Adam is in Montréal, hunting his way through yet another tangled conspiracy. When he misjudges a seemingly straightforward mission, who will come to his rescue? Answer: a pathologically sarcastic hacker who may or may not be stalking his former co-worker.
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

It's not supposed to end this way, in an air vent, as a side effect of his investigations. Then again, he was supposed to be dead years ago.

"Day of the Triffids" by GUM

Chapter Notes

This is non-canon compliant since I've only just started playing Mankind Divided & I don't want to spoil it for myself. No-one asked for this, but here, have it anyway.

This is a simple break and enter and steal some classified and compromising material deal, and Adam’s confident it’s all gone to plan. He’s disabled alarms and laser sensors, avoided giving the staff any intracranial bruising, and he’s found what he came here for. In and out, undetected. It’s a clean and easy job by his standards: he’s so relieved he hasn’t encountered a semi-militarised security team or a fully-militarised police squad that he lets his guard down.

The EMP grenade comes out of nowhere, and he’s too slow to roll for cover when it detonates. The shockwave is stunning, astoundingly so: first HUD drops offline, then his energy reserves drain as the air goes out of his lungs. He’s dazed and dazzled, nerves sparking with neuralgia, the pain a million pinpricks that expand by the power of a thousand. Doesn’t help matters that he’s one foot in the atrium’s central fountain.

The water feature creates a feedback loop of direct-current, seizing artificial and flesh-and-blood muscles with electrified cramps. At least, that’s what the rational part of his brain informs him. The rest is telling him this shouldn’t hurt as much as it does for as long as it does, and that something must be seriously amiss.

When the charge finally dissipates—an eternity later, and the abrupt absence of pain feels similar to pleasure—he spasms, choking, falling flat, weapon forgotten and the taste of blood on his tongue. CRAWL, his instincts scream. CRAWL. NOW.

He’s fortunate, or blessed, to get out amidst the flurry of bullets and the blaring of mechs. How did he miss the mechs? He should have been more careful, but vigilance is what he does best. So, how did he fuck this up so astronomically?

NO TIME. YOU’RE DYING, ADAM JENSEN. YOU’RE DYING AGAIN.

He drags himself to an air vent, clawing it open and squirming blindly inside, elbow over elbow, then drops several storeys when the shaft takes a vertical turn. No Icarus, either.

The impact sets off what he dully understands as convulsions. He’s receding deep into his grey matter, unseeing, distant, and dumb: his body is far away, and he wonders whether what he knows
as his body can even be considered one. Not for the first time he feels the phantoms of his former arms and legs tugging and grasping, all while his prosthetic limbs flail of their own accord; as his heart hammers in its reinforced cavity.

Routine missions are what kill most cops, he remembers from his first day in the academy. He learnt through practice that it would likely be a civilian with a fear of authority and a trigger-happy finger who ended his career prematurely; a domestic dispute not taken seriously enough; a stray bullet from friendly fire. It’s not supposed to end this way, in an air vent, as a side effect of his investigations. Then again, he was supposed to be dead years ago.

According to the message tingeing his faded vision red, he’s experiencing a **SYSTEM FAILURE**—all caps, no questions—and on the cusp of consciousness, he doesn’t care whether he’s salvageable. He’s not sure whether he wants to be saved, anyway.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

He needs to keep talking to stave off the onset of shock, and for all their arguing and insults, he’s missed Pritchard.

"After Landing" by Bowery Electric

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Jensen! Jensen, answer me! Jensen!”

Adam’s uncertain how much time has passed when he comes to. The pain has lowered from a shattering scream to an ongoing roar: not enough for him to remain blacked out, but more than enough for him to be delirious.

Static drones in his inner ears. He could have sworn someone was calling his name.

“Jensen! Where the hell are you, and what the hell are you doing?”

HUD is still down, and Adam’s struck by how much he’s come to rely on his enhanced vision: he feels lost and useless, with no plan of how to get out of here, or cognisance of where here really is. But he’d recognise those nasally, impatient tones anywhere, and for once he’s ecstatic to have them intrude unannounced.

“I was hoping you could tell me, Francis.” His voice is scratchy and his head is swimming and everything aches. He listens to the frenetic tap of keys on the other end, then an angry exhale. Pritchard sounds relieved.

“You’re in Côte-des-Neiges. Or, from what I’m picking up, beneath it: somewhere between street level and Namur Station.”

Côte-des-Neiges, Montréal. He’s here chasing a case; recalls something about the black market and black hats.

“That sounds right. Any clues on what happened? Because I’m in the dark.” He raises his head, and hell it hurts. His view of his surrounds—an air vent—is shattered by glitches and clouded by shadows.

“Your central readings were off the charts, then dropped so low they were almost undetectable. Jensen, I thought you’d died.”

He ignores the annoyance—worry?—that wobbles his former co-worker’s voice; remembers a blast followed by a fall, but little more. He needs to keep talking to stave off the onset of shock, and for all their arguing and insults, he’s missed Pritchard.

“You can’t get rid of me that easily.”
“I’m out of luck this round,” Pritchard scoffs. Only this no-nonsense, blunt-to-a-fault hacker could make Adam’s near death experience sound like an inconvenience. “I’m near Place-D’Armes, in the Old Town. Are you capable of walking?”

“Doubt it.”

“Fare evasion it is, then. This will be easy for you. There’s an access passage adjoining the tunnel for the Orange Line: if you head down and south-west, you should reach it in several minutes.”

He pulls himself upright, pulse palpitating and skin stinging. He’s acquired burns where alloy meets flesh, collarbone and back blistered and inflamed. The scent of singed hair haunts him, but there’s no smell of smoke: so, not a chemical burn; likely electric. The only way to achieve those injuries is to conduct a high voltage charge.

When was he electrocuted? Now that he thinks of it, how did Pritchard tap into this frequency? And why is Pritchard here?

“I’m in no condition to make it a metre, let alone the other side of the city.”

“I’m aware of that. Your systems are unsteady, so I’m patching an adrenal jump to you. It’ll only last you long enough to find the route: I suggest you prepare to run. Not that you’ll have much choice when your flight response kicks in.”

