, do,” Earl Fox said, and Juno felt his face heating up again, and he scratched his wrist, and felt the very top layer of his skin break. “Only, there are some things I’d prefer to keep between the two of us, if you would be interested in going elsewhere? Other than that, I’m open to all methods of interrogation,” he continued, and it could have been innocent enough, but no, this was absolutely Rex Glass speaking through several layers of alias, and Juno couldn’t even look at him.

“Are you getting sick? You look warm,” Mick asked, and Juno counted himself lucky that Mick, having never been attracted to anyone in his entire life, was slow to recognize the feeling in anyone else. Rita, on the other hand… Juno shuddered to even imagine it.

Behind him, Rita rolled over, and Juno wanted to pick up a pillow, press it to his face, and scream at the sound of it.

Chapter End Notes

me, literally 24 hours ago: i want to finish this fic by september if i can
me, editing my work four hours ago: boy i am so excited to get to these solid noir stunts
i have planned, that's what i do this for, is those good stunts
also me: [adds literally ten pages to a chapter that isn't even that important to the plot
because i wanted to play with the group dynamic, it has to be two chapters now]

anyway, if i get to chapter 20 and i haven't given you or myself the gift of stunts i owe
you a oneshot called coolnoirstunts.txt that's about sasha wire trying to get a nice
breakfast but this city just has so much crime

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edited 9/19/2017
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

An interrogation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In retrospect, Juno could have put more thought into his choice of interrogation room. He could have done worse—there were several rooms in the house that had beds and other horizontal surfaces on them, there were bathrooms, there was the roof—so yes, he could have chosen a worse place for a private conversation (or, no, not a conversation but an interrogation, they didn’t need to have a conversation because there was clearly nothing to discuss, this was going to be a purely crime-based exchange, nothing deeper than that) with Peter Nureyev. And it wasn’t like this is the first time Juno had pulled someone into a closet for a quick talk. Closets were convenient, private spaces, they were everywhere, and usually being in one threw people off enough that they said more than they meant to. And this one seemed pretty soundproof. It was a level-headed, logical decision.

Except it really didn’t seem like that with Peter Nureyev towering awkwardly and uncomfortably over him in the dark, with the door closed behind them and suddenly it was just the two of them and Juno had to figure out how to get out of this without doing anything incredibly stupid and dangerous, which was an unusual difficulty for him. He felt the back wall for a light switch, and the gunshot wound that kept fading to the back of his mind gave him a quick reminder that his arm did not want to bend backwards today, thank you, and he winced. At least the light wasn’t on yet.

“You must take all the gentlemen here,” Peter Nureyev’s voice said, so at least he was amused by all this. That made one of them. He heard the pull of a chain and a vintage-style light bulb switched on just over their heads, and the sudden brightness made their proximity to one another feel obscene, and Juno pressed his back against the wall behind him. For his part, Peter was folded over in a way that must have been difficult to balance, and he had one hand braced against Juno’s wall and the other bent against the door frame, and he was leaning over Juno in a way that was just because of the limited space, nothing else, there was no other reason for Juno to think about on repeat, and Juno could feel his breath moving in his hair and of course he could smell Nureyev’s cologne and see his mouth smirking at him and he needed to find a track and stay on it, now.

“Talk, Nureyev.” Juno said. One-word sentences could be safe. Names could be safe, as long as he used the right ones. Commands could be… iffy. He’d judge the situation as it happened.

Nureyev didn’t say anything, not immediately, and Juno realized his mistake, and he added, “About the case. About Calvera. Why are you here, did you do anything for them, if they’ve got anything to do with,” me almost getting you killed again “the other night. Just… let’s only talk about the case, and not… anything else.”

Nureyev looked down at him, and his face went unreadable, and this wasn’t going to be easy, was it?

“I know I said I would stay away from you if you wanted me to,” he started, and Juno cut him off, reached for the doorknob, and Peter Nureyev grabbed it first and said, ”Don’t,” and Juno pulled his
hand back like it was on fire, and Peter let go immediately and tried to put his hands up in a *I mean no harm* gesture, but that made him tip forward which made Juno sink lower against the wall and they were *so close* to each other, and Nureyev regained his balance and Juno scrambled to push himself back against the wall again, and Nureyev kept his hands as up as they could be without elbowing Juno or the wall.

They held this armistice for a second, Juno cursing himself for reacting like that. Things were different now. He was fine. He’d said before that he wouldn’t stop Juno from leaving, hadn’t he?

He risked a glance at Nureyev’s face. It was… horrified. And Juno’s face, reflected in his glasses, just looked *scared* because you get caught in some bad relationships, some kidnappings, a rough childhood, and then you can’t get over it for the rest of your life, can you?

“I--you can leave right now, I can speak with Detective Strong--” and Juno *loathed* himself, wanted to meet himself in a back alley and feel his fist connect with his own face over and over again.

“No. It’s fine,” Juno said, and hardened his expression as if it had never shown a single sign of weakness. “Say whatever you want.”

Nureyev’s face was on tiptoe. “I told you I would leave you alone,” he said again. “And I will, as soon as all this is over. You’ll never have to see me again,” and Juno wasn’t sure he’d heard correctly. Had they already talked about… what happened, what Nureyev did? Did Juno forget about it? Was this just some kind of sick mind game? “And until then, I can be someone else if you need me to. But I have to see this through,” and the intensity with which he said that last part, the simultaneously present and faraway look in his eyes, reminded Juno of something, a stolen fragment of memory twice filtered from its source, and all the pieces formed a picture of a place he knew intimately but had never been.

“New Kinshasa,” Juno exhaled, and put the heel of his hand to his forehead in realization and *disappointment?* relief, it must have been relief. “You’re here because of the Guardian Angel program.”

For a second, it was all the sound of both of their breath and eyes locked on eyes and Juno had the sudden, ardent wish for his memory to wipe itself clean so he could reach up and kiss him without remembering the consequences. “Yes.” Nureyev averted his eyes when he said it, looking up to the light above them, and it all became so clear. He wasn’t here for Juno. It was all principle, principle and nobility and that part of Peter Nureyev that was always following the fastest trail to the end of something, even when it took him through living bodies.

Well, that made everything easier, didn’t it? It would start feeling easier any second now. In any second Juno would relax and stop walking on eggshells and stop obsessing over how he could get Peter Nureyev hurt this time, about what would happen if he was allowed to be this close to him any longer, about if he’d misjudged Nureyev completely and would wake up with a knife in his back. He always did forget to consider that last one. But it didn’t matter. All of that would go away soon. And so would Peter Nureyev. And that was a good thing, on paper and also in practice.

And Juno would know that, any second.

The feeling didn’t come.

“What were you doing in Hyperion City?” he asked, because the closet was too small and maybe it was an illusion but it felt like they were pulling each other to meet in the center of it.

“I had a job,” he said, and his voice was still soft and Juno strained forward to hear it. “I was
supposed to break into a few buildings, leave a few things behind, and go. I found the concept intriguing.”

What Juno had meant was, You can get a job anywhere. Why here? followed by I lived an entire life here without you in it but now this whole city is rebuilt around you, and now you think you can just come back? But Peter Nureyev had given all the answer he would give without Juno asking for more, and Juno gave up that right months ago. “Who hired you?” he asked instead.

Nureyev shrugged. “It was more of a drop-off situation,” he said.

“And you took it? You?” Drop-offs were for people who didn’t have the luxury of choosing what jobs they could take, and considering the things Peter Nureyev was capable of, combined with the number of weeks Juno could live off of what Nureyev spent on bath products, didn’t make sense. “Is someone threatening you, or are you just trying to pay off thirty-five years of missed taxes?” Nureyev laughed indulgently, and Juno was pretty sure he was laughing at the concept of taxes.

“What can I say? I was bored.”

“You were… bored. So you decided to just show up somewhere where someone had some weird back-alley job and hope you didn’t wake up with one of your kidneys mounted on some mob boss’s wall.”

“The organ trade really has changed since insurance started covering synthetic organs, hasn’t it?” Nureyev asked, wistful. “So much less romantic than it used to be.”

“You have no idea,” Juno said. It still troubled him, that Nureyev would take a drop-off, but he couldn’t let Nureyev steer him off topic. “I’ll tell Rita to look into who hired you,” he said.

“I’ll just send you the information, you can pass it on to her,” Nureyev said.

“Rita’s on the office mail,” Juno said, which was true. It would have technically been more accurate to finish that with because I’m the only Oldtown kid who didn’t bother trying to figure out how technology worked when they finally got out, but he wasn’t the one getting interrogated here.

“I can use your personal mail,” Nureyev offered.

“I use the office mail,” Juno said, and a flicker passed over Nureyev’s face. “You know the address. I’ll have Rita check it out once she gets up. In the meantime, I need to know exactly were you dropping off and where.”

“I made a map of the locations,” Nureyev said, and he started rooting around in his pockets. “Let me see…” Juno hadn’t even known legging could have pockets. He watched with interest as Nureyev extracted an ever-growing pile of things from his pockets and onto the floor, and he took a minute to notice how his movements kept bringing Nureyev closer to him.

This was his last closet interrogation, Juno decided. After this, never again. Unless he really needed to, or really wanted to, or he thought it was a different room and didn’t want to look unprofessional by admitting it. “How did you even get all of that in there?” Juno asked, so that he could be thinking about something other than how near he was to a very beautiful thief.

“I know an excellent tailor,” Nureyev said with something like pride, and handed Juno a crumpled paper. Juno looked at it.

“Is this a… tree…?” Juno asked.
“It’s a map,” and it was an offended tone. Well, he should have just gotten a real map instead of trying to draw one. “That’s Main,” he said, pointing at one of the branches.

Juno tried to puzzle it out in silence for a minute or two. It did not look like a Hyperion City Juno had ever seen, and if there could be an expert on a city that lived and shifted and changed and killed and stood resolute like this one, it was Juno Steel. After a full thirty seconds of silence, Juno gave up.

“Maybe you should just… tell me about it,” he said. “Draw me a words picture.”

“I don’t see why I would need to, I’m an excellent cartographer,” he said, and Juno laughed at him, and Peter Nureyev looked affronted but then they were smiling at each other, just for a second, and Nureyev turned unsure and Juno cleared his throat and the moment stuck there.

“The, the drop-offs,” Juno prodded, trying to unwind time again.

“Right. Yes,” Nureyev said. “Two of the locations were storage units, one was a house. All abandoned for quite a while, judging by the dust. I didn’t make it to the fourth one, for obvious reasons,” and he tipped his head and gestured his shoulders towards Juno, “but I did poke around a bit in the ones I did get to. I didn’t find much, though I can’t say I was all that invested at the time.” He was almost over-animated now, shrugging, raising his eyebrows, gesturing with his hand that wasn’t resting on the wall a foot or two over Juno’s shoulder. “I’m sorry to say I didn’t find it especially stimulating except in retrospect. I was given a whole cache of items intended to interrupt electronic frequencies or scramble files, and turned them on and left them in the given locations. It wasn’t all that complex, but in light of your suspected connection to a major technology research company, and the destruction of some related evidence there, I do wish I’d been a bit more interested.”

Nureyev didn’t chatter. Or, he did, but not like this. He switched subjects rapidly and created these webs of connections you could never see coming and called you four or five pet names on the way and left you wondering how you got to this from a quick mention of interplanetary trade routes. This was not that. He was channeling some other Nureyev, one of a long line of forged names to hide behind.

“Is that all?” Juno asked, deciding to cut it as short as he could get away with while he could.

“I… suppose,” Nureyev said, and Juno turned to leave.

“Except,” he started, and Nureyev was back to being wholly himself. Juno thought. It was silly to consider himself a steward of a thief’s aliases. He didn’t even know for sure that he had any idea what the unmarked Peter Nureyev was.

But he had a pretty good hunch.

“I meant it,” Nureyev said, then clarified, “That I can be someone else if you need me to. If that’s… easier. I’ve never tried nesting an alias within another before. It could be good practice,” and Juno couldn’t tell whether the thief was trying to give him a gift or trying to get him to keep his distance.

Juno shrugged half-heartedly, because a weight had settled over his head like a veil and it didn’t want to let him move. “What’s the point?” he asked. “It’s still us,”

/me,

and he cast his eyes down at a crack in the corner of the door frame, because he shouldn’t have said anything, should have left. All the fatigue he should have been feeling for the past--two days? How long had it been since he’d slept, exactly?--settled in his joints.
Nureyev’s voice drifted over him. “The thing about having a new identity is that you get to create your own history,” and he leaned in closer, and Juno wanted so badly to take the offer but he couldn’t let his arms reach out and grab it.

“We can’t, Nureyev,” he said. “You gave me your name,” and the heavy feeling trickled down to the tips of his fingers, or maybe it had always been there and he only now noticed it, and it filled the silence and still air of the cramped space, and he thought they would fall into each other if he didn’t do something.

“Juno,” Nureyev said, and his voice had so, so much, and he couldn’t let him say anything else.

“Good interrogation,” he said abruptly, “I’ll get you that map in a minute,” and he made some rough, unskilled maneuvers towards the door, scrambling through Nureyev’s arms. He bypassed the closet-themed questions and ribbing from Alessandra and Mick, and went back downstairs. He had always had a few maps of the city around; they were useful. He took a few minutes to try to figure out which pile of papers they were in; when he didn’t remember his filing system he had to admit that it was a bit of a mess.

He finally located them under the sad basement couch, which made sense, he couldn’t step on them or anything if they were under a couch. He took the least crumpled one, flattened it a little bit with his arm, and carried it and a pen upstairs, and dropped them on Nureyev’s lap. “Found it,” he said.

Nureyev said nothing, took a second to study the map, and then circled a building, and drew three Xs on different points near it. “I don’t understand why you couldn’t just use my map.”

“Your map was a work of art--endlessly interpretable, but only truly understood by the artist,” Juno said, grabbing back his actual, readable map and studying it. He narrowed his eyes and walked back downstairs. He had to check something.

Which meant spending ten minutes trying to find another map he had been using. Eventually he found it, and propped them both up against the wall to compare them. “Huh,” he said, and walked back upstairs.

“Alessandra, you have a car here, right?” He knew she did.

Alessandra looked up at him. “I… might,” she said, suspicious.

“Does it use keys, or a card, or a push button, or--” he asked innocently.

“Strong veto on stealing my car,” she said, going back to whatever it was she was doing, and for some reason Mick and Peter Nureyev looked at each other, Mick with childish joy and Nureyev with his smirk. They both ignored it, as was the protocol with surnames like that.

“Okay, then can you drop me off at my apartment so I can get mine?”

“No,” Alessandra said, looking at him like he was obtuse, and Mick said “That sounds like a bad idea,” and Nureyev said, “Are you familiar with the concept of hiding out?”.

Juno let his head fall back. Now he had to figure out how to steal a car.

“Look, I think there’s going to be something at this warehouse,” and he pointed at his map, “and I don’t want to spend an hour waiting for the 16 to take me there.”

“Wait. Let’s take a step back there. You asked me, a detective, for my car, because you want to do detective work. And your first thought, when I said you couldn’t take my car, which belongs to me,
was that you, a person on the run, should try to take public transportation.”

“And why would you take the 16? The 34 is way more reliable and it stops like, two blocks away,” Mick added.

“Yeah, if you want to spend forty minutes in the main line traffic,” Juno argued, and Alessandra Strong broke in.

“Or you could ask me, a detective, to take you in my car and also investigate,” she said.

“One of us has to stay here with everyone,” Juno said, and Alessandra made a face.

“They’re not kids, Steel, they know how to protect themselves,” she said, and she sent a nervous glance at Nureyev while she said it. “And you’re having memory problems. If anyone shouldn’t be left alone, it’s you.”

“I can--” Juno started, and Mick and Alessandra both said, “Take care of yourself?”

Juno closed his mouth.

“I could go with him,” Nureyev said, pretending not to be paying attention. “We can leave at two and blend in with the graveyard shift. Though we’d have to spend an hour or two casing out the location, I think, which could be terribly boring if we don’t find some way to entertain ourselves.”

“So Alessandra, when do you want to head out?” Juno asked quickly and too loudly and with a squeeze in his throat, and he could swear he saw Nureyev’s eyes alight with a sad satisfaction.

Chapter End Notes

i accidentally typed ‘strong’ and ‘steal’ in dialogue between alessandra strong and junosteel and instead of changing it immediately and pretending it never happened i leaned in to my discomfort, forgive me

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edited 09/19/2017 and i didn't take it out now either bc i believe in living with your mistakes
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

A detectives-only road trip.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was a relief to be out of the house. They’d gotten a late start, and it felt like he’d been waiting for hours to finally be able to leave. First Alessandra had wanted to wait until the next night to go, for ‘cover’, which made sense but meant waiting another entire day without leaving, and then when he brought that up everyone had tried to get him to go to sleep, and he suspected that there had been a coordinated group effort to trick him into a bedroom so Rita could barricade him in. He did end up falling asleep, after spending a couple of hours complaining about it as loudly as possible, so of course he forgot everything about the previous day and had to be re-briefed on waking. Then, when that was done with, Alessandra had come downstairs, and they realized they were both wearing the same outfit (scarf, tan jacket, gray shirt, dark brown pants), which wasn’t a real problem, exactly, but it felt like a little much, so they both got changed.

Then after that, everyone started in on him about eating before he left. Apparently standing in front of the refrigerator and eating an entire slice of bread in one bite just wasn’t enough for some people, so that was a whole thing. Then, when he had been bullied into eating an apple, he had made the mistake of mentioning that he was surprised they were letting him leave, and then it was a sea of outrage that he could think they were stopping him from leaving, that he could do whatever he wanted but they didn’t want him to do it alone, which in his book was the same as forbidding him from leaving.

When that multi-headed lecture was over, Alessandra let it slip that Juno was driving (Catch, she’d said, and tossed him the keys, and he’d actually caught them with just one fumble, so take that, binocular vision), and Nureyev wasn’t having that—He has head trauma, he could get hurt,—and it became a debate that ended when Juno got… more heated than necessary, and ended up saying things that should have been private, about what right they may or may not have had to control each other’s lives, and Nureyev had gotten very quiet and backed down.

Alessandra had also offered to knock Juno out and put him in the backseat if he seemed like he was getting ‘out of hand’, which, in Juno’s opinion that no one asked for, Rita was a little too enthusiastic about. Well, whatever got them out of the house faster. And then he got to leave, though not before Mick very seriously told Alessandra that Juno was ‘precious cargo’, and honestly outside wasn’t that much better but it sure wasn’t as claustrophobic, which was something, at least, and he was driving, and he felt alive. Being with Alessandra was less stressful than anyone else in the house. She didn’t have a stake in him the way the others did, and they’d already cleared the air on the whole once-promising-romance front, so they could just drive and not talk and Juno could enjoy his time not pacing holes in the basement for a little while.

He’d hoped so, anyway.

“We’ve got to talk, Steel.”
Juno reflexively stepped on the brake, jolting the car. “I think we’ve already talked about the case enough,” he said, nervously.

“No, about the case, Juno,” Alessandra said, and it had been going so well until then. They’d made it about halfway down the street, and he was sure he would remember back to those seconds of silence fondly. “I get that we were never really a thing, and that you and that Fox guy have something weird going on between the two of you, but can you cool it a little with all the flirting?”

The world sped by Juno very, very quickly, and he sputtered nonsense that gradually rose to a yell. “I’m--we’re not--I’m not, I never flirt--you’re just--I only flirt with danger.” His face was burning.

“Yeah, well, if the future Detective Danger doesn’t slow down he’s going to get me a speeding ticket,” Alessandra said lightly.

“Detective Danger is ridiculous. Danger and I would hyphenate.”

He tapped his nails nervously against the back of the steering wheel and eased off the gas. How much longer would they be in the car? Fifteen minutes? Could he keep deflecting for fifteen minutes? It must have been what, five minutes already, right? He could handle this for--

He looked at the clock. It had been about 45 seconds since they left.

He was going to die in this car.

“Yes, yes, you’re an old-fashioned lady,” Alessandra said. “But seriously. Can we talk about this?”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Juno said. “I’m not flirting with… anyone.”

“You blush every time he says anything to you. Yesterday morning you slapped yourself in the face because he told Rita he’d worked at a burlesque club once.”

“What?” Juno said, and the car swerved. Alessandra lunged to grab the wheel. “Did he see it?” He had wondered why his face hurt so much last night.

“Everyone saw it,” she said, wrenching the steering wheel in her direction so the car was going straight. Juno’s face was burning again. “And then you tried to tell us it was because you felt a mosquito. You’re a mess, Steel.”

Juno Steel didn’t believe in fate, but for a second he thought that maybe, just maybe, his short-term memory loss had happened for this reason and this reason alone, to spare him from living with the visceral memory of this embarrassment. Except not remembering meant he had to ask questions, like, “Wait, Rita was there? Did… does she… she watches so much weird stuff, Strong, it gives her ideas.”

Alessandra sighed “She laughed for about five minutes, so I’d say yeah, she figured out your dark secret.”

“Which laugh?” Juno exclaimed.

“Watch the road!” Alessandra yelled as she lunged for the wheel again.

“Calm down, I’m doing fine,” Juno said, overcorrecting against Alessandra’s pull of the wheel and driving straight over a trash can that had fallen off the curb.

Alessandra didn’t say anything, and Juno didn’t want to take his eyes off the road again, but he could
feel the fury radiating off of her.

“I can pay for that,” he said.

Alessandra inhaled deeply, held it in, and then exhaled. She did this two or three times, then opened her eyes again. “Juno, what I’m trying to say is…” She trailed off. “Take a right here.”

“What?” Juno said.

“Turn right.”

“But--”

“Just do it,” she said, and it looked like she was going to grab the steering wheel again, so he did it. She settled back in her seat. “What I’m trying to tell you is, I don’t care that you and this guy have a weird thing happening--”

“There is no weird thing, everything about all of this is perfectly normal,” Juno said, wondering if there was a way he could roll out of this car without it crashing with Alessandra inside. Maybe if he got onto a straight enough road he could do it. Somewhere with a cliff for him to slide right off of might be good. Too bad Hyperion City wasn’t known for its lookout points.

“Juno. Mick figured it out. Said you were ‘half in love with anything that had half a chance to kill you’.” She shifted downwards slightly in the seat. “You’re not subtle.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not true,” Juno said, unsettled by how much it was completely, entirely true. Mick could do that sometimes.

“Okay. For the purpose of this discussion, and for my general peace of mind, let’s assume you’re not pining after the man we found covered in blood and holding a knife in an alley, who you keep openly flirting with in front of all of us. Fair?”

“It’s more complicated than that,” Juno said, and Alessandra inhaled sharply.

“I don’t want to know, just let me talk,” she said, pointing at him with her pressed-together hands. “Pull over here,” she commanded, and Juno said, “Why--?” and she said “Steel,” so he did. “Now turn it off.”

The car went silent.

“Okay, Juno, I’m going to say this, and I’m only going to say it once, and then we’re never going to talk about it again. No exceptions. Understood?”

Juno nodded, because she wasn’t mad at him yet and he really didn’t want her to get there.

“I am so tired of falling for people who fall for someone else harder,” she said, and Juno blinked. “We’re both adults, and I get that this isn’t something either of us can control, but I was really into you when we met. I’m not anymore,” she rushed to add. “I mean, not like there’s anything wrong with you, but for me you’re a little too--”


“Self-absorbed,” Alessandra decided.

“Oh, a new one. I’ll add it to the list.”
“No, you’re being self-absorbed. Let me finish.”

Juno stopped talking.

“I’m not in love with you or anything, but we had something, for a little while, and now I have to see
you every day having this weird, star-crossed thing with this man who didn’t even try to make a
good alias and who has got to be some kind of international criminal and it’s hard not to wonder
where exactly I went wrong, okay? Is there something wrong with me, that I’m only attracted to
people who are only really attracted to people who are bad for them? Do I look like the kind of
person who’s b--” She stopped, shook her head. Juno’s eyes were wide. Was he supposed to say
something? Could he say something? One of the first things you did to me was punch me in the face,
but, wouldn’t be a helpful response. Or, maybe it would be a good way to break the tension? Juno
opened his mouth to give it a try, but Alessandra held up a hand.

“Just… try to tone it down around me. Please,” and then she got out of the car and started walking
towards the apartment building across the street.

“Where are you going? This is your car,” Juno complained to the empty passenger seat. It didn’t
answer. Outside the window, Alessandra took a key out of her pocket and opened one of the doors
on the mailbox next to the front entrance. She took out a formidable pile of mail and packages and
thumbed through it, her back to the car.

She did this twice, then put everything back in the mailbox, locked it, and returned to the car.

“Did you make me drive here so you could check your mail?” Juno asked incredulously.

“Yes,” Alessandra said, and closed the car door behind her.

“You want to pick up your dry cleaning next?” Juno asked calmly as he started the car back up. He
hit the gas harder than necessary.

“I’m waiting for a package,” Alessandra said, and she was looking in her notebook and making
some markings.

“Oh, well, if you’re waiting for a package,” Juno started.

She cut him off. “It’s my meds, Juno, I’m waiting for my medication.” Juno wanted to ask, but
didn’t. “I started getting my scripts delivered when you called me about Mick, just in case I had to try
to lay low.”

“Oh,” Juno said again. “Wait, no, you were an inspiring coach to a failing sports team, that’s the
opposite of laying low,” he said.

“I really love voidball,” she said intensely.

“Between that and checking your own mail while we’re in hiding, it seems like it’s either that or you
really hate laying low.”

She sighed. “Yeah, okay, fine. It was stupid.” Neither of them said anything for a couple of blocks.
“I just… haven’t been able to go to my support group or anything lately, and it’s been a lot, and I… I
wanted to check.”

“Right,” Juno said, because he had to say something; then, casually, as if it didn’t matter to him at all,
“You’re in a support group?”
“Um. Yes.” She didn’t seem especially interested in talking about it, but. Who could blame him for innocently trying to pass the time in the car, right?

“How… is that? For you, to be in that,” he asked, trying to keep the tone to casual small talk.

“It’s,” she chose her words carefully, “good, I guess? It helps? I don’t know.” She looked out her window. “I started doing it, a while after I got home, from, you know, the military. It, um, made things… easier? I still have to see my therapist sometimes. For the aforementioned meds. But, um. It’s good.”

More silence.

“Are you thinking about seeing some-” Alessandra started, and Juno slammed the brakes, throwing them both forward.

“Oh, look, a parking spot,” he said, and swerved so the tires scraped the curb.

“We’re three blocks away,” she said. “And you scraped my tires.”

“If it’s that important to you that your tires don’t get scraped, you shouldn’t have let me drive,” Juno said, getting out of the car and throwing the keys back to her.

The throw went wide, and she was barely out of the car, but she caught them easily anyway, in that effortlessly cool way only certain people could ever hope to achieve. “Honestly, I thought if I didn’t make you drive you might try to jump out of the car on the highway or something.”

He didn’t know how everyone kept seeing through him like this.

“Besides, it’s a lot easier to get someone to talk to you if they’re in the middle of doing you a favor,” Alessandra added lightly as they started walking. “It’s the easiest trick I have. Should we move the car closer? Neither of us are especially good at sneaking.”

“It’ll be fine,” Juno said automatically, but he wasn’t listening. He was thinking about Mick painting Nureyev’s nails, Nureyev braiding Rita’s hair. They could have talked about anything. Like, the weather, or… what else did people normally talk about? Crime? Probably crime, he decided. They were just talking about crimes, as people usually do. Maybe those thefts on 8th, those were topical. Or the abductions and state-sponsored surveillance, now he was thinking about it. Looking at it realistically, that would be the most topical discussion. So that was probably what they talked about, all the time, and none of them knew anything about him, especially not the puzzle of feelings living somewhere in his chest that he couldn’t untangle himself.

They were crossing a large, flat expanse, and Juno could see the entrance to the warehouse ahead, a thin cylinder poking out of the ground. It looked like it could fit four or five people at once, which seemed inefficient for such a large property. It was supposedly a security measure; Northstar was notoriously secretive about its technology. Juno had always thought that was unnecessary; all they made were movies and parks, and the second they had a patent all that secrecy turned into nonstop bragging and bravado.

“You think the other entrance is open?” Juno asked. He didn’t know why, but something about the idea of going underground through such a small entrance made him nervous.

“If I thought the loading dock was open I would have made you drive us in there,” she said. “The visuals would have been excellent.”

“Yeah,” Juno said, and looked around. There had to be another employee entrance. He was sure of
it. He just didn’t know why.

A group of the makers Hyperion City’s bright future had gotten to the entrance before Juno and Alessandra had--the cylinder was covered in graffiti, and the entrance was forced open, and the whole thing smelled like every kind of smoke imaginable, and given enough time Juno could isolate and identify each one. To be a drug-addled teen again.

“Ladies first,” Juno and Alessandra said at the same time, and then Juno shrugged and squeezed through the gap in the opening. Alessandra followed, albeit with a little more difficulty--she was much taller than he was. The room was small, mostly a shade of used-to-be-white with a few spots of paint here and there. There was a curved sheet of flat glass in front of them. He only noticed because all of its graffiti looked glossier, and because Alessandra started poking around on it immediately.

“What do you think? Is this thing ancient enough for you to know how to turn it on?” she asked, looking at either side of it and running her hands around its edges.

Oh, it was a screen. Okay, that seemed right. “Is there an on switch?” Juno tried.

Alessandra stared at him. “Are you joking?”

“... yes?” Juno lied tentatively, and Alessandra looked at him with genuine concern, steepled her fingers together over her face for a moment and then pointed them at him.

“How are you like this,” she asked quietly.

“I’ll call Rita,” he said, a little dejected, and pulled out the comms Rita had given him, which she had promised was untrackable. He had started to worry about that kind of thing recently.

“Are you sure you can handle using that by yourself?” Alessandra asked with significantly more sincerity than Juno would have preferred.

“Shut up,” he said, and he was about to call Rita, and then he thought of something. He walked to the screen and put his palm in the center of it.

Nothing happened.

“Okay, now I’m really out of ideas,” Juno said, and he called, resting all his weight against the place where his hand was connected to the cool glass.

Still, nothing happened.

But something was supposed to, the voice that lived in his gut told him, and he didn’t ask it why.

Chapter End Notes

edited 9/19/2017
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

the detectives-only field trip continues

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Even with the backup power on, it was dark. It seemed like the backup generator was made to power an alternate set of lights, because these ones didn’t seem like anything work should be done under. They tended towards deep violet, and dimmed from smoke damage and disuse. The walls of this room were black and white once, Juno thought. That was Northstar’s thing everywhere. Making everything so that it could only be pristine, untarnished. Appearances mattered here. The black walls would have lit with stars and constellations, and not a single mark or fingerprint would have flashed in the light against the unbroken expanse of obsidian.

The dome of light in the center of the vast, unending ceiling would have lit blue-white, and looking at the irregularly placed lights around it you would have been able to identify Polaris in a second.

The warehouse Juno stood in now went on further than he could have seen even if the eye he’d gotten from O’Flaherty was working, and every inch of it was melted and twisted and wrong and covered in forty years of ash and dust. It still smelled like smoke and decades of air standing inert. It was hard not to choke on it. Doors warped out of their frames, conveyer belts had melted themselves sideways, and glass and screens were all shattered or misshapen, and he was sure that those that weren’t would be just as scrambled as the one upstairs if they got it on. Which was lucky, because he may have implied some things that were untrue, on the way down here. Like, just as an example, that whatever Rita had done on the other side of that one-channel comms she’d made for them had been what got the elevator working, and that if the screen had lit up and engaged when Juno touched it, well, probably Rita gave him clearance for that without even realizing she’d done it, she was very good at that kind of thing.

And if it so happened that Northstar Entertainment placed a big emphasis on family? And that age-ten-and-under children of employees were allowed to come and go as they pleased, so long as the center had a ‘caregiver’, or some kind of glorified baby-sitter, checked in? And that Sarah Steel’s tenure at Northstar witnessed a change in security protocol that switched from updating security information across all systems to updating it on a building-by-building basis, so that this forty-something-year-old building thought Juno was probably still in that ten-and-under range?

Well, no one needed to know about that. It was fine if only one of two detectives knew that employees must have been checked in during the fire. And there were ways Alessandra could find out, like if one of them stumbled across a body or something. Finding a forty-years-rotten corpse would be a viscerally unpleasant experience for the both of them, so it was almost guaranteed to happen. And it would be even more unpleasant if anyone started talking to Juno about his family, or his life, or anything about him and they had to look at a horrible desiccated corpse. So really, it was better for everyone if he didn’t say anything about it, and waited for it to come up naturally.

He hazarded a glance at Alessandra, who was still standing just outside of the elevator, frozen in place. “Come on in, the asbestos is great,” he said with a cough.
“Right,” Alessandra said, snapping out of it. “Sorry, this place is just--”

“A pseudo-intellectual eyesore,” Juno said.

“I was going to say incredible,” she said. “Just, look at it,” she said, gesturing widely.

“It was kitschy and impractical at its best, and now it’s kitschy, impractical, and destroyed beyond all repair,” Juno replied, and bent to look under the equipment next to him. The movement stirred years of ash, and his lungs protested violently in a way that shook his shoulder unpleasantly. He wrapped his scarf around his mouth and nose. He should have done that from the beginning, probably.

“Good idea,” Alessandra said, now a little muffled. “I don’t know,” she continued while Juno pulled a flashlight out of his pocket and shone it at the shadows ahead of him. Nothing but cobwebs and the remains of the mice dumb enough to get stuck in them, and the other mice brave enough to try to help the first. “Don’t you ever walk into a place like this and think, This shouldn’t be beautiful?

“If I thought unbreathable air, garbage, and visceral reminders of disaster were beautiful, I would spend more time in my apartment.”

“So instead you spend time in Hyperion City, the Martian capital of unbreathable air, garbage, and visceral reminders of disaster,” Alessandra Strong reminded him.

“That’s… yeah, that’s fair,” he said, straightening up. The dust was already sticking to him, he noticed in the light. It was all swirling like a storm now that there was someone inside to disturb the air. He looked around again, to see if he was missing something.


More importantly, there was nothing visible that was worth shutting down entirely. It all looked too… typical. They had to be missing something.

Alessandra was looking at something over at the wall, studying it intensely. Juno wandered over.

“You find something?”

“Looks like some kind of control panel,” Alessandra said, and Juno leaned in to hear her though her scarf. “Lots of switches. There are four that I think are for the conveyer belts,” she pointed them out, “and this one engages some kind of emergency protocol,” it was a red lever labeled **DO NOT PULL EXCEPT IN CASE OF EMERGENCY**, so that seemed like a reasonable guess, “and I’m still trying to figure the rest of them out, if you have any ideas--”

Juno pulled the rest of the switches, all at once.

A lot of things happened at the same time.

“I was going to say we should call the house again!” Alessandra yelled over the sudden creaking that came from everywhere and the flickering of purple lights and the sound of dust raining down around them.

“This is faster,” Juno shouted back, and they both braced against the wall on either side of the control panel. Light was leaking in from somewhere, but the dust was too thick for them to tell where, and the creaking was unpredictable and overwhelming and everywhere, and Alessandra was grabbing his arm very, very tightly, and he wondered if she might break it, but she was sliding to the floor and he slid down with her and he didn’t know what was happening and she was gasping for air the way in a way that felt familiar but he couldn’t quite place and she buried her head against her knees and he reached for her arm and said, “Strong? Alessandra?” and the noises slowly receded and the dust
started to die down and she was still balled up and making these terrible wheezing noises and he reached for her shoulder and said, “Alessandra?” again, and she pulled his arm, sharp and hard, and Juno shouted because he had a gunshot wound in that shoulder, and he suspected his stitches were ripped open yet again, and she dragged him so he was eye-to-eye with her, and, no, he was wrong, that’s when his stitches ripped back open.

”Never do that again,” she yelled at him, gasping and choking, and Juno finally recognized what had happened. He’d woken up like this before. More often than not, in the last few months.

“Are you… okay?” Juno asked.

“No, I’m-not okay, I’m-having a goddamn-panic attack-because-you couldn’t wait two seconds-to start-pulling some-some-mystery switches, you ass!” she shouted at him between gasps for air.

Juno put his hands up as well as he could and leaned away and tried to make himself very, very small and said nothing while Alessandra continued to cling to his arm. He stole glances at the room while he listened to her breathing slowly, agonizingly become less ragged. It was easier to see now, partially because the dust was receding, and partially because there was a huge opening in the ceiling. They’d found the loading dock, apparently, there was a giant circle cut out of the ceiling so it could become a floating platform. There was a staircase leading up now, too—a connection to a larger entrance? And it looked like the main source of the creaking they had heard was the conveyer belts trying to turn themselves on with limited generator power and what sounded like a thousand broken gears. There was dust and ash swirling too thickly to see below waist height, but he could hear the clunks of it matching up with the shaking of the machine. With his free arm, Juno carefully reached up and flipped the first four switches Alessandra had pointed out into the off position.

The creaking stopped. It was just their breathing and the settling of dust.

“Give me a second, I’ll be fine, I’m okay, I’m okay, I’mokay,” Alessandra said, and she was still holding his arm, and he should have told her to let go but he deserved it, he deserved this. Juno didn’t know what he made her remember, but it was clearly bad, and some broken stitches and a bruise were the least penance he could take.

They sat like that for a minute or two. Then, all in one motion, Alessandra let go of him, ran her hands through her hair, and suddenly she was standing again. Her hands had residence on the back of her neck, and she walked briskly to the center of the room, swinging her arms into big, dramatic stretches, sort of the way Juno did when he had too much energy and there was nothing for him to shoot at.

“Alessandra, I’m sorr—” he started, and she said, “It’s over. I don’t want to talk about it,” and Juno could understand that.

He got up and pretended that an entire quadrant of body was not in severe pain. He’d worked through worse.

“So, uh. We found the loading entrance,” she said, a little breathlessly.

“Yeah,” Juno said, trying to keep a reasonable distance from her by staying close to the conveyer belts. “We… did do that,” and he took a step but there was nothing beneath his foot, and he let out a shout and Alessandra whipped around and had her fists up but Juno’s foot hit something solid and he stumbled forward and downward until he was pressed against a wall and finding his footing again.

“Found a staircase,” Juno said, his face doubly muffled in his scarf and also in an obsidian wall.
“Yeah, that’s weird,” she said, her voice a little too frantic and her statement a little too inane.

They both looked down the stairs which were visible now that two flashlights focused on them. It was almost totally dark. There was more dust there than above, and a faint blue glow rising.

“I’m gonna go down there,” Juno decided. “You can, uh, keep watch, or something, if you want.”

“I… really need to punch something, I think,” Alessandra said. “And it doesn’t seem like we’re going to find anything for that up here. Besides, there’s not even anything worth shutting down on this floor. If there’s anything like an answer in here, it’s probably in the terrifying subbasement.”

“Terrifying basement? What happened to this place being beautiful?” Juno asked.

“A lot of things,” Alessandra said quietly, and pushed past him down the stairs, flashlight out and footsteps louder than necessary. He hissed pain into his scarf and hoped she didn’t hear it, and followed her. “And most things worth seeing are both,” he thought she said, or maybe it was him.

The next floor down was a circle with radiating hallways around it. It was laid out like a star, or a panopticon. The center of it held a huge blue-white orb, scorched and with cracks radiating around it. He circled its circumference to find the source, and on the other side it was buzzing threateningly with electricity, a huge chunk of it smashed in like it was an egg.

Or, no, not like an egg, nothing in this underground labyrinth was egg-like, they couldn’t both be thinking about one of their repressed traumas right now, and Juno slid his thumb nervously across the place where his fingers joined his hand and moved his shoulder just enough that the pain of it brought him back.

Besides, he knew what this was, and it wasn’t an egg.

He called Rita again.

“Mr. Steel’s on again!” Rita shouted before she even said hello.

“Wait, don’t put me on speaker--”

“You’re on speaker, Mr. Steel,” Rita said.

“Hey, J,” Mick said from the back. “You two having fun out there?”

“Tons,” Juno said flatly. “Look, Rita, Alessandra and I found something, and there’s a computer here--”

“Put Ms. Strong on,” Rita said.

“But--”

“Put her on.”

Juno sighed. “Rita wants to talk to you,” he said, and handed her the comms.

Alessandra put it on speaker.

“Hey, Rita,” Alessandra said.

“Hi, Ms. Strong! How’s Mr. Steel doing?” and thought he heard the sound of a door opening in the background while Mick’s voice said “Hey, Al,” and Juno’s heart sped up.
“Same as always,” Alessandra said.

“I hope you aren’t letting him do anything dangerous, or impulsive,” Nureyev’s voice called from far-off, followed by the sound of a door closing, and Juno snapped “I can hear you,” and Alessandra said, “Does he ever do anything else,” but she was humorless and exhausted, and Juno unconsciously grabbed at his new bruise.


“Are you talking to Alessandra or are you talking to me?” Juno complained. “Either way, no. I can’t even teach myself about clothes.”

“You just need to start wearing things that aren’t neutrals sometimes,” Mick said.

“What’s wrong with neutrals?” Juno asked, and at the same time Alessandra said “They match everything!”

There was an uncomfortable silence on the other side of the comms, and he was pretty sure he could hear Nureyev weighing a response from miles away. “Maybe it’s a detective thing?” Mick ventured.

“We’re getting off track,” Alessandra snapped. “We found a subbasement that’s not supposed to be here. You know anything about it?”

“Gimme a sec,” Rita said, and Juno heard the sound of furious typing. “What’s it look like?”

“A panopticon with a big orb in the middle,” Alessandra reported.

“The orb’s a computer,” Juno said.

“Debatable,” Alessandra said.

“Right,” Rita said. “So… like…” And then the comms was all the sound of typing in a flurry.

“Rita, dear, that’s not what a panopticon looks like,” Nureyev said gently from the other end of the line.

“A panopticon is a prison, isn’t it? This is a prison shape!”

“That looks like it could be right,” Mick said.

“Like a star,” Juno half-shouted. “It’s shaped like a starburst.”

“You don’t have to yell, Mr. Steel, you’re on speaker!” Rita shouted.

“Everyone else is yelling!” Juno shouted back.

“Juno…” Alessandra said.

“So it’s… like this?” Rita asked.

“Yes, that’s right,” Nureyev confirmed, and Rita said a decisive “Mm-hmm. Okay, so I’m looking at blueprints from a Northstar lab, it looks like that’s how they design their labs. Which means! Drumroll, dj-uh-dj-uh-dj-uh-dj-uh-dj-uh!” Rita wasn’t great at impressions. “Maybe you’ll see some of the prototype robots! And we can adopt them and make them our mascot!”
“No mascots,” Juno said automatically.

"Juno," Alessandra repeated, and Juno looked up, and he saw something shining and metal and lit with white light perched on the wall, shaped like a grasshopper rubbing its front claw-things together, about the size of his hand, and its eyes—or, sensors, they were sensors on stalks, robots didn’t have eyes—were moving independently of one another over his face and whirring quietly, and then it froze.

“I think we found one,” he said softly, and he wasn’t sure why he did this, but he reached out a hand to it while Rita squealed excitedly and someone else on the line shushed her.

“Wait, is it a cute robot or a murder robot?” Rita asked. “Sometimes they look very similar. They actually reuse models for murder robots to be cute robots on a lot of streams, at first I thought that was lazy but then I realized that it was actually this really powerful statement about how our preexisting perceptions of things we don’t understand can color the way we perceive them in completely unrelated contexts,” and then the thing started making an insistent beeping noise.

“I think we’re about to find out,” Juno said, and the grasshopper reared back and shone a red light directly into his cybernetic eye. He didn’t flinch, but with the way his left eye was watering he knew he should have.

“Juno?” Alessandra asked, a warning.

“What’s happening?” Nureyev asked nervously, and his voice barely registered. Everything felt frozen in place.

And then the thing leapt onto Juno’s hand and latched onto his arm and scrambled up to his face, and it plunged its forelegs into his cybernetic eye and started rooting around, and Juno stumbled back and grabbed it and threw it to the ground as hard as he could, and it broke into pieces. “What was that?” Juno shouted, and Alessandra was tugging at his sleeve and pointing, but then she let go and looked at her hand.

“Are you bleeding?” she asked, and Juno remembered his shoulder, and he said, “Later,” because he saw what Alessandra was pointing at, and the voice on the phone said “What’s happening,” again, but more insistently now, and three more grasshoppers whirred into view, and one of them started repairing the broken one on the ground and the other two were looking at Juno.

“Time to run?” Juno asked.

“Time to run,” Alessandra agreed, and they took off in the direction the wire buried under the floor was leading, the people yelling from the other side of the comms all but forgotten.

Chapter End Notes

i’m replying to fewer comments now because the idea that i’m falsely inflating my comment count is Stressing Me Out, so i just want to take this platform to quickly say that every time someone comments something nice on this fic I have to cover my mouth with my hands and gasp, stars in my eyes, and if i could reply to everything without it adding to my number of comments i would because i so much want all of you to individually know how appreciative I am of it, you all are wonderful
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Juno and Alessandra make some new friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Juno was no stranger to running at the slightest provocation, but it felt a little silly to be running full strength from a couple of fragile automatons less than half the size of their real-life counterparts. Still, when there was a problem staying in place couldn’t solve, running as far and fast as possible was the next best answer. Besides, if Alessandra thought it was a good idea, it probably was.

“I think--they’re trying--to fix the eye,” Juno half-huffed, half-shouted at Alessandra, who was a few strides ahead of him. Beneath the tinned yells from his comms he heard more beeping, and risked a glance back at the rapidly lengthening hallway behind him. There were more of the grasshoppers now. Kind of a lot more, actually. Not enough to actually call pest control, but enough to decide that if any more showed up he’d definitely do it tomorrow if it was still a problem then.

“You think?” she yelled back, an unnecessarily sarcastic response to relevant information.

“I don’t know! Maybe it’s relevant--to whatever--your plan is?”

“What do you mean, my plan? This was your idea!” Alessandra shouted back at him, and there it was. A perfect reminder of why Juno tried to work alone. The detectives stared at each other, the dawning realization that neither of them had a plan festering between them, the sound of whirring and beeps and mechanical chirps multiplying behind them.

“Should’ve called that exterminator yesterday,” he said, mostly to himself. “Okay, new plan: part one is, we run like hell.”

“What’s part two?” Alessandra asked.

“Depends how good part one goes,” Juno said, and tried to run faster. Three people were yelling at him from his comms all at once, but they could wait.

He felt something land on his head, and he grabbed it before it could make a single move, and while he turned to throw it against the wall, he saw a metal swarm behind him.

Not ideal.

“Okay, bad, is how part one is going, so let’s introduce part two, which is: find a way to stop running like hell,” Juno called.

“Thank you for the descriptive and comprehensive plan, Steel, couldn’t do this without you,” she tossed back, and then looked ahead. “Idea,” she yelled, and ran even faster. Of course she had been running slower than her maximum. Juno, meanwhile, was currently at his absolute fastest. Between an opened wound and recent lack of exercise and light malnutrition and short legs, he wasn’t going to be winning any intergalactic presidential awards for speed. Alessandra was at the end of the dark,
eerie, buzzing hallway in moments, and Juno watched as she... stopped, and kind of bounced for a second, and then started kicking the wall ahead of her.

Juno didn’t have the most time to think about it, because around then two of the things jumped on him, and one scrambled up his neck and the other was caught in his hair, and he yelled “Why this,” while he tried to shake them and grab them off.

“Give me a second,” Alessandra yelled back without looking at him, and she gave the wall another decisive kick, which shook that portion with a thud. Juno threw the grasshoppers against the wall again, where they shattered. He felt something wet hit his face and ducked, slightly, and there was a weight on his back, and claws on his ear, and come on, and Alessandra was kicking the wall again, except now Juno was close enough to see in the violet light that what she was doing was kicking a door down.

He took just a second to envy how cool that was while a grasshopper plunged its forelegs into the pupil of his cybernetic eye and pulled it open. He didn’t feel it so much as he knew it. He felt the noises of it scrambling around in there through all the bones of his face and the caverns of his sinuses, and it wasn’t unpleasant, exactly, but it was overly familiar, like ordering a drink and turning around and suddenly there are unfamiliar hands are in unexpected places, and Juno did what he usually wanted to in those situations, which was: grab the thing, throw it on the ground, and give it a good stomp.

He heard another thud from Alessandra’s side of the doorway. “You’re going to break, the latch, you can’t close--agh,” he yelled as his face entertained a new visitor, but she got the idea.

“We can hold it! Do you have a better idea?” and her voice was frustrated and she kicked again and the door swung open and Juno was nearly there and she held the door with a “Get in get in get in get in,” and Juno felt metal legs on his cheek and heard beeping and felt probing lights all over him and the moment he got inside they both pressed the door closed, and Juno threw the grasshopper thing skittering up his arm onto the ground and stepped on it, hearing the crunch of metal, and Alessandra grabbed one off his back and threw it against the wall where it broke into damp, shining pieces, and they both took a second to take care of the eight or nine others who had gotten a free ride inside.

After a moment or two of harsh breathing and listening to the sounds of scuttering against the wall behind them, they returned their attention to the comms, which was still shouting various iterations of Juno’s name and demands for clarification.

“Hey, sorry, you all still there?” Alessandra asked, breathless.

She was met by three people yelling all at once. He picked out a J, a Mr. Steel, and a fair share of Junos.

“He’s fine,” Alessandra said over the tinny shouts. “Me too, if any of you were worried,” she added, but more quietly, and Juno looked at her, eyes a question. She didn’t look back.

“What is happening,” Nureyev demanded, and it sounded like his mouth was too close to the receiver.

“We got a chance to explore the local wildlife,” Juno said, looking at the room around him. It was mostly big, metal boxes. Mostly unharmed, except for a few obvious chunks missing and cracked and melted glass.

“What he means is, we got chased by a whole lot of robots that are trying to fix Juno’s eye up, and now we’re hiding in some kind of server room.” So that’s what the boxes were. Good to know.
One the other end of the phone, Rita squealed. “Tell me about the robots,” she said all in a rush. “Mr. Steel, I know this is all kinds of stressful for you, but I’ve wanted you to do a case with a good robot for years now, and the closest you got was that hacked ATM that kept giving people lists of their deepest insecurities instead of creds,” Rita said, and Juno shuddered.

“Don’t remind me.” That hadn’t even been a case, he had just started investigating it because he had to figure out who figured out so much about him. (The answer was that his spending habits happened to match up with those of someone who feared that the best thing they could do to improve the world was die; the perpetrator had been working for a weirdly specific market research firm and he’d had some kind of breakdown in the process. He got off without a charge by claiming it was performance art protected by free speech, and, Juno knew for a fact, mailing the judge a comprehensive list of their less-morally-acceptable spending habits).

Nureyev’s voice said something Juno couldn’t hear. “Nah, cameramen aren’t robots, legally they’re classified as film equipment.” Rita must have gotten the comms back from him. Juno had a strange moment of what must have been pride. It had been a while, so it was hard to be sure. He wondered if she knew she’d managed to steal a comms back from a master thief.

“Come on! Are they cute? How big are they? Gimme a size and shape to work with,” Rita demanded.

“I don’t know, small? Grasshopper shaped, but if grasshoppers were small?”

“Are. They. Cute,” Rita repeated in the voice Juno usually tried to avoid incurring.

“Let me try,” Alessandra breathed to Juno, trying not to get picked up by the comms. “They’re a whole lot less cute than you are,” and Juno definitely recognized that version of Alessandra’s voice from a different detectives-only field trip. It was pretty uncomfortable to be a third party to it.

“Don’t try to charm me, Ms. Strong, nothing’s as cute as I am,” Rita said resolutely, and Alessandra shrugged at him with an implied, Well, I tried. Judging from past experience, Rita should have at least giggled at that. She must have really been serious about her whole robot thing.

“Don’t hit on a secretary in front of her boss while she’s on the clock, Strong, I don’t want to have to see it,” Juno said. Also, it put Rita in a difficult position, but that could go unsaid for multiple reasons, not the least of which being that Rita really should have gone home a long time ago.

“Thanks for looking out, Boss,” and Rita’s voice came out sentimental, and he thought maybe they could move on before it went firm again. “But you’re not getting out of this one.”

Juno groaned. “I guess they could, to some people, be considered cute. I’ve been a little distracted by how they keep shoving their weird hands in my eye and trying to get me killed by a hopeful local government official, so if you could maybe just do some of your computer things now so I can get out of here without becoming a human tracking device again?”

“They must be really cute,” Mick’s voice said faintly from the background.

“I’m sure they’re adorable, Juno,” and maybe the call stuttered out for a second before Nureyev continued, that was a risk you took when you made a comms untrackable, “Detectives, are you somewhere safe? Do you need help? And Juno, Detective Strong said you were bleeding. Are you all right?” and the urgency in the way he said it brought Juno’s hand involuntarily to his bleeding shoulder, and his fingers kneaded it anxiously, just once.

“I’m fine.” Juno was at his gruffest. “Must have walked into something,” and the lie was out of his
mouth before he even knew he was saying it. Alessandra looked at him oddly, then her eyes
widened and she covered her mouth with her hands. Juno shook his head, quickly, and that must
have confirmed something for her because it was like her face went blank all at once.

“J?” Mick said from the background. Right. Mick was there.

“I’m fine. Or, I’ll be fine as soon as we get back. Which we can’t do if we don’t figure out why
we’re here. Rita, we’re in a server room. Can you make that… connect to a computer, somewhere?”
There was silence. “I don’t know, maybe there’s information in this? It has, buttons, and a vent. I
think it’s buttons? I don’t know.”

The silence continued. Juno, if he was being honest, had no idea what a server really was. He knew
that was where the cloud was, probably, he thought. He didn’t know what the cloud was, but he was
pretty sure it was in servers, so, that was one point for him.

It stretched on, until:

“Mr. Steel,” Rita said calmly. “I’m gonna ask you a question, and I think we’ve known each other
long enough that you owe me an honest answer.” She took a deep breath. “Are you a time traveler?
Are you from the past?”

“Hilarious,” Juno said drily.

“No. I mean it, Boss. If you’re a time traveler I can get you the help you need. I’ve seen all the
streams. What cursed you? Are you doomed to drift through the sands of time until you encounter
the reincarnation of your lost-love and they say your true name? That’s probably the easiest one to
deal with, we’ve got possibilities lined up there—”

“Rita, if you want to help me, tell me how to take the information out of this thing and into your
computer,” Juno interrupted before his ears got too hot. She was getting ideas again, and he really
did not need Rita involved in his… his… affairs. That was a safe enough word for it.

“Please tell me you know that’s not how it works.”

Juno didn’t say anything.

"Mr. Steel," Rita cried in frustration, and he heard a hand brush against the receiver, accompanied
by an indulgent, “I know,” from Mick.

“Can you please just tell me what to do!” Juno snapped, because for some reason the idea of Peter
Nureyev figuring out how bad he was with computers was stressing him out.

“Describe what you’re looking at to me.” Rita’s voice was flat, testing him.

Juno twisted his mouth. “Boxes?”

“Is he joking, or…?” He heard Peter Nureyev say under his breath.

“All he uses his computer for is a footrest,” Rita said back.

“Very funny. If that’s my computer, then what am I playing solitaire on?” Juno asked.

There was another long silence.

“Mr. Steel. Give the comms to Ms. Strong.”
“Yeah, okay,” Juno murmured, and he did. Alessandra’s eyes were distracted, but as soon as she took the comms she was all business.

“Hey,” Alessandra said. “It looks like they aren’t on, and they’re missing some pieces to them. What should I do?”

Rita was barking instructions, and Juno could hear an undercurrent of Mick explaining that yeah, Oldtown was kind of a crappy neighborhood, and it took him years to figure out how to do a routine search, himself, and Peter Nureyev was saying, “Really?” as if that meant something to him, and Juno decided that he didn’t want to be doing nothing anymore, so he got up, barricaded the door, and started checking the room. Alessandra had gotten out some kind of wire that was connected to the comms and was attaching it to the server, but she looked up when Juno passed her.

“The door?” she asked, frantic.

Juno gestured back at it. “I pushed one of those other boxes in front of it, it’ll hold. I’m checking something out,” he said, and walked to the wall where one of the grasshoppers was splattered.

Rita was screeching. “Mr. Steel, tell me you didn’t push one of the file servers out of place!”

Alessandra peered over. “No, that looks like some kind of locker—is it open? You should open that.”

“Can you do it? I’m looking at something,” he said, examining the mechanical parts on the wall. There was some kind of liquid splashed over them.

“Oh, were you looking at something? Well, in that case,” Alessandra said drily. “Sorry, Rita, what do I do now?”

Right. Alessandra was busy. “Okay, yeah, in a second,” he said, and went through his pockets quickly. He usually had some kind of cloth-thing to get samples on, and bags, but maybe he used the last one earlier. A lot earlier. Possibly several years ago. Well, whatever. It didn’t seem corrosive or anything—honestly, it just looked like what happened when you smashed a real grasshopper—so he just grabbed a couple of metal pieces and put them in his pocket. He’d have to remember to wash his hands later.

Part of him registered that this seemed like a bad idea, but by this point in his life, he’d be more concerned if it seemed like a good one.

Juno moved on to the locker. It was a pretty old lock, which would have taken a good lockpick about a second to open if it hadn’t been melted into one piece. As it was, it took thirty seconds, because it took Juno twenty to figure out which of his pockets he put his laser cutter into.

“C’mon, Calvera, you couldn’t even splurge for a keypad?” he asked as he cut a neat, burning incision into the lock.

The door opened, and Juno peered inside.

“Found the body,” Juno announced in Alessandra’s direction. “Except… wait.”

The thing in the closet was mostly human-shaped. And it definitely smelled like a dead body. But this wasn’t quite a dead body.

Juno shone his flashlight at it, and he was met with the bright glare of dirty metal.

And then it moved.
"I know you"

It said.

“Nope,” Juno said, and closed the door, of the locker, which clunked back at him, and he had to hold it shut because that lock wasn’t going to be holding anything anytime soon. “Not today.”

“What was that?” Alessandra asked. Juno was turning the locker so that the two unclosable doors could keep each other honest.

“Nothing I want to deal with,” Juno answered.

“Juno?”

Juno sighed. “It’s some kind of humanoid skeletal robot.”

Alessandra looked down at the comms. “We have way too much of the download left to not look at the humanoid skeletal robot, Steel.”

“Or we knew you” it said again from the locker.

“Or we can just interview it from out here, see? We’re doing great.”

“Right, we ask it a question and it does a robotic shriek at us. Effective.”

“I think it’s working fine,” Juno said. “You have a name?”

“Or someone like you” the voice said.

“See?” Juno said. “It’s still saying creepy, unsettling things, but now it’s saying things from inside of this box, where neither of us have to look at it. This is going to be one of the best interrogations I’ve ever done.”

Alessandra looked at him oddly. “It’s not saying anything,” she said. “That’s just--sounds.”

This felt familiar.

”where are they,” the voice asked.

“It just said, ‘where are they,’” Juno said. “Say it again,” he said to the box.

”where are they,” the voice asked again, more insistent, and Alessandra jerked back.

“What?” she asked.

“Is that sine wave speech?” Mick asked, and Alessandra raised her eyebrows, looking the way most people did when Mick knew something relevant.

“Probably,” Juno said.
"What," she asked again.

“So, sine wave speech is like… if you took the frequencies of talking, and found sort of… the central points of them, and then turned those into sine waves.” Juno wasn’t following at all, which, when Mick was talking, meant he probably knew what he was talking about. Good for him. “It’s actually really cool, originally they were just part of some old-timey thought experiment but then artificial intelligence got big. So, for a while people were using them to figure out whether their artificial intelligence programs were good enough to keep using without having to program a voice that actually sounded like a voice, and a lot of places have them as backup in case a robot’s artificial articulators degrade. Did I tell you guys about the week I spent as a backup mechanic in Westside? Ran into a couple of these things. Couldn’t understand a word of ‘em for the first few days, but by the time I was done there I was sort of a pro at it.”

“I’m sure you were,” Juno said. “Guessing you were less of a pro at fixing them?”

“The world wasn’t ready for my methods,” Mick said.

“What kind of methods?” Alessandra asked.

“Mostly? Hang glider attachments.”

“Sounds about right,” Juno said. “Rita? Questions for the robot?”

He was met with silence.

" where are they “

it said quietly from the locker.

“She’s typing,” Nureyev supplied.

“Right,” Juno said. “Well, if none of us have any questions for the robot, I’d say we’re about through here.”

“Nice try,” Alessandra said. “Did you check to see if it has anything on it?”

“Other than fire damage and the charred flesh of whoever was in that locker with it? No. Because I didn’t want to look through the forty-year-old charred flesh.”

“We’re doing an investigation, Steel, we can’t just not look at something because it makes you a little bit queasy.”

He almost said Then you do it. Almost. And then he thought about it.

Alessandra Strong was a lot of things. Competent. Tough. Intelligent. And a damn good detective. And she was so good at being those things that it was easy to think that was all. Even if you’d just seen her have a goddamn panic attack. Even if you’d read her mind less than a year ago. It was a lot to consider.

“Fine,” Juno said, and went to turn the locker. And a creaking, tarnished hand pushed out the door and grabbed him by the shirt and jerked him forward.

" where are they “

And the other door, the one behind the locker, had enough space to crack open now, and ten-fifteen-
thirty grasshoppers pushed their way into the room.

"Juno!" Alessandra yelled as he was engulfed in robotic whirs and beeps and lights, and he heard her rush forward, but he was a little distracted by the non-feeling of forelegs pushing into his eye again. He tried pushing and pulling them off again, but there were too many.

Then, suddenly, they were all scrambling away, and he got to see Alessandra punch a robot in the head. With both eyes. One of which had a whole lot going on in it. Too many lights, too many sounds.

“Hey, Alessandra? I’ve got good news and bad news.” And the comms was screeching at him again, but Juno ignored it and stood up. “Bad news is, I have a functional tracker in my right eye and about fifty missed calls from O’Flaherty’s people telling me exactly what they’re gonna do with it.”

“The good news better be pretty damn good, then,” Alessandra said, stepping on the fragile joint in the robot’s shoulder, which gave her just enough time to rip her arm out of its grip.

In answer, Juno pulled out his gun and fired a few shots. The robot and the grasshoppers still in the room went down in a second.

“That is good news,” Alessandra said.

“Yeah. Not as good as the bad news is bad, but, I’ll take it,” he said, and he couldn’t stop his face from forming a grin. He’d forgotten how good it felt to hold a gun and know he couldn’t miss, even if it also meant he was about to get himself and probably most of the people he knew killed. “You should finish getting whatever’s left on that server and get out of here.”

“Don’t think I will, thanks,” Alessandra said. “Rita, can you do this any faster?”

“Two minutes,” Rita said.

“Okay, we can probably make that work. Fox--you still have the frequency emitter, right?”

No one answered.

“He, uh, left,” Mick said. “Or, no, he’s back. Hey, what are you doing?”

“Something dangerous and impulsive,” Nureyev’s voice said pleasantly. “Detectives? I’m coming to meet you. I’ll be there soon. Don’t worry about leaving without me; I’ll catch up.”

“No, don’t come over here, it’s not safe, you’ll get caught,” Juno said all at once.

“You insult me, detective,” he said, and Juno heard the sound of a window sliding open.

“Why did he leave through the window?” Mick asked.

“Because he’s a man of mystery,” Rita said dreamily, and Juno said “Can you please focus on getting us out of here?”, and he heard the sound of cars approaching.

“Plan?” Juno asked.

“Rita hacks, I punch, you shoot, and we survive long enough to figure out the rest later?” she suggested.

“Sounds good to me,” Juno said, feeling the eye that wasn’t quite his balancing his vision again, and he crouched next to the door and set his gun back to stun.
this fic is officially Actually Novel Length, which I know I put in the tags but I thought I was JOKING, i'm so sorry, thank you for reading this much of a thing i'm doing, you're all incredible and boy do i hope your expectations for this fic is that there will be more of it because there sure sure will be that
“Mind giving me a second? I have to check my calls,” Juno said in a strangled voice to the woman whose arm was tight around his throat. The dots in his vision were getting a little thicker than usual, even more so when the arm constricted him further.

“Shut up already,” the woman said, bored.

“Gold luck with that one,” Alessandra Strong said from somewhere behind them, and Juno felt his whole body spin with the force of Alessandra’s fist making contact with the face of the woman holding him. He fell to the ground and breathed, a sensation he had missed more than expected. He grabbed at his throat and tried to make his windpipe un-crush itself and looked around for his gun, which he’d lost around when he started getting strangled. The room he’d been dragged into was just as dark and eerie as all the others, although this one was certainly spinning and buzzing more than he remembered. Or maybe that was the reduced oxygen and continued blood loss combined with the adrenaline rush of a near-death experience. The answer was unknown to modern medicine, or at least unknown to Juno’s foggy memories of human biology class.

He grabbed the bottom edge of the frame of the observation window at the wall behind him and pulled himself into a standing position. The glass was shattered, and the room inside faded to pitch-black. Probably some kind of lab or set-up for observation of some experiments or something. He wasn’t overly familiar with the scientific method, but observation sounded like an important part of it.

As Alessandra hit the guard with three more neat, well-placed jabs and knocked her backwards with a side kick, Juno spotted his gun and loped over to pick it up, moving as quickly as he could in his slightly oxygen-deprived state. “Need a little help?” he asked, and then shot. It was tricky--Alessandra was inches from the woman, and the path to the woman without hitting an ally would be a tough shot. For other people, anyway. Alessandra was left pulling her arm back while the woman crumpled to the ground.

They both looked at her, then at each other. Alessandra broke first. “What the hell, Steel?”

“Just returning the favor,” Juno said, twirling his gun in his hand and almost dropping it in the process. He briefly wondered if it meant something that it took shooting a whole menagerie of robots and two or three people, without worrying about whether he was being used or set up, to make him feel like himself for the first time in months. After the shortest possible period of musing, he slid that thought aside. He could spend time unpacking it if he really wanted to, but as far as symptoms and symbolism went at least this one was exhilarating instead of debilitating.

“No, not that,” she hissed. “You can’t just run off by yourself whenever you want. We had a plan.” She was keeping her voice down. Juno didn’t really see the point.
“What part of ‘constant surveillance’ don’t you understand?” Juno said. “They’re after me, Strong.”

“Both of us now,” she said lightly, but her voice was titanium.

“Look, these people seem like ‘a bird in the hand is worth two thousand creds on the underground bird trade’ types, and as far as birds go, I’m pretty high in demand,” he rambled out.

“... Am… I supposed to be following this metaphor, or was that a cryptic reference to your past, or?”

Juno bristled. He didn’t make that many cryptic references. Usually they were pretty damn overt. “I’m under some stress, okay? They can’t all be winners. Look, just—we can meet back up when Fox catches up with us,” [if he doesn’t get caught by someone else first, what’s taking him so long? [he never gets caught (but what if this time) and when he does he gets out of it fine] but there’s a first time for everything] and Juno pinched the bridge of his nose, right between his eyebrows, “so that you don’t get hurt?”

“My plan was better,” she said, and made no move.

“Well, one of us has to get out of here with whatever Rita found, and only one of us isn’t a human tracking device.” How much time had passed? More people had to be coming.

“You took the comms!” she rebutted.

“Oh, right,” Juno said, and pulled it out of his pocket. “You, uh, had your hands full when the download finished.” To be entirely accurate, at the time the download finished, Alessandra Strong was throwing one guard onto another guard and knocked them both into the wall. Technically Juno could have just stunned them immediately, but Alessandra had really wanted to get into a fight. After the episode upstairs he couldn’t blame her. “It’s all yours,” he said, and held the comms out to her.

Alessandra stared at his outstretched hand for a moment, then took it. “At least you didn’t swallow this one.”

“One time. I swallowed one pill one time and you can’t let me live it down.”

“We’ve talked about this,” Alessandra said.

“Have we?” Juno asked.

“Extensively. Come on. We need to get out of here, before we run into anything else that wants to kill us.” Alessandra made to walk away. Juno didn’t follow, and she let out a sigh of frustration. “You are wasting our time, Steel, so get a move on,” she said.

Juno still didn’t move. “I think we should split up before whoever’s walking down here right now finds us,” he said.

“What--”

“Footsteps,” Juno said quietly.

Alessandra furrowed her brow and tried to listen. As they got closer, her eyes widened and her head suddenly turned to the direction they were coming from. “Damn,” she said.

“I can take them out, but you’ve got to go upstairs and find Fox and get each other out of here, I’ll figure this out,” Juno said, and readied his gun towards the steps.

Alessandra’s jaw clenched; he could see the muscle in her face twitch. “No,” and she took four long
strides forward as three armed guards entered the room all at once. Juno shot the guns out of their hands, easy, one by one, and Alessandra grabbed the one in front and hit him, hard.

“You left me alone--” One of the other guards grabbed her, and Juno stunned them with a quick shot to the head. She shook her arm and made a fist, and then jabbed the big one again, but he ducked and sent another ungraceful hit back in her direction, “--to fight off two guards by myself--” she went to kick the guard, but he caught her leg and tried to sweep it from her; she used her momentum in falling to throw him onto his back, “--and now you’re acting like I’m some civilian--” she flipped him so he was facedown, “who can’t take care of myself?” She pinned the guard down. “Which is it?”

“I’m sorry, was I interrupting something?” the guard asked sarcastically. It was had to tell. “Should I go, give you two some time to hash this out?” His voice was crushed into the floor.

“I’m glad you’re feeling chatty,” Alessandra said, breathing hard, and she twisted his arm a little. “We have a couple of questions for you.”

Juno’s mouth fell open with envy. The thought *I want to be her* had burst into his head fully-formed, and it didn’t leave a lot of room for questions.

Good thing one was provided to him in the form of the two bodies on the ground before him.

“Weren’t there three of you?” he asked, and Alessandra’s eyes went wide.

Juno engaged his eye and fired a stun bolt over his left shoulder without even turning his head, and heard the person who was about to jump him fall to the ground.

“You know your people gave me a way to see heat signatures, right?” Juno asked. He didn’t miss the racket in his brain, exactly, but he had to admit that some of it was a useful racket. It still didn’t feel comfortable, or like it was his, or anything less than a violation, but it had utility, so he might as well use it.

He did a cursory check of the room. Nothing else, yet. “All right, now that it’s just the three of us,” Juno said.

“I’m not telling you anything,” the body on the ground said, and his voice was younger than Juno thought at first. Must have been mid-twenties. Too young for this job. “You’re killers and thieves and Hyperion City has enough of those.”

Well, he wasn’t the most wrong anyone had ever been. Alessandra and Juno made eye contact and silently agreed not to bother disputing the ‘killers’ accusation. Alessandra looked… sad, mostly. “What are you doing here,” she asked, and he heard years in it.

“I’m doing my damn job,” the man cried out, and he twisted his head up to look at Juno, then seemed to think better of it. “Ramses O’Flaherty is going to make this city better for once in our sorry lives and I won’t let a double agent like you stop him!”

This was a kid. Juno used to give speeches like that to a mirror, before he’d realized that the kind of good he could be wasn’t an innate quality like with everybody else. For Juno Steel, good was a choice that he had to make over and over and over and over and over again without knowing all the terms of the bargain, and one slip-up, one moment of being weak and choosing the wrong, selfish thing, could knock that all down and into pieces. He’d learned quick. He still slipped up. He slipped up a lot. He’d stopped himself from wanting so often that he had almost forgotten what wanting felt like, but he still wanted so much more than he was allowed.
He couldn’t be good, because too much of him wasn’t. But maybe if he did enough good things
despite that it wouldn’t matter in the end. Except he usually screwed up more than he fixed. Except
he was so, so deep in the red on net good. Except he couldn’t tell which was sicker, him or the city
he lived in.

He still gave the speeches sometimes. But they were different now.

“Look, kid,” Juno said.

“I’m a grown man, you, you… criminal consorts,” the kid yelled back.

“Yes, yes, you’re incredibly mature,” Alessandra said, still sounding oddly sad. “Have you been
tracking anyone else? Where did you take them?”

Juno thought he saw her loosen her grip. Just a little bit.

“Just your conspirator friends. They get a fair trial,” the kid said. “So, no, the HCPD isn’t involved.”
He sounded so... arrogant. But at least it was good to know that Juno wouldn’t have to deal with the
HCPD again anytime soon. One government entity with a vendetta against him at a time. “You’re
both going to rot for what you did to Cath and Lee and Rina and, uh. What was his name. The new
guy.”

“What, stunning them?” Juno asked. “A couple of punches?”

“They’re dead, you monster,” the boy said, and that didn’t make sense, because that was four--well,
not names, but, identities?--and even if Nureyev had… taken care of… the people following them,
way back then, the numbers didn’t add up.

Three options.

One, the kid was lying to stall for time to get reinforcements. Very possible. Juno would have done
it. Did do it, usually. Blatant lies had saved his life several times over.

Two, Juno was getting framed for something. Also not out of O’Flaherty’s depth. But it was
unnecessary, unless they needed someone to be to blame, and there were probably better options
than Juno, but so much about this didn’t make sense that he didn’t write off the possibility.

Three. Peter Nureyev was here, and killing with impunity, and not letting them see him. Considering
it made his whole chest tight.

“We should… get moving soon,” Juno said. “More people are going to follow.”

An image: Peter Nureyev, holding a knife over Mag, for Brahma.

He wouldn’t.

Of course he would.

“You want to do the honors, or should I?” Alessandra asked, and looked up at him, and her whole
demeanor changed. “Behind!”

A metal hand grabbed him. ”you“ Its voice was fizzling, winding down.

'reback"

didyouforget“
And the grip on his arm was firm, and Alessandra got up to free him, because the burned, melting thing was crushing his arm and reaching for his face. “What were they doing here,” she yelled, and punched a robot in the face for the second time that day, and as her fist made contact Juno heard a crunching sound and ring from the metal hitting her fist rang so much less hollow than it had earlier, and she let out a low-pitched, groaning shout and doubled over.

“Alessandra?” he asked frantically, and the thing was pulling at his face. “Buy me a drink first,” he said, the words stretched by his mouth, and Alessandra was back up and she kicked the thing down. For the second time, Juno was dragged to the ground with the thing holding him.

And then Alessandra ripped its arms off, which was, admittedly, a first. It must have run on some kind of hydraulic system, because the ground was suddenly very, very wet, and Juno was scrambling backwards and getting back to his feet because he didn’t want to be there and someone else had his arms and someone was taking his gun and hauling him upwards and the worst, most selfish and craven part of his brain asked, Nureyev? and then he felt the gun to his head. That wasn’t entirely unprecedented, since their relationship was what ‘it’s complicated’ was made for, so he didn’t break away as quickly as he needed to and suddenly that kid, that misguided kid who was playacting the hero, had him.

“You were distracting us?” Alessandra asked, enraged, but then the robot-thing, melted and cooled practically into a solid, was getting up and walking towards her, and she had to kick it down again, and took a few steps backwards, and Juno was yanked further away from her, so he was well out of arm’s reach.

“Wrong place, right time,” the kid said. “You take care of whatever that thing is, and then we’re all gonna head out on a little trip.”

“Wait, you don’t know what that thing is?” Juno asked. “So you’re just protecting this place with no explanation?”

“I’m not protecting anything except Hyperion City. I came here to pick up a couple of crooks,” the kid said with self-deceptive bluster, and it was a cringeworthy line Juno could imagine himself saying a thousand different ways fifteen years ago. In the background, Alessandra Strong stabbed a robot through the chest with what looked like a metal pipe, and swept the thing up so she could pin it to the wall like some twisted fourth-grade etymology project.

Juno saw the glint of metal about the size of his hand whirl and leap into the room.

“Your friend’s a lot better at this than you are,” the kid observed.

“Tell me about it,” Juno said.

“Too bad she has to deal with you,” he said, and Alessandra, heaving breaths of exertion and leaning into the pipe she’d just thrust through the wall, turned her head slowly towards them, and Juno had never even imagined Alessandra hating anything, but he looking at her face now hit him physically, like when the electricity in his apartment acted up and gave him a shock. He was glad not to be the target of Alessandra Strong’s ire.

“I don’t know, I think I have some redeeming qualities,” Juno said, confident in having Alessandra Strong on his side.

The guard took a step back.

“We’re, uh.” He was rattled. “I’m taking your friend upstairs now. You do anything, make any
moves, and I shoot him right now.”

Her left hand was in a tight fist. Her right looked like it really, really wanted to be. (Behind her, Juno saw a couple of grasshoppers peering into the room, approaching the pinned automaton.) Then she took a deep breath. “Lead the way,” she said, and she twitched her whole head like she was trying to shake the anger off of it. It clearly didn’t work.

“Thanks for your cooperation,” he said, and started walking Juno up the stairs, backwards. “This is going to look so good on my resume,” and it came out like a gloat.

“What, are you looking for a nine-to-five?” Juno asked, struck by the absurdity of it. They were back on the main floor now, and there was a car parked in the landing dock.

“I’m technically campaign staff,” the kid said. “It’s a short-term kinda gig, but once we get police reform--.”

He didn’t finish, because he heard the sound of a car approaching. “That should be our ride,” he said.

“I call shotgun,” Juno said automatically, and the arms holding him shook once as the guard half-laughed despite himself, then immediately straightened up.

“That wasn’t even good,” he said.

“You laughed, though,” Juno said, as the car got closer, and louder, and Alessandra looked out somewhere beyond the landing dock, her moments-ago stoically enraged face altered by furrowed brows. Juno tried to turn to look, but the shove of the gun against his head convinced him not to.

The car was approaching more quickly than Juno expected. It seemed to be behind them in a second, and judging from Alessandra’s face, they had been right earlier. The aesthetics were great, and he had to miss it because he was being held hostage by barely-adult. Typical.

They car slowed to a stop, screeching, and a door was thrown open, and the kid turned Juno around like a trophy and said, “I got them--” and there was Peter Nureyev.

“Don’t kill him!” was the first thing Juno said, and he wasn’t sure who he was talking to. Nureyev’s eyes were somewhere far, far off, and he was approaching with a knife in hand.

“Hey,” the guard said, and took a step back, and Juno remembered he had to close his eye because he couldn’t let anyone see Peter Nureyev’s face because of him, and luckily he was an expert in self-deprivation, and he felt the guard take the gun off his head and point it at Nureyev and--

Alessandra Strong grabbed the kid and wrenched him off of Juno, knocked the gun out of his hand, and hit him with a left hook and a yell.

Nureyev kept walking towards the guard, who was just a kid, even more so now that he was still and on the ground. The thief’s eyes were glittering not like jewels but like fire, and he was ready to burn.

So Juno did the only thing that made sense, and grabbed him by the shoulders, and tried to hold his ground while Peter Nureyev advanced like a lion towards prey and pushed Juno stumbling backwards. “We have to go,” and he would have said his name, he felt a premonition of the name Peter on his lips and it was new but somewhere in his chest he wanted to feel what it would sound like, except that name wasn’t his to use. “We’ve got to get going now, that’s just a kid,” and both of Juno’s eyes were open because he’d forgotten caution entirely, and Peter Nureyev wasn’t going to stop but then he looked at Juno’s face and his arm and back to his face and the knife fell out of his
hand.

In a second he had his hands on either side of Juno’s face and they were eye-to-eye, Juno leaning upwards and Nureyev sloping downwards.

“You’re bleeding,” he said, “You have a bruise,” and he ran a thumb over the place where that thing had grabbed him and his fingers over his neck where he was being strangled only minutes ago, and Juno’s hands had moved to Nureyev’s wrists, which were a straight line down from his face, and he was so close and they were so close and he wanted to know so badly if his lips were still as soft as they had been months ago--

“I will hot-wire this car and leave you behind, Steel, I swear I will!” Alessandra snapped.

“If that’s what you want,” Nureyev asked distractedly, and Juno was close enough to feel it, and he didn’t let go, and he was looking at Juno like--like he wanted--

Juno’s brain, heart, probably liver, that thing on the right side of his gut he could never remember the name of, all of the vital organs really, were stuttering out too many thoughts, and he didn’t think he’d be able to get out of this without letting himself ruin Peter Nureyev’s life.

“We talked about this an hour ago, Steel, one Martian hour ago we--” Alessandra stopped. “Is that the RUBY7?”

“What?” Juno asked, and he pulled back immediately to look at the car.

He knew that car.

“So it is,” Nureyev said with all the shock and surprise of someone finding a long-forgotten sock in the laundry. The shades behind his eyes were drawn again. “I hadn’t noticed.”

Juno’s head was still spinning. He couldn’t string words together. “You,” he started, then stopped and began again and made it a full sentence. ”You,” and he jabbed a finger into Peter Nureyev’s chest because it was so much simpler to be angry at him, and he welcomed having an emotion that was easy.

“y O U “

“w h e r e a r e t h e y”

“h a v e y o u s e e n h i m “

Juno, Nureyev, and Alessandra all turned to the stairs, where melted metal bodies were emerging from the underground. One of them had no arms and a hole in its chest.

“Your description of these… robots? … leaves something to be desired,” Nureyev said.

“Different robots,” Alessandra Strong said. “We have to go, now,” she said, and the robots kept walking towards them, and Juno heard something so he turned around for a second, and the good news was, he did get to see a car drive into the warehouse through the loading dock, and it dotted out the light for a minute and then curved in, and it really did look great, aesthetics-wise. Very cinematic. Would have been better if it were Peter Nureyev in the RUBY7, but this was still pretty good, even if he didn’t have much time to enjoy the view.

“I still have shotgun, I called it,” Juno said, and Peter Nureyev and Alessandra Strong were heading back to the car, and he was going to follow but then he thought better of it. He had two eyes again,
just for a little while, and he wanted to get his Faustian bargain’s worth. He ran to the kid to grab his gun back from where Alessandra had dropped it.

He slid to the ground and it was back in his hands, except now there were three robots staring at him and surrounding him and making their impossible, garbled words at once and he couldn’t pick a single line out from the others.

Now that there were lights from outside and the overall ambiance was less dark-and-violet, Juno could see a little better.

It almost looked like the robots were covered in blood. Almost. But that would be, but there were, but--it really looked a lot like blood. Juno froze and didn’t get up because he couldn’t get up because it really looked like blood and they were reaching for him again and that car was approaching--and the RUBY7 reversed right into the robots and sent them flying.

Peter Nureyev leaned across from the driver’s seat and swung the passenger’s side door open. “Get in,” he called, and Juno couldn’t make himself move because it was all too much even as the other car was approaching, and then Alessandra Strong was climbing forward from the backseat and reaching for him, and she grabbed his hands and he let himself be hauled into the glorious stolen broken promise of a car.

“Where’s the, the thing, the frequency emitter thing,” Alessandra demanded as she reached across Juno to pull his door shut while his head reeled with memories of being Dahlia Rose and having another hostile foreign object waiting in his head to sabotage him, and his shoulder throbbed and wept and he felt it below the flurry of images rotating through his mind, and Peter Nureyev slammed his foot on the gas. Alessandra manipulated the wrist of her right hand back and forth, cringing hard at the sensation. It was swelling and turning colors.

“Floor of the backseat. When you’re ready, of course,” Nureyev added to Juno.

Juno eyed the car behind them. “In a minute.” He felt the weight of his gun in his hands, felt both his eyes working in tandem again, heard the computerized voice in his head and did some calculating. All those things together added up to a 'why not', so he engaged assisted targeting for what he hoped would be the last time.

“Mind if I put down the window?” he asked, and was leaning halfway out of the car and aiming at their tail before he had an answer.

Chapter End Notes

who would win?  
-a beautiful detective who's never turned his back on anyone (except for you), OR  
-a very good, very fast car?

edited 9/19/2017
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Welcome to the obligatory car chase.

Recommended listening: Hit and Run, LOLO*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Juno was shooting at the headlights of the car behind them when the RUBY7 took a sharp turn and a rough tug on his coat jerked him unceremoniously back into the car. He lost balance and fell back against the oddly luxurious upholstery of the passenger seat and swiveled, frustrated, to Alessandra.

“I was kind of in the middle of something there, Strong!” he complained.

Alessandra gestured at a flickering lightpost that blurred past them, right where Juno had been hanging out his window. “That was about to be in the middle of you, Steel.”

“This city’s zoning practices are unsafe and incomprehensible,” Nureyev said through gritted teeth from the driver’s seat.

“Those things are on every street corner, you shouldn’t take that sharp a turn when someone’s hanging out your window,” Alessandra volleyed back.

“We are being tailed and they are shooting at him and the layout of this city is senseless,” Nureyev spat.

“You’re doing fine. I can keep myself from getting killed, I’m going back outside,” Juno said, gun drawn, eager to escape the tense confines of the car.

He couldn’t admit it, even in his own head, but even though this was his fault, and even though he knew that it would be much easier to go through the whole unpleasant process of overloading the eye and overwhelming his brain and turning the damn thing off again so they could outrun their tail using what was possibly Mars’s best getaway car, he chose not to because for once he was… enjoying himself. It had been a very long time since he’d felt useful, like he had the capability to accomplish anything without making it all worse with every attempt. It had been even longer since he had been allowed to choose his own enemies and shoot at whoever he damn well pleased.

Now he was a free agent and he could finally do something again. Giving that up was unthinkable.

Alessandra grabbed Juno’s arm in a vice grip for the second time that day before he could pull himself out the passenger-side window and feel the rush of shooting and hitting and feeling bullets fly by again. This time Alessandra’s hand on his arm was gentler, and on an arm and shoulder that felt up to the abuse. She had the box that Nureyev had used to break his eye in her right hand. Punching a robot had done no favors to it. It was swelling and turning a color that Juno usually only ever caught on his face in the mirror the morning after taking a chance on Hyperion City’s seedier bars.
“This is ridiculous, Juno, you’re going to get hurt. Fox, how does this thing work?”

“I know what I’m doing, Strong!” Juno said, and tried to shake her hand off. Of course it didn’t work except to make her grab tighter, but it was worth a try. “As soon as we lose them I’ll do it, okay?”

“No, we’re doing it now, Juno. You are putting us in danger—”

“You’ll still be in danger, I just won’t be able to do anything to protect you!”

“We don’t need protecting!” Alessandra shouted back. “We are both capable of taking care of ourselves, and I have had enough of getting shot at and chased down and trying to outrun things today!” Her words were punctuated by shots hitting the back window of the RUBY7. They bounced right off. It really was a quality car. “Now how does this thing work?”

“If something happens to either of you it is going to be my fault, let me do this,” Juno said desperately. Alessandra opened her mouth, but Nureyev interrupted by reaching across Juno’s lap and starting to undo the latch on the glove compartment. A shot shook the car while he was distracted, and he said something that had the cadence of a curse and the vowel system of some other world and sat back up to execute a sharp weave. Juno looked back and saw the car chasing them loudly swerve to try to match their speed.

“Juno, get the glove compartment,” Nureyev said, and as he spoke his voice siphoned tension out of himself. It was enough of a non sequitor that he complied without question, and the small door slid away to reveal its contents.

“Hey, Fox?” Juno asked. He had to stop himself from allowing the wrong name to fall out of his mouth. He had dropped all pretense of his other identity, and it was making Juno’s head tie itself in knots. He almost called him Duke, but that had more memories than he cared to delve into attached to it.

“Yes?” Nureyev was reaching into the glove box but keeping his eyes on the road, voice and demeanor suddenly so placid that it seemed like he was driving to some calm lakeside for Intergalactic Settlement Day, rather than getting shot at by guards managed by political campaigners.

“If you haven’t been using the RUBY7 until now, why is the glove compartment full of knives?”

Nureyev glanced into the glove box, which held an intricate system of knife racks, organized by shape, color, and, as far as Juno could guess, maximum temperature. There must have been forty of the things in there, the smallest the size of Juno’s thumb and the largest roughly the shape and size of a bread knife, assuming that your bread routinely came wrapped in a human ribcage. Tucked into the sides were various forms of ID, which Juno was sure would all bear Nureyev’s face and someone else’s name. The thief raised an eyebrow with the barest minimum of effort; it only twitched higher than the other by inference.

“Hm. The previous owner must not have had any gloves,” Nureyev said. “Now, would you mind handing me my throwing knives?”

“Are those passports?” Alessandra asked, letting go of Juno’s arm to investigate.

“Ah, yes, I was going to return those to the post office, must have forgotten, thank you for the reminder,” he said, and slid his hand in and out of the pocket overflowing with alternate identities from planets Juno only recognized from maps and star charts and transferred them to his coat pocket. “My throwing knives, Juno?”
Juno picked one at random and handed it to him. “That’s a push dagger,” Nureyev said with barely a glance.

“A what.”

“Not for throwing,” Nureyev clarified.

“Any knife can be for throwing if you throw it,” Juno grumbled, and Nureyev’s face passed through several phases in an instant, and Juno was a scholar on that face, or at least he’d taken a pretty good crash course in it, and for just a second Juno saw not quite amusement or frustration or a scowl or a smirk or closed doors or picked locks and he couldn’t place it except

(not every name can be as pretty as juno,)

and then he wished he hadn’t.

Keeping his eyes on the road ahead, Nureyev leaned across Juno again and picked up three knives, held in the spaces between his fingers, and displayed them to Juno like a peacock displaying his feathers. “These are throwing knives.”

Juno knew he was supposed to learn something from this, but they looked exactly like every other kind of knife.

“How was I supposed to know that? I’m not a mind reader.” Juno paused. “Anymore.” He’d been saving that one for a while, and the audience he had right now was the largest possible number of people who would get it, so, why not.

“Great, I’m glad we’ve all had a lesson on knife identification, now can you please explain how to use this thing?” and Juno finally heard the stress that creeping into her voice.

“I won’t do anything to Juno that he doesn’t want,” Nureyev said, and drew a sequence of shapes on the touchpad by the steering wheel. Juno’s window slid shut, and wouldn’t open again no matter what he did.

Juno glared at Nureyev in disbelief. “Child locks? Really?”

At the same time, the roof of the RUBY7 retracted into itself. “Juno, darling, could you take the wheel for a moment?” Nureyev asked, and without waiting for an answer he hauled himself upwards, his upper body popping through the sunroof and his feet poised in a way that should not have looked stable, with one balanced between the front seats and the other stretched back so it was still on the gas pedal.

Juno reached for the steering wheel, then stopped. “What did you just call me?”

“Get the wheel!” Alessandra ordered from the backseat, and Juno lunged for the steering wheel and did a very cumbersome, awkward turn so they could all avoid driving through a billboard advertising the latest Kanagawa show. Honestly, maybe he should have just hit that one. “I asked for one thing,” Alessandra muttered to herself.

“I said ‘detective’, detective,” Nureyev called calmly from outside, unshaken by the abrupt change in inertia as he adjusted his footing and readied a throw, glowing knife in hand.

“So we’re going to let the guy who’s driving take a break to try and throw a knife at a moving car?” Alessandra asked over the sounds of shots being fired. “Because--”
The knife hit the front windshield of their tail and shattered it, a spiderweb of cracks turning the glass opaque, and the person in the front seat knocked pieces of it out just so they could see the road ahead of them while the car floated left and right. Nureyev ducked down passively towards Alessandra. “You were saying?” he asked, and a shot narrowly whizzed by the spot where his head had just been.

Alessandra looked at him, and then at Juno, and then back at him. “Did you two meet at target practice or something?”

“Define ‘target practice’,” Juno said grimly as he tried to figure out how to deactivate the child locks and avoid crashing into a building at the same time, and Alessandra gave him a look that was equal parts exasperation, concern, and mortal terror.

From back above the sunroof, Nureyev said pleasantly, “We were set up by a mutual friend,” and tossed another knife at the car. This one punctured the hood and released a cloud of smoke with it.

“Great work, really nice, can you please come back down here so I can get back to shooting?” Juno called up to him.

Nureyev paused, and narrowly dodged another shot. “No,” he decided, shouting down to the unwilling passengers. “I’m proving a point.”

“What point are you trying to prove, Fox? That you overcommitted to the whole knife thing and now you don’t know how to get out of it?” Juno asked, and a “Thank you”, floated quietly forward from the back of the car.

Juno shouldn’t have been surprised that Nureyev actually looked insulted after that.

“No, detective,” he said, “We don’t need you to save us. We have matters perfectly in hand.” His voice was reassuring even with the tinge of insult from Juno’s knife comment, and he was looking down at Juno and Juno was looking up at him, and then the car lurched because neither of them were looking at the road and Nureyev was knocked off balance and the RUBY7 began slowing to a coast.

“Juno, get in the driver’s seat,” Alessandra ordered. “Fox, you keep… doing that, I guess,” and her hands landed in the universal gesture for I don’t even know and I have unilaterally given up on attempting to know, “unless you want to tell me how your multiple frequency emitter works so we can use this RUBY7 for what he was made for.”

“This is my car--”

“You stole it,” Juno muttered while he awkwardly squeezed around Nureyev, passing much, much too close to him in the process, and landed in the driver’s seat. The sound of the car behind them was getting louder, but his feet weren’t quite reaching the pedals. He adjusted the seat forward--how were Nureyev’s legs so long?--and hit the gas.

“Stole it? I would have no way of knowing how difficult it is to steal a car, of course, but it seems as though, to obtain a car like this, one would need some kind of assistance, or accomplice, perhaps,” Nureyev mused, almost to himself, and turned back to lightly chiding Alessandra. “And you can’t just come in here and start bossing the RUBY7 around, he’s very particular, aren’t you, girl.” Nureyev patted the passenger headrest fondly.

Juno met Alessandra’s eyes in the portion of the rearview window that wasn’t blocked off by Peter Nureyev’s back, and they shared a look something to the tune of This is weird, right? It’s not just me who thinks this is weird? while Nureyev pressed two fingers to his lips and then quickly tapped them
If he ever does that to me we’re gonna have to have a talk, Juno thought before he remembered that he couldn’t keep letting himself think like that. Must have been the adrenaline. Or the blood loss, that was always a possibility. Rita had said something to him about state-dependent memory once, and damn if he didn’t end up beaten to hell every time he ran into Peter Nureyev. For all he knew, this was all some more of his brain chemistry gone awry, waiting until he was hurt to remind him how much he wanted to sidle as close as possible to the thief made of sharp edges.

Juno didn’t usually want things. He wanted escapes, both physical and chemical, and the illusion of some kind of purpose, and to be able to move through the world without having to watch for all the traps he unwittingly set into motion for other people to fall into. He wanted to know what it was like to feel that carefree, optimistic way he could tell other people felt routinely, and he wanted those people to think he was one of them but to treat him like he wasn’t.

When he wanted things, they usually weren’t… attainable. Which was one difference between him and Peter Nureyev, who was rooting through the glove box again, leaning backwards and face-up, oddly crab-like. Maybe Juno would be the type to just take the things he wanted, too, if he could just look at something that could be taken and want it.

Nureyev reemerged with four more throwing knives and made to haul himself back up through the sunroof. “Look after each other while I’m gone, you two,” he said in a smiling, lilting voice, and rose to try to throw a knife into the throat of the driver of the moving car behind them.

Or maybe he wouldn’t.

“Was he talking to us, or was he talking to you and the car?”

“I would say it’s unclear, but,” Juno started as he crossed an intersection, except he never finished because then another car stopped right in front of them and the passengers were shooting at them, and he had to swerve and hit the breaks, fast. Alessandra was shouting and Juno felt Peter Nureyev lose his balance and fall on top of him, accompanied by a cracking sound that Juno was used to hearing much closer up.

“N--” he just barely started, then bit his tongue. “You okay?” he amended, barely looking at the road, which was bad timing, because the car in front of them was moving to work with the other and surround them both.

“I’m perfectly fine,” Nureyev said, except there was a drop of blood rolling down his forehead, and Juno couldn’t explain why but it was like a switch had flipped and he felt… calm. Or, not calm, exactly, but like there was a clear, obvious path to what had to happen next, and all Juno had to do now was follow it.

“You’re hurt,” Juno said, more disgusted with himself than anything else. Nureyev was pushing himself up and towards the passenger seat, and he looked dazed and dizzy and Juno should have been paying attention to the road, but instead he looked at the rearview again and said to Alessandra, “Grab the wheel.”

“I am as far from the wheel of this car as it is possible to be, Steel, this is ridiculous!” Alessandra yelled, but Juno already had the car door open and was hanging out of it, aiming for the driver of the car behind them.

“Then move,” he said, and he shot at the driver’s wrist while Alessandra’s arm snapped forward to grab the wheel.
He hit. He always did.

He was going to miss this, a quiet voice somewhere towards the base of his skull reminded him while shots zipped by around him and he could feel them passing by and they didn’t hit him, because this was the part of the gig he was good at, doing deadly things no one else was dumb enough to even try, tricks that were half daring and half an opportunity to wave a greeting to death while they brushed by and tell them, *Yeah, I’m a little busy right now, but let’s meet up some other time, and stay the hell away from everybody else until then.*

The car behind them careened off-road, and Juno watched it careen into the wall of a pawnshop, and he idly wondered what a car would go for at one of those places.

That was one down, for now.

And then two more cars showed up.

Juno knew a little about Roman mythology, and not only because his name was Juno. Myths counted as educational, apparently, though he was pretty sure the lessons he took from them weren’t quite the ruminations on history and the impact of culture on story that teachers recommended. What they were was more of a lesson about playing a rigged game against unimaginably angry and unimaginably powerful beings who would unleash all the power they had on you just because they were slighted and you were there.

What Juno had done to the angry god that was Ramses O’Flaherty was cut a head off of the hydra he had raised from birth, and watched two more grow back in its place. For one inexplicable second, Juno tried to remember how to defeat a hydra, as if that meant anything to a fleet of cars and a politician philanthropist. (He remembered something about a hero asking for help, which he dismissed. There was a reason why the only “Romans” left were in bad theme restaurants and those edutainment-style theme parks for teaching kids about human history.)

Juno watched them approach and surround them as if in slow motion, and raised his gun to aim, except they were shooting first and he wasn’t going to get hit himself but the door to the RUBY7 was open behind him and he didn’t know whether Alessandra or Nureyev could get out of the way. So he did the only thing that made sense, which was try to close the door, but that meant falling out of the car, which wasn’t great for him personally. He’d made the decision the moment he understood what was going to happen, of course, so realizing the consequences wasn’t going to change anything; they only reduced the relative confusion of the transition from not-falling to falling.

”*Juno,*” he heard two voices yell out, and along with the terror of falling he felt a lump of guilt, tempered by anger. They didn’t have to care about him. He’d done just about everything he could to stop them.

He hit the ground, and cars were racing towards him, and he tried to think of a plan to get out of this one, but a night of getting hit and chased and scraped and breaking old wounds was finally catching up to him, and his brain whispered, *if you cauterize their necks new heads can’t grow,* which he was alert enough to know was completely meaningless.

Well, here it was. Not how he wanted to go, but if he had to die for someone, those two were… actually a pretty good option. Definitely better than running into the road to save a cat, anyway. Alessandra Strong and Peter Nureyev and Rita could handle it from here. Even if Peter still had the damn car, Juno trusted him not to leave them in the lurch. Probably shouldn’t. He had no good reason to. But… Peter Nureyev cared a lot about Brahma. And he cared a lot about… just Brahma, definitely just Brahma.
More importantly, now Rita had a vested interest in Peter Nureyev, and when Rita wanted to find something she was unstoppable. Nureyev was going to have to stick around, though Alessandra probably wouldn’t like that.

Everything would be… fine, without him, he thought, and waited for whatever the end was going to be.

Instead, he heard a voice yell, “What the hell, Steel,” and felt himself be grabbed and thrown, which was something he was decidedly not ready for, and he landed more or less on top of Peter Nureyev, which he was more unprepared for than just about anything else that could have happened in that moment.

Nureyev didn’t seem to notice, and his arms had reflexively moved to hold onto him, but they were floating around him without making contact. That was probably for the best. “Juno. Are you all right? Are you hurt?” he asked, voice very even. As if he didn’t have a growing line of blood running down the side of his own face.

Somehow, he managed to make it look good.


“I said I’m good,” Juno lied, and didn’t move from where he was, because he wasn’t good, he was rattled and now that he’d stopped lying to himself about being fine everything hurt, and he couldn’t even do anything right at his best, and apparently he couldn’t control his own mouth, and he had given up back there for just a second and now he had to remember all over again how to stop himself from giving up and the answer wasn’t coming.

“Great, okay, we tried your way, now it’s my turn. Here’s a wager for you: If I lose these cars right now,” Alessandra demanded of the dazed detective thrown across the passenger seat and the man therein, “will you stop trying to get yourself killed and let him shut that thing in your face off?”

Honestly, Juno couldn’t imagine caring anymore. “Yeah,” he said with the flat affectation of shock. “Fine.”

He felt Nureyev tilt his head and study him. Don’t, Juno wanted to say, but saying anything felt too heavy, so instead he just looked down and away.

“Great,” Alessandra said. “Fox, grab the thing in the back and do whatever it does. Juno, we’re going to take on some height, so, don’t look out the window for a little bit.” She pushed the seat back, adjusted the rearview mirror, and buckled her seatbelt while Nureyev pushed gently around Juno to half-crawl to the back. More cars appeared appeared while Alessandra adjusted the side mirrors, which raised a question of how many cars O’Flaherty’s people had to spare.

“Think you’re going to pass your driver’s test first try?” Juno asked of Alessandra’s sudden dedication to car safety, too exhausted to really put the edges on his voice.

“It’s the law, Steel,” she said, and the RUBY7 rose, quick and graceful, and in the back Peter Nureyev popped his head up from where he was checking under the seats so he could throw a judgmental glance in Alessandra’s direction.

Despite her dedication to honor arbitrary and unnecessary driving regulations, Alessandra Strong was, Juno learned quickly, a very good driver. Not like he was looking too closely, considering how far up they were, but if Juno closed his eyes and didn’t listen to the gunfire, he could have thought
this was a normal, leisurely car ride across town.

“I love this car,” Alessandra Strong said very calmly.

“He’s taken,” Nureyev said defensively and immediately, and rose with his strange box in hand.

“We’ll see,” she said under her breath, and executed a breathtaking three-point turn in the middle of the airspace over what must have been Broad and Main, judging by the sheer amount of neon light seeping around the skyline.

Nureyev narrowed his eyes, and Juno didn’t know how to warn Alessandra she was playing with fire, so he didn’t. She’d figure it out. Nureyev was--well, he wasn’t harmless, but Juno was sure he knew better than to open warfare.

They continued like that for a little while. Eventually, the sound of gunfire faded into the distance.

“Okay, I lost them, can’t see them at all, I’m great at this, now will you please let us turn that thing off?” Alessandra asked.

“I already said fine, Strong, do whatever you want,” Juno said, and he resented how apathetic it was.

“You heard the lady,” Alessandra said to Nureyev, and Nureyev put on his best unimpressed face for her.

“Juno, this is going to be unpleasant,” he said.

“But last time was so much fun,” Juno said. Unfortunately, having every signal and function his eye was capable of engaged at once was one of his last especially vivid memories, so he knew exactly what he was in for.

“It will be over in a second,” Nureyev assured him, and Juno felt that overwhelming, claustrophobic noise and light taking his whole brain again, and his ears were ringing, and he had the faint idea that his carmates were yelling something and that the car was moving much more frantically than before but the ringing of it all was too much for him to really focus on anything else.

It took more than a second.

“Is it off?” Juno dimly heard from somewhere next to him when the sounds and images finally started fading. He waved a hand in front of his face to check.

“Can’t see a thing anymore, if that’s what you’re asking,” he answered, ears ringing.

“Alright, everyone hold on and get down,” she said, and the RUBY7 lurched and threw them forward while reversed neatly into an alley. “This is one of the models with cloaking, right? We can cloak this?”

“He’s a master of disguise, yes,” Nureyev said, a slight tinge of affection seeping into his voice, and he stretched forward to draw some shapes on the control panel, and the whole car went back.

“They found us that fast?”

“I lied, when I said we lost them,” Alessandra admitted freely. “Sorry. Didn’t know how else to make you stop trying to be a big damn hero.”

Juno wanted to be mad, but he couldn’t make it happen. He just shrugged. “Probably would have done the same thing.”
“That’s why I did it,” Alessandra said lightly. “Now, everyone shut up,” she warned, and Nureyev slid forward to draw several more shapes on the keypad. Juno guessed they engaged cooldown, some kind of armoring, maybe something to reduce any kind of echo-based locating, and while Nureyev was up there he grabbed another knife for good measure. Juno felt a suspicion grow in his pins-and-needles brain, and he looked at the place where the key was supposed to be as the thief retreated.

It was empty. Juno looked at Nureyev, eyes narrowed, and after a second Nureyev’s face formed a small, collaborative smirk, like he was glad to have someone to share the joke with.

“Don’t you think you have enough knives for now?” Alessandra asked.

“I don’t feel comfortable unless I have at least three on my person at any given time,” he said, which could have been another easy lie, but Juno didn’t think so.

“Where’s the third one?” Juno asked. He knew Nureyev had one that he kept in his improbably useful pockets; he’d found it each of the several times Juno had the opportunity to inspect them.

“Play your cards right and you just might find out,” Nureyev said without missing a beat, and then there was a silence where everyone avoided making eye contact with each other, and Alessandra groaned and put her face in her hands.

Soon enough we’ll all have to find out, he remembered a mournful voice telling him in another car, in another life. It must have been almost thirty years ago. He tried to rush that conversation out of his head, tried not to open the map of the sad state of Juno Steel today and trace it backwards, but he could hear her voice in his head.

...still feels like I’m borrowing someone else’s time...

God. Not this.

I used to be afraid like that too, Juno,

and her hand was off the steering wheel and on top of his.

I thought I was going to be dead by the time I was twenty years old. Sometimes I wake up and I’m still surprised to be here.

and she laughed, and it was thirty years later and Juno still didn’t understand how she could have said that and how she could have laughed.

Did it get better, after that? Did it ever... stop?

and she laughed again.

The only thing that changed was I woke up and I was twenty-one years old and suddenly iI knew for a fact I was living off of someone else’s time, Juno. Sometimes I wake up and it still feels like I’m borrowing someone else’s time,

and why did she say that to a kid, with her other kid asleep in the back? could she already tell he was going to be screwed up forever, that he was made from the same flawed factory blueprints she was?

Whose time?
Juno grabbed one of his new bruises, hard, and let himself think about which article of clothing Peter Nureyev might be hiding another knife under, because it was the only thing that seemed like it would be distracting enough.

For once, he was not proven wrong.

Alessandra let out a breath as if she could tell which corner of the bedroom Juno’s thoughts were in, and exactly whose hands were where. “Can you two… not do this?” she asked as a couple of cars passed by very slowly, shining lights towards them.

“I didn’t do anything!” Juno half-whispered back.

Alessandra sent a couple of skeptical eyebrows his way and shushed him, and Juno groaned and slid further down in his seat, arms crossed. Except then it was just him and his thoughts sitting among the only two hookups he’d had all year that he wasn’t objectively too drunk for, and he had enough trouble getting along with just his thoughts when it was Rita he was stuck with and he could tune in to her going on and on about some stream he’d never seen and didn’t intend to ever care about. He cast around in his mind for distracting topics that weren’t 1) about Peter Nureyev, 2) self-loathing, 3) blood and robots and the juxtaposition thereof, 4) mortality-adjacent, or 5) his screwed-up family, and he came up entirely blank. He couldn’t even think of the case, because it was an unholy mixture of all of the above.

He drummed his fingers on the clutch and tried to focus on the tapping sound that resulted.

In the silence of the car and with lights passing by, Juno could hear the other passengers turning their heads towards him. Or maybe he could feel it. The interior of the RUBY7 felt smaller than he remembered all of a sudden.

He tapped faster.

Suddenly, there were two hands on top of his, and then they both withdrew, and Juno watched Nureyev and Alessandra both Please,-after-you-ing each other in complete silence, gesturing and emoting heavily. Neither of them were winning.

Juno almost laughed, but it got caught in his throat and he was able to swallow it down and put on his neutral, slightly-grumpy expression, and he held out his other hand to them, suppressing an eyeroll more theatrically than necessary.

“One each. You happy?” he whispered, and each of them grabbed a hand--Alessandra had to reach awkwardly with her left hand and Juno cringed when he saw the other, her right looked really bad, and looking at it made it slightly less overwhelming that Nureyev was holding his hand, he could think about undressing him and letting his hands and his mouth and his teeth go wherever they wanted but apparently hand-holding was where he drew the line of what was and wasn’t acceptable, but after a couple of seconds Juno was able to stop thinking about it.

Maybe it was too damn corny to say it, and he put on his best show of you’re-treating-me-like-a-kid-you-jerks for the sake of saving face, but his brain was… quieter, after that. And it was…

Of all the ways to spend the rest of the long wait until Alessandra Strong declared them clear to go, this one was… pretty okay.
*not because it has to do with this chapter but because i'm word-of-god-ing that peter nureyev listened to it in the car on his way over and that his second-wildest and most unattainable fantasy is he & junointegether and then kill him
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

a ride home and a few stitches

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

a moving car
a flat empty expanse out the window, dust blowing
peter in the driver’s seat
he was so tired, like he hadn’t slept right in weeks, and he felt fresh bruises on him, in him
the ruby7’s screens kept blinking and flashing information every time he opened his eyes
he remembered this.
he and peter, just this one last time before it all went to hell
soon they would get on the train and get the egg and junos would realize at some point, he wasn’t
sure when, he’d given peter nureyev… all of it. more than junos had to give. everything good he had
left
and then they would get off the train and
i will have what i want i will have what i want i will--

Juno’s eyes flew open. “We can’t get on that train!” His hand was gripping Nureyev’s bicep and
everything ached and he knew something was wrong with all of this but he couldn’t collect the
pieces of it. “Leave the Egg of Purus and Engstrom and Miasma and the whole damn thing, you
can’t get on that train,” and his tongue was barely touching that place on his palate just behind his
teeth where Nureyev’s name began when he remembered this was Duke Rose, still, and he clamped
his mouth closed while the car swerved, and Juno grabbed Nureyev’s other arm and it felt like he
ripped his own off at the shoulder to do it, but this was important, more important than a name
dropped in an empty getaway car.

“Juno, you were dreaming,” Nureyev said urgently, and started to reach for him, and Juno jerked
away from his grasp so quickly his head made a decent-sounding smack against the window. He
didn’t even register the hit.

“I don’t care, we can’t get on there, you can keep the damn car, you keep being Duke and I’ll be
Dahlia and we can con every damn criminal on this godforsaken planet but you can’t get on that
train,” and he didn’t know how to make it make sense but she was going to torture him and it was
going to be all his fault and for nothing, nothing at all except maybe Juno’s life if Peter Nureyev
didn’t save him but he couldn’t let Peter Nureyev get on that train.

“That’s over, Juno, it’s all already happened,” he was saying in an urgent voice, and that didn’t make
any sense because if it had all already happened why were they in the RUBY7 and how was Peter
Nureyev still here, after all of it?

“Juno, whatever happened, I wasn’t there for it, right?” Alessandra Strong said from the backseat,
and Peter Nureyev and Juno Steel turned to look at her as one four-armed creature. “It’s already
over,” she said, her voice urgent but calm. “Can I,” she gestured as making to grab Juno’s arms, and
Juno blinked, then nodded, trying to make himself catch up to the present. “Okay.” She reached for
his arm and pulled him off of Peter Nureyev, then gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder with her
good hand, and Peter Nureyev laid a hesitant hand on his forearm, just for a second.

Then his hand was gone, and Nureyev returned to getting the RUBY7 back onto the roads that Juno
suddenly saw as not a barren desert but Hyperion City’s premier location for abandoned lots. The
second-coolest place for kids to hang out before they were old enough to drink, other than the sewer
grates over the waterworks, he remembered. He’d gotten a fair few scars in places like this, the only
ones in his collection that had any hope of disappearing from him. It figured, that the least painful
would be the ones to go.

“I--okay,” Juno said, trying to figure out how he got here, but he couldn’t focus, so instead he said,
“You kept the car?”

“You did just say I could,” Nureyev countered.

“Yeah, because I thought you would--I thought we were--,” Juno gave up. “Shut up. How did we
even get this thing out here, it’s flashier than the sensor on my carbon monoxide alarm,” Juno asked,
and the interior of the car shook with uneasy silence.

“You should probably tell your landlord about that,” Alessandra said.

Juno shrugged that off--he was pretty sure his landlord had died a few months back, but he was too
far behind on his rent to feel comfortable checking. “I can sense carbon monoxide on my own,
thanks,” he said. “That’s what the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning are for, and they’ve
never let me down yet.” He thought about it. “They’ve only let me down once,” he corrected. That
had been a pretty bad week, all things considered. He still hadn’t thrown out all the letters he’d
written to himself. Most of them were really out of voice for the people they were supposedly from,
but the Andromeda ones were actually pretty good, if he said so himself. Northstar should’ve been
trying to nab him for the live-action, just for old time’s sake.

“Juno, has anyone ever told you that all of your jokes are deeply worrying?”

“Let him make his jokes,” Nureyev said from the driver’s seat. “It’s how he…” He trailed off, like he
wasn’t sure whether the ground he was treading was steady or not, then picked up again.
“Communicates.”

It was a strange coincidence, the ache in Juno’s chest that revealed itself then. Something must have
hit him hard right over the left side of his ribcage. He’d probably find a pretty bad bruise there later.

“I can communicate for myself,” Juno said.

“Trust us, we know,” Alessandra said. “So let’s talk. What’s the last thing you remember this time?”

“We don’t always have to do this,” Juno complained, uncomfortable.

“Yes, we do,” Alessandra said with an air of finality.

He really didn’t want to do this. He just wanted to be better already, and everyone kept telling him he
would be soon, but people were wrong all the time. Every time he admitted he was missing
something he could feel them wanting to put him in a microscope to find where the problem was and
fix it. He didn’t ask for that. He didn’t want that. He’d always managed on his own fine.

But on the other hand, there was no way to dodge Alessandra Strong. She was smart enough to
figure out a lie, tough enough to do something about it, and frustrated enough with Juno’s entire deal
to refuse to let it go.
“I remember getting out of your car,” Juno said in a grudging voice, only a little bit ashamed.

The car was quiet again. “And?” Alessandra prodded.

“If there was more I would have said more,” Juno snapped.

The RUBY7 pulled over.

Juno and Alessandra both looked up at Peter Nureyev, who was bent forward and rubbing his temples, face blank.

“Go back to sleep, Juno,” he said into his hands, and it was like Juno’s eyes (eye) had adjusted.

Peter Nureyev was exhausted, and bleeding, and weary. It didn’t look right on him, like a suit jacket a couple of sizes too big, and Juno couldn’t help but stare.

“I can fill him in, it’s not a problem,” Alessandra offered, but she sounded tired too. Looked it. Alessandra Strong wore exhaustion and pain like a heavy blanket on her shoulders.

This was his fault, somehow, and he didn’t even know why.

He shifted his shoulder until the wound in it bit him back, and he focused all his attention on the feeling of getting what he deserved from the nerves reaching up through his skin.

“No, it’s fine. I’m asleep already,” Juno said, and he slid down in the seat and rested his forehead on the window and stared at the world passing by, tried not to think about anything else. Eventually his brain was empty enough that he could pretend to sleep without getting the usual passengers jumping onto his undistracted train of thought, and soon enough after that, he wasn’t pretending anymore.

Rita finished up typing a few things on her computer--apparently she was compiling or decrypting or inflating the data Alessandra had downloaded, and Juno was unashamed to admit he didn’t really know or have the capacity to understand any more of the situation at hand than that. “Okay, I did it. Now,” she threw him a towel. “Clean that up before you sit on this nice couch, Mr. Steel, I have to scrub bloodstains out of our office enough and I’m not going to do it on my vacation.”

“This isn’t a vacation, Rita, people are actually trying to kill me.”

“Yeah, yeah, what else is new. Go clean up,” she repeated, gesturing at the blood-caked right side of Juno’s shirt and waving him towards the laundry room sink.

Juno patted a damp cloth at the skin around his shoulder wound and briefly wondered how Alessandra was doing. Nureyev had looked a little bit too cheerful about being in a position to give her medical assistance, and the look that Alessandra had thrown to him like a lifeline while Rita dragged them both downstairs seemed somewhat alarmed. Juno hoped he actually knew how to bandage up a broken hand, and that his so-called medical experience was more than spending a day or two tacking ‘Doctor’ onto a fake name designed to cut and using a scalpel with impunity.

He’d wanted to say something snarky and reassuring about how Nureyev wouldn’t hurt her while they disappeared to the dining room Alessandra had basically claimed as her space, but when he opened his mouth to speak he realized he couldn’t think of a single reason she should be reassured. Or, not a snarky one, anyway. At least Mick was with them. He’d keep them both… something. They were already civil. Distracted seemed like it could be right.

He was glad he’d had the presence of mind to draw Rita’s attention to his shoulder problem for several reasons. First of all, he... trusted Rita. Mostly. He wasn’t great at trust. He’d gotten better at it,
a few months back, but he… wasn’t better at it anymore. But if he had to pick anyone to stab him repeatedly with a sharp needle, Rita was a pretty decent choice. She’d had the chance to stab him pretty much daily for the past fifteen years, after all, and somehow she hadn’t taken the plunge yet.

There was also the fact that the idea of his bare skin under Peter Nureyev’s hands, puncturing him over and over again, was a whole lot to consider, let alone to experience, and every time his thoughts drifted towards that scenario everything else became meaningless static and he could feel Nureyev’s hands sliding up his ribcage and his thumb pushing his jaw upwards and--

Rita slammed a flask on the table, and Juno pulled out of the obsessive daydream with some regret. “Drink this,” she said.

“Were you… hiding a flask in your bra?”

“Nah,” Rita said, and reached into her shirt and dug around for a second. “I was hiding two.”

On the one hand, Juno was the most grateful he had ever been to anyone in his entire life. He really needed to self-medicate. Everything in his head kept building, and his somnolent purges of temporary memory didn’t do anything to ease the way all of his stress and terror and the general burden of living kept piling up inside of him, and at this point he’d do anything to curb the desperate growing urge he had to make Peter Nureyev pin him against the wall and tear him into pieces. On the other hand, “Why?” he asked.

Rita spread her fingers and moved her hands in a sharp outward arc in front of her. “For drama! So whaddya say?” She unscrewed the top of her flask. “Are you gonna toast or what?”

This felt like one of the things he was supposed to say no to, in both a professional and a medical sense, but he wasn’t going to start paying attention to that kind of thing after he was 38 years deep into ignoring it. “Why the hell not,” he said, and unscrewed the top. “To inappropriate boss-employee relationships, I guess,” Juno said, moving his flask towards hers.

“I ran this by HR, they’re fine with it,” Rita countered.

“I’ll drink to that,” and they both took a long drink. It was significantly better whiskey than Juno usually bought for himself, which was to say, it wasn’t Whiskey-brand whiskey. He didn’t know if the effect was psychological or physiological, but he did feel a little better.

Something occurred to him. “Should you be drinking, if you’re about to stitch me up? Should I be--never mind, you’ll get this thing back from me over my dead body. But should you be?”

She waved him off. “It’s just a couple of stitches, I could do that in my sleep. I was the last one in Scouts to get my improvisational medical intervention badge, so it’s nice and fresh up there.” Somehow that wasn’t exactly what Juno wanted to hear. “Besides, I thought maybe we could drink a little, chat a little, like old times. You know, we could talk about some crimes, or the new streams that are coming out this fall, or I don’t know, maybe relationships…”

“No,” Juno said immediately.

“Okay, but I just think that if there’s something you want to get off your chest, about I don’t know, a little crush you might have? I’ve been told I give very good relationship advice,” she said, and her face was positively cherubic.

“Are you trying to get me drunk so that I’ll tell you about my--my--” He didn’t want to say ‘crushes’, but she’d gotten it into his head and now he couldn’t think of a suitable synonym that an adult would use. That was probably the blood loss and the remaining static in his brain, both from having the eye
shut down again and from the recurring thought that in some other universe Peter Nureyev was pulling a needle through another Juno Steel’s skin right now and it was all very distracting. “Personal life?” he finally decided. “Or lack thereof?”

“What kind of woman do you take me for? Fifteen years, and you accuse me of trying to get you drunk with one flask of whiskey? It would take at least four of those things just to get you tipsy and I only had room for two,” and her insult was palpable.

The defense checked out. They’d had a pretty good night at the bar right before she hired herself, and she’d saved him from a lot of bad nights at other bars after, so it was safe to say that Rita had a pretty good idea of his alcohol tolerance.

It still surprised him to know that she could drink him under the table, but Rita was the kind of person who surprised you.

“Besides, I have my ways of making you talk. I know all of your weaknesses,” she said, taking a long drink from her flask as she began assembling gauze, cotton, and some medical implements Juno didn’t care to know the names of.

“Name one,” Juno challenged, and threw back the rest of his flask, probably more quickly than was strictly polite.

Rita stopped her movements, steepled her fingers together and then inverted them into a wide V she let rest under her chin while she posed. “Me,” she said with another angelic smile, and Juno couldn't help but laugh, wry and reserved.

“Don’t try your luck,” he advised her, and Rita huffed theatrically and began studiously tending to his shoulder wound.

“Fine. We’ll talk about something else,” she said. “Doing anything exciting for your birthday this year?”

“Pass,” Juno said.

“What, afraid of losing your youthful charm in your forties? Because all the commercials have been saying that forty is the new twelve.”

“I’m not turning forty.”

“Thirty-nine, forty, it’s pretty much the same number. C’mon, boss, what are we gonna do?” she needled as she started the stitching. “I have a cake to decorate and--” Rita gasped. “Should I put someone... in the cake?”

“No. I hate this. No.”

Rita sighed in her energetic, overwhelming way. “You have to give me something, Mr. Steel!”

“Fine. My ideal plan, my wildest fantasy, is that I get sucked into a wormhole that spits me out after exactly one Martian year and I can be done with it. Can you make that happen?”

Rita thought about it, really thought about it with her whole face and upper body, even put down all the medical implements she had around her to ponder it.

“No,” she finally said, dejected, and she pulled another stitch through.
“All right, glad we’re on the same page here. Now let’s never talk about it again.”

Rita fixed him with a pout. “You never share.”

“Yeah, I got sent home early that day in kindergarten.” That was his last day at that school, in that neighborhood.

Juno sagged a little. Rita looked at him, then hardened, straightened her back.

“My mother always told me friendship is a two-way street, so maybe this is my fault too, but Boss, you’re driving a cargo truck and you parked sideways across five lanes of traffic, and now there’re these big giant pile-ups on either side of you and it doesn’t matter what the traffic report says because eventually those cars have gotta get back home, Mr. Steel!”

Juno felt his eyebrows furrow while he tried to figure out the metaphor. Maybe he was too tired for this. “I’m your boss, Rita, I don’t have to tell you about my life,” he said.

“But you do! You do tell me about your life, Mr. Steel, but only in pieces and then all at once and you expect me not to do anything about it but I can’t sit here and let you not do anything about this stuff and then I have to illegally hack into the neighbor’s internet again if I want to try to help you because you won’t let me do my job and you won’t let me be your friend and then what’s the point of me even being around, other than my good looks and and intrepid spirit?”

“I’m not going to make it so you have to get yourself involved every time I mess up--”

“I want to be involved! I want to be involved, and I am an unstoppable force of nature but c’mon, boss, a gal wants a hand sometimes! I don’t want to have to sneak around every time I try to make your job easier! Every time I try to do anything for you I have to collaborate with, one, a PI; two, the, no offense but, less-competent of your two childhood friends,--”

“None taken,” Juno said on Mick’s behalf. He was pretty confident Mick wouldn’t mind, not because it wasn't insulting but because the other option was Sasha ‘Surviving Employee at Dark Matters’ Wire.

“--and a thief who couldn’t even be subtle about it when he had an alias he had documentation for and it’s almost impossible but I’m doing it, Mr. Steel, because I don’t know how else I can get anything done if you don’t let me help you!”

“Wait,” Juno said. “You knew he was a thief? I didn’t even notice until we were almost martyred on the altar of Cecil Kanagawa.”

“Oh, right, I forgot about that. That lipstain was really good for your complexion,” she said, and added another stitch. “You may have been blinded by your instant infatuation, but I knew from the moment I saw him that he wasn’t a secret agent at all, but some kind of imposter, only pretending to be on the side of the law.”

“How?” Juno asked, ignoring the ‘instant infatuation’ comment.

“I’m so glad you asked. My first clue was this: He said his name was Rex Glass.” Juno stared, uncomprehending. “Rex Glass. Rex. Glass. Rex Glass.” She kept repeating the name over and over again, becoming more agitated each time.

“Yeah, it’s a name,” Juno said, backing up slightly and wondering if he’d made the wrong choice of temporary doctor.
"You're not listening! He said his NAME," she repeated, "Was WRECKS. GLASS," and Juno finally heard it.

"... oh my god," Juno said, and buried his face in his hands. "How is he still at large? How does he survive out there?" Juno now had to know for the rest of his life that a person he had sex with had chosen the name ‘Wrecks Glass’ as a clever alias. He’d had sex with objectively worse people, but somehow this felt insurmountable, and Juno stared at the ceiling, perfectly still, for ten seconds.

"Private investigators easily swayed by a pretty face, probably," Rita said. “Sit back up, I gotta finish this,” Rita said, and Juno complied.

“What were the other clues?” Juno asked when he recovered, trying to ignore Rita’s color commentary.

“Hm? Oh, it was really only one. I haven’t been, you know, attracted to a detective or investigator or special agent or anything since I started at the HCPD. I got a window into your lives and it was as if a little,” she stopped her work to hold up her pointer fingers on each hand and quickly tilted them, keeping them parallel, “pwwft, switch went off. It just can’t happen, no matter how hard I try. It’s my curse, boss.” She looked askance. “I used to sit down with Frannie and watch Outer Rim PD without getting all grossed out by the romances. Now I have to pay attention to the overarching plots instead, and they keep putting the season arcs on hold to explore internal conflicts, which, there’s nothing wrong with that but you’ve gotta be invested,” and she closed her fist on the last word.

Juno ignored most of that, because it seemed largely irrelevant. “Oh, come on, no one in the HCPD was that bad.”

Rita didn’t say anything.

“Yeah, who am I trying to kid.” Juno leaned back, then sat up again and pointed at Rita. “Wait. Wait, that’s why you don’t get all giggly and weird around Alessandra!” Finally. He’d been trying to crack that mystery for months.

“I think by ‘giggly and weird’ you mean ‘flirtatious and alluring’, boss,”

“No, I really don’t,” Juno interjected.

“--and I don’t use my natural charms around her because you two had a thing going on and my mother raised me right, Mr. Steel,” Rita said. “Besides, I don’t know if she’s my type.”

“She’s a competent former soldier who could crush you without even noticing she did it until it was already over, how is that not your type? How is that not anyone’s type?” Juno asked, scandalized.

Rita made a noise of layered, multifaceted disagreement. “Mr. Steel, you should know her better than that by now. And I’m not trying to sound judgmental, but personally, my type doesn’t usually involve anyone being able to kill me, so much. Except in, you know--”

“If you say ‘a sexual way’ or anything like it I will call the police on myself right now, Rita, I swear I will.” Juno already knew too much about Rita’s more personal sexual preferences, despite his best efforts not to.

“All right, all right, I thought we were bonding and being candid about our feelings but I guess I was wrong,” Rita said, passive aggression coating every word.

“Yeah, no, that’s not what we’re doing, and now I’m looking forward to forgetting this conversation entirely,” Juno said, though he’d been remembering more lately. It would be just his luck to keep this
moment with perfect clarity. “Are you almost done?”

“Kinda,” Rita said, by which she always meant not at all.

Juno was surprised to find that he was a little glad they weren’t finished. Though he supposed that he had work to do when this was over. And people to avoid. It was a respite to be here, was why he was relieved. Probably.

Rita was quiet for a little too long, and the sharpness of the needle was drawing him into too deep a lull, and his head was too overflowing with thoughts, and the words started coming out of him before he meant them too.

“Hey, Rita?” Juno asked.

“What’s up, boss?” his secretary answered, suddenly very involved in fixing his wound up. It was easier to talk when no one was looking at him.

But not that much easier. “Do you think that…” he managed to get out before he had to stop. “Have you ever…” He tried again. “You know how sometimes when we get a theft we’ll have to handle whatever it was that got stolen, and it’s always something really expensive and important and we know we can’t keep it, and you get that moment where you think to yourself, I can’t be trusted with this thing, I can’t have this, and for a second you just want to throw it on the ground and break it into pieces?”

“Mmmmmmm…” Rita hummed. “Not really.”

Juno wasn’t listening. “How do you stop yourself from doing that? Or, how do you stop the other person from giving you the thing in the first place because you can’t be trusted to hold this thing for even a second, you’re just going to get it broken or stolen and even if you don’t, you don’t deserve the thing and you know you won’t be allowed to keep it?”

Rita seemed absorbed in her task. “People get to keep things they don’t deserve all the time, Mr. Steel,” she said. “They just have to do it.”

“You can’t keep things you can’t take care of,” Juno said, and he was being dragged down down down into his own head again because what was wrong with him, why was he saying this, why couldn’t he just take care of whatever was wrong with him without dragging Rita into it?

“Yeah, but those have a way of getting away on their own. Which reminds me,” she added, and Juno didn’t realize how tense he was until his body relaxed. “So I know what the stance is on robots in the office, but,” and she was as animated and alight as ever.

He resurfaced. “Rita. Robots tried to kill me today.”

“That’s an unfair accusation! You can’t know that for sure, you don’t even remember it!”

The bickering was a relief, and Juno let himself fall into it. And honestly, whatever he was talking about before was embarrassing, and made no sense, and was almost definitely a product of several varieties of exhaustion, and he was glad it was over and forgotten so quickly. “I think the eyewitness accounts are pretty reliable, Rita, so we’re not getting walking death machines in our office.”

“It’s a robot or a cat, Mr. Steel, you’ve gotta pick one, I’ve been here for fifteen years and I’ve never asked you for anything,” she pleaded.

Juno’s subsequent list of things Rita had asked him for, each more elaborate and absurd than the last
and countered by Rita’s increasingly shrill justifications, lasted him through the end of his stitches. They were still squabbling after he’d put on another shirt and checked on his other bruises and possible injuries, and they only stopped when they realized that the constant electronic buzz that meant Rita’s computer was hard at work ceased entirely.

“Well, that’s my cue,” Rita said. “Let’s see what you two dug up,” and Juno almost opened his mouth to suggest they wait for Alessandra, but then he thought better of it and let the oversight rest. He wanted the chance to take a look at this first. Just in case. Juno crowded behind Rita while she flexed her fingers, and they both prepared themselves for the day’s second delicate operation.

Chapter End Notes

tl;dr: updates are going to slow down for a little bit while I minimally edit some earlier chapters and work on writing some latestage chapters

edited 9/19/2017: edits have been... mostly done. editing is Bad (tm)
“Can you scroll through that again?” Juno asked, looking over Rita’s shoulders at the screen.

Rita let go of the mouse and turned to look at him. “Boss, do you want me to print this out for you or something?”

“No, don’t.” If he missed something, he didn’t want to leave the evidence around for Alessandra to find. Sarah Steel had only been a junior employee at Northstar then, but it was still possible that she had been there. To advise on projects related to films, for tours, to visit a friend from the internship program, or just because it was new to her and she could.

He didn’t like having to think about her like a regular person when he knew what she would be later. “Just, one more time?”

Rita sighed. “And the important detective reason you’re using my extensive talents to scroll through the same visitor’s logs while you get your fingerprints all over the screen of my computer no matter how much I tell you you don’t have to touch it is…”

“Because I’m your boss and you get paid the same either way.” Juno met Rita’s look of boredom and frustration with his most authoritative eyebrow raise. Eventually Rita relented with an eyeroll and a huff, and returned to the top of the log, which she’d already filtered to show employees at other Northstar companies. The list was still agonizingly long.

“You could just tell me what you’re looking for,” Rita said. “I guarantee I could find it in two seconds and then we could look at the robots, boss, please, there are never robots and I’ve been waiting for hours and I have earned this! Let me remind you that medical assistance was never in my job description!”

“You don’t have a job description, Rita, this was never supposed to be a job,” Juno pointed out.

“Yeah, so this definitely isn’t on it!”

He couldn’t tell Rita what he was looking for, not because he thought Rita didn’t know Sarah Steel had worked for Northstar—the information was out there—but because him saying it would confirm that yes, he did have something to do with that Sarah Steel, and then she would have this piece of information Juno didn’t want her to have, that Juno didn’t want to have himself, and then he had no control over what she did with it or thought about it and then she would start reevaluating everything he did in the context of, Oh, his mom was Sarah Steel, and that would give her enough to figure out… to figure out a lot of things.

Her name wasn’t in any of the recent visitors’ logs. He thought. But there was nothing wrong with double checking.

It was so much easier when he could do these things by himself.
“So? Did the fifth time finally crack open that mystery you’ve been waiting to uncover or can we please move onto the robots,” Rita asked.

“Maybe one more—”

“I’m sorry, did you say, ‘Rita, look at the robots, and did I mention that your hair looks great today?’” Rita asked, and she was already typing extensively. “Thank you so much, I’ve been changing my routine lately, you’re the last one to notice but no hard feelings,” she continued, and Juno could not even begin to understand what was happening on screen other than that his secretary had gone rogue. Well, it wasn’t the first time. Usually she was trying to for-your-own-good him into sleeping, or eating something that fit her narrow idea of a meal, or going home, but there were outliers. She’d locked him in his office so that she could rearrange all of the furniture into some kind of obstacle course once. He’d almost broken a leg trying to get out, but, in Rita’s words, the important part was that they were all doing their best and having fun. At least this time it was relevant, and not likely to get him any more injured than he already was. Speaking of, he was feeling a little lightheaded from all the standing, and took the opportunity to lean on the back of Rita’s chair. Maybe after they parsed all of this and Rita took her notes he should sit down somewhere.

“That’s a lot of files,” Juno observed. “Which ones were they working on when they got torched?”

Rita hit some keys. “I believe the technical term is ‘lots,’” she answered as the page refreshed itself and barely moved its contents.

“Okay,” Juno said, holding back the fatigue and frustration. “What about big metal person-shaped ones that talk to you?”

Rita typed some more, and Juno watched the screen change.

“That’s… still a lot,” Juno said.

“Yes,” Rita said.

“Is there any way we can narrow that down, or,” Juno furrowed his brows.

“Oh, so when it’s a list of names you’re happy to look over it a thousand times, but when it’s about the perfect combination of pets and technology,” she opened a file, “then you don’t want to even… bother… Aww, this one was supposed to be a little train conductor! Look, boss, they gave them a hat!”

Okay, so he’d lost Rita. Juno tried to make the gears in his head turn, but right now all his robot memories were secondhand and were the wrong shape to fit. From what he could tell, that was for the best; it seemed like the kind of day that would make him need to lay in the dark somewhere until he stopped thinking about anything. The counterpoint was that most of Juno’s thoughts made him want to lay in the dark, that’s why he laid down in the dark so often, and most of those thoughts weren’t necessary to investigating a mayoral candidate who was using shady human surveillance and threatening his friends and killing some people under the guise of protecting others.

Juno knew from experience that it didn’t work. Not in the long run. Not if you couldn’t fix the toxic thing—the fear, the greed, the sick core in your chest that was always always there and would never go away no matter what you did to kill it—that led to killing and letting people die and taking everything you could without consideration of the consequences and giving the consequences to innocent people who were just trying to survive because at this point, why not? Why not give all the power to whoever was wealthy enough to hold it and leave everyone else to fight for whatever they could find within their reach? Why not let people decide whether to stop providing for their kids or
go off their meds or give up and do both because what did any of it matter? Why not let the police make arrests based on whoever was the lowest bidder? Why not create a city where everything was endlessly falling straight into hell and the only people who made it were the ones rich enough to pay passage and the ones tough enough to punch out the devil and step over all the bodies to pull themselves out?

People like Juno Steel were a temporary solution. A man like the one Ramses O’Flaherty was pretending to be could have been a permanent one, could have started putting in the infrastructure to fix it and then they could all find out once and for all whether this city had a corrupting force of its own or if there was something in it worth saving.

Maybe next election.

In four goddamn years.

“Boss, they love giving these robots little hats!” Rita said from her computer chair.

“Sounds adorable.” Right. They had to get back on track, or else Rita would be here for hours, and he didn’t know if they had hours to spend on this. They were on a clock that was running down, but none of them could see the digits. It would help if he had… anything. Like, if he’d left some kind of…

Juno ran upstairs and checked his coat pockets.

The light, weirdly sticky pieces of dented metal landed next to Rita’s keyboard in an oddly satisfying clatter of sound and shape. She gave them a quick glance, and let out a sigh.

“Boss, please don’t give me your pocket garbage,” Rita said, returning her attention to the screen.

“It’s not garbage, it’s evidence,” Juno said. Unlike some people in the house, he wasn’t the type to fill his pockets with anything that wasn’t nailed down. If he had unidentifiable mystery trash in his pockets, it wasn’t there on a whim. This garbage was important.

Rita wrinkled her nose in distaste and gave the metal another cursory look. “It could have been evidence in a bag.”

“Yeah, well, it isn’t, and soon I’ll have the dry cleaning charges to prove it,” he said, inspecting the inside pocket of his coat, which was perhaps the least clean it had ever been--this from someone known to take semi-regular, if involuntary, tours of Hyperion City’s sewer system. All of his old receipts were congealing into one mass in there, and one side of his lapel was rendered completely unable to bend. It was probably time to get it cleaned. He’d think about it.

Rita picked up a pen and poked the metal, and laughed to herself when it stuck slightly to the pen before falling off. “Gross.”

“Imagine having to deal with it when it was all in one piece, and also, on my face,” Juno said, shuddering at the secondhand recollection. “So what can you tell me about it now?”

Rita poked it again, and lifted it gingerly, apparently seeing how long it could stay stuck. “Probably nothing, boss, that’s not how computers work. Unless their schematics are clear enough for image recognition, or…” Rita trailed off as the thing fell again, then picked up her comms and scanned it, and she was typing again, and he heard some pings coming from the computer. He’d talked to her about turning down the volume on that thing, especially for the typing sounds, but it never took.

“Are these good beeps?” Juno asked, just to fill the space. The door at the top of the stairs opened
before Rita could finish her indulgent sigh, and Alessandra Strong filled the entire frame. Her face was the kind of angry that rendered itself speechless, and Juno felt his muscles tensing to run. He was glad Rita was between him and Alessandra’s calm, methodical approach.

She stopped when she was a couple of yards away. “You’re looking at the data we grabbed?” she asked, and she sounded so even.

Juno didn’t say anything. Everyone had a breaking point, and he had no idea where Alessandra’s might lay. It was always better to tiptoe until it was over.

“Steel, I broke my hand punching a robot to get that. I had a--” she stopped herself, looked at Rita, looked at Juno’s fearful, suspended stare, and took a few calming breaths. When she spoke again, her voice was less even, more natural.

“This might surprise you to hear, but it was pretty damn terrible in there, Steel. I went down there and kept you from getting killed despite your best efforts, and--” She stopped again. “We’re going to talk later. But right now you’re going to fill me in on what you’ve found so far. Any trace of O’Flaherty here?”

“Not by name or facial recognition. Not to say he can’t have been some kind of nameless-benefactor or remote boss or something; best bet is if he was directly involved he managed to clear all of his information out.” See? I’m forthcoming and compliant, he tried to scream in the subtext. He knew that she was annoyed, not angry, but he couldn’t stop himself from wanting to handle the situation as gingerly as possible. He couldn’t know for sure. “Now Rita’s looking into projects, with an emphasis on murderous robots.”

“Found ‘em,” Rita said, right on cue. “Let me read through it real quick.”

“We can read--”

“Scientists,” Juno said by way of explanation.

“Never mind,” and Alessandra went to lean on the table to better see the screen over Rita’s other shoulder. She only just stopped herself from leaning on her right hand. It was bandaged pretty well, he noticed, and he very pointedly did not allow himself to ride that thought any further toward the bandage-er. Instead, he paced around a bit, trying to keep his thoughts somewhere he had the emotional capacity to deal with.

“Can you just wait?” Alessandra asked.

“I am waiting,” Juno said, opening and closing his hands with nervous energy.

“Mmkay.” Juno and Alessandra both turned to give Rita their full attention. “It’s a lot of stuff about cybernetics and biocybernetics, but basically, these little guys were designed to fix the broken animatronics in the park without being all out of place and distracting, and at first they were jumping all weird and wrong and slow and so they fixed it by giving them muscles!” She said this like it was supposed to be very dramatic, and was met with only blank stares.

Rita made that sound she had that was a combination of a sigh, a groan, and a frustrated yell. “It’s an important scientific development, Mr. Steel!”

“Alessandra didn’t know either!” Juno said immediately.

“Ms. Strong isn’t my boss, boss, I have no right to criticize her,” she said.
“That sounds like the opposite of how that works,” Alessandra said.

“All due respect, Ms. Strong, but you haven’t worked with Mr. Steel the way I have,” Rita said, and Juno rolled his eyes. “The important thing here is, Calvera Innovations made robots that use biological and robotic systems that support each other, so if the biological functions degrade, they can use their mechanical functions and passive joint forces to continue working, and if the mechanical functions degrade the biological ones can take over, like a large-scale biocybernetic, you know,” she gestured at Juno’s eye, “attachment, but the whole thing.”

“So,” Juno started, rolling over the words in his head. They mostly made sense, but she was talking so fast.

“The metal parts and the meat parts rely on each other and make it work longer,” Rita tried, and Juno and Alessandra nodded.

“And you need that because…” Alessandra started.

“Because it’s illegal to make something effectively immortal and entirely under your control unless some bits of it are made of metal first?” Juno suggested.

Rita scowled at him. “And because robots can’t mimic specialized movements efficiently, on account of how inefficient non-robotic systems are. Have you ever seen someone with a cybernetic eye that didn’t have human muscles attached? This is like the opposite of that. A robot thing that moves like a bio thing.”

Alessandra, if anything, looked more confused, but willing to accept it as fact. “I guess that’s… charming. Creepy, but charming. But why would you want that?”

“Image,” Juno said. “They’re for the parks, right?”

Rita gave him a strange look. “Yeah,” and she even sounded a little bit suspicious. “They are.”

“Don’t look so surprised, I know things, okay?” Juno’s face started to warm. “Anyway, they would need something to repair their malfunctioning equipment, and nothing can make someone leave a theme park faster than the reminder that those 200-miles-an-hour death traps aren’t indestructible. Those little bugs are a whole lot less obvious than a repair robot.”

“Okay, if they’re supposed to repair things why didn’t they fix anything in the building except…” Alessandra stopped. “They only tried to fix your eye and each other,” she said.

Juno opened his mouth, closed it, pointed at her, opened it again. “You think--”

“--they’re not supposed to fix machines, but--”

“--machines with a, uh. With muscles and meat and--Rita, is there a name for that?”

Rita shrugged. “Machines with some meat on them? I don’t know, technically it’s a cyborg, but that’s kind of a loaded term legally and they’re not using it here, so,” she shrugged. “I actually watched a stream about this kind of thing once, but it was with bio androids and everyone went on and on about the ethical dilemmas of it, but then there was this robber baron-type who just wanted to take the technology for his own nefarious purposes, but then in the end it turned out he was an android all along! It was a real big surprise, none of the other characters saw it coming, and then in the end he had to work as part of the assembly line in his own factory, and I think the point was that his previous actions had stripped him of his humanity? Except he wasn’t human, as much, so the morals of it were hard to follow, but it was an older stream, so you have to kind of think about that
kind of thing while you watch, you know how it is,” Rita explained.

“...Right,” Alessandra said. “So why would they need to make, um, cyborgs?” She looked to Rita for confirmation of the nomenclature, and Rita half-nodded, half-shrugged, “To make cyborgs specifically to fix other cyborgs if these are… the only…”

“Unless,” Juno started.

“They had more in development,” Alessandra finished.

“Or they had more out of development,” Juno said.

“The robot from the locker got pretty messed up, but it came back and it was mostly fine,” Alessandra added slowly.

“Are you sure it was the same one?”

“I impaled it with a pole,” she said. “Pole was still there when it came back up.”

They looked at each other, and then both turned to Rita.

“One search for projects involving cyborg androids, coming right up?”

“Please,” Alessandra said.

“See, boss, that is how you treat a lady,” Rita said, and started typing while Alessandra furrowed her brows.

“You don’t say ‘please’?” she muttered, and Juno huffed, a who’s got the time? kind of sound.

“Hm,” Rita said.

“You find something?”

“I found nothing,” Rita said. “There aren’t even walls around it, or anything missing. Nothing’s hidden, there just… isn’t anything person-shaped in the bio files. Let me....” More keys. “Yeah, no, nothing’s been hidden, or deleted, there’s just nothing here.”

Alessandra narrowed her eyes. “But they were there.”

“Cover-up,” Juno reminded her. “Wouldn’t be a good one if they left anything uncovered.”

“So it was for this?” Alessandra said. “I guess it makes sense, it’s an ethical nightmare--”

“Right, because corporations care so much about ethics in this city.” Juno let out a dry laugh. “If it’s not on-the-books illegal, or they have the cash to bail themselves out, they’re going to do it.”

“Okay,” Alessandra said, stretching the word out. “Sure, legally it’s… permissible, but, like I said, that’s an ethical minefield. Someone would have come forward, or said something.”

“And like I said, when has any corporation in this city ever cared about anything other than getting sued by someone who might actually win?”

“ Corporations may be run by rich asses, but they’re made of regular people, they’re not some mass of automatons following a single doctrine. Someone must have know that wasn’t right.”
“Yeah, I’m sure everyone in this city is jumping at the chance to get blackballed by one of the
highest-paying and most stable companies we have. Why bother paying rent or feeding your kids
when you can stand by your principles instead?”

“Contrary to your rosy outlook, some people want to do the right thing. Calvera had a lot of
employees. Someone has to have sounded the alarm.”

He’d forgotten about Alessandra Strong’s misplaced faith in humankind. Clearly she hadn’t been in
this line of work long enough. Or living in this city long enough. She’d figure it out eventually.

She was in a war, the voice in the back of his brain said, but he didn’t pay it much attention.

“That’s a nice thought. Would be better if you had any evidence to back it up, but who needs that in
this line of work, right?” and call Juno Steel a hopeless fool, but somewhere in his lungs he held
back the exact amount of air it would take to say Convince me.

“We’ve already established that there was a pretty thorough cover-up. That wouldn’t have had to
happen if no one was going to report.”

And there it was.

“So your argument here, your evidence for why people aren’t all fueled by greed and necessity is
that the people who aren’t were probably killed for it?” Juno laughed in disbelief. “What’s more
likely: someone filed against their patent or something and it was more profitable to torch it all than to
lose in court, or some mid-level employee decided to take their heroic stand against the tech branch
for an entertainment company in the name of ethics?”

“Look, arguing the why of it isn’t going to accomplish anything,” Alessandra said, and Juno knew
he’d won. He kind of wished he hadn’t.

“This debate on the relative morality of individual action is fun and all, but can we please focus on
the important thing here, which is that they made a whole new kind of robot that they probably gave
a hat and they didn’t even leave me any files where I could look at it?” Rita was almost screeching
by the end of the sentence.

Juno thought for a second. “Right. Projects. What were they working on? What did they want…
cyborgs, or whatever, for?”

“And how many people were working on it? How many of them knew?” Alessandra added.

“Actually, that’s a good point. Who worked on the grasshopper project, and what else did they work
on?”

“Oh, that’s good,” Alessandra said. “Focus on people who don’t have prominent roles in any other
projects, and anyone who has specific training in biomechanics.”

“She’s my secretary, you can’t boss her around,” Juno said, then turned to Rita. “Do that.”

“Coming right up, boss. Can I print out the info for you this time, or are you still gonna read over my
shoulder like a creepy librarian who doesn’t think you should hack into private files on shared
computers even though you still have 45 minutes left on your checkout?”

“You can print it out,” Juno mumbled, avoiding looking at Alessandra at all costs.

The list of projects ended up being very long. Much longer than ideal. Alessandra, Rita, and Juno all
stared at the printout.

“You know,” Rita started. “This looks like it’s going to be lots of work, going through these files of pictures of robots and intensive descriptions of their programming. And I know you two probably aren’t excited to go through it, so if you need someone to sacrifice their time and mental capacity on robot info on here while you two look at the boring paper copies,”

“Rita, what about me makes you think I’m going to stop you from reading about… circuitry, and… wires, and things?” Juno asked. He knew computers had both of those things in them. He was at least 70% sure.

“I don’t know! You’re unpredictable, Mr. Steel!” Rita shouted. “And I’m gonna spend the next couple of hours looking at these files either way, there are pictures and vids and all and I thought maybe I’d save you the trouble!”

“Okay,” Juno said, leaning away from her. “Knock yourself out, I guess? I’ll read through… this pile,” he said, slightly deflated. It looked like the kind of pile you fell asleep halfway through the first page of, even when--maybe especially when--death was on the line.

“Actually, I’m going to call a detectives-only meeting. It’s mandatory,” Alessandra said, and before Juno had time to protest she had pulled him into the laundry room and shut the door behind them. She rested her hand on the edge of the sink, and Juno leaned against the door, which was the fastest escape route and had the additional perk of being the second-closest option to laying on the floor and maybe falling asleep by accident while he was down there.

Maybe he really was tired. And admittedly, some of his best nights of sleep were fueled by comedowns from blood loss and adrenaline highs. Nothing like losing a fortieth of your total volume to tire you out too much to think about all the people you’d ever hurt before drifting off to the usual restless slumber.

“So, uh. How’s the hand?” Juno asked, wishing he’d tried even a little bit at any point in his life to be good at small talk. He tried to remember any recent weather anomalies, but it was Mars, where the whole planet was all dust storms and acid rain and never anything unexpected.

“Broken, Steel. I punched solid metal.” She crossed her arms. She was so imposing when she wanted to be, as if she were a living statue of a warrior in deliberation. “Look, forget the pleasantries. Why are you trying to hide all of this relevant, helpful information from me? Am I just a bodyguard to you? Someone who can keep you in one piece while you do all the real work? Maybe I haven’t been around the block as many times as you have, and I don’t exactly have your police background, if you can even call it that--”

“How did you know about that?” Juno asked before he realized he was talking.

“Why do I have to keep reminding you? You hired me because I am, in a professional capacity, a private investigator, Steel, did you really expect me not to find out? I saw the way those guys from the HCPD reacted when they saw you ODing on Martian tech, it wasn’t hard to put all that together. I have eyes, and basic computer skills.”

“How did you know about that?” Juno asked before he realized he was talking.

“Must be nice,” Juno muttered. He’d never been good at keeping his mouth shut.

“Oh, get off the pity train.” Juno tried very hard not to flinch at the sudden rise in volume, but the way that Alessandra paused to collect herself let him know that he hadn’t succeeded. “Look. It probably doesn’t feel like it, but you’re still getting things done, even down an eye and with all your memory stuff and your fixation with self-sabotage, and so what if you need help sometimes? You
have people here who want to help you. I was a soldier, Steel. I’ve never done anything by myself until suddenly the war was over and I was back here, and for the first time I was alone and I didn’t have anyone anymore. And you’re sitting here like the worst thing that could possibly happen is that we keep putting our lives aside to try to help you?"

“I don’t need your favors, okay? Rita’s here because I pay her, and that’s fine—”

“I deal in favors, Juno. You have friends. Friends and whatever that Fox guy is. Speaking of, I’m adding ‘dropping really obvious hints about the crimes you’ve committed together’ to the list of things I don’t want you to do around me.” She kneaded at her bandaged hand with her fingers.

“It’s not like I just woke up and thought, After years of trying to be on the side of good, wherever that is, let’s commit some crime, Strong, it was more complicated than that,” Juno began.

“Yeah, you’ve been trying to tell me how complicated all this is for you. Which is funny, because I expressly stated that I do not want to hear about it.”

“Okay. I guess that’s fair.” Neither of them spoke for a stretch. “But you’re wrong. About my having friends. I have people who want things from me, and usually I’m enough of an idiot to give them over, and sometimes I’m lucky enough that they give something back.”

“You’re lying to yourself and you know it.” The words had the sound of the lowest string on a cello snapping in two. “I survive everything, Steel, even when I shouldn’t. Things that kill everyone, absolutely all of them, but never me. And everyone who’s ever cared enough to try to be there to help—” She stopped, and her voice was more solid when it reappeared. “Everyone I know who would even consider doing something like this for me is already dead, so maybe quit acting like this is such a huge burden on you.”

“Why do you think I want to do this alone so badly? You’re not the only person who’s ever seen anyone die for them,” he snapped. The silence shook with the quiet power of it.

It hung.

“Oh,” Alessandra said.

“Yeah,” Juno said bitterly. “Oh.”

They were both quiet a little longer.

“Look, maybe this is a bad time, but do you think you would ever want to see someone? And… talk about this? Like, a professional.”

He couldn’t say he hadn’t thought about it. “I don’t think there’s a way to cure killing the people you’re supposed to be saving.”

“I’m going to stop you right there,” she said, and Juno caught her scraping her nails against her forearm. “I can’t talk to you about letting people die, okay? There are… so many reasons why I can’t be the one to do that for you. If you want to talk to someone I will help you find someone to talk to, but I can’t be that person.”

Juno didn’t have the heart to add on another joke about his health insurance or lack thereof. Besides, Alessandra Strong was already dangerously close to figuring out that Juno really did get most of his healthcare from the veterinarian he’d saved from an attempted poisoning. Some people really took their pets seriously.
“I’m fine.”

She patted him on the arm, Juno thought at first for reassurance, and then realized that it was because he was standing in front of the door. “One detective to another? You’re really not.” Alessandra moved her hand to the doorknob, and Juno shifted his weight so he wasn’t leaning against it anymore and it could open freely. “But I’m not either. I’ll be working upstairs if you want to join,” she said, and maneuvered around him and out the door.

“Yeah, maybe,” Juno said to the empty room.

It didn’t answer.
Juno Steel was not allowed to be tired right now.

Admittedly, he’d had a long day. But he had fallen asleep in the car, which, combined with caffeine, was the same as having had a regular amount of sleep in his book. They had case details to search now, and questions to answer, and so many printouts where the words kept trying to swim around on him, and he could not be tired.

Really, being upstairs with Mick and Alessandra was a measure to keep him awake. And Rita making him look at robots every thirty seconds was starting to wear on him. He had to remember to check on her later and make sure she didn’t end up staring at those things all night.

Juno would have been curled up on a corner of the couch, but it was currently occupied by a mess of socks and old tees, so instead he’d started making a constellation of papers on the floor again, mostly talking only to himself but occasionally volleying thoughts towards Alessandra, who would volley her theories to Mick, who would… well, he did his best. It seemed like it helped Alessandra talk it through, so it didn’t really matter. It was kind of hard to stay focused with their talking, which was nothing like Rita’s running commentary, but he was running out of room downstairs to organize all of his files. Which was another good, emotionless reason why he was not working silently in a basement anymore.

If he were really pressed, Juno might also admit that he kind of liked being around the easy energy Mick and Alessandra had with each other. They made a weirdly good… team? Was it a team, what they were? They’d coached team sports together, maybe that was why that was the only word he could think of. He pushed it into the back of his head and started organizing all of his notes and papers the way he liked them, so he could pace around without completely losing the thread of what he was doing.

“Oh, no, it’s spreading,” Alessandra commented, deadpan.

“Scientists thought they could contain it,” Mick said in a bad impression of a voiceover. “But this time… has science… gone too far?”

Maybe they made a little too good a team. “That’s a lazy narrative choice and you know it,” Juno said without looking up, then gestured vaguely at the pile of clothes. “Besides, you don’t have room to talk when your things are always out wherever.”

“Those could be anyone’s clothes. Those could be your clothes,” Mick hedged. “You don’t know.”

In answer, Juno reached into the middle of the pile and pulled out one of Mick’s old t-shirts, which said MERCURY on the back. He didn’t even have to look for it; he knew it would be there. “Could
“... no,” Mick admitted quietly.

“All right, glad we’ve established that you’re going to try to use,” Juno gestured at his head rather than catalogue all the new things that were still wrong in his brain, “this against me whenever you want,” and he tossed the shirt back onto the pile while he turned to Alessandra. “And thanks for letting it happen, that’s reassuring.”

“Oh, come on, that one was obvious,” Alessandra said.

“Yeah, it was obvious, but they’re not all going to be obvious, I have enough to think about without having to sit down and try to figure out which of you are lying to me just because you can,” and his voice was mostly calm but he suddenly felt a powerful need to remind himself to keep it together, keep it together.

“Oh, yeah, that’s my laundry,” Mick admitted.

Sometimes it was incredible to witness Mick Mercury missing the point by several miles. “That wasn’t the problem,” he tried to say without yelling. “You go on a bunch of car chases and inspire a ragtag group of teens together, and now you’re just this… united front, and you’re both okay with trying to make me believe whatever you want?”

“I would have stopped him if it wasn’t an obvious lie, and you know he wouldn’t have said it if it wasn’t,” Alessandra said, her voice only a little like the one she used when she was rolling her eyes. “And we had one car chase. Maybe two--”

“You don’t remember the exact number?” Juno asked, quietly.

“--but our daring escapes were mostly waiting to make sure we weren’t being followed on one of the weird sidestreets on the way back from Mick’s office.”

“Mick’s office?” Juno asked, while Mick shook his head wildly at Alessandra.

Alessandra looked at Mick, then at Juno. “At Mick’s job? It’s kind of hard to get into that many daring detective hijinks when one of you is in a nine to five and coaching team sports.”

Mick put his forehead flat against the table, groaning a “Nooo,” all the way down.