“Short distance sprint. Got it.”

“And Jensen?” Pritchard pauses, then sighs. Adam can envisage the hacker, brow furrowed and mouth set in a grim line. “Don’t mess this up.”

The jump sends a jolt of exhilaration through him, along with an icy sense of terror; heightened reactions coupled with heightened anxiety. He fights the urge to curl in on himself and instead clambers into a crouch, bolting through the maze of ventilation until the ghosts of his hamstrings burn with lactic acid. He reaches the access tunnel with seconds to spare, a train speeding along the adjacent line shaking dust from concrete walls. Pritchard’s estimation was spot on: Adam slumps, legs folding beneath him. He feels vaguely hypoglycaemic, sweaty, unable to control the twitch of his limbs, motor functions clumsy and painful again.

“Any chance you can mainline me some morphine?”

Pritchard snorts: his version of a laugh. “I’ll see what I can do when you find me. There’s a service scheduled in one minute. The last cars have been locked out, and won’t pull up to the platform. You can reach them if you hurry.”

“Gonna need another hit.”

“All right, but I’m warning you: the crash will be harder on your heart this time. I’ll shoot a sedative through to ease you down.”

“Sounds like you’re dealing me a speedball, Pritchard.”

“This is twice as dangerous but markedly less fun, or so I’m told. Now stop sitting around and catch your connection, Jensen.”

This time the upswing hits so hard and fast that his teeth rattle with internalised G-force. He’s back to being invincible, made of carbon and supercharged particles and superhuman resolve. The colour seeps from before him, a contrast of fluorescent lights guiding his way through a disused mains
room, then the narrow walkway to the tunnel-proper. He feels the train before he hears it: vibrations reverberating through the ground and up his shins, a pulse width that travels through him and around him.

“ETA?”

“Thirty seconds. How are you holding up?”

Yeah, that was worry. “Still holding up. How long will this jump last?”

“TBA.”

“So long as I don’t pass out on the tracks, I can work with that.”

“They’re electrified, so I’d advise against that, yes.”

Electrified. Water. EMP. A grenade that he missed, but didn’t miss him.

The train proves easy to board. He slots his fingers into the seam of the pneumatic doors when they pull up next to him: pulls, metal grating on rubber, and gives himself enough space to slide through.

“Pritchard, I made it.”

“This service runs express from Snowdon to Victoria Square. It’s a recently upgraded high-speed model, so you have two minutes, give or take, until you have to move again. I’m going to run some diagnostics in the meantime.”

“I think I was hit with an EMP grenade,” Adam admits, slipping into a seat. “And I might have been in a fountain when it detonated.”

Pritchard makes an exasperated noise, the click of keys insistent. “Can you go one day without enacting your death wish?”

“Your concern is touching. I’m pretty badly burnt, and all you can do is complain.”

“What, you want a GET WELL SOON card? I thought my figurative hand-holding would be more than enough for you.”

Adam sighs, precariously close to passing out again. His heart rate is so high that every incidence of arrhythmia amidst his tachycardia is sickening. The train sways as it traverses the western side of the city: he catches flashes of the underground as it passes by, his line of sight slowed down and refracted as if his brain is buffering. The metro is much the same as it must have been when it was developed in the sixties, with added security measures and cordons across the platforms to segregate Augs and Normals. How much the world has changed, and how little. He grips the edge of the bench until plastic cracks beneath his artificial fingers.

“Thanks, Frank. Hope we’re even now.” He speaks with more solemnity than he’d intended, though perhaps it’s necessary with all they’ve been through.

His reward is an indrawn breath, followed by a reply with the usual barbed edges. “Not on your life, Jensen. Your status should hold for several minutes. There’s more sewer crawling awaiting you on the other end, though I’d say you’re accustomed to that by now.”

“And from there? I’m not exactly inconspicuous.”

Pritchard hums. “The police will be out in force to find a deep fried, massively-augmented loner. I
have a bug-in bunker two hundred metres from the station: we’re going to have a long chat about what you’re doing attacking accountants. Picus is pinning it on ARC already.”

The subterranean city glides by, dark and light, tiles and glass and metal and flesh.

“Yeah. All in a day’s work. Jensen, out.”

Chapter End Notes

So my bae is now aware that this exists bc I told him about it when I was drunk & we've spent the past few days arguing about whether Deus Ex's otp is Jensen/Malik or Jensen/Pritchard

wHaT aM i DoInG wItH mY lIfE
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

"I see you've graduated to a real lair. Suits you."

"Kerosene" by Crystal Castles

Chapter Notes

Hello & welcome to Snark Central! If you've just arrived, you're in for excessive sniping, banter, & insults as a mode of flirting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From station to station, on the fumes of self-preservation and an inbuilt drive to finish what he’s started. The going is slow at his hobbled pace: Adam shakily makes his way through a vacated arm of the Underground City, walls riddled with the pocks of old bullet holes and corridors crowded with the skeletons of abandoned shopping carts. It’s quiet, empty of anyone, but still he tracks every sense, the input overwhelming even without augments. Storefronts smashed, glass crunching like frost beneath his feet. A tang of stale petrol and kerosene from where Molotov Cocktails had created Rorschach patterns over fallen billboards. Neon signs written in French and English, their tubes broken and casting shadows rather than light. His breath plumes before him in the dim silence of the metropolitan grave. Cold, like the ocean depths of the Arctic. Cold, like the metal that serves as his exoskeleton and most everything else. He’s so cold.

And yet the flare tossed with purpose by parties unseen—though not unknown—warms him somewhat. His mind is making rudimentary links to homing beacons and homing pigeons, moths attracted irrevocably to flames, flowers turning their faces towards the sun, following, following...

“You look as if you pissed on an electric fence in the pouring rain,” says Pritchard, stepping to meet him. “Suicidal idiot.”

Adam considers a scowl, but then sways where he stands as the final ounce of adrenaline leaves him. He’s too tired and ill-feeling to rise to the occasion with real venom, beginning to shiver with the onslaught of renewed pain. The hacker breaks some long-held habits—his sanctified personal space; his inconsiderate nature—and angles his shoulder against Adam to act as a crutch. They go quickly through the gloom, Pritchard issuing rearm orders to turrets and proximity mines in their wake.