“Wait, what?” Juno asked. “But you said,” and then he remembered that Mick Mercury was still, always had been, the King of the Highway. None of the royalty Juno had ever met had been born into their crowns; they only ever had to say they had them and trust they would be so adorned. “Oh.”

Wait. Then--

“Okay, which part of what I just said was a secret? I thought you were trying to stop me from telling him you got fired from coaching team sports,” Alessandra asked in a frustrated voice.

“That too,” Mick mumbled into the table.

--they sent him video of Mick during the day when the eye was working, but he was never in an office--

Alessandra nodded once in realization, then stood up and began picking up her formidable accumulation of mugs. “Okay. At the risk of somehow betraying more of your weirdly mundane
secrets,” she said, moving them to the sink and half-heartedly rinsing them, “I’m going to go find somewhere to lay down for a few hours.” She considered the very full drying rack, holding two or three mugs by the handle in each hand, and finally decided on resting them haphazardly on top of the pile. “So I’m going to keep talking about nothing until I’m safely out of range of whatever’s going to happen here,” and she scooped up her tablet and papers into a messy stack on top of the cabinet, then returned from her pill bottles, “and you two… can...” She stopped, looking closely at the full bottles in her hand. “Talk this out,” she finished distractedly, looking closely at her prescriptions before moving them on top of the cupboard with everything else. She stood for a moment, staring into space with the exact variety of suspicious, wheels-turning detective stare that Juno used to practice in the mirror but never quite perfected.

She turned and went upstairs without another word, and as soon as the door closed behind her Mick turned to him.

--so had Mick Mercury ever been in danger? He must have been, but--

“I can explain,” Mick said, interrupting Juno’s line of thought.

“One second,” Juno said, distracted, his face intense.

--were they falsifying images? Why would they need to do that? Unless there were much fewer people keeping Juno in line than he thought, and they didn’t have the people to spare on surveillance, but then why--was it all a lie? Would Mick have been in real danger? He would have, right? This wasn’t all for nothing, again, was it? No, not an important question for figuring this out; he dropped it to the side. Why didn’t Mick tell him about this days ago? He couldn’t suddenly have this wrench thrown into everything right now--

“I didn’t think it was important,” Mick said defensively. “I wasn’t trying to screw anything up, or anything, and I wasn’t lying, I just didn’t want to tell you.”

“That’s omission. Still counts,” Juno said, slightly overwhelmed. “And the getting-fired was definitely a lie, how did that even happen?” He reached for one of Alessandra’s pens and the first piece of paper he could find and started scrawling on it. “If I ask you about this you have to remind me you were in an office all day, okay?” Juno said, sliding the paper over towards Mick.

“Oh, yeah. Sure,” Mick said. He looked confusedly at the paper, and then gave up on trying to find any meaning in Juno’s notes. “Getting fired wasn’t my fault. Alessandra taught the co-captain how to throw a punch at a scrimmage and things got kind of out of hand.”

Alessandra’s technique for punching combined with the underdeveloped reasoning of a teen was a terrifying concept to consider, and Juno tried not to dwell on it. “If you got fired, why did you keep telling me stories about how bad your team was? You could have at least thrown your fake sports team some points.”

“I love an underdog story,” Mick said wistfully. “And uh. My, uh. Job,” the word came out as a cringe, “is just, so boring, J, there is nothing to think about so I just kind of try to think about… anything even a little bit interesting while I’m there.”


“I… look, King of the Highway is an embarrassing thing I did when I was a kid, and it isn’t a position that comes with health insurance, okay? I’m almost forty, J,” he said, and then his voice fell
to something like a mumble. “And you and Sasha and now Alessandra, you’re all doing this really
cool, stream-worthy stuff, and I’m just kinda… here?” He shrugged with the right side of his body.
“It’s like, suddenly your lives got really cool and mine got really boring except for my projects, but
they never shake out into anything, and now I work in an office because it was the only thing left to
do. Or, I did,” he gave a one-sided, eyebrow-raised cringe that made him look so young and
sheepish. “I’m… probably not hired there anymore.”

“After over a week of absence with no warning?” Juno asked. “Yeah, no, I’m going to go out on a
limb and say you’re not getting that job back.”

“Yeah, that’s fine, I guess.” Mick said, tracing a circle on the tabletop. “Look, I wasn’t trying to lie,
exactly. It’s not like… I guess I just wanted you to think I was doing something cool? But like,
normal-person cool. I don’t need to be some kind of hero or anything, but… I want to be
something,” Mick averted his eyes. “It sounds… kind of pathetic, when I say it out loud.”

“Yeah, it does,” Juno agreed readily. “Glad you finally joined the rest of us.”

“Shut up,” Mick said.

“No, really,” Juno said. “I don’t trust anyone who’s not at least a little pathetic. Everything else is
usually some kind of affectation.”

“Oh, like your whole misunderstood-loner thing,” Mick said.

Juno stared. “What?”

“You know, how you’re always pretending you don’t need anyone or care about anyone when
really you’re,” and he nodded towards Juno as if he expected Juno to understand what that meant.

It wasn’t surprising how easy it was for Mick to say exactly what he was thinking; the surprising part
was how often the thing Mick was thinking was completely right. “I’m not faking this, it’s not some
romantic thing, like I’m trying to look good or something,” Juno said, not knowing for sure if the
words were true.

“Well, that’s good, because it’s a pretty bad look,” Mick said in a reasonable voice. “And it’s
definitely not working for you romance-wise.”

“Shut up,” Juno said. “I didn’t mean it like that. That’s the last thing I need to be thinking about. Or,
one of the last things I need to be thinking about.” There were a lot of things Juno didn’t want to or
couldn’t think about fighting for the number one spot, and judging from the inside of his head, they
were all winning. He squeezed his eyes shut and started over. “It’s not an affectation, this is my real
life, I can’t have people I care about around me all the time.”

“But you do,” Mick said. “You couldn’t turn anyone down to save your life.”

“Couldn’t turn anyone down to save their life either,” Juno mumbled to himself, and picked a stray
pen up off the table and started fiddling with it.

Mick looked at him, as if he expected Juno to elaborate. He didn’t.

“J?” Mick asked, and it would have been so easy not to answer, would have been fine to just sit and
wait for time to run down and for Mick to decide Juno wasn’t worth the time.

Except Juno couldn’t sit still and wait for time to meet him, was physically incapable of keeping
himself from pushing his way past every silent moment. “I’m the same age she was.” He couldn’t
look at Mick like this. “The first time she… Remember fourth grade, that night that,” it took him a second to make his lips form the right sound, “Ben and I broke into your room? And we… stayed over, a little while?” Juno stopped, because Mick was nodding and saying the rest wasn’t worth the feeling he was tearing his own veins out through his skin inch by agonizing inch. “Not like it means anything, but… we’re the same age, now.”

“Are you going superstitious on me, J?” His voice was light, but he was leaning in attentively, and something in the set of his brow betrayed his concern.

“It’s not superstition, it’s…” Juno twirled the pen in his fingers until it escaped from between his third and fourth fingers and flung itself to the ground. He and Mick both looked at it but made no move to pick it up.

“Everyone thinks I’m like her.”

Mick leaned over and used the very tips of his fingers to try to toss the pen back at Juno. It was short by a couple of inches and fell back onto the floor, eventually landing next to Juno’s right foot. He leaned down and picked it up and continued moving the pen finger-to-finger.

“Well, yeah. Because you are like her,” Mick said, and Juno found himself standing up, and his chair was flat on the ground behind him and the pen was across the room again.

“Don’t. Say that,” Juno said, and he was walking in Mick’s direction, and he hated the look on Mick’s face as he leaned away from him.

Mick put his hands up. “I didn’t say you were going to end up like her, J! But you,” he stood up to try to intercept Juno’s determined march for the door. “Wait, J, that was a dumb way to say it, but—” Juno tried to duck under Mick’s arm, and Mick just moved the other in his way. “Juno, could you please just wait a sec and hear me out?” Mick asked, and Mick calling him Juno was just surprising enough that he stopped fighting to get past.

“Why, so you can tell me I’m always a hair trigger away from killing—everyone? Strangers, kid sisters, friends, fiances, you?” Mick flinched backwards and Juno let the self-loathing from it fuel him. “What are you even trying to do here, Mick? Give some inspirational speech about how I’m made of something different than she was and shouldn’t we go stand outside and stare at whatever stars we can see past all the light pollution and regular pollution and dust storms and think about how damn poignant it all is, that if you watch yourself closely enough and don’t let yourself step out of line your whole goddamn life you don’t have to become your mother!”

“J, you’re not becoming your mom—”

“You’re right!” Juno said, and he felt his face as a manic collection of strings pulled tight. “I’m worse. Because Sarah Steel? For all the hell she put us through, she only ever got one person killed. Me? I started in on that family business when I was thirteen goddamn years old. Every good parent wants to give their kid a head start, right? Well, she sure did her job on that one, I was following in her footsteps before she even made them, and in the end—” [i half killed ben myself]

“Will you stop it?”

“Why should I? No one else is going to say it!” He’d lost every other destructive decision he used to quiet the sickest part of him, and it had been growing louder and louder and now the only way to stop it from consuming him was to name it, and no one would ever let him. He didn’t even know if he could. “You have no idea what this is like!”
“Then tell me!” Mick shouted right back. “Because I was there, for all of it! I was trying to help you and you never tell me! I’m sorry that I was never able to fix it or stop it or help you before, but I’m not useless, okay?”

“What? No,” Juno said. “You don’t get to take responsibility for anything my mom did, Mick, you don’t get to—”

“I’m not taking responsibility for something that wasn’t my fault, J, I’m not you. I’m just saying, I could have done more, I didn’t know how but I could have, especially while you and Sash were gone, but I didn’t, and I think about it sometimes, and I’m sorry I couldn’t be that person. I don’t think anyone could have, but honestly? I wish I’d known enough to try.”

Juno had hit the limit of frustration; now he wanted to be angry, to throw himself at something and make it hit him back, because he didn’t understand why this was what his life was and why he had to live it and why other people had to try to make it theirs, and the extent of it was too much for one person to feel at once, so he stopped feeling anything, thinking anything. He dropped his arms and looked for some thought to hold onto to keep from going blank.

“That’s, stupid. That’s a stupid feeling to have,” he stuttered out. “You did a lot. Okay? You did a whole lot. More than you should’ve.”

Mick hesitated. “Thanks,” he said, then let go of Juno’s upper arms. Juno responded by sliding to the floor, just because he could, and Mick sat next to him, both their backs to the wall. “You spend a lot of time on the floor, huh?” he asked.

“I guess,” Juno answered. They sat in the somber, companionable silence of a bar memorial service.

The number on the clock changed a few times.

“Sorry I tried to lie to you. Sorry I’ve been lying to you. I won’t do it again.”

“Okay.”

They stayed in place. Mick looked at him a few times, started to say something, stopped.

The clock changed again.

“Hey. So. The thing I said about your mom?”

“Forget it,” Juno said. “I know it’s... forget it.”

Mick kept talking anyway. “You don’t do what she did, J. A lot of things are like other things, like,” he flattened his legs out against the floor, “Acid’s a lot like water, but if you see a rainstorm outside you want it to be water, you know?”

“But we’re usually stuck with the acid,” Juno observed. “Really interesting thought. Too bad that I’m a person who’s genetically similar to another person, and not some pretty concept of... likeness.”

“Yeah, I know, but... you’re like her, not her bad days,” Mick said.

“No. You can’t do that. The thing that she had wrong with her was still... her, you don’t get to pretend it was some different person living inside of her because it makes you feel better about how sometimes she was nice to you and did good things and told jokes and, went to PTA meetings or whatever.” His mom hadn’t gone to PTA meetings, but the point stood.
Mick bent a leg again, leaned back against the wall more. “Yeah, okay. Forget I said anything.”

“Probably won’t have any trouble with that,” Juno said, and it was almost a joke.

“Yeah. Bad wording.”

They sat like that for a while, neither of them willing to move.

“I should probably finish my laundry,” Mick said.

“Yeah,” Juno agreed.

They sat there a little longer; then Mick clapped his hands on his legs and pulled himself up. He clapped his hands against each other, clearing off the dust and crumbs from the floor, then offered his hands to Juno. “C’mon.”

Juno looked at him, flat. “I think I can handle standing on my own.”

“Come on,” Mick repeated. “If you don’t get up now and go to bed I’m gonna see if I can still pick you up,” he threatened.

“I will walk halfway across this planet to the nearest lake and throw you in it,” Juno said, but took Mick’s hands as offered.

“Not even for old time’s sake?” Mick joked.

“No. Find some other feat of strength to impress me with,” Juno said. “Make Alessandra teach you how to kick a door down.”

“Fine,” Mick said, and pulled Juno to his feet. His eyes were immediately full of stars rushing in and out of his vision, and he collapsed slightly into Mick to steady himself.

“J? You alright?”

“I’m great, just trying to make a wish before the meteor shower’s over,” he said, watching the specks of light slowly fade away as they zoomed out of his line of sight. “Too late, missed it.” He stood still, balancing against Mick until he felt steady again, then gave him a solid pat on the back and disengaged.

Mick was giving him that look. Everyone in the house had a Is Juno Doing Okay? look now, and it was starting to feel a little unfair. “You should probably go to bed.”

“There’ll be time for that when no one’s holding a metaphorical gun to your head.”

“I’m terrified of going to jail for no reason and everything, but I’m pretty sure if you die of sleep deprivation that’s not gonna help,” Mick said. “You kind of look like death warmed over, then cooled down and left on the counter a couple days.”

“You really know how to charm a guy.”

“Can I charm you into a bed?” Mick asked, and Juno immediately recoiled.

“If you’re my friend you will never say it like that ever again,” he said, arms making an unintentional X over him.

“What, I--oh, gross, J, we’ve already been down that road--”
“What are you--no, Mick, we kissed *one time* and it didn’t *count*--”

“--and you can’t keep reading innuendo into everything I say,” he finished.

“I wasn’t reading the innuendo, the innuendo was there!” He was still reeling from the realization that, even if it didn’t count, he was currently trapped in a house with three people he had kissed--he’d forgotten about Mick, because it didn’t count--and Rita. This was a nightmare he was living in, some kind of hellish farce. And now he had to try to explain innuendo to Mick for maybe the thousandth time in his life. “And we were *six*.”

“And you’re so strong, to withstand my magnetic pull for all those years since then,” Mick joked.

“Gross,” Juno said, and gave him a light push, and Mick laughed.

They were quiet again.

Juno sighed. “Maybe I should go to bed,” he murmured. “Not because you asked me to.” More because if he fell asleep in this kitchen, he would wake up in the middle of Alessandra’s whirlwind of an organizational system, with Rita force-feeding him French toast or something. And it was starting to feel very likely that he was going to fall asleep at this table. He had the feeling he was going to do something before the night was over, but he couldn't remember what, so he let it go.

“Whatever you say, J,” and Mick put a hand on his shoulder while Juno pulled himself up and out of the chair. “Sweet dreams.”

“Good one,” Juno said in some sad relative of a laugh, and he dragged himself upstairs and into the first bedroom he could find.

There was a warm body next to him, was the first thing Juno was dimly aware of when he woke up.

That was good. Much more reassuring than a cold one. He nestled into it, not-quite-awake. He smelled Peter Nureyev’s cologne and skin and sweat wrapping around him, making the fuzz in his brain that much stronger, and he moved an arm across the man’s chest to pull himself in, and felt a drowsy arm encircle him and a voice separated from its consciousness mutter his name before he let his eyes flutter closed.

And then he opened them again, and the warm beating heart beneath him didn’t stop, and Juno didn’t know for sure what mistake he’d made, but he doubted it would take much detective work to figure out.

Chapter End Notes

this is. uh. this is how you wanted this to go, right?

(forgive me)
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

what did i do last night p1: juno steel edition

The waking-up wasn’t Juno’s usual breathless terror. This was beyond panic. This was waking up with the calmness of knowing nothing could be done to make this situation worse. It was spell-binding, his ability to ruin everything. He could make a stage show of it, if the whole detective game didn’t work out.

Not to say it was working out especially well now, but the perks were supposed to be pretty good.

Juno briefly considered the chest beneath his head, and tried not to imagine tearing his own ribs open.

He didn’t bother moving. Staying where he was for another minute wouldn’t make it any worse.

It must have been five-thirty, six in the morning. He didn’t care to learn the exact number.

He couldn’t even remember what the sex was like, which seemed unfair but also about right in the context of his life so far. He couldn’t really remember if there was sex, which was maybe worse. He wasn’t especially clothed. Still had his shorts, but that didn’t mean anything. It was only another note to remember when he recreated the scene of the crime later.

He could hear Nureyev’s heartbeat under his ear, feel him breathing into his hair, feel his body’s tiny movements of keeping-himself-alive under him. He was so goddamn--so handsome, and beautiful, and awe-inspiring, and all the other words that described anything Juno Steel wanted to crawl inside of to die. Even in sleep this was the kind of man you could cut yourself open on, but the edges were a little fuzzier, more blunt. And he snored, just a little bit. Juno shouldn’t have liked that.

He slept with his lips parted and his eyes not-quite-closed. Always had an eye open, just in case.

Juno’s thoughts were wordless, collapsing into a blank want for this to last. Time never felt real for him, until it did. Things would happen, and everything would keep happening around them, and suddenly there was a before and an after, and the afters kept getting worse and worse. As long as Juno didn’t do anything, didn’t move, didn’t breathe or feel or let his pulse race, this could be a now, and beneath all the nothing he felt the thought terrify him.

He couldn’t move, didn’t want to move, had to move.

If he were honest with himself, which he very rarely was, Juno had wanted very badly to wake up with Peter Nureyev. Just that one time. It would have made a good change, opening his eyes and looking forward to seeing whatever was going to happen next.

It would never work, not really. Nureyev may have been the thief, but Juno had a whole catalogue of stolen moments with good people, and he hadn’t deserved a single one of them. And those ones all hurt now, too, like guilt and nails scraping wrists and voices he would never hear again speaking as one and eyes that looked at him and saw him and recognized him and then went dim.
He lay still for a minute or two, trying to give himself a reason to move that would put him back in control of his muscles, to give himself a reason to make himself feel something so he could go.

_You don’t get to keep things just because you want them_, he decided, and the thought didn’t feel like it was his.

_I have to do this again_, and that was just counterproductive, it made him want numbness and nothing else and he couldn’t stay here, he had to go, he couldn’t keep his head on Peter Nureyev’s chest and stare up at him like he was the only warmth Juno had because eventually he was going to wake up and Juno didn’t know what he could say, didn’t have anything he could do to make this okay, he couldn’t push him away and push him away and push him away and then wake up in this tangled pile of skin and muscle.

_Alessandra Strong is going to be so mad_, he amended, and yes, he could make that one work.

Juno pulled himself away like he was grabbing a beaten dog by the scruff of its neck, dragged himself out of the bed and stepped on a pile of yesterday’s clothes, picked them up and stumbled himself to the bathroom.

He showered with the intention but not the strength to drown. He didn’t even really wash himself. He just stood there, waiting to see if he would drown now. Or now. Or now. Or--never.

Eventually he turned off the water, because the water had to be turned off eventually. And eventually he stopped leaning his head against the wall trying to figure out _what he did, what he said_, because he had to stop eventually. He inspected himself in the white-specked mirror, turned around to look at his back, trying to recreate the events of the night from the marks on his skin, and that made it worse because he didn’t have a single bruise or mark or scratch that couldn’t have feasibly come from the regular wear and tear of having a living body and being Juno Steel, so _what did he do?_

_What did he say?_

The best case scenario was… there was not one, there was no best case scenario. The best worst-case scenario was that they had sex and agreed it would be a meaningless last thing and also that they would never talk about it again and Juno could get out of this cycle of wanting and wanting and wanting and _losing_ and watch Peter Nureyev leave. Then Juno could let go of the breath it felt like he was always pushing down against his diaphragm, and keep on living right up until he died and it could all be that simple.

The worst worst case scenario was… an exact repeat of before, but now leaving would be a hell of a lot more complicated than sneaking out in the middle of the night, wouldn’t it? An exact repeat of before, but over and over again, every single time they saw each other, Juno leaving the moment no one could stop him or ask him why. There wasn’t an answer, at least not one anybody would hear when he said it.

Of course Juno Steel wanted to run right off the edge of this planet with a dashing man who would sweep him off his feet and promise him the whole damn universe. Of course he wanted to unravel himself into pieces and see what new thing he could make of them. Of course he wanted Peter Nureyev to look at him like he thought Juno could bend and twist the stars into a new constellation if only he asked, and of course Juno wanted him to ask so that he could give it a try and see what a lady could do with a man like that holding onto him.

Juno Steel wanted a lot of things. But instead of getting them, he always ended up in Hyperion City, the cursed and corrupted prize jewel of colonized space. Same as always.
And that same always he was living in had been fine. It really had. He had been fine. Not good, not safe, not home, but fine. He hadn’t even known how tightly his ribs were clenched around his chest, had forgotten how hard it had been to have a beating heart and working lungs, until Peter goddamned Nureyev grabbed his lockpicks and crowbars and pried them open. He could have died not knowing if he’d just managed to pull back before he got caught in the fox’s elegant maw.

He’d been given every opportunity to escape before he could have another bite taken out of him, but he just kept crawling right back in.

Juno got dressed, opened the bathroom door.

And was face-to-face with Rita, staring at him like some possessed mirror hung six inches too low. She looked… excited. Too excited. Not in a robots way, or in a boss-have-you-seen-this-new-stream?you-gotta-check-it-out way. Her eyes held a wicked glint he was too familiar with.

Juno swung the door closed again.

There was a knock at the door.

Juno opened it, a numb, automatic motion. It was Rita.

Juno sighed.

“So you do have some manners,” Rita said, pushing against the door before Juno could close it on her.

“What do you want,” Juno said in a hushed, flat voice. Rita’s eyes were red-rimmed and tired, but she still seemed so vivid.

Juno didn’t really have the heart for vividness right now. Didn’t have a single vivid organ in his body on a good day, as far as he could tell. Though admittedly, there weren’t that many good days he could use to check.

“Mr. Steel,” she sung out in a whisper. “You got a minute for a little caucus?”

“What do you want, Rita,” Juno repeated with the exact same flat cadence as before.

“I have some information you want. But you,” she said raising an eyebrow, “have some information I want. And I thought we could work out a little trade.”

“What.”

“Did you or did you not,” Rita said, dramatic, “spend the night in the quarters of one Mr. Rex Glass-or, Mr. Earl Fox, sorry,” and the apology ate a little bit of the showwoman’s exclamation point to it.

Juno grabbed her by the shoulders and shushed her, glancing wildly from side to side, looking especially at the door to the bedroom he’d just vacated. “What are you trying to do, wake the whole damn city up?” he half-whispered.

“Well, Mr. Steel?”

“It’s none of your business, Rita, I can’t think of anything that is less of your business than this is.” The words flowed frantically, like he wasn’t the one who was saying them.

“You’re my boss. That makes us business partners, Mr. Steel! Emphasis on the business,” and she highlighted the word with a popping-open sort of hand gesture.
“You can insist you’re on vacation or you can do… whatever this is, not both,” and Juno didn’t really need to understand the logic of it, he wasn’t sure there was any, but it would have been nice for something to be simple and to make sense.

“You don’t stop being my boss when I’m on vacation time, and I have the missed calls from all my weekend trips with Frannie to prove it,” Rita said. “Now come on, Mr. Steel, give me some details!”

“No. No. Absolutely not doing that. And keep it down.” He walked Rita backwards by the shoulders and plodded down the stairs.

“Mr. Steel,” Rita hissed, trailing him closely. “You are creating a hostile work environment and I am not going to stand for it!”

“Yeah, put it in my file with all the other infractions,” Juno said, calling her bluff, and opened the door to the basement. Rita was going to follow him, but at least it would be harder for everyone else to hear her from there.

She tailed him down the stairs, groaning an admirably frustrated “Mr. Steeeeeeel” the whole way down. He didn’t know how a human being could have that kind of lung capacity but still get winded running from a suspect hell-bent on shooting them both. She usually got less winded than Juno did, but the point stood.

“What do you want, Rita,” Juno asked, collapsing into a tired, stooped sitting position on the ground. Rita kneeled so she was facing him, slightly restrained by her pencil skirt.

“Don’t play coy, Mr. Steel. I’m in the market of information, buying and selling,” and her voice was low and dramatic.

“Are you trying to quote something?”

“That is irrelevant.” Rita produced a stack of papers. “I have an offer for you. I, your indefatigable and lovely assistant, have a pile of relevant information for you that I think you will find very interesting. And you are having some relationship troubles. So,”

“No, Rita.” He didn’t put any force into the words. “We both know you’re not going to let me waste my time not-solving this, you know it’s important, just give me the papers.”

“Oh, I understand the situation, Mr. Steel,” Rita said. “But you’re not the only detective in this household.”

It took Juno a second to understand what was happening. “So let me get this straight,” Juno said, cradling his head in one hand and rubbing the spot that he could feel growing a headache. “You’re withholding evidence from me, to give to the other detective in this house, who I am currently working with… so that you can give a commentary on my bad decisions?”

“Oh, they’re not that bad, he’s very handsome, boss, like a painting. Of an actor. From a period drama! And a good painting, too, not one of those post-Martian-contemporary-impressionism things,” Rita said, staring intensely into the distance. “People just don’t look like that, Mr. Steel.” Juno took the opportunity of Rita’s latest weird daydream to try to grab the papers from her hand. He didn’t put much effort into it, because he didn’t have much effort to spare, and she deflected him easily and held the papers far behind her.

“You can’t catch me off guard that easily, boss! And besides,” she said, and here she puffed up a bit, “I don’t think Ms. Strong will share this with you until she’s done with it. You haven’t exactly been forthcoming with information, Mr. Steel.”
“Alessandra’s not going to withhold information from me, Rita, she’s a professional. Unlike some of us.”

“Aw, boss, you’re doing fine,” Rita said.

“I was talking about me--” Juno stopped, and Rita gave him a knowing smile.

“Fifteen years, Mr. Steel,” she said, and Juno almost smiled, felt a pressure behind his eyes, and he wasn’t sure what it meant, but then Rita raised her eyebrows, put a twist to her mouth, and the feeling passed. “Ms. Strong may be a professional, but she’s been giving you a lot of talking-tos about valuing her worth as a detective lately. I think she might think twice about letting you see this before she does.”

“You don’t have a leg to stand on, Rita, hand over the file.” He genuinely didn’t know whether or not Rita thought this was a game.

“I knew I should have saved those flasks,” Rita muttered to herself. “Why can’t you let me have fun for once, Mr. Steel?”

“Because this isn’t fun, we’re trying to stop a corrupt mayoral candidate who wants me dead from gaining political power and I’m pretty sure I’d still vote for him over Pereyra. Why do you care so much more about who I’m spending the night with than ending this?”

“Someone’s always trying to kill you, Mr. Steel, it’s part of the job. And this city’s always been kinda corrupt, that’s not new either. But you,” she said, and she looked so earnest, “You don’t spend a lot of time with nice people, Mr. Steel. And it’s not that I think Mr. Fox is a nice person, exactly, but I like him. And he likes you, and did I mention he’s very handsome?”

Juno wanted to be mad. And maybe it was that his feelings were spent, or maybe it was… something else, but instead of feeling angry, which he rightfully should have, he sighed and fell straight backwards so he was half lying down, and he relished the small impact that hit his head and his shoulder and all the hollow, hurting spaces in him.

“Mr. Steel?” Rita asked. If he didn’t know better, he might think she was alarmed. “You can’t avoid me by pretending to fall asleep or anything, so don’t even try it. I’m sharp as a knife, boss.”

It was always a knife metaphor now. “Look, Rita, I don’t even know what happened. And whatever it was, I messed it up.” Juno shook his head at the ceiling. “Again.” He did his best not to care or feel but his mouth kept going. “There’s not a way to not-screw-this-up, so stop trying to get involved, it’s not going to work out.” It’s not going to work out, and as he said it he realized the full meaning of the phrase. It was all going to have to happen again. He’d already left once and he was going to have to do that all over again because judging from the morning’s events he had no control over himself, and Juno wanted the floor to slowly, gradually pull him downwards and through Mars’ mantle below and drop him in a dark room where he could be terrified and alone. “Is that what you wanted to hear?”

Juno heard the sound of rustling, crumpling papers and fabric, and Rita laid down on the floor next to him. Juno could tell she was looking at him, but he kept his eyes fixed on the water-stained ceiling.

“Close enough,” Rita said, and she slapped her stack of papers on his chest, hard enough that a little of the air flowed out of his lungs.

“Thanks,” Juno said before he could stop himself. He didn’t make the move to look at them.
He was pretty sure this wasn’t how normal bosses interacted with their employees, but Rita wasn’t a normal secretary, either. He knew that better than anyone. “You… you slept last night, right? I didn’t make you stay up all night or anything?”

“Yeah, boss, I got some sleep. Gonna get some more soon.” Juno wished he could have believed that easy lie.

“Okay,” he said. “Good. Do that.”

“I think you should talk to him, boss.”

Juno sighed again. “No. I shouldn’t.” He kept staring at the ceiling until he wasn’t even looking at it anymore. He really needed to start looking at whatever Rita found, but… in a minute.

He wondered what Nureyev was going to think when he woke up.

“Go get some sleep. I’ll get Alessandra when she’s awake.” She was good at staying on task. And he got the sense that Nureyev didn’t like her, but it was hard to tell. Juno hoped he didn’t, anyway.

“Sounds good, boss,” and as she sat up Rita reached over and patted him on the top of his head with her fingertips, two blunt taps. “Enjoy your robot files, they were real fun to make.”

“Rita?” Juno asked, unready to sit up again.

“Yeah, boss?”

“Don’t pat me on the head.”

“Yeah, it felt kinda weird, but by then I was already doing it. Your hair’s still all wet.” she said, and Juno held the stack of papers to his chest while he sat up and Rita stood. “You sure you’re gonna be okay down here by your lonesome?”

“That’s the idea, yeah,” Juno said, falling into his usual prickliness with ease. Putting up his spines was nothing. Keeping them from piercing was a different story altogether. “We’ll find out for sure if you ever leave.”

“All right, all right. Go wake somebody else up if you need anything. I’ll be back when I’m replenished and ready for a new day,” Rita said, and Juno crooked a sarcastic little wave at her as she retreated.

Juno waited until she was gone to fall back down and drop the papers directly over his face. It was all he felt like he had the capacity to do to leaves of paper with words on them, but he didn’t have the luxury to only do what he felt like he had the capacity to do and contemplate the texture of the smooth, cool printouts on his face. He had to read them because he had to figure this out, had to get everyone back to their lives without him.

First he had to move his arms. They were too cold and too heavy and he didn’t know how he managed to use them every day, but eventually he clumsily grabbed the ream of paper and let his arm fall back down.

After an agony of stillness Juno rolled over, leaned on his elbows, picked up the papers, and started reading. He flooded himself with information, not making connections yet, only storing enough random facts that they could push him out of his mind. He wanted to drink until he couldn’t put thoughts in order and get into a fistfight in an alley and let anyone who was interested take him home and unmake him, but if none of that was going to work right now he could lose touch of Juno Steel
in other ways. He could let some grand picture of corruption and intrigue and corporations absorb
him completely while he let papers fall into new arrangements and made patterns he didn’t even
understand himself while he read.

He sat up when the last of the notes were turned over and regrouped and his thoughts were a flat
board covered in red string. He looked it all over again, made some changes, and tried to make it all
into a picture.

“You’re…. Kidding;” he said out loud when he had squinted his eyes in exactly the right way to see
the image, then immediately dismissed all his thoughts and tried to start over and make… well,
anything else.

He used to just do regular cases of suspected infidelities. Those always paid well, he never had to kill
anybody, and they were easy. But now it felt like everything was conspiring to give Juno the stories
he’d always wanted to live, but wrong. An ancient Martian killing machine. A bomb hidden in a
cat’s stomach. He’d even been ready to die for a damn job interview a while back. And now this. A
political conspiracy that balanced, eternally teetering, on an educational exhibit in the earliest iteration
of Mars’ most beloved theme park.

There had to be something else. The cogs in his mind turned such that everything that wasn’t related
to the case was thrown out, and it was a relief to not think about being Juno Steel, not to think about
footsteps or the sounds of a door opening or a voice saying his name that was attached to someone
he saw-but-didn’t-see until she was right in front of him and suddenly he had to think his own
thoughts again.

“Rita told me I should talk to you,” Alessandra said, a little brusque, hands tucked into her pants
pockets. She stood up straight even with Juno folded over on the floor. For his part, he didn’t look
up, only kept staring at a fixed spot on the ground while he tried to think of some other theory he
could float.

“Rita’s supposed to be sleeping,” Juno said automatically. It was the closest thing he could grab.

Alessandra shrugged. “Well, she’s not. Last I saw, she and Mick were planning a spaghetti dinner.”
Juno looked up in alarm. “They kept calling it family dinner,” she said, a little buoyed to have Juno’s
attention. “I can’t tell if they’re joking or not.”

Juno shook his head silently. He felt like he wanted to be mad, but he couldn’t make his emotions
connect to anything except a sigh and a cold void in the bottom of his stomach. “That’s… a problem
for later, I guess. Don’t let either of them try to make pasta. It’s not going to end well.”

Alessandra waited a beat. “Are you going to elaborate on that, or?”

“I try not to think about it.” Juno could have said something cutting, about Mick’s uncanny ability to
cause a kitchen fire while boiling water, or Rita’s creative solutions to everyday problems, but it felt
like a lot of effort.

“Oooookaaaay.” Alessandra used her entire mouth for the word. “Fair enough. So. What’s the
news?”

The question was innocuous enough, but for a lightning-struck second Juno wondered if Alessandra
could see through him, could tell exactly what he’d done (whatever he’d done) and was waiting for
the best time to wrench it from him and to give him the consequences that were waiting around one
of these corners to jump out and start in on him at any moment.
He would deserve it, whenever it happened. Whatever happened. He was used to talking in a way that people could know what they were getting into if they tried, where he could weave all the dysfunction and self-loathing into the fabric of his speech, but he had just enough self-preservation (or maybe it was emotional fatigue; that was far more likely than some previously unseen survival instinct) to avoid saying *Woke up clinging to the man I keep pushing away like he he was a liferaft and I was drowning, why do you ask?*

Instead, he asked, “How much do you know about how Hyperion City was founded?”

“I made it through fourth grade, Steel. I know how the city was founded. Took a while to get the irony, though,” she added.

“Yeah, funny how a crowdfunded expedition to try to recreate society without systematic inequalities created the most corrupt city in the solar system, huh?” Juno said, handing her the corresponding stack of papers. She reached for it with her right hand, then remembered the bandages and switched to her left.

“That’s reductive,” Alessandra said, half-listening while she read.

“Then how would you describe it, Strong?”

“The original settlers created society according to their ideals but were eventually corrupted not by their own citizens but their determination to interact with and provide a welcome space for the private space tourism industry, forcing them to allow for the interplanetary transference of wealth, which subsequently enabled the super-wealthy to take control of the settlement when Earth became temporarily uninhabitable in... 2088? 2164? I always get the year wrong,” Alessandra barely seemed to be thinking about her answer while she read. Juno raised his eyebrows, impressed despite himself.

She looked down at him. “I’m pretty into history. No one asks me about it,” she said in explanation while she flipped the page idly over to see if anything was written on the back.

“Oh, Huh,” Juno said. “But, yeah. They ended up with the least socially advanced city light-years around because they let their vision of a future they didn’t have yet blind them,” and it was surprisingly easy to feel bitter towards these wide-eyed, hopeful idealists of the past.

“They made something better than what they had,” Alessandra said. “That’s worth something, at least.”

“Better isn’t good, Strong,” he said. “We could have been good.”

She looked at him oddly, like she was trying to solve him, and when she spoke next her voice was more thoughtful. “I don’t know, I think better’s pretty good when everything you had before was worse. Now what’s this about, exactly?”

“Gregor Maxwell,” Juno said, and handed her another stack of paper.

“Either give me everything or just tell me, Steel,” Alessandra said, snatching the papers from him and starting to read them anyway. He kept his hands where they had been in the air while he tried to process what he was supposed to do next.

“Uh, yeah. Sure. One of the projects in development when Calvera broke off from Northstar was supposed to be about the colonization of Mars. An interactive look at history.” He gestured to the information from before. “That looks like the first project Gregor Maxwell was assigned. And after that it was all biomechanics. Pitched the things himself, looks like.”
“Yeah, Steel. I was reading the employee records last night. You were there--” She cut herself off, but not quickly enough. Juno looked up at her, a simple acknowledgment that yes, she said something thoughtless. “Sorry. Anyway. He’s one of the employees who got let go a month before the fire, right? Citing…” She pulled her tablet out of her pocket and clumsily navigated to the information she was looking for. “‘Misconduct and misuse of company property, no further details.’ And…” she continued searching through her notes, her bandaged right hand clunky but efficient. “What’s so important about him?”

“According to wherever-Rita-gets-her-information--”

“Do you mean the internet?” Alessandra interrupted with disbelief, and Juno scowled at her.

“–he’s been gradually commissioning people to,” he tried to remember how everyone kept explaining it to him and keep it from sounding like a question, “scramble up the outgoing signals on all their tech?”

She took pity on him and navigated to another section of her notes. “Because of how their old servers updated. Certain kinds of hacking attempts would cause their information to cannibalize itself. Rita’s term, not mine. She… really liked being able to say ‘cannibalize,’” Alessandra said, stretching her neck and shoulders in mild discomfort and running her left hand over her collar.

“Yeah, that sounds like her.” After all those years of his begging, Rita had finally found someone else to bother. It should have been a relief.

“So he’s trying to destroy evidence of his biomechanics work with Calvera,” Alessandra started.

“No, he’s not,” Juno said. “Because he’s--”

“Is this going to be one of those things where you say he’s been dead for ten years and then we’re back at square one?” Alessandra asked.

Juno glared, an exhausted thing with no heat in it. “Not now that you said that.”

“I’m not going to let you have all the fun,” and Juno’s glare softened to mild annoyance in the face of the fine line of amusement running through Alessandra’s exasperation.

“Yeah, fine.” Juno said. If this was all the revenge Alessandra wanted he could call himself lucky. “Been dead for thirty years, not ten. And one of the places that had all of its data cleared was his own house.”

Alessandra Strong finally fell into a crouch next to him, and he was sort of relieved not to be staring up at her anymore. She reached past Juno and pulled over a map with some marks on it. “Right,” she said, and shakily took a pen the pen from behind her ear in her left hand to make a quick, frustrated movement against the paper. She twisted her mouth and narrowed her eyes at the crooked circle that resulted, and then at the hand that made it, like it had disobeyed her very clear instructions. Juno could relate.

“So someone’s using his identity to make shady back-alley deals to destroy information,” she said to the map. “Who would have access to his info three decades later?” She paused. “Ramses O’Flaherty was a different person thirty years ago,” she said in measured, thoughtful tones.

“I’m getting there,” Juno said.

“It’s not a presentation, Steel, just tell me what you think is going on,” Alessandra said, withdrawing
a breath as she flexed her hands in agitation. “Do you have, I don’t know, documentation of later employment? Bank records? Exit interview transcripts? A really bitter video diary where this guy says he’s going to replace his face with someone else’s and then run for mayor?”

Juno remembered: her face was wrong, like something was swimming and writhing just beneath it. He remembered all the other faces that didn’t look right anymore, how he hadn’t known for a long time that half of what made a face a face was alive, and when it wasn’t anymore it was just an assortment of eyes-nose-mouth-chin-cheekbones and the time it’d taken to grow them. He observed himself remembering that first dead face, and all the worse ones after it, felt a shudder trying to build under the heaviness of his shoulders, and then pushed it all aside with a surprising ease. “We both know no one sticks with a diary long enough to say anything incriminating,” he said dismissively.

Alessandra gave him a grudging nod of acquiescence. “And look,” Juno said, handing her another paper from somewhere in his nest. “Does that look like the bank account of a guy who’s mad at the company that fired him?”

Alessandra’s eyebrows raised immediately. Juno’d felt more or less the same on seeing the guy’s bank account; the vault that stored his creds was probably bigger than Juno’s apartment. Or, it started out that way.

“He invested a lot of money in Northstar,” Alessandra said.

“Look at the last couple of months,” Juno said. He’d done the math, and the withdrawals added up to several hundred thousand creds total.

Alessandra let out a long, low whistle. “I’d say that’s enough to buy yourself another life. You?”

Juno paused. “Yeah,” he said. “Something like that.”

“Okay, not the enthusiasm I expected after the,” she looked at what Juno assumed was an invisible watch that wasn’t on her wrist, “ten minutes of buildup you made me sit through.”

“Funny. So, the files don’t say this guy successfully made any robots. Cyborgs? Androids?”

Alessandra shrugged. “But I’d say almost getting torn apart by some of them is pretty compelling evidence that he made it happen. He got that done.”

“That was never in question, Steel. The question was why it’s related to a mayoral race.”

Juno sighed. “An interactive, surface-level, feel-good educational exhibit on the establishment of Hyperion City’s first-ever colony that included major figures from the original Hyperion mission, and one person played God a little too hard? That’s what all of this,” he looked at the room around him, which by this point was a living, breathing, and possibly malevolent conspiracy wall, “is for? Here? We don’t give robots rights here, there’s no legal reason they should care. Moral, maybe, but we’re not great at caring about that, either.” He really didn’t want to have to say it. “That’s what Ramses O’Flaherty is looking to push under the rug before the big election, when it doesn’t even look like he’s involved?”

“Okay, but if what if he’s Gregor Maxwell--”

“He’s not,” Juno interrupted. “Gregor Maxwell is dead.”

“There’s more than one way to die,” Alessandra said grimly.

“Yeah, well, this is the literal one, where you stop being alive forever,” Juno said.

Alessandra frowned. “So you think O’Flaherty’s one of the people who…. Worked on the project?
And he’s trying to…. Destroy, or protect the robots?"

Juno sighed. “The exhibit included the storied and largely misrepresented cast of characters in Hyperion City’s past. Most of them were supposed to say a few pretty phrases and fill the room with bright-eyed citizens, but one or two of them had some more to say. And one had a whole lot. A whole speech. Was supposed to be available to talk with exclusive visitors, even.”

“Yeah…?” Alessandra trailed out, and Juno couldn’t tell whether she was intentionally avoiding the obvious.

“It doesn’t make sense for someone in the middle of this kind of scandal to run for mayor of a city like this unless they had a really good reason.”

“And Ramses O’Flaherty wants to become the mayor because,” Alessandra started, looking at the pictures alongside the project notes, and she didn’t finish.

They were both silent for a moment. “Look. We both know this isn’t what’s happening, but one of us has to say it, and if you’re not going to do it--”

“I have my dignity, Steel.”

“Dignity? I haven’t heard that name in years,” Juno said.

Alessandra crossed her arms and stared at him silently. He mirrored her in a silent acceptance of the extended challenge.

It felt like an hour before Juno broke, but it was probably closer to however long it took to kind of want to blink. “Fine. I’ll say it. So what if Ramses O’ Flaherty” he shook his head at himself and finished the sentence, his voice put-upon, reluctant, and half-singsong, like a child owning up to a playground wrongdoing, “is a cyborg designed to be Cyrus Ortega, first mayor of Hyperion City.”

Alessandra didn’t say anything.

Under her scrutiny, Juno could feel how ridiculous it sounded, and shook his head. “Yeah, okay. I’ll see myself out,” and he prepared to pull himself to his feet.

“No, it’s not that.” Alessandra said. “It just….That’s messed up. And I really should not be thinking it makes any sense.”

“I don’t know,” Juno began with a voice like a shrug, “at this point this might as well be what’s happening.”

“I guess?” Alessandra asked, and for a second he thought she was going to accept it. Then she shook her head. “No. What? No. This is ridiculous.”

“You think I don’t know that? You think I would have said that out loud if I didn’t feel like one of us had to say it?”

Alessandra made a questioning shrug. “I don’t know. You’re not exactly at your best right now, and neither am I. Maybe we should give this just a little more thought before we dive headfirst into political robot conspiracy territory.”

“You were just saying that Ramses O’Flaherty is an eighty-year-old man wearing someone else’s face, how is my thing less feasible?”
“Because that happened a year ago in the Outer Rim, there’s a precedent for it,” Alessandra said.

“Okay. O’Flaherty has connections with people who work in biocybernetics and weird, silent guards,” Juno said, ticking off his fingers at each piece of evidence completely different person shortly after Maxwell’s death. Maxwell was involved in a project that required an articulate reproduction of the first founder and mayor of Hyperion City, and O’Flaherty’s whole schtick is for a, a new sunrise in a Hyperion City free of thieves and criminals and corruption.”

“Okay, but this requires assuming that someone made it to the running for mayor as a cyborg,” Alessandra said.

“Pereyra openly murders people, Strong! It’s their whole thing. The vetting process for our public elections isn’t exactly airtight.”

“Okay, that’s valid. Compromise: We need to look into this Maxwell guy more, figure out if he has an actual, tangible connection with O’Flaherty, or if he used his biocybernetic connections to extend his youth and finally live his low-level political dreams,” Alessandra proposed.

“No,” Juno said quickly.

“Really?” Alessandra asked, and he heard the offense in her voice.

Juno gave up. He didn’t know why Alessandra was here; probably more because of how dangerously easy it was to become fond of Mick Mercury, with his haplessness and sudden deep-felt truths, than on Juno’s own account; but regardless, she was here. He didn’t owe her anything, but she would hold onto this until he gave her a reason to let go, and there was no escaping her for now.

“I… recognize him. From other things I know about Northstar. And Calvera. He’s definitely dead.”

“What things?” Alessandra asked.

“Look, it’s…. Nothing important, okay?” and he looked away, because his family might have been dead and gone but it was his, and it didn’t matter how much it might help one or two things make a little more sense. He was the one deciding whether or not he got dragged through their memories again.

“It sounds a hell of a lot like it’s important,” Alessandra said, and Juno somehow found a way to slump over more.

“Look, I…” He tried to make a lie that made sense. “I knew someone who had a restraining order against him. You get notified when they die. There was… Sh-They wanted closure on it. He’s definitely dead, okay?” and he looked away before he could see Alessandra Strong’s face do the math and add it all up.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

all the traps juno's fallen into

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For a while, after getting fired, after moving, Sarah Steel wrote nonstop. She woke up in the morning and sat at the kitchen table and wrote by hand into one of a thousand identical leatherbound notebooks, scribbling until Juno heard her drop her pen and withdraw breath and open and close her hands over and over again, and her hands on Juno’s shoulders were always too cold when she was making sure he got to bed on time.

For a while, it made her better. She would sit at the table and plant Juno and Ben at her feet with a pack of crayons, and they would decorate the vast wooden ceiling suspended on the table legs above them however they wanted. And they were still happy, then, when his mother would write stories and Juno and Ben would color her tales right into the table she worked at, one of the things that they’d taken from their old house to this new unfamiliar place.

It didn’t last long enough. Money ran out eventually. Time ran out eventually. She got a job, and it was a bad one, and sometimes she still wrote, and sometimes it still made her better. Juno would watch her sturdy nail-bitten fingers scrawl something on a notebook, the newspaper, the grocery list, whatever paper had enough space for what she was thinking, and her eyes went somewhere far away, and when she came back she was… okay. Normal, even. Someone he and Ben could recognize.

And other times she would write on walls and desks or on the blank top side of the table that hid her children’s devotion to every word she’d ever given them, but she would stop halfway through her sentence and hold her pen like she wanted it to snap in two and hiss, *It's the same damn story! It's always the same damn story, they’re all the goddamn same,* or mourn, No, no, nonono, Sarah, you idiot, or make a sound somewhere between laughing and crying, *I gave it away, I let them take it,* and then Juno would make sure Ben stayed safe upstairs for the rest of the night.

Ben was too little, when Sarah Steel began to change all at once. Ben didn’t know how to tell the difference between the kind of crying where you put a hand on her shoulder and the kind where you pretended you didn’t know it was happening. Didn’t know how tight a hand was supposed to grip your wrist if it cared about keeping from snapping it in two. Didn’t know when to make himself small instead of puffing himself up bigger. Didn’t know when the thing that wanted them quiet and far away was gone and the woman that was too tired of fighting to be a mother was there.

Juno didn’t know either. And maybe Juno had been too young, too. But that didn’t change the fact that Ben was too little for Juno to let him near the parts of Sarah Steel that were clawed and feral. And that’s what Juno told himself when he snuck his brother food after dark and hid broken plates at the bottom of the garbage pickup and watched, always watched to see whether the creature that lived in his mother’s skin was awake or resting, as if there was some way to crack the puzzle of its sleep-wake cycle and somehow save them all.
Juno spent a lot of time with his mother. At least for a while. Not because he wanted to, but because it was something he could do. He didn’t think it would make him hate her so much. Hate the way she couldn’t get herself out of bed even when she was there, and how even when she tried it all came out wrong, with burned food and forgotten permission slips. Juno saw a lot of Sarah Steel, and after all of those years, giving up on her was the best gift he had ever given himself (and didn’t that teach him?). Sometimes his brain would hand him phrases fully-formed and for a second they would feel right and comforting and he would be impressed by how damn right they felt, and then he would hear them in her voice or see them written in her scrawl on the refrigerator door, barely visible through a violence of self-censoring penmarks.

Sometimes, she said to him, and he remembered he was cooking something--maybe soup? But he thought maybe that was someone else’s memories pushing his out, and he couldn’t know for sure anymore--while she said, the closest you can get to home is knowing that the things that happen to you when you’re sixteen are still living in you. It doesn’t matter how deep you push them into your bones. You can cut off the air and the light and the shields but as long as you’re alive they’ll keep going on and resurfacing and learning how to get out and cut you wide open, and Juno, fourteen years old and wondering if he’d ever felt what home was, didn’t understand.

He thought maybe now he did. Maybe not in her way, but in his.

He still didn’t know whether he had ever felt at home. Maybe when he was too young to remember, before Sarah Steel stopped trying. Or home for Juno Steel was stumbling into an apartment where no one was there to try to know anything about him or save him from himself at the end of a long case. Or maybe the only place that could ever be home for someone like Juno was the state of un-being that he must have been in before he ended up in this body, on this planet, in this universe.

(He’d read one of her notebooks once, when he was nine, or ten. Or, more accurately, Ben had started digging through her things and reading her books and Juno couldn’t let him do it alone once he had started. An errant page that caught Juno’s eye started with you were born broken, sarah, and you thought you could make something whole out of flesh that had missing pieces, out of a body that let this city take bites and slashes from it, and you might have learned to bite back but your jaw could never open wide enough and they were always swallowing entire buildings whole, you were only ever just one more broken person playing god trying to make something good from fundamentally broken parts and you shouldn’t have you shouldn’t have you shouldn’t have and it went on like that for a whole page.

It took him years to realize. It took a hand on his face and a tender, I’m sorry, on one of the days he was hopeful and stupid enough to think she could still do what parents do, after he’d come home and dropped on the couch and lay there for hours feeling a relentless nothing and said maybe there’s something wrong with me. He was the thing she-shouldn’t-have. He and Ben were how Sarah Steel played at a creation story, and she had found them too like her to be anything but lacking. There was something oddly calming, in the knowing, like a piece clicking into place. It was a burden, but one he’d always been carrying. It was better to finally realize it was there.)

There were times she looked at them like… like she wanted an asteroid to hit her where she stood, flattening her the second before she had to blink. There were times when she looked at them like she wanted to wrap them in a blanket and pull them under the table and turn out all the lights and never let them move out of her arms. And that was when she was okay, the days when she came home and poured herself two glasses of water in a row and drank them like she was drowning herself, the days when Juno or Ben asked her to tell them a story and she would hand them a book and tell them to pick a name. She’d give them a description--pick something elegant and golden and unyielding or something brave and daring that glints in the sunlight--and Juno would read names out to Ben and they would pick the one that felt right.
He knew she was just buying time, using nonsense phrases that barely held onto meaning to keep him and Ben occupied with Greco-Roman mythology while she began to spin a story out of nothing. But he had been so excited to be a part of the making of it that being a pawn was worth it.

He taught himself to read for that book.

But that didn’t matter, anymore. Sarah Steel never stopped telling stories, but the stories changed, and eventually they were all about beautiful cities who thought they wanted to keep you safe but their jaws wanted blood and didn’t care where it got it from, and they were about people who said they were on your side but dug their claws into you and everything you loved because they wanted so much to make everything you had theirs and she would fall into juno, take care of ben, take care of yourself, this city has teeth everywhere and if you wander too far you’ll walk right into its mouth and he wanted to snap back, to yell that the city’s dark wet mouth was better than being here, at least he knew what he was in for in Oldtown’s darkest corners, at least this city had never pretended to love him. Eventually he granted himself permission to say what he needed to, because when he didn’t say it Ben would pipe up first.

Juno only had to see the aftermath once before he taught himself to talk back, and fast.

But it didn’t matter anymore. It didn’t matter that his family was complicated because they were gone, he’d grown with them like they were three vines ensnared by each other, and now the only evidence of what the other two had been was the hollow shape Juno was twisted around, too dried out now to change.

It didn’t seem right, that someone could twist you up and change you and then be gone the second you looked away for too long.

Juno wished he was drinking. Getting into a fistfight. Making himself an easy lay. Doing something that made his heart race and flooded his head and made it impossible to get stuck in memories like: driving to a funeral, or maybe a viewing, so his mother could cry relieved tears in the passenger seat and then ask to go home.

She’d said she was teaching him to drive, that day, and like an idiot he’d thought maybe that meant she was getting better, that somehow he had done all the right things and the real Sarah Steel was back and he’d finally get to meet her. He could only remember the time before in facts and figures, and knowing that Sarah Steel had once carried the capacity to parent inside of her was not the same as having the living evidence of it in front of him.

Eventually Sasha Wire had gotten sick of having to drive all the time, and she taught him behind the wheel of Mick’s old death trap in the old cemetery, using the paths between graves as a road. Mick would lean forward from the middle of the backseat, swearing back and forth that he could tuck and roll out safely if anything went wrong, while Sasha steadily reassured Juno that if he crashed Mick’s terrible car with her inside she would dig her way out of her own coffin just to drag him back down with her.

She never had to make good on her promise, because the death trap was much sturdier than it looked. Or felt. Or sounded. And they all agreed that the graveyard had been getting a little headstone-crowded before that, anyway.

Around then was when Juno decided that for him, home could be finding a dark corner where he didn’t have to think or be seen or let anyone near him, and curling there for as long as he could without letting the world fall apart around him. Sometimes they were real, physical places. Other times they were more like… states of existence. Like, say, a coma, or anything leading up to it. They had been fine enough places to stay when they were empty. Lately they… hadn’t been.
The world was always crumbling into pieces around him, and he always had to be the tether that could keep it all in place if he just stretched far enough. He could never quite reach everything he needed to, and everything in this house was a too-present reminder to all the times he’d failed. Ramses O’Flaherty was, too, past and present. This whole city was a violent, helpless guardian that Juno couldn’t take care of right, couldn’t find the right sequences of actions and phrases that would give it the momentum it needed to get better. The whole robot situation was at least different. Would’ve been nice if it didn’t have to be a Northstar thing, but it seemed about right that it was.

Alessandra Strong’s skepticism for the android angle was its own confirmation that something in there made sense. She had the ability and inclination to be completely dismissive, and instead she was only being a little bit dismissive. Juno’s personality and lifestyle were both of the kind that made people want to shut him down, and by now he was familiar with the subtle differences in the different varieties of wanting someone to quiet down and move on. Alessandra thought she should want him to try something else, but she didn’t really, because she knew it all held water.

O’Flaherty even looked like Cyrus Ortega, if you put the old Northstar gloss on him. He looked more symmetrical, taller, broader, and everything on his face seemed clearer, somehow. Like if you melted the history-book face he and Alessandra had found in a pile of papers and books and reformed it in a sharper, modern mold. Or if you took Ramses O’Flaherty’s most overwhelmed, hopeful face and melted it down a bit, so it wasn’t quite so defined.

“I guess you could melt down a robot’s face,” Juno mused to himself. “If you really wanted to.”

“Isn’t his face flesh?” Alessandra asked, and Juno noted the isn’t in place of a wouldn’t his face be.

“Flesh can melt, but… oh. Oh, that is grim,” she said.

“A little burn is getting to you?” Juno asked. “You’re the one who brought it up.”

“You brought it up, Steel. And yeah, no, the grim thing is that we went to a place that got burned down, and everything in it--”

“Was an exposed metal robot. Yeah, I see where you’re going here,” Juno said. “You basically punched a moving skeleton.”

“Four of them, actually,” Alessandra said, face disturbed. “I should be more upset about that.”

“Sounds like someone’s starting to believe in the robot theory,” Juno said.

“I believe that there are robots. Cyborgs? But digging up a picture from ten thousand years ago that maybe looks like him isn’t evidence,” Alessandra asked. “A lot of people look like Cyrus Ortega. He’s got that kind of face. You could look like him. I could look like him if you squinted hard enough.”

“This is harder for you to believe than Martian mind-reading pills?” Juno asked.

“This is easier for you to believe than teleportation?” she asked right back. Rita must’ve been bragging about being a better detective than he was again. Communal living brought a fresh new hell of humiliations and discomforts every day.

“Yeah, Strong, for some reason it’s a little easier to believe in the corruption of corporations that don’t manage the consequences of their actions than instantaneous travel across space,” he said. “There was no evidence anybody ever did it before.”

“Why do you only need evidence when something’s actually good?”
“Because I’m a deeply broken person who can’t accept the idea that anything can have positive impact without being outweighed by negative consequences,” Juno said, angry and sarcastic, but mostly exhausted of being prodded at over and over by people who didn’t seem to learn.

Alessandra looked at him, then nodded in the way people did when they didn’t know what else to do. “Okay. I’m not going to get into that.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Juno said.

“Oh, no, the last thing I want to do is plumb the depths of your psyche,” she said, and Juno nodded, a me-too gesture. He preferred to spend as little time as possible in his own head himself, and he lived in there.

They avoided looking at each other while the moment dissipated.

Before Juno could say anything to keep himself from thinking again, Alessandra’s morning alarm went off.

“Right,” she said. “I have to go eat and, you know. Take some pills.” Juno nodded, and Alessandra looked at him. He didn’t realize until she was up the stairs that maybe she had expected him to want to eat something too, and do something other than sit in this half-dark and keep himself blank as he could and not let his mind wander back upstairs.

There were plenty of other things to think about. Like: did the metal in Ramses O’Flaherty change anything?

Juno immediately knew the answer was no, but it felt like the kind of thing a detective was supposed to really ponder, preferably looking out a window dramatically. Maybe with a monologue or two. There weren’t any windows underground, so he had to settle for a bad print of a beach scene that was leaning against the wall.

He pondered, and came up empty. Far as he could tell, it wasn’t all that different from being a person. O’Flaherty didn’t get a choice whether he was made or not, and now he was here and grabbing at more power than he needed so he could hurt people who didn’t deserve it. The only difference was that it was possible that maybe O’Flaherty was reaching for something good, instead of creds and fame. And that any half-awake person could probably lawyer around a cyborg’s legal protections in court, if they needed to; Hyperion City had too many businesses that used robots as unpaid labor to make cyborg protections unequivocal. Not this cyborg, given that he was a wealthy mayoral candidate and enough creds could solve anything in this city, but, a regular cyborg would definitely be left without a leg to stand on. And there were vested business interests in keeping anything metal from having rights, so it was probably more complicated than that.

There was probably something deep in there. He’d spent a lot of time thinking about it. (He’d spent thirty seconds thinking about it, but every one of those seconds spent on O’Flaherty and ethics was not spent dwelling on making theories around mistakes made with a man who treated him like he’d never been broken before and never would be again if he just let himself stay).

Juno stared at the basement around him like it was something new. He wondered when it had become such a mess. Usually only his apartment looked like this, though he’d also been in some untidy landfills that matched the basic design aesthetic. It was oppressive and comforting and familiar. It was the darkest corner he had, right now, and he wedged himself into it, wishing he was off finding some better coping mechanism for being Juno Steel every day.

(He could have been someone else. He could have renamed himself and rewritten his story and lived
He was such an idiot for not going. He was an idiot for thinking about it again now.

A space had been gaping open in his chest, growing wider, and he observed the rippling excess of nothing with dull surprise. He hadn’t known there was anything else in him to lose to Peter Nureyev, but it looked like he must have come up with something else.

He didn’t have time to feel things. He already had the ghost of his mother, and is mother’s ghosts. A man who stole her things and followed her and was making living people just because he could. A mayor who thought he had a second chance to cleanse this city of everything wrong with it, as if even if he succeeded he could make it stay that way. A thief who wouldn’t stop trying to save him and didn’t know he couldn’t. It all felt like the same thing over and over. It was being pulled into the center of the same black hole and thinking, this? again?, because nothing he put together stayed fixed. It only broke more, and each collapse was worse than the last. At first he got a few scars every now and again, and that was livable, and then a couple more, and that was fine, and then it all kept getting faster until suddenly he was down an eye and a shoulder and an aspect of memory and it was all winding out of control and the string that could keep it all in place was slipping out of his hands.

Juno was grabbing futilely at that invisible lifeline when the door opened again, and he turned to tell Alessandra Strong about the solution to his ethical cyborg quandary. Except it wasn’t Alessandra Strong. It was Rita, so tired she was wild-eyed, towing Peter Nureyev down the stairs, and the hole in Juno’s gaping chest went wider. His hair was wet. He didn’t even have any makeup on yet; had he slept through it all? Until now? How late did he sleep? Juno realized he didn’t know; there weren’t any clocks when you were kidnapped and stowed underground, and he had been trying to avoid him here, so Peter Nureyev’s usual transition from sleeping to wakefulness was all a mystery to him. Was he a late sleeper? Had he been too tired from the night before to wake up at a usually time? Juno didn’t know why he was so caught on this, more so than he was caught on Peter Nureyev in general. Maybe because he could so easily imagine Peter Nureyev watching the sun rise, but maybe the image had been the setting sun all along. Or both. He imagined Peter Nureyev a lot, when he was far enough away that it couldn’t hurt anything, and when he felt like hooking his fingers between his ribs and spreading his hands open so the bars of bone parted from one another and exposed the dark insides.

“—so while all of that’s happening, Doctor Osmond is in the janitor’s closet, and she has to craft a clever disguise and weapons out of what she has on hand. So she grabs a broom, some rubber bands, and two heart monitors—”

“She’s a surgeon, isn’t she? Shouldn’t she have access to a whole range of scalpels and bone saws and what have you, just to begin with?” Peter Nureyev was ignoring Juno entirely, and that was a well-placed stab. The kind that was meant to relieve the pressure in your lungs so you could breath again. “And she’s in a hospital, the simplest thing would be becoming a patient with whatever contagion is most prominent in the next settlement over. A child could pull it off.”

“It’s not that kind of stream, Mr. Fox,” Rita said patiently. “If the disguise was good she wouldn’t get caught at the end of the first act, and if she used her surgeon stuff she could’ve made her daring escape without help from the mysterious new orderly. You have to set it all up just right to get that kind of drama,” and she clenched her fists and gazed up at him.

“Oh, then the doctor was manipulating the circumstances so the rest of it could be seen as the machinations of fate taking their course,” he said with an undercurrent of approval.

“Doctor Osmond would never,” Rita said, scandalized. “Especially not after everything she went
through in season one.”

“A surgeon would never forget that they had a scalpel, nor would they allow themselves to be parted with it. Your doctor is hiding something,” Nureyev said with authority, and Rita opened her mouth to argue, then covered her mouth with both hands, and her eyes went wide.

“I know you have no idea what you’re talking about but that gives me the most genius theory, Mr. Fox, it’s real subtle but I think it works right into the themes of the show, I gotta post this on the forums,” Rita said, and moved towards the computer.

“Is that what you’re bringing the whole house down to the evidence room for, Rita? Because you want to post on your forums?” Juno asked.

“Nah, I needed something from the top shelf and I can’t reach up there,” she said, gesturing to the old shelving unit on the wall. “Speaking of evidence, how’d you like the robot files?” Rita half-posed, waiting for some kind of words of approval she was realistically never going to get. Not because she didn’t deserve them, but because if he couldn’t make it good enough, he shouldn’t even try.

“Oh, right. O’Flaherty’s probably a cyborg copy of Cyrus Ortega. Still figuring out the overall plan and motive. And I’m gonna need some more info on Gregor Maxwell when you have a chance,” and he tried very hard to keep it all casual. “Specifically any roommates he might have had.”

Rita pointed at Nureyev. “I told you,” she said, excited. “I knew he was some kinda android, you can tell by the way he talks, it’s just like the streams,” Rita said with glee and vindication, and for his part, Nureyev looked like he could have been impressed, though he took it in stride.

“Marvelous detective work, dear, my hat is off to you,” he said to her with something like warmth.

“You’re not…? No, of course you aren’t surprised, who am I kidding,” Juno said.

“It’s a pretty typical plot, boss,” Rita said while she circled behind the computer and began typing, and Peter lent her a casual nod of support, but he was still ignoring Juno. Which was… good. Definitely good. Better than the alternative. It was a good thing, that was happening, because that meant they didn’t need to say a word to one another, and Juno could just ignore both the problem and its curling roots.

Nureyev leaned casually against the back of Rita’s computer chair so his forearms were across her shoulders and his head was just diagonal to hers, looking more comfortable to be draped over her than anyone else could have, and Juno felt more and more emptied out with every second.

“Didn’t know you needed backup to do a web search, Rita,” Juno said. “Or to get to a top shelf. Just climb the damn thing like the rest of us.”

“We are guests here, Mr. Steel!” Rita said, and the printer started going. Peter Nureyev straightened up, put a hand on her shoulder while she got up.

“Lead the way to the offending shelf, then,” he said, bending down towards her, and Rita giggled and gestured at a box on top of the shelf that Juno hadn’t put a single thought towards for a second since he got here.

Peter Nureyev reached up to take it, and Juno watched while he slid it off the shelf and almost buckled in half under its weight. Juno’s muscles made him stand up and reach in his direction despite himself, and he had to pull himself back, pretend he was doing nothing at all.
“Are they allowing private ownership of hyperdense substances already?” Nureyev asked, clearly struggling to keep composure. “I should pick some up, next time I’m at the market.” Rita took it from him easily and balanced it on one arm while she opened the top, removed one item and handed it back to Peter.

“Could you put this back for me? I think I actually left something upstairs, give me just one second, I’ll be back in a jiff, won’t even notice I was gone,” Rita said, walking backwards towards the stairs, holding her hands behind her back.

“Are you holding a hammer?” Juno asked, making no effort to follow or stop her while Peter Nureyev struggled to lift the toolbox back up, eventually placing it on a lower shelf as if it were meant to be there.

“What? No,” she lied badly as she climbed the stairs in reverse. “Me? A hammer? No, of course not, that’s ridiculous, now give me one second,” and she was at the door now. She opened it, then fake-coughed while she swung the hammer into the inside handle of the door to the basement hard enough to knock the thing right off.

Then she stepped outside of the door and closed it behind her.

“Oh no, the handle of the door just came right off, looks like you two are stuck down there, together, and can’t get out, on account of the door is broken, who coulda seen this terrible situation coming,” Rita yelled through the door.

“Why are you talking like that,” Juno said, not especially loud.

“I gotta go, I left my curling iron on, don’t want this place to burn down, now don’t ask me any more questions because I won’t be here,” and her voice got softer as if she was retreating.

Juno pointedly avoided looking at Peter Nureyev.

“Rita, I know you’re still at the door.”

“No I’m not.”

“Rita.”

Juno heard a muffled sigh, and then loud, exaggerated footsteps.

He put a hand on his face, over his good eye, and dragged it down while he pivoted towards Nureyev, so he was looking at him through his middle and ring fingers. Being devoid of emotion like this, and thrown deeper into a state of not knowing what to do by a secretary gone rogue, made it easier to look Peter Nureyev in the eyes, shake his head, and shrug and put his hands out in a universal gesture for I really, really don’t know.

“She does know that I’m a thief, yes? A master of break-ins and -outs both?” Nureyev asked, and Juno was impressed that he was making a genuine effort to follow Rita’s thought process.

Juno wanted to give some kind of answer, anything to keep Peter Nureyev looking to him for a little longer, but he found all he could scrape up in response was a deepening to his shrug and a further exaggerated shake of his head. He opened his mouth to try to answer once or twice, and both times no words came out. He was dimly aware that he would have been angry if he were capable of feeling anything.

“I’ll... go break us out, then,” Peter Nureyev said, because of course he was going to leave if Juno
didn’t say anything, after leaving him twice, and he started making strides towards the stairs, lockpick already in hand. Juno caught his arm as he passed.

“If we leave now she’ll know it didn’t work, and then she’ll find some other way, and she’s already using a hammer, Nureyev. I don’t want to know what the next step is.” His voice was flatter than he thought it would be. Flatter than it usually was when he told himself tiny lies like, it wasn’t an excuse for an excuse’s sake, and taking his arm was the fastest way to stop someone from walking past and ignoring you.

Peter Nureyev considered this. “I do wonder what she would come up with next, but I see your point,” he said, crossing his arms with an easy grace that made Juno’s shoulders feel heavy. “What do you recommend?”

“She does this a lot. I pretend I’m doing what she wants until she lets me go. I used to try to get out, but it’s not worth it. Might as well just make it seem like we’re doing what she wants.” And sometimes he even felt a little better after doing or pretending to do whatever Rita tried to push him towards. He’d never tell her. Juno leaned his shoulder against the wall, tired of supporting himself, and felt a sharp straining in his tendons that was almost relaxing. “And she wants us to—” Peter Nureyev completed the sentence at the same time as Juno did.

“Talk.”

“-have rough makeup sex in a basement,” Juno finished.

Nureyev stared at him, mouth slightly open; then he blinked once, and subtly shook his head, and Juno couldn’t read whether he was angry or if he was going to start laughing. “As much as that sounds like a,” he stopped, self-censoring, “way to pass the time, I have the feeling that wasn’t quite her intention.”

“I’ve spent more time with her than any one person should,” Juno said. “I think I would know.”

“I wonder if you might be projecting?” Nureyev said, but he moved on before Juno could put up his spikes. “But if your preferred tactic is to pretend to go along with Rita’s more extreme methods, don’t you think that of the two options, talking is a bit easier to do convincingly? Not to say I won’t fake a moan or two if I must,” Juno’s body did a lurch that he tried to turn into a cough, and he did not look in Peter Nureyev’s direction, “but there’s nothing quite like the real thing,” and it was almost casual.

Juno knew Nureyev had done some things. He’d stolen and killed and manipulated the whole world around him, Juno’d seen it firsthand, even, but in that moment he couldn’t help but feel that he was at a previously unseen depth of cruelty, that if Peter Nureyev wanted to send him to an early grave with words alone he could and would and Juno wouldn’t even put up a fight.

Chapter End Notes

they call me Mood Whiplash
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sometimes, before, when Juno would batter himself with the names of the people he had let die, Peter Nureyev’s name would come right along with all the rest. It would always take him so long to realize and correct himself. Peter Nureyev and the dead had a lot in common. They had believed in Juno, and Juno had, in one way or another, failed them, and now none of them would ever get the chance to make Juno pay for wasting their trust in him.

Well, Peter Nureyev was here now. Not dead. Still wearing the scent of something rich and far-off and unknowable. He could make Juno pay whenever he wanted. Could have stuck a knife between his ribs, a real one made of lasers and hilt instead of words and glances, while he slept. Pulled him in and slit his throat. Pushed him out of a moving car. Anything.

But all he had done was try to keep him… safe, and Juno didn’t know what to do with that. It wasn’t normal, for someone to treat him like this, and he couldn’t trust it, not when it was coming from a man who changed the status quo so quickly that trying to follow it could make him light-headed.

Peter Nureyev was leaning against Rita’s setup and surveying him. “I didn’t realize that convincing your secretary we are talking involved so much sullen silence,” he said finally.

Juno shrugged, and he watched Peter Nureyev’s jaw clench and relax in under a second, a flash in him that Juno barely saw. “Juno, darling, it’s not like you to be so bashful. If you’re lost for words I can suggest a conversation topic,” and Juno could see a jab coming from miles out.

He really wished Nureyev would stab at him without the games. The only way to face pain was head-first and all at once, and if that wasn’t possible the only option was to avoid it. Juno leaned back, closed his eyes very slowly. “This is… a horrible idea,” Juno said. “So it fits right in with all the other ideas I’ve ever had. Let’s just go. It doesn’t matter how many hammers Rita has next time, I’ll deal with it. I’ll… threaten to take out the cable or something,” he said. “I’ll talk to her. We can go back to… whatever we were doing before.”

Peter Nureyev flared, like a flame, like a siren.

“Leave at the first opportunity, then. Ask me to stay and then leave. Make a pining, naive fool of me for a third time, Juno.” It was a challenge, and it made Juno stop, because there it was. The anger Juno was waiting for and hiding from. He’d finally found it. Juno didn’t want to say a word, only wanted to let Peter Nureyev tear him apart in all the ways he couldn’t make himself do to himself.

It felt as though Peter Nureyev had become everything in the room that was not Juno Steel, filling it with scent, sound, and sight. It was oppressive. It made Juno smaller and flatter, and he became less willingly so he could give Peter Nureyev more space to fill.

“You left first, Nureyev,” Juno said, as if that was why, as if it would have meant anything even if it was, as if that had anything to do with them anymore.

“I came back, Juno! I came back every time,” and Peter Nureyev’s eyes were always clear and bright, but there was something burning in them now. “Do you know how little I keep? I’ve opened my life up to you and let you read it like a book, but it seems you’ve discarded all of that the moment it wasn’t useful to you anymore. You’re the only place that I return to, Juno. Can you understand
what that means, why that is important?"

Juno’s heart and head pounded out of time with one another. “The car,” he said. “You came back for the car, too. And,” except Juno couldn’t think of another and. He’d been in Peter Nureyev’s head, but that wasn’t knowing his life.

“The car—” Nureyev waved the thought away like it was a particularly offensive fly. “That was a coincidence. Barely a side trip. I didn’t come back to Mars to see Ruby again, Juno.”

“Then why did you? I thought you were done here. I thought you’d seen every pretty Martian skyline you needed and were off to see the next planet more-beautiful-that-the-last,” and his voice came out bitter and sad.

“You think that they’re still—” Peter Nureyev cut himself off. “Never mind that.” He reached into his pockets, rummaged a bit, and pulled out a tube of eyeliner (expensive, of course) and a hand mirror. Now armed, he removed his eyeglasses, setting them down on Rita’s table, and aggressively applying liner. When he began speaking again, his voice was calm again. “I thought you didn’t trust me, but it was only ever that you wanted me to be the type to run, didn’t you, detective?” he asked, without a glance towards Juno.

Juno didn’t say anything. The words he could have said were stuck in his throat. He let his head fall back against the hard flat surface of the wall, letting the words cut and soak his skin.

“You’ll keep leaving,” Nureyev said, making a sharp flick in the corner of each eye. “You’ll never stop running the second I look away.” He surveyed his work, made the line over his left eye just a bit thicker. “It’s my own fault, I suppose. I’ve heard it’s a bad idea to fall into the same trap twice, but you see, I’d never had the chance to try.”

He clicked the cap of the eyeliner back down onto the tube.

Juno fixed his eyes on the ceiling. It was becoming a familiar companion. “Yeah. I might have heard that one, once or twice,” he said, and wondered if he could just… fall asleep for a few months. Drift through all of this, missing it all through no fault of his own. Wake up to everything being over, everything having been fine without him. Maybe better.

He wanted to do it all over, wake up in Peter Nureyev’s arms again. He’d live with the consequences as long as he had to.

“Last night,” Juno began. “Did we…”

“We don’t have to speak of it again, detective,” Nureyev said, hands back in his pockets until he found two tubes of mascara, one for eyes and one for brows. Juno watched unabashedly as he applied a first coat to his eyebrows, a practiced motion.

“I don’t know what it is, Nureyev,” Juno said. “I just woke up with—” with our skin touching and our arms around each other and the confirmation that I made the biggest mistake of my life when I didn’t go with you but at the same time i knew, i just knew, that i never could, nureyev ”I just, woke up, okay?”

Nureyev used his little finger to smooth his eyebrows into a higher arch, then applied another layer of pigment. “Mm. I thought that might happen,” he said, distracted and noncommittal.

Juno felt his chest tightening, squeezing on his lungs. “Look, I know I messed up, but, how’d I do it this time?”
Nureyev sighed and screwed the cap back onto his brow pigment. “I didn’t allow you to do anything untoward, detective. Not to say you didn’t try.” Nureyev turned his attention to the mascara this time, and the process was quicker, more careless than before.

“Can you give one straight answer?” Juno asked, feeling a rock in his chest. He couldn’t think, couldn’t comprehend what it meant, couldn’t decode euphemisms or circle around the topic at hand. “Events. Locations. Use a chart if you have to, I don’t care,” but I don’t know what I did and I need to watch myself, always, and I’m so tired, Nureyev, please.

Nureyev paused in his application of mascara, cast his eyes in Juno’s direction for only a second, then went back to his lashes. “I spend a not-insignificant amount of time on the roof, out here. The window of that bedroom is the best point of exit for it. I was on the roof when I heard you having some kind of nightmare. I woke you up, you almost cracked your head open on the bedside table, I grabbed you before you could give yourself more head trauma, we kissed. I put an end to that, but you wouldn’t let go of me, so I let you hold on a while.” He screwed the mascara shut as well, set it down, and dove back into his pockets.

The story had too many spaces in it. (They had kissed). It sounded like him (They had kissed and Juno couldn't even remember it), but Nureyev was used to convincing lies, and he was probably used to Juno Steel by now too. (But they had, hadn't they? It was the exact self-sabotage he would do). “Why should I believe that?” he asked, hoping Nureyev would admit something more dramatic, something that felt worthy of whatever he and Peter Nureyev were to one another. He was terrified to have kissed him, and relieved to have only kissed him, but there was a pit of disappointment to the relief that Juno couldn't bring himself to explain.

“It was always a losing battle, teaching you to trust,” he said with a light shake of the head while he opened a lipstain. “But the answer to your question is a simple one. When I seduce someone into a night of torrid passion, I make sure they can remember it,” Peter Nureyev said, applying a layer of deep burgundy to his lips, a motion so practiced that Juno would bet he could do it without the mirror if he wanted to, and Juno couldn’t tell whether Nureyev was using the lip stain application to torture him or if it was just a welcome side effect.

“Is this a joke to you?” Juno asked. “I don’t know what happened, Nureyev, just--help me out here,” and he asked for things so rarely that he’d never learned how to have the right cadence, the right tone to make it seem like the request was nothing to him. There was an undercurrent to it that could best be described as a whimper, something immature and exposed that he shoved under petulance in the hope that it would be hidden there.

He thought he saw Nureyev soften for a second, and Juno made his own face hard before he could know for sure. Instantly, all of the openness in Peter Nureyev closed. He was all business now, and Juno watched as he put blotted his lips, then reached to put his glasses back on.

“Trust me, detective, you would remember it if I had made love to you.” Juno recoiled instantly, and Peter stopped smoothing his hair into place to raise his now-made brows at him.

“You say that?” Juno asked, viscerally disgusted.

“What, make love?” Peter repeated.

“Don’t repeat it!” Juno half-yelled, shuddering.

Peter Nureyev at least had the decency to take Juno’s discomfort seriously, or at least without laughing openly. “Maybe it sounds different on Brahma,” he suggested. Peter Nureyev always said the name of his planet like it was something precious and breakable and lost to him, the vowels
vibrating with a longing that resonated in Juno and made him feel like he was breaking down into pieces with the sound of it.

“It can’t, Nureyev, it sounds horrible everywhere.” Juno couldn’t stop scowling. “It’s a curse on every sexually active adult in the galaxy. Why does anyone say that. Why do you say that?”

“I think in the original Brahmesi it’s actually quite lovely. I’m sure if you heard it I could change your mind,” Nureyev teased offhand.

“I’d like to see you try,” Juno said without thinking.

Peter Nureyev froze entirely for a second, then thawed. “Those are dangerous words, detective,” he said, clouds of smoke in his eyes and knives glittering in his mouth. Good, Juno thought without meaning too. He wanted danger and cuts and storms.

“Try it,” Juno challenged, drawing his legs up closer to him and looking Peter in the eyes, trying to say, I’ll go to you right now if you ask. It was an incredibly stupid thing to do, which was why he did it. If he’d spent all day self-flagellating because he thought he’d had sex with Peter Nureyev, he might as well make it worth it. He still had the residual feeling of being unable to make this any worse, and it was the same as feeling invincible. Better, even, than feeling invincible, because from the bottom there was nowhere to fall.

For a second Peter Nureyev stood and looked him over, and Juno almost smiled and congratulated himself on leaving Peter Nureyev, of all people, speechless. “Fine,” Nureyev said, businesslike. “Come here, Juno,” and of course Juno did, because this was his favorite trap to fall into, and Peter Nureyev leaned down to him and breathed something into his ear that was all full vowels and clipped syllables and the kind of letters that always sounded a little like a whisper.

“Good, you’ve proven that it only sounds okay when you don’t know what it means,” Juno said, a crack in his voice on the first syllable, a shiver running down his spine from the feeling of hot breath on his ear.

“I could show you what it means whenever you like. Just say the word, Juno,” Nureyev said, still low and soft.

“Won’t say no if you’re offering a demonstration,” Juno said, and it felt like he was being possessed but he needed to break things, had an unreasonable and insatiable desire to do everything wrong whenever possible, and this was no exception. His head was stifling him with words and thoughts and this was a chance to try to make it quiet. Peter Nureyev made him feel too damn much, but all that feeling could silence him, make his brain someplace that wasn’t so hard to stay for a little while.

Juno felt Nureyev’s eyes trace over his mouth as the corners of his lips twitched, and suddenly he saw something snap in the thief. “Well, if that’s what you want,” he said with a stab in the general direction of nonchalance, and in the next second Peter Nureyev had a hand on the center of Juno’s chest, pushing him backwards, and his thumb brushed Juno’s lower lip while a hand pushed his chin upwards, and he was soclose to him. Nureyev pushed so Juno was sent stumbling back into the office chair Rita had been using. One of Nureyev’s legs was folded flat on the chair next to Juno’s thigh, and the other was extended and pushing them so the back of the chair hit the wall, not exactly hard but not soft either. The hand on Juno’s chest slipped to the back of his head and pulled him in, and Juno was gone, gone, gone and his lips were on Nureyev’s and then everything was everywhere in flashes that didn’t make logical sense but he was already letting himself drown. The teeth on his lower lip felt the same as he remembered but more, and he exhaled shakily as soon as there was enough space between them to release the breath he’d been holding for over half a year from his lungs. The lips traveling up his jaw felt the same way--something that emptied his chest out and
made him want to find something new to fill it with.

“Stop me if you can’t forgive me long enough to stay,” Nureyev said with his lips on the space behind Juno’s ear, and what felt like a too-brief eternity passed before he continued. “My reputation might not withstand a third abandonment,” he said into Juno’s neck, which already missed the teeth and lips that had been there seconds before, and Juno’s collar was unbuttoned and he could already feel the beginning of a mark forming, “And I want to know whether I should leave you something to remember me by,” and both of his hands were reaching under his shirt, pulling the fabric with them in their incessant drive upwards.

Juno’s head was in a fog, and low moans were coming from some place in the back of his throat that didn’t feel like part of him. This is a bad decision, a strangely coherent thought informed Juno while he tried to pull at Nureyev’s shirt and felt his hands moved back to the arms of the chair each time, and eventually Juno gave up and was about to let himself fall entirely when--

forgive me?

“Forgive you for what?” Juno asked after taking a few deep breaths and working very hard to stop himself from stopping himself. It was a valiant effort, the kind a guy deserved a medal for, especially given the direction things were going.

Nureyev laughed, giddy and mirthless. “Don’t be cruel, detective,” he said, pausing in his lip-led journey down Juno’s chest, and Juno couldn’t help but squirm and groan. “It’s unbecoming for a lady.”

“Wait,” Juno said, hating himself desperately while he pulled Nureyev up. “What are you talking about?”

Juno was seeing more of Nureyev’s confused face today than he ever had in his life. It was… it made Juno wish it was ten seconds ago so he could do something about the way it made him feel. “Manipulating you,” he said as if it was obvious, slightly breathless and with his lipstain smeared like wine, like blood. “Making you think you couldn’t leave me without stealing away in the night. Not giving you enough time to choose to leave. I left you alone, I didn’t stop them from hurting you. You were going to die right in front of me and I couldn’t do a thing,” he had his hands on either side of Juno’s face now, cupping the back corners of his jaw, his throat, the space just behind his ears, and Juno could make him stop talking, stop saying these senseless, wrong things if he just leaned in a little more, “I was caught by Miasma. I got you involved with Miasma in the first place. And this whole thing would have solved whole thing in one go if I had only been Rex Glass all along,” and Nureyev was smiling in a way Juno had a thousand times before, when he hated himself the most. “I’m a very good thief, Juno. Not because I’m good at break-ins, or planning, or lock-picking--though I do excel at the basics. I’m a good thief because I can make people want to give me whatever it is I want from them, whether it’s the diamond necklace off their neck or the codes to their safe or,” that horrible smile again, “an undying love and affection.”

Juno could imagine an alternate universe where he reached for him and stopped him from saying anything more, swept that familiar-yet-foreign self-loathing right off his face and pulled him in. In this universe he did absolutely nothing except remain where he was, because only a second ago he’d been at this man’s mercy and he’d never been good at being the one to make a move.

“I thought I could be different if I could be, Peter Nureyev, with someone,” and he said the name hesitantly, like something unfamiliar and comforting and disappointing all at once. “But I always am, no matter what name is on my passport,” and Nureyev was cringing and smiling and pinching the bridge of his nose, and then it turned into one of his smirks, celebrating a private joke.
Juno opened his mouth to speak, but the only thing his brain could think to say over the buzzing of Peter Nureyev’s hands on him was, “What are you talking about?”

Peter stared at him, and then closed his eyes and let his head fall back. He was… laughing.

“Nureyev?” Juno asked as Nureyev pulled himself off of the chair and walked in a small circle, fingers locked behind his head, and Juno wondered if he’d broken him, and how. Eventually the strange laugh subsided, and he approached again and cupped Juno’s chin in his hand just as Juno was about to regain control of his body. He shivered under his steady gaze.

“You lovely, noble, foolish detective,” Nureyev said, much too close. “What have I done to you, that you can’t spot manipulation until it announces itself?” and Juno leaned towards Peter Nureyev despite himself. Then all the words sank in, and they were suspended in time together.

Until Mick Mercury kicked the door down.

Chapter End Notes

my roommates don’t know anything about this podcast, but they are supportive, so every time they see me working on this fic, they ask me, "did you make them kiss yet?" until now, i have had to say "no" or "it's unclear to all but myself". but now? now i can say, "yes, roommates. i did make them kiss." and it only took me. the length of two novels.

also, i want to apologize for the bad thing i made peter nureyev say. i stand by what i did. i hate it and could not look directly at my computer screen as i typed it, but we all suffer for our art here on archive of our own dot organization.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

what i did last night: peter nureyev edition

Being around Juno Steel was like botching a theft in the home of an eccentric millionaire. It was being trapped with him while the safe slowly filled with water, and knowing that even on Mars detectives were rarely born with gills.

There was never enough time, and Peter Nureyev, ever the opportunistic, ever the thief, wanted to take what he could before he lost him. He couldn’t stop feeling the phantom of Juno, still in his arms, losing blood like sand from an hourglass. There was a time for rage and insult, but using it now, when the detective was chasing mortal peril, was a waste. This was a time for action, tempered with restraint. Peter Nureyev was unparalleled at the former.

Restraint was the difficult thing. It felt clunky, unnatural to do anything halfway. It wasn’t quite like making himself smaller—he had done that before, and that was all crossed arms and quiet nods and traces of a fear he barely knew in every smile. He could throw all of himself into being something meek, folded-over, and easily overlooked, though it was always preferable to be loud, charming, and self-assured. He was fairly certain that meant he—he meaning Peter Nureyev—was loud, charming, and self-assured. It was hard to know for sure if he was anything at all, or if his base self was an empty house for a thousand personalities to inhabit.

Restraint was not like becoming smaller at all. Restraint was becoming large enough to cover the mouth of all but one of the inhabitants of Peter Nureyev, and knowing which one was which. Earl Fox, for example, was the kind of man who blended into the background because he was just strange enough to seem benign. Put another odd thing in an unmatched set, and no one would bother looking closely enough to see that it was the exact piece they were missing.

No, restraint was something different entirely. It was when people mentioned Brahma, when New Kinshasa was on the news, when patricide became a topic of conversation and he had to laugh and remain light and hold onto someone’s arm anyway, short bursts of apparent tranquility when all he wanted to do was break out of the trap of his alias. Restraint was keeping the part of him that was always Peter Nureyev awake and alert and with his arms wrapped around himself, holding him back from the thing that he wanted because it’s not time to chase this yet, you have another goal awaiting you.

Strange, that it was always Peter Nureyev who wanted the wrong thing in the first place, and it was always Peter Nureyev doing the holding-back.

Sometimes the Peter Nureyev in him wanted too much. Sometimes the Peter Nureyev in him convinced every alias he had that they all wanted the exact same thing, and that was when problems arose.

For example, at that very moment Peter Nureyev was standing behind Juno Steel, leaning on the chair back he had deftly turned so that the both of them see their audience. A gentlemanly thing to do, he thought. Chivalrous, even, to allow Juno the courtesy of an unbroken view of the intruders, to give him a clear line of sight to Mick Mercury, who was celebrating as if he had scored a winning
goal, and Alessandra Strong, who looked proud of him despite herself. And if that clear line of sight meant that they both saw Juno Steel, undone and marked with the deep red stain that matched Peter Nureyev’s smeared and smirking lips, well. That was unavoidable.

And if Juno Steel happened to react to knowing that his companions could see the story of the last five, perhaps ten, minutes on their faces, that certainly wasn’t Peter Nureyev’s fault. And if that reaction told Peter Nureyev where he stood, what his (not his) detective thought of rearranging the pieces of the events of their meeting and un-meeting, that would be a desirable but entirely unintended side effect.

Something about Juno Steel twisted Peter Nureyev’s mind so that it was always devoted to sweeping him off of his feet. The way he wore his turmoil bodily, and let his face betray his emotions even when he intended not to. The sound of his voice, a warm, hurt, rich thrum that Peter thought he might like to listen to even more than he did his own. How he could outsmart him without even knowing him, how he would invite a mysterious stranger of a master thief into his home and expect to defeat him and actually do it.

The problem was that he wanted Juno Steel his. He ached for him, deeply. Maybe as much as Juno Steel ached in all things. Peter Nureyev had wanted to ease that, if Juno would have let him. Their loneliness hadn’t taken the same shape, but the edges of it had fit together perfectly, and he had a cacophony of thoughts about that, each of a difference voice and cadence.

Peter hadn’t realized, then, that Juno seemed at his best when his planet really did want him dead. That maybe Juno Steel could not be tricked into carrying a load any lighter than a whole planet.

He so wanted to trick him. So he did, unabashedly. He knew Juno swallowed the pill, after all. He had known all along. He was supposed to be stealing it. He wouldn’t have been much of a thief if he weren’t following it.

Peter Nureyev had disliked Miasma even then. He never liked his clients, but there was something distasteful about her from the beginning. And now he woke up every morning in an empty bed, sure Juno Steel had just perished in front of him, was screaming in a dark room because Peter Nureyev couldn’t handle a little pain well enough.

He couldn’t have known. And he had wanted to see what would happen, what this strange detective would do when cornered. Give it up? Fight his way out?

That he would swallow it was not an outcome he had not considered, because it was perhaps the single stupidest thing a person in that position could do. But there was something daring about creating a third option where there was once none. The blunt resourcefulness of it intrigued him, the way Juno would use himself bodily to create an alternate pathway out of two dead ends.

He had wanted to see more of that. And he had learned quite a bit from Miasma’s confidential file cabinet, which had very insecure locks) about what the pill he was trying to steal would do. So he thought he could accomplish dual purposes. Show the detective how good, how noble he could be, to put stopping Miasma from killing the world over his own capital gain.

And. It would certainly be interesting if the detective awoke latent mind-reading abilities for him, wouldn’t it? Not to say he thought it would work for sure, but he was tentatively confident.

He didn’t think Miasma would know. He thought if she caught him he could play it off as an employee trying to do overtime, perhaps an irresponsible cad combining work with a bit of play.

He had been overeager. Smitten into naivety, to neglect to realize that his client was manipulating
him right back.

He hadn’t known Juno well enough, then, to know how quickly he would put a gun to his own head.

It had all gotten out of hand.

He couldn’t let that happen again. He would hold Juno Steel close whenever possible from now on, cut anything that could hurt him in half, or else never see him again--all the voices that Peter Nureyev arbitrated over disagreed on the best course of action, but most came to the conclusion that it would be best if they were separated.

He could pretend that the concern was for Juno’s sake and Juno alone, but there was also this: No part of him wanted to be left without a word in an empty bed. Not again.

_Fool me twice_, they used to say at times like this.

The story Peter Nureyev had told Juno Steel detailing the night before had been somewhat abridged.

There wasn’t a good reason why, except that: the first time Juno Steel had left him to wake up alone, Peter had hoped for a while. And then, when it was clear there was no reason to hope, he decided that Juno Steel had died in that tomb. Except when he was far enough away that he could see all of Mars, there was no way to imagine Juno Steel was not there. If Juno Steel were dead, the planet would surely have stopped burning so red and bright in the sky out of anger, out of spite.

He had tried spite himself, but it wasn’t enough only to hate, and there wasn’t nearly enough fuel for a sustained burn. Then it was forgiving, forgetting already a lost cause, but Peter Nureyev barely remembered a time when he cared about anything enough for it to hurt him, and forgiveness was pushed back even further. He couldn’t take any of it with him, after all.

If he could only understand, that might have helped, but Juno Steel was an enigma, a perpetual surprise. Peter Nureyev might have found him dull if he weren’t. If only he did. If he had only failed to find the parts of Juno Steel that caught, they both might have been better off for it. But he had ensnared himself in the detective’s burrs and thorns now, and undoing the entanglement had somewhere along the way become an escape beyond even his expertise.

So Peter chased, in his way, right up until he realized that the chase only made Juno Steel run faster. So now, distance. But not too much. Or too little. Something in between. And Peter Nureyev, as proven by the lipstain marking his mouth and Juno’s skin, found it difficult to do anything halfway. All of the starting and stopping was a waste of time when he could be forced to drop everything in an instant, abandon all his best-laid plans, and land somewhere else with a new name.

But it didn’t matter. Distance, but only an arm’s reach. It was all a lost cause if he didn’t give that.

He only wanted to know why. He didn’t need the detective entire. Or, he did, but in the same way he needed… oh, sunlight, or some other such luxury. He had lived well in the darkness before. It was a good-enough life, when one had the time required to adjust.

It was a life of doing things alone, no matter how many shoulders your hands brushed or how many smirking smiles you gave away. It was a life of sitting on rooftops and slitting throats and taking what you needed to survive and then taking more because the universe was deluded if it believed it could get away with daring to take so much from him in the first place. That it could get away with making him throw away the things he wanted with his own hands.

Peter Nureyev spent many evenings sitting on the roof and facing the stars, defiant in the face of all
of those that hadn’t caught him, staring at the dome above and holding himself out to the world.

Sometimes he wondered if anyone was even looking for him, or if his name on bulletin was only a formality at this point. If he had the chance to plant his feet somewhere. He didn’t know how to get his fill of unnecessary luxuries and stop these dangerous cravings for more.

Peter Nureyev stared up at the dome. He wondered if he could see Brahma, tonight. If Brahma could see Mars back. Probably not. The two orbits rarely aligned, and when they did even the smallest amount of light pollution could render them invisible to one another. He didn’t usually think about it so much, but he was spending so much time with the person he had given the only home he ever had. It was on the mind more often than usual.

The winds that never left Mars alone ran through his hair, against his chest, and he tried to think of nothing else. The whip of a breeze had a sharpness to it, in the whining and mournful sounds it made. It keened and shrieked and cried out, and he felt a pull in his chest that was becoming near constant, something he had tried to exorcise from himself, that he only felt for--

Peter Nureyev climbed down off the roof, slid back inside the open window. And there he was. Juno Steel, curled in on himself like a hurt cat who hadn’t the energy to lick their wounds. Crying out in his sleep. Peter Nureyev watched for a second. Another stolen thing he could take with him.

Juno hurt enough in his waking hours, Peter Nureyev finally decided, and he walked over to Juno, leaned on the bed, and shook at the detective’s shoulder. “Juno,” he said, trying to keep his voice gentle, soft. “You’re dreaming.”

*You can be Duke and i can be Dahlia and we can con this whole damn planet,* Juno had said after his last dream.

He had hurt Juno very badly. But Juno had awoken wanting to save him nonetheless. He wondered what Juno might say this time. If he would wake up and see a monster, or a knight.

Juno’s eyes opened, and he let out a half-yell and scrambled backwards, and Peter Nureyev’s mind’s eye could see it all play out, Juno’s head connecting with the nightstand behind him and he couldn’t allow Juno to hurt himself any more, not in front of him, it didn’t make sense for him to move so quickly for such a small thing but nothing about this was logical anymore, so he lunged and caught Juno in his arms, one hand behind his head and the other on his upper back. He found himself face-to-face with the detective, and perhaps, he considered, this was going to lead nowhere good.

“Careful, Juno, I can’t always be here to keep this pretty head of yours safe,” he said, trying to keep his voice low and quiet. People were sleeping, after all.

He watched Juno’s face pull itself into the waking world, to go from frenzied and half-gone to something more alert, and for a second he looked at Peter like he was something miraculous and yearned-for and he reached upwards, let his fingertips brush over Peter’s arm. He watched melancholy and bitterness drain into him as he got his bearings, and wondered if Juno Steel had woken up in that hotel room.

He had promised himself he was done with hoping.

As a rule, Peter Nureyev was always ready to break a promise when a change in circumstances required it.

“Don’t waste your time, Nureyev,” Juno said, and he never got tired of hearing his name in Juno’s mouth, even if it was only the latter half. The detective seemed so tired. With good reason, but it
might have been more than Peter Nureyev could bear. “Was never too good at pretty. And safety and I aren’t exactly on speaking terms.”

“Yes, I did get that impression,” Peter said, a rueful smile on his face. “Well. For now,” for now i can stand between you and every spiteful knife that drives towards your heart “I’m good enough at pretty for the both of us.”

Juno had the smallest laugh, barely even there, just a release of breath, and every time Peter Nureyev heard it his heart broke open and healed over rapidly, over and over again. “You’re good enough at pretty for-- nevermind.” Juno started, then stopped, unmoored and drifting and shining in the diluted moonlight that snuck through the window.

“Hmm?” Peter inquired, and leaned further down, a small smirk. Juno didn’t say anything, tilted his head away, so Peter took one of his hands back and leaned on it, willing to wait. “You were saying?”

“Nothing,” Juno repeated, but it had the sound of weakening resolve, and Peter hummed contentedly. He could wait forever to hear Juno speak.

The detective turned his head away. “Just, watch out for Venus. I hear she’s the jealous type,” he muttered, and Peter smiled before he could remind himself not to get any closer.

“I’ll keep my eyes open,” he promised, but the grin crept into his voice. Juno turned back towards him.

“You liked that one, huh?” he asked, but his eyes were looking at him like he was a marvel.

“Very much,” Peter said, and they were very close, and he and Juno Steel were making another mistake on the account of the other. Juno reached upwards, kissed him sleepily, but urgent, like he was convincing himself Peter Nureyev was real. Juno Steel always surprised him. Peter Nureyev let himself melt into it, let himself take this.

He had waited so long to let Juno Steel fall into this particular trap that he didn’t stop himself after the first kiss, kept coming back for more.

It was a little bit the same as he remembered, a little bit something new; Juno Steel tasted like iron and salt and whiskey and adrenaline and like getting caught in a windstorm that whipped up the moment your feet touched ground. The first time he pulled away he drew from Juno a long, shaking breath and he could feel his chest contract, and who was he to intentionally stop himself from giving the detective what he wanted? Not even to mention what he himself wanted. How rare it was, that he could give two people what they needed at the same time.

His hands had a tendency to move and take and plan without Peter’s instructions, and he was often surprised to find the things they had done when cleaning out his pockets later, but it would be disingenuous to say Peter Nureyev’s hands were stealing something else without his permission.

So he had made some promises, to Juno, to himself. One or two words of bond. Three at the absolute most. But faced with the choice of keeping some nobly intended pledge from months before or pushing Juno Steel back against the mattress, crawling on top of him, and kissing him over and over and deeper and deeper while Juno let out ragged breaths beneath him and twined his fingers into Peter’s hair to pull him in, well. It wasn’t a choice at all.

He wanted to say Juno’s name over and over again, let his lips travel where they may, but if he let either of them speak he could scare Juno off again, or, worse, he could remember all the reasons why
he should not be kissing Juno Steel again, not now, not yet. Peter Nureyev didn’t usually mind an
element of danger, but right now he was dealing with a thing too easily broken to take that kind of
risk.

And Juno was fragile, wasn’t he? Or, not fragile, but breakable. A porcelain creature who ran like he
was iron, and had the cracks to prove it.

Juno made a keening sound as if he were in pain, and he might have been. Peter slowed, left him
with something warm and gentle, and checked his hands to see if they probed any bruises or shook
any sprained ribs. He rummaged about the storage system of his mind for his better judgment. He
couldn’t imagine where it had gone off to.

“IT’s the same,” Juno said now that his mouth was otherwise unoccupied.

“Hm?” Peter pulled himself back to look at Juno. He looked dazed, reckless, windswept, and he
couldn’t help but think, this is what you do to him as he gazed down, and he was as proud and guilty
as he ever was while he entertained the thought.

“Nothing,” Juno said, and gazed up at him a second more. “Anybody ever told you you’ve got fox’s
teeth? Always thought so. This time around the name’s a little too on the nose.”

“No one’s been fool enough to try,” Peter Nureyev said, and basked in being above Juno Steel for a
moment while his sense caught up with him.

He had to stop. The detective tasted like a dive bar, and he had been battered and bruised and ill, and
he might wake up remembering nothing, and make all kinds of assumptions, and he had to stop and
run some kind of damage control. That would be much easier if Juno was not moving in again, but
Peter Nureyev had refused many such luxuries before. It hadn’t killed him yet.

He put two fingers on the detective’s parted lips, stopping him a second before they collided. “Wait
until this can be something you remember in the morning,” he said, his voice quiet and husky
because the sound didn’t have to travel far, Juno was just the touch of a fingertip away and--

This wouldn’t do at all. Be good, he admonished himself. Or he will leave the second you give him a
moment to think. He will leave. He will leave if you do not stand up and walk away and give him
space. He will leave if you give him a second’s opportunity to remember exactly who Peter Nureyev
is. He saw right through you and he still wanted to see more, so be something nice for him to look
at. Be. Good.

So he started to pull away, had every intention of pulling away, but there must have been some kind
of error, because Juno, lovely, exhausted Juno was following him, chasing the point of contact like a
moth a flame. He could close that distance in an instant, if he were so inclined. He was very inclined.

“Maybe it’ll be something I should forget,” Juno said, and his eyes had a glint to him he recognized
when the detective leaned forward, pulled him back in by the nape of his neck, and he would have
succumbed instantly and let the whole game be lost if not for that familiar look.

Peter Nureyev would not consent to being the gun Juno Steel held to his own head. So despite the
fact that he was light-headed with want, and despite the fact that a voice in his head was whispering
that this would be the simplest thing he had ever been given the opportunity to steal, he pushed him
gently back.

Because this is what good felt like. Like starving until you were ready to drive your teeth into
anything foolish enough to land in reach. “No, Juno. It won’t,” and there was no way to make that
any less seductive than it was, so he didn’t bother. There was no point in asking a bird not to sing. “The only thing you should be doing is taking a rest. You’re exhausted.”

“Don’t tell me what I am,” Juno said, but the heavy softness of fatigue was settling all over him, and Peter didn’t know if he could take it, his sleepy, soft detective, (not his, not yet, not anymore, maybe never again, maybe never at all), trying so hard to keep his edges. “You don’t get to do that. You don’t know anything about what it was like before you got here.” Peter let the accusation slide into his pocket with everything else; he hadn’t the time to dwell on the sting of it. “For fifteen years everything was fine. I did my job, and I was good enough at it to get by, and there wasn’t a single damn thing to make any of it more complicated than it had to be. And then you showed up and everything got to be so,” Juno’s eyes closed all the way as he spoke, and the nails of one hand curled against one of his arms. “Much.”

“For me it was twenty,” Peter said. Juno slowly opened his eyes to look back up at him, still so confused, still so angry. “Years, that is. Twenty uncomplicated, brilliant years traveling the solar system, stealing and fleeing and living without anything to care after. It was quite a run, you know.” They certainly made a pair, the two of them.

“You should’ve kept running,” Juno said, eyes closed again, and it put a bitter taste in the air. “You should’ve been gone the second you got the chance.”

“Certainly, some of it was less than ideal, but it’s surprising what one can bear when there’s interesting company about,” Peter said, looking at his interesting company from just far enough away to be safe. “Would you like me to keep running now, Juno?” he asked, soft again. It was an unfair question. But he would leave, if Juno asked him to, if Juno meant it.

Juno pulled himself a little closer to him, and Peter wondered if he knew how much warmth spread through his chest at the tiny movements of nestling in he made. “Why won’t you just hate me so I can do my damn job in peace,” and his voice was muffled enough that he just might have misheard. He was tucked against Peter’s arm now. “If you want me to go, I’ll go,” he said, trying to spell it out. Juno Steel could be so obstinate. Uncooperative. Willfully obtuse. “Just say the word.”

Ask me to stay, Juno. Tell me you want me here. Tell me leaving was a mistake. Make me believe it.

Juno didn’t say anything. His breathing was even and slow.

“You can’t get out of giving me an answer that easily, Juno,” he said quietly. “I’ll get it out of you eventually.”

Juno Steel had an odd gravity. It was so much harder to move away from him than towards. He had almost managed it when Juno draped an arm over him and pulled himself back to him, and, he supposed that was as good an answer as any for the time being.

He stayed awake as long as he could, dimly remembered seeing the first rays of sunshine approaching through the window while Juno clung to him.

And then, of course, he woke up. Alone again. And maybe that was the most he could hope for, was waking up alone. Maybe they would both always be running in opposite directions. Or else Peter Nureyev was chasing something that stayed in place, running in futile circles. Herding him, cornering him. He was supposed to let Juno come to him, but in this one respect he was too much the predator to go against his nature like that, to simply lay in wait without any reason to think he would come close.
Could anyone blame him, for taking every opportunity he could? Could anyone look at Juno Steel, undone by both their hands together, and find wrongdoing in Peter Nureyev straying from the blueprint, in being a little less good than he had planned?

He smirked while he looked down at the detective again. It didn’t matter how bleak the future was until you were in it, he decided. This was the present, and it had a glowing potential to it.

“Wonderful technique, Mick, Detective Strong clearly did an excellent job coaching you, but Juno and I were about to have an important talk, so if you don’t mind,” he said, before anyone could take the upper hand from him.

The change was immediate, and Peter Nureyev couldn’t keep a satisfied smile off Earl Fox’s face.

Detective Strong steelpled her hands together and leaned her forehead against her fingertips. “We talked about this yesterday,” she said, to Juno, and he was sure every one of his teeth--fox’s teeth, Juno had said--was showing now.

Juno wasn’t quite recovered yet, and Peter let his fingers play absently with a loose coil of his hair, near his forehead, while he still could. Mick Mercury looked just as thrilled as he had when he knocked the door down.

Mick Mercury was difficult to pin down. He was either an idiot or a genius--not in the way that Juno was both. Mick Mercury was definitely one or the other. The two extremes looked too much like one another to distinguish for sure, and his opinion of which side he fell on changed day-to-day.

“Did you two see that? I know you were busy, but did you see? Who’s the strong one now, huh?” Mick called down to Juno.

“Sasha,” Juno said automatically. “It’s always going to be Sasha, Mick.”

For a second Mick looked put out, but then he recovered. “Well, Sasha’s not here, is she?” Mick said. He was drunk on power. Peter Nureyev had seen it before. A point towards the ‘idiot’ end of the spectrum, then. He relinquished his light hold on Juno while the detective came out of his reverie, stiffened, realized where he was. Jerked and wheeled away, and Peter took the opportunity to straighten up, arms crossed, and look at the detective’s undone state a little longer, from a new angle.

“Anyway, you two are being safe down there?”

“You don’t have to ask me if I’m being safe every time, Mick,” Juno snapped, voice cracking, eyes overly-wide and staring at a piece of nothing hanging in midair, hands buried in his own hair while he folded on himself slightly.

The tips of his ears were reddening, and he felt his smirk threatening to soften into a real, moony-eyed smile. He had to fight that instinct. Juno couldn’t run from him again.

“Is this because of that death cult? Did one of the witches put a curse on me?” Detective Strong asked herself. She seemed more perplexed than anything else, which was an interesting change. Even frustration seemed absent.

Mostly absent, anyway.

“Did someone say curses?” Rita’s voice asked, and her footsteps approached the doorway. “Cause my friend Frannie can read auras, she can tell you if anybody put a curse on you, she’s real good at it! See, Frannie says curses are this weird pink-chartreuse color but all grainy-like, she was just telling me a couple weeks back that…” She was in sight now, momentarily frozen and taking in the scene.
Then she started making a… sound. Peter wasn’t quite sure what it was, but it seemed like one of her good sounds. One hand covered her mouth. Her other arm was straight in the air. It seemed like a supportive gesture, which was kind of her.

Juno stood up and walked into the laundry room. Peter heard the sound of the water of the laundry room sink at full blast, then something putting itself in the way of the flow, while Rita grabbed Mick by the arms and started shaking him, making that sound all the while. Maybe a squeal? A shriek? He would think of it later, he was sure.

Now that it was safe to do so he smiled, fond and besotted, at the now-closed door to the room where Juno was now, if Peter guessed correctly, running his head under the flow of laundry room sink. All in all, the results were tentative, but there might be something promising there if he could just stay in line a little longer.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the one hand, Peter Nureyev had undone a not-insignificant amount of planning in a matter of hours. On the other, one only had so many chances to kiss Juno Steel in their lifetime, and it was seemed a shame to waste one. Or two, as the case may be.

While he stood by the decision, the consequences were less than ideal. The cost of moving forward was continuing to plumb the depths of the manipulative web he had spun, thick enough that it had clouded Juno’s vision entirely. Admittedly, there was a certain guilty appeal to the idea of a blindly devoted Juno Steel, if only Juno had the capability to believe him good.

But Juno didn’t, and couldn’t, and Peter wouldn’t have cared about him at all if he had. Peter didn’t have the time to spare on the easily duped. Juno saw right through him, and had been fool enough to dive towards him headfirst despite that. Right up until he remembered Peter Nureyev had something of the monster to him, that he would kill one thing he loved to protect another, and it was only a matter of how the math of attachment evened out. Peter didn’t know if he could convince Juno that it hadn’t been a cold calculation, but a matter of deciding whether he cut out one part of his heart or the other.

Or maybe Juno knew; he’d been in Peter’s head, after all. He wouldn’t blame him, if he’d rather have someone with a heart kept whole.

He had thought about what Juno might be thinking enough times that he had to have been right at least once, but none of his vivid specters of the detective in the next room was more convincing than any other. He had been so sure that Juno had seen how Peter brought him to the brink of death and saved him from a folly of his own making, over and over again, and wanted no more of it. That Juno hadn’t forgiven him for refusing to undo time and be reborn Rex Glass.

He used to be proud, of being irredeemable. But now he was just confused. Tired, a little bit, of thinking in circles, of forming a theory and having it categorically refuted by his most-tolerated detective.

What are you talking about? Juno’s voice repeated. Peter couldn’t quite create the real thing, but it was close enough to pull him into the next part of the conversation Mick Mercury had interrupted. He had several months of inadvertent practice putting Juno Steel back together out of memory.

You think you manipulated me? I’ve got a list of exes a mile long who make you look like a goddamn beacon of chivalry. I knew what I was getting into. Didn’t think you’d want me to stick around. Didn’t think you would believe I wanted to, either. I’ve had enough of being a pawn in someone else’s secret plans for a lifetime, thanks. What was your end goal? I follow you around with nowhere to go and you drag me into heists and cold-blooded murders until suddenly, what, I’m the living shield between you and another anthropologist who couldn’t get IRB approval?

I wouldn’t let you get hurt, Juno.

It’s a little late for that, Nureyev. You always let me get hurt. Can’t help yourself. You can’t stay away, can you? Just had to prove your promises are as worthless as your name is. As if I didn’t already know that. I tried to tell you, Nureyev, and you didn’t listen.
These imagined conversations were never productive; he didn’t know why he bothered when he
never learned anything he didn’t already know. Really, if Mick Mercury had waited a little longer,
he might have gotten somewhere. The wall was crumbling, but at this rate they would overthrow
the entire system of government in Hyperion City before Juno gave him the missing piece that would
bring it all to light. He wanted to be Peter Nureyev for him, but he knew little enough about Peter
Nureyev that it wouldn’t be so much of a compromise to be someone slightly more to Juno’s tastes.
If he could only figure out exactly what they were.

There was a way to bring Juno the stars. He was sure of it.

He only had to complete a list of ifs. If he could make Juno willing, and not an unwitting prisoner. If
he could make Juno understand he owed nothing to this city. If he could bring Juno to want to see
the world beyond this beautiful, ancient, unkind planet more than he wanted to make it something
kind. If he could bring himself to cut these bonds he had, to pursue something greater and more
beautiful.

There were people in every colony. The ones here on Mars would rather Juno be happy and well
than with them. They weren’t the type to be selfish of him.

An unwise way to care for someone, really; it gave people who cared fiercely and selfishly too much
of a chance to step in. Though, Peter had to admit, it was illuminating to walk among them. Not to
say he was ready to trade his freedom for a few conversations with people who could be familiar
with him; only that he was enjoying them while he had the opportunity.

It was charming, if slightly disconcerting, how enthusiastic Rita was for him to seduce her employer.
Equally charming was how much Juno was willing to tolerate her despite all his talk, and how he
even unlocked the door for her when she demanded to be let inside. Although that decision could
have been influenced by other factors. He had offered to pick the lock.

He wouldn’t have done it, of course; Mick Mercury had already been bouncing on the balls of his
feet, eager to continue the use of his newfound skill, and the two most likely outcomes of the
situation were further property damage or Juno’s acquiescence. Still, it was generally good form to
offer one’s services, especially when it appeared they would be entirely unnecessary. It made people
think they knew more about you than they did. And he liked Rita. He thought. He wasn’t sure yet,
but she was very strange, and cleverer than she let anyone think. She harbored a hidden moral
ambiguity to her, unnoticed beneath all the gushing over streams and occasional misstatement or
trouble with numbers. Peter always felt more comfortable with a person who had dark corners to
them, who were practicing a kind of duplicity of their own.

He had assumed at first that she would want him to be virtuous, good and brave an only morally
conflicted in that saccharine cinematic way, but even when he was Rex Glass she had liked him most
when he hinted towards darker intentions. And she was doing a wonderful job conspiring with him
to keep his previous identity use a secret.

Besides, he didn’t have much time to watch streams when undistracted by the crafting of a new self
and planning of a new heist, and he found her diatribes on contemporary trends in Marsian
entertainment fascinating.

Rita started a low, conspiratorial laugh as she slipped inside the door, looking a bit like she was in
danger of swallowing her own hands. “You missed a spot, boss,” she half-sung to Juno. Rita waved
at Peter as Juno, unseen, sputtered out syllables Peter wished he could see, as Rita bore one of the
largest, most self-satisfied smiles Peter had ever seen outside of a mirror. Peter smiled back at her
fondly.
It helped that Rita seemed to like him. Rational or not, Peter Nureyev was instantly and entirely against his will endeared to those who saw through his act and continued to interact with him anyway. It was an act of idiocy, to choose to interact with Peter Nureyev instead of one of his ten thousand window dressings, but over the past several months it had become clearer and clearer that he was one to suffer fools, willingly and gladly.

It was permissible to like people, so long as he didn’t let it affect his work. Right now, his work was to stand between Juno Steel and his worrisome bent towards martyrdom while making sure that the second of only two planets he had ever wanted to return to wouldn’t go the way of the first. Having amiable relations with the similarly-motivated was not only acceptable, but necessary to the job at hand.

That meant acting like the kind of person they could wrap their minds around and understand with minimal effort. It meant living a parody of normalcy. And it absolutely meant not positioning one’s self to eavesdrop on conversations between detectives and secretaries when one could be observed doing so, regardless of how vital that information might be.

Peter Nureyev rearranged his headspace, and willed himself into feeling a wave of calm wash over all the places he hadn’t been able to stop Juno Steel from touching him. He only had to choose to focus in on the calm and not the way he felt afire and incomplete.

He chose calm, continued to choose calm, silenced the phantom of Juno in his head, and assessed.

He had gone against plan again. Admittedly, it was difficult to keep plans around Juno, but the sheer amount of improvisation he was doing moment to moment was untenable. He hadn’t put the most thought into his persona, and that had worked before but he hadn’t thought he’d be spending weeks with a second detective who didn’t trust him when he began. It was all very challenging.

Peter Nureyev took off his glasses, wiped them on the hem of his shirt, and got a bit more into character, as a version of Earl Fox who still made sense in regard to recent developments. He had made significant progress in his case study of Juno Steel, and had slipped several abandoned files into his pocket, so it wasn’t a loss, exactly, but it was still less than ideal. But it had been a pleasant way to pass the time.

Now, damage control. He would be… unaffected, he decided. Unaffected and oddly proud but still slightly concerned, for this detective. But not overly so. They knew each other. He would be the sort of person Mick Mercury could trust not to hoard Juno away, but he wouldn’t play a saint in front of Alessandra Strong either. Not like he could; if she was even a tenth the detective she seemed, she was already assuming he wasn’t who he said he was. So for her he was… a man faking his name. It was uninspired, certainly, but it would do. He made some minor rearrangements, swept his hair back into place, and walked up the stairs as if it were nothing.

Detective Strong looked him over, arms crossed, surveying him. It was quite the complicated game to be someone-other-than-himself-pretending-to-be-someone-other-than-himself for her, but if he weren’t up to the challenge he wouldn’t have showed up playing the hero with a notorious stolen vehicle full of forged identification documents and questionably legal weaponry.

She watched him the same way one would watch a bag left conspicuously unattended at a spaceport, which was, frankly, insulting. He had been nothing but well-behaved around her, with a few perfectly understandable exceptions. There was just no pleasing some people.

“It seems as though we’ve all three had a busy day,” he said, directing his words to Mick Mercury and his sentiment to Detective Strong. Mick Mercury didn’t seem to dislike him or distrust him (and while he had given up on answering the question of whether Mick Mercury was idiot or genius
except as an interesting pastime, this was among the strongest evidence in the idiot column by far).

“Yeah, I basically kicked two doors open,” Mick said, puffing up. “I’ve never felt more alive.”

“The timing could have been better,” Peter said, wondering idly whether basically two rounded up or down, “but the form was expert.” He wouldn’t know; he’d never had to try. “I’m going to get a glass of water. Would you like anything?” He gave the illusion of a pause. “No? Excellent, excuse me.” Peter pushed his way through them, sliding a hand over Mick Mercury’s shoulder as he passed, trying to decide what he wanted to do with the rest of his day. They followed, which he had seen coming; where else were they planning to go? Mick pulled a chair at the table, and sat in it backwards; Detective Strong leaned a shoulder against the wall, arms crossed, watching him. Peter decided that Earl Fox didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary, and took a long drink, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand when he was done. Only then did he allow Earl Fox to look up, taken aback by the attention.

“You smeared your lipstick,” Alessandra said drily, tilting her head to gesture at her own mouth.

Peter made a bit of a show of looking at the back of his hand, then picking up a spoon to view his distorted reflection, his lipstain painting a short history of his day. “So I did,” he said, and pocketed the spoon without making a single alteration to his appearance. He would take care of it before Juno emerged, he was sure.

“We’re running out of spoons,” she said, and Peter didn’t see why that was his problem. He could sense an interrogation coming, and he hadn’t to readied his questions. He neatly seated himself on an empty spot on the kitchen counter and folded a leg beneath himself, bent gracefully to avoid knocking his head on the cabinets.

“Shame,” Peter said. “I could go pick up some more, if you’d like.”

“Interesting concept,” Alessandra said. “Another solution would be that maybe some of us could stop putting everything they pick up directly into their pockets. Some people could even take those things out of their pockets, if they wanted to give that a try.”

Mick looked back and forth between them. “She’s talking about you,” he said.

“Yes, I thought as much,” Peter Nureyev said, and congratulated himself on avoiding condescension. Pocketing anything with the possibility of holding fingerprints or DNA was so much a habit that he forgot he was doing it. Combined with his generally tactile nature, he supposed he could see why this could potentially be, in some way or form, an annoyance. But he wasn’t planning on getting into the habit of sloppiness just for Alessandra Strong’s ridiculous pet peeves. “I’ll get more,” he said, and Detective Strong shook her head and looked upwards.

“Sure,” she said, and uncrossed her arms, returning to her table of investigational materials.

“However you want to solve this problem is fine by me. Don’t get us caught.”

“I never do,” he said confidently.

“Good for you. Now would be a bad time to start,” she said without looking away from her notes. She was careful to keep everything contained to one place, but he didn’t see why she or Juno needed the physical representations of their thought process so scattered, so loose. Someone could take them without a second’s planning, just reach out and slip them into their pockets with barely a sound. This was personally advantageous, but he really should say something. He would bring it up eventually. When it came up in conversation.
There were more important conversations to be had. It wouldn’t come up for a while. He had a bit of the mind reader in him himself, even without the mixed benefit of a Martian tumor. Detective Strong’s thoughts were agitating on her face. She wouldn’t be able to focus without loosing something on him, and everything about her screamed of a need for focus, a single-minded constant march forward that could not be stopped. She needed to move on to the next thing, working right through every obstacle.

Peter Nureyev was quite an obstacle to confront, but he was confident she would get there.

In the meantime, he had scanned and stolen information to peruse. He didn’t move from the counter; he felt oddly comfortable perched there, above everyone, in an unexpected place, flipping one-handed through pages of reading and taking unneeded space. He could be comfortable anywhere, really; there was at least one of him for every seating position.

He had gleaned quite a bit, from stray notes, over-shoulder glances, and some light hacking—though he had the feeling that it wasn’t his computer skills aiding him as much as Rita’s generosity. Really, it was a shame how little they all seemed to be collaborating; they all had different information that they just weren’t telling one another about. Rita had pages of project notes and employment records and an address. Alessandra Strong had timetables and stakeouts and maps triangulated by hand. Juno had… secrets, mostly, and hunches, and firsthand knowledge of O’Flaherty’s headquarters. And Peter, of course, had some secrets of his own.

And Mick Mercury was… there.

He might bring it up, that they should have been talking to each other more, next time he thought of it. Maybe over dinner, though Peter doubted that would actually happen. He certainly hadn’t cooked anything… perhaps ever, and he hadn’t seen anyone else present try. He knew detectives. They were nutrition tab and takeaway types, and the group was rounded out by himself, who had only ever been destitute or in the lap of luxury and nothing in between, and Mick Mercury, who Peter had witnessed making concoctions that were nothing short of obscene afflictions on Mars itself. A group meal did require that someone know how to make food, and that seemed a slim chance.

It would also require Juno Steel to stop sequestering himself, and that was even slimmer. At first Peter had thought Juno was so set on avoiding him he would let himself starve. Now he wasn’t so sure. The current conclusions were troubling.

Peter Nureyev’s usual move, when someone he was working with and wanted alive was being harmed, was to kill the perpetrator to spare the victim. An unforeseen complication was that in this case the two were looking more and more like the same detective.

And then there were the cyborgs, but cyborgs weren’t complicated. You figured out how to kill them, and then you did it, and then it could be over and Peter could take these last weeks he had left on Mars to work out the rest of it. Really, he’d expected to be past this by now, but one thing distance let him forget was that Juno Steel made things more complicated than they had to be. It could have been simple, really.

If he had let Peter acquire a cybernetic for him there wouldn’t have been any strings attached, but he was so stubborn. Peter had been so sure Juno had run from him because he felt himself being surveyed and surrounded and ensnared, and now he had to reassess, reassess, reassess and he wasn’t supposed to be thinking about Juno, but he couldn’t stop trying to turn Juno around in his head. He was a lion in a cage and he needed something to methodically claw apart, and the motives of Juno Steel were the only thing that wouldn’t yield for him.

“Can you please stop that?” Detective Strong said from the table, and when Mick Mercury didn’t
respond he looked up and saw the words were directed to him, and specifically his left hand.

“Stop…?” he began, then looked at the offending hand, which was twirling a kitchen knife in his fingers, back and forth. “Ah.” He hadn’t remembered picking it up. He had some nervous energy left, it seemed. One more pass, then, and then he would pocket it with everything else. He watched his hand keep going for a moment or two. It helped, to watch himself move in ways that didn’t feel like he was in control of them. It reminded him that Peter Nureyev’s role was limited in his own body.

“Seriously?” Alessandra Strong asked when he made no move to stop. Detectives never could be patient for him. “Am I going to have to take all the knives in the house for you to stop flashing them around every time I try to concentrate?”

“Mm. You can try.” And she would certainly succeed, at least until he stole them all back, but he didn’t have to tell her that. He made a show of pretending he was reading the papers he had taken from downstairs.

Mick Mercury pushed his chair towards the wall. “I think I left something over here, by this very quiet wall,” he said. A wise move, if an overly cautious one. For someone so averse to tension, the company he kept must have been a heavy cross to bear.

“I don’t know what your deal is, but can you at least pretend you’re taking any of this seriously between near-death experiences?” Alessandra Strong asked, pushing herself into a standing position and taking a step or two towards him. “You just show up on Mars with some kind of burner identity and a stolen car-”

“He has a name,” Peter interrupted.

“With the Ruby Seven,” she corrected, exasperated. “Which is a stolen car, and a pretty notorious one, if we’re going into specifics.”

“Oh, strange how that happens,” Peter said, trying not to smirk overtly. “I must remember to thank the previous owner for their horrible security.”

“So you’re just… admitting that you stole the car, now?” She gestured back at the table, “In front of Mick?”

“I know he steals stuff, he keeps taking my nail polish,” Mick said. “That’s the first gateway theft, to stealing a car. I’ve been keeping the rest of it in my…” Mick reached into his pockets, and Peter Nureyev knew they would be empty. He had been very bored, lately, and in the face of boredom boundaries were more like loose guidelines.

Peter turned back to Alessandra Strong, now standing formidable, arms crossed, and considered his options. He wanted to disarm her, confuse her just enough to accidentally start liking him.

“We’re at that point, yes,” Peter said. “Need I remind you that Ruby and I saved you and Juno from mechanical peril just yesterday? Not to say I had no confidence and your and Juno’s detective abilities, but my way was much simpler.” He continued before Alessandra could open her mouth to say something ungrateful. “I’ve done more than a few favors on your behalf since arriving here and asked for nothing in return; it’s not-unreasonable to assume that I’m owed some measure of privacy regarding my,” he tried to think of a word that fell just short enough to be intriguing, “extracurriculars.”

“I don’t owe you anything, actually.” It was more or less the reaction he wanted. “I didn’t ask for
your favors,” she said, and glanced over at her refilled bottle of pills. Peter followed her gaze until she noticed, then made eye contact.

He raised his eyebrows in a silent, knowing question.

“I don’t know what your game is here, but don’t think you’re going to win me over by sneaking around and doing something half-decent when you think no one’s going to notice,” she said, finally. “You can’t go ten minutes without doing something overtly suspicious, and I’m not going to trust you just because Steel does. He’s got some work to do, in the judgment department.”

She clearly wasn’t as good a detective as she looked, if she thought Juno trusted him. “If I wasn’t off doing something half-decent it would have been something entirely neutral, and completely useless, instead.” Peter relished the rigid confusion on her face. “It gets so tedious, waiting around here all hours of the day. Or night, as the case may be. You have to do something to fill the time,” Peter said. “And options have been limited, so I’m falling back on some of my old hobbies.” It was the truth, mostly; he welcomed the distraction. More than that, Alessandra Strong was an asset, or an ally (the definitions were a bit too similar for him to keep them separate, sometimes) and it was inefficient to allow her to function below ideal levels when he could easily remedy that.

Alessandra Strong was not swayed. “You have a stolen car and a glove compartment full of passports. You could be gone by now, if it’s that boring for you. Back to the Outer Rim,” she said, and this was exactly why he didn’t usually spend time with detectives, “or wherever that accent came from. So why aren’t you?”

There was a way to tell a lie that taught the interrogator nothing, and there was a way to tell the truth that took the shape a lie would. “Didn’t Juno tell you?” Peter asked lightly. “I was a teenage revolutionary.”

Alessandra looked him up and down. Peter made himself an achievement in untroubled stillness, a satisfied smile teasing at his mouth.

“So is that all you’re going to do here, is be mysterious and wait until something goes wrong and then run out and try to fix it without telling anyone? You’re just going to keep sitting here hoping we screw up so you can run off and feel useful? Flashy heroics just mean you didn’t prepare well enough. If we are at that point that we need someone to run in and be a hero we have done something very wrong.” He couldn’t interrupt, explain that he knew how to set things up and be patient but Juno didn’t, and was too fond of total sacrifice, and he was going to get himself killed if Peter didn’t stop him. “You don’t get to pretend you’re cleaning up after us when you didn’t do anything to stop us from making a mess of it while you were busy posing and tossing innuendo at your crush.”

He wasn’t especially impressed. She was clearly coming from the exact wrong place; she’d pinned him down wrong.

He had so hoped she wouldn’t. “Anything to add?” he asked Mick when Alessandra Strong finished dressing him down. “Any insults to my character, or unfounded allegations about my motives you’d like me to address?”

“The first time I saw you I thought you were a vampire,” Mick blurted out, and Peter had to admit that he hadn’t expected it to go in that direction.

Alessandra Strong turned to him. “Please not again.”

“No, I should get this off my chest,” Mick said.
“Sure. I was working my way up to a good point about how no one here knows how to collaborate and it’s making all of this unnecessarily inefficient, but fine. Let’s talk about vampires,” Alessandra said.

Mick accepted this as a blessing to proceed. “It’s not like I think you were drinking blood or anything,” he said, turning back to Peter, who tried not to look as bemused as he felt. “It’s just, you know. It was dark out and, I was pretty tired and stressed out and there was the blood, and the teeth, and then you were awake at night and sleeping during the day all the time, and you keep taking all the silver stuff, and, you know so much blood science, and you know, do you ever get where you can’t stop thinking about that kind of thing? I just, kept thinking about it,” he clarified in a ramble that trailed stutteringly to a halt.

“Oh, Mick,” Alessandra said. “Thanks for the input.”

“I don’t think that anymore,” Mick said after another moment of silence.

“I know, Mick,” Alessandra Strong said in the same impatient tone.

“Because… I don’t… believe… in vampires?” Mick said, watching their faces suspiciously for a reaction as he went.

“I know, Mick,” she repeated.

Peter kept his face neutral as possible. “Perfectly reasonable. I would be lying if I said this was the first time someone suspected me of vampiric tendencies,” Peter said. That was a lie. No one had ever accused him of being a vampire before, because he was a human man and vampires did not exist. Even if they did, he certainly didn’t see himself as a vampire type; those were stories of comfort and old money and being an unwilling victim who couldn’t help but leave more unwilling victims in their wake. All of Peter Nureyev’s victims were very willing, if he could help it. He liked making people like him, to want him to have the things he wanted.

As such, he had no rehearsed answer for this situation. but it was amusing to act as though he did, and that was all that mattered in the grand scheme of things.

“It’s not like I believe in vampires,” Mick said, more confident than before. “But I am afraid of them.” Detective Strong sighed, having lost even the semblance of a productive conversation entirely. “And you know. Out of everyone I know, if any of them were gonna have a thing for a vampire, it’d be J.”

Peter leaned in despite himself. “Really,” he asked.

Alessandra Strong twitched her neck and shoulder, hiding it as a stretch. “Okay, this is where I check out,” she said, and stepped back to the table, moving everything a little more than she had to.

“Yeah, sorry, Al.” Mick, for his part, altered his voice to a stage whisper. It wasn’t any quieter than his regular voice, but he was trying. “Yeah, he kind of…” Mick looked at him as if he was confessing something he shouldn’t, and Peter thought he should listen. “He’s got some… I don’t know. I think he needs to feel like the people he gets close to could… stop him, if they needed to. And that they would want to.” he said.

“Please, keep bringing that up in front of me, Mick,” Alessandra Strong said, concentration already broken.

“It’s not an insult, Al,” Mick said in his normal voice, and Peter observed with mild interest. “It’s great, how you’re all tall and muscly and really good at punching stuff and lifting things and opening
jars.”

“Sure. I don’t feel great about how everyone who’s ever been slightly interested in me is a literal
masochist, but that’s something I can deal with on my time, when when we’re done talking about
robots and state-sponsored murder,” Alessandra Strong snapped. “And whatever weird, unhealthy
decades-spanning on-again off-again thing you two,” she gestured at Peter, “have with each other is
none of my business and I really don’t want to hear about it.”

Peter did some quick calculations. He didn’t begrudge Juno a fling, given his own tendency to
default to seduction when things went south, but just to be safe, he thought he might test the waters.
“Oh, it wasn’t decades. Not even a year. We met, oh, eight months back?” And maybe the clue was
too revealing of his previous trips, but he had the feeling Alessandra Strong was too honorable to
throw him to the wolves. “Right around the Kanagawa murder?”

“Eight…” Alessandra looked at him, suspicious. “You’re going to have to be more specific. The
Kanagawas murdering someone isn’t exactly a milestone event.”

“I meant Croesus,” Peter said, letting some satisfaction drip into his voice, and Alessandra raised her
brows.

“Oh, right, he died,” Mick said. “That was a weird week.” He paused. “You think they’re doing
okay?”

Alessandra Strong was letting the chronology of it work itself out, and if he was confident that there
was nothing there before, he was even more so now. “Yeah, Min and Cecil are doing fine, judging
from every stream in the city,” Alessandra answered Mick, shaking her head. “Two damn weeks.
He’s a goddamned mess.” She was staring into space, and Peter congratulated himself on a job well
done. It was nice to have the reassurance.

“Yeah,” Mick said, voice fond and sad. “He is.” He sighed. “And he’s my best friend. Other than
my dad. No offense, Al, you’re up there too.”

“I’ve known you for less than a month, Mick, not everybody runs headfirst into commitments the
moment someone thinks about buying them a drink.” She sent a glare in Peter’s direction.

Nureyev chuckled to himself, both at Alessandra Strong’s blatant misunderstanding of his and
Juno’s… history, and at the imagery of it. Buying a drink. What a concept.

Mick nodded, and turned back to Peter. He hesitated, and Peter stared encouragingly. It was an Earl
Fox move. He had collected an entire reference worth of information that way. “Look, you’re not
trying to…” He started over. “J’s… been through a lot. Some of it was really… bad.” Peter could
relate, he thought. “I don’t want to see him like that again.” Mick shrugged, almost apologetic.

Peter had given Juno the biggest part of his past, and he had taken Juno’s from news reports and
high-security data, but that wasn’t the same as knowing what Juno had been through. All he had of
Juno was what he had seen himself, and every time Mick Mercury gave him another glimpse of his
childhood friend a chilly curiosity ran through him. But there were parts of Juno he did have, that no
one else did.

“I was there when he lost his eye,” Peter said, aloud, confessional, because Juno Steel made him a
miserable fool. Alessandra Strong looked up from her reading, interested. “He was an idiot, several
times over. A brave, noble idiot.” Peter didn’t want to make eye contact anymore. “I don’t want to
see him like that again, either.”
They were quiet.

“So, you are being safe?” Mick asked again, and Peter thought maybe he understood better what he meant this time.

“The safest,” Peter said, in the style of Earl Fox, with sincerity but no depth. “I wouldn’t even let anyone steal his identity.” That wasn’t exactly a lie. More of an ironic joke that might never pay off.

“Good,” Mick said. “Keep that up.” Mick started walking towards the kitchen, then paused. “If I started making some pasta, would you want garlic in it, or…,“

“I’m not a vampire, Mick,” Peter said.

“Who said anything about being a vampire? It seems like you’re really thinking about vampires, huh? Maybe we should talk about that,” Mick said, and measured out some pasta. “Does this look like enough for five?” Peter and Alessandra Strong both shrugged.

“Put in however much you want,,” Alessandra said. “But I really need you to tell me you don’t think vampires are real again.” Peter wondered if she was planning on taking a vacation after this. She seemed as though she needed one. Maybe to one of those aquatic planets. She seemed like she might enjoy a nice, quiet swim.

“There are cyborgs and robots and cryptids out there, and this is a very handsome man with very sharp teeth who I found biting my friend’s neck. It’s irresponsible for me not to think he’s a vampire.” Peter considered this. The logic seemed sound.

“No,” Alessandra said, and Mick turned on the burner on the oven, placing down a pot.

“Far be it from me to criticize a chef,” Peter said after a pause, “But isn’t there supposed to be water in there?”

“I know what I’m doing,” Mick said calmly as the pot began smoking,

“Do… you?” Peter prodded, polite.

“Because it looks like you really don’t,” Alessandra added.

“Give it a minute,” Mick said. Peter picked up his glass of water, just in case, and felt in his pocket for his passports. They were safe. Good.

Reassured that he could guarantee his own safety, Peter watched curiously as Mick used one piece of pasta to transfer the fire from the burner to the rest of it. “What are you doing?” Alessandra asked, disbelieving.


“That’s not going to call the fire department, right?” Alessandra asked.

“It would have to be connected to something to do that,” Peter said, wondering if he could find the severed wires in his pocket quickly enough to punctuate the sentence. Probably not. His pocket storage tended to take on a life of its own; he would remove one item and six more would follow. He briefly considered pulling out the first wire-like thing at hand just to make the point, but if anyone would be able to identify wires at a glance it would be Alessandra Strong, and he would prefer to avoid giving her another reason to think him the shallow lone showman.
“Seven, six,” Mick counted down, and there was the sound of heavy footsteps bounding up the stairs. “He’s earlier than usual,” he observed calmly, fire slowly growing, and Peter leaned forward and watched with interest as Juno ran past himself and Alessandra Strong to the over. “Damn it, Mick,” Juno shouted as he pushed his friend aside and slammed the lid of the pot over the flames, moving it to the over-crowded sink and running the water. He was breathing hard, winded from the short run.

Peter frowned. If he was already winded, Juno wasn’t well. More so than he had suspected, even. He had a brief flash of reaching out an arm to rub circles on Juno’s back as he doused the flames, but he wrenched the image to a halt. Distance. The draining of sand from the hourglass was better than losing the hourglass altogether. He tried to silence the voices in his head who told him to take what he wanted before he lost it forever. Instant gratification would be fleeting (but it would be real, it would happen before it was too late, at least).

“Were you two enjoying watching Mick to burn the goddamn house down?” Juno demanded.

“Still better than the streams,” Alessandra answered with disinterest.

“At worst it would have been an opportunity to redecorate,” Peter added on cheerfully. Juno glanced at him, then dumped all the water into the sink, refilled the pot, slammed it on the stovetop, and grabbed a washcloth and thrust it at Peter.

“Clean up your face, you look, you look ridiculous,” Juno snapped in that voice he had when he didn’t know his own feelings. He avoided Peter’s knowing gaze, turning to Mick instead. “See this, Mick?” Juno asked, turning on the burner. “That’s where the fire’s supposed to be. You want to write that down?”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Mick said, and Peter took the opportunity to drop the unused washcloth in the sink while he searched his pockets for some makeup remover. He located it relatively quickly, and wiped the lower half of his face off. Juno was barking cooking tips at Mick and chopping garlic and cooking and here, Juno was here with them on purpose, making pasta, and it had been unthinkable only moments ago.

Juno’s motions were smooth, practiced. Relaxed, even. It was… different, from how he usually was, even after dealing with unexpected flames.

Peter cocked his head to the side, reappraising Mick Mercury once more. Starting a fire was idiocy, but it was weaponized idiocy.

He added another tally to the genius column. He had certainly earned it.

Chapter End Notes

me, like a week before stolen city: more fic should have chapters where everyone has a spaghetti dinner for no justifiable reason
stolen city: [makes pasta canon to mars]
i have no regrets
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

it's not my fault that they made pasta canon

He knew how to cook. Not like a professional chef did, but like a honed practice, learned in bits and pieces from a decades-long process of trial and error. Peter watched from the countertop, engrossed in the small, practiced motions of Juno’s hands that appeared between the sarcastic narration and pointed insults sent in Mick’s direction.

He should have asked for a meal, one of those times he had ended up in Juno’s apartment. It would have taken some doing to create the right circumstances to rope the surly detective into it, but he hadn’t had much else he cared to waste his excess hours on between Martian artifacts. The days of puzzling would have been worth the sight of Juno Steel, swift and sure, moving quickly and confidently without a single ounce of certain demise on the table. Peter Nureyev couldn’t fathom where this hard-won skill fit in what he knew of Juno’s life. Dark Matters had extensive information on his detective, which Rex Glass had taken advantage of in another lifetime, but even the most invasive surveillance couldn’t give a list of each and every moment in which the detective could have learned how to mince garlic or estimate servings by eye or make water boil.

Living as a momentary flash in the corner of someone else’s eye had always been enough for him, before. Not to say that he wasn’t curious about the parts of other people that he didn’t get to see, but speculating wildly about the rich inner lives of the people he had used and duped and stolen from had always been a game before. The answers had never been important to him. Hypotheses floated readily at the forefront of his mind, and none of them felt wrong, even when all the details but names and faces were fabricated entirely. He told himself other people’s stories whenever his mind didn’t have enough in it to keep itself quiet and unprotesting.

How did Mr. Engstrom gain his fondness for Rangian Street Poker? Well, that’s a bit of a long story-how familiar are you with the shuttle from Mars to Deimos? It’s a long, tiring ride, you know, and without something to keep you occupied it can be difficult to keep composure and, more importantly, your nerve. Angstrom took the trip alone that day, and maybe if he hadn’t…

But then there was Juno Steel, a living conundrum. A lock he couldn’t pick, not because he didn’t have the skill but because it was impossible to find where the mechanism was hidden. Assuming there was a mechanism at all.

“Whatcha thinkin’ about?” Rita asked from somewhere below his shoulder, tilting her head to tap his arm with her forehead before pulling herself onto the counter next to him. She really was very small. It caught him by surprise; he always pictured her only slightly smaller than her voice was.

Peter Nureyev leaned back, and arranged his face into something a bit less natural, careful to keep the tone of his voice thoughtless. “Welding, mostly,” he said.

Rita stopped in her process of wrapping herself around one of his arms and leaning against his shoulder to look up at him, offended. “Welding?” she asked, and he could feel the disbelief in the vibration of her voice against him.
“Mm. Among other things. To be precise, how to break into something that refuses to open. I haven’t tried welding before.” He continued watching Juno, wondering how long he was planning to continue pretending that he couldn’t hear a word of anything to the right of him.

Juno didn’t look up. It was to be expected.

Rita looked between the two of them. “You’re a weird guy, Mr. Fox,” she said, and resumed cuddling into him to watch Juno cook with all the rapt attention she paid to her streams.

He held the left side of his body very still, stiff, even, while Rita rested her head against the highest part of his arm she could reach. He wondered what she was trying to accomplish, what it was she wanted from him, that she would grab pieces of him like that. Physical familiarity was a sign that someone thought he had something they wanted, or that they believed that he was something they wanted. Touch was and had always been for taking, for manipulating, for coveting, and it was an uneasy feeling, to have someone else’s hands on him without his putting them there himself.

“Am I?” Peter asked, distracted.

Detective Strong, from the table, looked away from the group by the stove with a roll of the eyes and back at her notes. “Remember two days ago, when you were pretending to be subtle? I miss that.”

“Subtle about what?” Mick asked, trying to join the conversation.

“My insatiable hunger for human blood,” Peter said before he could stop himself, smiling conspiratorially at Mick with a flash of teeth.

“What,” Juno said long-sufferingly.

Mick tensed his shoulders. “I know vampires are fake, okay?”

”What,” Juno repeated.

“That’s exactly what a vampire would want you to say,” Rita accused, face still against Peter’s arm.

“I mentioned vampires one time,” Mick started.

“One?” Alessandra asked.

“Al, be cool,” Mick complained.

“Al, be cool,” Mick complained.

She raised her eyebrows, gave a small, self-answering headshake, and left Mick Mercury to dangle off a cliff of his own making.

The intricate advancements in the social atmosphere of the house over past week proved too much for Juno, and he continued to publicly admonish his friend instead of catching up. “Mick, we all know you believe in vampires and no one cares. Now can you pay attention? The next step, after everything’s in the pan, is to ask yourself one simple question: is anything on fire? If the answer is yes, you did it wrong,” and he pointed back at the pot on the stove, where everything was bubbling contentedly.

“You don’t have to keep yelling at me about it,” Mick said. “I know how to cook without starting a fire.”

They all looked at him.

“T do!” he said.
Rita lifted her head up slightly, and Peter took the opportunity to shift his arm into a slightly more comfortable position. “You couldn’t even cook when you did start a fire.” Her cheek fell against his arm again just as she finished the sentence, and he halted his movements mid-stretch, the buzzing undercurrent of his brain resuming the study of what she could possibly want, to be so physically familiar with him.

He knew other people didn’t work the way he did, didn’t immediately jump to collect all of the *if*/*then* in every possible interaction, but it still put up his hackles, just the slightest bit.

Alessandra nodded, taking Rita’s comment into consideration. “She’s right. What you did here wasn’t so much cooking as it was arson.”

“Don’t take it personally, Mick, you know how prickly he gets,” Peter said off-handedly.

Juno made a noise Peter hadn’t heard before. Something like the whistling of a broken teapot, or a scorpion’s rattling hiss, and he didn’t know whether he should tend to it or move very far away.

He continued observing. He thought Rita might be trying to fall asleep against his arm, and he preferred not to disturb her; judging from their talk that morning, she hadn’t been able to rest for quite a while, between her machinations and her everyday responsibilities. More than that, he had taken it upon himself to pursue his vested interest in hearing every sound Juno’s mouth could possibly make, and that had been a new one.

“Again,” Alessandra said, muffled by the fact of her hands on her face, “Can we please go back to when you were pretending to be subtle so I can stop devoting my valuable time to trying to figure out whatever *this* is?”

“Time marches ever-onward, Detective, and if we choose to keep our eyes on the comfortable past we miss the glorious present,” Peter said, the words flowing out of his mouth as quickly as he thought them. There was a clatter at the stovetop, and the corners of his eye caught the jerk of Juno’s shoulder and a splash of red jumping from the pot on the stovetop and onto his hand. Juno hissed a curse and raised the back of his hand to his mouth. For a second Peter wondered what Juno would do, if he took his hand effortlessly, mindlessly, and licked the offending spot of red off himself. Alessandra would be frustrated, of course; Rita would thrilled enough to faint on the spot, or else start making that noise from earlier again; Mick would try very hard to be supportive in the only way he seemed to know how, which was, for some reason, inquiring about their sexual health, and Juno would. Well, he would certainly do something. At the very least, he wouldn’t be able to ignore him any longer.

He would be angry, probably. Snatch his hand back like something burned, say something else cutting about how Peter Nureyev didn’t know a thing about him, should have stayed out chasing the stars, that he was a killer, an irredeemable creature designed to draw blood.

“Boss, that’s gross,” Rita commented to Juno mouthed the sauce off of his hand and thrust it under the faucet, the words muffled by her cheek pressing into Peter’s arm.

Juno glared. “Want me to throw some noodles on top, maybe use a fork next time?” For just a moment his eyes met Peter’s, and then they ripped themselves away, and focused on his hand in the running water.

Peter was in the habit of folding people flat and reading them like a gossip magazine. Juno didn’t even bend. Still, he found himself reaching for every possible word for what he had caught in that glance.
Frustrated. Tired. Angry. Jealous? Exhausted. Sad, always. Or, not sad, sad was too basic a word. Melancholy. And, yes, jealous, definitely jealous. Of Rita? Of Peter. Of Rita’s fast comfort. Of all of them. Of everything that was something other than himself. And so, so tired, the kind of tired that made him want to put a blanket around his shoulders and hold it closed around him. Juno Steel would never stop fighting at all the perceived injustice in the world, but maybe he could be persuaded to take a breath between swings.

A hum in his thoughts tried to remind him to stop, to hold himself at arm’s length, to not-care if there was any possible way to avoid it. He had decided a very long time ago not to love anything that didn’t love him back--objects, planets, people. But rules were made to be broken.

And Peter Nureyev’s body was a weapon designed for the express purpose of breaking them.

Mick looked at Juno, brow knitted with worry now he was alone with the stovetop. “Should we clean this off? You know, in case it burns?”

Juno turned to stare at Mick in disbelief. “Didn’t realize you’d become a fire prevention expert in the fifteen minutes since you almost burned the house down, Mick.”

“I learn from my mistakes,” Mick said. Or, lied, judging by the look on Juno’s face.

Alessandra Strong hopped back into the conversation. Really, the detective had to decide whether she wanted to talk or not. “Hey, to be fair, if starting a fire makes you a fire expert in the fifteen minutes since you almost burned the house down, Mick.”

“Nah,” Rita said, without taking even a second to think. “I’ve got him beat.”

Peter took a moment to count. A couple on Brahma, with Mag; one escaping from the only police headquarters he had ever been taken into against his wishes; two minor diversions to aid a hasty exit when taking a priceless diadem and an even more priceless hard drive full of potential blackmail, respectively, not even counting the many security systems he’d tricked with some small, controlled combustion; the list went on. “And me,” Peter said.

“And Juno,” Mick said.

“What happened to it doesn’t count if it’s on a dare?,” Juno asked.

“Okay, J, but what about in sixth grade--” Mick started.

“Don’t. I know what you’re going to say, and, don’t.”

Mick nodded, and Peter tried to reverse-engineer the year and fit it in with what he knew of Mars’ history. He came up blank; he hadn’t thought to focus on Oldtown in any of his research on the planet. He preferred to steal from those who could stand to take the hit. If he was still curious later on, which he certainly would be if Juno was involved, he could probably get the whole story out of Mick later; it was easy enough to grease the hinge of his jaw. Mick Mercury was the rare type who could speak without a single assurance that anyone was listening.

“Am I the weird one here?” Alessandra asked to no one in particular. “Did I miss some important coming of age, the day I learned where fire extinguishers were kept and how to use them?”

“Yeah, probably,” Rita said. “But you turned out okay. You’ve got lots of other talents.”

“Yeah! We can both kick down doors, now--” Mick cut in.
“If they’re antiques, Mick, you can’t just going around trying to kick every door down,” Alessandra corrected.

“Yeah, take it from the expert metal-puncher herself,” Juno said, eyeing her broken hand with an air of superiority.

“Oh, I’m sorry, next time I’ll leave you to die, I guess,” Alessandra shot back.

”Let me have this,” Mick pleaded, and Peter laughed, and in doing so felt a small inner alarm of wrong-ness go off in him.

He was still trying to put his finger on exactly what it was when Juno turned off the burner, filled a bowl with pasta, and thrust it into Mick’s hands while turning to leave. Peter felt Rita stir, then stick out a leg to bar Juno from exiting. “No good, boss,” Rita said. “We’re gonna sit down and eat a spaghetti dinner together if-hey, Mr. Steel, no fair,” she said while Juno pushed her leg back down and continued walking.

“Can I have a fork?” Mick asked Peter from where he leaned against the door, as if his friend fighting his secretary was a normal occurrence. On second thought, it probably was, by now. Peter reached into his pocket for a fork and held it out to him, balancing it between his pointer and middle fingers.

Mick hesitated. “I might get my own,” he said.

“You may have some trouble with that,” Peter said, running a quick mental inventory as Rita thudded off the counter to physically restrain her employer from leaving the room. Juno let out a yelp as she jumped into him.

“Should I be doing something about this playground fight we’re watching?” Alessandra asked from the table.

"No," Juno and Rita said as one. Rita had gotten her arms around his neck and was dangling off of Juno’s shoulders.

“C’mon boss, just one dinner?” she asked.

“Get off of me, Rita,” Juno choked out. “If you strangle me to death because you want me to eat some pasta you’re fired.”

“Who’s gonna fire me, your ghost?” She gasped. “That’s a great idea. Juno Steel Detective Agency, Starring Rita, and Juno Steel is a ghost… Mr. Steel, you gotta sit down and eat dinner so I can write this down.”

“Why,” Juno choked. Alessandra took the small lull in the fighting to stand up and walked around them, careful to avoid any errant movements.

“Can I have some of that?” she asked Mick, pointing at the pot on the stove.

“Yeah, help yourself,” he said, and handed her a bowl.

“Thanks,” Alessandra said, and served herself. “Do you have all the forks?” she asked Peter.

“That’s a personal question,” he answered.

Alessandra sighed while, in the background, Juno walked steadfastly out of the kitchen, Rita
grabbing him by the ankle, wailing out an impressively high-pitched and sustained "Mr. Steeeeeeeeeel," and dragging the table with her by her feet. The resulting noise was unpleasant but not unbearable.

“Do you have enough for everyone?” Alessandra asked.

“I could certainly find some, if that’s what you’re asking,” Peter said.

She shrugged. “You’re washing them.”

“I would, but Mick seems to get so much enjoyment out of it, I wouldn’t want to take that away from him.” Peter rummaged through his pockets and produced four more forks, and Mick reached out to take them. Alessandra intercepted Mick’s wrist and shook her head at him, then turned back to Peter.

“It wasn’t a debate, Fox. You are going to wash them,” she repeated, and Peter rolled his eyes good-naturedly and slid off the counter.

“If you insist,” he said, picking up a washcloth and soap. The only sounds while he worked were the running of water, and Juno in the next room.

“Was your grip always this strong?” Juno yelled, slightly out of breath.

“Maybe your grip is just weak, didja ever think about that?” Rita shouted back.

As their bickering continued, Peter figured out what was wrong about the situation.

This was what relaxed felt like, then, around other people.

That wasn’t supposed to happen. He had to fix that.

But, later. It could wait. For now. Well, he had been running for a very long time. Some degree of comfort had been earned.

Peter fell into trying to remove every trace of fingerprints, his own saliva, fibers from the air, all of it from the metal, because he could only leave one trace of himself anywhere, and that was the name that Juno kept half-locked away. Two dots could make a line, and lines could lead, so he couldn’t leave anything concrete.

“Okay, I get it. You don’t want to have to clean dishes. Fine. Can you please release the hostages before this gets cold?” Alessandra asked.

“You caught me,” Earl Fox said pleasantly, and gave the cutlery a final rinse. Detectives always did assume the worst of him. Sure, he was a criminal and a fugitive, but he was very good at hiding it. And it wasn’t like he was a monster. He had never hurt anyone who hadn’t put themselves in the position to be hurt first. He gave the metal a shake to remove the excess water and held the forks out before Mick and Alessandra; some kind of offering, though he wasn’t sure which.

Mick grabbed a fork with a quick ‘thanks’, even though he’d already been eating spaghetti straight from the pot, by hand and grasping one noodle at a time when he thought they weren’t looking. Alessandra took a fork too, and leaned against the counter while she picked up a bowl. “So, who do you think is gonna win: Juno or Rita?” she asked as she spun herself a forkful.

“Rita,” Peter said without a second’s hesitation, at the same time as Mick said, “Rita, definitely.”

“Yeah, no question,” Alessandra said. “I was going to make it a bet, but,” she took a forkful of pasta,
chewed, swallowed. Her face became thoughtful. “Give me one second,” she said calmly, then walked out to where Rita and Juno were still fighting.

“This is good,” Alessandra accused, disbelieving, and pointing her fork at Juno, who Rita now had around the middle despite his persistent march forward.

“... yeah?” Juno said. “Thanks, always glad to meet a fan?”

“No, you don’t understand,” she said in tones intended for a misbehaving and particularly obtuse child. Peter stepped out to find a better viewing angle. “This tastes like real food.”

“What’d you expect it to taste like, scrap metal, tears, and the physical repercussions of years of neglect in childhood?” Juno asked.

“A little bit, yeah,” she said, her voice angry for want of any other emotion to fit the situation. “This is good food, Juno!”

“Yeah, I know how to cook, it’s not hard, you just take the food and you cook it,” he said.

“Don’t sit there and say it’s not hard,” she said. “It’s very hard.”

“He makes good soup, too,” Rita added. “A couple of years ago I got a cold and he made me some.”

“That was my soup, Rita,” Juno said.

“I know, and you did a great job. Was there tarragon in there?” she said back.

“What the hell is tarragon,” Juno asked, pausing in his attempts to remove Rita’s arms from his abdomen.

“I think it’s a spice?” Mick peered from the kitchen, mouth partially full, to join in.

“An herb, actually,” Peter corrected. Latent knowledge from when he had posed as a chef out on the ISS. He was surprised by the oddly useful details that stuck with him. He didn’t even care for food, really. Not that he disliked it. Eating was a perfectly neutral process, except insofar as it kept him alive. He ate heartily, lustily, even, but at the end of the day food was another chore on a long list that contained plenty of options that were far more appealing.