“Close,” Adam eventually mutters when Pritchard kicks open a door and guides him in. He gazes around in a haze. Humour—a byproduct of survival mode, perhaps—coats his words. “I see you’ve graduated to a real lair. Suits you.”

Pritchard responds with a roll of eyes, then props Adam against a dented cabinet to key in a code. Corrugated shutters grate down, sealing them inside.

The bug-in bunker isn’t what Adam anticipated. Sure, there’s not much to be done about the drip of
moisture in the distance, nor the chill of the river, frozen over above ground and leaching damp into
the entombed mall, nor the dingy confines of an abandoned tech store, but still. Coffee mugs
overflow with cigarette butts. Wrappers that once held energy bars litter surfaces like discarded tinsel.
The blue glow of monitors crowded before CPU’s and snaking wires give the impression that this is
more a permanent locale than a rabbit hole to scurry into when the world above is abnormally
chaotic. It’s a step down from the Rialto: Adam recognises the two-man tent, set up in the centre over
what appears to be a salvaged hospital gurney minus its lower frame and wheels.

“Insulated with aluminium to bounce interference from rogue frequencies when I’m updating my
implant,” says Pritchard when he catches Adam staring at the tent, presuming scepticism. “And
before you say anything, yes, there’s interference, yes, it works, and no, I’m not paranoid.”

“Didn’t say a word, Francis.” He’ll keep a backlog of retorts ready for when he’s in some condition
to spar; watches the hacker sweep around, clearing space and gathering equipment in a barely
contained frenzy.

“I notice you’re back to taking a sum total of zero precautions.” Pritchard stops to survey him
appraisingly, gestures, then turns on his heel. “Your ridiculous cape has seen better days. Lose that,
and the armour.”

Adam’s coat is in tatters, shredded from snagging on jagged industrial joints and charred through in
places. He allows it to slip off to join the rest of the mess, unclicks his flak vest, then feels himself
begin to crumple. The filing cabinet creaks as he leans his weight on it.

“You don’t look so great yourself.”

Pritchard’s not what he expected, either. Still wearing the same old motorcycle jacket over a sweater,
hair pulled haphazardly to the back of his head and a snarl threatening to crest, but in the year since
they’ve seen each other he’s grown sickly thin and so pale that he’s grey, eyes flashing out of
insomnia-bruised sockets. Adam wonders when the hacker last slept properly: he estimates sometime
before hell arrived on earth in the form of The Incident.

“Coming from you, that’s gross hypocrisy.” Pritchard leads him, stumbling, to a barber’s chair not
unlike the one Koller used. The lack of bloodstains is a bonus. “Now sit, and stay.”

“I’m not—” he starts.

A goddamn pet. He’s cut short by a sudden wave of roiling pain, as if his
blood is alight with fire. Instead he focusses on Pritchard’s movements: setting a medkit-come-
toolbox on the ground next to him; balancing on a stool before him; extending a narrow lead to jack
into the inside of his wrist, then linking the end to something lost in his periphery.

“Consider it an IV drip.” The cable is split, its two segments wrapped in a simplified helix then
running in separate directions. The thicker half consists a transparent tube, funnelling green fluid
from an elevated stand, contents tingling as it runs up his mechanical arm. The other half is insulated,
looping off to one of many laptops that Pritchard eyes when it lets out a small blip; hooks a clear
saline bag to the stand along with the green pack, tears a syringe from its wrapper with his teeth, and
orders Adam to lean his head before prodding the line of carotid artery.

“And that?”

“A regular IV drip. You’ve done more damage than I may be able to fix,” Pritchard says quietly,
more than himself than to Adam.

“Not good, huh.” Adam’s becoming a ragdoll with heavy, dangling porcelain limbs; a puppet with
its strings cut. His arms hang limply by his sides, numbed from whatever solution is coursing through
cybernetic veins.

“Closing in on catastrophic, from a remote view at least. Your neural augs are the primary concern at the moment, and you’re going to want to be under for the recalibration. I’ll have to knock you out temporarily. Sorry.” The apology is added flippantly, though there’s an undercurrent of concern tugging at Pritchard’s features.

“Could save you the trouble,” Adam murmurs, before he slips into a blurred state of stillness and unseeing. There was morphine in that mainline, after all.

Chapter End Notes

I love all & any feedback, thanks for reading it makes my life worthwhile.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

He attempts to push down awareness of his lack of control, and his Id bites back. Morphine has always given him fever dreams, but this is markedly different.

“Heads Under Water” by Foxtrott

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The first few seconds of the drug take him up—shooting up, up, and away—while he follows the ricochet of an alien compound circulating to his cells. At the final prime number in his mental countdown, his awareness is minimised and magnified: a literal pinprick, passing through the narrow eye of a needle, heading from the macro- to the micro-level. The cannula that invades his vein is infinitely sharp, though it no longer niggles where it lays. It’s beautiful in its simplicity: a foreign body that only hurts to aid; lingers only so long to deliver relief.

*Go with it*, he tells himself. *No need to fight it.*

He balances, takes steady breaths and realigns his equilibrium to keep from falling on his own sword. Panic could send him spiralling, convert him into a missile with its heat-seeking targeting gone awry. He doesn’t want or need that while Pritchard is probing around inside his malfunctioning augs. He could kill the hacker, or himself, or the pair of them, if he doesn’t relax.

*It’s fine. Safe, now.*

Adam and anaesthetics rarely mix well, but he’s versed in the vivid hallucinations they bring. He’s had enough practice to relent to the undertow; to allow himself to be swept into the fog of unconsciousness, on his own terms this time. He goes willingly with the tide rather than swimming across towards shore.

“It’s okay,” he hears from a distance. “You’re going to be okay. You’re a chronic moron, but you’re okay. Okay? I’m not going to let—”

A jolt, and he’s rocketing into the reaches of the horizon behind his eyes. He’s over the edge, but he doesn’t feel so much that he’s falling as he is floating, while the rest of the world rushes at an ever fastening rate: past him, then through him, scattering him like ashes.