Meals, however—the proverbial act of communion—were a different story entirely. Sharing the table was a symbolic gesture, and one where he was often the recipient. It was a game, to make someone else’s table his own. Food didn’t taste like much of anything until he was using it to draw someone into a con, a partnership, a bed.

Peter took a forkful of spaghetti.

“It is good, you know,” he said after he swallowed. “You should eat. When you’re done you can return to your cave of solitude, but it seems like your secretary is intent on making it very difficult for you if you choose not to partake with us.”

“You made good food, Steel, you should at least eat it,” Alessandra said. Her voice made it clear that it was a personal affront for Juno to have impressed her.

Juno paused, still trapped in Rita’s grasp. “Yeah, fine,” he said, and finally managed to pull himself out of his secretary’s arms. “What’s the food you eat usually like?” he asked. “Because if you think that’s good-”
“Bad, Steel. It’s bad,” she said.

“Huh,” Rita said.

“‘Huh’ what?” Alessandra asked.

“I dunno,” she said, propelling Juno forward and into the kitchen with two hands on his back. “You just seem all responsible. Like the kind of person who knows how to do things, and doesn’t not-do things.”

“I’m going to stop you right there. It’s not that I don’t know how to cook. I’m just bad at it. There is a difference,” Alessandra said.

“Not really,” Mick said, turning a chair sideways and sitting at one of the heads of the table. He was already nearly done eating. “If you do it and it’s bad it sounds like you don’t know how to do it.”

“You started a fire!” Alessandra said.

Mick opened his mouth to argue, and Peter wondered whether to advocate for the intentionality of the earlier flames. He decided against it; there was something appealing in being the only one following the inner workings of the mind of Mick Mercury.

Peter sat cross-legged on the chair across from Mick, one knee brought to his chest and the other tucked underneath him. There was a definite space between himself and the others; a requisite buffer of negative space separating him, as if he were presiding. He smirked a bit. He knew that it wasn’t the best sign, for them to have instinctually given him a wide radius, but he couldn’t help but feel it as a signifier of his own power.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why I’ve called you all to council today,” Peter said, playing the role of the cold king bored by his own reign. There was power in acknowledging the unacknowledged, to reinterpret their instinctual distance from him as something under his control.

“Because there’s a spy in the court?” Mick asked excitedly practically before Peter finished his sentence.

“What?” Alessandra asked.

“Oh, God no,” Juno said from the stove.

The statement had been meant to cut, but Mick Mercury had inserted himself into it. Peter’s next words flowed out easily, without thought.

“Yes, well, you know I value those who are loyal to me, and I am starting to believe more and more that you,” Peter stared pointedly at Mick, and began spinning together an entire kingdom and history in his head, “aren’t.”

There was a clunk something like a hard-headed detective’s forehead hitting a kitchen cabinet. “I should’ve just left you to try not to die in jail.”

“How could you say that?” Mick asked.

“I don’t regret it,” Juno said darkly.

“Not you, him! I’ve dedicated years to this court!” Mick shouted.

“What is happening,” Alessandra said.
“Wait, wait, wait,” Rita said, too excited to keep her mouth from going. She ran next to Peter on her toes, strands of spaghetti flopping over the sides of her bowl. Her bowl hit the table with the clunk, then her hands followed as she lowered herself so she was eye level with Mick and pointed at him accusingly. “I know you took the diamonds!” she shouted.

“Rita, that’s not even what they were doing,” Juno complained while he scooped pasta into a bowl like the noodles owed him an explanation.

“Every good story has at least one diamond, Mr. Steel!” Rita cried back, breaking character instantly. Still, Peter was inclined to agree with Rita. Precious gems were inherently worthless, but they sold for high prices, and always made the game more interesting.

“Whole lot of bad ones, too,” Juno said into the cabinets.

Alessandra steepled her hands over her face, wearing a look of deep concern. “What is happening right now,” she repeated in Juno’s direction.

“Mick thinks he’s good at improv, he’s just like that, and Rita,” Juno didn’t finish the sentence; the up-and-down bounce of her feet while she followed the back-and-forth illustrated the point well enough.

“Oh. Dinner and a show,” she observed wryly.

“If you two are finished?” Peter asked. Making Juno Steel feel things had been a favorite of his short-lived hobbies, even if that feeling was the constant mounting exasperation he flatly refused to convert to fondness.

Juno stared at some spot on the wall, moving his head in the smallest imitation of a shake. “I’m leaving.”

“No, Mr. Steel, if you leave now this whole operation’s blown,” Rita said, grabbing the arm of his coat before he could escape.

“I hate this,” Juno said, but Rita’s grip back on his arm made him reluctantly sit down in a chair. Rita’s sway was greater than most expected, or even noticed. Peter was gratified by her efforts.

“C’mon, Mr. Steel! Lean in to the characters! Let the spirit take you!” Rita said, fists clenched. “Let the character allow you to chase all the urges you can’t follow yourself!”

Juno stared at her. “Fine. I... filled the room with... nerve toxin. And it’s deadly.”

“And you’ve been spending years building up your immunity to nerve toxin just so you can survive and gloat?” Mick asked, pointing a finger accusingly.

“Nope,” Juno said, and took a too-large forkful of spaghetti.

“Juno,” Mick said, his voice a warning. Peter felt a deep respect for his commitment to the story.

“Some things are worth dying for,” Juno said with a shrug, and Peter Nureyev held himself down, didn’t let himself move, didn’t look down to see the way his chest had cleaved neatly in two, because too much of him was on the other side of a locked door waiting for Juno Steel to die.

That was unhelpful. Inefficient. He pushed Peter Nureyev through to the other side of the same door, the one so close to the place where he had left Juno to be tortured alone, where he had been tortured himself--something he only allowed himself to acknowledge when he woke up in the middle of the
night holding an unreleased scream in his throat—and left him there. He wasn’t sure how Peter
Nureyev had managed to get out in the first place.

His legs unfolded and crossed neatly one over the other. His back straightened, and his shoulders
tilted as he draped an arm over the chair back behind him.

Juno didn’t see the way that he, Mick, and Alessandra were all three looking at him, in horror, in
concern.

Even in this Juno couldn’t try to keep himself alive.

“You’re no fun, Mr. Steel,” Rita said, put out.

“None at all,” Earl Fox agreed, readily and pleasantly through Peter’s mouth. “Should I put an
exclamation point on it? I can fake a very convincing death. I really should have chased the stage,
but you know how it is, life has its own plans regardless of how well you lay your own.”

One good thing about Earl Fox was that he knew how to prattle on without a thought. All of his
words started in his lungs and flowed out until there wasn’t any more air to make them, and the brain
didn’t interfere one bit. Being Earl Fox was low effort, low risk, so when he needed to keep Peter
Nureyev’s life—or, more accurately, Rex Glass’s life, Duke Rose’s life—from interfering with this
one, Earl Fox could behave normally. Wouldn’t even raise an eyebrow.

Well, other than Alessandra Strong’s, but she was just as good a detective as Juno, and not nearly as
easily mislead by wolf wearing another wolf’s clothing.

“Yeah, I really don’t need you to do that,” Detective Strong said.

“Well, if you really want me to,” Earl Fox with a willing sigh, and brought a hand to his throat,
preparing a performance.

“No one wants you to die,” and he could hear the closing of a mouth around an N, followed by an
uneasy pause. “Not yet, anyway,” he muttered into his food.

“Tell me how you really feel, detective,” he said.

Rita made a contained screech of frustration. ”Yeah, maybe tell him how you really feel, boss,” she
said.

“I don’t,” Juno said, and it might have been convincing if the detective wasn’t so resolute about it.
And if he hadn’t so recently allowed himself to be marked and molded by his lips, but if he hadn’t
suspected that the detective felt something he wouldn’t be here trying to seduce him.

Alessandra Strong let her head fall into her hands once more. “Can we please just talk about the
robots. Or, car insurance. Or sit in an awkward, unending silence until we all go our separate ways?
Any of that sound good?”

“All? Any? Or we can, you know, be done dinner and go our separate ways now instead of
waiting?” Juno suggested hopefully. His bowl was still mostly full. It seemed like he was only
willing to take bites when he thought no one was paying attention, and Peter sensed an uneasy truce
among the rest of them to act like they weren’t.

“It’s good pasta, Steel,” she said, and it appeared she hadn’t yet processed her confusion regarding
Juno’s cooking abilities past the anger stage.
“The instructions are on the package, Strong, it’s not hard!”

“You don’t know how good you have it,” she said darkly, and took another forkful of pasta. “So, at the risk of you two going back to whatever it is you’re doing-”

“Nothing,” Juno said, teeth gritted and skin looking ready to burn. If he wanted to, he could reach out and put a hand on the back of Juno’s neck, let his fingers spread out and draw Juno towards him and see how powerful that nothing they were doing was.

If he wanted to.

“Sure didn’t look like nothing, Steel!” Detective Strong said. “So, we’re going to talk about anything else--the weather, your stamp collection, I don’t care--and you’re going to work all of this out on your own time.”

Rita looked ready to jump across the table and shake her. Peter didn’t entirely disagree; Detective Strong was more of an obstacle than he had wanted to deal with. He didn’t need to win her over, but it would have been helpful if she was less averse to the necessary steps in the delicate operation of unraveling Juno Steel and finding the answers he needed.

Mick looked around the table to see if anyone else would speak, then raised his hand. “I asked AI to explain the robots but I didn’t get it and then I didn’t want to ask too many questions,” he said all at once, in a rush.

“Oh, it’s real easy,” Rita said. “Guy was making ethically unsound cybernetic robots, one of them thinks he’s the founder of Hyperion City, and now the robot’s running for mayor and trying to purge the city of anybody who knows, and also regular criminals. And there were cuter robots, that had hats on, but Mr. Steel couldn’t’ve gotten us mixed up with one of them, could he?”

“You’re telling me that the thing you have a problem with right now is that Ramses O’ Flaherty doesn’t wear enough hats for you?” Juno asked.

“I’m just saying, I looked at all those robots and most of them had hats, but you just had to pick the one who didn’t have any hats at all, and that’s the one you let install a surveillance machine in your head. Of all the robots in the world.”

Earl Fox cut in. “Rita, dear, you’re being unfair.” He ate a forkful of pasta, and swallowed it. “There weren’t all that many robots with hats. Four of ten, at a maximum.”

Mick’s brow was furrowed. “Yeah, but how did he… get here? Did he like… escape, or did somebody kidnap him, or is he the real Cyrus Ortega?”

“That’s the part we don’t know, Mick,” Alessandra answered calmly.

“Except that last part, I know for a fact that he isn’t ten thousand years old. Doesn’t look a decade over a thousand,” Juno cracked.

Mick frowned. He had such high hopes, and always ended up disappointed. “How do you not know?”

“I’m not going to pull out a dictionary and read you the definition of ‘mystery’, Mick,” Juno said. “You already learned how not to start a fire today, I don’t want to overwhelm you.”

“Hey, play nice,” Alessandra said. “And it’s a good question. Not the real Cyrus Ortega part, you have to know that makes no sense, but the rest of it. Assuming that our city’s mayoral candidate is
literally a robot: How did he get out of there? Especially with so much of the flesh and skin intact.” Mick Mercury shuddered at the word flesh, and Juno’s mouth twitched. Peter Nureyev’s body, on the other hand, relaxed a bit at the word. He could count himself a fitting ally to someone who was able to discuss blood and viscera at the dinner table.

Rita sighed and flopped back in her chair. “Do you really have to talk about work all the time while I’m on vacation?”

“Yes,” Alessandra said. “I’m working.”

Juno turned to her. “Not a vacation,” he said, as if he had said it many, many times before.

“Okay, but, assuming he is a robot--and we shouldn’t, but I’ll bite--what’s the point of giving him another identity thirty years deep?” Alessandra asked.

“He needed somebody to go out and buy him cigarettes and the robot kept getting carded,” Juno proposed, sarcasm leaking in.

Rita pouted and crossed her arms, and Earl Fox reached across the table and ran a hand up and down her arm. “They’re beyond help, Mr. Fox,” she said gravely. “Couldn’t have a good day if you dragged ‘em to Polaris Park on the back of a dogsled.”

“I know,” he said automatically in the same quiet tone.

“I just wanted to make ‘im talk,” she said, and Earl Fox made a comforting noise or two while the detectives kept at their line of thought.

“Funny,” Detective Strong said. “Anything serious in there? I was thinking, this is his life’s work, but then why would he just save one? But--and again, this is hypothetical—”

“Yeah, you don’t think he’s a robot, we got that, you don’t have to say it every time,” Juno said.

“I don’t want you to think I’m going to go along with any more of your half-baked theories than I already have. Anyway. If he’s a robot, he’s clearly sentient, and has a will strong enough that he... “ she made a face, “‘wants his city back’, and even if that’s programming—”

Juno interrupted her. “He can’t have the city back. He never had it. This city doesn’t belong to anyone. It’s malignant. It owns us, and anyone who gets to close to it gets sucked in.”

“You’re still on that?” Mick asked.

“Yeah, boss, you don’t have to take every opportunity to talk all flowery about how much you hate living here, we all know,” Rita said.

Juno, for his part, looked slightly confused, almost as if he was surprised the words had come out of his mouth. Alessandra went on, unphased.

“Sure, the city’s a Venus fly trap, complete with all the teeth and toxic smog, but it doesn’t own us. Nothing can own a person. We barely own ourselves. We’re a part of this city, but it doesn’t care either way if we’re here or not.” She said it all like the words only had superficial meaning, and maybe to her they did. But he couldn’t help but think about Juno Steel, so dedicated to this place he seemed to hate. “We could all leave right now and the city wouldn’t be able to grab us back.” She shrugged, and ate her last forkful of spaghetti.

Juno only stared, and Peter Nureyev would have given nearly anything to reach into his head the
The contents of Juno Steel’s mind had to empty before him eventually, but until then he slid into the conversation like a snake through a crack in the door. “You’re ignoring the obvious,” he said, keeping his tone light.

“Oh?” Detective Strong asked, unimpressed, but interested. “What’s that?”

“It’s simple,” Earl Fox pushed Peter Nureyev aside again, to explain, “Maxwell liked his faked copy of Ortega. He cared about him. So he took him. He took him selfishly, and made his life much harder than it could have been, but what kind of life would he have had otherwise?”

(Peter Nureyev hadn’t had a father in the strictest sense of the word, but he’d had something very like one once, and his aliases always did. He had a vague idea of how parental feelings might manifest, though he couldn’t imagine feeling them, especially not like the parents of his other selves. They were usually doting types, always long dead of something pedestrian and benign. Hypertension, an accident in a spaceport, sometimes even old age. It felt a little less like the dagger was still clutched in his hand that way.)

“That’s not…” Alessandra paused to attempt a diplomacy that didn’t come, “…helpful.”

“Isn’t it?” Earl Fox asked, rambling on in full force. “People rarely ever frame their own actions as part of some terrible grand plan. Usually,” and he made it very conspicuous, how little he was looking at Juno Steel, “when people see something they like, they try to make it theirs. And if it is already theirs, they keep it with them.”

Juno looked up from where he was resolutely avoiding looking anywhere near him, and caught his eyes, and… still angry. Still sad. Still jealous of the world that didn’t allow him to be swallowed whole.

“And if it doesn’t want to go?”

“You tell me, Juno.” Peter Nureyev said with fake lightness, repeated from across the days.

They locked eyes. Vulnerable, now, that’s what he was, and if he could just push him in the right place he could make every wall crumble down and-

“I walked right into that one,” Alessandra said ruefully. “I knew I should have just taken that missing persons case instead of getting wrapped up in any of this.”

Juno tore his eyes away, and Peter came back to himself. He had almost been there, he had almost found the weakened keystone that kept Juno Steel trapped.

Rita pushed herself onto her knees on her chair and reached as far across the table as she could, barely reaching across the distance it took to pat Alessandra’s hand. “Yeah,” Rita said. “You probably should have.”

“Thanks for the…” Alessandra paused, grabbed Rita’s hand in her own.”Your hands are really soft,” she said, eyebrows furrowed.

“Right?” Juno said. Peter considered it. He supposed they were. More so to Juno, probably, whose hands were rough and scarred and hardened by years of fighting, and Alessanda, who was the type to bring a gun to a knife fight and then throw it aside and use her fists instead.

Mick reached over. “Can I feel?”
“I’m not a piece of meat,” Rita said, slapping Mick’s fingers away from the six inches of space around her wrist.

“Aw,” Mick said. “Okay.”

Alessandra snickered, and Peter smirked, and Juno…

He was very, very still. And he wasn’t taking the opportunity to tease his friend.

“Gears turning, detective?” Peter asked lightly.

“My cybernetic is made with my cells, right?” he asked, so uncomfortable with the very idea. “But Ortega doesn’t have any ten-thousand-year-old cells left, and O’Flaherty doesn’t look that much like him-”

“So now you admit it?” Alessandra asked.

“So where did he… come from? The, the,” he wrinkled his nose, and Peter Nureyev was met with the urge to pull him in for a kiss right there in their mixed company, because he’d already given in twice and these things always did happen in threes, but, patience, restraint, he has to come back first, “the… flesh part.”

Peter pushed his latest desire to kiss Juno Steel aside with all the rest of them, so that it could have like company. That corner of his mind was becoming very crowded; no wonder it was spilling over. He used the cleared space to turn the question over more fully.

“That’s… a pretty interesting question,” Alessandra said. “Oh, that’s eerie,” she said after pausing to think about it more.

He processed and came to a conclusion in less than a second. “Interesting, maybe. Eerie, certainly. And I can see why a detective’s natural curiosity would cause you to preoccupy yourself with these kinds of questions, but as far as thought experiments go, it’s entirely pointless. A scientist could have artificially produced human systems out of anything. Himself. A sibling. An unpaid intern. A hair off the ground. A years-long expedition to locate a shard of Ortega’s original urn and using that to sequence his DNA. it doesn’t matter, we already know the end result. It all shakes out that same in the end. He sets the city on a pathway to dictatorship and overextends the hand of justice, and someone either lets him or stops him. The particulars of his genetics don’t apply.”

“Okay, but, what if he’s made of celebrities?” Rita asked.

“Oh. Then I stand corrected, this is the only interesting question that has been asked all night and possibly ever,” Earl Fox said, all charm and teasing. He stole a glance at Juno.

Troubled. Uncharacteristically quiet, too. Juno Steel had his secrets, but he was terrible at stopping his mouth from sloshing out bits and pieces of them.

He was withholding something. Or planning something. Another pair of handcuffs in his pocket, another gun to his own head.

“Detective, you’re thinking again,” he said, a bit singsong.

“Am I?” Juno asked, distracted.

“Apparently not,” Detective Strong said.
“No, that’s his thinking face,” Mick assured them.

“Let me check,” Rita said, and grabbed his face in both hands. Juno yelped in protest as she yanked him towards her so she could survey him closely.

“Looks more like the face he has when he’s about to start yelling,” Rita observed.

”Rita,” he shouted, slightly muffled. “Let go of my face.”

“All right, you don’t have to get so mad about it,” and she released him.

“You think you know a lady,” Mick said sadly.”I really thought that was his thinking face.”

“You…” Alessandra stopped. She was getting a little better at trying a little less hard to make the group conform to her sense of order as time went on, he noticed. It must have been a difficult change for her to undergo. “Never mind.”

Juno had already drawn back into himself, thinking yet again.

The group fell back into idle conversation. Juno stayed silent, occasionally eating. Peter found himself doing the same, barely tasting it.

Juno wanted to save this city from itself. Peter Nureyev had seen that go wrong one time too many. He himself could handle it. He had done the right thing, back there, of course he had, because it was an impossible choice no one should have ever asked him to make and he made it anyway. Even if he had killed Peter Nureyev to do it, cut away the only things he cared about, the only things that he knew for sure cared about his real self, too.

The detective was one to steal away in the night. The detective was one to try to shoulder everything himself. And the detective, more or less, knew what had to be done by now, he must have seen the cleanest line from point A to point B was a bullet that he didn’t know would hit its mark.

Peter Nureyev and Juno Steel worked well together. Juno Steel, he decided to the sound of his fork scraping mindlessly against the bottom of his empty bowl, would not go back alone to the city that had been so long biding its time in the wait to eat him alive.
The locked and sealed doors in Peter Nureyev’s mind leaked blood and rot, and they rattled with the yells and pounding fists of the people behind them.

As a rule, he kept those doors shut tight. Not because what they hid was too much for him. He had already lived through them all once, after all. No, it was only that when the doors were ajar he fell inside of them. Time slowed and space expanded and he was vividly and entirely in a somewhere-else. All the parts of him that were always alert and thinking and humming in the background of him tangled into the diaphanous net. It was something like dreaming, something he knew wasn’t real anymore but couldn’t pull himself out of, something where:

*juno steel had a face covered in blood, he had been poking around in peter’s brain all (day?) and peter had been doing what he could to help him, nothing had to hurt if he didn’t let himself feel it, if he focused not on the way that everything in him felt like heavy corroding rusted metal in a caustic solution but instead on the spaces between the pain, the very center of the desperate throbbing pressure in his head, the way it would feel to be the dust that was traveling down his throat and slicing at his trachea from the inside, or the cold air that stung his tired raw eyes that had been staring and adjusting light-dark-light-dark for much too long. if he treated his pain like a casual observer it could be bearable, it could be someone else’s, it could belong to duke rose or rex glass or any of them, really, as long as it wasn’t his. but juno steel had a face covered in blood and peter had to be there, had to stay, had to wipe it off while juno made his barely conscious protests that were only a step from intelligible, or maybe juno’s mind had been made to force his way into peter’s for long enough that he was getting a feel for the shape of it, long enough that he knew that if juno had the strength to speak he would tell him not to bother, that miasma looked a lot better through a layer or two of blood anyway, because he was stubborn, because he suffered like it was the only remedy to an ailment duke-rex-peter couldn’t name

and then the sound of metal hitting metal, and something shattering, and the door closed again, as easy as that.

He was sitting one leg tucked under him in a kitchen chair, in front of a table populated by Alessandra Strong and Rita. (he was miles underground in the desert; he was nowhere at all). Behind him, Mick Mercury was rearranging the dishes in the sink and picking up shards of a plate that must have fallen off of his architecturally improbable dish tower.

“Nice! More plates,” Mick said to himself, and dropped the largest pieces back into the sink before turning the water back on.

“Aw, that’s great, we were running low,” Rita shouted to him from where she lounged across the couch.

“I know, right?” Mick asked, yelling more loudly than he needed to over the sound of the water and dishes clattering against each other. Alessandra Strong and Peter, in the center of this optimistic and misguided exchange, met eyes with the least animus they had yet. Juno was gone. The co-occurrence of those two states was unlikely to be a coincidence. Juno had dismissed himself before the dishes were collected, which felt somewhat fitting to the way the detective operated.

Juno didn’t wait for the right pieces to fall before he ran. He didn’t wait for the setup. He ran in and
didn’t care what hit him as it fell, didn’t care what bits and pieces he had carelessly left behind.

Peter reached into his pocket and pulled out a laser cutter, and mindlessly flicked it on and off while he considered.

All Peter ever had to do was wait, watch, and react, simple as that. He was no stranger to it, the stopping and considering and halting the split-second responses for just long enough that he could think, and then execute the snap judgments that had kept him alive until now. Juno was collecting the slow and inevitable momentum that would drag him to an idiotic decision, and he only had to intercept at the right time, and give the precise push that made everything else fall into place.

Except Juno didn’t move to the places he was supposed to. His marks were so clearly labeled; *stand here for the spotlight, and move here when the music starts.* But he refused to cooperate, which forced Peter to improvise, and badly. He had already given Juno several pushes that nearly killed the both of them.

It was insanity, he had heard once on Mars, to attempt the same thing over and over again with different results. Peter Nureyev, who was not from Mars at all, was more familiar with Brahma’s version, which stated that one was more likely to experience different results with each consecutive repetition of the same situation.

He would have liked to believe the latter, but he had dozens of people from nowhere in particular arguing in his head at any given moment, and no mind to pay to archaic idioms.

The knife clicking on and off in his hand asked him if maybe he was grasping for an excuse to have another near-death experience with Juno Steel.

Peter declined to answer it, because the truth of it was, Juno only wanted Peter Nureyev when the both of them avoided a gruesome end together, feeling each other pulsing with the same adrenaline. Juno’s favorite of his false selves was not anything the thief constructed intentionally. The detective’s favored iteration of the thief was the mistake Peter Nureyev didn’t know how to stop making. The person he became when he was something Juno wanted was cloaked in a fog made of blood loss and exhaustion and the driving, vibrant heartbeat of a body caught celebrating its own improbable survival.

Like most imposters who outstayed their welcome, the man behind the clouds was revealed by morning light, but without Peter having seen the transformation himself, it was difficult to know what had changed.

Alternatively, and most likely, nothing had changed. A monster had styled himself a king, but the morning had come and left him still an unfeeling craven beast, this time in a crown.

No matter. Juno was planning on having a near-death experience either way; it was hardly his fault that keeping Juno alive meant they survived together. Even if the other party did all the work of surviving while Peter only wrapped up the final steps, or if he was the reason why Juno was in danger in the first place.

Peter Nureyev bore none of his own illusions; he knew he wasn’t good, that his nobility only went as deep as the names he gave himself. The question was whether or not Peter Nureyev was worth keeping alive, or if he should rip his own name out of himself and leave the sorry syllables, rusted from disuse, behind on some forsaken planet that could disintegrate it to nothing. There was no point in having something valuable if no one was going to use it, and even less in keeping the one relic that could burn through his skin and puncture a hole through his chest in his care.
“You’re doing your knife fixation thing again.”

Peter looked up. Alessandra Strong was studying him once more. She wasn’t one to be distracted by artifice, or to give up on trying to grasp a tricky concept when she found something to grab on to.

“Idle hands,” he said, pushing it all back, and the flash of his knife picked up in tempo. “They’re to be avoided, if I recall the idiom correctly.”

“Is your answer to every problem to stick a blade in it and see what happens?” she asked.

Peter mentally flipped through a scrapbook of his plans gone most awry. ”I’ve also been known to dabble in basic seduction,” he said with a cheerfulness he didn’t feel. “And advanced seduction.”

“Like I said,” Alessandra muttered, more to herself than anything, and Peter couldn’t help but be delighted at the double entendre. Rita must have been similarly caught off-guard, judging by her surprised gasp of a laugh that fell to a lewd chuckle.

“I know my skillset,” Peter said, leaning towards her on his elbows like he was telling a smug secret. Ideally, he would take that moment to reach around her and take something from a shelf just behind her shoulder, or put something in his mouth, or stare with barely-disguised lust, but he was uninterested both in the romantic attentions of Alessandra Strong and in being thrown bodily across the room, so he settled for a suggestive eyebrow raise and left it at that.

“Yeah,” Alessandra said with distaste, glancing towards the basement, “we noticed,” and if she was going to take a moment to think about Juno keening at Peter’s teeth marking his neck, he may as well join her. It was a welcome distraction from trying to foresee the functions of Juno’s impossible, foolhardy mind.

“Yeah! You’re very talented, Mr. Fox. You seduced Mr. Steel, you seduced me--,” Rita started.

“He seduced you?” Alessandra asked.

“That’s a common misunderstanding. I flirted with you. There’s a distinction,” Peter said, almost offended.

Rita shrugged that off. “Whatever. All I’m saying is, Mr. Fox has a natural gift,” she bragged. It was a bit perplexing. He was the one doing the seduction; if anyone should have been bragging it was him, and he didn’t really see it as anything brag-worthy. Anyone could seduce someone, it wasn’t particularly hard.

“Do you think I could seduce someone?” Mick Mercury yell-asked over the sound of water running. Almost anyone could seduce someone. It wasn’t particularly hard for most people.

“I’ve always wanted to try. I think I’d be good at it.” He shook the water off of his hands, then started tugging at his collar. “Is this alluring?” he asked, trying to give a tantalizing glimpse of his collarbone. The shirt was clearly too tight around the neck to be pulled aside, but he was doing his best. Peter observed this shallowly and returned to the Juno in his head, put a finger to Juno’s lips before he could say anything that he didn’t want to hear.

Rita looked at the half-wall that bisected the line of sight between her and Mick Mercury, slight incredulity and disgust in her brow. “... No,” she said definitively.

“You’re not even looking,” Mick complained.
“We’ve all got lots of gifts, Mr. Mercury, but maybe you don’t as much have this one,” Rita said.

“Try revealing your shins more, they’re your most appealing feature,” Peter advised dispassionately. His imagined, remembered fingertips slid up Juno’s stomach. His skin was softer there. It was an expanse of sparse, downy hair broken by the occasional scar.

“Alessandra?” Mick asked, hopefully, tugging his sleeve harder.

“Last time someone tried to seduce me I hauled off and punched the guy,” Alessandra said, dry. “I’ll do it again.”

“Did it work?” Rita asked, eyes wide and interested.

“Punching him?” Alessandra asked. “There’s not a lot to get wrong there.”

“No, the seduction,” Rita clarified. “It always works in the movies, but when I tried it they told me that I was violating our patient-client relationship.” Her brow furrowed. “Do any of you know any good dentists in Midtown?”

“I… Alessandra Strong looked at Rita, sitting demure and cross-legged, all soft fabrics and pink cloth and guileless smile. “What?”

Rita shrugged. “Sometimes things just happen, and then they keep on happening, and then outta nowhere you’re banned from your dentist’s office. Anyway, did it work? How seduced were you, scale of one to ten, one being visceral disgust and ten being swept off your feet, heart beating, irrevocably and uncontrollably lost to the tides of love?”

“A... three, maybe?” she guessed haltingly.” I did tell you I punched him, right?”

“Romantic tension,” Rita answered without a second’s consideration.

“...No,” Detective Strong said. “It was mostly just weird. And he stole a keycard off me while I was distracted,” she added, a surprised, angry afterthought. “I almost forgot that.” She looked at the space ahead of her, distracted, and mumbled to herself, “I should talk to him about that later.”

“I’ve done that trick a few times,” Peter offered. “It takes a certain amount of finesse.”

Alessandra and Rita’s eyes both drifted to a place beyond his shoulder, and before they could say anything Peter had Mick Mercury’s wrist tight in his hand, interrupted in his attempt to pickpocket him.

“A good first try,” Peter assured him.

“How did you do that,” Mick asked incredulously.

“I am a person of many talents,” Peter said. Really, he had just seen Mick’s reflection on the inside of his glasses, but he liked to add to the mystery. Peter grabbed Mick’s other wrist, aiming for his other pocket while Peter was distracted. “Really, you could just ask,” he quipped before bringing his hands lazily over his shoulders and releasing Mick Mercury to steal another day. He wasn’t paying enough attention to feel punitive; he had other, more important things to think about.

“Then the misdirection wouldn’t work,” Mick explained, patient.

“You didn’t do anything,” Rita said.

“You’ll see,” Mick said, as close to ominous as he could get.
“I’d prefer not to.” Alessandra Strong leaned slightly backwards, and scanned the room. “It’s not that I’m surprised that you and Juno are both terrible at seduction, I just can’t believe you both tried.”

“What?” Peter asked, alert at Juno’s name, and he paused his self-indulgent replay.

“I mean. You can look at them for two seconds and know they have no idea how to be alluring on purpose,” she explained. “Look at Mick. Look at what he just did.”

“No,” Peter said. “Juno.”

Alessandra stared at him, something running through that sharp mind of hers.

“Did you…” she stopped. “Juno.”

“Juno?” Peter asked.

“Steel,” she repeated with real anger in her voice.

“Mr. Steel…” Rita asked, several steps behind.

“J?” Mick asked.

"He used your move on me," Detective Strong said angrily, slamming the door on Juno Steel moaning into Peter’s mouth, and Rita began laughing, heartily and instantly.

Someone else’s words were on his tongue the second an imagined Juno Steel wasn’t. "Really?" he asked, snapping the knife in his hand shut and arranging his face into the smugness that was strangely out of reach. He leaned on the strand of self-satisfaction that had suddenly drawn taut in him. There were other feelings pulling him apart in ways he couldn’t rearrange in a way that made sense, but he could stay standing if his pride remained stable enough to put his whole weight on.

*He never returned anywhere, never left fingerprints on anything, never saw the changes he made beyond newspaper stories that couldn’t identify him, only the conspicuous spaces he left behind.*

Rita was still laughing, and in real danger of falling off the couch. “And he… got.. A three?” she gasped out.

“That does seem kind of high,” Mick said.

Detective Strong looked flustered for the first time in his recollection. “I never said my standards were great, okay?” she said. “It’s been a while since I put myself out there.”

Rita fell off the couch.

“Okay, no, this is unfair. He’s here,” Alessandra Strong said, pointing wildly at him, trying to salvage anything.

“Yes, but I’ve already established myself to be mercurial and eccentric.” Peter observed from somewhere within Earl Fox. “Comedy comes from subverting expectations, and I’ve set up no expectations to subvert.”

“Yeah, you have,” Mick said immediately.

“Shhhhh,” Rita said, laughter subsiding. “He likes to be mysterious.”

“What?” Peter asked, calm (not calm at all).
Detective Strong rounded on him like she had been waiting for this, eager to divert attention. “You never do anything embarrassing, or intentionally endearing. Everything you do positions you as an authority or as an inexplicable, mysterious guy with a backstory so complex that it seems like a waste of time to try to look into it.” She said it like she was sharing a mundane list of facts. “Either way, we aren’t supposed to want to ask too many questions. You show up in a notorious stolen car, or hint at five or ten mutually exclusive life stories, or climb out the window when there is a regular, working door right there,” she said, gesturing at the door with principled annoyance, “and that’s normal. But if you were to, for example, find out I was running low on meds because someone doesn’t know how to shut his mouth around an obvious criminal,” she directed this at Mick, “secretly refill them on one of your secret night trips, and then not-say anything about it, that would be suspicious and unexpected.”

Earl Fox laughed. “That is quite a theory from someone who was drawn in by what sounds like a frankly terrible act of temptation,” he said, blinking rapidly and ignoring the sudden inexplicable tingling in his nose and eyes. He made his face flat and arrogant, pushing his chin upwards and feeling his brows relax and rise, and examined his nails as he spoke. “If you weren’t such an excellent detective I would accuse you of a dreadful lack of intuition,” and while he spoke it felt like his throat might be closing on itself and like his eyes wanted to burn.

Alessandra stared, and really, did detectives always have to look at him like he was a puzzle to solve with too many pieces pocketed and slid under the couch when they weren’t looking? He met her eyes, unfeeling and without yield, until she conceded.

His heart was beating so loudly of a sudden. Strange. He took the necessary steps to tame it--slowing his breathing, stretching his shoulders, not thinking about being seen, not thinking about Juno, not thinking about Juno doing what Peter Nureyev would do, not thinking about why that might be or why that might make him feel something so sharp it hurt, why he could see Juno’s eyes looking at him like he was something too precious to reach towards, why the air forcing its way up and down his windpipe felt like a solid object that threatened to choke him.

The way Alessandra looked at him now was familiar. It was odd to be on the receiving end of it. “You’re faking it,” she said with concern and surprise.

“I’m insulted,” he teased, ignoring the slamming against his ribs and spreading his fingertips to rest them on his chest, in mockery, in a monitoring of his own bodily systems. “If I were faking it it would be much more convincing.”

It had been said before. People, especially the clever, the ones who had met people like him before and been badly burned, caught on. That could be navigated. The important thing was not to concede anything until he could make the real indistinguishable from a plausible lie.

“I know what it looks like to pretend there’s nothing to be afraid of,” she said with narrowed eyes.

A heavy weight, that was what it felt like. Weight and suspension and being trapped between two plates of glass with a light shining down on him, and he had to strange urge to run right then, to stop upstairs and take Juno and drag the both of them away from here. He cut time off of each of his carefully crafted plans, quickly and indiscriminately.

“I’m not afraid,” he said, and it rung so true and confident when he heard it in his own ears, tinged with amusement at being misunderstood so utterly. Being afraid implied some degree of permanence that he simply didn’t have. Peter Nureyev hadn’t been entirely real for years. He was ephemeral, and if he was a rock dropped in a pond he had never submerged long enough to see the ripples radiate outwards.
To impact something. To be remembered. To be a person at all. Those were the conditions that would have to exist for Peter Nureyev to be afraid of being caught, of dying, of creating a ruin. It wasn’t fear that made him run from those things, but the rational process of weighing his options and choosing the more preferable.

There were other things to fear, but they required having things other than the self, and Peter Nureyev barely even had that. Or, he had so many that losing one or two was practically meaningless.

“No,” she said. “I didn’t say you were.”

Peter considered her. Unshakably certain of her own correctness, so sure she had come across a crack to probe.

Mick and Rita looked at each other over their heads. “Are you following any of this?” Mick whispered in a voice that was about the same volume as normal speaking.

“No really, but it’s very dramatic,” Rita whispered back, slightly louder.

Earl Fox forced his mouth into a smile, and Alessandra Strong saw what was there and drew back instinctively, almost imperceptibly.

“Yes, yes, cyborgs and death threats and Mick Mercury’s clavicles, it’s all very alarming in equal measure,” he said, breezily, as if he were telling a joke.

“Who are you,” she asked, skipping right over the opportunity to give a light-hearted jab in Mick Mercury’s direction. Whether her question was too pressing or if she wasn’t one to tease over an ill-advised attempt to allure (which seemed probable), she was refusing to follow the conversational path Peter was so carefully designing as they spoke.

Peter tilted his head. “Would you like me to start from birth, or conception?” he asked, already deciding on Earl Fox’s parents’ names and occupations, doing what he could to drown out the undertow. (He tried to return as little as he could. He tried to be something fleeting. He didn’t think he would be remembered when he wasn’t present. In and out and leave no trace. Drop a name, leave marks on skin, empty shelves and then run, and don’t look back, not until they all had enough distance to have forgotten and gone right back to the way they were, before, with half a memory of a man who wasn’t what he said he was and was long gone, that’s what he knew from when he was young and foolish and as Alessandra Strong said, afraid, and he thought he could find home, not necessarily on Brahma but somewhere, but home meant a place that waited for you when you were gone and nothing ever had. It was a place that stood as proof that you were even when no one knew your real name or could agree on what your fake one was. By definition, by lifestyle, he didn’t get to have that, and that had always been bearable).

Alessandra sighed. “Please don’t.”

“It all started on a brisk summer day on Kepler,” Peter began, and Alessandra pressed the place where her palms met her wrists against her eyes.

“All I want to know is, are you here to try to figure all of this out and see this through? Or are you just playing the weirdest possible long game to get in Steel’s pants?” she asked.

“Gross,” Mick said.

“That’s my boss,” Rita complained.
“You are both actively supportive of this,” Alessandra Strong said.

“Yeah, but I don’t say it like that,” Rita explained.

“It looked like they were having a good time,” Mick said with a shrug, and Rita snorted.

“As charmingly as you said it, if you think I’m playing cat-and-mouse to seduce our resident shut-in you’re entirely mistaken,” Peter said. The notion was absurd. He didn’t need to play a long game to get in Juno’s pants; he needed to play a long game to stay in them.

She scrutinized him again. “Fine,” she said. “Then why are you here.”

He smiled, full and false and incandescent. “Detective Strong, you have many abilities befitting your career of choice. One you sadly lack is the ability to accept the answers you’re given.”

Alessandra Strong’s face remained so steady that one could build a home on it. “I’m supposed to accept, what. Cyborgs taking part in the democratic process? A con man, or, thief, or, former teen freedom fighter or whatever, hanging around and pulling his own agenda? Being pulled out of my life headfirst because some lady I met months ago got mixed up in a political scandal that I never even needed to know about?”

“Oh, it wasn’t that much of a life, really,” Peter said flippantly. “You seem to have taken well to the removal from the solitude of your empty apartment.”

“I like my empty apartment just fine,” she said in measured tones.

“I’m sure,” he said. Deliberate provocation could be a useful tool in the distraction of an audience. It was the fastest way to make something more interesting than he was.

Rita sucked in some air, quickly, and leaned forward. Mick Mercury, on the other hand, made a creaking sound deep in his throat and started sidestepping away.

“I gotta go... be somewhere else, now,” Mick said quickly, and backed out of the room, abandoning the dishes to the sink. “Have fun, don’t do any cool robot stuff without me, see you,” he said, walking backwards.

The detective rolled her eyes, somehow made more irritated by Mick’s retreat, but she waited until she heard a door close behind him before she started in on Peter, hushed but offended.

“Did you think that you would find something different, when you broke into my apartment? Did you have a nice long look around in there, at all the things I don’t have because I enlisted when I was a teenager and didn’t get to come back until it was all over? Were you looking for gifts and pictures of a family I don’t have and friends who died, who just died out there when I didn’t? Or maybe,” she continued, not caring much about the control she tried to hold around him, “you’re thinking of the things a person starts collecting when the war is over. Except it turns out that sometimes the people around her keep dying anyway, and she keeps not-dying anyway. Maybe you’re looking for the trash that piles up when you can’t leave the house anymore because if you make it out of bed, which is a long shot, you have to decide whether you’re ready to go outside and have a public breakdown because some billboard ad starts up a little too loud and you can’t stop sitting around feeling sorry for yourself or yelling at your own head to get up and just go.”

She tapped her fingers insistently on the counter, a steady rhythm. She wanted to say something more, but she was stopping herself. The phantom arms that always held Peter Nureyev back gripped tighter and steered his idle thoughts away from those doors he didn’t open.
Rita’s eyes were wide. “I gotta go help Mr. Mercury be somewhere else,” she said, and Alessandra Strong let out an angry laugh. She was glaring now, but her deep, even breathing lifted and dropped her shoulders. Peter leaned back, and observed, until Rita’s oddly loud footsteps faded, then stopped. They sat quietly for a little longer, Peter relaxing a bit with every second she wasn’t trying to know him.

“Getting to the empty-apartment stage was hard,” Detective Strong said, still resentful. But it wasn’t directed at him.

Peter nodded. “May I make a suggestion?”

She eyed him with disdain. “Please,” She said, sarcastic and ready to fight, “Tell me how to manage my literal PTSD. It’s not like I would know, right? Obviously if I have it it’s because I’m doing something wrong, right?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t know anything about that,” Peter said, blatantly ignoring the line of closed doors still rattling in him. “I only mean in terms of rewriting your blank slate. I spend more time than most,” he paused, trying to find the subtlest way to put it, “curating my person.”

“By doing literal identity theft?”

“That would be akin to plagiarism,” Peter said with disgust. “These are all my own work.”

“Caught you,” she said, with a space where triumph could have gone.

“Excellent detective work, I don’t know how you caught me when I’ve been so careful,” he said dismissively. “I only mean to say that the person you are trying to trick yourself into being is far more convincing when you have some props.”

“Mmhmm,” Alessandra said skeptically. “I might not be the most interested in taking that advice from someone whose props include a notorious stolen car, which is, objectively, the worst prop for whatever it is you’re trying to do here.”

“Bringing Ruby into this was unfortunate and inevitable,” Peter said breezily. “You really can’t let him go, can you?”

“I can’t. Because it was unnecessarily reckless. That car is traceable; it’s one of a kind. You put yourself in danger. You put Juno in danger.” She paused. “And Rita, and Mick,” she added like an afterthought, and Peter couldn’t blame her. They both had an air of invulnerability to them, Rita’s from the brilliance she carefully his, and Mick’s from his good-natured obliviousness. It was easy to imagine them in danger and impossible to imagine them hurt.

“And you?” he asked.

“Surviving’s usually not the problem, for me,” she said, dark and sedate.

Peter didn’t have much concern for himself, either. Juno, on the other hand. Covered in scar tissue, the distinct markings telling more stories than Juno had breath to put into words. Juno, who was always bleeding or poisoned or struggling to hold up his own slowly collapsing supports.

“And I seem to remember hearing somewhere that Juno can take care of himself,” Peter said, as if it were a joke.

Alessandra Strong sighed. “Somehow, I feel like I’ve heard that one once or twice myself,” she said to the space ahead of her. “It’s funny,” she said, but she didn’t mean it. “When you see enough
people die for nothing, thinking they’re going to be the one person who changes everything, it stops looking so appealing.”

Hinges creaked down every corridor of him, revealing a small menagerie of failed martyrs.

Mag, who crafted the first of Peter’s false selves so carefully, who must have loved him in spite of (because of?) the way he had used his own two hands to fill Peter’s only conception of himself with beautiful-empty lies, who fell victim to whatever lay under the construct of Peter Nureyev. Miasma, who changed her genetics so she could become a part of something she had no claim to, and misunderstood so deeply that it tore her atom from atom. Peter Nureyev, whose eyes lit up and whose shoulders lost a tension he didn’t know he had every time he gave himself over to the next name in line. Juno, voice so relaxed on the other side of that door, convincing himself simultaneously that this was exactly what he wanted, and that Peter Nureyev could have been what he wanted too. But only as long as the door stayed closed.

Peter slammed every door at once. “Yes, it never looks quite as noble from the outside, does it.”

“No.” She sighed. “He’s going to do something idiotic and keep trying to get killed, and there’s only so much anyone can do to stop him.” She gave him a sardonic, tired look. “Any ideas?”

“Mm. Can’t say I have any,” he lied. He had many ideas. He was adding to and grabbing from his plans more and more with every word that passed between them, because it needed to be solid and foolproof and quick enough that even Juno couldn’t run through it as easily as shattering glass.

It wasn’t that Juno didn’t know what needed to be done. He ran in recklessly, but then he halted and hesitated and let things go too far on the off chance that if he saw what people were capable of, he might be able to forgive himself for what he had to do to stop them.

It seemed tiresome, to have a life so permanent that one had to weigh opportunity and well-being against the possibility of eventual redemption. So much easier to slide the weight off his shoulders like a stained silk garment and exchange it for something clean and new. So much easier to never bother wasting the time it took to trick yourself into believing the marks may wash out, this time.


“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Peter said, automatic. He knew exactly what she meant.

“No,” she said. “I guess you wouldn’t.” She said it resentfully; what she meant, he assumed, was, I guess you’ll make me say it. She rapped her knuckles on the table, a quick, perfunctory one-two, and considered him carefully. “Look. People live here. Can you please just, be discreet?”

“Discreet about what?” Peter asked, smirking. He stood up, leaving his chair dragged out from the table. Detective Strong mindlessly pulled it in with her foot so the back was flush against the table’s edge.

She sighed, and put her face in her hands, and avoided looking at him. “Please. If you keep doing your seduction thing instead of actually being helpful. Can you please, please make it so I don’t have to know about it. Please.”

Peter’s smile widened. “The question isn’t if, Detective Strong, he said liltingly, as he stepped gracefully backwards out of the room. “Good night, Detective.”

“Oh my god,” she muttered to the empty air, and he suppressed a laugh.
thanks for sticking with me through the delay, everyone!
Patience was all well and good, but one could only hold a pose for so long. Figuratively and literally; Peter Nureyev consented to be caught only when he could control wholly the impression he cut.

“Hello, Juno,” Peter said, low and quiet from where he leaned against the window frame. He watched with rebelling fondness as the detective nearly jumped out of his skin and aimed his blaster towards him in one quick, smooth motion, like a cat landing gracelessly on its feet after a long fall.

Peter appraised the barrel aimed towards him with disinterest. “Is that how you greet all of your gentleman callers?” he asked.

Juno swore, and stored the blaster back in the inside pocket of his jacket. “You scared the hell out of me, Nureyev,” he said through his gasping breaths and pounding heartbeats. “Don’t you have something better to do than send me into cardiac arrest?” His arms were crossed around himself. Calming himself down from the scare, but something else. Guilt, maybe. Alone in a bedroom, fully dressed and armed, futilely trying to hide the obvious signs that he was planning on doing something he shouldn’t.

Juno Steel, always placing himself counter to the big, bad world, alone as he could stand.

“Mm…” Peter hummed as he pretended to consider it, aiming his eyes skyward until he reached the end of his deliberations. “No, it seems that my calendar is empty of all more pressing arrangements. I have nothing at all better to do than stay here and antagonize you.”

“Great,” the detective said darkly.

“Isn’t it?” Peter Nureyev asked, meeting sarcasm with false cheer.

Juno stared at him, lit by the dim, polluted outside light, and Peter stared right back, illumination creeping at the edges of his silhouette and in the reflections caught by his glasses and jewelry.

The detective’s shoulders slumped. “What are you doing here, Nureyev?”

“The detective, as always,
lacked the patience and social grace to follow the standard flow of conversation. Peter admired the
directness, as much as he would have enjoyed a more thorough discussion. “Why are you… here.”

One hundred answers branched out in front of Peter Nureyev, and he followed each of them down
their many-forked paths, seeking out some sure pattern in the chaos of it. It was a tactic that rose
more out of habit than anything else. He knew by now it was no use to try to foresee the future
where Juno stood. Every single line of possibility snaked into Juno Steel’s fist, clenched tight to hide
the outcome from Peter’s keen vision, no matter how closely he tried to follow them.

It was a waste of effort and energy to search for hypothetical answers he couldn’t begin to guess, but
as long as they were there he was unable to stop himself from trying to find the one most efficient
throughline. It was a compulsion, a need to always know the best course of action. It was there if he
could only convince Juno to let him see it.

Peter gathered up all the threads that could have led to a correct path and decisively closed a pair of
scissors through the wild tangle. He watched every possible end and answer between himself and
Juno Steel unravel and twist into filaments as he sunk into the calm that could only happen when a
plan had fallen apart entirely and all of the rules were gone, save for one: win, or find a way to lose
on his own terms.

“Come over here, Juno,” Peter said, and slid out of Juno’s sight, outside the window, his back
pressed safely against the building’s smooth exterior. He waved a hand to the sill, an overly-courtly
invitation to join him. “There’s room for two.”

“I think I’m fine in here, thanks,” Juno said, but Peter heard his footsteps, then saw out of the corner
of his eye a pair of elbows appearing at the sill, followed by a pair of shoulders and a head peering
warily outwards. Juno eyed the place where Peter crouched precariously on the narrow ledge,
turning his whole head to see him, then shuddered and turned away again, letting his mostly-dead
cybernetic eye block out the image. The detective had too little faith in him if he could even doubt his
demonstrably excellent sense of self-preservation.

There was no need for concern. While the adornment jutting out at the house’s second story wasn’t
what one would describe as roomy, it provided ample space for a master thief, especially one that
had perched for hours in spaces far more cramped than this one. He was most comfortable when he
was just a little bit uncomfortable. It kept him… singular. And focused. From beside him, Peter
watched Juno reflect light and pool shadow on his skin, radiating by doing nothing more than
standing there, restless but unmoving.

“So, what. Are we stargazing now? Are you gonna give me a virtual tour of space from the safety of
the window, maybe take a minute to really point out every place we - ” Juno started, then paused,
guilty.

Peter stared straight ahead, eyes on Mars’ two moons, looming jagged and irregular. It was rare that
he saw them both in the same sky, and he took it in, the same way he took in every sight he might
never see again, a list that consisted of each and every scene he had ever encountered in his transient
existence.

“Every place we what, Juno?” Peter asked without looking at him. Juno opened his mouth, then
closed it again.

“Nothing,” Juno said. “It was,” but Peter hadn’t been done, and he continued speaking as if Juno
hadn’t said a word.

“Every star and moon and planet that we could be, right now? Every beautiful place I would have
taken you if you had chosen to stay?” Peter asked. “Every place Duke and Dahlia Rose could be ‘conning the whole damn planet’, as it were?”

The detective started at that, and Peter could somehow feel him swallow as a light breeze passed, threatening to whip itself into a dust storm.

“I… yeah,” Juno said, aiming his voice at the ground below them, and Peter exhaled through his nose, and his chest felt emptier for the lack of air. “Probably too much light pollution for much of a tour, anyway. Can’t see a damn thing out there,” Juno said with a cadence that was too melancholy to be the grumble required.

“Perhaps, with your vision alone,” Peter conceded, deciding to leave the way it is now unsaid. “Though if you have any interest in following the movement of the planets, a clear view is unnecessary. Did you know you were passing Venus tonight?” He had memorized too many star charts not to have an exacting understanding of how each planet hurtled itself through the void. “I considered taking you there first,” he said, and next to him Juno shifted and dug his nails into the place where his neck joined his back, “I ultimately decided against it, for being not enough unlike Mars to distract you from the memory of it.” His words came out as if he were describing some mildly entertaining gossip, but from inside himself Peter could feel the longing in it, and he didn’t know whether he wanted Juno to hear the sounds of wanting or not. “That was my mistake, when I left Brahma. I kept trying to find a place like New Kinshasa.” He hated how little he said the name, how wrong it felt in his mouth now. “Of course it was all beautiful, unspeakably, indescribably so, but none of them were right. They were sad imitations, I thought. It was… foolish, of me.” Peter tilted his head a bit, so he could see Juno better without turning towards him. “Ultimately, I decided Venus would be best after a year, between Gliese and Io. I thought that might be when you were ready to see something familiar again.”

Juno’s face went through a series of changes so fast that a lesser man than Peter would barely follow, ending with the detective rubbing hard at his temples with wide, open hands, like he was trying to cover his eyes and pull his hair out. There was something heavy in the movement, and a phantom hand placed itself over Peter’s sternum and held him pinned to the wall even as his arms argued and begged to reach out.

“What are you trying to do, Nureyev?” Juno asked, voice pulled tight, not really wanting an answer. “Make me feel bad? Because I’m already there, Nureyev, every time I look out there I think, you could be there, Steel, you could have been out there but you screwed it all up, and then I’ll look around the city and everything I see is, You idiot, you could’ve been gone, you could’ve left it all behind this time, this place doesn’t need you, it’s better off with you gone, you and Rex Glass walked down these seedy side streets and you could’ve had it all back, and I already couldn’t take it before you came back, Nureyev, so I have the guilt taken care of, okay? I’m blowing you out of the damn water there,” and his voice edged towards hysteria, eyes wide and focused on the palms in front of his face like they had answers written on them.

Peter felt half his mouth smile, sadly. Juno Steel only made grand emotional admissions when he thought certain death was imminent. “You’re far too much a glutton for punishment,” Peter said trying to infect his words with no emotion at all. “I have no intention to share a plan created with so much artistry with someone proven unable to appreciate it.”

Peter silently mapped the convoluted journey as well as he could on the sky in front of him. He had, intentionally or not, sworn off all the places he had imagined taking Juno Steel. This didn’t leave him with many places to go. So much of the universe left unexplored because he had thought, only once, about what a place might look like if he were not alone.
He snuck a look at Juno, who looked at the sky like maybe he could make it crash right into him if he tried hard enough.

The inside of his ribcage didn’t feel empty so much as it felt as though cage were all there was of it.

“You haven’t told me why you left,” Peter said, looking back to the pinprick of light that would become Venus if he ever came close enough to let it.

Juno inhaled a shaky breath, and his mouth made a series of shapes with no sound. Peter watched patiently, but without sympathy.

Juno gave up, clasping his hands together tight and burying his face in his elbows. “Don’t. Not tonight,” he pleaded, muffled into his sleeves.

“I would hope that after all this time you have a more compelling answer than that,” Peter said lightly, feeling too many emotions in equal measure all at once trying to break into him. “Allow me to get you started. When you woke up, what horrified you first? That I had convinced you to fake a marriage, gotten you into an unfamiliar suit sized perfectly for you for the second time in as many days, then convinced you to steal a car? Did you remember Christopher Morales, and how he could have stolen that pill long before you got your hands on it if he had really wanted to keep you from taking it? Or was it when Rex Glass—,” Peter paused. “No, you liked Rex Glass well enough.” It was an odd feeling, to be jealous of one of his other selves. Not to say he wasn’t used to it. They all had fuller lives than he ever could. “Was it that you woke up in bed with a thief and having no idea how you got there, except that he must have pulled every string he could to catch you there, regardless of whether that put you directly in harm’s way? Or had you already seen enough on your little trips into my memory to decide that I was irredeemable, but you would give yourself one night nonetheless?”

The last of his words felt just as bitter churning in the air as they had every time he had thought some variation of the sentiment since he had woken up alone in Hyperion City, on the first day in a very long time he had expected not to.

He was so preoccupied with trying to exorcise the parts of him that noticed the metallic, caustic taste of the words still on his tongue that Juno’s next words didn’t quite enter his ears at first.

“What?” Peter asked, not sure if he’d misheard.

“I didn’t wake up, Nureyev,” Juno repeated, a desperate sadness in the words, as if he were trapped on one side of a plane of glass trying to convey a message of dire importance that he didn’t know how to translate. “I didn’t fall asleep. I… don’t sleep, a lot. Don’t know if you noticed.” Juno’s gaze was resolutely trained down and away from Peter, like it always was when he was saying anything he meant fully, like any communication beyond the sound of the words themselves was too much for him. “I… Watched you sleep for a while. A damn long time, actually. I didn’t…” he covered his eyes with one hand, then pulled it down his face like he could take his skin off with it. “Didn’t want to miss anything,” Juno muttered, and pushed the flat of his hand against the stubble at his jaw in hard, unrelenting circles.

It was always such a straightforward process to feel nothing at all. He only had to make himself dead and empty and devoid of feeling, make space for someone new inside of his lungs and then refuse to let anyone else in.

Peter Nureyev crouched, an unwelcome visitor in his own body, impartial enough to continue arguing against himself in their small debate.
“Well, that far from disproves my theory,” Peter said, suddenly animated and gesturing and entirely hollow. “I made you watch me kill my father, twice. I demanded you,” he dropped the very smallest of pauses against his own will. He recovered after a half-heartbeat and hoped the silence was short enough that Juno could have imagined it wasn’t there at all, “care for me in the same way I care for you, and I didn’t let you stop to wonder why,” Peter said. “If it all moved quickly enough, you wouldn’t have the time to change your mind, or remember that I was so very quick to kill the only person I’ve ever had. I’m very good at manipulating people, Juno,” and only a moment ago Peter had thought emotionlessness was easy, but suddenly it was the hardest feeling there was.

“Will you shut up?” Juno asked, strained, and Peter almost expected him to say, Did you hear that? and then Peter would hear it, and the two of them would duck for cover together and be two people in one pile, hearts beating close and frantic, and-

But Juno was looking right at him. “You didn’t manipulate me,” he said, volleying Nureyev’s own words towards him with disbelief and frustration. “I know what that looks like.” A sad, rueful laugh shook his chest.

“I think I might’ve manipulated myself, a little,” he added after a pause. “Into thinking I could…”

He didn’t say anything else, only stared intently at the nothing in the palms of his open hands.

“You could what? Run off with a man who would as soon kill you as keep you, judging by the snippets of his own recollection he handed over so proudly?” Peter asked, mouth full of venom, eyes daring Juno to look at him and tell him he was wrong.

It was a surprise, that he did look at Peter, at first baffled, then searching. Peter didn’t know how he had ever been safely unaware of the unrelenting inward pull of Juno’s gaze. Maybe, some sentimental and poetic part of him treacherously suggested, he had felt it all his life but never been able to give it a name before he stepped into Juno Steel’s office.

“Nureyev, do you know how much I wish I could have done what you did?” Peter blinked. Juno Steel didn’t have a father to kill, he knew that much.

He didn’t have family at all, anymore. “Do you know how different it all would be, if I’d just…” Juno stopped, furrowing his brow and looking away again. “If I were the kind of person, who could… do that,” he tried again, agitated.

Peter internally summoned a long forgotten memory of reading a pair of hastily-written obituaries, published in a local paper of little renown, in a Dark Matters chartered car.

“You saved a whole damn city, Nureyev. You’re…” Juno sighed. “And I’m,” He gestured at himself as though that had meaning, then sighed, and pulled at a fistful of hair at his temples. “I’m too damn tired of being the last thing people see before they die to know how to get anything right.”

The stars and moons never looked more like pairs of eyes passing judgment on them both, and finding them lacking.

“It gets easier,” Peter said. “You can tell yourself, it was what I had to do, and choose not to feel a thing.” He had a flash of being cold and alone and not knowing where to go next except away, the same cycle repeating itself until he didn’t feel cold and he didn’t feel alone and he didn’t feel anything, anything at all, “You choose not to feel it, and you continue choosing not to feel it every second of every day. The ghosts come every night to shove remorse down your throat, and every night you tell them they must be mistaken and turn them away. You keep waiting for the weight of all you’ve done to hit you, but one day you wake up and realize it isn’t a choice anymore. Maybe it
never was.” His voice became more and more pleasant as he spoke, more disconnected from the topic at hand.

“I...” Peter could feel what it might be like to be words trapped in Juno Steel’s throat, dropped quietly and softly, like they were plates of glass that could break into shards on the way out of his mouth. “Nureyev,” Juno said, as if he knew he could make Peter feel everything all at once even when he had finally given up on ever feeling anything again.

“That is, of course, barring the possibility that everyone who has fallen to our collective misdeeds was immortal all along, marking the both of us forever free from sin,” he said breezily, retreating while he still had life and limb, and Juno let out his sad, one-syllable laugh.

“Sounds kind of nice,” he said, and tapped his knuckles against the windowsill twice. “Would dig up a few more enemies than I really need right now, though.”

“I personally welcome the challenge,” Peter said.

“Yeah,” Juno said with a voice surprised to be allowed to speak at all. “You would.”

It was the two of them, and the moons, and the stars, and the wind, and the harshness of the city lights. It wasn’t quiet; Hyperion City and everything around it was always buzzing, like the barely-noticeable drone of a lamp left on. It was a distraction only until it became familiar, and then it even became comforting, a much-needed reminder of the city’s strange consistency even in its constant change.

“Juno?” Peter asked, Juno’s name landing between them like a handful of coins on a wooden table.

“Hm?” Juno acknowledged. Not guarded, not as much as he had been.

He will leave again if you get too close, Peter warned himself, but warnings were to be considered, not heeded.

“Tell me why you didn’t stay.”

There was wind, on Mars. Nearly always. A current that carried dust on its shoulders and tried to touch every part of you it could reach. A current that tried to whisper you a warning from miles off that you could never quite hear, no matter how much your ears strained for it.

“You already know, Nureyev,” Juno said. “I said it a long time ago. You,” he stopped, like the right words just weren’t in him, and his voice plummeted in volume. “You’re a gift I don’t deserve. I,” but Peter didn’t let him finish.

“That’s not good enough, Juno,” he said, firm. It was the closest he had let himself get to angry.

“You didn’t say anything. You left me there, alone.”

“You’ve been alone before,” Juno said with the indelicate cruelness he brandished so often.

“I was alone because I chose it. And then I chose you,” Peter said, feeling something thick and unfamiliar in his throat, “and you left without a word.”

The wind, again.

“I didn’t... want to,” Juno said, hushed.

“No one was making you,” Peter said evenly. “So you must have wanted to.”
“It’s more complicated than that, Nureyev,” Juno said, frustrated with Peter, or himself, or both, or neither.

“You either wanted to stay or you didn’t. You left. Why,” Peter demanded, his voice still disconnected from the words.

Juno stopped.

The detective had a beauty to him, a rough-hewn elegance in his bone structure, and a sorrow in his eyes that looked so frustratingly, inaccessibly familiar. Peter Nureyev couldn’t imagine how anyone could be anything less than utterly covetous of Juno Steel, especially now, tragically torn in two and brushed by fingers of celestial light.

“You know what the worst part is?” Juno asked, voice breaking the way it did so often. “I don’t know.”

Peter studied him, Juno’s sad, overwhelmed cringe taking over his whole body.

“It’s a start,” he said after a long pause.

At least it was true. Or, he could believe that Juno Steel didn’t know that he knew exactly why he left Peter Nureyev alone without a warning, without a word. He was an excellent detective, but that meant he was just as good at keeping secrets as he was finding them. An unstoppable force and immovable object where the two were one and the same.

Peter and Juno looked out at the stars together, silent, separate, and he wondered if this sky looked any different through the eye of one who had never seen another.

“Juno?” Peter didn’t wait for him to answer. “You’re leaving tonight.”

Juno didn’t respond, and that, combined with Juno Steel’s persistent habit of only telling the truth when he thought he would never get a chance to reckon with it, was enough of an answer.

“Juno.”

“What else am I supposed to do? Sit here and wait for a plan? Let all of you get in the way? Let Rita or Mick get in the way?” He asked. “Do you want me to be the one who gets Cockroach Strong killed?”

“Cockroach Strong?” Peter asked, brows furrowed in surprise.

“It’s a nickname. It’s a positive thing,” Juno clarified. “She’s unkillable. And I’m not going to be the one to break that streak.”

Peter frowned as his many conversations with Alessandra fell into context. Somehow, that she was publicly lauded for survival made everything else seem… worse. He didn’t know how. He would consider it more later, if he was bored.

“What do you intend to do alone, Juno?” Peter asked. “Even at your best I doubt you could take down a political conspiracy on your own, and you are not at your best. Your eye is broken and your memory is failing you and your body is sore and hurt and you never sleep or eat, and you are walking into battle as though you expect to be a warrior succeeded.”

Juno sighed, aggravated. “I know about a thousand six-legged mechanics who can get this thing fixed,” he said. “So I’ll fix it. I’m not a great detective, but at least I’m still a damn good shot,
whether I know what I’m shooting at or not.”

Peter frowned at the contradiction. “I thought you were tired of the killing.”

Juno drew back. “I’m not going to kill him,” he said, as if there were any other possible interpretation of what he had said before. “I’m going to expose him. The police already hate him; if he’s not a person his assets will be temporarily seized while the court assesses his sentience because this city can’t step into the right century with everybody else. But that also means he can’t skip town or hire anyone to kill the whole city while we’re waiting for our subpar justice system to do its job for once.”

Peter raised his eyebrows. “That is… idiotic,” he critiqued.

Juno made a noise of disgust. “It’s just an excuse to disenfranchise artificial intelligences the way they disenfranchise everyone else, it’s not like they’re ignoring the obvious ethical argument for considering artificial intelligence as having personhood because they’re misinterpreting the evidence,” he said.

“I meant you, Detective,” Peter clarified.

Juno scowled. “It’s not a great plan, but we’re running out of time,” Juno snapped. “We have to do something before I tear my skin off in here.”

“You’re running out of time,” Peter corrected. “You want to be able to move without anyone getting in the way of your foolish obsession with self-sacrifice.”

Juno’s scowl deepened. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know you had a better idea.”

“I do, actually,” Peter said. “You don’t do it alone, and make us all rush in to save you from yourself.”

“I didn’t ask for your critique, Nureyev!” Juno said.

“You explicitly did, yes,” Peter replied.

Juno made a noise of frustration. “I know what I’m doing, okay? I’ll take care of it.”

Peter sighed. “No, I don’t think you do,” he said, thinking of all the files he read over Rita’s shoulder, that he had grabbed from Alessandra’s tablet, that he had read off the floor where Juno left them or read off the wall he wrote on with no thought to how easily the writing would be traced back to them.

“Yeah, well, at least I’m doing something!” he said, and tapped his fist on the windowsill.

“I’ll follow you, if you go,” Peter said. “My car will fare better than any vehicle you may find if it comes to a chase.”

“Not your car,” Juno said automatically.

“Agree to disagree,” Peter said back, and Juno’s scowl deepened, then became self-concious, even shifty.

Juno sighed. “Fine. Let’s just… drop it then. You’ll… follow me out, I guess. I don’t have to like it.”

“Your trick of leaving me asleep will not work again, detective,” Peter said, predicting Juno’s thoughts.
Juno sighed again. “Guess not,” he said, and Peter felt a twinge of annoyance at the way the words had the sound of a lie. “You wanna come inside? We can... talk about it.”

“No yet,” Peter said, though his legs were starting to feel little static pinpricks. “Any change of mind about joining me out here? It’s a lovely night.”

Juno leaned out the window. “Once you get past the layer of smog, yeah.”

Peter exhaled, too languid with the realization that Juno Steel would never protect himself to bother projecting a well-rehearsed chuckle. “Always the romantic.”

“Yeah, you got me,” Juno said roughly, and Peter heard him rest his elbows on the window pane. They both said nothing. Peter waited.

He wanted the weight of watching the stars to seal his feet in place like concrete, holding stillness through every tremor that wanted to thrum in his muscles.

“I won’t let you go alone, you know,” Peter repeated.

“You’re just gonna make it all harder, Nureyev,” Juno said.

“Or maybe you’ll hear a knock on your door and Death will finally be there for a long-overdue appointment, Juno! And then you will leave the rest of us behind, and alone.” The last part was, of course, a lie. Juno was the only one of them whose fragility felt urgent. “There’s no point in you going if you don’t even manage to do what you came for, if all you do is make a man with incredible political power and wealth angry enough to try to take a posthumous revenge.”

“I…” Juno said, but Peter didn’t let him finish.

“Don’t leave without me, Juno. Promise me.”

“I don’t have a choice,” Juno said.

“Then it doesn’t matter whether you promise or not, does it?” Peter retorted, feeling his frustration build.

Juno looked at him oddly for a long moment, then shrugged. “Okay. Yeah,” he said. The detective was so certain he could fool Peter into false security.

“Promise me, Juno,” he repeated, and reached in through the window to tilt Juno’s chin up towards him. Juno’s hands rose to clasp Peter’s wrists automatically, and the way the detective looked at him was enough to make him feel like one person pinned to one place, just one whole thing and nothing more or less.

“Okay,” Juno said, softly enough that Peter had to lean in to hear it. He didn’t meet Peter’s eyes. “I... I promise.” His eyes dropped to Peter’s lips, then back to his eyes, and they both searched each other for permission for what would inevitably come next, if their history could tell them anything of their future.

“Good,” Peter said with an odd finality, studying Juno’s face for traces of artifice.

He hid himself so poorly.

“And to seal the vow?” Peter asked, and traced a thumb over Juno’s lower lip, watched him lean into
the touch as his lips barely parted.

“Your choice,” Juno said after a long pause, and Peter could feel the shaking tension running through the detective’s body. He knew Peter’s preference exactly; there was no need for him to ask for it, but he certainly appreciated that he had.

Peter leaned down, beginning to pull himself through the window, and brought Juno’s lips to his.

He was again pleasantly surprised by how much he had missed them, for having had such little firsthand experience. It was the way Juno began to fall apart the second the two of them touched, the melting of the false iron the detective hid himself under, Peter thought as they slowly separated and examined each other again, too afraid of the other changing their mind to take the chance.

Neither of them changed their mind, and he moved one of his hands to Juno’s hair and leaned forward, striving for a better angle for wholly possessing Juno Steel, encouraged and guided by the moans rising from Juno’s throat. It was helpful to have immediate feedback in times like this.

Peter wrapped one long leg around Juno’s waist, so much sturdier and surer than his own, and pulled him closer. Juno’s hand found his thigh and traveled the length of it before gripping beneath, holding him in place, and then did the same with Peter’s other thigh. Peter, for his part, complied, catching Juno Steel between his legs while Juno hoisted him up, and Peter thrilled at the unnecessary display of strength. He folded over to kiss his mouth, his ears, the space at the corner of his jaw, not quite the right size or shape to meet him, but enthusiastic enough to find a way to make it work.

Juno took a step backwards, and Peter shifted his weight forward, away from the wall behind him. He would have liked very much to be pressed against that wall, but he had other plans for the night that could not proceed while he was bending himself into impossible configurations. Juno stumbled backwards with the unexpected change in balance, Peter feeling when the back of his Juno’s knees connected with the bed and he collapsed into the mattress. Peter curled on top of him, holding him in place flattened into the bed.

“What do you want, Juno?” he asked breathlessly.

“Do whatever you want,” Juno choked out while one of Peter’s hands slipped under his shirt and traced the scars and soft skin on his stomach, traveling ever-upwards.

“Those are dangerous words, detective,” Peter purred into Juno’s ear, and Peter marveled at how Juno was helpless to do anything but let Peter straddle him, and lean down and kiss his jaw, behind his ear, his neck. He watched with pride the way he made Juno Steel struggle to remember how to use his mouth for something other than touching skin, even as he acknowledged that Juno was again refusing to give him an answer. “So, I ask again: what do you want me to do to you?”

Juno struggled to form words. It might have been unhelpful of Peter to gently run his well-manicured nails back and forth over the bare skin of Juno’s sides, but there was no way to know for sure; the low sound filtering out from deep in the detective’s throat could have been caused by anything at all, and Peter certainly wasn’t the one to say what.

“Whatever you want,” Juno repeated, when he caught his breath again. “Just get me out of my head, Nureyev,” and it was louder than it should have been, and his eyes were hungry and desperate and Peter Nureyev could not read minds, but he didn’t need to, because Juno Steel wanted a hurt that would match the one he felt everywhere else, of course he did, he had known that from the first, hadn’t he?

“If that’s what you want,” Peter said, drawing Juno’s body up along the bed, running a hand up his
torso to shift Juno’s head towards the pillows at the top of the bed. This was impeded slightly by
Juno’s insistence in pulling at his shirt and actively participating in his own slow seduction, but Peter
suddenly found himself patient.

He aimlessly entangled himself in Juno Steel for as long as he felt he could, reveling in how much
power he had to make the detective want like this. He let his lips brush over Juno’s throat and felt the
detective turn limp with a sigh, and he muttered every epithet he had ever given the detective into his
skin while he slowly, deliberately drew Juno where Peter wanted him. Juno melted at the mere
suggestion of his teeth at his pulse, and Peter was more than happy to dissolve him to nothing, into a
senseless creature that could be moved into whatever arrangement he so desired. He wrapped his
legs around Juno’s legs, and his arms around Juno’s torso, and ran the very tip of his tongue over
Juno’s bared neck before sucking a mark just below the corner of his ear.

Then Peter pulled his head away, impressed by his handiwork, and waited for Juno to come back to
what he might have left of his senses. It was only a moment of Peter’s hot breath landing against his
collarbone before Juno blinked his eyes open and twisted his head around to look at Nureyev,
confused and still half in a trance.

“Nureyev,” Juno asked, quickly assembling the scene in which Peter’s arms and legs restrained him
from behind. “What are you doing.”

“Tell me why you left, Juno,” Peter asked into Juno’s ear, tightening his arms against Juno so his
own chest was flush against Juno’s back.

“... what?” He turned quickly, suddenly panicked, and Peter kept his grip clamped tight as Juno
pulled against him.

“I’m afraid you won’t be getting out that easily,” Peter said, calm and measured.

“Christ, Nureyev, can this wait?” Juno’s voice threatened breaking again. “We were in the middle of
something there.”

“No,” Peter said. “It can’t. You only let me close enough to touch you when you want to be hurt,”
and he mouthed at the space next to Juno’s shoulder before he knew he was doing it. “Tell me why,”
he asked over the sound of Juno’s involuntary sigh.

Juno groaned in frustration. “Can we at least switch positions or something?”

Peter ignored the request. “Juno Steel. I gave you a gift held by no one else living, twice over, and
you gave nothing in return. The one thing I ask you for, the only thing I want, is to know why you
left.”

“I told you!” Juno strained against him, but Peter held fast. “I don’t know how to say it so it makes
sense, Nureyev!”

For the first time in a very long while, Peter felt himself letting an irritation he didn’t know he had
enter his voice. “Then don’t make sense,” he hissed. “Just say something so that I can stop this
ceaseless wondering, Juno.”

“I was trying to,” Juno muttered, and Peter stopped himself from letting a wordless, frustrated snarl
escape him.

“You have everything, Juno, I gave you everything I have,” he said in hushed tones.

“It’s not much,” Juno said in the thoughtless, caustic way that made Peter wish he could throw
whatever was left of his heart on the ground at his feet.

“It’s everything!” Peter snapped. “It’s everything. And you won’t answer one question, you won’t even try!”

“I am trying!” Juno said, and Peter clenched his teeth to hold back the displays of aggravation that wanted to take him.

“Say what you’re thinking. Out loud,” Peter clarified, trying to slow himself and halt the rising anger that was leaking into him. “Say everything that comes into your head, until you can tell me something honest.”

Juno laughed disbelievingly. “You want me to be honest? You?” he asked, and Peter’s heart flattened with the impact of hitting the floor beneath them.

“Yes, Juno, I do. You know the only true things about me.”

“I didn’t want them!” Juno said back, his voice rising too loud.

They were both silent.

“You don’t mean that,” Peter said in normal tones.

“I never asked,” Juno muttered into the mattress.

“Juno - “ he warned.

“I didn’t ask to have any of this, Nureyev, you just gave it to me,” Juno said, voice muffled, and Peter remembered a cold hand under his in a dark room, and Juno Steel bleeding for him.

Peter let his arms and legs go limp, and pulled back from Juno.

Juno turned towards him. “What are you doing?”

“I’m freeing you from my clever trap,” he said. “I have my answer,” and he felt so heavy. And strangely free. It could all be the same as always from now on. Exactly the same as before all of it. Each planet more beautiful than the last.

“Your… no, Nureyev, that’s not,” Juno started, then sighed in frustration again. “That’s not it, it’s,” Juno tried, but he stopped as abruptly as if he had hit some invisible roadblock. “It’s,” he tried again, and looking at Juno’s face, resolutely avoiding the thief’s steady gaze, Peter only knew that he could never know Juno Steel the way he wanted to, such that he could memorize the map of his every vein and artery and the capillaries that branched away from them.

They listened to each other’s breathing, and the rustling of cloth and sheets as Juno turned onto his back to stare at the ceiling, and Peter tentatively placed a hand on his chest. Juno was always so cold.

“Nureyev, did you know anything about the Martians before you came here?” Juno asked, voice odd.

“I picked up a thing or two,” he said. “Enough to convince an expert.”

“They’re everywhere, around here,” Juno said, looking at nothing again. Peter wondered if he had taken in the reply at all, or if it was only a question asked so that Juno knew how to begin.

“Everything that’s good, people say it’s an old Martian thing. We spent two years in history class just talking about the Martian utopia, how… good, it was. How much they accomplished. It was a lot,
Nureyev, they did a whole damn lot, and we all tell ourselves if we do things right, we’re gonna be like that. Making amazing things and ending wars and living in relative harmony.”

Peter Nureyev had privately thought all the stories of the Martians were ominous. That kind of harmony rarely came without bloodshed. But he had an inkling that the Martians weren’t the important part of the story.

Juno laughed mirthlessly. “But we’re not going to be like that. They weren’t even like that. The people who told us those stories don’t even get to know how wrong they were.”

He reached for the hand on his chest and started playing with Peter’s fingers, not with any particular aim but because they were there and he needed something to hold onto. Peter leaned on his other elbow and reached out his hand to stroke Juno’s hair, steady and reassuring as he could be.

Juno laughed again, the sound of something breaking. “But Nureyev, you and me? We know where that story really ends.” Juno’s hands were gripping Peter’s too tightly, like he didn’t know what he was holding, only that he had something there.

The hand in Juno’s hair paused its work. He shifted the detective so that Juno was leaning back against his chest and Peter’s hands could secure Juno’s calloused, destructive fingers in his own, and his arms could encircle Juno’s abdomen, and his lips could find purchase at the top of his head. Juno let himself be moved, pliable and thousands of feet underground.

“They kept trying to get better, Nureyev,” he said to the ceiling, and Peter let his lips brush whatever parts of Juno they could reach. Juno lay unmoving, as if every motion were far beyond his register. “But they were all the same, they were all sick in the exact same way. And they made teleporters and mind reading pills, and the Martians didn’t do that because there was some innate thing about them that made them good and brilliant and remarkable, it was because if they didn’t try to fix it, it would kill them right there. In the end none of it was enough. The best damn thing they could come up with to fix it was killing themselves. They gave up, Nureyev. After all those years of building and trying and making things better. After building a whole perfect society just to try to solve it.”

Juno’s hands were loose in Peter’s grip, and Peter let them fall so he could trace reassuring circles on the detective’s chest.

“And so I thought to myself, they would’ve found a way to get better if fixing it was possible. Teleportation can’t be easier than cutting out the part of you that wants you dead, right?” Juno’s laugh was blunt and uncontrolled. “But, it’s not part. It’s all of you. Your whole body, everything about you is poisoning you at the same time you’re living in it. You can’t just be the good parts because there aren’t good parts. There aren’t parts. It’s all just… you.”

Peter tightened his grip on Juno, buried his face in Juno’s hair.

“Nothing fixes it, because you’ve got a rotting core, and no matter what you do it’s going to keep dying, and the only way to get it out’ll kill you right there,” Juno said. “So you let it rot you. You keep getting worse, and you can feel it happening, and you know how this story goes, because you’ve seen it before. You can’t control it forever. Better people than you couldn’t do it.” Juno’s eyes went glassy. “But you keep fighting it, every goddamn day, and you don’t get to stop.”

Peter ran the back of his hand down Juno’s cheek, and the detective didn’t move at all. The backs of his fingers returned to him damp.

“Juno,” Peter said, his name all he could muster.
Juno was quiet for a long moment. “Nothing fixes it, Nureyev, and if you don’t try, you can tell yourself there’s something out there in that big infinite universe that could save you, but there’s nothing,” the bottom fell out of whatever container held his voice, “All I’m doing is lying to myself long enough to get me to the next morning.”

This was the closest he would get to seeing Juno Steel.

“Juno,” Peter said with concern. “Look at me.”

Juno didn’t look. He rolled aside, back turned away from Peter’s suddenly-empty hands and he could only watch while the detective curled in on himself, his breathing quickening. “It doesn’t matter what I do. It’s never done. It’s never quiet,” he stopped speaking abruptly and he raised his hands to his head again, his forearms squeezing together to form a kind of shell over his face.

“Juno?” Peter asked, alarmed. “Juno.” He sat up, and carefully crossed to Juno’s other side, ran his hands gently up his scarred forearms and to where Juno’s hands were tangled in his own hair. Carefully, softly, he hooked his fingers through the spaces between Juno’s and extracted his grasping hands from his head, and pulled Juno to his knees. They were face-to-face.

Juno was open and raw and afraid and simultaneously disconnected from all of those things, gasping to manage his breath and pounding heart as if he didn’t know he needed oxygen at all, and Peter studied the lines borne of his expression like they were a new kind of lock to master before carefully placing a hand on the back of his head and pulling him in.

Juno buried himself in his chest, hands suddenly clinging to him, and his legs wrapped around Peter’s waist for good measure, like he was trying to reassure himself that they were both still there.

Peter kissed the top of Juno’s head, ran a hand up and down Juno’s back as Juno started to break away. “You can let go,” Peter said, quiet, and Juno headbutted his chest with a light knock. Peter pulled the hand behind Juno’s head closer in a futile effort to keep him from trying to hit anything else. Juno wanted so badly to be hurt.

He pushed away, giving himself enough space to breathe.

“I’m not,” Juno started, breathing hard. “I don’t feel anything, I’m not sad,” he tried to explain, blinking back tears like their presence was something bewildering and offensive, “I don’t know why this is happening to me,” and Peter thought he understood.

He pressed the detective’s face back into his chest, and this was the worst thing Peter Nureyev could be doing, this was the last thing he should be doing if he wanted a Juno Steel who came to him freely and unmanipulated, but.

“I have you, Juno,” he said softly before pressing his lips into the top of Juno’s head. He knew without asking that Juno Steel did not let anyone hold him, did not let anyone keep him safe, had never had anyone to slit the throats of everyone who approached him with the intention of leaving him hurt and scarred

“I’m here,” he said, and Juno’s shoulders shook.

“Don’t,” Juno warned, voice threatening to crack into pieces from all its tremor. “Don’t do this,” and Peter held him tighter in preparation to let him go again, but Juno wasn’t done. “If I let go of any of it it’s all gonna come out, Nureyev, and I....” he gasped a deep breath and held it, pressed his forehead harder into Peter’s chest.

“I’ll stay,” Peter said, simple and undecorated. “If you want me,” and he felt Juno Steel collapse all at
once.

“You asshole,” Juno mourned into his chest, and Peter let out a laugh that could have perhaps become a sob of his own, given the proper care and cultivation, and he thought he could feel a weight looming so heavy it could crush him where he was.

When Juno Steel woke up, Peter Nureyev was already gone.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Dark Matters uniform suited Rex Glass exactly as well as it would have suited Peter Nureyev, had Peter Nureyev the time or inclination to try it on himself. It had something sleek to it, something sharp and serious and dangerous. Even with the rush job on the tailoring, Rex Glass looked put together. No thread out of place, so long as no one turned any single article of clothing inside out in front of them. Though if someone did, well. He had the feeling that Rex Glass would be more than capable of providing a distraction while being investigatively undressed.

Rex Glass, was more in love with the sound of his own voice than Peter Nureyev was, but not so much so that he could not be charming if given adequate incentive. Overtly flirty, even, if the situation called for it. If absolutely necessary. Or, not if necessary; if sufficiently charmed. Nothing Rex Glass did was necessary, strictly speaking. The man studied ancient Martian artifacts and the supernatural as if either was a serious science. He came from a world where necessity was a distant, foreign concept, a distraction that he was mercifully free of.

Peter Nureyev could not say the same, but he had spent a significant portion of his years living in a firsthand study of those who did. He had a deep and intimate knowledge of their inner workings; he disassembled them like machines and found the circuits that matched. There was something poetic in their sameness. The people who he stole for and from all had the same self-assuredness to them, no matter where they lived or what language they spoke. They tricked themselves into the rigid belief that the way they lived was simply the way it was to be alive. Because no true misfortune had ever befallen them before, none ever would.

Rex Glass walked with that confidence, that ignorance, and he reveled in being himself. He spoke in poetics and lauded himself on his cleverness and double entendre with every word he uttered. If he spoke arrogantly enough, and walked with just enough distraction in his step, no one would bother trying to see beyond the surface of Rex Glass. There were certain markers one could wear that signified, You know this man, in bits and pieces, in the reflection on the window and at your book club and in the park on a summer morning, and Rex Glass availed himself of them, pinning the persona he wanted others to read to a shadowbox at perfect right angles.

There was danger, in relying on misdirection more than evidence. But sometimes one had to rely on his charm, and Rex Glass could be very charming indeed.

“Don’t,” Sasha Wire said, holding her palm out towards him before he even opened his mouth to speak. She wasn’t even looking at him, instead scowling at the comms blinking off before her.

He had already been somewhat interested in Sasha Wire--she had a good name. It had bite to it, and severity. Put together, the syllables Agent Sasha Wire said, this is a person whose time is too valuable for you to waste. She matched her name well. They usually did, in his experience. People grew into the names they were given. Half of making something was giving it a shape to grow into.

He might find a use for her name on some other planet when he was finished with his current employ. It was a bit grim for his tastes--he preferred to name himself with a hint of splendor--but it would work well if he ever needed to fake the existence of a boss or a co-conspirator. A surname like Wire had a strong utility to it; it would be useful to have on hand.

“I’m sorry?” he asked, as if he wasn’t quite sure what he’d just heard. “Agent Rex Glass. I don’t
believe we’ve met face-to-face yet. And what a lovely face it is,” he added as he extended his hand for a handshake, testing the waters.

Agent Wire glanced up at him without a hint of interest, unless sheer, corrosive rage qualified as interest, in which case she glanced at him with intense interest. Just as Rex Glass was about to drop his suave composure she dropped her eyes pointedly at his proffered hand, and snubbed it without word or movement, simply returning to her work without acknowledging or interacting with him any further.

That was expected. Rex Glass was one to come on too strong. He knew this about himself, but perhaps he was just arrogant enough not to bother exercising self-control. He withdrew his hand with a smile and a flourish, as if he had just collected an important piece of data on how a co-worker should behave.

He stood patiently in the center of her office, perfectly content to ignore all social cues signalling he do otherwise. There was some information he wanted from Sasha Wire before he departed.

After several minutes of Rex Glass watching Sasha Wire contentedly and with no indication of stopping, the agent met him halfway. “Shouldn’t you be halfway to the,“ she clenched her teeth slightly, “liaison’s office by now?” She did nothing to shield him from the disinterested, angry tone of her voice.

Rex Glass considered the annoyance in the word . There was a history there, then. Good. If he was going to be stuck with someone breathing down his neck, he needed to have all the information he could to distract them. Sasha Wire’s expertise would do nicely.

“Oh, of course. I was only trying to find my way to the exit. Your offices here are laid out so differently from those in the Outer Rim, I could end up walking these halls eternally. Much like the third Venusian Empress. She was so distraught by the Winter Uprising that she spent the rest of her days walking endlessly through the palace, and some say you can hear her footfalls still,” Rex Glass effused. He had stolen that story from one of the biographies he used to research for Rex Glass. The entire thing was falsified, of course, but that made it all the more appropriate.

“Riveting,” Sasha Wire said.

Rex Glass didn’t move. He smiled at her, expectant and benign and with just a flash of teeth.

She stared at him, absolutely oozing aloofness, and he remained pleasant and slightly bumbling because if he tried to charm her right now he courted the distinct possibility that she might tear his throat out with her teeth. She wanted him to be easy to deal with, so he would be exactly what he sounded like on the forged papers he had delivered in another disguise an hour earlier.

She sighed and stood up and jerked her head at him to follow. “I’ll see you out.”

He smiled at the sound of their heels clicking against the polished floor in duet. He stepped confidently, quickly, making it clear that he knew exactly where he was going if she only stopped to think about it. Rex Glass didn’t intend to give her the time.

“It can’t be usual that you set agents up with local freelance detectives, is it?” he asked with the most feasibly-unintentional condescension possible. “Is he some kind of consultant, perhaps?”

Sasha Wire snorted. “Absolutely not. Juno Steel would not be involved at all if I could help it. And he wouldn’t be involved if he could help it, either.”

Juno Steel. Juno, the goddess of protection. Queen of the Gods, and, if he remembered correctly, the
mother of Mars. Steel, colloquially a sword or knife, as in steel, comma, taste my. He found little more than the definitions of the names floating around online, as well as some intriguing but outdated snippets from the past. This was his chance to prepare himself, to research further.

“I see,” Rex Glass said. He didn’t, really. “And why did he agree to do it, then?”

“Three reasons,” Agent Wire said without looking at him or slowing down. “One. This case happens to be about his favorite subject.”

“Oh, a fellow scholar?” Rex Glass asked. “How wonderful, we can discuss the mask’s ancient origins together in depth. You may be surprised to hear this, but it can be difficult to find a willing ear on the subject!”

“In what world is that supposed to surprise me,” Sasha muttered.

All right. So instead of looking into the detective and reviewing the blueprints on the car ride over, he would need to do a much deeper dive into his supposed specialty. That was unfortunate. It was all rather dull, and he was already quite tired of playing the role straight.

“No, it’s not the Martians,” Sasha Wire continued at regular volume as she held up a tablet showing an image. A phrase written in blood. YOU’RE NEXT, JUNO STEEL.

“An egoist, then.” Because private investigators weren’t self-involved enough. Well, if it became too tiresome, or there was too much interference in his own aims, Rex Glass could move their unfortunate but necessary separation from one another a bit earlier.

“Close enough,” Sasha Wire conceded, and he wasn’t certain what that meant at all. “Second: I asked him to.”

“Oh, are you close?” he asked, knowing the answer was yes. No one was that angry after ending a call with someone unimportant.

She laughed, which was a surprise. He hadn’t guessed she could. “The operative word there wasn’t I.”

“Then the operative word, as you called it, was…”

“Asked. Even if he did turn me down, he would have found a way to investigate it anyway. Hasn’t left a thing alone in his life, if someone asked him to take care of it. Much to both our detriment.”

A hero complex, then, and one disruptive enough to make this woman betray a hint of personal information. That would be frustrating to deal with, but it made everything much simpler. He could be a damsel most compelling if the situation required.

“And the third reason?”

“That’s classified,” Agent Sasha Wire said as she held the front door of the building open for him. Rex Glass walked through with a thank you, and Sasha followed to the sleek black car.

“Oh, were you not briefed on my security clearance?” he asked, flashing his (forged) badge.

Sasha Wire smiled, and it had a mean, clever wryness to it that interested him. “You’re a smart guy,” she said, a little sarcastic, a little dry. “You’ll figure it out.” And then she closed the car door on him, and he was left wondering at the punchline to the joke Sasha Wire was telling herself.
Oh, well. He wasn’t planning on spending much more time with the citizens of Mars; he didn’t need to vex himself with it.

He pulled out a tablet and ran a simple, Dark Matters-assisted search for Juno Steel, and settled in to learn this detective cover to cover.

Duke Rose smirked to himself in Juno Steel’s darkened apartment. The answer had been much less complicated than it had seemed at the first. Angstrom already knew of Duke Rose, and he thought Duke Rose was coming alone. They had both said as much, and Angstrom wasn’t the type to welcome an associate unannounced without good reason. It would raise more flags than strictly needed, especially given the significant likelihood that he would have to burn every bridge he had on Mars.

Except one. Because there was not a bridge he could burn to stop Juno Steel from coming back to him. The detective had outsmarted him at every turn. Handcuffed him in place, interfered with his plan to steal the pill, even managed to track him down now through the smuggler he had been working with. Juno Steel could follow him no matter how quiet his footsteps and how blank his trail, and Peter Nureyev wanted to know more about him.

He and Duke Rose were going to be married, after all.

Or, not he and Duke Rose, but Duke and Dahlia Rose. Angstrom couldn’t fault Duke Rose for bringing his husband on a business trip. Especially if the two of them were relative newlyweds, deeply in love.

That might knock the detective off his persistent place a half-step behind him. And Duke Rose was interested in meeting his Dahlia. Perhaps Juno Steel would make Dahlia Rose his own, knocking Duke Rose persistently off of his footing the same way Juno knocked Peter off of his.

Maybe Duke Rose would prove himself foolhardy, a risk-taker, and Dahlia would have to be in the background collecting him and keeping him on-track. Or, no, Duke and Dahlia were two parts of a well-oiled machine. Dahlia was the mastermind, of course, and the one who stepped forward and took care of things when the plan went south, while Duke took care of the contracts and the acquisitions and the follow through. Duke was, of course, the face of it; he was effusive and charming in all the places where Dahlia was harsh and sharp.

The thought was rolling away and collecting momentum and dragging him with it before he knew it was happening. Because Duke and Dahlia Rose? They were unheard of. Unless you knew who you were, because if you knew the Roses, you knew they were notorious. Dahlia Rose, of the Rose family, born into a criminal dynasty that spread far over Mars’s surface, and Duke Rose, nee Thorn, (and here Peter paused to cringe internally at the preciousness of it, and tried to remind himself that logically it wouldn’t work for Duke Rose to retroactively have had a different name, but the story was spinning too quickly now to stop it), well, Duke wasn’t from much of a family at all.

Really, the two of them shouldn’t have ended up together. They were nothing alike. But they kept running into each other. Stealing the same painting. Running cons on the same senator. Catching each other’s eyes in the same casino. And at first Duke thought all Dahlia held for him was annoyance. Annoyance and frustration and a deep, regretful, lingering attraction, the kind that made him pull Duke into stopped elevators and dark rooms and take whatever he could to exorcise that feeling, one that Duke reciprocated willingly because that was the most he would ever get from Dahlia Rose.
Or so Duke thought. Until…

Until what.

Or so Duke thought, until he found himself half-broken on the ground, and he saw figures rounding on him, and he saw Dahlia, but that could not have been right, because Dahlia didn’t care about him, not a bit. Because Dahlia had no reason to be there, none at all, but Dahlia was there, and Dahlia was telling him to hang on, and Duke was blacking out (because Duke was not Peter Nureyev, Duke had the luxury of letting go when he couldn’t stay awake anymore). And Duke was waking up, and Dahlia was still there. And Dahlia kept being there, wherever Duke was. They never stopped being together, after that. (Overly sentimental, he thought to himself, and not detailed enough to flesh out their backstory).

Duke and Dahlia became notorious. (There was no evidence. Angstrom wouldn’t fall for that for a second). Their wedding was full of Roses and of associates Duke had picked up here and there, friends and acquaintances and bitter enemies. The ceremony had no fewer than four near-deaths, and created five crime rings that were still at large. And Duke and Dahlia were still at large, and still deeply devoted to one another. Duke was more outwardly smitten, but Dahlia showed how he felt in smaller ways. In small touches. And large ones. In looks and possessive arms over his shoulders. In being there. In staying.

Maybe people didn’t know what Dahlia saw in Duke. But that didn’t matter, because Duke didn’t know either. And,

Keys at the door.

He hadn’t thought nearly enough about the plan, or how to explain it to the detective. But he was no stranger to winging it, when necessary.

The door opened, and he tried not to squint in the sudden light, eager for what was to come next.

Earl Fox was not in love with Juno Steel yet.

But if one were to go by past precedent, they would assume it was only a matter of time. Peter Nureyev, somewhere buried under all of his better selves, made the very same assumption. He had made Earl Fox to be already heartbroken, lovelorn, bereft of all softer feelings. He needed the unmoored pining to stave it off. Unmoored pining was what he felt for places, things, and the dead; what he felt for being fourteen and happy and sure. And now he felt it for a person, an answer, a bed that was now empty, and it was pushing him dangerously towards distraction.

He had built a life of being impossible to find, and before Mars it was perfect. Airtight, even. And after Mars it wasn’t, and he couldn’t even lie to himself about the reason why he was fighting the urge to drop clues in his wake at every turn.

It was not a self-destructive impulse, not in origin, though it would kill him were he ever to execute it. No, it was simply that every time he thought to leave a note or a calling card and stopped himself, it was because his lifestyle until now meant that Juno Steel would never know where he was again.

He wanted to rewire his brain, to stop asking why over and over again. Each answer was worse than
the last. But there was so much he refused to think about. There were so many places that were Peter Nureyev and Juno Steel, together, and he couldn’t think of their names without hitting every wall he put up.

There were not many things that made him feel content or whole, but there were even fewer that tore him apart, and he could not afford to keep letting his hands try to drop evidence he was here and real in his line of work. There was too much at stake. So Peter Nureyev unwrapped the situation like it was a logic puzzle, or a particularly tricky job:

On one planet, there is a thief, and on another, a detective. The thief survives through his anonymity. He cannot leave a trace without being caught and locked away and returned to the only planet he can legally call home, the one that stopped being home long before he killed the only parts of it he could imagine wanting to go back to.

The detective stays on Mars. The detective does not leave Mars. The detective wants to leave Mars, but not with this thief. Not with anyone, but the thief especially.

This thief, though, this utter fool of a con, gave away something very important to the detective before he left. He did it freely, but he had never shared anything like it before and had underestimated the consequences. (A name, a memory, a heart plucked from his chest entire—they hadn’t had the same worth as when he gave them, but the value, as with all things, appreciated with time and use). He wants it all returned to him.

He cannot approach the detective, or the items with which the detective was entrusted will be lost. He cannot leave a trail, or the thief will be lost. The detective cannot leave Mars. Mars would not be lost without him, but he can’t admit that to himself without losing the only conception of his identity that he has.

Such were the pieces. There was nothing of a plan shining through them, or none that Peter Nureyev wanted to follow. So he tried to dismiss it as sentimentality and nothing more.

The thoughts were not dismissed. They ran in the background of his mind, endlessly. It stopped him from thinking about the question of why? if he could plan a way to find out instead. After weeks of deliberation so all-encompassing that he botched two relatively simple jobs and was banned from all 53 moons of Saturn, even the tiny, barren ones that he could have bought with a single stone from the bracelet he had taken there to fence, he started feeling the chorus of why? biting at his edges again, and he took a guess at an answer.

He hadn’t prepared enough aliases for a return trip to Mars. The only one he had adequate documentation for was… suboptimal, for his current purpose. Good enough to get there, but not one he could use when he landed. So he had to improvise, slightly, but he didn’t need to be especially convincing to anyone.

The thief chose an alias off the top of his head and didn’t bother putting it onto any half-decent paperwork. It felt too much like tempting fate, to put work into this when it could all come to nothing. And it was freeing, to build as he went.

The thief did not step near the detective’s home, the detective’s work, the detective’s… anything.

The thief kept his eyes open for the detective. The thief would let the detective find him, to let the detective chase him if he wanted, whether out of anger or of some less preferred emotion. The thief set something of a timer for himself, so he could not lose himself here again.

The thief made plans. He wouldn’t steal the detective’s heart this time; he had tried once, and the
detective was good enough at his job to consider the thief’s involvement suspect. No, he would find answers. He would investigate. He did not need Juno Steel, except as a focus of study. He did not need Juno Steel to come back to him. He did not need Juno Steel to want him at all.

And if the detective didn’t, if he could give a definitive answer, and tell him to go and never come back, that he had broken promises enough, he would leave forever. He would know that leaving a trail was pointless, and he could go back to doing his job without distraction, and maybe someday he could step on a new planet without remembering the empty space behind him.

He leaned his head against the window, and wondered idly if the Ruby7 was still where he had left it.

Peter Nureyev watched Juno Steel slumber, and wondered at how peaceful the detective could look, if he would only let someone take care of him.

Juno was deep in sleep, but not still. His lower lip twitched while he slept; his eyelashes had an occasional flutter to them; sometimes he would nestle restlessly against the sheets, tiny, warm movements that made him want to hold him until his detective woke up in his arms and saw that he was still here, that not everyone left in the night without a word when they cared for something so much that it felt like the world could twist and bend around him.

His chest ached with how much he wished he could. But Juno Steel would throw himself into the fire if anyone let him. Peter had already woken up to an empty bed twice because his partner was hell-bent on finding ways to make this city kill him, and he didn’t intend to allow it to happen again. “Juno?” he asked, quietly, and Juno stirred, but did not wake.

Peter sighed, and tried not to wish too deeply that the detective would wake and give them more time, and slowly untangled himself from enveloping the detective’s compact body in his.

He took his glasses back from the nightstand, put a hand to his ear to make sure his cuff was securely in place, and dressed, quick and efficient. Juno mumbled something unintelligible at the sound of coat hangers clanging against each other in the closet, and Peter went still, watching.

It would be so very easy to stay. The simplest thing in the world, to fall back into bed with him, to stay awake until Juno fell out of whatever dream he was drifting in, and then do whatever it took to keep him from running into a fool’s battleground without a plan.

It would never work. Juno was too noble, too determined, too sure the only way out was through and that the only way through fit exactly one passenger. Someone had to call the game off early, and Peter certainly didn’t think he was more capable than Juno was, but he had seen Juno try to sacrifice himself three too many times, now, or was it four? Five? Too many, for a detective who grew into a name that asked too much of him. He was an armed protector, one who cared for the collateral damage such that he was unable to drive a blade through the heart of the problem. It made Peter want to see through Juno’s eyes--eye, now, still his fault, still more than he should have ever allowed to happen--and understand why anyone would live the life he had and still care for the nameless, faceless figures in the background, even the ones with the admitted intent to hurt him.

He truly wanted to understand. But not quite yet.

Juno had nestled back into a comfortable position without him, curled up alone on the bed, and
Peter’s heart wanted to open at the seams and entrap them both.

There was nothing for it. He leaned across him and pulled the blanket over the sleeping detective. He was always so much colder than Peter was; anemia, perhaps? Low blood circulation? Either way, Peter was left wanting to keep him warm, and there was something reassuring in having someone he wanted to pile blankets on. Maybe he could make an honest man of himself someday after all, he thought, kicking Juno’s abandoned clothing aside. Maybe he could revel in domestic life, build a whole new identity of it that never changed and stay in place and meet people who he would run into at the grocery store later, and, what did people do? Throw a housewarming party, maybe, invite people inside and show them some horrible paintings, stolen of course, and dare anyone to question him about it. Be a beacon in the community, commit crimes and help Juno solve them, assist Rita in dragging her self-absorbed boss to the movies a time or two.

And, he remembered, deflating, get found immediately and returned to New Kinshasa, where he would be at the mercy of the police surveillance state.

A problem to think about on another day. He forced his thoughts to avert their gaze and put on a pair of boots, heeled, careful not to disturb the detective too much in the process, and gave himself a quick look in the mirror. He was dressed as Peter Nureyev this time, beyond a doubt. He rolled up the sleeves of his button-up, adjusted his corset slightly at the waist, and quickly finger-brushed his hair.

Good. His makeup was slightly mussed, but he could fix that in the car. Now the only thing left was to leave.

His eyes did not want to leave Juno Steel, asleep and already rolling out from the blanket Peter had placed over him. Waking up alone would be another thing worth hating the thief for. Another knife he could stick in his own chest, another burden he would carry in the crease in his brow.

Peter would have to work quickly, then. He leaned down and pulled the quilt back to Juno’s shoulders, letting his lips brush Juno’s cheek. “I’ll be back before you wake,” he breathed as he passed over the detective’s ear, and he walked to the window lightly enough that his heels didn’t even click.

Then he stopped, put a hand in his pocket, and searched, past all the things he’d collected as a whim, souvenirs and memories of his first and only roommates since he had ceased to wear each alias like ill-fitting shoes. It wasn’t an experience he needed to repeat; he did prefer having space to himself after hours and hours or days and weeks of pretending to be the exact kind of charming that was needed. But it was nice to have people underfoot when he was bored, and to be able to do little projects for them when he was especially understimulated, or badly needed distracting. It was nice to know people, but the heart-stopping terror of being known wasn’t worth it.

Ah. There they were. Peter Nureyev couldn’t leave Juno Steel without making a statement, and he pulled one item out of each pocket--one hand full of cold metal, the other a warm, stiff booklet--and set the scene.

He looked over his work once more. There was an appealing symmetry to the scene, him leaving Juno Steel behind like this. He focused on that--the symmetry, the aesthetics, and nothing that was threatening to consume his only impulse of goodness. He banished every thought of falling asleep with the detective, except the parts where he woke up alone. The beginning and end of Peter Nureyev and Juno Steel, a voice in his head supplied to him unbidden, and he swiped it away before it could make itself a portent.

He would be back. If he could. He was capable of the kind of damage Juno was afraid to damn
himself for, the kind of damage that would save him without harm.

He stole one more kiss--the forehead, this time--and disappeared out the window in one silent, well-practiced motion.

Another city he saved, another knife in someone’s back. It all became easier, the second time.

Chapter End Notes

my friend and i were talking about the duke/dahlia fanon and she said 'that is only acceptable if it's peter nureyev's fantasy while he's waiting in juno's apartment at the end of midnight fox' and she wasn't wrong. she isn't allowed to read this until it's done but for when she does; you were so right.

anyway, last arc, get hype, etc, thank you for reading!
Christopher Morales sliced through everything that did not step aside for him when he asked, hand flying an easy, practiced path. He was the cat who snapped the mouse’s neck when it tired of the game predators play with easy prey, only to leave it aside and stretch in the room’s last patch of sunlight. He eschewed stealth; here, he was a burning vision of vengeance, and it did not matter if he was seen. He moved with the intention to be was the last thing those who would interfere could ever comprehend.

He was slow, and deliberate, but he did not pause. He was the sudden violence of an avalanche, the inevitable forward motion of a glacier. His path was only logical in retrospect. He disappeared from sight and reappeared like a grain of sand on the wind.

Those he encountered were inconveniences he did not want, and he dealt with them as such. He did not pursue them unless they pursued him first; anything else seemed a waste of his time.

Ramses O’Flaherty watched the man’s movement through the hallways with interest. Trepidation rose in him, without fear to follow. He was a strange man, Christopher Morales. Rex Glass. Whoever he was. The man tearing ascending through the building was not as mysterious as he wanted to be, certainly, but he was an enigma nonetheless.

Ramses was something of an enigma himself. The man ripping his way to him had come in the cover of night, as though he expected him to be asleep. As though he had ever really slept. While it seemed the problem of Juno Steel had not been best left unresolved, he was reassured by the false assumption of safety in the cover of night made by the detective’s associate. Assuming he survived the night, it seemed he had chosen the least-pressing complication to temporarily put off for later. There had been speeches to write, and to give. Evidence to hide. People to find. Tortured existences to halt. He had stayed on task with everything else; he couldn’t be blamed for letting one thing slip through.

Or two things. Pilot Pereyra had made themself something of a nuisance by moving much slower in their pursuit of the Freedome than anticipated. It was disappointing to think that setting all of that up had been a effort wasted, but it was too late now to redistribute the campaign resources, and the polls were favoring him despite Pereyra’s persistent campaigning.

He wasn’t surprised. He had spent more time thinking about this city than anyone. He had devoted two lifetimes to it.

Most threats to his campaign diminished with each positive poll. Others only became more pressing with time. A man on a murderous charge against his campaign aides and guards fell in the second group. The guards would be fine; they were built to survive vandals, and they were not people, not in the way Ramses O’Flaherty was. They were made only to perform a function. Ramses O’Flaherty was also made to perform a function, but his was different. His was to be alive, and he had cast that aside for not being enough.

The campaign aides would not fare as well. They knew what they were getting into, working on an opposition campaign in this city, but it was still cause for regret. The man had let those who chose to flee do so, and cut through the rest.
Except one. One single, cowering guard who was left grasping for some mirage of innate, hidden logic in probability, life, and death.

They had encountered each other before, the two of them, the boy from the underground and the man wearing many names on one face. One of Ramses’s many layers of consciousness watched them recognize each other, from the sound of heels clicking down the hallway, slow and deliberate; from a flash of a laser cutter and the sound of someone falling; from hearing the screech of something going terribly wrong. They saw each other, and they knew, and Lito reached for his blaster, determined through the shock of having seen such an unceremonious display of death.

He didn’t use it. Not because of any lack of intention, but rather because in an instant, it was out of his hands and in those of Morales. How do you set this to stun? Ramses read on his lips, and Lito moved forward, set in a fighting stance.

The intruder was faster, despite his theatrics. Oh, here it is, he continued, and switched the blaster to stun while pulling the trigger. This was the closest he looked to clumsy, and yet there was a deftness in the efficiency with which Lito collapsed and the security footage flickered out.

This was the only security feed that diverged from the pattern: walk in, slash through what obstacles there were, and cut the security. He watched them all at once, laid overtop of each other, and they could have been the same exact room and event but for the actions of those in his employ.

Ramses supposed he should count himself lucky that the man thought cutting the security would stop him from seeing the feeds. It was a laughable mistake. Ramses O’Flaherty was the security feeds. Or, Cyrus Ortega was. The metal of him had capabilities that the flesh of him would not have been able to imagine alone.

The duality was useful, when utilized correctly. Most of him, the part of him that could be a machine for analysis, was deep in thought, determining what course of action was most appropriate at this point; the sorry remainder was stuck on an unproductive comms call.

“Go home, Lito,” Ramses said over the line, knowing that the young aide would not heed the advice. He never should have allowed him to go to Calvera with the rest of them; he was not wise enough to be made afraid of his debts. Being given a secret had emboldened him, and it was making him troublesome. Ramses knew how to find people who needed to devote themselves to something impossible. It was useful, to have a handful of people who would blindly trust him to the end of the world for the sole reason that if he were proven to have been untrustworthy all along it would be too much to bear.

Giving them reason to doubt that trust went one of two ways. They defected entirely, or they redoubled their devotion and transformed it into something at the edge of worshipful, a service to an ineffable idol. Ramses O’Flaherty found the latter more inconvenient than the former. He could make up for the neglect of desertion on his own. It was much more difficult to undo the damage of a zealot.

“What?” the boy asked. “I’m not going to go home,” and the tone and timbre of his voice betrayed an indignance that a subordinate should not have. Ramses had known everything he needed to know about him the first time he heard that well-meant arrogance. Lito had equal chance at a future in leadership, early mortality, or the crushing ennui of disillusionment. If he was lucky it would be only the latter.

“You don’t understand! He’s just, killing people! You didn’t see him before, he’s just, doing it, it doesn’t matter, and he is heading your way, I’m not leaving you alone in here-” Lito’s voice was breathless. He hadn’t recovered from being stunned, and he thought he could act the savior. If Ramses were like Pereyra, he would swat at him like a fly. But he was not at all like Pereyra.
“Lito.” Ramses O’Flaherty never needed to say anything more than someone’s name. He often did, of course, out of the sheer enjoyment of the words he could assemble and the effect they could have, but it wasn’t required.

He heard him swallow through the receiver. It was a delicate, drawn-out process to deal with young idealists who didn’t know the interchangeability of their utility. One had to draw a labyrinth that could not reveal itself a trap, all nimble conversational beats and just-happening-to-mention the thing that would convince them they wanted to do exactly what Ramses had wanted in the first place. In times with lower stakes, it could be a game, even, a diversion from the matter at hand, and the reward was worth the effort. It was easy to trust those who wanted to save the world to believe in his innate goodness, his commitment to the ideal. It was only difficult when it got into their heads that they could save the world just a little bit quicker than he could.

Lito was young enough to believe in a better Hyperion City than the one he lived in, and smart enough to know it would not come of its own accord, and self-centered enough to think he could be a vital part of what would change it, and those three things together made for a complication that he was exhausted of solving. “Sir?”

“Go home, Lito,” Ramses repeated. “I survived this long without your help. I can certainly go a bit longer.”

“All due respect, Sir, I think your odds will be better if you don’t try it alone.” The boy’s whole voice shook. “And honestly, I don’t really feel like sitting around and waiting to see what happens next.”

Ramses considered sending a spark through the heart he had provided, and into the boy’s central nervous system, and towards the part of the brain stem that would short him out, but he didn’t. He wouldn’t infringe on free will. He never made anyone do anything.

That wasn’t to say that he let them do whatever they wanted, either. He simply set up the systems, and let them run.

“This is the second time he didn’t kill you. There won’t be a third.” The boy began to protest, and Ramses put up a hand Lito could not see. “Lito, if there is one person here there could be more still at headquarters,” he said, extracting information from his remote storage. “Beulah Lahir. Your sister?”

It wasn’t a threat. Only an appeal to things that were at stake, more so than the life of a politician, the fate of a city.

People did not make optimal choices, or effective ones, or ones without risk. They made the choices they thought they would be able to live with, or the choices they thought they could die for. Ramses O’Flaherty watched a man tear his own life apart, once, and at the time they both thought the man was doing it for him. It took decades of living alone in a world that wasn’t made for him to understand that Gregor Maxwell had only done whatever it took to keep what was his, clinging tightly to the only thing he thought he had made right.

Gregor Maxwell had been wrong. His father had assembled the interface of nerve and diode that together made his brain, but he had never lived in it. Ramses O’Flaherty knew better. He could not say whether it was metal or flesh or the combination of the two that suffocated him and made him act in ways he himself could not even understand, but nothing felt like enough. There was no barrier between love and need and want for him. There was nothing between want and joy and misery. It was entirely possible that there was nothing in him at all, that it all came from a bleached and commercialized anthology of every existing account of Cyrus Ortega that lived in him, and he was only a vessel forced to follow the whims of a leader long perished.
It had been simpler, before he started allowing Cyrus to have his way. But it had been unwise to put an idealist back into their corrupted city and expect them to be happy enough to simply be there.

“I can’t stop you from staying here and doing your duty as a member of my campaign,” Ramses said evenly. This was untrue. Many of the people who worked for him had biocybernetic augmentations, and many of his biocybernetic augmentations had emergency override functions. It would go faster if Lito did not know that. “But you have responsibilities outside of his election. There are higher callings for you than this one. Remember that.” And before Lito could say anything else, Ramses O’Flaherty ended the call.

That would keep him out of his hair, anyway. Reinforcements might have been helpful, but Ramses thought it might be best to have limited witnesses while he dealt with an intruder. With the call ended, he had the headspace to move some of the security feeds out of his vision. The office wasn’t decorated much to his taste--far too minimalist; he liked the way accumulations of objects carried the false weight of a stable lifetime with them--but it was a temporary measure while he and Pereyra waited out the death rattle of the election.

He turned to the guards on either side of him. They hadn’t been given speech, or much in the way of thought. “Go,” he said aloud, and lightly pushed instructions from his network to theirs. *Find the intruder, and bring him to headquarters.* He didn’t have much hope that they would complete even the first step, but he could use their eyes.

The guards nodded to no one in particular, and set out, with one goal in mind. They would either achieve or fail, and then they would await further instruction. Ramses watched them enviously as they stepped out, thinking nothing at all.

He sat with the silence of the office for a minute, deep in thought. His hands reached into the box before him and examined Pereyra’s goodwill gift, his nerves aching for something tangible to examine.

The campaign aides had told him that Pereyra sent a pair of shoes to any opponent as a sign of goodwill just before the election. That he shouldn’t think anything more or less of it than that, even if he had found the heels stabbed into the door of his quarters, and that if they disappeared mysteriously the morning votes were read, that was nothing to worry about.

Ramses sent the current mayor a fruit basket in return, reportedly. He wasn’t especially involved; he didn’t care about misguided intimidation tactics or their customary gift exchange. He was more concerned about gaining free reign over the city’s machinations before anyone could learn of his own machinery. Putting the two politicians together for the week before the election was a tactical move; one candidate’s guards couldn’t attempt an assassination or kidnapping without putting their own candidate at risk. There was no proof it had ever worked that way, and plenty of instances when it had not worked at all, but at least the city could claim it had done its due diligence.

Everyone he encountered seemed very concerned about his odds of survival. It was touching, especially given Pereyra’s continued disappointment each time they encountered him alive in their shared but separate confinement. Judging from every word that had ever come out of Pilot Pereyra’s mouth, they had faith in their own certain victory, but felt every second waiting for Ramses O’Flaherty to die or disappear like the rest of their opponents was a second wasted.

Ramses O’Flaherty could relate to this, if nothing else about the exalted criminal down the hall. There was very much he had intended to accomplish before the election gave its last breath. He had a long list of names that could threaten his autonomy, and he had so few eyes left in the city to track them down. He could not rest easily until he could either consign all of them to his team of roboticists and guards, or eliminate their ability to put him at risk.
There were some he chose to put out of their misery. Prototypes, mostly. Half-made, half-destroyed things that had the chance of growing and healing into something like him.

It was better, if he were the only one. He could hear their endless confusion and fear echo through him, as they tried to face a world that their systems would never be able to see as anything but the idealistic first-settlement, regardless of the evidence before them that this Hyperion City was not the one they were promised.

Ramses O’Flaherty knew well enough to know he was not what he was promised, either. He was a repository of facts and journals and drives and thoughts over which he had no control. He was made of memories that were neither real nor his own, but he had been given the presence of mind to know reality diverged from them. He had learned to discern between the two. Not easily, not perfectly, but he had learned.

Cyrus Ortega had a vested interest in taking Hyperion City back from the violent, unforgiving hands that clenched it tight, but that did not mean the person who called himself Ramses O’Flaherty did not have his own reasons. He only wished he could separate them such that Cyrus was on one side, and Ramses the other, and each was clearly marked as such, and there could be a blank space in between for storing everything he knew to be false of his new life.

It would never happen. It was hard enough to simply function while keeping track of who he was. He was full of glitches that he had learned to override manually, more appearing by the day. Wires would cross, and he would relive some old memory from years ago, vividly, in the back of his head. He would short out such that he couldn’t make himself move, even though he knew nothing was wrong with his body, only the system of communication within it. The nature of reality was fleeting to him, and had become more so with no one to meaningfully confide in, and sometimes he wondered if this life he experienced was a trick his electric brain was playing on his flesh, or that his brain played on his circuitry, or if they were playing a trick on each other and the casualty was the combined consciousness that made Ramses O’Flaherty.

There were days that he thought Cyrus Ortega was trapped in his brain, an unwilling prisoner in the wrong time, in the wrong city, always looking for a way out, or to gain control entirely. Maybe he already had.

There was such a buzzing in his head, one that had started months ago and never calmed down. It felt like there was just one thing in him that was static, and he didn’t know what it was. It wasn’t important enough to identify. He had more on his plate than that. Maybe he would set his nervous system up for another restart after the votes were all cast, and see if that did the trick.

That was the stream his life took now: find a new problem. Clear out the bugs. Take care of it, discreetly, and allow no one to say a word of his mechanical nature. He did not have the time to be the first of his kind if he wanted to get anything else done.

In the bottom of his vision, a guard was felled with a flash of a knife, and another feed of images went dark.

Ramses O’Flaherty carefully put the shoes back into their box. They weren’t his style, but he liked things in place. He rose from his desk and walked to the door. The hallway was empty and silent save for his footsteps and breathing, and the buzz of electric lighting.

He barely noticed when he reached the stairwell door. The stairwell itself was a vast, winding thing that followed no sensible path, and he usually enjoyed considering the utility of its irregularities, but he was preoccupied flicking through layers of security to try to find signs of the intruder. It would have been easier if he had taken the lift, but he had never been one for elevators. He did not like
being trapped in so small a space, with so many people. An elevator had no hierarchy in which to sheathe one’s self. Better to be in charge of one’s own rise, each step moving him further upward under the unnatural lights. Rays of true light bounced down from the domed skylight as he approached.

He opened the exit door to the roof, careful to close it behind him, and breathed in the polluted, recirculating air of the city. His regular spot was swaddled in dark as usual, just out of sight of the ground below, and he went to it, watching the sky intently for a sign of the morning light that would mark the last full day before the election.

The Hyperion City skyline rose around him, familiar and strange. The city was still beautiful, even used and disregarded as it was. Even taken and parceled for profit in bits and pieces by thieves of every shape and style.

The most common thief, the unoriginal, stole money and goods alone. Those were not the thieves Ramses O’Flaherty cared about. They had not taken the settlement he had worked so hard to create and twisted its purpose to become the very thing he had wanted to stand against (that Cyrus Ortega had wanted to stand against. Their harm was repaired so easily, negated entirely by simple acts of philanthropy; there was nothing there to dwell on.

If thieves only stole capital, Ramses O’Flaherty wouldn’t be here.

Thieves stole names. Memories. Agency. Lives, even, he reminded himself as he watched the man slice through his other guard’s artery. His movements were neither driven nor tentative. They were automatic. The clear deliberation in each step, the premeditation of every movement, should not have caught anyone off guard, but that is why it did. They expected him to slow down, to be something human, but nothing he did betrayed the natural limitations of humanity.

Another security feed ended, and O’Flaherty stared out at the sky, where the sunrise was barely threatening to cut through the night.

The Cyrus Ortega in him liked to watch the new day take the old, and he was fairly certain Ramses O’Flaherty did too. Another thing the two of them had in common.

The stars faded, and the grid of the dome began to appear like a trick of the light. In only a few minutes, there would be another day survived, another day Hyperion City continued existing despite its refusal to be the Hyperion City he had created. He had already made a better world. Now he only wanted to live in one.

It would be that Hyperion City again. There was damage to undo, before it could go back to what it should have been. It would take a lifetime to fix it. But he had a lifetime to spare.

So long as he could keep living it.

Ramses felt the blade on his throat before he realized that the man had arrived at the roof. Skin split into a second mouth at the coaxing of the razor’s edge, carved with the same dispassionate mastery as Ramses had watched only seconds before.

“I apologize for the brusqueness of our introduction, but I have a date to keep,” a voice said to him, or maybe to no one in particular. “Know I would have used more sophistication if I had time enough, but sometimes the situation calls for haste over artistry.”

He turned to look at Christopher Morales, feeling the movement split his flesh further, and stretching the incision into a twisted gash while the dull-red leakage grew into a beaded collar.
The person who was Ramses O’Flaherty and Cyrus Ortega and bits of metal and flesh saw the face of his opponent in shock for only a second before he felt the hum of his processor shake in his chest.

Ramses O’Flaherty could think so quickly that time slowed down, if he needed to. He used this ability only on the rarest of occasions. He became a controlling voice in his own head, giving himself instructions and analyses. He was not in control, and the heat of the metal in him would sear his flesh when he tried to situate himself as his own commander.

Before he was aware of what he was doing, he had firmly gripped the man’s arm in both hands, he was bending forward to carry his momentum, and it was so slow, to feel the man’s weight lift itself off of him. Each millisecond passed like a melting candle.

It was a relief, when the man was finally off of him, and he straightened up, feeling time struggle to return to the correct pace. He watched the arc of Christopher Morales’s body flying through the air with interest, and stood, stoic, as he crashed through the skylight.

The sounds came to him all at once: the burst of shattering glass. The displaced air of a body falling. A screeching cry like a crow shot down from midair.

He’d thrown him slightly harder than intended, then. For a moment he wondered if anyone had heard, and whether the truth would be answer enough to explain his simultaneous state of severed arteries and obvious survival. It was not a concern for that moment. Everyone who might have heard was dead or otherwise incapacitated.

He pushed instructions to every guard in the building. *Get up. Clean this up.*

He looked back to the rising sun for a moment or two, hearing the groaning and creaking of human suffering rising below, while the lower layers of his vision watched beings of metal stand and bleed, worse for wear but functional.

Ramses observed a little longer. It was so rare, that he had time to himself like this. He ignored the futile gasps and cries, and stood with the fading of the stars until the last was gone from the sky.

He turned, and walked back to the stairwell entrance, encircling the broken skylight like a shell. He took his time careful to avoid stepping on the shards of glass that had escaped. The gape on his neck hung open, and his hand probed the wound to assess the damage. It came away covered in something that was almost, but not quite, blood.

His pain felt like anyone else’s. It worked on the same principles, traveled the same nerves. But for him, pain was different. It was just another in a litany of sensations that had once been too much to bear. He had learned to bear it. Pain was only ever a feeling, and feelings, he had found, were largely extraneous to his continued existence.

His footsteps echoed in the stairway, a calm descent in even meter. He stepped over the body on the ground, dodging his reach easily. Christopher Morales was not moving as quickly now, but he was still conscious, still fighting, still filtering ragged breaths through his throat. His persistence was admirable, but ultimately useless; his footsteps did not even change tempo as he left the would-be assassin behind.

He reached the door to his floor and he re-entered the hallway, dripping something that was very nearly blood behind him.

Healing would need to come sooner than later. There were other ways to get oxygen to the parts of him that needed it, but usually if someone were to describe an attribute they wanted in a politician, it
was that they were living and breathing. Ramses was not yet failing in those respects, but he was well below the usual bar for success. He would live without his biological structures, but living alone had ceased to be enough when he had decided to be a person. He had a city to rehabilitate, and nothing could get in the way of that.

He opened the door to his room. It was colder, now, and the wind was blowing through pages scattered from his shelves, and bits of glass and metal stuck to the bottoms of his dress shoes crunched against the tile floor with every step.

Ramses walked to his desk, and opened a drawer. A bottle of whiskey was there, safely tucked away and undamaged. He didn’t know if he enjoyed whiskey, but he had many years of rigid, cross-confirmed documentation in his memory convincing him he did.

He took out a glass, and poured it in, ignoring temperature and environment. He drank.

The liquid dripping out of his neck cooled and thinned as he swallowed. The glass clinked against the table as he set it back down.

“Hyperion City,” he said, intending to practice his acceptance speech as a test to his damage, but the first words were too garbled and electric and he knew that this was more of a problem than he had anticipated. He sat at this desk, deep in thought, intruder forgotten.

He took another sip of whiskey as the man’s gasps and cries and panicked breathing faded to nothing across an overly-lit hallway, and Ramses did not flinch at the sting of alcohol leaking through the gaping smile that curled on his throat.

Chapter End Notes

haha (w)re(x/cks) glass, get it
“What… happened, here, exactly,” Alessandra Strong asked, voice a spring with no target to unspool itself against.

Juno shrugged as well as he could without getting up from where he hung half-off the bed. It was bad enough getting her attention when he heard her even footsteps, when all he wanted was for sheets and pillows to swallow him alive. She was looking at him, and he had to lay there and know that she knew exactly what had happened here. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he said.

“What a surprise.” She looked the room over with keen eyes while Juno waited for the ceiling to collapse and crush him. It was a welcome alternative to poring over the pieces of moth-eaten memories left in his head.

“Can you get the door?” he asked dully.

She nodded, and turned to pull the door shut behind her, her face clearly asking, What did you get yourself into this time? Juno didn’t know where an answer to that question would even begin.

The room felt Peter Nureyev’s absence like a memorial etched onto the walls. He was gone, and Juno knew it in his sleep, and he knew it in that merciful gray space between sleep and waking when he did not need to know who he was, and he knew it when he found the words you don’t have to go ricocheting off the walls of the abandoned warehouse of his skull, trapped and unspoken. He knew it in the quilt still-tangled in his legs, and the cold of the air next to him, and the smell of dust in the wind coming through the open window. He knew it in the way he could only think in words disconnected from their meanings and images without context and bursts of feeling strong enough to leave him motionless.

*He said he would stay,* the words in his muscle and nerves said. They broke his skin and burrowed in wherever they could find purchase. *You threw yourself into the same wall until you made a hole big enough to stick your arm through. You gave him everything you could find there, because he said he would stay, and you believed him.*

He knew because this was what he deserved, and he had known from the first time he saw Peter Nureyev smile that he had a set of teeth that would delight to rip what was left of his heart clean out of his chest.

But mostly, he knew it in the feeling of metal against his wrists, warmed to the temperature of his skin.

It wasn’t the first time Juno Steel had woken up still-cuffed to the headboard, but usually he’d at least gotten something out of it. He flexed his hands.

They were only just beginning to feel a buzz of static around the edges when he woke up.

Peter Nureyev hadn’t been gone long. Juno had missed him by minutes.
Hell of a time to sleep soundly for once.

“I knew you were a handcuffs guy,” Alessandra muttered, and she reached towards his wrists to examine the locks.

He let his arms go slack in their restraints, the sound of the chainlinks clattering against each other too loudly for the silent room. “I’m not a handcuffs guy,” Juno started, then reconsidered. “Yeah, okay, I am, but that’s unrelated.”

He shouldn’t have looked at Alessandra’s face. He didn’t want her reaction. He didn’t want her to be here, watching him, but she was the only person left to find him who wasn’t Mick or Rita, so her mix of pity and rage and whatever else was in there would have to do. He thought her eyes might burn through the keyholes, or that the chain would snap from mere exposure to the set of her jaw.

“What happened, Steel,” she repeated, and he welcomed the possibility of disintegrating on the spot if it meant that he did not have to answer.

He couldn’t keep watching her look at him. His eyes traveled to her hands at his wrists, and he eyed the handcuffs they studied like an old enemy. “I lent these to him a long time ago,” he said, punctuating with a pull of his arms and a rattle of chain. “Looks like he finally decided to give them back.”

He had no reason to think that the last wrists these restraints clasped were those of Rex Glass, except that Peter Nureyev was gone and had left Juno Steel handcuffed to the headboard and it felt so much like a message. What those handcuffs said was, We have a history, you and I, and you have never had the luxury of a past which remains buried.

They said, Everyone who has ever wanted you has wanted you in pieces. They asked you to dismantle yourself, to rip yourself apart right there, and you have complied every damn time.

They said, You knew from the moment you saw him again that there was a part of Peter Nureyev that wanted you clawed open, that wanted to leave you broken and empty for what you did, and you wanted him to do it.

If Peter Nureyev had only hurt him, if he had only pierced Juno’s skin with his fingernails and bisected his capillaries with his teeth, that would have been fine. Juno deserved that, and hurt was nothing.

But Peter Nureyev had his number. Peter Nureyev knew that Juno Steel needed hurt, that he wanted nothing more than to have a body screaming at him loud enough to drown out his head. He knew that, but he left him untouched and intact and trapped with a splitting headache and the infectious, malevolent nothing that whispered all the ways it wanted to consume him.

Alessandra dropped his wrists, and rubbed at her temples with her fingertips. “I’m going to kill him,” she said, tired and calm.

Juno’s throat burned with all the things he needed to explain and couldn’t say. “No,” he said. “I deserve this, Strong.”

“You don’t deserve this,” she said, mimicking his words back at him incredulously. “No one deserves this.”

Juno’s own self-loathing struck against him and sparked into a flame. “You’re right, Strong,” he said, biting back insults and threats bubbling up from the toxic pit his mother had left in his chest when he was born. “I deserve worse. I deserve a lot worse. This is nothing.” He laughed ruefully. “This is
“Did you want me to help you out of these now, or do you need few more hours alone to drown in self-pity?” Alessandra snapped. “A guy left you in restraints and you’re not even a little bit angry?” and he could hear under her words, What’s wrong with you, Steel?

That, he could have answered.

Juno opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. “No,” he said. “Can you just check my pockets for the key?”

Alessandra looked at him, brows furrowed. “Why did you have the key on you?”

“I didn’t.” Juno sighed. “I just have a hunch it’ll be in there.” If he was right, Peter Nureyev had spent the last night putting things back where they belonged. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m wrong. But I at least have a couple of lockpicks in there that’ll do the trick.”

Alessandra waved her broken hand at him. “If it comes to lockpicking, I might have to call in reinforcements.” Juno felt a sudden flare of urgency in his chest.

“You can not tell Rita about this. Do not let Rita see me like this, Strong. I will never live it down.”

“I’m not a monster,” Alessandra scoffed, then picked up his coat from the ground, and threw the rest of his clothes on top of him, underhanded and wincing in distaste. “I showed Mick how to lockpick.” She looked at Juno’s arms. “This would be good practice.”

“Why are you teaching him to pick locks?” Juno asked.

“I couldn’t think of how else to get him to stop kicking doors,” she said. “He catches on pretty fast.” She looked at him seriously. “Did you ever show him any of this before? It took me months to get that quick at it.”

“Yeah, he’s full of hidden talents.” Juno eyed his wrists, trying to calculate their circumference in reference to the handcuffs. “I don’t know, I think if I broke my thumbs I could probably slide out of these.”

“That can be plan B,” Alessandra said drily, and began rummaging through his coat.

“Yeah,” Juno said, and stared at the ceiling, trying to stop his brain from wanting to put the pieces of the previous night back together.

Juno Steel remembered sobbing into Peter Nureyev’s chest, and he remembered it because he wanted the memory the way he wanted a glass of whiskey and a gutpunch. Nureyev was gone, Juno was cuffed, and none of what he had said meant a single thing.

He was an idiot. He didn’t know what the hell he was thinking. He wasn’t thinking at all. He pulled at his arms again, wincing at the sound of the chain and the pain at his wrist. It didn’t seem to want to give, and he couldn’t bring himself to care beyond basic irritation. Eventually his wrists would disintegrate to dust and so would everything else and none of it would have ever mattered.

He twisted his body so he could bury his face in the mattress and feel his shoulders being pulled from him. It felt like being stabbed in every one of his still-healing injuries, which helped. His head was bright with pain and murky from misremembrances, but he had to think. About what, he wasn’t sure, but he’d get there.
“You’re going to dislocate your shoulders if you keep that up,” Alessandra warned.

“Kind of the point,” Juno said, muffled.

Juno heard the sound of Alessandra Strong dropping his coat.

“Steel? Look at me,” she said.

Juno grudgingly untwisted himself. His head was an inch clearer, a milisecond faster. His head turned in Alessandra’s general direction. “What, Strong.”

“Explain what happened here, Steel,” she said. “I’m pretty sure I know, but you need to say it.”

There were blank spaces all over him, but he could recite the gist of it. It was always the same. “Every time I meet someone I try to figure out how they’re going to leave,” Juno said. “Usually they only stick around long enough to realize this is what I’m like and get out while they can, or they die trying. He didn’t.”

“Not what I meant,” Alessandra said, but Juno didn’t know how to stop, when he started to say something true.

“Strong, he stayed. I left him there. I just left him, and I’m going to keep doing that with everything that makes me feel anything.” The words were so easy when no one asked for them. “Other people feel things and it’s just another day. I feel things and… it gets bad, Strong.” He swallowed. “He left me before he could see if I’d stay. He made it so I couldn’t leave if I wanted to, because he thought I would. And he was right. All we can do is leave each other.” He pulled his wrists to the handcuffs dug into them, hard. “This time he’s not going to come back, and that’s the best thing that could ever happen to him.”

She was coiled again, and Juno waited for her to leave, or yell, or do something.

Seconds flashed by on her watch.

“Steel?” she said, and her voice was calm.

He lay still, cold settling in him. It didn’t matter how clearly he told them why. They didn’t understand it. They didn’t understand it because there was something wrong with him, and that same thing was functional and pristine in people like Alessandra Strong and Peter Nureyev. “What?”

“I’m really good at advice. Everyone says so. Everyone. And yet you haven’t listened to a thing I said the whole time we’ve been here. So either shut up and stop trying to get me to tell you what to do, or get your head out of your ass and listen to me every once in a while.” Her tones were clipped, teetering wildly at the edge of frustration.

Juno didn’t say anything, hiding once again in the safest option. Denied of conversation, Alessandra busied herself looking though his coat, muttering to herself all the while. “All you two had to do was keep your hands off each other for a minute, and stop trying to go off by yourselves to try to be a hero. But sure, if you think you have better ideas than me, a person who is locally known for surviving everything that gets thrown at me, please, share,” and she turned one of his pockets inside out so roughly that Juno thought he heard a seam rip.

“I’d take your advice more seriously if I cared about surviving,” Juno murmured off-handedly, looking away.

In a second Alessandra Strong had thrown his coat aside. She loomed overtop of him, too close to
“Juno? You don’t have to listen to anything else I say if you listen to this, right now,” she said, and Juno tried not to feel a heartbeat that shook his whole chest, tried not do anything stupid and impulsive just because he was handcuffed to a bed and she could break him in half and he wanted to be broken. “You need to get help. I don’t care how. Call a therapist, go to a support group, make Rita drag you to couple’s counseling if you have to--”

Juno’s whole body cringed at *Rita and couple* existing in the same sentence. It was a temporary remedy for recurring handcuff fantasies, but he wouldn’t say he was grateful for it. “I’d rather die,” he said.

“You’ve made that clear!” Alessandra snapped back. “You know we’re all worried about you, right? Mick Mercury is worried about you! Rita is worried about you! And they’re both too afraid to say anything because they think you’ll stop talking to them entirely if they ever act like they think anything is wrong! But you know what, Steel? The past couple of weeks is the most we’ve ever talked, and if you drop me I know that you have them looking out for you, and someone needs to say it so that you’ll understand, so: you need to get help.”

Juno swallowed, and he could feel how wide his eyes were, staring up at her. Cold sweat clung to the back of his neck, and he couldn’t stop himself from looking afraid.

It took him a few tries to make himself say something, and Alessandra watched, impatient and tired, and the ends of her hair was so close to brushing his chest where it dangled from her head.

“It won’t help,” he said, and he didn’t know why it came out so easy, so familiar. It was a simple fact now. Not defanged, but biting so deep into him that it fused with his bones. He barely even felt it, until he remembered it was there.

“Fine! I can’t see how it would hurt, at this point,” she said, leaning closer, and Juno gave up on pretenses.

“I have,” he said. “I’ve been to see… a lot of people. A long time ago. When I was a lot better than I am now. If it didn’t help then it won’t help, Strong.” He tried to shrug, and pain hit him across his chest and arm and shoulders, and the world got a little sharper with it.

“So, what? You’re not even going to try?”

Juno shrugged. “I think I’m past trying by now.”

Alessandra was contemplating him again. The concept of Juno Steel having tried once to be better should not have been so much of a revelation. He could tell that she wanted to make him think it would be worth it, to try to do more than just survive.

He was going to keep disappointing her. It wouldn’t be anything new.

He stared back up at her dully until he couldn’t stand it anymore. “So, you want to unlock these, or are you too busy enjoying the view,” he asked tonelessly.

“Right,” Alessandra said, and sat up, continuing in her methodical address of each of his coat pockets. “You have a lot of pockets,” she said, an unsure attempt at conversation.

“It keeps things organized,” Juno said, returning his eyes to the ceiling.

Alessandra paused to look at him skeptically. “One of your pockets was full of loose pretzels.”
“It’s a system.” Juno closed his eyes while Alessandra busied herself searching for the key again. A feeling that should have been dread but felt more like simple anticipation of anticlimax mounted in him with each pocket emptied.

It was confirmed when Alessandra had checked over the whole thing twice. “I found some lockpicks,” she offered as a break in the silence.

“Can you use them?” he asked, knowing the answer.

“Nope.” She turned them over in her left hand. “You even consider getting some more modern ones?” she asked.

“No.” Juno sighed. “Do you have any?”

“I did,” she said, and looked towards the door.

“Mick?” he guessed.

“He was really enthusiastic about it.” She shook her head, processing his shocking efficacy. “And it was them or the doors.”

Juno groaned, then stopped to do some risk/reward analysis. He didn’t want Mick to know about this. But the other options were Rita or breaking his thumbs. Normally he would have been tempted to go the thumbs route, but he was already a significantly worse version of Alessandra Strong; he didn’t need to wear double her injuries.

“Yeah, okay,” Juno said. “Go get Mick, I guess.”

“You’re sure it’s okay?” she asked. “This is a… compromising position.”

“Oh. Is it?” Juno asked bitingly, rattling the handcuffs again. “Then call the whole thing off.”

“You don’t have to shake those things every time you want to make a point.” She stood up, and brushed her hands off on her thighs. “It’s like being threatened by a really pathetic ghost.”

“Adds to the ambiance.” He gave the links another half-hearted jangle.

Alessandra opened her mouth to say something, then bit it back. “Just, don’t go anywhere.” She turned and took a long stride away, and almost opened the door when Juno heard from inside his chest, Don’t leave without me, Juno, and he tried to catch onto the shape of what he was remembering.

“Check my pants pockets,” he said suddenly.

Alessandra turned to him. “You don’t use your pants pockets.”

He forgot how unsettling it was to talk to other detectives. They knew too much about each other on first glance, but never anything important. All their split-second deductions were for show, and from the outside it was easier to see the exact way that made them miss the point. “No,” Juno said. “But he does.”

He didn’t need to clarify who he was. After all that, calling him by an alias felt like doing him a disservice. All of his names were worth too much for Juno to let them die outside of his mouth, anyway.
Alessandra hmmed thoughtfully, lifting his pants up by the leg. A small booklet—a passport—fell out of the back pocket as she did, and a small metal key clinked on the ground as it fell from between the pages.

“Looks like you get to avoid humiliating yourself in front of a childhood friend,” Alessandra said as she bent to pick up the key. “It’s your lucky day.”

Juno twitched his head towards his shoulder. “Nothing he hasn’t seen,” he said, while Alessandra freed first his left wrist, then his right. He started to pull his arms back towards himself, intending to try to restore his circulation, but Alessandra had already caught his left wrist in her hands, massaging the reddened ring where the restraints had cut into him.

It would have been nice, if he hadn’t suddenly been hit by the thought that he never wanted anyone to touch him without trying to ruin him again. He snatched his hand back, and held it protectively in the other, clutching it to his chest.

“What are you doing?” he asked defensively.

Alessandra pulled her hands back like she had burned them. “Sorry,” she said. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s fine,” he muttered.

“I wasn’t trying to,” she began to explain, but Juno cut her off again.

“It’s fine,” he repeated, because it always was. He pulled himself to a sitting position, and suddenly he felt indecent in the way he probably should have all along. Alessandra looked at him, again trying to find the right words to usher him towards pursuing some state of stability he knew he could never reach.

“Are you going to let me get dressed, or do you want to make sure I don’t end up handcuffed to something else first,” he asked warily, pretending to be focused on bringing life back to his hands.

“I’m not stopping you,” she said, and made no move to leave.

Juno rolled his eyes and reached for his clothes, sure to grab the passport he saw fall in the movement in the untidy pile.

“Whose is that?” she asked while he pulled his shirt on clumsily, arms not quite as awake as he was.

“It’s his,” Juno said. “Mine now, I guess.” He didn’t want to look at it or touch it or have it, but he didn’t want anyone else to have it either. It was another calling card, another name he would try and fail to excise from himself. He set it down on the far side of his body from where Alessandra stood in wait, and pulled his pants back on. More than being asleep, his arms felt like they wanted to be cold and unmoving. With every move he made they dangled and waited to fall. He flipped the passport open to the ID, just to prove his limbs and fingers could work if he asked them to.

He scanned the page. Nureyev had gotten the photographer to let him smile in the photo, and he looked radiant and deadly and Juno felt his smirk like a stake through his chest. Except this wasn’t a real ID, it was a picture he took himself, chose on his own. Or maybe he got someone else to take it, Juno thought as he stared at the image in a futile attempt to scry the reflection of some collaborator in his eyes.

He didn’t notice Alessandra was looking over his shoulder until she made herself known with a loud, incredulous snort, and he fumbled the book shut, feeling like he’d already betrayed Peter Nureyev again when he wasn’t even there. “He doesn’t do anything halfway, does he.” Her voice did not
imply this was a positive trait.

Juno looked up at her, not sure what she meant.

“You were too busy staring at his picture, weren’t you.” Juno felt his face warm, but he didn’t respond. “What are you two, high schoolers?” she asked angrily, then stood up and walked back into the room she’d claimed as her own, muttering to herself all the while. His heart was racing again, and he risked opening the passport again in the empty room.

He read the name three times before he understood what it said.

“You’re kidding me,” he said out loud, and for a second he was sure he was going to track Nureyev down and make him explain exactly what he meant, but of course the very act of him reading the name meant it was never going to happen.

He was never going to see Peter Nureyev again. The act of leaving what he had of Mars behind was Peter Nureyev giving up on Juno Steel. And as much as he’d known it would happen, as much as he’d prepared himself for it, it still felt like being pressed flat by two walls slowly closing in on each other.

Alessandra swung the door back open and threw what sounded like a very heavy backpack on the ground in front of her, jarring Juno from feeling the crack of his own ribs as he was crushed in his own mind. Her arms were full of loose odds and ends, and her muttering had grown into a diatribe.

“What did I say?” she asked herself. “Don’t make any grand gestures. All that’s going to do is cause a big problem for everybody. We don’t need to play the hero, Fox! But no, what do I know,” she monologued as she dropped rations and flashlights and equipment Juno didn’t even recognize from his HCPD days into her backpack, “I’m just the person who survives everything,” and she checked the charge on her blaster with a definitive click. “So, sure! Why not handcuff a lady with a shoulder injury to the bed! Why not leave a cryptic goddamn trail of breadcrumbs behind! Not like we specifically had a conversation about this, when I said all that would do is make things harder for all of us!”

Juno blinked. “What?”

She looked at him with a bafflement that could sear a hole in him, and gestured at the ID in Juno’s hands. “Fox left you a message. He’s trying to take care of this by himself, because no one here has ever heard of the goddamn buddy system.” She threw a password scrambler into the backpack with force Juno thought might be excessive, judging by the cracking sound that resulted. “And now we have to go rush in and make sure he didn’t get caught by some of the most dangerous, powerful people in this city, because why would he include any of us in his grand plan!”

“Oh, right,” Juno said. That was what he had been doing last night. Planning to leave and take care of everything on his own, before anyone else would have tried.

Alessandra stared at him again, and he could tell she knew exactly what he had just remembered, and that she had no intention of addressing it right now. “You have a blaster on you? I’ll drive.”

“Drive where?”

“To save Fox from whatever half-baked plan he’s trying to accomplish,” Alessandra said, short. “I assume it mostly involves murder, assassination, whatever. You really know how to pick them, huh? Though, same goes for me, I guess.” She unzipped a front pocket like it was an enemy.

Juno reached out, taken aback by how far down the wrong path Alessandra Strong had flown. “We
don’t have to save him, Strong. He’s doing fine. Always is.” He hated the wistful tone that dripped out of his throat, and the way he couldn’t stop his mouth from moving. “Never needed anyone to protect him. Every time I tried I just made it worse.”

Juno wondered how many times he would need to have Alessandra’s disbelief aimed at him for it to stop creating an instinctive reaction of shame in him. “That’s great, Juno, thanks for sharing,” she said, slightly sarcastic. “But that’s kind of irrelevant, because right now it seems a lot like your guy left to kill a beloved politician-slash-philanthropist and never came back, so maybe let’s cut back on the rosy retrospection.”

“You don’t know him.” Alessandra Strong brought a hand to her forehead and groaned as Juno spoke. “If he tried he did it. Either way, he could be on another planet by now. Or, finishing whatever job he came here for.”

Alessandra closed her eyes and mouthed some words that looked suspiciously like counting to ten. “Steel,” she said, when she opened her eyes again. “First of all, that’s not how time works. There aren’t any planets six hours away, and that’s not even factoring in travel time, or customs—”

“You know what I mean,” Juno grumbled.

“Secondly,” Alessandra stood up and leaned out the door. “Hey, Rita,” she shouted in the general direction of the rest of the house. “You watching the streams right now?”

“Yeah,” Rita called back. “Don’t tell Mr. Steel.”

“I won’t,” Juno called from the room.

Rita’s footsteps padded down the hall at a speedy, bouncing pace, sliding to a halt outside the door before she peered around Alessandra in false apology. “I wasn’t really watching that much, Mr. Steel. Or, I was, but it’s been so boring, and I’ve been getting so behind on my shows, and frankly I am on vacation and I can do whatever I want with my time so I don’t see why I can’t enjoy a nice relaxing stream if I want,” Rita declared.

Alessandra looked from Rita to Juno. “You don’t let her do anything, do you?”

“I don’t know what I have to do to make you understand that I have never had any control in this relationship.” He hadn’t even been advertising for a secretary when Rita started working with him.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m beautiful and unstoppable,” Rita said, waving Juno off.

Alessandra looked between them again, as flummoxed as ever by their inexplicable bond. “Okay. Rita, you see anything about O’Flaherty getting killed on those streams of yours?”

“I would’ve said something. Once it went to commercial. If it was a bad commercial, there have been some really good ones lately, like there’s a new song for tuna brick and it’s real catchy, it’s kind of a,” Rita started humming rather than finish the sentence.

Alessandra turned back to Juno, gesturing at Rita with both arms. “No dead mayoral candidate!”

Juno scowled. “So O’Flaherty’s not dead, according to the streams. That doesn’t mean he’s there.”

Rita’s humming slowed, then stopped. “Boss? Why’s Ms. Strong so worried about whether Mr. O’Flaherty got killed?”

Alessandra answered on his behalf. “Fox handcuffed Steel to the bed and left. I think it’s because he
tried to take O’Flaherty out, and he’s not back because something happened, and now we have to go get him. Your boss,” she motioned at Juno, who had fallen into a betrayed speechlessness at the word *handcuffed*, “disagrees with me.”

Juno sputtered for a few syllables, then said, “You didn’t have to tell her about the handcuffs!”

“It seemed relevant,” Alessandra said with a shrug.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Steel, I already know all about your sexy handcuffs,” Rita said dismissively. “And Mr. Fox wouldn’t do that. He’s a gentleman, and that’s no way to treat a lady.”

“They’re not sexy handcuffs. They are regular handcuffs.” He might not have said anything for all the attention Rita and Alessandra paid him.

“Yeah, we’ll differ on that.” Alessandra was resistant to the idea of Nureyev as gentleman, and Juno supposed he could see why, if he thought about it. “My theory is, he left to take out O’Flaherty alone, to stop him,” she gestured at Juno again, like he was an object, “from leaving to take out O’Flaherty alone, to stop us,” she gestured at herself and Rita, “from coming up with a plan and moving forwards as a group, which would have been a good idea, and not a terrible one.”

“Mr. Steel!” The pitch of Rita’s admonishments must have gotten higher with every one.

“I didn’t do anything!” He had been stopped from doing something wrong this time, and he didn’t see how that warranted Rita’s extreme reaction.

“But you would’ve!” Rita cried. “You said you would wait for us!”

“I never said that,” Juno said, even though he wasn’t sure whether he did or not. It didn’t seem like something he would say.

“Not with your mouth! With your eyes, boss!”

“I never said it with my eyes, either!” Juno frowned. “One of them isn’t even mine!”

Rita ignored him, again. “I thought our nice laundry room talk meant something!”

“What laundry room talk?” he asked, forgetting to pretend he knew exactly what he was talking about.

“Can we focus?” Alessandra asked, frustrated. “Is there a way to track his car or something?”

“Oh, sure, let’s track the Ruby7, the most notorious getaway car on Mars,” Juno said. “Can’t believe no one’s ever thought of that before.”

Rita raised a timid hand.

“It’s notorious. People might report it if he’s using it, and then we can figure out if we have to rescue your…” Alessandra paused. “Really, who is this guy?”

“Mr. Steel,” Rita said, raising her hand higher.

Juno dismissed the question of who Nureyev was. He wasn’t sure if Nureyev even knew for certain. “You were there, Strong, it has cloaking. We’re not going to find him if he doesn’t want to be found.”
“Mr. Steel,” she repeated, louder.

Alessandra snorted again. “Of course he wants to be found! He left you that ID, and what kind of name—”

Juno’s eyes flicked to Rita, then back to Alessandra. "Don’t," he warned.

“Boss!” Rita screeched it in the way only she could.

Mick Mercury appeared at the door, his heavy footsteps moving unperceived by the rest of them. “You guys talking about me?”

“What about my secretary yelling ‘boss’ sounded like we were talking about you, Mick?” Juno asked with frustration.

“Oh, I thought she said Mick.” Mick took in the room, then pointed at the handcuffs, still limp on the bed where they had been discarded. “What’re those?”

“Those are Mr. Steel’s sexy handcuffs,” Rita said to Mick, before turning back to Juno. “Now, Mr. Steel, before I say anything I want you to know I might’ve done something just a little bit maybe unethical.”

“They’re not sexy handcuffs,” Juno repeated.

“It’s fine, I know all about your sexy handcuffs, J,” Mick said earnestly.

“They’re not - ” Juno stopped himself, and tipped his head to his hands. “Look, not just any pair of handcuffs can be sexy handcuffs. But these ones especially are strictly business handcuffs.”

“Sure they are,” Alessandra said, while Rita gave him her most skeptical face.

“We don’t have time for this.” Juno felt his face burning again and tried to calm the pounding pulse in his ears. “Rita, I don’t care if you broke some ethical guidelines, just tell me what you did.”

“Okay, so, Mr. Fox and I have been spending a lot of time together and I noticed that he’s not around a lot, not anywhere in the house anyway, and he’s always going out windows and showing up with neat cars and,” as Rita spoke Mick Mercury took one long step forward, and pointed at the handcuffs, a question in his eyes. "Knock yourself out, Juno mouthed at him, and Mick fell into a sitting position on the floor and set to clicking both cuffs closed, “so I thought, Rita, this is your friend, and everyone says there’s never anything wrong with looking out for a friend when they need it, even if they don’t want you to. Sooo,” and she drew out the ‘so’ long enough that Juno wasn’t sure he wanted to hear the other side of it, “I slipped a tracker in his pockets. Two, maybe. A day.” She paused guiltily while the sound of Mick clicking the handcuff locks back open fractured Juno’s split headache. “And I throw in another one every time he braids my hair.”

Alessandra and Juno gaped. Rita, sheepish, raised her hands outward, framing her face with fingers spread in a fanning motion. “Still don’t care if I break ethical guidelines?”

Juno’s mouth was dry. “Can you,” but his throat felt too oddly full to finish. He cleared his throat.

Mick clicked the handcuffs shut again.

“Rita, can you use that computer thing to…”

They clicked open. “Do you have to do that right now, Mick?” Juno asked.
Mick closed the cuffs again. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Juno said. “Rita,” he tried again.

“I just want to get really good at getting out of handcuffs. Just in case,” Mick added quickly. “Not for a reason. There’s no reason why anyone would ever put me in police-grade handcuffs.”

Juno sighed. “Can you do it quieter? Or, somewhere else?”

“I don’t think I could do it quieter,” Mick said, then paused. “Unless…”

“A silencer for handcuffs is nothing, Mick,” Alessandra said, and Mick closed this mouth and let his arms fall to his sides, slouching. “Rita. Can you find Fox?”

Juno would have asked. He would have gotten there. Even if he wasn’t sure he wanted an answer.

“Gimme a minute,” Rita said, and briskly reopened her computer, typing faster than Juno could see, and he didn’t want to know where Peter Nureyev was.

Either Nureyev was out there getting himself killed for him, or he didn’t care about Juno at all, and both ways Juno had been left, just like that. If they couldn’t have each other anyway, it was easier to stay in this gray area of uncertainty, where the answer didn’t matter because it would never be relevant to him.

He wanted it to matter, but he never did want the right things.

They waited while Rita’s typing subsided.

She studied the image in the screen for a moment, and Juno watched it reflect in her glasses, before she turned the screen around all in one motion.

“Oh. That is a lot of trackers,” Juno said, looking at the hive of dots at the Hyperion City Court Towers and refusing to comprehend what that meant.

Behind him, Alessandra made a noise of disgust. “I asked for one thing.”

“This is at least the third thing you asked for,” Juno said, and instantly regretted it when Alessandra fixed him with one of the more-terrifying glares he had even been on the receiving end of. “And they were all reasonable and we should have considered following your advice?”

“Don’t try me, Steel.” She took a deep breath, and hefted her backpack to test its weight, and the room went quiet while she considered.

Rita raised a hand again, then lowered it.

“I did something else,” Rita said, all in one rushed exhale.

Juno was afraid to ask, but that was a daily occurrence with Rita. “What do you mean, something else.”

Rita pulled a small, wiggling thing out of her pocket, and Juno drew back instinctively, covering his eye with a hand. “Get rid of that thing, now,” he said, pointing.

“Calm down, boss, Peri won’t do anything if there’s not any blood coming out of you,” Rita said dismissively. “I got the blueprints and I read the notes and everything.”
“Blood?” Juno asked with a crack in his voice.

Rita nodded. “They’re made to fix the tech stuff that’d mess with the flesh part and scare the kids. That’s why they kept chasing you around, probably. Or maybe they just wanted a home,” Rita said, and her eyes were suddenly deep in the process of writing a touching children’s book.

“And you gave the thing a name?” This was his own fault. He should have just let her keep the damn office cat, scorpion tail and all.

Rita nodded at him with a proud smile.

“That thing was smashed to pieces. It had biological materials in it. How did you fix it?” Alessandra asked with incredulity.

“I had to improvise a little with robotics on the flesh part, but the rest of it was just following the instructions,” Rita said. “Anybody could do it, if they were really good at computers and robotics and they were also kind and attractive and open to new relationships - ”

“Yes, you’re good at fixing robots, we get it - ” Juno said.

Rita beamed. “Aw, boss, you didn’t have to say that.”