He attempts to push down awareness of his lack of control, and his Id bites back. Morphine has always given him fever dreams, but this is markedly different. This is not simply the abstract given partial, momentary form; his fears growing wings and taking flight as full-blown nightmares. This is him riding an elevator to the basement of his cerebral cortex, forced to witness the firing of each neuron and synaptic pathway as he traverses the hallways of his mind. This is someone else, digging metaphorical knuckle-deep through the mush of his precious organic matter; sifting through the last remnants that feel real, authentic, wholly human.

Panic it is, then.
He glimpses a glimmer of blade, scalpel-sharp and fast, then reels at the wash of red around him. There is blood, spilling forth without clotting. Blood, pulsing from a source that cannot be stemmed. He watches bodies torn limb from limb, chopped and sliced and diced then reassembled with pieces missing and replaced by parts that do not belong. He knows those screams, those pleas; knows the face hovering in front of him—prostrate, strapped, paralysed—awaking on an operating table.

No. Please, not here again. Anywhere but here.

He tumbles back together under an avalanche of powdery snow: it compresses down on him, surrounding him. He's in a pocket of oxygen with unflinching ice all around. He stiffens with rigor, cells calcified, then travels deeper in the blinding whiteness, where there is no up and there is no down. Deep freeze, cryostasis, short-term hibernation. He's been here, too.

“Breathe. Don’t forget to breathe.”

The snow compacts, so cold that it burns and sublimates into solid above, liquid below. He’s submerged in the wreckage of Panachea after the fall of humankind, plunged into the depths of the sea. He struggles, bubbles shrieking in a stream from his open mouth as he thrashes for freedom from the deep. When he rises, gravity giving him leeway, he’s encased: so close that he can see the sky through hairline fractures, the ice so clear that it’s glass, cracked but unrelenting against his fists. So close to the surface, but he can’t reach it. His image in a mirror, destroyed by its reflection. Is this suicide?

“Don’t you dare do this to me, not today. You absolute, incorrigible jerk—”

And then, someone else breathing on his behalf, since he no longer knows how to. His chest inflates, starved brain singing as stars pop, saturated, the gasp of air absorbed. He’s only afraid of drowning in his dreams, and he’s no longer asleep.

There’s slap landing on his cheek, shoulders roughly shaken, an exhale in time with his own. He choke up the snow, the water, the ashes: all him, all in him, but he isn’t a part anymore. He’s not apart anymore.

“Remind me to never resuscitate you again.”

Pritchard sits before him, swimming in and out of his reality. The hacker’s face is set in an expression that can only be classified as fury, but his eyes are wide with something Adam can’t place. He points to the spray of bright yellow bile, swamping up his to ankles. “You owe me a new pair of shoes. Asshole.”

Chapter End Notes

Me irl: Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation is nothing like kissing, it's purely to save someone's life when they're not getting enough oxygen

Me in this fan-fic: Adam is such a damsel & he's gonna be SO WEIRD about Pritchard kinda-almost-sorta kissing him

Also, I've had several surgeries, & each & every time I get totally wackadoo because of the anaesthetic + painkillers. Get me on some oxycodone & I'll literally convince myself that I've been body-snatched & have been replaced by a corpse. Fun times, my guys.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

"Impressive effort, Jensen. You came this far from giving me a heart-attack by proxy."

"Smoke Rings" by Laurie Anderson

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A full saline bag, a shot of Hypostim, and a Cyberboost bar have him feeling more like himself. A nauseous, out-of-it, ashen version of Adam Jensen, though that’s reasonable blowback from nearly drowning on solid ground.

“What’s the damage?” he asks around a cigarette. His own pack of Royal Bloodhounds is ruined, and Pritchard has reluctantly allowed him a single Holy Smoke. The taste is acrid, too harsh, but the nicotine helps. He wasn’t going to watch his companion chaining them without joining in.

“I’m not totally hopeless at triage, but I can only get so much from what I have.” Pritchard rubs his temples, sitting forward in his swivel chair. “And I may be a tech genius, but I’m not a doctor.”

Adam blows a lopsided smoke ring in his direction. “Your humility isn’t reassuring. Not your style, either.”

“Well, I’ll bring you up to speed. So far today, you’ve almost died not once, but twice. If it weren’t for your rebreather, you would have suffocated before I could come to the rescue.” This is evidently a source of irritation: the hacker’s croaky from stress, wan with exhaustion, and still he has teeth. “Impressive effort, Jensen. You came this far from giving me a heart attack by proxy.”

“That habit can’t help matters.” Adam nods to the puff emitting from Pritchard’s lips. “Should slow down on the smoking unless you’re after a stroke.”

Pritchard appears to assemble a comeback—‘By the way, when are you going to address your casual alcoholism?’—then decides not to bite. He lights another cigarette instead, ashing it with a sarcastic flick of his wrist.

Adam fiddles with a tear at his knee, thinking. Pritchard’s behaving in a way that’s out of character. He’s the same infuriating blend of intellectually arrogant and socially oblivious, but he’s also nervous, and that can’t be attributed solely to Adam’s condition. He’s not simply suffering his regular high-strung petulance and paranoia: Adam could recognise that brand of personality deficit from a satellite. Something else is bothering the hacker, prompting him to avert his gaze at intervals lest he be caught inspecting Adam closely; shucking his jacket on and off, as if he can’t decide whether he’s hot or not.

“You mentioned my rebreather kicked in,” Adam tries.

“I did.”

“So, performing mouth-to-mouth: you were just happy to see me?”
If he dwells on the strangeness of the situation rather than turning it back on Pritchard it’ll all come flooding out, and Adam will accidentally mention that he hasn’t kissed anyone since Megan—since he became what he is—and give Pritchard an opportunity to mock him. ‘Congratulations: that’s the most pathetic thing I’ve heard in a while.’ Or worse, Pritchard might pity him, suspicion giving way to an uncomfortable quiet, broken by an offhanded comment. ‘If that’s what constitutes kissing in your mind, then maybe you should get out more.’ And no, of course he doesn’t consider run-of-the-mill resuscitation akin to kissing.

Slightly similar, with a separate intent.

Oddly enough, Pritchard flushes, arms folding in defence. “The risks of opioid depression,” he snips. “You were down to seven breaths per minute, and I wasn’t keen to kill off any more of your brain cells. You need all you can get, Jensen.”

“Still sulking about me being sick on your shoes? Because I hate to break it to you, but you have terrible taste in footwear.”

“Careful, or I’ll mute you.” It’s a hollow threat, and Adam’s glad for the lingering weirdness to be transmuted into familiar sniping and griping.

“I’ve been warned, so quit stalling. How much havoc did the EMP wreak?”

Pritchard gets up to pace, toying with a strand of hair. “It wasn’t just the grenade: falling down an air-shaft didn’t help matters. Your limbs will need attention, but I won’t get to those until you’ve recovered somewhat. Unfortunately, my initial assessment of your injuries was lacking: the inflammation around your chest ports, and at your shoulder and leg joints, is the very least of your problems.” He waves to the bandages adorning Adam’s upper abdomen. “I’ll replace the gauze tomorrow.”

“What’s the bad news?”

“You’ve gone and given your internal organs sunburn. Good thing your cell regeneration is above average, or you’d be facing a serious infection; maybe some minor haemorrhaging.”

“Layman’s terms, I was almost barbequed.”

“Closer to parboiled, but essentially.” Pritchard narrows his eyes. Has he also noticed the gap created by their mutual radio silence? The rift of time and continents, suddenly bridged as if nothing has changed?

“You say that with a little too much enthusiasm, Francis.” Yeah, Pritchard must be aware that their conversation readily takes nostalgic turns towards their adversarial early years: they’re both playing along. Now Adam’s doing the stalling, unexcited by the prospect of more out-of-body voyages into his fucked up subconscious. He clears his throat. “And my neural augs?”

Pritchard’s nose wrinkles in frustration. He takes his jacket off again. “Many have been wiped of their latest updates, so I’ll need to rewrite the coding. It’ll be arduous, and it’s unlikely to be much fun for you while I’m in there.”

“More hallucinations. Great,” Adam mutters, running a weary hand over his face. He just can’t catch a break today. The hacker perks up, interest pinching at his features: Adam clenches his jaw. “Next time you rejig my implants, double-check the dosage. It wasn’t all sunshine and butterflies when you were poking around in there,” he quashes any enticement of curiosity with the roughness of his voice. They’re not going to devolve from figurative to literal hand-holding, and that’d be inevitable if
he told Pritchard about being subjected to visions of himself, disembodied then dismembered. That, or mockery, or pity. It’ll take more than a bad trip to break him.

“What I want to know is, how did you know I was injured?”

Pritchard paces with more conviction. “Your Health System sends me an automatic alert when your heart rate or breathing goes into the red zone. And earlier, they were both deeper in the red than I’ve ever seen them.”

“Still keeping tabs on me? How sweet.” Joking aside, Adam’s perturbed: how long has Pritchard been spying on him from a distance? That goes above and beyond the no-contact rule.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Pritchard snorts, unconvincing in his authority. “I neglected to disconnect the link after you left Detroit, and since I hadn’t picked up anything abnormal, it remained on. According to your GPL, you’ve been keeping a low profile.” He stubs his cigarette and rounds on Adam, rocking back and forth on his heels. “So, what were you up to this time, Jensen?”

“You’re the one who’s been stalking me. You tell me.” Adam’s not dropping this without coercion. He’s currently more entertained than accusatory, especially when Pritchard picks up the jacket only to promptly discard it again.

“I’m not stalking you. I’ve had bigger issues to deal with than you sneaking around and smashing skulls.”

Adam nods, feigning mollification; Pritchard glares, tapping his toe against the leg of the desk. “Go on, show off already,” Adam sighs when the stalemate persists. “We both know you’re going to.”

Pritchard plants himself in the computer chair to pull up a report from Sentinel on the nearest screen, all wonky waveforms, the erratic dips and peaks of pulse alongside oxygen saturation. “Fine, but even you’d be able to read these timestamps.” He stabs a finger at a segment of imaging. “1600, and your heart’s at a resting rate. By half-past, it’s jumped up. I assume that’s when you were playing secret agent, hmm?”

“It’s referred to as infiltration.”

“Whatever. You picked an hour when those office workers were less alert, ready to pack up and go home. Not a bad plan by solo standards, but you should have done more recon before bursting in, guns blazing. It’s from sheer willful ignorance that you missed the mechs.”

Adam screws the last of the Holy Smoke into crumbs between his finger and thumb. “Pritchard,” he says, annoyance threatening to creep up his throat. “Play fair. I took out their security protocols. There were no mechs listed in the schema, and I didn’t notice any on the scans. Or during my recon,” he adds for emphasis. “And I had a stun gun equipped. The staff will have a hangover, but I didn’t hurt anyone.”

“That’s a positive development,” says Pritchard’s face. “Except yourself,” he continues aloud. “That spike at five on the dot, then the crash that follows, is you being cooked. I realise your pain threshold is ridiculously high, but even so. On scale of one to ten, I’d venture that’s an eleven.”

“Pretty bad, yeah,” Adam concedes, and nods for Pritchard to go on.

The hacker skims the report for a minute, muttering under his breath. “You didn’t mention the seizures. A tonic clonic with several consecutive focal seizures. How’s your memory of the past few hours?”
“Patchy. Plenty of déjà vu.”

“I imagine as much. You’re clearly disoriented, too. The hallucinations may have been partially morphine and neural weave related, but a focalised seizure could also account for them.”

“Look, I know as much about the brain as I do about space: not much,” Adam begins, “But if a pulse was set to a certain pattern—”

The colour drains from Pritchard’s already pallid cheeks. “Shut up.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me fine.” Pritchard fixes him with a steely look before turning back to the screen; cocks his head from side to side, a tendon jumping in his neck as he talks to himself.