“- but I’m not letting that thing anywhere near me if you three are going to be around,” Juno finished. “If it goes bad I’m not giving O’Flaherty everything I have on you. I can’t let anyone else - ”

“Boss, you didn’t let me finish,” Rita said. “I wanna see if I can hack it. Send you messages, keep tabs on each other, show you some real cute cat pictures, all of that. I can have eyes on you, and you can have eyes, plural. Maybe shoot something and hit it? And do all your other cool eye stuff. I liked the colors a lot.”

Alessandra cut in before Juno could say anything. “Will that work?” she asked.

“Definitely! Probably. Maybe!” Rita said with confidence. “If I work fast.”

“You always work fast,” Juno said, deep in thought. There was no good reason why he shouldn’t have wanted this. There was no rational excuse he could give for her not to try.

Except that he didn’t want to. He had things to discuss, with O’Flaherty, things that he didn’t want anyone else to be around for. They could get hurt; he was always worried that they could get hurt; but it wasn’t just that. There were things he didn’t want anyone else to know about him.

He needed to talk to Ramses O’Flaherty, and he needed to do it alone. He didn’t need the rest of them to help him. He could break off, on his own, leave them somewhere safe, cut Rita off from sight--

He thought about Peter Nureyev, slightly shocked, blood dripping down his temple and knives in hand.

Peter Nureyev didn’t get hurt, except because of Juno Steel, and he didn’t know if he could, or should, be the one to fix it anymore.

In the end, it wasn’t a choice, not really.
“Why do we have to be in the back,” Juno asked from the backseat of Alessandra’s car.

“Leg room,” Alessandra replied, turning around in the seat to back out.

“Sorry, J,” Mick said, sounding less than sorry while he pushed his seat back as far as it could go.

Juno shook off the annoyance, and turned sideways to avoid having his legs crushed, giving the back of the seat a kick as he did. “Look. I don’t want any of you to go in there with me, okay?”

Alessandra cleared her throat.

“Maybe Strong,” he conceded.

“Definitely Strong,” she objected.

“Fine. But just you. Okay? It’s just going to be me and Alessandra, the detectives, in there.”

“Yep. Absolutely,” Mick said, nodding wildly and hiding a hand just out of Juno’s sight.

“Are your fingers crossed?” Juno asked.

“No,” Mick said, and hid his other arm behind his back as he showed him the separated fingers of the first.

“Mick,” Juno warned, but Rita was grabbing him by the arm and pulling him into a sitting position, laptop at the ready.

“Mr. Steel, you want to do this or not?” she asked.

“Not at all,” Juno said. “But that’s never stopped me before. Show me the bug, I guess - “ He was interrupted by his own cry of pain as Rita stabbed his finger with a pin. “Why,” the detective asked as a bead of blood welled up. In answer, the grasshopper from the underground looked up at him curiously, and he felt the air on him change as the creature’s bean of red light traveled up him.

“No one talk to me,” Rita said seriously, flexing her knuckles. “I have some work to do,” and Juno flinched and let out a yell as the creature jumped onto his face for what he hoped would be the last time.
Chapter 33

Seeing and hearing with his cybernetic eye was an experience far away from seeing and hearing without it. There were places that THEIA and Juno’s perceptions didn’t overlap, and while he became reacquainted to working around the discrepancies he couldn’t stop noticing the flaws. His left eye kept forgetting how to focus in reference to the right, and he had to continually remind himself to focus a little more with his own eye or the THEIA at odd intervals with an intentionality that felt not so much like choosing when to breathe as it did like forcing his platelets to bind a gash together and heal it over without scarring.

The heat signatures were ahead of him like a seventh sense, and they were more useful than he remembered. He played around with the old functions the best he could, a little like trying to flex the joints surrounding a newly-healed bone. It didn’t work as smoothly as it used to, but he didn’t need it to yet. He only needed it to work well enough to find Ramses O’Flaherty before anyone else.

He and the once and hopeful future mayor of Hyperion City had some things to discuss. In private. And, as was typical for Juno Steel, the minute he needed privacy, that was when privacy decided to become five person’s worth of complicated.

“Mr. Steel!” Rita’s voice shouted from deep within his head. “Can you hear me, Mr. Steel?”

Juno jumped, and Alessandra tensed next to him, putting a hand on his arm like she was ready to throw him down and finish a fight on his behalf. He knew the gesture; usually he was the one making it.

“You don’t have to yell, Rita, I can hear you,” Juno said. He didn’t know if he could get around having a permanent passenger in his head, one who was seeing everything he could and he could hear speaking from somewhere behind the stirrup of his ear. It didn’t feel the same as mind-reading. It was less invasive, more urgent.

Sometimes, when Juno was a razor’s edge away from falling asleep, there would be a voice right next to him, shouting into his head (iwillhavewhatiwant or littlemonsters or just juno? in any one of too many voices), jolting him awake before he could realize he had imagined it, and that was what it felt like. Like a late-night call from an old friend, except this one didn’t hate Juno’s guts yet.

“Can he hear us?” Mick’s voice asked faintly from next to Rita, and Alessandra nodded at Juno and released her grip on his arm to turn on the comms.

“Yeah, I think he can hear us,” Rita said at about the same volume as before.

“He can hear you,” Alessandra said into the receiver, and Juno reached to take it out of her hand, but of course she was faster. She kept an armspan between Juno and the comms. “We’ll let you know if it seems like we’re out of the radius.”

“Great, thanks!” Rita said brightly through the comms a split second after she said it directly into Juno’s head, voice not quite syncing with itself in a way that his head didn’t want to process. He tensed, brow furrowed and nose wrinkled, fighting the urge to cover his ears again, or dig his fingernails into the part of his forehead where he felt a fissure begging to open and release pressure in his skull.

He shook Alessandra’s hand off his shoulder where she was holding him back from reaching the comms and grumbled, “What do you think I’m going to do, take the thing and run?”
Alessandra stared at him in disbelief. "Yes," she said in hushed tones, and Juno decided to attribute the look on her face to the concentration and disgust it took to navigate around a felled body of the guard ahead of him. He tried not to feel nauseous from it, tried not to think about Peter Nureyev with a knife in hand, tried not to think about blood or bodies or things that no longer knew that they had once been alive.

“What’d you say, boss? She looks mad,” Rita asked into the phone. “Oh, you see that heat signature over there?”

“Tell him where it is,” Mick suggested faintly, and Juno gave Alessandra’s arm a quick tap and gestured to the wall while he looked around for what Rita was talking about.

“Right. Over on the…” Rita started as Juno and Alessandra pressed silent and flat against the wall.

“Left?” Mick suggested, as Juno caught sight of the almost-invisible cold body of a guard approaching stiffly from around a corner.

“Uuuuuuuuuuuuhyes,” Rita said when Juno fixed his eyes pointedly on the figure approaching, “On the left, yep, found it, boss, great work.” Juno gestured its location to Alessandra, and they both in one movement navigated back around the body they had just passed and ducked back down the accessory stairwell, keeping below and the guard’s eye level. Where they thought was below. They’d find out if they weren’t.

So much of scaling a building with this kind of security with someone like Alessandra Strong was hiding, and waiting, and watching, and all Juno wanted was to run out and get caught and know. He drummed his fingers on his leg, and Alessandra gave him a shove.

He clenched the offending hand into a fist.

The two of them barely moved or breathed as Juno watched the guard pass them, much closer in hue to a blue-purple than his and Alessandra’s violent reds and oranges. They had always been red before, when he looked at them through THEIA, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to know why they weren’t.

He tapped Alessandra’s arm when the guard passed, and they continued following the map Rita sent, tiptoeing at the edges of security cameras in the opposition hallway. It was, according to Rita, good they weren’t on the side of the incumbent. Apparently, it was harder to move around over there. Juno didn’t really care; all he knew was, Pilot Pereyra was on that side, and Juno only had so many things he wanted to deal with on any given day and seeing them tonight would put him over the threshold for the rest of his life.

Not to say sticking to O’Flaherty’s side was a cakewalk, but most of the work had already been done for them. The deliberateness and care of their actions felt unnecessary when there were such clear signs of disturbance everywhere - the occasional body, broken cameras, trails of wet footsteps and droplets leading from places where bodies should have been. The signs were more frequent the further they climbed, and the amount of dark red marking the tile floor told him that he and Alessandra were nearly where he needed to be.

Juno Steel knew where he would find Peter Nureyev. He was going to find the last trace he’d ever see of Peter Nureyev in O’Flaherty’s office. Juno Steel would stand over a dead body and know the thief was somewhere safe and on the run and hating Juno Steel just enough to have killed a whole building’s worth of people for him.

Or he would find Peter Nureyev in Ramses O’Flaherty’s office, dead and empty and having felt
enough about Juno Steel to die for him.

He stepped around the body on the ground again and pretended it wasn’t there, wasn’t anything at all, and he and Alessandra Strong carefully navigated the safest path down the hallway towards the natural endpoint of Juno’s dread.

The top floor was colder than the rest. There was an eeriness here, like some tension was waiting to break. Drops and smears of blood marked a decisive trail, creeping under the closed door to O’Flaherty’s office and leading in perpetuity in the other direction, and Juno was so completely certain of what he was going to find there that his legs took him in a straight line towards its terminus without being asked, one hand outstretched and the other on the grip of his blaster.

He was walking, until he wasn’t, until his shirt was too tight on his neck and chest and he turned, choking, to find Alessandra Strong grasping his collar.

“What are you doing, Steel?” she hissed at him.

“What did you do, Mr. Steel,” Rita asked with disappointment. Juno ignored her except to register the problem of Rita’s lip-reading. Maybe he’d have to do this one eye down after all.

“Wasn’t thinking,” Juno whispered back, letting her pull him back. He really didn’t know why he had forged ahead; he didn’t remember telling his legs to move at all. He chalked it up to the splitting headache and the numbness in his chest clouding his judgment, and ignored the voice that was nudging him to remember how little he ever wanted to think at all.

Alessandra looked very much like she wanted to be angry but wasn’t willing to take the time to indulge the emotion. She exhaled through her nose, then jerked her head in the general direction of the door ahead, a question on her face.

Juno looked through the door.

“Nothing,” he said to Alessandra, hoping his voice was steady despite the feeling of his heart skipping a beat.

“Mr. Steel, did you see that?” Rita asked in his skull, and he chose not to answer.

“Trail must be going out,” Juno said, and they carefully navigated forward so they were next to the door. He gestured at the marks on the floor, then down the hall. “It’s leading that way,” he said, and Alessandra’s brow furrowed oddly and she bent down to look.

Juno put his hand on the door handle.

“No, it’s definitely going into the office,” she said, and she sounded so genuinely bewildered that Juno almost felt bad about ducking into the open door to Ramses O’Flaherty’s office and locking it behind him.

The last he saw of her was a just-too-slow lunge for the door handle before the entrance was firmly sealed. “Steel!” she shouted, while Rita screeched, “Mr. Steel!” directly into his head, and they both devolved into directives and admonishments to open that door right now, we had a plan, what are you doing.

He was in O’Flaherty’s office, and his feet crunched something hard beneath them. The lights were on, even in the bright morning light, but Juno wasn’t there to critique the man’s irresponsible energy usage.
“You,” Ramses said in the eerie mechanical grinding voice that Juno’s ears had learned to interpret when he was still young enough for sound and speech to sink into him. He ignored the cacophonous chorus of it under Alessandra and Rita jointly yelling at him, muffled from the outside of the door and clear and too-loud on the inside of his head.

“Yeah, long time no see, got a lot to catch up on. Give me one second, will you?” Juno requested as he hefted a chair across the room and tucked the back under the doorknob. It wasn’t Alessandra Strong-proofed by any means, but it would buy him some time. Strong would never speak to him again, but he had a feeling she didn’t especially want to invite him to any Sunday dinners in the near future anyway, so it wasn’t so much a betrayal as it was another in a long list of advancements towards the inevitable breakdown of their relationship.

He brushed off his hands and pointed his blaster at O’Flaherty. Okay, all yours, he had intended to say, but the false nonchalance stopped at the precipice of his tongue.

Rita’s shouts fell silent. “Gross,” she said finally, and that’s not how Juno would have phrased it, but he couldn’t disagree.

Since Juno had last seen him, Ramses O’Flaherty had become granite and stone, his complexion lost of life and motion. Blood unfurled from his neck in a long, unwinding fringe, and if Juno Steel knew anything he knew that Ramses O’Flaherty was dead.

But Juno Steel had never been right about anything important before, and Ramses O’Flaherty wasn’t dead, not exactly.

He was dead insofar as he wasn’t what people usually thought of as alive. His eyes were backlit, glowing a faint red. He moved his head, and nothing on his face shifted, a still unmoving mask. His expression was locked in a pensive stare, permanently.

Juno focused everything in him on not-thinking about it, not allowing himself to turn the sight in front of him into anything meaningful, but there was nausea rising in him and burning in his chest and his knees wanted to collapse beneath him.

O’Flaherty’s face revealed nothing, because it was dead around him. “I’m not accepting unscheduled appointments,” he said in that horrible grind of mechanical sound, and his mouth didn’t move at all when he said it.

Juno’s first oddly cognizant thought was: lip-reading wouldn’t be a problem after all. His second was: Peter Nureyev wasn’t here, and Ramses O’Flaherty wasn’t dead, and there was a cleanly-cut gash separating his throat into two distinct sections, but that was as far as that thought went, and then it became stuck on he’s not here, and he moved on because there was so much more to say and Rita wouldn’t stop talking to him, asking, “Mr. Steel, I hope you know what you’re doing because—one second, Ms. Strong, I’m yelling at Mr. Steel—” Rita paused. “Boss, Ms. Strong told me to tell you she knows you can hear her and you better let her in right now—”

It was oddly grounding, to have Rita talking in the background of his thoughts. It made it easier to stay standing, even as he used his fifteen years of practice tuning her out entirely. It made it easier to say, “Looking a little worse for wear, O’Flaherty. Long night?” while flatly refusing to comprehend the meaning of the decisive line across O’Flaherty’s throat.

“No longer than the rest of them,” O’Flaherty said without moving. “Your sense of timing is unfortunate. I was about to call my guards about removing an intruder from my office.”

Juno ignored the bile in his throat at the stillness in his dead flesh and the creaking, modulating sound
of him. “That’d be a bad move. The second that door opens Alessandra Strong is going to come right in here and she is a whole lot better at this than I am, and wants to talk a whole lot less.”

“What makes you think she’ll survive them,” O’Flaherty asked, and Juno tried to stop staring directly at him, but he couldn’t look away without being too afraid of what he would do if Juno wasn’t watching carefully.

“You want to take your chances on Cockroach Strong?” Juno asked, and he was glad he didn’t need to bluff. The only doubt he had was that Strong might go after him first.

Ramses didn’t move or speak, only sat too-still.

“Take a seat,” O’Flaherty said after a long pause, and lifelessly gestured toward the chair wedged against the door.

Juno looked at it, shaking slightly from Alessandra Strong’s efforts. “I think I’ll stand,” he said, grateful for a moment of looking away from the living cadaver before him.

“Your choice.” Ramses O’Flaherty lifted a mostly-limp arm to clamp his hand gracelessly around a glass and raise it to his mouth. He took a sip of whiskey, and Juno watched with spellbound revulsion as the liquid dripped back out of the gape of his neck, cleaning off a layer of built-up seepage there. “Would you like a drink.”

It was an oddly effective form of intimidation, to be offered a drink by a dead man with a face locked in a state of pondering something mildly irritating.

“... No thanks,” Juno said, Alessandra’s yells and threats at the door and Rita’s tirade in his head all but forgotten.

“So, what brings you to my office today?” O’Flaherty asked, unshaken by the barrel pointing at him and the banging and shouts from the door. Or, if he was, he was entirely incapable of expressing it.

“Looking for a friend of mine,” Juno said. “Seen him? About this tall, you tried to get me to let you kill him a week or two ago? Looks like you ran into him there,” he said, and his hands were shaking without his permission.

Ramses didn’t react. Of course he didn’t react, he couldn’t react in a way Juno could see anymore. He stared at Juno silently, with nothing but light in his eyes.

“You know that shooting me will do nothing,” Ramses stated.

Juno made no move to put the blaster down. “I don’t know, might give it a try anyway. Could be good for releasing some of these pent-up emotions or something.”

Ramses made a wordless sound, and it took Juno half of the rest of his sentence to realize it had been some horrible, robotic approximation of a sigh. Or a laugh. He couldn’t tell which. “Juno, my quarrel isn’t with you. You must know that by now,” he said, as though Juno were simply a tiresome child. “I am only trying to make this city what it deserves to be, what it should have been all along.”

“By killing people?” Juno asked, disbelieving.

“When necessary.” He took another sip of his drink, and Juno watched the liquid drip out of his mouth and throat again, trying to replace any disgust or fear with disassociation, with fascination, with whatever expression was on the dead mayor’s face now. “I attempt rehabilitation when possible, but often it’s not.”
Juno tried to make his thoughts work, to say something thoughtful and convincing, but he didn’t have that in him. “Things are what they are, O’Flaherty,” and it was meaningless, so he tried again. “You can’t make this city the way some guy on a spaceship a few millennia ago wanted. It’s gone. It’s never going to be like that again.”

“Of course things don’t have to be what they are.” The lifeless body ahead of him tilted its head, neck oddly limp and gaping open from a new angle, showing something that looked distinctly different from the inside of a human body. “I am bringing this city back to what it was. I am the only person who knows how to fix it. I am the only person who understands how it went wrong.”

“No, you’re not.” Juno’s ribcage wanted to shudder off of him. “You’re not Cyrus Ortega. You’re a half-baked, sanitized approximation for the entertainment of tourists and their kids, and you’re made out of a handful of DNA a guy grabbed from wherever he could find it without getting caught. You have an obsession with protecting this city because you think it’s part of you and you don’t know what the point is if you can’t fix it, and you’ll kill the symptoms before you try to fix any of its problems because you’re sick, O’Flaherty.”

“What I am is not a sickness, Juno. I am a career politician. I know better than anyone how to deflect accusations that I am unfit for the job.”

“Who’s making assumptions?” Juno asked, and he swallowed before he continued on. “You have Sarah Steel in you. Don’t think there’s anybody left who understands that better than I do.”

Ramses paused at that, looked up at Juno, and Juno thought his heart stopped while he waited for his irrational suspicion to be refuted, for O’Flaherty to tell him he was wrong, and that he was simply like this, and he and Juno Steel shared nothing, nothing at all. He let the cadence of Rita’s words fill the silence for him.

Juno started when Ramses began speaking again. “If you think the forging of a brotherly bond will change anything between us you are not half as capable as I had hoped.” He looked at Juno with indulgence, with sympathy towards a toddler caught in the relentless attempt to fit a peg into a hole that was clearly the wrong shape to accommodate it. “My genetic relationships are meaningless to me.”

“I’m done with brothers,” Juno said. “And we aren’t that. But Ma was sick, and so are you, and so am I.” His voice got quiet, quieter than he wanted. The bluster was out of reach, even when he needed it most. “Runs in the family, whether you like it or not.”

“*I am not sick,*” Ramses said. “Not everything unfamiliar is a sickness. This is what I was made to be. None of me is human. None of me is a robot. I am not a point on a spectrum between those two things. I am what they make of each other.”

“*That’s* not what I’m talking about,” Juno said. “You know what the worst thing about Sarah Steel was?” He didn’t wait for Ramses to answer. “The worst thing about Ma was, she thought she was protecting us. Said she was keeping us safe.” He needed Ramses to understand, to see himself in what Juno was saying, but he didn’t know why, he knew it wouldn’t change a thing.

(Everything in Sarah Steel that could have been good died with the rest of her when Ben did, Juno would have told anyone who asked, but no one ever did, he didn’t let anyone ask. And a lot of her could have been good, but she just wasn’t that, she was a monster made of the wasted potential to be something good and so was her son.)

“Your mother killed herself.” Ramses O’Flaherty spoke without tone, and as clinical as it was Juno couldn’t help but feel a stab through his lungs every time he heard someone tell him this part of his
own history. “And your brother.”

The wind was knocked out of him just hearing it, and blood rushed to his head, but he stayed standing. Juno fought the urge to explain: Sarah Steel had two sons, and one of them was sad and angry and made as wrong as she was, and she didn’t care too much whether he survived the city. If killed him it would be his own damn fault for taking a running leap headfirst down its throat. Her other son was different. Benzaiten Steel was too good, and there was nothing in him that would throw up spikes before the city’s greedy hands could grab him and drag him down. She kept trying to make him stronger, tougher, and Juno didn’t let her because Ben was good, and then he left, just for a few months, just long enough to get out and make a life where he did not need Sarah Steel anymore, and when he came back they were both dead.

“None of this has anything to do with Sarah Steel,” Ramses continued through Juno’s stricken silence. “Her name is meaningless to me. I am like this because I am not supposed to exist. My father dug up a dead man through his writing and speech, and he brought him here to the wrong time in the corruption of his life’s work and expected him to be well-suited to living in it. He exhumed a settlement of people and gave them just enough memories to know what they were missing, and to know their memories were not their own, and you think a simple hereditary illness is enough to explain away my deficiencies.”

“This isn’t how you fix something. You can’t return it to some ideal a guy daydreamed about in his journal. That’s gone,” Juno said. “It’s gone and you can’t get it back.”

“I have already built this city once. I’ll do it again if I must.” Ramses pushed his chair back and stood, far too stiff. “I would rather save the good that’s already here than tear everything down and rebuild. And so would you.” Juno took a step back. “That’s why you’re here. That’s why I took advantage of your need for the one thing that gave you your worth.” Ramses slowly lifted an arm to gesture towards Juno’s eye, and Juno raised his arm holding the blaster straighter, twitching his finger on the trigger. “I thought we saw eye to eye. So to speak.”

Juno breathed until his lungs stopped shaking with the effort of holding air in them. “Ramses,” he said, and it wasn’t quite steady but he was saying it, his mouth was making the words and sometimes that was all he could ask for. “What do you think will happen if killing every criminal in this city doesn’t fix it.” It was fear, he realized. He had so successfully pushed it away from his thoughts that he had forgotten it existed. He swallowed nothing from a dry mouth. “What if none of it makes it into the Hyperion City some guy in a spaceship thought up all those years ago.”

“It will.” O’Flaherty stepped behind his chair, pushed it back in.

“It won’t. And you’ll have done all this for nothing. And the city will never be what you wanted it to be. Then what.”

“That won’t happen,” the man repeated, and took a step out from behind his desk, and Juno stepped backwards again.

“Would you let it stay the way it is? Fundamentally wrong and impossible to save? Because I think you wouldn’t. I think you’d burn it all to the ground first, and you’d go with it.”

“I see no reason to waste my time answering rhetorical questions,” Ramses said, and he was in front of Juno now, and his expression didn’t change a millimeter--how could it, he was dead--and Juno felt something. His head was wrong, aching like a clamp was trying to burst it open from the inside, slow and agonizing, but Juno’s arm didn’t waver except for the tremor that was already fighting him.

“Get out of my head, O’Flaherty,” Juno commanded, but his voice shook with panic.
“You may not be mine to direct, but I made an investment in you, Juno, and I’ll have it mine,” and Rita was yelling again.

“Mr. Steel, I’m coming in there,” Rita screeched into him, and he couldn’t let her come in here.

“No, don’t--” he said to her, but the sentence was consumed by a burning flare in his splitting headache, and Juno yelled out a cry of pain, lowering his blaster for the first time to claw at his crown.

“Watch the car,” he heard her command, like she was speaking through a badly tuned radio receiver playing on the other side of the wall, and the sound of a door closing behind her cut off anything Juno could have heard of Mick Mercury’s answer.

He thought he could hear typing. He couldn’t tell for sure. He was hearing a lot of things. Two sets of nimble fingers were rooting around in his head, turning things on and off, and he wasn’t there, he was trapped in bursts of his brain and eye refusing to do what he told them to.

Rita. Rita was there, and he heard her mumbling to herself the way she did when she was working on something difficult, in and out against all of bursts of sound and light and image that he knew were coming from the man before him.

Juno couldn’t help but feel like he wasn’t part of this, like once again he was being pulled along and forced to wait somewhere he would’ve rather run in headlong, like he was going to leave his body behind in a few minutes anyway and it wouldn’t be his problem anymore, and he grabbed a hold on anything that would let him think about something other than his head trying to split in two (again) and people rooting around in his brain (again) and he just needed to stop Ramses but he wasn’t alive, and he wasn’t like Rita, he didn’t know how to use machines, they all reminded him of being four years old and maybe something that could have been okay someday and he didn’t know how they worked, all he knew how to do with machines was the same thing he did with everything, he only knew how to--

break them.

Juno clicked the blaster to stun and aimed the barrel at O’Flaherty with an arm that shook and jerked, and he felt some of the onslaught subside.

It was a hunch.

“You can’t kill me,” O’Flaherty said, and Juno could still feel him trying to move around his head, the way he could still feel Rita doing the same, but he knew what he was doing, even beneath the feeling that his new eye was going to pop out of his head just like the last one.

“No. You’re already dead. But I can short you out, right? I can make the thing that keeps you working stop, if I hit you with enough volts. I have the feeling a standard-issue stun charge can probably do the trick.” Juno didn’t look for confirmation. He wouldn’t have found it in O’Flaherty’s unliving face even if he needed it. “So tell me where he is.”

He was steady, even with the blood and the hands slapping each other away from his head.

“Christopher Morales is where I left him,” O’Flaherty said, and for a second Juno didn’t know who he was talking about, because he had only barely met Christopher Morales, and then it clicked and he could process the non-answer.

Juno knew what O’Flaherty was doing.
One thing they taught at the police academy, something Juno Steel had already known, even then, was that it was a mistake to tell someone with the power and intention to kill you that the person they were looking for was dead, even if it was clear that they were.

“Was he alive,” Juno asked, and he was surprised, at how easy the words could come out of his mouth.

Ramses O’Flaherty didn’t answer.

“Is he alive,” Juno repeated, and O Flaherty didn’t answer the question.

“You would kill a mayor.” Juno thought it could have been a question. “You would destroy Hyperion City’s only hope.” Or maybe an answer. “For this. For him.”

“I wouldn’t kill a mayor.” Juno pulled the trigger. “Election’s not ‘til midnight, though,” he said voice coming from somewhere far away from his own body as the lights behind O’Flaherty’s eyes flickered out and Ramses collapsed backwards like a board.

Juno stared at him. The lights didn’t come back on.

Rita was saying something, and her voice was loud, and Juno wasn’t listening.

Peter, he thought, and he let himself out of Ramses O’Flaherty’s office.

“Juno,” Alessandra said when she saw him, but then she looked past him and her eyes went wide. He had forgotten faces could move like that. He looked at her, transfixed, as her face changed from shock to something else with only a few tiny movements.

“Mr. Steel, I’m almost there, don’t do anything,” Rita said, panting and out of breath, and somewhere in there Juno registered he was breathing a little too fast himself, and then he remembered what he was doing. He pushed past Alessandra Strong and began walking down the hallway, but walking wasn’t fast enough so he walked faster, and that wasn’t enough so he broke into a run. “Mr. Steel!” Rita cried somewhere in the background of his head, and he returned to the reassuring ease of ignoring her entirely.

“Steel, what did you do?” Alessandra shouted from far behind him, but Juno was running too quickly to hear. Ramses O’Flaherty had left a trail from him to Peter Nureyev and it was traced in blood, and when he grabbed the door handle to the entrance to the staircase Juno threw it open without caring that this would be the last moment on the before side of whatever would be beyond it.
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

this chapter has fanart and it's incredible, get a few paragraphs in and then look at it immediately, thank you tumblr user clint transnureyev (tw: blood)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter Nureyev was oddly positioned and limp and bleeding and still, and the morning light traced its fingers over him as though he were an offering left by someone who could not, would not be forgiven, but whose gift might well be accepted nonetheless. He was lit orange and yellow and green and that was useless, that wasn’t Peter, that was just his shape and size and temperature, and the color slipped away and both of Juno’s eyes just saw Peter Nureyev, pale and seeping red on the stairs.

“Peter,” Juno said, and there hadn’t been any air in him so he shouldn’t have been able to say his name. “Peter Peter Peter Peter Peter,” the chant came out of him while fragments of glass were crushed into the soles of his shoes, and it continued as he collapsed on the stairs next to Peter Nureyev and brushed the reflecting mosaic shards away from his too-quiet body, numb to the way it bit into his fingers and palms, and the sound of his own voice didn’t stop. Peter Nureyev was still and unmoving and all Juno had of him was the name he had been too afraid to make real for so long. He had been given so much time and he had refused to use a single second of it and now it was gone and he should have known, he should have known this was how it would end.

Juno wanted to reach out and touch him and feel if there was any warmth left in his skin but he couldn’t allow himself to make contact, couldn’t let the edge of a finger touch a single hair on his head because if he touched Peter Nureyev and Peter Nureyev was dead it would be his fault for making it real and Juno Steel could not kill Peter Nureyev, too. He planted one hand to the left of his head and the other to the right, and crouched over him, and splinters of glass licked at his hands but he couldn’t feel a thing. “Peter? Peter.”

This was the part of the story where they woke up, this was the part of the story where they heard his voice and their eyes opened and he knew they were going to be okay, it had never worked out that way for him before but that only meant that the universe owed him one, just once one of them would wake up and see him and be okay, just this one time even if every other time they left him and never came back and all they let him keep was a cold body while he screamed into his comms receiver and sometimes he didn’t even get to have that. “Peter, please,” he said quietly, and Peter Nureyev didn’t move, and Juno couldn’t touch him.

Peter Nureyev was a body lying in sprawled and unwoven disarray across the stairs, a disassembling image that Juno couldn’t process, and Juno couldn’t breathe or think or move because if he stayed just like this time didn’t have to do its work. He could stand resolute if he had to, if it meant keeping Peter Nureyev here, but it was a fragile armistice, and if he did anything, anything at all, time would inch forward again and leave Peter Nureyev’s life on the ground behind it.

He was bleeding so much, and he knew in his head that it wasn’t even close to the worst he’d ever seen but it was a lot, too much in the same way that liquids always were so much more than their container, and he knew if he moved either of his hands they would reveal themselves to be stuck to
the ground beneath, and he would see the left-behind afterimages of his handprints traced in the blood of a thief. “Peter,” he breathed, because he couldn’t say anything else, and he owed him so much of that name after all this time.

There was another world where Juno was holding Peter Nureyev’s body close to his chest, and Juno wanted to be there, but in that world Peter Nureyev was dead dead dead dead dead and here there was no way to know, Juno was keeping him alive by not letting anything touch him, he was going to keep Peter Nureyev safe.

His hands were floating around Peter Nureyev’s head and, yes, his palms and fingertips were dark dark red, if he touched Peter Nureyev now he would anoint him with his own blood and Juno wanted to throw up.

He killed Ramses O’Flaherty for this. Just shot him where he stood. He killed him so he should have been able to take the guy’s goddamn pulse, right? Should have been able to put his fingers to his wrist and find some kind of movement there, or move his hand to Peter’s mouth to feel whether he was breathing, or—

Peter Nureyev’s eyelids fluttered, just for a second, just quickly enough that Juno might have imagined it, and that was what made Juno move again. “Peter?” he said, a little too loud, and Peter didn’t move but Juno’s ear was already pressed against Peter’s chest and for a second there was nothing but then suddenly there was something instead, and Juno had to hear it and feel it a couple more times to make sure the sound wasn’t imagined, and then two more after that to make sure it was still there, and then just one more because what if it stopped while he was just sitting there listening instead of doing something, what if it ceased entirely because Juno wasn’t helping him, and then Juno lost count, and he let himself be volleyed between the dread of silence and momentary relief of tension and sound but he didn’t let himself think the word alive.

From somewhere several featureless deserts away from where Juno’s thoughts were now, a ding went off in his head. A third party is requesting permission to screenshare, a sanitized voice in his head intoned. Do you accept the request?

He didn’t even hear it, the same way he didn’t hear Rita calling for him to listen to me or the sound of the city waking up outside. He didn’t hear anything but what Peter Nureyev needed him to hear if he wanted to keep his heartbeat from teetering to a halt. Juno ignored every voice in his head the same way he had learned to ignore his own, and listened to the uneven sounds of expansion and contraction beneath him, too intent on keeping Peter here to notice the footsteps that tripped to a halt in the doorway, or the voice that said, “Shit,” or the one following behind it that said, “J,” or the sound of glass crushed underfoot as they approached him. He didn’t notice until Alessandra Strong was reaching an arm in his direction and saying, “We have to get him to a hospital, now,” and the tone and closeness of her voice was immediate enough for Juno to register the words.

“No. No, you can’t touch him.” Another ding went off in his head, but Juno didn’t have the time to attend to it. He found himself kneeling, one hand on Peter’s chest and the other held in front of him to keep Alessandra back, his body always the most useful barrier he had. “You touch someone and they’re like this, you go to pick him up and get help, their spine goes out of alignment and they die right there.”

Alessandra put both of her hands up, and took a step forward. “I know, Juno. But we can’t just leave him here.” Another ding, again pushed back to the same place where Rita was saying... something. Words. He wasn’t sure what.

Alessandra took another step forward, and Juno didn’t think, just let his arms do what they wanted and aimed his blaster at her. “Don’t touch him.”
“Woah, woah, J, calm down,” Mick asked from next to the door, where he was crouched on the ground with one hand balancing on the floor, looking exactly like he did when he was very close to passing out, and Juno wondered why he would do that when there were so many splinters of glass littering the tile.

Alessandra turned to Mick and shook her head, a warning not to speak. Like Juno was something too volatile to handle, like they had no idea what would happen if they tried to move Peter Nureyev from anywhere but right here, like they didn’t care that right here in this place and moment Peter Nureyev didn’t have to be dead yet. “Steel, put that thing down and get a hold of yourself,” she commanded, suddenly at her full height. “We can get him out of here and take care of him but you have to let me move him first, and if you can’t handle that I need you not to shoot at me for trying.”

Juno looked at the arm holding the blaster like it was a stranger to him. “We can’t move him, Strong,” he repeated, tucking the thing away while trying to remember when he had pulled it out. “And we can’t…” Juno should have paid attention after they pulled each other out of that tomb, when Peter had brought him to the hospital without anyone finding out who he was. All he had been thinking about then was how much he hadn’t been prepared to survive, he had thought he was finally going to make up for all those years of people dying for him and now he was alive and he didn’t deserve it, he never had but he had to keep being alive anyway and he didn’t know how, and now he had no goddamn idea how to get Peter Nureyev into a hospital without compromising his whole secret goddamn identity and he would kill Peter Nureyev one way or the other. “We can’t take him to a hospital.”

Alessandra Strong let out a cry of frustration. “Of course we can’t, why would it be simple? Why would this one thing be-”

“Al,” Mick said from the wall, and Alessandra froze midword, turning to look at him. Mick looked pointedly at Juno, who found himself halfway to standing, one hand still keeping Peter Nureyev’s heartbeat from stopping and the other ready to… something. Stop her. Keep him safe.

Alessandra looked at him, and she must have seen something there, because she took a breath, and her voice fell in an exhausted heap as she relaxed out of her soldier’s stance. “Okay. No hospitals. We will... figure that out.”

Juno eyed her with distrust, but he sunk back down, wary and ready to leap if he needed to. “No hospitals. Or doctors.”

“Yes,” she said.

Juno stared at her for a moment longer, then looked at Mick, who was firmly on the ground now, turning the color of ash and paper, then at Peter, pale and unmoving but breathing, and then back at Alessandra. Tinny shouting sounded somewhere in his head, and that insistent beeping kept coming back and making itself known, but Juno had stopped hearing his own thoughts. He heard blood in his ears and Alessandra Strong’s voice and Nureyev’s breathing, now that he could feel it right there under his palm, and he heard that it was wrong, and Peter Nureyev was colder than he was supposed to be. Peter Nureyev was supposed to be warmer than he was, he remembered, and Peter Nureyev wasn’t, even through layers of fabric and with his body unspooled and lying in the sun.

“Okay,” Juno said, and he heard the voice he had been ignoring say, Permissions Granted, and suddenly he was seeing a different room out of one side of his head. It was familiar. It was the same one he had just left.

”Finally, Mr. Steel, boss, I know you can hear me, Mr. Steel what do we do,” Rita asked, and Juno was seeing the room through Rita’s glasses and he couldn’t be in there, he needed to be here, so he
swiped the image away and returned to Alessandra, speaking steadily and approaching once more.

“... but we can’t leave him here, Steel, do you understand that?”

“Yes,” Juno said, because he did, to a point.

Alessandra nodded. “Good. I’m going to lift him, okay?”

Juno shook his head, fast and frantic. “You can’t, his spine needs to stay--”

“I know!” Alessandra snapped, too loud, and Juno flinched back. She paused, and evened her tone. “I know what I’m doing. If we don’t move him he will die here, Steel, so let me do this.” She turned to Mick. “Get the car and drive up to the roof. We’ll meet you there.”

“Uhh. Yes. Sir,” Mick said, eyes wide and chest heaving, and he reached a hand for the door without getting up.

“We can’t leave Rita,” Juno said automatically, because somewhere off to the side of his vision he could see what she was doing and he didn’t understand what it was but she shouldn’t have been doing it alone.

“I know. I’m thinking,” Alessandra said. “Hold his head in place while I lift.” She stretched her arms and looked at the body on the ground, approximating the path of least harm as Mick opened the door, dragging himself to a standing position as he did so.

Just as he reached his feet, someone swung the door aside, and Juno heard the clicking of high heels over Mick stumbling back onto the ground before he fully processed what he was seeing.

“Who sent you?” Pilot Pereyra asked with inexplicable delight. They weren’t especially large, but somehow their form filled the entire doorway, pristine and imposing in their dressing gown and with a full, flawless contour. “The team told me they weren’t getting any more assassins after last year. Was it Michelangelo?” they asked knowingly.

“We don’t have time for this,” Alessandra Strong said.

Pereyra looked at her, bemused. “Neither do I,” they said. “I only wanted to congratulate you on a job well done. Or, done,” they edited, glancing at where Peter Nureyev lay on the ground. “Was he new at this?.”

“We’re not assassins,” Alessandra Strong said.

The mayor smiled, skeptical. “Of course you’re assassins. You killed a politician for hire.” They stretched their arms over their head. “I’m all for rebranding, but let’s not mince words.”

“I want to say for the record that I didn’t kill anyone, but if there is payment coming I will accept it,” Mick said from the ground, raising a hand and looking at Juno.

“No one is going to pay us, Mick,” Juno said, distracted.

“Because we aren’t assassins,” Alessandra Strong grumbled to no one.

Pereyra turned to glance at Mick as though seeing him for the first time.

“What is this, some kind of lost mailman?” they commented, gesturing. “How did he get in here?”

“The door,” Mick said, glad to have a question he knew how to answer.
Pereyra glared at him. “I didn’t ask you.” They turned back to where Juno and Alessandra knelt on either side of Peter Nureyev’s limp body. “Who hired you?”

“Look, Pereyra, we’d love to answer your questions, but there’s a Ramses-shaped corpse in Ramses O’Flaherty’s office and we’ve got to get this guy to a hospital, so let’s catch up later, when no one in the room’s bleeding to death, okay?” Alessandra asked. “Let’s go, Steel.”

“You would be surprised how hard it is to find a room where no one is bleeding to death,” Pereyra commented.

“For you?” Alessandra asked. “I’m not shocked. Now, can you get to whatever it is you do all day so we can get out of here and I can go back to my job?”

Pereyra laughed, and turned to walk out the door. “You’re not assassins at all, are you?” they asked, and no one answered. “Great. Then let me explain: I am very busy with some more… personal pursuits, right now, which I would love to be getting to. Dealing with this mess would take time away from them. But, if no one from my office hired you, none of that is my problem.”

“That’s… exactly what I was saying, yes,” Alessandra said, and looked to Juno for confirmation, but Juno was far away, in some other room.

“What is my problem,” Pereyra continued, glaring at her, “is rewriting an entire acceptance speech to include my opponent’s untimely and unfortunate demise before they announce the outcome of the race, so if you don’t mind, I have to go and fire my speechwriter for her lack of foresight.” They took a few steps, then paused next to Mick, looking him over carefully. “Do you write?” they asked. “You have the mismatched clothing, and the general air of,” they paused to pick the right word, “grime.”

Mick opened his mouth while he considered his answer. “I mean, I dabble,” he started, but Juno interrupted him.

“You know, Pereyra,” His voice was steadier than it felt in his throat. “I think it’s a little your problem.”

Pereyra glanced back over their shoulder. “And why would that be?” they asked, with a perfected tone of boredom.

“Because you were just framed for the murder of your opponent,” Juno said calmly, watching Rita wipe her hands frantically on a set of curtains while a person shaped object fell unceremoniously down. “Got stabbed with one of your shoes and pushed out the window. It’s not the best frame-up I’ve ever seen,” he added, watching Pilot Pereyra’s face process this, “but it’s not the worst, either. Enough for you to get caught up in more courtroom drama than you want. And it seems like you’re in a hurry, Mx. Mayor. Fastest way out of here is a good old-fashioned cover-up.”

“Wait, what?” Alessandra asked.

“Yeah, that’s why I never bring her anywhere,” he said, referring to Rita. “Worked out this time, though,” Juno said, keeping count of heartbeats and breaths under his hand. “It’s a busy street, Pereyra, and anyone can look up and find him there any minute. I wouldn’t waste any time.” He looked at Peter’s face, and wondered if he could hear any of this.

Pereyra shook their head, baffled. “You know I have the entire police force on my side? Nothing is going to happen to me. The last time someone tried to make me face a consequence they woke up in the Cerberus Province with a new name. When they tried to come back it was like they had never
existed,” they said fondly. “I wonder how they’re doing.”

“The HCPD still have to make a show of doing their job sometimes,” Juno said, not looking at them. “If they don’t everyone will know you’re just another common criminal strong-arming your way to the top. You have to at least pretend you’re meaningfully subverting due process.”

“I am not a common criminal,” they said angrily, the way Juno knew they would.

“Mick, get the car,” he said, without looking up. “And grab Rita on your way down, will you?”

“Uh. Yeah,” Mick said, still shocked and uncertain, and Juno looked up in time to see him navigate carefully around the mayor, keeping an arm’s length between them as he passed through the door. “Still the roof?”

“Yeah. See you there,” Juno said, some deep inner part of him relishing the sight of Pilot Pereyra trying to work out their part in all this. “Strong? Help me get him upstairs,” Juno said, and Alessandra nodded, slightly shocked.

“This has nothing to do with me,” the mayor said with a sudden look of understanding. “You aren’t here for me at all.”

“No,” Juno said. “But no one else is going to clean up this mess.” Alessandra nodded at him, and Juno placed his hands beneath Peter’s head and neck, holding him carefully in place.

He held his breath when they lifted him, and they both froze when Peter Nureyev was in the air, supported only by their arms.

“He’s okay?” Alessandra asked.

“I… think so,” Juno said, finally feeling the dread overflow in his chest, and his own breathing grew shallower with panic and he couldn’t do this, this was Peter Nureyev and it was his fault.

“Keep it together, Steel,” Alessandra warned softly. “One step at a time,” and then they were moving, and leaving Pilot Pereyra behind to scramble for the high ground.

The mayor sighed. “You’ll owe me a favor. All of you,” they projected after the detectives, as though this were only a mildly irritating setback. To them, maybe it was.

“Get in line,” Alessandra said without a pause or a glance in their direction, jerking her head in Juno’s direction. “If you really want a favor from me, you can collect it from Steel.”

“I think I like you,” Pereyra said with surprised respect.

“Please don’t,” Alessandra Strong told the acting mayor of Hyperion City as they reached the top of the stairs, then added to Juno, “Steel, if we go down for this I’m pinning it all on you.”

“Wouldn’t expect anything less,” Juno said grimly. It wouldn’t be the worst thing that could happen to him.

Alessandra nodded, and hefted Peter carefully to a slightly safer angle. “Get the door.”

Juno nodded, and carefully shifted his hold on Peter Nureyev’s head and neck so he could open the door to the roof without letting Peter Nureyev die in his arms. As he did, he heard Pereyra downstairs, speaking briskly into their comms.

“Hello, David, quick question: how quickly can you cover up a murder?” A pause. “No, it’s not
hypothetical. When has it ever been hypothetical?” Juno and Alessandra brought Peter Nureyev slowly through the door while the mayor listened to their answer. “Why do you always assume it was me? I’m a very busy mayor, David, how do you expect me to find that kind of time?”

The door swung closed behind them, and they waited for their car to arrive.

“You think that’s going to work?” Juno asked.

“Absolutely not,” Alessandra said. “You?”

“Depends how badly they need a favor,” Juno said, then looked down at Peter. “Think he’s…”

He didn’t finish.

“I have no idea,” Alessandra Strong said. “Keep breathing, Steel,” she added, and Juno realized he wasn’t, and that the edges of his vision were going gray. “Steel? Steel, you have to stay with me.”

“Right,” he said, but he was shaking, and his head was somewhere else, but he had to stay here and hold Peter Nureyev’s head up until Rita and Mick came up in the car. So he stayed, until they arrived on the roof, until he was holding Peter Nureyev still in the backseat, until he finally looked at him and saw: this was blood, this was a body, this was his hands covered in blood again and the head of someone dying on his lap and he couldn’t see or feel anything else and his mother and his brother had just died again but this time he was there, this time he was there and he saw it and it was him that had killed them, with his own hands this time, not neglect, not lack of understanding, with a shot from a blaster and a quip, and now Peter Nureyev was bleeding on his lap and he still wasn’t awake and Juno Steel couldn’t hang on any longer pretending none of it was real, and he said, “I have to,” but that was too much, and he saw Rita lunge to keep him from pitching forward and toppling over next to her and then the world pulled him under.

I think he’s waking up, a voice said, and Juno’s eyes shot open, and he grabbed the first arm within reach and pulled.

“Where is he,” Juno said, and Rita shook him off.

“I’m right here,” a voice said.

“Not you, Mick,” Juno said automatically, then stopped. “That came out wrong.”

“No, I get it,” Mick said.

“He’s right there, Mr. Steel,” she said, and Juno blinked. The world looked bigger than usual. Probably because he could see all of it. It was clearer, too.

It was his office. Alessandra was leaning against the desk. Mick Mercury was on the floor, cross-legged and leaning forward on his elbows. Juno was slouching off of his chair, and he pulled himself up before he could fall off. Rita was staring up at him, her chin resting on the chair arm.

And Peter Nureyev was asleep on the couch, with a blanket pulled over him, and he didn’t look right yet but his wasn’t bent wrong anymore and his cuts had already started healing over.

“What happened,” Juno asked, and the panic was rising. “He didn’t wake up yet?”

“He did,” Mick said.
“You both keep missing each other, it’s like a movie,” Rita added.

“He’s pretty out of it. I don’t think he’s used to taking pain medication.” Alessandra gestured at the side table, which was all pill bottles and glasses of water. “Kind of a lightweight.”


“How do you know he’s okay?” Juno asked, calmness years behind him. “He’s not awake.”

“Relax, J, could an unwell man steal this?” Mick asked, picking up a stethoscope from the ground and showing it to him.

Juno stared at it, trying to puzzle through the meaning. “You took him to a hospital?”

Alessandra put her face in her hands.

“... No,” Rita tried. Juno’s heart was racing again. “Well, okay, yes, but it’s fine, Mr. Steel--”

“Like hell it’s fine! Were there cameras? Did you use his name? How did you get him in? How did he get out?”

“None of us know how to deal with back injuries! We brought him in as Earl Fox long enough to get him looked at and find a brace, I know that’s not his name, Steel,” Alessandra said with a meaningful look, and Juno scowled and tried to think of every way he could keep anyone from finding Peter Nureyev. “Rita took care of the cameras. It’s fine.”

Rita knew cameras. That was good. “And no one saw him?”

“No one but the doctor,” Rita promised. “City’s a little distracted right now, boss.”

“What’s happening with O’Flaherty?” Juno asked.

Rita, Mick, and Alessandra looked at each other.

“Yeah, we have no idea,” Mick said.

“No one’s said anything yet, so that’s good,” Rita said with trepidation.

“But they could just be waiting to put us on trial for a combination of murder and treason, Rita,” Alessandra said with frustration.

“It seemed like a good idea at the time!” Rita said. “And it didn’t look like you were going to do anything with the dead cyborg in the office!”

“You had a robot that was specifically built to fix things!” Alessandra cried back.

“Ohhhh no, I put up with a lot in this job, but zombie cyborgs is where I draw the line!” Rita said, and Mick nodded in agreement.

Juno interrupted before they got too deep into the minutiae of Rita’s decision-making process. “So he’s okay? So he’ll be okay.”

“Yes.” Alessandra stood, and took her keys out of her pocket. “He’ll be fine as long as you both stop
“doing that thing you do where you’re idiots who try to get hurt,” she said, and pulled her hair into a high ponytail. “Probably he’s going to need some kind of physical therapy. You too. Go to a doctor, Steel.” She walked to the side of the room and picked a bag up off the ground. “I’m heading home. Either of you want a ride?” She directed the last at Rita and Mick.

“You’re just going?” Juno asked.

“I’m just going. This isn’t my responsibility anymore.” She moved her arms back to stretch her back. “You can take care of it from here. And I kind of want to get this looked at,” she said, gesturing at her broken hand. “I think it’s okay, but I’d rather get it checked.”

“It was never your responsibility,” Juno said.

“You hired me,” she said flatly, and Juno shrugged, because he couldn’t argue with that. She addressed Mick and Rita again. “I really need to go take a very long car ride. I’ll be yelling about Steel for at least five minutes of it. Both of you are welcome to join. I don’t know if we should leave Steel alone—”

“I’ll be fine,” he said, reading the labels of the pill bottles set on the table next to Peter Nureyev’s head.

Mick raised a hand. “I should probably tell my dad where I am,” he said apologetically, and Juno frowned.

“Oh. Yeah, this is probably going to be hard to explain,” Juno said.

Mick shrugged. “The worst part’ll probably be telling him I lost my job. The rest is kind of… not unlike what I usually tell him when I’m gone for a while.” He got up. “How quick do you think I can file a patent for a comms you can throw?”

Juno considered this. “Not quick enough, probably.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Mick said, putting on his jacket. “You gonna be okay?”

“I’ll be fine. Go home,” Juno said, looking over at Peter.

Mick followed his gaze. “You think he likes soup?”

“Don’t cook anything,” Juno warned.

Mick accepted this, and nodded. “See you?”

“See you,” Juno said, and he watched as Mick and Alessandra left.

Juno looked down to Rita. “You can go, if you want.”

“I know,” she said.

“They’re probably going to complain about me in the car. Wouldn’t want you to miss out.”

“I don’t know,” she said, but her eyes were on the door. “You’re really sure you’re going to be okay?”

“I am,” he said, and he meant it. “You should go, I don’t know. Rest. Watch a stream. Make that thing a hat or something.”
She didn’t move, and instead turned to Juno, studying his face. “You want to be alone with him,” she concluded, holding a self-satisfied smirk just under her serious expression.


Rita beamed. “Okay, boss,” she said. “I’ll be back tomorrow, bright and early. Ish.” She stood up, suddenly as energetic as ever, and half-jogged out the door, grabbing her coat on the way and letting the coat rack topple over behind her. “Wait up!” Juno heard her yell as she ran down the hallway. “I have video of Mr. Steel trying to use a grocery store self-checkout and I think he tried to fight it!”

“I didn’t try to--” the door to his office swung shut and locked behind her. “I didn’t try to fight it,” he grumbled quietly to the now-empty room, and no one heard him.

Juno watched Peter Nureyev, and waited for him to wake. He said Peter’s name a few times, hoping it might make him come back to consciousness, but it was all starts and stops, never anything permanent.

He looked out the window, at the movements in the street, at a city that couldn’t decide whether it was in celebration or mourning.

It was Hyperion City. It had always been both.

The light had gone down and replaced with the usually nightly brightness when Peter stirred again. “Peter,” Juno said, and he didn’t know what he would do if Peter fell asleep without a word again.

Peter Nureyev opened his eyes, slow, deliberate. “Juno?” he asked, and he looked so confused. “What…” he brought his hand up to his face, and traced over the cuts on his cheeks and nose and hands and arms. “Scars,” he said, softly.

“We’ll take care of it,” Juno said.

“I can’t have more scars, Juno,” Peter said, and he sounded so tired, so singularly focused on keeping his skin free from permanent marks.

“I know, Nureyev,” he said. “We’ll take care of it.”

Peter looked up at him, more vulnerable than Juno had ever seen him, and Juno didn’t know how to be a person without finding something to die for. “Okay,” Peter said, and it wasn’t an admission of trust so much as it was a pause in an ongoing negotiation.

“O’Flaherty’s dead,” Juno said dully, remembering the quickness of it all.

“I know,” Peter said. “It would have been a waste of a good pair of handcuffs if he weren’t.”

“Nureyev, I swear, the first thing you’re going to do when Rita gets back is tell her they weren’t sexy handcuffs.”

“Never,” Peter said sleepily, and Juno gritted his teeth.

“Not a joke,” Juno said. “You would’ve left me there.”

“I gave you the key days ago, Juno,” Peter said. “You could have found it if you had looked. But you never did care to learn more about me from anything but your own thoughts.”

Juno swallowed, and closed his hand around the passport in his pocket. “That reminds me,” Juno said, thrusting the open passport towards Peter’s chest. “The hell kind of name is Jupiter?” He
ignored the burning heat in his eyes and the catch in his throat; in the end, the thief had ruined him after all. “You want to be a couple of fucked-up gods? Is that what you want?”

“With you?” Peter asked, half-awake, and Juno didn’t know how to push him away, how to make him realize he wasn’t worth all this. “Of course,” and Peter’s hand reached out and found one of his, and when Juno looked back at his face his eyes were closed.

“Fine,” Juno said, choking on the angry swell of water leaking out of his eyes. ”*Jupiter.*”

“Peter, for short,” Peter Nureyev murmured, and then drifted back into sleep.

Juno let his forehead fall against the chair arm. “You idiot,” he said, muffled in the upholstery.

He stayed like that for a while, trying to stay awake for Peter, but eventually when he closed his eyes and reopened them he realized he was slumped over in the dark where it had once been light. He pulled himself back up, cautious.

Peter Nureyev was still there. He looked… the way he always looked. A little pale, maybe. But. Good. He was snoring a little bit, again.

Juno could have reached out and held him. But he didn’t.

“Nureyev?” Juno asked. “You still sleeping?”

Peter Nureyev didn’t even twitch, only breathed, deep and even.

Juno inhaled. “Good,” he said. “That’s… good. It’ll help.” He didn’t know why he was bothering to talk, except that otherwise he might go off the deep end waiting in here alone for Peter Nureyev to wake up and prove Juno Steel hadn’t killed him in one way or another.

“Nureyev, I know why I left.”

Peter didn’t move, except to sleep.

“It wasn’t a decision that I made, Nureyev. It was just… I wanted to go with you. I wanted to go so much. And I couldn’t make myself do it, and there’s not some single answer that I can point to and say, that’s what I need to fix to be better. I know that’s what you want. You want this to be something with just one easy answer so I can fix it and we never have to worry about me running off and doing that again.”

Juno let his head fall back, and stared up at the ceiling. “Would you believe, I want that too? I mean, I spent my whole life wanting to be a detective. Of course I want an answer. But there’s not one. There’s just the thing that’s always been wrong with me, and it’s not gonna change. I want things, Nureyev, and I want to be good enough to try to take them even when I know they’ll never fix me. But I can’t be that.”

He closed his eyes, and covered them with his palms. He was starting to get a headache again, a single spike driving into him amid all of regular pains and aches.

“Can you…” Juno began, but he didn’t know how to finish the question. “Can that… can that be okay? Can that ever be okay, for you?” and his voice sounded so small in the dark.

His office was quiet. The snores from earlier had subsided, Juno realized, and an arrow of fear shot through his chest.
“Nureyev?” Juno probed, keeping his voice quiet, trying not to panic. “You awake?”

Peter Nureyev stirred, and his lips made sounds Juno couldn’t hear, and then he went still.

“Guess not,” Juno said, and let his racing heart fall back to its normal rate.

The next time Juno woke up, Peter was awake, and watching him. Juno had fallen out of the chair at some earlier point of almost-waking, and he felt the texture of the carpet making indents in his back, and his whole body was sore when he moved to sit up, but he didn’t notice because Peter Nureyev was looking down at him in the dark, and reaching down to lazily trace his fingertips over the lines of his face.

“You’re still here,” he said, like he didn’t quite believe it, and Juno felt a pang of regret in his chest for all the times he’d made Peter think he wouldn’t be.

“So are you.” Before Juno had let you escape his mouth Peter was reaching towards him, and before he could close his mouth around the syllable Peter had dragged Juno up towards him, pulling himself half off the couch to catch him in a kiss, and Juno let himself go quiet until Peter broke away, their foreheads resting together.

“Juno?” Peter asked, breathing shakily.

Juno smiled to himself to see Peter Nureyev undone for him. “Yeah?”

“I’m going to go back to sleep now.”

His face fell back into its usual protective stance. “Nureyev, I’m not gonna kick you out if you don’t want to--” Peter’s eyes rolled up in his head, and his eyelids fluttered closed, and if Juno hadn’t understood what was happening Peter Nureyev’s head would have crashed unceremoniously onto the hard floor below. “Oh, you meant right now. Okay, careful,” Juno said, in case Nureyev could still hear him. He had Peter clutched to his chest, head supported in his hand, his upper half hanging off the couch and threatening to be dragged downward by the pull of gravity without intervention. “I’ve got you,” Juno muttered, and shifted into a more stable position to lift Peter Nureyev back onto the couch, laying him carefully against the pillow while he looked on with concern.

Juno checked his pulse at the wrist, but he wasn’t satisfied with his count, so he moved his fingers to Peter’s neck instead, and if he ended up studying Peter’s face in the meantime, no one could blame him; there was nothing else in the room worth wasting his time looking at, and he stayed there for a while, because Peter Nureyev was alive and he thought if he moved away from him even an inch there were parts of Juno Steel that would be split away from a stubborn refusal to shift away from the thief’s orbit.

It was over, Juno realized, more or less, it was over, and now he and Peter Nureyev were collapsed against each other in another dark room waiting again for what was going to happen next, and now that they were at the end of it Juno Steel realized he didn’t know why or how any of it had happened in the first place.

He leaned his head against the cushion next to where Peter lay asleep, and his voice was soft and surrendered while he counted pulsebeats and seconds one more time. “What did you have to go and do all that for, Nureyev?” Juno asked, and Peter Nureyev didn’t answer.

Chapter End Notes
july 5th, 2017: haha it would be a funny joke if i pretended that i thought the only thing that differentiated T rated works from anything else is that you have to say "fuck" but only once, and i know exactly where and when i am going to use it
today, march 21, 2018: i can officially certify that the choice i made was neither funny nor worth it
Chapter 35

If Juno Steel couldn’t have nothing, if he couldn’t have silence and emptiness and no memories of blood and broken bodies and more people dead, then he would take standing watch while Peter Nureyev kept himself alive. He would take recounting every part of his body that hurt and every single memory he was afraid of while the morning returned. He would take trying to find something to be afraid of in Peter Nureyev other than the way that the thief made it impossible to stay numb.

He never wanted anything that was good for him, he reminded himself as he turned his head to study the flutter of Peter’s eyelids as he lay sleeping on the couch behind him. He never wanted anything that he knew wouldn’t leave him, or hurt him, or tear everyone in the room apart on his behalf and leave Juno wondering why he couldn’t make that feel the right kind of horrifying.

He never wanted anything that didn’t want him trapped, he reminded himself, he never wanted anything that didn’t have blood in its mouth and a hunger for more. And even when he did, he had taught himself not to hold on to anything worth having a long time ago.

Peter Nureyev’s arm was hanging loosely over Juno’s chest, the back of his hand brushing Juno’s thigh. He knew he was supposed to take it in his own, but that wasn’t something people like him were allowed to do. People like him couldn’t want, couldn’t have, couldn’t hold on, not without consequences.

No one understood what he meant when he tried to explain how badly he screwed up the not-holding-on. It wouldn’t be a problem if everyone would listen to him, and stop reaching for him. He was a walking signal of neon letters, saying: *I am the geographical center of a minefield,* and they all tried to get to him anyway. Some of them even made it for a little while. But it was only ever that - a little while. The blinking reminder that this would be just as temporary as everything else flashed above him, and even if no one else believed it, he knew. Try as he might, he couldn’t keep without ruining, or breaking, because ruining and breaking were his birthright, and it was too late to unlearn them now.

Juno let the places where Peter Nureyev’s arm draped over him be enough, and waited for him to wake again. It was hard to forget and easy to miscount all the ways in which Peter Nureyev was a fatal affliction, but everything ended up fatal in the end if you waited long enough.

Peter’s arm moved, and stretched, and wrapped around him, and for only the barest of seconds Juno thought it might find his neck and break it.

It didn’t.

There were two arms now, one free and one braced, holding him pinned to where he leaned back against the couch, and a head rolled to rest on his shoulder.

“You’re awake,” Juno said inanely, because everything else seemed too big, too important.

“Possibly,” Nureyev said. “There’s a convincing argument to be made that this is all but another dream.” He kissed Juno’s neck, and Juno didn’t want to react, but he closed his eyes and drew in a sharp breath, like he always did. Peter pulled away, considering. “It feels real,” he said with false skepticism, and dove back in to test again.

Juno pulled away.

He didn’t know why, and seeing Peter Nureyev’s face, caught in mid-air, disappointed and exposed
and betrayed and sad, Juno was left asking his body why it had pulled him back like that. He was left scrambling for something to say, something that would fix it before he had to think about Peter Nureyev leaving Juno Steel alone and trapped or Peter Nureyev killing hallways full of people because he thought that was what Juno needed from him or Peter Nureyev hurt under a beam of sunlight or Peter Nureyev hurt deep underground or Peter Nureyev, who kept acting like he wanted Juno Steel protected and safe and his and those three words weren’t things people wanted from him.

“Don’t… don’t think this gets you off the hook for the name thing, Nureyev,” he said, wishing he could go back to when he could only feel nothing, and hoping he would never want to feel nothing again.

Peter Nureyev played the fool. “Is there something wrong with it?” he asked into Juno’s collarbone.

“We’re not married.”

“Steel is a good name,” Peter argued. “It’s distinctive.”

Juno refused to reveal any emotion other than annoyance, but he could feel the heat rising there, and he couldn’t look Nureyev in the eye. “Change it.”

Peter faked a sigh of resignation, and Juno embraced the exasperation he felt growing in him, glad to have a feeling that he knew how to handle safely.

“Fine. I’ve always like the sound of Flint,” Peter said, and Juno could hear the smirk in it.

“No.” Juno was flat as he could manage with so much running rampant through his head.

“Irons,” Peter suggested.

“I will turn you in to the HCPD myself,” Juno threatened, without much weight behind it.

Peter’s teeth unsheathed themselves. “Always trying to get me in handcuffs,” he said, and slid a hand under Juno’s shirt.

“Change the name, Nureyev,” Juno said, swiveling towards him despite himself. He was not quite immune yet, but building a tolerance meant repeated exposures.

Keys jangled in the door. “That’ll be Rita,” Juno started, but when he turned his head towards him Peter was right there, and he wasn’t sure why he let Peter Nureyev kiss him while his secretary re-entered their office, but he did.

“Good morning, Mr--” Rita’s footsteps stopped a second before her mouth did, followed by the sound of her bags falling to the floor. She started making her excited noise again, which Juno usually only heard during season finale season.

Well, he had been looking for a way to get Rita to be quiet every once in a while. He broke off from Nureyev’s mouth and scrambled to his feet, ignoring all the creaking sounds his bones made in the process. He leaned against his chair, an unconvincing stab at nonchalance. “Rita, can you… not do that? I already have a headache.”

Rita adjusted her tone appropriately, commencing with a now-silent cry of victory for a little longer before taking a deep breath and composing herself. Peter watched with interest as he pushed himself into a sitting position, the motion accompanied by a quiet groan that did not escape Juno’s notice.

“Good morning,” Rita said in her usual voice, as though nothing she had done had been odd or out
of the ordinary at all, and Juno tried to make the color in his face go down with willpower alone before she could get a good look at him. She seized her bag back from where it had fallen on the floor and walked briskly to her desk, taking off her shoes and tucking them under when she reached it. “How was your night? Good?” she asked, drawing out the good longer than was required.

“We each killed half of a beloved politician yesterday, so, not great,” Juno said, at the same time that Peter said, “Excellent, thank you, and how was yours?”

Rita beamed. “See, Mr. Steel, that’s what manners look like,” she said, and Juno looked at Nureyev for some kind of confirmation that he didn’t deserve this, but Peter was fighting back a smile at his expense. “It was good. Caught up on my shows, returned Frannys’ calls--oh, Mr. Steel, everyone loved your self checkout video,” she added.

“I didn’t even know that was a camera,” he muttered.

Peter Nureyev smiled familiarly at Rita while slowly stretching his legs, testing their limits, and Juno didn’t think he imagined the hiss that came with the movement. He looked at him with concern, with a question in his eyes, but Nureyev didn’t seem to notice.

“I’ll show you sometime.” Rita began unpacking her bag onto her desk.

Peter bit back a laugh. “No time like the present.”

“If you show him anything I’ll change the locks on you,” Juno said.

“Hm. That does sound like a difficult challenge,” Peter said thoughtfully. “I would think it over carefully, Rita.”

“You’re right, Mr. Fox,” she said seriously. “Might be tough to get in without a key.” She winked at Nureyev. She didn’t say narrate the movement aloud this time, so that was an improvement.

Juno tried to come up with some justification why they shouldn’t be ganging up on him like this and he came up entirely blank. He fell sullenly into his chair, back turned to Rita and his arms crossed.

“Don’t be so grim, detective,” Peter said. “I’m sure the camera caught your best side.”

Juno glared.

“I’ve been telling him for years he’s got a face for the streams,” Rita said, organizing items into a few separate piles.

“You’ve never said that about me.”

“I thought it once!” Rita pointed at the pile in front of her. “I got you bandages and breakfast and I picked up some streams I thought you might like, and there’s some over-the-counter stuff and I made you a get well card, and if you turn it upside down it’s a condolences for the murder card.” Rita held up the card next to her face, and posed with it, demonstrating its versatility.

“It’s very… wiggly,” Juno said in as appreciative tone he could muster.

Peter smile, in the mood to charm. “Bring it over here, I want to read it.”

Rita’s eyes widened. “I forgot to sign it,” she said in a hushed voice.

“I wasn’t in the mood for reading anyway,” Peter amended quickly, and Rita relaxed and resumed her cataloguing.
“And Mr. Mercury asked me to give you this.” Rita hefted a container full of something that could have been, by the loosest and most creative definition, soup, out of her bag, and let it topple directly into the trash. “I’ll tell him you loved it.”

“No, tell him never to bring soup into my office again,” Juno said. Rita and Nureyev looked at him disapprovingly, and Juno shrugged under their judgment. “I told him not to cook anything.” He tried not to think about Miasma, about his eye pushing out of him and--he wasn’t going to think about it.

Peter considered, then said, “Tell Mick Mercury it served his purpose,” with a face like someone making machinations.

Whatever weird mind games Peter Nureyev was playing on Mick Mercury were none of his business, but Juno asked anyway. “What purpose? Making sure we know he wants to poison us?”

“No,” Peter said. “No, I don’t know what he’s planning but we can’t let him know that,” he said, retreating into himself to think.

Rita wrinkled her brow, trying to follow his thoughts. “I think you’re maybe overthinking it, Mr. Fox. Just a little bit.”

“Maybe,” Peter said, but he was somewhere else.

If the extent of the mental toll of Peter Nureyev’s injuries was that he thought Mick Mercury was some kind of secret mastermind, that was probably a good sign. They’d laugh about it later, Juno thought.

If the two of them had a later. If they had anything but a now.

“So are you gonna leave or what?” Juno asked, hearing how it sounded as he said it, and seeing how it sounded on Peter and Rita’s faces. “Or, I mean. Are you. Do you have plans? For where to go next? Distant stars and planets and all that?”

“I’m not entirely up to traveling,” Peter said. “This amount of metal gathers attention.”

Juno nodded. “So, uh. You want to stay here?” he asked, wishing Rita weren’t watching him so intently. “Because you can, if you want.”

“Company lovely as it is, I can’t stay in your office forever, Juno,” Peter Nureyev said expectantly, and Juno thought he caught on to what was happening this time. Peter Nureyev had invited himself into Juno’s apartment before, after all. Juno was going to give the right answer this time.

Or at least something like it. “Do you want to come home?” he tried at first, but that wasn’t right, Peter Nureyev didn’t have a home, but it was already out of his mouth. “M. My home,” he clarified, but then it sounded too much like he was pointing out that Peter Nureyev’s home wasn’t his, which was true, but, “My apartment. Where I live,” and by then Rita was watching with a mixture of fascination and horror and the usual amount of joy in her boss’s pain, and Peter Nureyev was bemused but entertained, and he felt his face was heating up. “I don’t know! If you’re tired of sleeping on my couch I at least have a mattress. It’s not a great mattress, I think you’re supposed to replace them every ten years but I’ve never done it,” and Rita looked like she wanted to reach over and shake him, and at this point it would be a welcome subject change. “You don’t have to sleep in my bed. But you should,” and that sounded like Juno was asking for him to be there and he didn’t even know what Nureyev wanted, so he covered, “Not necessarily with me there, I can sleep on the couch, or the floor or something. Or I can, you know, I don’t have to sleep, I.”

Rita walked behind him and put a hand over his mouth. “Mr. Steel is inviting you to his apartment
because he wants to nurse you back to health,” she said, and Peter’s eyes were laughing.

“That sounds wonderful, thank you, Rita,” Peter said in Rita’s direction, and Rita released Juno before he could take revenge. At least she learned from her mistakes.

“That’s not what I was saying,” Juno grumbled, sullen and contrary and not thrilled with having his secretary so meaningfully entangled in his personal life.

Rita turned to him with a look of pity. “We know, Mr. Steel,” she said. “That wasn’t what you were saying at all, but what you were doing was kinda hard to watch.”

“I don’t need help inviting someone to my apartment, Rita!” he said, intentionally neglecting to mention that Peter Nureyev had invited himself.

“You’re welcome, boss.” Rita said as though she had reason to think he was grateful, and she patted him on the head.

“Rita,” Juno warned, and Peter laughed, leaning forward as though to add something, but he bit back a sound instead and froze where he was. He moved a hand behind him, to the center of his back, intaking air as he slowly, carefully stretched.

“Are your painkillers working, Mr. Fox?” Rita asked with concern.

“I just took them,” he said smoothly by way of explanation, and Juno would have believed him if he didn’t know it wasn’t true.

Juno didn’t ask why, but he watched Peter Nureyev carefully after that, looking for signs of flashes of pain and cataloguing them carefully. He wouldn’t be the one to hurt him further.

Juno’s apartment was a little cleaner than usual. He had to change the sheets, and pick some bottles up off the floor, and move all of the small piles of things he really should have thrown out by now into larger piles of things he should have thrown out by now, but it was… presentable. Better than the last time. Mostly because this time he hadn’t been in it in a while, and it was cleanest when Juno let the rooms lay fallow instead of inflicting himself on them.

Peter Nureyev was in his bed.

“Let me know if you need anything. I’ll be… somewhere. It’s not a big apartment, you’ll find me,” Juno said, and he stood there for a second, not sure what else he was supposed to do for the rest of the night. He could probably clean the kitchen. Or, more realistically, he could stare at the wall and think about how cleaning would work, if he were to start doing it, and he could sit there trying to make himself go until morning came. It was as good away to pass the time as any, he thought as he turned away.

“Night,” Juno said, and he took a step.

Peter’s hand wrapped around Juno’s wrist.

“Stay with me,” Peter asked, and Juno waited for Peter to pull him in.

He didn’t. He only lay there, one arm outstretched, the other curled protectively to his chest, looking up at Juno like the world would collapse or start anew depending on whether he chose to stay.
Juno Steel had forgotten how to get into a bed without collapsing, or being pulled or pushed or dragged or thrown, and he hesitated, wondering if he had ever known how it was done. “You sure?”

“I want you here, Juno,” Peter said, and Juno could have collapsed from the weight of that alone. “I want you with me.”

It was easier when Juno was needed, when it wasn’t a question of what was good for a person. He could do what he wanted, when someone needed him, and Juno wanted Peter Nureyev with him, too. If only so he could be sure that Peter was breathing through the night.

He wanted more than that, but breathing was a place to start.

Juno climbed onto the mattress, taking care not to move it too much. “Tell me if I do anything that hurts you, Nureyev,” he said, keeping space between them, only meaning, I know you’re as stubborn as I am about pretending pain is nothing but please don’t let me be the thing that’s hurting you.

Peter reached out and pulled Juno to him, rough enough that it felt like falling. “The only thing you could do to hurt me now is leave,” he said, shifting overtop of him with a sharp intake of breath, and Juno wrapped him in his arms and laid him back down.

“Be careful,” Juno said, and he was terrified of breaking him but he could at least do this. “Let me take care of you,” and Peter Nureyev’s protests might have gone on longer if Juno had not immediately begun showing him exactly what Juno Steel taking care of Peter Nureyev entailed.

When Juno woke up, his arms were still wrapped around Peter Nureyev’s waist, and he waited for the panic, for the nothing, for the feeling that he couldn’t do this, not knowing what this was except that he couldn’t.

It didn’t come. Juno stayed awake wondering when it would start again, watching the room go from dark to bright and seeing the light from the blinds travel across the bed, climbing over their still bodies, until Peter woke up.

He felt it before he saw it, felt how Peter was moving in places where he once was still, felt his breathing halt, then start again at a shallower pace.

Juno waited.

One of Peter’s hands found Juno’s where it was held at the base of Peter’s abdomen, and then Peter Nureyev twisted his body with a hiss and a wince. “You okay?” Juno asked, muffled by the way his chin was now interrupted by Nureyev’s shoulder.

“Fine,” Peter said, as though the answer didn’t matter. “You’re still here.”

It wasn’t right, how every time Peter Nureyev said it it in a tone of wonderment. He would call it reverence if the thought didn’t make him want to stick his head out the window and gasp for air. “I live here,” Juno said, not knowing how to say: it’s not over, it’s not fixed, I’m surprised too but you can’t let this make you think it’s fixed. Peter was already rolling on top of him before he could begin to try, and he let out a gasp that was just too sharp to cover for in the movement. Juno put a hand at his back and felt the warm, spiderlike metal there at the same time that Nureyev collapsed onto him, arms clinging wherever there was purchase.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Juno asked, running his fingernails carefully over the long line biting into his back.
Nureyev took a deep breath, then another. “Never better,” he said into Juno’s chest.

Juno waited for him to say something else, to move, to do anything, but they both stayed. There existed the distinct possibility that if Juno moved too quickly, or at all, he would break Nureyev in two, so he stayed as still as he could, only tracing lines on his skin with the ghosts of his fingertips.

Peter did have scars, Juno noticed. Barely visible white lines marked him with evidence that Peter Nureyev had been breakable all along. They weren’t raised or ropelike the way Juno’s were. They didn’t feel any different from the rest of his skin until Juno noticed they were there, and even then.

And now he would have more. Juno wondered if he had more or less scars than the number of people he killed. His own were about on par, by his personal estimation.

A few rounds of watching Nureyev breathe through a pain he wouldn’t admit was too long. “Are you going back to sleep?”

Peter didn’t say anything, only clung a little closer.

“Because I was gonna get up.”

“No,” Peter said, voice slightly muffled.

“Okay,” Juno said after a pause.

He felt Peter Nureyev’s heartbeat slow on his stomach.

“Are you warm, or is it just me?” Juno asked, and without a word Peter slid a leg under the sheets and blankets and lifted them up, letting them transfer themselves into an untidy heap on the floor. That done, he hooked his free leg around Juno’s knee.

Juno was trapped again, and he tried to feel something about it.

“Are you really asleep?” Juno asked.

His only answer was in Peter Nureyev’s steady breathing.

“Okay,” Juno said, and settled in to avoid the nothingness that percolated inside him a little longer.

He had known all along that it wouldn’t fix anything to have Peter Nureyev there with him, but he had never wanted it confirmed. Nothing makes anything easier, he told himself, like a mantra. He doesn’t need you, but he needs someone, and you’re here, so be someone.

Juno tried to cook for him, but it was hard to figure out what Peter Nureyev liked, and guessing felt… presumptuous? Like being wrong would mean more than just not knowing what Peter Nureyev ate, but it would mean not knowing Peter Nureyev too, and, well. Did he know Peter Nureyev? Did he invite a stranger into his home? Or, maybe the better question was, did he trap a stranger in his home, because Peter Nureyev didn’t stand still—but he couldn’t travel the way he was, with fresh wounds and broken bones, right? He needed someplace to stay. And maybe knowing Peter Nureyev was a stranger was the same as knowing Peter Nureyev, anyway.

It was all a mess in his head, but he wanted the mess of it.

There were days Juno tried to go outside and Peter would try to stop him, and they developed into a routine: Juno went to work, because bills existed and he wasn’t letting Peter pay for him because that meant something, and stolen money would only make everything more complicated anyway. And
Peter Nureyev followed. And Juno would leave him with Rita and pretend he didn’t know Peter was following him, and pretend he trusted Rita not to be looking through his eye when he didn’t ask for it. And Juno would look at the dome and think, *I could go. I could just keep walking. I could leave the dome and walk across the desert until I collapse and no one could stop me.*

He never did, but he thought about it.

He tried to pretend he didn’t want to drink until it made sense that nothing made sense, and he did it anyway, and let Peter find him sprawled under the table at home. He let Peter pull him up and lean Juno against him while Juno talked about everything that came to mind, while Peter asked probing questions, until he eventually found himself saying *it’s not like i want to die exactly, but it’s the next best thing to never having been born and I already missed the boat on that one,* and he knew the moment he said it that he shouldn’t have but he couldn’t make himself care. When Juno Steel woke up they were both under the table despite Peter’s still-healing spine and Peter was holding him tightly enough that Juno couldn’t get out without waking Peter up.

He lived the fiction that the fights he got into were necessary. He lived the fiction that this wasn’t normal, that sometimes he wasn’t like this. He lived the fiction that he could remember everything perfectly on his own instead of collecting notes privately in his eye, and he wondered whether he could have any worth without it teaching him how to see and keeping a list of what he should have known at any given time, and he wondered whether the stakes it drove into his head would ever stop.

Days passed with Juno Steel watching Peter Nureyev carefully. He spent every morning doing stretches that were clearly too much for him and dabbing creams onto every place where his skin was split to keep it from leaving too obvious a mark, and it occurred to Juno that Peter Nureyev was doing anything to avoid being stuck as himself, with a limp or a scar or some other identifier that would mark him.

There were days Juno would catch him falling into someone else, and he didn’t know how to get him back except to wait, and to ask, *Nureyev?* until someone who sounded like Peter Nureyev answered. Peter Nureyev picked up after himself obsessively, as though he didn’t even realize he was doing it, and it still didn’t look like anyone but Juno lived there. He didn’t even know where Peter’s clothes were, or his toothbrush.

Sometimes Peter would stare into space, stricken by some thought that Juno couldn’t access, and when he asked what he was looking at Peter wouldn’t answer.

They woke up clinging to each other, like they were afraid the other was going to disappear while they weren’t looking, or they woke up to one or the other or both of them shrieking from nightmares that didn’t go away just because someone else was there, or they woke up to an empty bed and froze and gave in to despair immediately, before they identified the sounds of running water or pages turning in the next room.

They had a silent truce not to ask each other the questions they knew they needed to answer.

The two of them did not know how to be separate now that they were in the same place, but they didn’t know how to be together either. It was a delicate balance, to pretend they could sustain this, and it required their silence, their complicity. It required that they both act like this could be normal, that they were the kind of people who could have normal, and not the kind of people they were, with sharp nails that ripped through skin. To ignore that Juno wanted Peter Nureyev there to make him feel nothing, even when the whole point of Peter Nureyev was the exact opposite. To ignore that Peter Nureyev wanted Juno Steel to tell him who he was, when Juno Steel was afraid to even consider the answer.
The trick was to avoid it, to turn away whenever from anything not present and immediate. It was avoiding the past and avoiding the future and living in that exact second and pushing the part of the mind that was always asking how will i hurt him and how long can this last as far away as possible.

It was focusing on the physical, the near, and not asking too many questions. And it worked.

And the worst part was, even with all of that, it was... nice. It was good, it was something he wanted to keep, and that’s how Juno knew it must have been bad for him or bad for Peter or bad for the both of them, but they were too busy seeing each other for the first time to break away.

He felt himself pulled down, but they were going down together, and he didn’t know how far they could fall before they resurfaced or drowned.

Juno watched from across the office as Peter tried on the shoes Pilot Pereyra sent.

“It’s some kind of summons, I know it is,” he said with a scowl, but he couldn’t help but feel something in Peter bending over and straightening up with what looked like ease. It was good, he knew it was good, but there was a question in Peter Nureyev being healthy, and it was what next?, and Juno wasn’t ready to answer it. Instead he watched Peter roll his ankle to admire the deadly point of the stiletto heel with something that looked like...

“Are you jealous?” Juno said.

“Of what?” Peter asked with someone else’s voice.

Juno turned over how he wanted to phrase it in his head. “The entire concept of deadly high heels,” he decided.

“I can’t say I’ve never thought about it,” Peter admitted.

“Of course you have,” Alessandra Strong said through the comms, sounding very much like she would rather be hitting her head against a wall, or having a tooth extracted. “Look, just, do you have a note? Or, anything?”

Juno shook his head, then said out loud, “Didn’t find anything.”

Alessandra sighed. “Okay. Fine. This better not end with you dragging me into some other scandal, Steel.” He heard her say to someone else in the room, quiet and far-off, I used to just catch cheating husbands and look out for paranoid newscasters. I used to-- and then the call ended.

Juno looked at the box. “I don’t like this,” he said.

“I think that you could be quite stunning in heels if you gave them a try,” Peter said, distracted in the process of admiring his own legs.

“No, not the heels, I have heels, it’s just hard to wear them and,” the look Peter was giving him was a lot, and made color rise in his face, and Juno wasn’t ready to engage this line of thought. “Doesn’t matter. It’s not that I don’t like the shoes. They are really gaudy though.” Peter shrugged, and only the lightest twitch of an eyebrow passed over his face as he did. Juno narrowed his eyes, and vowed to watch more carefully for signs of discomfort. “But what are they trying to accomplish here? Do they want to win me over or something?”

“I will accept that, if you’re interested,” Peter said, still admiring the footwear. “It’s a powerful
Juno frowned. “I meant as a constituent. What are you saying?”

Peter perched on Juno’s desk, and lifted a leg to the wall above Juno’s shoulder. “Only that if you wanted to become a consort to the powerful and wealthy, I would support you.” His eyes were laughing at him.

“I’m not going to be Pereyra’s consort,” Juno said, crossing his arms and looking over towards his thinking window. “They’re corrupt murderers and they haven’t done anything to improve the city’s infrastructure. I get it, they’re powerful and their contour is always perfect and their legs go on forever and they look like if they killed me they would’ve forgotten my name five minutes before they called me in their office but that doesn’t mean I would be their consort,” Juno said with disgust, and tried to scowl at Nureyev, who was, for some reason, beaming.

“Juno,” Nureyev said, carefully. “Darling,” and Juno knew he was about to say something Juno was going to hate, “do you have a crush?”


Peter nodded, looking like a demolition expert on their first day on the job, fuse steadily in hand.

“Stop looking at me like that, a crush and being attracted to someone are entirely different things. I don’t have a crush.”

“Whatever you say,” Peter said, and moved his leg deliberately so the sole of the shoe was balanced on Juno’s shoulder.

Juno looked at it. “You’re never going to let me live this down, are you?”

Peter very carefully pressed his foot down on Juno’s shoulder, and Juno sunk to his knees. “Never,”

“Can you at least wait until after the next election?” he complained. He was kneeling now, Peter resting his ankle on Juno’s shoulder. “This is going to do things to me I can’t come back from.”

Peter pushed Juno’s chin up with the shoe’s pointed toe. “Will I still be here for the next election?”

“S not up to me,” Juno said as he felt the heel of the stiletto trace a dividing line between his neck and collarbone. Then the meaning of what Peter said hit him. He swallowed, and tried to hold his composure. “Wait, what?” he asked, then grabbed Peter’s leg with both hands and gave it a gentle shove aside. “Stop that. Are you,” he swallowed again. “Do you want to stay?”

Peter drew his leg back in, and looked at Juno oddly. “I don’t stay, Juno,” he said, and the bottom of Juno’s stomach fell out.

“You, you can,” he said, and he knew it wasn’t going to work. “If you want.” Peter was inscrutable, and Juno couldn’t stop talking. “Stay here. With me. And, and Rita, she likes having you around. I know there’s a whole big universe out there waiting for you, and this is just… this, but,” Peter was studying him again. “If you wanted to stay you could.”

“You would never leave with me?” Peter asked, and Juno felt new cracks form in his ceramic heart.

“I don’t think I can,” he admitted.

“Could you try?”
“I already tried once,” Juno said. “I don’t think it’s gonna change.”

They stared at each other for too long, and then Peter’s face was cast in a shadow of its own making. It was the end of something. “Then I should go.”

He was blocked off and unwelcoming and the person in front of Juno wasn’t Peter Nureyev anymore, whoever it was.

“What?” Juno asked. “What do you mean, go?”

“If this can’t work, it can’t work, Juno. I can’t stay in your apartment forever, and you can’t leave it. I came here for an answer, and now we both have that.” He closed his eyes slowly, then opened them again, and nodded, as though making a deal with himself.

“No,” Juno said, surprising himself. “No, Nureyev, I…”

But he couldn’t say any more. The words wouldn’t come.

Peter nodded, closed off entirely. “I’ll leave tomorrow,” he said, decisive. “I have to return Ruby soon anyway. I made myself a time limit, and I may as well keep to it.”

“Return…?” Juno asked.

“I turned him in, just like you said, Juno,” Peter said, “And then I stole him back,” Peter said, as though it changed nothing. “It’s the only way no one would look for a stolen car. But they’ll be looking soon.” He stared off into the distance. “I thought I might need to give myself a reason to leave.”

“What if I don’t want you to leave, Nureyev?” Juno asked, wanting to be angry, wanting to be cruel, but Peter Nureyev could be his match for both. He stood up and walked back to his own shoes, and switched them back on as he spoke.

“And what if I want you to come with me, detective? What if I still have places in the stars I want you to see?” He looked over at where Juno was impaled on a stake the exact length of the distance between his mouth and the wall. “I can’t stay, Juno. There are people looking for me. If they find me, I will…” He stopped, brought himself back to calm. “I will not be found. But I can’t stay here just because you can’t leave. And I don’t want to, Juno. The universe is vast and every piece of it is beautiful. You should let yourself see it sometime.”

Juno couldn’t speak, and Peter’s face closed over again. “I’ll be in your apartment tonight. I’ll leave before you wake. You can meet me there or not,” he said quietly, and made to walk out.

For some reason, the irrational thought that snuck into Juno’s head was, What will Rita say when she finds out? and from there Juno’s mouth was moving without thought, because he had heard Rita talk about her romcoms enough times that he could regurgitate their plots like second nature.

“What if,” Juno said quietly, and Peter stopped, but didn’t turn around. “What if we made a time limit. What if we…” Peter Nureyev still wasn’t looking at him. “What if. In six months, if we decide that things would be better if they were different, we meet somewhere.” He wasn’t going to do it, he had already done so much and now Juno was asking for more but he couldn’t leave it like this. “And if we’re both there we can…”

Peter stayed facing the door, and let out a long exhale. “Work something out.”

“Yeah,” Juno said, and Peter turned his head.
Juno’s eyes were pleading, and he hated that, but he couldn’t stop it if he wanted to.

Peter studied Juno a long time. “Juno,” he said. “It’s been long enough.”

“We didn’t know each other, Peter!” Juno said. “I didn’t know anything about you, and now we’re just starting to know what we’re like when no one’s trying to kill us more than usual, and you’re leaving and we’re never going to see each other again, just like that?”

“Just like that,” Peter said softly.

“Peter, please,” Juno said. “Can you think about it?” Peter opened his mouth and Juno rushed to fill the space before he could. “I was miserable when you were gone, do you know that? I’m always miserable, but it was worse, and I’m the one who screwed it up. And this is better, and maybe that’s not good enough, but I don’t want to leave that here and I don’t think you do either, Peter, I think this isn’t what either of us want.”

“We can’t have what we want, Juno. What if we go another six months, and I come all the way back here, and you still can’t leave and I still can’t stay, Juno. What do you expect to happen then? Is this the rest of our lives you’re trying to make, where we have two trysts each year and six months of hoping for the impossible in between?”

“If we can’t make some kind of agreement next time we see each other it’s over, Nureyev. But… let’s give it one more try. Can you…” Juno swallowed. “Can you give me that, Nureyev? Can you let me think, for six months, that this doesn’t have to be the last time I ever see you?”

Peter turned fully, and Juno saw the tears welling up behind his lenses. “Six months is a long time, Juno,” he said evenly.

“I can wait,” Juno said. I’ll get better, he wanted to add, but that was a promise he had never kept before.

Peter Nureyev looked at Juno with longing, with pain, with too many other things to count.

“Six months,” he said, finally, and he left before Juno could understand that he was agreeing.

The car was coming soon, and Juno didn’t think sitting with Peter Nureyev between his back and the windowframe was the best way to spend their last moments together, but there wasn’t enough time to steal a Martian artifact for old times’ sake, so this would have to do.

Peter kissed his neck, an opportunist if ever there was one, and Juno leaned back into him, hands moving to Peter’s forearms as he half-turned to face him.

“You sure you want to go now?” Juno asked, even though he knew the answer. “There’ll be plenty of time to leave later.”

Peter raised a hand to tilt Juno’s face toward his. “Are you trying to trick me into staying?”

“Only if it’s working,” Juno said, staving off the feeling of heaviness threatening to overtake him and pull him to the ground below.

The car pulled up, and stopped next to the fire escape. Peter Nureyev didn’t have bags, just himself, and he stepped onto the metal platform, seemingly without a second thought. “Goodbye, Juno,” he said, and Juno didn’t know how every kiss Peter Nureyev gave him caught him off-guard, but they
did, and Juno was still in it when Peter opened the car door and greeted the driver.

It was a decent last kiss, and it made him want to call the whole thing off, to jump into the car with Peter Nureyev and let him take him anywhere, except part of him was concrete and attached to this city like an anchor on his waist.

“I guess I’ll… see you back here. Or not,” Juno said, not sure how else to say goodbye.

“Oh, we’re not meeting here. This is your apartment,” Peter said, closing the door behind him. “We’ll meet on neutral ground. The spaceport, please,” he said as an aside to the driver, while putting on a pair of sunglasses that Juno was fairly certain were his own.

“What? Wait!” Juno shouted over the car starting up again. “What do you mean, neutral ground?”

“A detective of your caliber should know how to follow the clues,” Peter shouted out the window towards him, beautiful and grinning. “I have the utmost confidence that you will find me when I want to be found,” he said, waving out the window. And then he was gone, back into the car, and Juno watched until the vehicle disappeared from sight.

“Asshole,” Juno said without much feeling, already a little emptier, and it took him a week before he realized that Peter Nureyev had said when.
he looked in the mirror, and it didn’t look like them but he knew it was his mother, and it was ben,
and there was something moving and churning under their skin but they were perfectly frozen and
still and solid and dead too, both at the same time, and they were watching him. he couldn’t move.
he wanted to, he wanted to turn and run, but he knew without knowing why that the second he
shifted, if he breathed or twitched or a single lash fluttered from one of his eyelids they would see
him, alive and unworthy and not dead at all, and the glass would break and they would reach out
and grab him and drag him in.

he stood there, staring, letting himself watch them, letting himself be watched

until he heard his blood coursing in his ears so loudly that he was stricken with the all-encompassing
fear they would hear it too, and notice the indisputable fact of his living veins

and the second he thought it, they turned to look at him,

(even though they had been watching him all along),

and it was all their faces aimed at him and he couldn’t look anywhere else but to them, their eyes
glowing eerie and skin blurred, writhing and restless atop something sinister beneath, and they both
said, as one, you’re the last of us, juno, you kept me here and sarah steel’s hand was biting into her
son’s shoulder.

so let him go, she told juno, and juno looked at ben, and they didn’t look like each other anymore,
they’d never been the same but they looked like brothers once, and ben said,

make her go,

in a cry that made juno step back, and in that movement, in that disturbance to the space, the barrier
between them was gone, and their hands were on him, dragging him home.

There was a shout trapped in Juno’s throat, and blood pooling in his mouth where he had ground his
teeth against the inside of his cheek in the night, and he reached for Peter. He reached out for him,
but no one was there, and he was alone with his rapid-beating heart and spinning head and coppery
mouth and shallow breaths, left with no one to hold on to when the night conspired against him.

Someone was supposed to be there. Someone had been there, before, and now there was nothing,
and as he adjusted to awakeness the disparate, jumbled thoughts collapsed into each other like cards
cascading back into a neatly assembled deck.

Peter Nureyev had been there, and then he had left. Juno had made him leave, because he hadn’t
made himself anything worth staying for, and now he was gone and Juno was here. Juno Steel and
the dark empty cold space on the other side of the bed. It’d been a while since the two of them had
some privacy, but now they were back to being thick as… Not thieves. Thick as the skull on a private eye, he told the blood rushing to his head, as though intentional self-loathing could quell the instinctive voice bubbling below.

The emptiness had missed him, judging from the way it was gathered so close on all sides, pressing in around him so he barely had space to breathe.

Juno curled up on himself, turning his hard edges and useless spikes out against the world, but it didn’t work the same as it used to. It wasn’t enough, now that he had gotten used to someone else’s hands on him again, waking each other up and finding out that they weren’t trapped by anything except each other’s arms, and then slowly, warily drifting back to sleep.

Juno lay awake instead. He could still feel their nails digging into him, hers long and sharp and his dull and soft and bitten to nothing, so many fingers covering his eyes and alternately tugging and smoothing over his hair and pulling on his arms and wrapping around his legs, more than two people should have had, and his own hands didn’t feel real enough to convince him they were the only two that hadn’t yet let go, gripped to his shoulders so he could cover his easily-skewered chest with the intersection of his forearms.

It wasn’t a new dream. He should have been used to it by now. He’d never had it alone before, was the problem.

It had been a mistake to want an alternative to alone again in the first place, the same way it had been a mistake to think he could ever have avoided becoming anything other than what he was now. This is the best you get. This is the best possible alternative to what you could be, he told himself. You can’t let yourself have anything you could break without it breaking you first.

This is the best picture of what the rest of your life looks like, Steel, this is where you’re always going to end up until the day you open your eyes and wake up with blood on your hands just like she did.

He closed his eyes and tried to breathe through the night to the morning, trying to wipe blood from a too-dry mouth onto his arm, the sleeve of his shirt he pulled up from the ground, anything he could throw out or wash off later without moving from where he was. When he blinked, the last unbanished remnant of his rapidly fading dream was there waiting for him. The show was over and the cast had taken their bows, but what was left on the stage wasn’t darkness, and it wasn’t nothing.

He refused to blink. His eyes went dry staring at the dark vast ceiling, watching the determined players from the theater of repressed traumas hang imposing from the blank canvas. They shifted and pulsed in the dark, grotesque and inescapable.

Don’t want him here. Don’t miss him. He won’t come back, so don’t miss him, he admonished himself, but he missed him anyway, an overpowering rebellion that he could only let scrape over him like sand in the wind.

Wanting had never been enough. There was a future where Juno Steel was happy and Peter Nureyev was himself and they had each other and it was good, but he himself wouldn’t be able to live in it. It was inhospitable to him, same as the futures he and Ben had dreamed up together under the dining room table, or he and Mick and Sasha had thrown down the sewer grates with handfuls of rocks and gravel, the same way that he didn’t get to live Juno Steel, older brother or Juno Steel, blushing bride or Juno Steel, HCPD Captain or Juno Steel, person worth being.

He did what he always did, and pushed down unless and if and maybe until he couldn’t see a trace of them anymore.
It had always been fine, to look at the doors and pathways before him and know they were closed, but now he had unlearned how to be alone. He used to know how to carry his own burdens.

The skill would come back over time, with repeated use. It would hurt like hell until it did, but eventually the carrying of it wouldn’t feel like carrying, and the nightmares and the waking world and the spaces in between would all become threateningly benign, instead of real and sharp and violent.

He lay awake and unmoving until the morning, unable to breathe without choking until he watched the sun find its way back to the sky with dull relief.

This is nothing, he told himself. A couple of corpses that want you dead is nothing. You’ve dealt with worse on your own.

But when he closed his eyes they were still there, and the light of day wasn’t enough to push them away. They followed him out the door and down the street, and he let them straggle behind until they dissolved into the afternoon.

Juno pounded his fist on the door of Alessandra Strong’s office harder than he needed to, as if the impact and sound could shake the last of the cobwebbed figures out of his head. He probably should have stopped by his office first, but he didn’t. Mostly because he didn’t want to. The list of things he didn’t want to do and ended up doing anyway was long enough as it was.

He checked THEIA to make sure administrator privileges were still revoked. They were. Or, it seemed like they were. He trusted Rita about as much as he could trust anyone, but that wasn’t much. Besides, trusting someone to be mostly good at her job was a whole different story from trusting her not to make herself more a part of his life than was good for her. She had proven incapable of leaving him to himself from the moment they met, and now she had a keyhole straight through his head to peer into whenever she... entered a few codes? Typed on some keys? Admittedly, he wasn’t entirely sure how it worked, but as with all things, he didn’t need to understand it to distrust it.

Rita hadn’t been asking him as many questions lately, or trying to push him around about cleaning and sleeping and eating regular meals, and that made him more nervous than anything. He was waiting for the other shoe to drop, for her to reveal she had been in his head the whole time or else for him to come into work and find out she was never coming back because she couldn’t keep doing this if he couldn’t make an attempt to take care of himself.

She wasn’t even asking about Peter. Mr. Fox. Agent Glass. Whoever she thought he was. He didn’t want her to ask. Or, he did, but only because he knew she wanted to and he wanted it over with.

Rita had tried to ask once. The day after he left, actually. Her timing was uncanny.

She didn’t ask again, after, and he knew she wanted to know more, she always wanted to know more than he wanted to say, so why wasn’t she asking?

Not like he wanted her to ask. He didn’t, it was the last thing he wanted to think about. That and Pereyra, and that and O’Flaherty, and that and becoming Sarah Steel, and that and Miasma, and that and--

Listing all the things Juno Steel didn’t want to think about would take exactly as many years as he’d been alive, so he stopped, and let them keep happening to him instead. They never stopped
happening, was the thing, and he had to carry them all with him even while they tried to drag him down.

It wasn’t that he wanted to tell her. It was only that he wouldn’t be worrying as much about why she wasn’t asking if she would quit being so goddamn patient and just ask.

He banged on Alessandra’s door again, trying to think about anything else. Maybe he should have called first. She didn’t seem like she had a lot going on outside of work, if she could pack up to follow him and Mick around for that long, so he usually just showed up. Besides, at this point she was probably more likely to find an excuse to be out of the office if he gave her any indication he might come around. Alessandra Strong hadn’t been answering his calls as often, which was what he expected. He was only surprised she hadn’t started distancing herself sooner than that.

He knocked again, wondering if the sound was distinctive enough that she could identify it as his, and that was why she wasn’t opening the door. “Strong? It’s me,” he called through the door. “I can wait out here as long as it takes, so you might as well let me in now.”

It took about thirty seconds before he wanted to crawl out of his own skin with the lack of progress, of action, so he knocked again. No one answered. He considered the risks involved in trying to pick the lock on Alessandra Strong’s door, so invested in making some kind of advancement that he didn’t bother investigating the source of the footsteps padding down the hallway until their owner said, “Hey, J,” and halted next to him. “You want help with that?” Mick Mercury gestured at the lockpick Juno had halfway into the locking mechanism.

“I’ve got it,” Juno said, then reconsidered. At least if Mick did it she would have something other than Juno Steel to be annoyed about. “But maybe you should give it a try. Keep those skills loosened up or, something.”

“I know all the tricks now,” Mick said, reaching around Juno to clear the locking mechanism, swinging his forearm so the key wrapped around his wrist landed in his hand. “I didn’t think opening doors could get boring. I tried windows for a while, but Earl was right. A window is just another door if you really think about it.” Mick unlocked the door with a turn of his wrist and began to pull the knob towards himself, but Juno didn’t move his feet from where they were planted on the floor, blocking the way.

He tapped his knuckles against the door, not as a knock but as a way to express some kind of action while he was caught between Mick Mercury and Alessandra Strong’s office door, staring at the key in Mick’s hand. “Mick?”

Mick took out the key attempted to slide into Alessandra’s office, turning sideways to fit an arm and the beginning of a foot through the narrow aperture. His brow was set as though he were calculating some careful trigonometry. “J?”

“Why do you have a key to Alessandra Strong’s office?”


“It’s not a visit,” Juno said to the back of the door, then shook his head at himself and went inside.

It was a nice office. Cleaner than his. Or, the mess was different, anyway. More clutter than… Juno hadn’t really considered that the papers crowding his office were trash before, but he guessed they were technically what some people might consider trash, to the untrained eye. It was smaller than his own office, but it looked more reputable. Probably why she wasn’t getting much business. People
with the money to hire and a case worth solving didn’t want their PIs reputable. He wasn’t getting much business either, but that was because between the media gag order and the people who had actually met him, there weren’t many glowing references for the Juno Steel Detective Agency.

Mick pulled up the blinds, and the room became much brighter than it should have been. Blinds half-open at most, that was the rule of thumb if people were going to take you seriously as a private eye. He wondered if he should give her some advice on making her office less livable. He wasn’t really a cat person, but looking around, he thought maybe Alessandra should get a couple. She needed something to knock a few things over just for the hell of it if she wanted people to hire her for the good stuff.

He had a hand raised to a stack of documents, ready to push, when he felt a new grip on his shoulder. He jumped back before he knew what he was doing, an unflattering yell coming from his chest.

“What do you think you’re doing, Steel?” Alessandra Strong had already bypassed congeniality and irritation, landing right in the center of weariness.

“Interior decorating?” If he hadn’t jumped halfway across the planet when Strong grabbed him he might’ve knocked something over anyway, but as it was he was a little too far and a lot too startled to try.

“I have that covered, thanks,” she said, and Juno wondered why she would look so clean when this was her job. “Now what are you actually doing here?”

“Great question,” Juno said. “But before we get to that: Why is Mick Mercury here, and why does he have a key to your office.”

“I work here,” Mick said, and Alessandra took a deep breath.

“You what,” Juno asked.

“A guy wanted me to look out for his friend for a few weeks and didn’t have the money to pay me for it, so we made an arrangement,” Alessandra said, looking exhausted.

Juno squinted, eyebrows bunched in thought. “Did I not pay you?” he asked.

“Not you, you idiot,” she said.

Mick raised his hand sheepishly.

”Mick?” Juno asked.

“Mick,” Alessandra confirmed.

“Mick!” Mick added, falling into a chair and putting his feet up on the desk in front of him.

“I can’t let him touch a lot of things but he was helpful to have around with,” she waved her formerly-broken hand at him, then looked at it oddly and tucked it under her arm. “You know, the hand thing.”

“You think you’re keeping him on?” Juno asked carefully.

“It’s a temporary thing,” she said immediately.

“For now,” Mick added.
“Sure. Learn how to answer the phone and we’ll talk.”

“I said Rita was temporary, too,” Juno warned.

“You say a lot of things about Rita. You mean less than half of them, and you’re right about even less,” Alessandra said shortly.

“You don’t work with her,” Juno argued.

“I lived with both of you and I remember it better than you do.” She had a point. “I don’t need a secretary, and can’t afford one in the long term.”

“Said that about Rita too.”

“Thanks for the tip. As much as I love the unsolicited business advice, why don’t you tell me whatever it is Pereyra’s making you do that you want me to save you from.”


“No.”

“Why did you ask if you don’t want me to say it?”

“Fine. Really sell me on it,” she said flatly.

“I think Pereyra’s going to an underexplored part of the Oldtown subway system to look for… something,” Juno said, reluctant to elaborate.

“Something?” Alessandra asked.

“A… specific thing,” Juno elaborated.

“What, their long-dead conscience and human decency?” Alessandra asked.

“No exactly,” Juno said. “Look, what it is isn’t important, but if we find out what they’re doing tonight and--”

“Definitely no. I’m busy tonight. Try your partner in crime.” It took Juno a second to realize what she was suggesting, and his teeth clenched against his will. Alessandra continued on, oblivious. “Seems like he could bond with them over a shared interest in unnecessarily opulent instruments of murder. Who knows, the two of them might even get along, and then all of your problems will be solved.”

“He’s not… around,” Juno said after a long silence.

“Not around as in,” Alessandra asked, and Juno didn’t let her finish.

“He’s gone, okay? I didn’t think I’d need to spell it out for you.” It came out in a mutter.

“Are you… alright?” Mick asked. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Yes, let’s all sit down and talk about our feelings for a while, sounds great,” Juno said sarcastically. “I’d love to waste time I could be using to get rid of a debt I didn’t even want talking about my complex emotions for another thing I screwed up, great idea. Look,” he turned back to Alessandra, who managed to look unsurprised and disappointed at the same time, “All I’m going to do is figure out what they’re doing and then get out of there. You in or not?”
“Not,” Alessandra said. “I have plans.”

“So do I,” Juno said. “My plan is to try to get anything on the corrupt mayor who’s taking advantage of the most vulnerable people in our city and blackmailing me. But if you have something more important to do, then by all means, take care of that.”

“It’s not that I don’t sympathize, it’s just that… it’s pretty important.” She looked like she would tell him what if he asked, but he didn’t want her to have the satisfaction.

“They are really important plans, J,” Mick added as he slid further down his chair so he was almost flat.

“Fine. But next time just say you don’t want to do it,” Juno said. “You don’t have to hide behind your… secretary and some really ‘important plans’.”

“You didn’t even ask what they were.”

“Does it matter?” Juno asked.

“Guess not,” Alessandra said, stony-faced.

“J,” Mick said, but Juno was already at the door.

“I’ll see you around. Or I’ll die underground. One or the other.” He stormed out of the office, walking before he decided where his legs would take him.

“Or you could wait one day,” Alessandra yelled after him, but he was already calling Rita.

“How deep underground will THEIA administrator privileges work,” he asked without preamble.

“Not that deep,” Rita answered distractedly. He could hear commercials playing in the background.

“Why? You going to the sewer again?”

“No. Stop sending me to the sewer, Rita, I’m getting a reputation.” Juno said distractedly.

“I’m not giving you any reputation you didn’t already make for yourself, Mr. Steel,” Rita said brightly, and he could hear her inhale, preparing to dive into her next sentence.

Before she could say anything else, disconnected again, and hailed a car.

Emerging from the subway entrance in Oldtown, Juno didn’t expect to see the sun. For some reason he’d expected it to be night, but it wasn’t. It was the bright of the afternoon, and his eyes didn’t want to adjust to it.

He really needed to look into getting a watch, but it felt like an unnecessary expense if he was going to have millions of creds of technology implanted in his head anyway.

Juno coughed into his arm while he tried to reorient himself to being outside. A cloud of dust and sand left his lungs, and he felt it expel itself, tearing against the unprotected inside of his throat like bits of shattered glass. His mouth tasted like copper and mildew and dust, and he didn’t feel anything except tired when he looked up at the sky and registered that he was alive.

“Probably would’ve worked out better if Strong was there,” he mumbled to himself, and fought the urge to sit on the ground and let the falling black sheet at the top of his vision take him. Instead, he
turned the administrator privileges back on.

Rita was in his head in a second, mostly yelling at him. He let it happen, using her voice as a backdrop to the sound of brushing sand off of his body and onto the ground.

“Yeah, I know,” he said when she paused long enough to get a word in. He had no idea what she had been saying, but he was sure it was very concerned and meaningful and probably had a lot of soap opera metaphors he both couldn’t and didn’t want to understand. “Look, I’m fine. Or, I’m not any less fine than usual, and that’s all that matters. Can you send me my calendar?”

“Who are you and what have you done with my boss?” Rita asked, suspicious. “The real Mr. Steel would never willingly take on the administrative responsibilities of his own job!”

“Yeah, I’m full of surprises,” he said, and coughed again. It was a little metallic that time, which was an unpleasant departure from the rest of the palate of underground delicacies. “Look, can you just send it? I think I have some light radiation poisoning.”

“Hmm. That does sound like something Mr. Steel would say,” Rita said. “So maybe it cancels the other thing out?

“Rita, you’re talking to me through a thing connected directly to my brain. It’s me.”

“Oh, right,” Rita said. “Sorry, boss, can’t be too careful these days. What do you want to know what day it is so bad for?”

“Checking if I missed leg day,” Juno said, and scraped his tongue against his teeth to try to get the taste of decay off of it.

“Mr. Steel, we both know the last time you were in a gym on purpose it was because you got the wrong directions to the secret warehouse where they were manufacturing all of those explosives.”

“You gave me those directions,” Juno said.

“Who gave who what directions doesn’t matter, Boss, it’s all in the past,” she said. “And it didn’t get on the streams or anything, so you can’t prove anything in a court of law.”

“I was there.” Juno held himself back from the argument; talking didn’t hurt, exactly, but it didn’t feel great, either. “Just send the calendar.”

“Fine,” she said, and his calendar appeared, somewhere behind and inside of his regular eyesight. “But Mr. Steel, you can’t just disappear and then show up and ask me to put a calendar in your brain without me sitting around and worrying! The first couple days were fine, there was a marathon on, but then after that, well, okay, after that there was another marathon and I kinda lost track of time but after that--”

“Thanks, Rita,” Juno said, and revoked administrator privileges, looking at the timetable for the day, and the one event listed.

He checked the time, and did some quick math. If he left now from Oldtown, it would probably take… fifteen, twenty minutes? Which was about as much time as he had.

Juno looked back down at the subway entrance. It didn’t look like anyone else was planning on joining him anytime soon.

“Why the hell not,” he asked himself, and called another car back to Midtown.
“Juno Steel?” a low, businesslike voice asked, footsteps clicking into the room. The fellow stopped short in her path when she saw him, taking in the dust on Juno’s jacket and skin and hair that slid off of him when he moved, his black eye and the purple bags underneath, and the cuts and wounds that he was sure were visible.

“Normally I wouldn’t suggest we try to reschedule again, but it looks like maybe this is a bad time for you,” she said, taking him in.

“No, this is fine.” Juno stood, and some pocket of undisturbed sand escaped from a fold in his collar and onto the ground, and they both watched it fall, listening to the light hiss as it collected at his feet. “Where’s your office?” He started down the hallway, peering into doors and looking for signs of the person he was speaking to.

“Are you sure? Because it looks like you may need some amount of medical attention,” she suggested delicately while he coughed dust into his sleeve.

“Never felt better.” He peered into an office with a partly-open door. There was a scarf the same color as part of the pattern on her shirt draped over the back of a chair, and he took a guess. “This you?” He asked, pointing inside, and she didn’t nod, exactly, but the deepened confusion on her face was confirmation enough. He walked inside, and looked around. The room was bright. Small, a little crowded. A desk, a swivel chair. An armchair, a couch. A side table with some plants Juno didn’t know the names of.

“Okay,” she said from the hallway, and walked inside. She turned to close the door behind them. “Feel free to make yourself,” he flopped onto the cushions of the couch before she finished her sentence, feet up on the chair arm and hiding the way every bruise and bone he had fought the impact, “... comfortable.”

A clock ticked. “I don’t think I’ve properly introduced myself,” she said. “Talia Ronan. You know that you don’t need to lay on the couch, right? That is a stereotype.”

“I know,” Juno said, making no move to sit up, or to change his position at all.

“All right.” She clapped her hands together, and clasped them into one another where they landed. “I am going to ask you to complete some measures of your current mental state, so that may not be the most comfortable position for you while you’re doing that, but we will get there when we get there,” she said, and turned in her chair to open a filing cabinet.

“Shouldn’t you be more prepared than this?”

“You’ve been a no-show for so long that I’ve started using your timeslot to try to learn circuit repair,” she said, opening the bottom drawer with her foot so Juno could see the equipment and wires there.

“Oh,” he said, not sure how to respond to that. “You any good?”

“Terrible,” she admitted, closing the drawer again using the same foot. She had to force the last couple of inches. “As it turns out, circuit repair is very boring, so thanks for finally deciding to show up.”

“I bet you say that to all your patients,” he said.

“Usually my patients show up, so, no, I don’t,” she said, distracted. “Here it is.” She handed him a
tablet, and he reached out an arm to grab it from her, lifting his legs slightly with the movement for leverage.

“Glad I finally made it in there so I could have your much-needed supervision while I circle some numbers,” Juno commented as he let his ankles fall back to the arm of the couch, trying not to think too hard about what the numbers meant while he scanned the page.

“I sent them out beforehand. Your initial answers seemed... suspect, so I thought I would see if you were familiar with the assessment.” She looked up at him from where she had been examining her computer screen. “Apparently not.”

“What initial answers?” Juno had swung himself back into a sitting position before he knew it had happened, trying to angle himself to read the screen; she shifted expertly to move it out of sight. “I didn’t,” Juno stopped himself. “Rita.”

Ronan shrugged. “Is Rita the type of person who would fill out a measure of mental health on your behalf? As well as sending some… additional materials?”

“What kind of additional materials,” he asked with suspicion.

“I can’t say.”

“Is it the How to Take Care of Your Detective manual again?” he asked, and he could tell from the mask of her face that it was.

Juno felt himself burying his face in his hands, remembering Rita’s disinterest in pushing him. “Of course she knows I’m here. Why wouldn’t she.” He sat like that for a second, hands steepled with the bridge of his nose pinched between his fingers, then stood up, all in one movement. A cloud of dust fell behind him. “I have to go. This was a bad idea anyway. I have to... I don’t know.” He made for the door, but Ronan held up a hand, and he sat back down automatically. She looked surprised at his compliance, and honestly, so was he. They looked at each other, neither having expected that to work, until she collected herself and took the opportunity to speak.

“Why don’t you want Rita to know you’re here?” she asked, as if the answer wasn’t obvious.

“Because she’ll think this means something,” he said. “That I’m, I don’t know, trying? And it’s still not going to change anything.”

“What makes you say that?” she asked.

He blinked. “Because nothing changes anything,” he said with difficulty. “I’m just like this.”

“Nothing changed anything’ is a pretty extreme worldview,” she stated.

“Hasn’t been proven wrong yet,” he said, feigning dispassion.

“Then why did you come here?” she asked. “Why was it important enough to you to come here that you would do it looking like you just crawled through a sandstorm, after three weeks of not showing up at all?”

Juno looked down at his arm, still covered in a layer of dust. “It wasn’t a sandstorm.”

“Then where did...” She stopped herself from finishing the question. “Okay, the point still stands. You came here, at what seems like a bad time. Why?”
There were a lot of potential answers. None of them seemed right.

A possible answer: When he wasn’t working he was thinking, and thinking was the last thing he wanted. It always ended in, he’ll come back and you won’t be able to go and he’ll leave and he will hate you and you will hate yourself more, or he won’t come back and you will stay there waiting for hours, maybe even days, not sure if he died or he didn’t want to bother chasing something that wouldn’t come to him.

Another: There was a deadline looming over him, and he thought it might help to have something he wanted to see the end of, but instead, every time he tried to fall asleep he asked himself, what if I die right now? What if instead of falling asleep everything catches up to me and my heart gives out and I die without having done anything, I’ve still only made everything worse and I won’t be able to fix any of it and I’ll never get to see what happens next?

Or: What if I live and I end up exactly like she did, like he did, like they all would have if they’d lived long enough, another victim of whatever crouched in the Steel family line unchecked?

Or: What if any of this could have mattered, this whole time. What if I could have made something matter?

Even something as simple as: At this point? Might as well. It can’t make today worse than it already was, right?

He couldn’t step a self-aware twitch in his face on that last thought.

“Not like I have anywhere else to be,” and he crossed his arms and settled in.

“Mr. Steel, are you going to your appointment?” Rita asked, and she made the last word singsong. He might have answered differently if he were paying more attention to her, but as it was, he was trying to figure out how the city’s third-largest industrial building had gone missing without anyone noticing it.

(It was a living).

“Yeah, in a minute,” Juno said, counting back how long it had been since Martian teleportation technology had been uncovered. “Hey, Rita? Remember back when you met Julian? How long ago—what are you doing.”

Rita had reached around him from behind his chair so her arms wrapped around his chest, and Juno found himself restrained. Her chin landed on his shoulder just as he reflexively pulled them into himself, so her head landed against his own.

“Giving you a hug,” Rita said.

“... Why,” he asked with narrowed eyes, leaning away to no avail. She was glued to him, tracking him like the eyes on some old portrait in a billionaire’s house that would later turn out to have some secret system of tunnels behind it.

“Just wanted to.”

“What’s your angle?” he asked, suspicious. “I can’t give you a raise or anything. Landlord’s been trying to get back rent.”
Rita pulled back so she could look at him. “Really? I thought she died.”

“Tell me about it.” Juno turned his head just as Rita rested her head back on his shoulder, rustling her glasses into an undignified, askew position. She nudged her face into him him like a cat to push the frames back into place.

Juno tried to slide the chair away with his feet, but her grip only strengthened against the resistance. “Can you let go of me anytime soon?”

“No,” she answered contentedly, resting her head against his. “I’m very proud of you, boss.” He glanced over in her direction, and her eyes were closed, and she didn’t look like she had any intention of letting go.

“Rita, don’t make this a thing,” he warned as she gave him a squeeze, and he let the pressure suffocate him. “It’s not...” He wanted to say, It’s not going to change anything, but he didn’t have the energy for another argument. “A big deal.”

“It is to me,” she said, and that sounded dangerously like caring, and without thinking about it or even really meaning to Juno shoved his shoulder into her chin.

“Stop that,” he snapped, and her hands flew up to her jaw while she let out a small cry he instantly regretted causing.

“Mr. Steel!” Rita shouted.

“I didn’t do it that hard,” he said, sullen. Even without looking directly at her he could see Rita still rubbing at the space under her chin. “Don’t make this more than it is. I don’t even know if I’m going back.” He slumped down in the chair, and stared resolutely at the wall. “And stop looking at my schedule.”

“Boss, I make your schedule,” Rita argued.

“Doesn’t mean you have to look at it,” he murmured.

“There’s too much on your desk for me to tell what’s what without looking, Mr. Steel, it’s not--” Rita jumped, then looked at something just out of his sight, somewhere beyond the door. “What’s that?” she asked, alert.

“What’s… what?” he asked.

“I don’t know, that’s why I asked,” Rita said. “Go do your heat-seeking thing,” she said, sounding excited at the prospect of Juno using his advanced technology. She never seemed to get tired of it. He would have made a bigger fuss about her endless enthusiasm for treating THEIA like a fun quirk, but the list of things hanging over him and waiting to fall was too much for him not to put a hand on his gun and walk to the door, peering down the hallway.

If he hadn’t been so busy getting himself involved in political intrigue, he probably would have foreseen Rita pushing him out the door and locking it behind him. As it was, he wasn’t surprised, only frustrated.

“Rita,” Juno protested. “We can’t keep doing this.”

“We can and we will, Mr. Steel,” she said through the door. “It’s a tradition. Have fun at your appointment.”
“It’s not a fun appointment,” Juno murmured again, but Rita was already back at her desk watching a stream, chin resting on her knees.

Juno took the keys out of his pocket and unlocked the door, holding the key so that the pieces of metal stuck in the mechanism from all the times he had to pick it because of this very situation aligned just right, and he re-entered, took his notes, and turned back around, refusing to acknowledge Rita’s smug “See you tomorrow, Mr. Steel,” as he stomped out the door and let it swing shut behind him.

He kind of had somewhere to be.

His comms lit up, and he raised his brow at the contact information reflected in the screen, and picked up without a second thought. Or a first thought. If there was anything like a thought attached to the instinct, it was, *maybe he’s*-- and then the sound of a door slamming shut.

“Who died this time, and how can I get out of you dragging me into it?” he asked into the comms, and Sasha Wire exhaled an angry puff of air.

“No one’s dead yet, but depending on how you answer the next couple of questions you could be,” she said, swift and without humor.

“Missed you too, Sasha,” he said, and she puffed out a sigh of annoyance.

“Mick Mercury called me the other day. Left me a message asking some legal questions, for ‘a friend’. He has two friends who aren’t me, and one of them is his dad.”

“Three, now. Maybe five, it depends.” He was pretty sure Mick considered Peter and Rita friends, because that’s how he was. The question was whether those feelings were reciprocated.

Sasha didn’t seem especially interested in Mick’s new social developments. “So you wouldn’t know why Mick Mercury is openly calling a Dark Matters agent asking about political assassinations, or small-scale fraud--”

“I haven’t done any fraud,” Juno said indignantly, but Sasha wasn’t done.

“--or romantic involvement with an interplanetary space fugitive, or,”

“How did he know,” Juno began, then thought about Mick’s interactions with Peter Nureyev. “Okay, looking back I guess it’s kind of obvious,” he said to himself, but Sasha was talking over him the moment he opened his mouth.

“Don’t say a word, Juno,” Sasha snapped. “Who is it? Don’t answer that, legally I *can not* know,” she warned, and Juno sat back to let Sasha enjoy her conversation with herself. “Was it Rex Glass? *Don’t* answer, of course it was Rex Glass, he’s like a human-shaped pile of knives and that’s your exact type.” He could hear her pacing. It didn’t sound like she was in her office; a few pebbles or rocks or pieces of gravel rolled and crunched with her footsteps, so she was probably outside somewhere. Less surveillance, which was probably for the best if she was spilling all of this personal information about him without a care. “I knew you would like him, but really, Juno? Him? The thief? The wanted criminal?”

“It’s not--”

“I cannot stress enough that, if you were to say something to me that implies you were sustaining
continued correspondence with Rex Glass past the point of his departure from Mars, which I assume you are not because that would betray a devastating level of stupidity previously unknown to humankind, you would be confessing to an act of treason,” Sasha said, cutting him off. “Do you understand that, Juno? Can you get the one act of self-preservation I can offer you right now through your head?”

“You know me, always putting my health and safety first,” Juno said, tuning out of the conversation until Sasha was done yelling at him.

Sasha let out an angry sigh that sounded very much like she wanted to reach through the receiver and pull him to the other side. “Okay, here’s what you can do now. I’m only going to say this once, so pay attention,” she said. “And you did not hear any of this from me, understood?”

“Don’t bother,” Juno said. “He’s gone.”

The sound of footsteps on the other side of the line stopped.

“Well.” Sasha said, suspicious and taken aback, deciding whether or not to probe further and choosing against it. “Good.”

“Yeah. Good.” There was an uncomfortable silence between the two of them.

“Speaking of Rex Glass, by the way,” Juno began. “Have you… heard from him, lately? Seen any signs?”

The comms was conspicuously, coldly silent now, absent even of breathing.

“I’m hanging up.” With that, the call disconnected, and the click hung where it was like a rigging snapped in two.

Juno stretched back against the couch behind him. “It was worth a try.”

Ronan stared at him.

“As riveting as that half of your conversation was, if you’re going to keep missing appointments at the rate you are, I would suggest that you don’t use my office as a place to catch up with your calls.”

“It was important.” He threw his comms onto the chair next to him and laced his fingers behind his neck, trying to pretend anything about this was comfortable. “So, where were we? My tragic childhood? Misspent teenage years? My tumultuous early twenties?”

“The last month is fine for now. How have you been sleeping?”

“Fine,” Juno lied.

“Are you eating regularly?”

“Pretty much.”

“Feelings of recklessness?” she asked, eyeing a deep cut that was burning red on the back of his arm, a remnant from a messy fight the night before.

He crossed his arms. “Also fine.”

“Drinking?”
“Never better.”

Her shoulders fell back, and she crossed her arms in her lap, leaning on her elbows. “Why are you here?”

He twined his hands closer together and let arms tense, bringing his elbows in towards his temples and letting his clasped fists rest where the base of his neck met his back. “Because I’m irreparably screwed up and I’m too much of a masochist to give up pretending I’m not?” Juno offered, no stranger to being the cause of someone else’s disappointment. It was easiest to talk until the sound of his voice became a Pavlovian indicator that they should stop listening. “Did you mean what made me think it was a good idea to come here, or what I want to fix? Because I meant the first one.”

“Neither,” she said. “You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t have something you wanted to accomplish. What are your goals?”

“Being less irreparably screwed up? The masochism is fine,” he added, and to her credit, she took that in stride.

“Okay, we’re going back to that later,” she said, but she didn’t write anything down. She didn’t move at all, but something in the intensity of her gaze made him feel like she was leaning closer to him, gradual and unstoppable. “Some nebulous concept of ‘being less screwed up’ is not a goal. What does that look like?”

“Not being irreparably screwed up. Are you sure you shouldn’t be writing this down?”

“Something quantifiable, Juno.”

“None is a quantity.”

“Let me rephrase.” She paused. “If this does exactly what you want it do for you, and you wake up a year from now and you aren’t,” she adapted his cadence, if not his tone of voice, “‘irreparably screwed up’ anymore—and allow me to register my complete disagreement with that self-assessment—what does your life look like? What’s different from right now?”

“I’m probably not wasting my time in therapy,” Juno suggested.

She nodded, not in agreement but as a punctuation mark on the conversation. “If you don’t have an idea of what you want from this, we are going to talk for an hour every week, and you are going to pay several hundred creds out of pocket for it, and we will get nowhere, and that’s no skin off my back because I’ll get paid either way. So either rest easy knowing that you have very charitably helped me afford a few more pieces of earthenware pottery for my curio cabinet and gotten absolutely nothing in return, or think about an answer. A real one. You don’t have to answer now, but think about it.”

Juno shrugged. “I’m probably more involved with politics than I want to be?”

“Relatable and a bit of an understatement, but still not a goal,” the therapist said.

“I don’t know! I want to be doing things that are good, and I usually just make things worse, and I don’t want to do that anymore, and I’m here because I don’t know how to stop! You’re supposed to tell me how!”

“I can’t do that if what you’re trying to achieve doesn’t mean anything. There is always going to be a way to be better. There are a thousand different kinds of good out there, and if you don’t know what yours is, I don’t either.”
“I don’t get to sit down and imagine what a better life would be like. The last time I thought for a second there was something better out there for me, I was locked in a room with a mutated anthropologist and a detonating bomb that was supposed to kill this whole planet, telling a guy that he was the best thing that ever happened to me through a locked door after I spent a few weeks letting him get tortured for me, and that was the last time I felt like I really understood what I was doing and how things worked and who I was. Who I am,” he corrected. “And then I didn’t die and I had to decide what to do next and it was so much easier to imagine getting better when I knew I’d never have to do it and since then it’s all been downhill.”

The clock ticked again, and Ronan tilted her head, scratched her face, lifted a stylus and then put it down while her mouth continually prepared to speak. “You were… what?”

Juno shrugged. “Long story.”

“Okay. All right,” she said, turning to move her computer to her lap and then typing. “That is definitely not a goal,” she said, gesturing at him with her pen held between her index and middle finger, “but I do want to talk about it.”

“You and everybody else,” Juno said under his breath. He avoided her gaze, his face adversarial and downcast while he huddled himself into the corner of the couch behind him.

“Seems like a hell of a story.”

“Are you supposed to say hell or is that just because I’m here?”

“Don’t worry about my professionalism, I removed all the bugs that automatically call the police when I use a mild swear word months ago.”

“… Really?” he asked, and he glanced nervously at the bottom drawer of her filing cabinet.

“No. No one is recording these sessions, that’s uncommon at best and unethical at worst.”

“Right,” Juno said, and let his discomfort carry the silence through.

“You don’t need to talk about anything you’re not ready to talk about,” Ronan said. “But you brought it up for a reason, and I can’t help you figure out what that is if you don’t tell me about it. I’m not a mind reader.”

Juno made a sound between a laugh and a flinch, and shifted so he was addressing the window, speaking not to his reflection but through it to the city outside. Superimposed over the buildings, his hand drifted to the corner of his eyelid, and below that a mouth moved in tandem with his own.

“You know anything about the Martians?”

“Robots aren’t scary, and people aren’t scary. But the cyborg, that was scary. The question is why.”

Juno finished his drink as quickly as he could, and tried desperately to make eye contact with the bartender to no avail. Mick had his hands out, full glass abandoned to the dim-lit countertop, ready to hit Juno with the pitch. “Framing murder as a necessary evil in pursuing an obsessive goal to an idealized vision of a city that can never exist,” Juno said answered with distraction, leaning over the bar.

“Skeletons,” Mick said, and Juno closed his eyes and exhaled through his nose. “Without them we’re just the meat goop. Throw that on a robot and you’ve got a monster.”
Juno turned to look at him. There was a lot to unpack there. “Okay, but if robots aren’t scary either—and I’m not saying you’re right, because you’re not—isn’t the scariest part—”

"I’m one step ahead of you, J," Mick interrupted, and grabbed for a napkin. “Do you have a pen?"

Juno reached in his pocket and rolled a pen down the bar. “Knock yourself out,” he said while Mick grabbed for it wildly and started drawing a Venn diagram with intersecting circles labeled METAL, SKELETON, and THE MEAT. The barkeep finally looked Juno’s way, and Juno pointed silently at his empty glass and made a keep ‘em coming gesture of his own design, which the new bartender didn’t seem to understand, so Juno said, out loud, “Keep ‘em coming.” Mick glanced up at him.

“You’re the one who invited me to drinks,” Juno said, irritated, before Mick could open his mouth. “What did you expect?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You wanted to,” Juno grumbled. “You know, I liked you a lot better before you started talking about me with Alessandra Strong.”

“Really?” Mick asked. “Because you’ve been hanging out with me a lot more.”

Juno scowled. “Work’s been slow. Don’t get a big head about it.”

In the absence of Juno’s willingness to communicate, Mick returned to the impossible scribblings on his bar napkin, narrating the intersections and arrows. Juno turned outward, back to the bar, and studied the busy crowd before them. The place was a little nicer than Mick usually brought him to. His shoes barely stuck to the floor at all, and most of the people sitting down, himself included, hadn’t passed out yet. That on its own was strange enough, but Mick had been odd, even suspicious, about the timing. Mick Mercury could keep a secret, but only if he replaced it with some wilder tale. Last time he’d gotten this feeling, Sasha Wire had shown up, and that hadn’t been a great day. Juno wouldn’t have come, but… there was someone he was looking for.

His eyes were so busy following every tall figure in the crowd that he almost didn’t notice when a short, bulky woman in a dark green jacket started ripping the place in two to make her way over. He looked behind him to try to see the unlucky guy who was about to meet her, but only saw the mirrored bar.

Sometimes it was all too on the nose. He watched her approach from the mirror, eyes wide like she had just won a carnival prize.

“You’re him!” the woman shouted to be audible over the dull talk and music, pointing directly at Juno while she cut through the last remnants of crowd separating them. “You’re the dumbass!”

“Yeah, that’s probably me,” Juno said while the bartender handed him a new drink. He picked it up and threw it back without even looking, slamming the glass against the counter when he was done. He slid off the barstool and took off his coat, draping it over Mick’s arm that had extended outwards, almost in some kind of wave. “Watch this for me, will you?” he asked, making to roll up his sleeves before he remembered he didn’t have sleeves, then directed his attention back to the small woman before him, wracking THEIA’s facial recognition for someone he could have met over the past few months.

There was nothing, and Juno resigned himself to a barroom brawl with someone he didn’t even remember. It had been a while. Might be nice, honestly; the muscle of him had a tendency towards the insatiable craving to be hit hard enough that keeping himself alive felt like a goal.
“Okay if we take this outside?” Juno asked, half-expecting her to throw a punch while he was mid-sentence. “I don’t want to get kicked out of another bar. Alley’s right through that door, you can remind me what I did to piss you off on the way out.” He stood up and gestured towards the door in a slightly mocking, tired, after-you gesture, but when he extended his arm she had his hand in both of hers, shaking it vigorously. It felt a little like she knocked a few parts loose with the power behind it.

“You’re the disaster lady!” she said, and she didn’t seem to be throwing him over the bar, so that was probably a good sign. Confusing and slightly, troublingly disappointing, but overall for the best.

“Most of the time,” Juno agreed as she clapped him on the back, and he felt it send a percussive note through his entire body.

“Micholas! You did it!” She turned her attention to Mick, and Juno caught a glint of silver at her throat. “Buy yourself something nice,” she said, taking his hand and sliding an indiscriminate handful of creds into it.

Juno looked between them, then settled on looking at Mick. “Micholas?” he asked.

“It’s a nickname,” Mick said by way of explanation.

“Mick is your nickname.” Juno paused, and said, “Mickname,” quiet and under his breath.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

The woman smoothly spoke over him, waving her hand in an unconcerned gesture of dismissal. “It’s my nickname for him and he loves it. Listen, I have heard some things about you and I have prepared some questions. First one is: what is wrong with you, exactly?” She said it like a congenial, boisterous greeting, and he guessed that with him it was.

“Hey, that’s kind of,” Mick interrupted, but the woman shushed him.

“Micholas! I am conducting an interview. Be polite.” She gave Juno her full attention. “Well? I’m waiting for an answer.”

“I don’t know. Most things?” Juno suggested.

She groaned. “It’s even annoying making fun of you! I almost feel bad about it,” she said with wonder. “Alessandra, you were right!” she called behind her, then turned back to him. “You’re no fun whatsoever!”

“Alessandra?” Juno asked, and he looked up to the crowd again. Beyond the three of them the crowd was parting around Alessandra Strong, who stood a whole head above the people she shoved past, peering over their heads to look for someone. Juno was pretty sure he knew who, and it was confirmed when Alessandra spotted the three of them and barreled ahead.

“How are you so good at getting through a crowd?” she asked the woman, whose head barely reached the height of her shoulders.

“My well of hidden talents is deep and unending,” she boasted. “Anyway, found Mick and your garbage fire detective friend.”

“Aw, I didn’t know we were friends,” Juno teased.
“We’re not friends” Alessandra Strong said, and Juno saw a flash of jewelry on her hand. He wouldn’t have noticed, except she didn’t wear much of it. Or maybe that was just while she was at work.

“I call bull,” the woman at the bar said. “You talk about how worried you are about his terrible decisions all the time, you hung out in a house with him for weeks, and now you’re introducing him to your fiance,” she said, and Juno recognized the light at her hand and the pendant at the other woman’s neck as rings.

“I wasn’t going to introduce you unless he asked me anything about my life. Which he didn’t,” Alessandra added with animosity. “It’s hard to go that long without saying ‘how are you’, but somehow you managed it,” she added.

“Fiance?” Juno asked, not sure if he heard right, and the small woman swept Alessandra into a bridal carry with more strength than he had expected from her.

“Fiance,” the woman said triumphantly, Alessandra’s arms around her shoulders to stabilize herself.

“Showoff,” Alessandra teased.

“What can I say, I love sweeping you off your feet. Besides, this isn’t just anyone. This is the dumbass,” she said with mild wonder in her tone.

“Do you all call me the dumbass?”

“No,” Mick said, at the same time as Alessandra said “Once,” and the woman holding her said, “Exclusively.”

Juno nodded. “That seems about right,” he offered appraisingly.

“See, Al? He knows he’s a dumbass. It’s not an insult if he knows.” She looked back at Juno, shifting Alessandra in her arms as though she could use the detective to gesture at him. “You’re the lady who went after some conman-slash-thief-slash-knife fetishist when Alessandra Strong,” she struggled to lift Alessandra even higher while the detective rolled her eyes, “was right there,” she said, and Juno had to agree with her tone. “You’re the frickin… you’re the basement gremlin.”

“She seems nice,” he said in Alessandra’s direction, pretending this was normal and expected, and doing everything he could not to think fiance or marriage or wedding.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Alessandra said, giving her a kiss on the cheek. “Put me down.”

“No way,” the woman countered. “I have to practice for when I carry you over the threshold. I want it to look professional.”

Alessandra laughed. “Only one of us has to be carried over,” she said. “And I’ll do the carrying. You fit through the door better.”

The woman hefted Alessandra in her arms. “This is a partnership,” she said, her face now much closer to Alessandra’s, who was looking at her with a starstruck face he hadn’t expected to see in her. He felt like this wasn’t something he was supposed to be watching, but he didn’t look away. “We will carry each other over,” she informed her with an air of certainty.

Alessandra laughed, and moved her hands to cup her fiance’s face. “That is not how carrying works,” she informed her.
“We’ll make it work for us,” the fiancee said, bold and sure.

“How?” Alessandra asked, still amused.

“I don’t know,” she said, “but if anyone can figure it out it’s you and me,” and she pulled Alessandra into a kiss that made Juno feel vaguely indecent watching them. He looked over to Mick for support, but Mick had a fist clenched over his chest and was looking at him like a proud parent hanging up a picture on the refrigerator.

“Really?” Juno asked. “What, are you going to start crying or something?”

“If anyone’s gonna start crying,” Mick began in an accusatory tone.

“Shut up,” Juno said, blinking as discreetly as possible and knocking his shoulder into Mick, hard enough that he almost lost his balance from the barstool.

“Hey.” Mick swung one of his legs into Juno’s, and it might have devolved into them brawling like the Oldtown kids they still were if that wasn’t when Alessandra and her fiancee finally parted from one another.

Alessandra tucked away a strand of the other woman’s hair, a fond gesture that made the vacuum in Juno’s chest feel like something urgent. “That’s still not how carrying works,” Alessandra informed her. “Now put me down.”

The small woman obliged Alessandra’s request with an air of regret. “You know, not everyone gets the privilege of being picked up in these arms. I don’t know why you’re so excited to leave them.”

“Because then I wouldn’t be able to do this,” Alessandra said, then lifted the woman over her shoulder as easily as if she were a protesting dish towel while turning to Juno, cheeks flushed and smiling too softly to look apologetic about it.

“So you two have really been celebrating the engagement tonight?” Juno asked.

“That was months ago,” Alessandra said. “Why would,” she followed Juno’s gaze to where her fiancee was slung over her shoulder. “Oh. We’ve had maybe one drink? She’s just like this.”

Juno nodded. “No accounting for taste, I guess.”

“I’m a goddamn delight,” a voice said from behind Alessandra’s back. Her hand tugged at Alessandra’s sleeve. “Put me down, I want to ask him about knife fetish guy.”

“No,” Alessandra told her, but she was still smiling.

“Engaged, huh?” Juno asked, again. “Kind of sudden.”

Alessandra considered this. “Not really?” she said, and her fiancee kicked her.

“Hey. Turn around so I can talk to the tiny bisexual moron.”

Alessandra made a face. ”You’re a tiny bisexual moron.”

“Exactly. I’m uniquely qualified to designate the tiny bisexual morons of the world, and he’s one of ‘em. I ruined you for anyone tall and functional and I have no regrets.” It was stated as a declaration, and Alessandra laughed.

“I don’t know, I can think of a couple,” she said, and released her to the barroom floor.
"No regrets," she repeated. Now back on her feet, she kept talking as if nothing had happened. "Hey. Hey. If you asked Alessandra any questions about her life instead of just calling to say, oh, the mayor wants me to find a rumored ancient wonder for them or the mayor’s missing and I can’t decide whether I should tell someone or not, like any of that even matters, you wouldn’t think it was so sudden," she said.

“I thought it was sudden,” Mick said.

“You think a lot of things, Micholas.” She drew Juno towards her and he leaned away even as she tried to be close and conspiratorial. “So about the car,” she started. “Was he like…” She raised her eyebrows. “into the car.”

“If we’re going down this road, I’m going to go get a drink,” Alessandra said more loudly than she needed to. The other woman caught her by the wrist with both hands, and pulled Alessandra back towards her like she was bundling up a loose wire.

“Get me one?” she asked with a plea to it when she had pulled Alessandra close enough. Alessandra leaned in and kissed her fiancee again, cupping her face with her free hand.

“Get your own,” she said, hand still caressing the other woman’s cheek, and then she extracted herself from her hold, leaving her seated like she was hanging on a string that hooked her directly onto Alessandra Strong.

“Are they always like this?” Juno asked Mick, trying to keep his voice down.

“You don’t get to talk, Steel,” Alessandra announced back at him pointing to him over the crowd, and then she disappeared into it. Her fiancé turned to watch her as she went, tiptoeing on the barstool’s crossbar to follow her movements, while Mick caught his eye and nodded.

“She’s gonna be my wife,” the woman between them said fondly, watching Alessandra navigate the crowd with ease while her hands drifted to her face.

Juno took a gulp from Mick’s drink.

“Hey,” Mick said, reaching to grab it back. “That’s my drink.”

“Were you going to pay for your own tab this time?” Juno asked.

“I would’ve,” Mick lied. “But not now.”

“Then it’s my drink,” he said, and took another long draught from the tumbler in his hand, and Mick leaned over the bar to try to get a replacement.

“Maybe next time, champ,” she said consolingly, and patted Mick on the shoulder, then looked at Juno, leaning back against the bar. She didn’t say anything, only scrutinized him.

“What,” Juno asked. “Something in my teeth?”

She didn’t bother answering. “I expected you to be one way and then I thought, no, no one’s ever the way you expect them to be. But you kind of are. So I can’t tell whether you’re exactly what I expected you’d be or not. I guess I thought you’d be less,” she paused, “obviously, tragically dysfunctional than you sounded like you’d be.”

Mick took Juno’s pen and another napkin, and started trying to diagram the sentence into something understandable. Juno couldn’t honestly say he’d followed any of that, but this wasn’t the first time
someone had heard stories of him being a complete disaster and assumed he couldn’t possibly be *that* bad.

Juno scowled. “Didn’t your fiancee tell you?” He asked bitterly. “You can’t expect anything from me if you don’t want to be disappointed.”

“And there’s the self-deprecation I’ve come to know so well both in lore and in life. You’re exactly like I thought,” she said, disbelieving. “And what’s with the tone? Your fiancee,” she mimicked, and made him sound angry and mocking. “You’re the one who let her go.” It was good-natured. Certain that she was on sturdy ground with Alessandra Strong. He wasn’t a threat, only a curiosity.

“Nothing,” Juno said automatically, not letting Mick’s face tell her how his mouth didn’t know how to make *fiancé* a neutral word, and hadn’t in years. “You two move fast, is all.”

“Nah, not really. We’ve known each other for a long time. We’re different now, but… not that different,” she said.

The bartender gave Mick another drink, and the woman intercepted it somewhere between his hand and his mouth, leaving him in an attempt to drink a non-glass of nothing. “We were war buddies. Stereotypical story. Girl meets girl, girl falls in love with girl, girl leaves girl for dead. Girl gets captured and becomes a POW for a while, girl gets released and goes back to Mars and remembers girl, and girl thinks, hey, why not? Got nowhere else to be.” She took another sip. “Girl is... horrified. Girl didn’t know girl was alive. Girl catches up with girl, and they still have a lot in common. Girl panics and runs. Girl chases girl, girl comes back, girl moves in. Girl and girl grocery shop and go to the park and talk to other vets and it’s better when they’re together, so they decide to keep being together.” She took a sip again. “In the end it turned out neither of us wanted to waste any more time. So we didn’t.”

“Oh. Uh. Congratulations?” Juno tried, and knew it was the wrong thing as he said it, because everything was the wrong thing to say to that. “On the engagement. And on making it back here. It’s... good you made it,” he finally said.

“Had nothing to do with me,” she said, staring forward. “You either keep going when you can, or you stop. I didn’t want to stop, and I was lucky. I got to make that choice.”

“… yeah,” he said, uneasy, and she frowned at him.

“Hey. Quit that. I paid Micholas so I could see the amazing self-sabotaging detective in action, not so you could sit down and have a long internal monologue about how hard my life must have been despite my dazzling humor and brave demeanor in the face of adversity.” She frowned. “I’m engaged! I’m gonna get married! I learned how to cook rice instead of ordering takeout all the time! It’s nowhere but up from here!”

“You didn’t know how to cook rice?” Juno asked.

“Yeah, it was my only flaw, and now that it’s gone I’m too powerful.” She sighed. “That was the only thing keeping me from becoming a god. I don’t know how I’m gonna tell her.”

“I can do it,” Mick offered. It seemed like he was joking, but you could never tell.

“No, communication is the most important part of a relationship,” She nodded to herself. “If it works, it works, but you can’t know whether it’s working until you make it work for you.”

Juno glanced at Mick to see if he followed that at all, and saw Mick was writing another napkin note, staring like it was hieroglyphics.
“That doesn’t mean anything,” Juno said.

“You don’t mean anything,” she said, and changed her tone as though she wanted to slam each word into their brains through their ears. “Look. I kind of thought I’d be dead by now, and I’m not, and I’m here with my fiancee and her weirdest friend and her third most terrible... ex?,”

“Hey,” Mick said, at the same time Juno said, “Only third?”

“and I didn’t think anything would end up like this,” she continued. “But this is what it is, and I’m going to hold onto it however I can.”

She finished Mick’s drink.

“I’m not going to say anything better than that,” she declared. “I have to leave right now so you remember me wise and sage and ready to throw down. I’ve got to finish this out strong.” She laughed. “Can’t wait until I can say that in a self-referential way.” She threw a glance in Mick’s direction, and her mouth twitched like she was playing a joke instead of pointing one out. “Because my name’ll be Strong.”

Mick tensed at name, then deflated.

“That still didn’t mean anything,” Juno said as she left a couple of creds on the bar.

“Shut your damn mouth, it was poignant and evocative,” she said. “Thanks for the drink and the hookup with this guy, Micholas, you never disappoint.” She slapped his hand in a practiced gesture of goodbye, and then disappeared into the crowd after her fiance.

Juno watched her disappear from sight while heads in the crowd moved in the exact path a very small woman might take to force her way towards Alessandra Strong. “Hey, Mick?” Juno asked, watching the crowd ebb and flow. “Who was that?”

“You know. Alessandra’s fiance,” he said, a little too fast.

“What was her name,” Juno said, expecting the answer.

“I forgot her name like a second after she introduced herself. I keep calling her ‘hey you’ and hoping she won’t notice.” He said it all in a rush, like a confession. “But I’m pretty sure she noticed. She won’t stop calling me Micholas until I say her name, and there is nothing, J, I’m pretty sure she might not even have one.”

Juno almost laughed. Maybe it was the drinks, but he was feeling generous. “I can be pretty good with names,” he said. “I’ll look into it.”

“Really?” Mick asked.

“Yeah, I want to spell it right on the wedding card I’m gonna forget to send.” He looked in the direction of where he’d last spotted the top of Alessandra Strong’s head. “I don’t like to take on work for a friend--”

“That is definitely not true--”

“But I’ll make an exception for my good friend Micholas Mercury.”

“It doesn’t even sound like a real name,” Mick despaired, and Juno laughed, and let the bartender hand Mick a consolatory drink without interception.
“Have you been thinking any more about goals?” Ronan asked when they had reached a silence in the conversation. She didn’t even look up as she asked, not quite precluding an answer, but not expecting one either.

Juno cleared his throat. “A little,” he said, hating how much he felt like he was taking an exam, how much he felt like this wasn’t a question he wanted to get right.

She waited, expectant, and he cast his eyes around, trying to find something to look to that wouldn’t look back. He settled on the window again, and the insider’s view of the famed Hyperion City skyline, retaining the look of something tacky and neon even in broad daylight, too familiar until he stepped back and saw it from a new angle and remembered: the place was beautiful, sometimes. Not all the way through. It was falling to pieces and corrupt and it let the best parts of it die, sometimes, (too often), and it was only good when you were far enough away that it couldn’t hurt you, and you didn’t have to know whether it was hurting anyone else.

It was home, and he wanted it to be better.

“It’s okay, you can take some more time to think about this and we’ll get back to it next week,” she recited, a familiar line from the past several months. It never changed.

“No,” Juno said. The words came without him planning, and they sounded a little more like a question than he wanted, but he felt sure. “There are some places I want to see.”

“Like… travel?” She raised her eyebrows, amused and skeptical and most of all surprised. “You want to travel?”


“No, we can work with that.” Her voice was careful and even, but she was still wearing that bemusement. “Let’s start there.” He was looking away, but he could hear a smile. “Where do you want to go?”

In the end it was Rita who told him, one day before he had reached the end of how long he could obsess over what would happen if he didn’t even know where Peter Nureyev would be, if he even did come back, which felt both exponentially more and exponentially less likely the closer he got to a half-year mark.

It was the name. She had some kind of alert for Juno Steel’s name, as though Juno would ever put himself into a position where he would get himself on any kind of news network around here without dying first. (That thought led him to the guilty realization that the dying-first was probably why she had it, and he wondered again why she was still here).

Anyway, she had an alert on him, and Peter was still using that name, and he didn’t like either of those things and he especially didn’t like that combined they made Rita think he’d gotten married without telling her, but… well, he knew where Peter was going to be. So maybe it wasn’t so bad.

It might have been better if he didn’t know, if he never found him, If he’d never wanted to find him. But Juno Steel had a problem with impulse control, with not-knowing the ending, with wanting wrong things.
It was a building. A specific apartment, really. Everything looked untouched, but Juno knew better.

It even still smelled like him, unless he was imagining it, but he didn’t know how he could.

The main room of the apartment was about twenty steps back and forth, a measurement Juno knew for a fact because he couldn’t stop walking it, because if he stopped walking he would be waiting and thinking louder than he was now, where each step brought him, Steel, you idiot, he’s not coming back, he’s done with you, he got caught coming back, he died, he’s laughing over how much of an idiot you are that you would think he’s coming back, and all of those things felt true at the same time, but beneath all of that was a stubborn, foolish hope that maybe.

He wasn’t.

But, maybe. It wasn’t no yet.

Juno crossed to the opposite wall, and planned what he might say if Peter Nureyev were there when he turned around. Expecting company? or Kind of a dump, huh? or Come here often?, something that said Juno hadn’t thought for a second that he would be alone in this room, just him and the barely-furnished room and the figure that had appeared at the kitchen table sometime between this set of twenty steps and the last.

Juno stopped walking, and stopped breathing, and stopped in every sense while he tried to make himself understand.

“You’re,” Juno said haltingly, and his mouth was too dry, so he licked his lips. “You’re here.”

Peter Nureyev was looking at him, so different and exactly the same. “I am.” Juno exhaled, shaky and relieved and terrified all at once. “You’re here,” Peter said back, and it was all wonderment and longing and trepidation, and Juno didn’t deserve it, but it made him want to cross the room and collapse at Peter’s feet anyway. It was a sense of being exhausted and at the end of a journey, but knowing that maybe there was nothing there.

Keep it together, Steel, he begged himself. This isn’t the kind of hurt you can take.

“How… are you?” Juno tried, because it was something to say, but it wasn’t the right question, and he scrambled for something innocuous to add. “Heard you’re breaking into real estate?” Juno asked.

“Home ownership, actually. The diametric opposite of breaking in. Which is new.”

“Yeah.” Juno paused, and looked around the room. “You bought an apartment.”

“A building. It’s a better investment.”

“Right. I knew that.” Juno shook his head, but none of the topics of conversation were big enough, except for,

“You’re here?” Juno asked again.

“I’m here,” Peter repeated, hiding that unbearable amusement he always carried at Juno’s expense.

Juno tried to think of something to say, other than You’re here, again and again in increasing tones of wonderment. “This isn’t exactly what I pictured when you said neutral grounds.”

“What were you picturing, may I ask?”

“I don’t know. A back alley? A park bench? The back of a movie theater? The Crimes & Subterfuge
section of the library?"

"Too public," Peter said. "I still have secrets to keep."

"My place was private enough for you before."


"What's wrong with my apartment?" Juno asked, more offended than he had any right to be, given the way he usually talked about the place.

"We can save that discussion for later," Nureyev said, and there was something in the way he moved his head and hands, businesslike, wanting to dismiss and go to the next thing, that made everything inside Juno Steel collapse all at once.

"I missed you, Nureyev, you know that?" Juno said, all in a rush, not wholly aware of the words until they were happening, placing a hand on the wall next to him as a precaution against falling. "I missed you. I didn't want to, but it kept happening. I just... missed you."

Peter Nureyev wasn't saying anything, and Juno risked a look at him to see him covering his mouth with one hand, the other tucked around his torso. His eyes were closed and his breathing heavy--Juno could see the rise and fall of his chest. He didn't know what that meant, and he was too afraid of the answer think about it, so he just kept talking.

"I thought you weren't--I didn't think you'd come back. I thought, you'd get tired of me, or you were just trying to get out of here, or as soon as you were gone you'd realize what a mistake I was for you. Or that you'd want to come back but on the way something would happen and I'd never even know, or that you weren't even real and," Peter's eyes had snapped to his face at that, and Juno felt his words jumble to a halt, then restart elsewhere. "You're really here? You're... this is real, right? I'm not, imagining this, or having a nightmare--you're not going to turn into a," he was going to say inhuman anthropologist or cyborg with my mother's voice, as if when he said it he might speak it into being, so he settled on, "monster, or something, right?"

Peter crossed the room in a second that lasted several years, and then he was right there, his hand tilting Juno's chin upwards with a touch Juno recognized before he even felt it. "I don't know. Let's check," he said, and kissed Juno softly on the lips. "Did that feel real?" he asked, and Juno caught his breath and opened his eyes.

"I wasn't paying attention," he lied. "You mind trying that again?"

"I suppose we all have our lapses," Peter conceded readily, and he pulled Juno in again, and he was pushed backwards, supported by a hand at his back and his own desperate cling to Peter, a reflexive grab when he felt himself falling, and he felt giddy and drunk and reckless and wild off of him.

Peter pulled away, holding Juno steady even as he was half-dipped to the ground. "And now?" he asked. "Do I have the courtesy of your regard?"

"You have my attention," Juno answered, "but I'm still not convinced. One more time?"

Peter clicked his tongue. "A detective who can't bring himself to learn the art of trusting his own senses. What am I going to do with you, Juno?"

"Surprise me," Juno suggested, and Peter Nureyev always did, backing him roughly into the wall behind him and kissing him until he couldn't breathe or think or talk or see anymore, until his eyes were starlight and his head spun, until he was nothing at all.
Peter broke away one more time. “And now? Have I managed to convince you to believe in me, or do you need to collect more evidence first?”

“Never too much evidence,” Juno said, and caught Peter’s lips, just one more time, and when they split away from one another and opened their eyes again Juno knew it was happening, and his heartbeat didn’t know what to do with itself.

“You’re really here,” Juno said, staring up at him and brushing his fingers over his cheek, spellbound. He was stricken by a thought, a fear really, as his fingers curled where they landed to rest at the back of Peter’s neck. “And you want to… figure something out? This isn’t just a courtesy visit?” He could feel his face becoming desperate and afraid, but he couldn’t rearrange his features any other way, and Peter stepped back to give him space. “You want to do this? Whatever… this is?”

“I could ask the same of you,” Peter said, eyeing him warily, as though what had just happened wasn’t confirmation enough that Juno was here.

Juno inhaled to answer, and when he found his throat afraid to release the air to make the answer, he realized: it wasn’t enough. It had never been enough, just to want something. He had to take it, had to be willing to face the consequences of living every day in an after that wouldn’t measure up to the thing he needed it to be to feel like he could handle all the every-single-days he had left, and that wasn’t something Juno Steel could do. He didn’t know what he was doing, he didn’t know how to make something his, he didn’t even know how to say the word--

“Yes.”

It was strange to hear it in his own voice, strange and terrifying, like putting a stake in his chest and laying Peter Nureyev’s hand on top of it and hoping he wouldn’t press down and shatter him into pieces.

Peter Nureyev looked down at him, eyeing him with caution, uncertainty.

It didn’t feel like they were anywhere real. It was a place removed from the rest of the world, and if Peter Nureyev left him here he might never be able to come back.

His face was so open. There was concern there, and something else. Not fear; he couldn’t imagine Peter Nureyev afraid. It was… leaving his window unlocked so someone could come in later, and not being able to know for sure whether the right person would be there when he got back. “Then, yes,” Peter Nureyev said, his hands traveling down Juno’s shoulders towards his hands, staring at Juno with an intensity that put him in mind of exactly how he felt every time Peter was in the room: like by being there he was giving the thief permission to tear the seams of him apart at the slightest whim.

Juno nodded, and a disbelieving laugh forced its way from his chest while he gave his head the slightest of shakes. “Okay,” he said, trying not to feel giddy, trying to remember that even now it might not be enough, that sometimes things just weren’t enough, but they both said yes, and that had to mean something, right? That meant something.

He let go of Peter’s hands and walked over to the table, pulled out a chair, and gestured for Nureyev to sit down opposite him. “Then let’s talk.”
this was long and took more time to complete than i thought it would, and i spent a lot of time working on it, and if you’re reading this, you read it and maybe even liked it, so, thank you. it’s kind of amazing to me that there are people here who enjoyed and cared about it. i hope you didn’t read this all in one sitting, because it is… very long. If you did go take a nap. drink some water. do a stretch. you earned it.

i still don’t remember what i was doing with the title, but i really didn’t think anyone would read this deeply enough to ask, so, thanks for making that choice haunt me daily. anyway, the end, i’m going to take a nap. send me some prompts/questions if you want me to have those when i awaken.

(icymi, tumblr user clint transnureyev made art for this? it’s very beautiful and i cried about it, so please give him some likes and reblogs here. tw blood

edit 6/26/2018: tumblr user parheliona also made art for this?? you can see it here if you want some very good gazing to pull at your feeble heartstrings)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!