Now this is the hacker Adam remembers: single-minded; adept at identifying minute details and anomalies amidst a wall of random information; intolerant, intolerable, and not to be interrupted when he’s in the middle of a data scan.

After a dozen minutes have passed, Pritchard’s muttering reaches a crescendo. Adam wouldn’t be surprised if his conclusion were accompanied by a shout of ‘Eureka!’ His reaction is far more restrained: when Pritchard straightens from his hunch, he presses his palms to his eyes and swears.

“What have you got?”

“Only enough to speculate.” He’s still in a bloodless pallor, clammy with sweat. Superior, rude, tantrum-throwing Francis would be preferable to this.

“Try me.” Adam edges forward to click his fingers at the hacker’s downturned face. Snap out of it. “It’s got to be more than I have to go on.”

With that, Pritchard is up and out of the chair, the momentum sending it twirling into the tent. “It doesn’t make any sense. That kind of technology has been conceived of, but it doesn’t exist! I’d know if it did! Unless...” He thums his knuckles on his chin. “That’s worse. That’s a lot worse. But who—”

“Hey, Frank? Fill me in before you have an aneurysm.”

Pritchard re-registers Adam’s presence with a start. “You keep calling me that. How hard did you hit your head?” He searches Adam’s face critically, then ignores what he finds. “Never mind. Warn me if you can’t keep up: I’ll take questions at the end.”

Adam swallows an insult, watching Pritchard clock into his usual egotism. The latter stomps back and forth, gesticulating wildly as he rattles off his thoughts. Yep, welcome back to normality.

“The average EMP grenade is set at twenty volts, which is more than enough to knock out the sturdiest turret. To combat an attack, biological augments have an inbuilt recovery mechanism: the excess charge is absorbed and discharged through kinetics, and as static. There’s a window of thirty seconds before most systems purge, or else they take permanent damage. The fail-safe is generally successful. Imagine, though, if an EMP were able to adapt to a target’s biometric frequencies.”

“Then the fallout reaches well beyond the short-term.” Adam’s not lagging behind: not yet, anyway.

“Exactly. A typical encounter with an EMP—even if you add a hyper-conductor like water—doesn’t explain an ongoing cascade effect across multiple augments. Here.” Pritchard points along the feed:
Smart Vision, hacking capabilities, C.A.S.I.E., Cloaking, Wayfinder. “An implant remains fully functioning until its usage is unsustainable, then it resets, which in turn loads and overloads the next. Hence, an untold amount of power surging: I couldn’t see the distinction at first with how fast it’s occurring. Blink, and I missed it. But whatever voltage and oscillation the electromagnetic pulse was dialled at, it was specific.”

“Specific to what?” Adam has to ask, rather than let realisation dawn without all the variables.

Pritchard wheels his chair over to sit, wringing his hands raw without a cigarette. “It’s not a question of what,” he says quickly, hovering just above a whisper. “But who.”

Now Pritchard’s lost him. “Don’t be cryptic.”

“You. You, for fuck’s sake, keep up!” Adam earns himself a poke square in the chest: Pritchard has forsaken low tones for yelling, carried away by his breakthrough. Adam bats the hand clear, only for the hacker to latch onto his wrist, giving it a squeeze to drive his point home. How long has he been living down here, alone in the dark? Adam wonders. What if he’s finally snapped?

“Just spit it out.” Adam pries himself free with all the caution of a snake-handler dealing with an antagonised python. Fitting.

“You’re so slow on the uptake,” Pritchard snaps, though he calms by degrees. “Specific to your augments, your body mass, the density of your implants, calibration, upgrade model and edition, which alloys were used in their production, your bloody biometric field. You.”

It clicks. If this is the alternative, then Adam wishes the hacker were mad. There are only two explanations for this, and neither bodes well.

The first and less likely conclusion: a new generation of EMP’s have been designed to innovate when they take out targets; a weapon that can scan, align, and detonate with tailored precision. Bad. That’s really bad.

The second and more likely: someone knew Adam intended to be there, in that office, and had planned for his arrival well in advance; an individual or organisation with information about him that few people are privy to. Pritchard is right: that’s worse.

“The EMP was versatile enough to adapt to you,” the hacker murmurs when Adam doesn’t speak. “Or was specifically designed to be used against you.”

There’s no smugness to it, though the sombre, near sympathetic pat on the back of his hand makes Adam balk: too close for comfort, and too much like pity. He deplores being pitied.

“Yeah, I got that.” This day is going even further downhill, when he thought he’d hit rock-bottom hours ago. “You’d better have more Holy Smokes up your sleeve, because we’re in for a long night.”

Chapter End Notes

Full disclosure: I’ve taken some serious liberties with canon, science, & medicine. If anything stands out as glaringly incorrect, please feel free to bring it to my attention. B)
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Trust. It's called trust.
"Compliments" by Bloc Party

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They’re making progress.

Adam has finally talked Pritchard around from rationing the cigarettes too stringently, and he’s sitting at a six on the pain-scale. Wrapped in a musty blanket and tossing back pills, he’s miles from how he’s been working the past months: picking his battles himself, beholden to no-one and nothing but a duty for the truth. The isolation of his previous set-up wasn’t ideal, and he can’t deny that company might do him some good in addition to offering an extra mind on the case. Theatrics aside, Pritchard is someone he can sound his ideas off; someone who understands the complex web behind every façade; someone whose cynicism extends only far as not to doubt what Adam’s saying.

Trust. It’s called trust.

They made an effective—if not fun—team as dual security heads, and their work in the wake of The Incident was rewarding where tension would allow. Over time, the antagonism between them has waned to a glimmer of its former scope: now it’s largely for show, just the way they operate; the foremost feature of their unconventional partnership. If camaraderie could negate the stakes, and the flutter of discomfort throughout Adam’s body, and the feeling of the walls closing in around him, it’d qualify as kind of nice. Or it would, if nice and Francis Wendell Pritchard weren’t mutually exclusive by definition.

Backtracking to the beginning, he fills the hacker in on his reasons for being here in the first place. Pritchard listens, using a black light to add notes in invisible ink on a blank span of wall. It strikes Adam as B-Grade, but it’s a reasonable precaution with what they’re uncovering. They’ll keep their plans offline and themselves off the map until they have a better idea of what they’re embroiled in.

In shorthand, Adam is here to seek out incriminating details on a monetary fund that just doesn’t add up.

“And the front is Smoly nec & Co.” Pritchard nods. “But Montréal: this is Picus’ arena. You know the mainstream media have hush-funds in the wings, especially with Everett at the helm.”

Adam nods in return. “I thought the same, but that was too neat. Too easy. And the amount of money changing hands can’t be payoff related. Buying silence doesn’t cost much nowadays.”

“God forbid something so straightforward as bribery.” Pritchard sullenly drops his head to rest against the plasterboard. “I miss the old days of blackmail and financed favours. It was a simpler, overtly dishonourable era.”

Adam doesn’t know much of Pritchard’s life before Sarif Industries: broad strokes, not the details.
“What was it that landed you in prison?” he inquires, all innocent disinterest. Fraud and related activity in connection with access devices and computers he recalls, having used the charges as ribbing-material back in the day. Hell, he knows a lot less about Pritchard than he should after years of working together, though he does know that his question will be met with deflection.

“If we’re still alive by the end of this, buy me a drink and I’ll spill. For now, would you focus?”

Adam suspected the firm as a cover for an augment removal-and-reassignment group. His suspicions were strengthened when he accessed a database of names and numbers, all recipients of bulk payments. Corroborated with missing persons reports, and Adam’s sure that the Augmented of Montréal are being butchered, or worse. Whoever’s behind it is benefitting by millions of credits.

His summary receives a frown. “It’s not like you to investigate the Harvesters. Not that it’s not important, and offensive to common, human decency,” Pritchard justifies to ward off an affront. “It’s just that The Illuminati have been your end goal since ‘27. This is relatively small-scale.”

Pritchard broaches the attack and all that came afterwards objectively, without hints of mourning; the anger once aimed at Adam long gone. No use crying over spilt milk, as the colloquialism would have it. It’s just a fact, now, that they were both altered irreparably. Panachea, the Palisades Blade, etcetera provided some vindication, but to what end? Cut a cancer out, and the chemo might kill you. It happened, and keeps happening, by way of new permutations; another three heads to the Hydra.

“Someone once told me that it’s all the same structure when it reaches the top,” Adam mumbles. “You get in at the ground level, and it’s your choice where to get out.”

By the twitch of his lips, Pritchard comes close to laughing. “Anti-establishment sentiments: that’s more like it. You know, I heard whispers of citywide disappearances. No-one paid much attention, since it’s just us hanzers.” He scratches at the skin in front his left ear, where his own implant discreetly resides: another tick to add to his growing list. “What started you on this? Have a sudden craving for danger that needed sating?”

“An email. Anonymous, and yeah, I tracked the IP address. It led to a bounce-server: the path went cold from there.”

“Got a copy?”

“Third down in my inbox.” He tosses his pocket secretary under-armed to the hacker, who has to reach to catch it. Adam blinks to rid himself of his double vision, to no avail. “The sooner you get my ocular implants fixed, the better. This is like going on a bender with none of the fun.”

“You don’t go on a bender to have fun, Jensen,” Pritchard corrects wryly as he reads, then clearly rereads the content, brows ready to fly off his face. “Clever.”

Is Francis high-and-mighty Pritchard stooping to deliver a compliment? “Which bit?”

“You, pulling numbers and deductions from the first ten thousand decimals of a Pi-Crypt and being cognisant of what you’re reading.” He’s bordering on sardonic. “The code itself shows that your informant isn’t in the business of whistleblowing, and has a rudimentary handling of encryption. The Perfect Circle. Cute.”

“Losing me with your nerd-lingo,” Adam says, head in hands.

Pritchard’s smugness has returned: he thumbs the screen with a sneer. “I forget that it’s not common knowledge outside the dark web. A version has persisted on hacking boards for so long it’s now a meme. You know, which shadowy cabal can be implicated by infinite digits? Any of them, if you
“squint.”

“I thought it was kind of smart.”

“You would. I still think we should keep an eye on the media, just in case you’re off track.”

“You would.”

They find another indication that Adam’s mission had been forewarned in the Picus RSS feed. “I take their journalism with an unhealthy portion of salt, but they’re a decent starting point.” Pritchard’s taken to bouncing a knee against the underside of the table, over-caffeinated and under-slept. He has Adam scanning over his shoulder. “It’s all about reading between the lines, or believing the opposite where many stories are concerned.”

“Preaching to the choir, Pritchard. Are they still running with the ARC angle?”

“Boutique Finance Firm Rocked by Augmented Terror. They’ll put satirists out of work—”

“Scroll down,” Adam interrupts. There’s a lurch in his stomach: it pays to skim more than just the headline. “Police reported eight fatalities, all shot point-blank. Professional, execution style.”

“I’m not saying that your recollection of events is impaired,” Pritchard starts, then back-peddles at the stiffening of Adam’s posture. “I’m only suggesting that the alternative is troubling.”

Troubling is an understatement. “A cleanup team. No witnesses, and no-one to counter the official version of events. They were prepared.”

Pritchard groans, composure slipping as the magnitude of all these possibilities sets in. This is a lot more than small-scale. “Why don’t you pick on someone your own size, Jensen, or is that not enough of a challenge?”

“Focus, Francis. Run those timestamps past me again.”

They crosscheck the Sentinel report and Picus’ coverage over siamese monitors.

“The story headlined at five, in time for the evening bulletin. Yes,” Pritchard says pointedly, “Released at the same time as the EMP detonated.”

“They’re quick, but no-one can break news before the alarm has been raised. Are we looking at a remote alert system? The grenade goes off—”

“And the news goes live. So, whoever it was is in bed with Cassan and co. Lucky for you, they wanted you in one malfunctioning, neutered piece.”

“Yeah,” Adam snorts. “That’s just what I wanted to hear.”

“Better than disassembly. I suppose they underestimated how stubborn you are.” Now that quip—what with Pritchard’s lip-biting delivery—was a compliment.

“Didn’t anticipate an accomplice, either.” Adam lets his elbow nudge Pritchard’s arm, before he’s shaken off by a sidelong glare. The personal bubble still stands, largely on the hacker’s end. “Now, who could want me out of action?”

There’s a first time for everything: Pritchard laughs for real at that. It’s not as off-putting as Adam would have supposed to see bared teeth in this context, and it gives Pritchard the illusion of normalcy, momentarily alleviating years and stress. To pretend this is funny is the only way to stay
sane. “That list must be as long as Pi by now. You have a habit of making more enemies than friends.”

Does count Pritchard as a friend? Adam wonders. If he has to wonder, that may be an answer.

The night wears on and turns into morning for the metropolis above, though the transition goes unnoticed in the bunker. Down here it’s perpetually twilight, like flying from the sunrise on a long-haul flight, landing at the same hour as lift-off. The effect is eerie, an atmosphere of time stagnant and unchanged while smoke drifts in whorls to the ceiling. Adam’s tired, but too wired to rest yet. All of this—the flow of theories; the effort it takes to concentrate; the bursts of pain that have him clenching his jaw and his fists—is setting him on edge.

By six they’re running in circles, only to find more open-ended, tenuous leads than solid solutions. They call a break, only to break the break with tangential shit-talk. Adam’s fairly certain Pritchard’s been snorting caffeine pills when his back is turned: the hacker is jumpy, taking stead of the surveillance perimeter over CCTV streams and staging a minor meltdown when a rat triggers a proximity sensor.

“Francis, it’s a rodent. They’re more scared of you than you are of them.”

“And I’m scared that the Gestapo are lying in wait for us to let our guard down. You’re a fugitive: behave accordingly!”

They bicker, all goodwill gone and replaced by reflexive grousing. When Pritchard cracks his knuckles then flexes his limbs to check on a security terminal hidden in the corner, Adam lights another cigarette, figuring it’ll go unnoticed. He’s immediately instructed to put it out, despite Pritchard’s location on the other side of the room.

“You’re respiration is shot, Jensen. As I already told you, I’m not going to help when you turn blue.”

“Fine.” Adam takes a drag, exhaling with more words. “I’ll watch on as you cough up a lung.”

“A lecture from the poster boy of how-not-to-live-your-life-LTD. How quaint.” The hacker cranes his neck to give Adam a derisive ogle. “Stop thinking so hard. I can hear the cogs turning from here.”

Adam’s trying to find a way to phrase his thoughts without showing that the insanity-mongering is getting to him. “I don’t know what your allegiances are nowadays, Pritchard...”

The man in question feigns offence, springing up to perch on the stool opposite once more and stealing Adam’s cigarette for himself. “Me? Allegiances? Perish the thought.”

“Let’s cut to the chase. There’s no love lost when it comes to Sarif, for either of us.” Pritchard gestures between them. “But I don’t do grudges, and I’ll only take yours as far as the clues go.”

Adam hums in assent. Sarif may have had the nerve to convert his employee into a test subject for deadly prototypes, but would he sell Adam out if the price were right? “Fair enough. You should put some feelers out to your cyber-cronies, and I should check out Eliza the third.”

“Breaking into Picus to flirt with an AI isn’t going to be easy. She’s a tool, anyway.” Pritchard leans for his lukewarm mug and takes a sip before he adds, “of The Illuminati.”

“Says the grown man who spends his downtime playing video games.” Adam’s not above taunting
on a good day, and now he’s both mentally and physically worn out.

“Some of us have hobbies outside of guns and atonement. You should try that, sometime.” The prickliness abates when Adam closes his eyes, the cycling of his crashing neural augs leaving him deflated and bereft of fight. Pritchard speaks quietly and close-by. “Let’s go with later. Um. How are you coping?”

That confusing concern is there again, and as before, Adam can’t stand it.

“I’m accused of murdering eight people, I was electrocuted then had back-to-back adrenal jumps, and now I’m trapped in a room with you,” he says before he thinks. “How do you reckon?”

He gains the briefest glimpse of hurt travelling through Pritchard’s form, narrow shoulders sagging until the hacker is altogether downcast. That was a low-blow, especially with all the genuine, unexpected empathy he’s being shown, and he tosses up a suitable excuse. ‘I’m so damn tired that I can’t think straight. Before I forget, thanks for saving my ass today?’

Pritchard beats him to it by righting himself with a shake of his head, drawing back until he’s looking at Adam down the bridge of his nose. “And I’m such a fan of meeting you like this.”

They pause, readying for another round of escalating pettiness. It’s Adam’s turn to retort, but he’s the one being a prick, so he should be the one to set it right. It’s only polite, and their arguing isn’t as enjoyable when it injures in earnest.

“Yeah. Crashing your plans, ruining your shoes, and I haven’t even asked how you are.”

Pritchard shrugs off the query, but he seems to accept the attempt at making amends. “You need to rest,” he insists, though he can’t quite stifle his own yawn, rising to combat his grogginess with more coffee.

“And you?”

“As the saying goes, I’ll sleep when I’m dead.”

Adam weighs up a jab about bleariness begetting inefficiency, or how shaking hands preclude more stimulants, or how Pritchard looks as terrible as Adam feels. But he’s selfish. He needs some peace and quiet, and he’s sure as hell not sharing the gurney until he’s recovered. God, he must be a mess: they won’t be sharing the gurney at any time, under any circumstances. Pritchard will probably have him on lookout duty by tomorrow, when he’s in better condition and itching with boredom.

“Don’t wait that long, Frank,” he says, then hobbles for the tent before he can see how that’s received.

Being addressed by his preferred name must incite a short-circuit: Pritchard stutters out some jibe pertaining to hypocrisy before he zips the tent closed behind Adam, remaining silhouetted against the thin fabric for a beat too long. Now I know how to shut him up, Adam thinks, drowsy with painkillers. The clatter of the keyboard and the occasional expletives resume once he’s ceased shuffling and tiredness overcomes him. That’s progress.

Chapter End Notes

Anxious Frank is my favourite Frank to write, but "Don't You Dare Pity Me" Adam
THE WORST. Urgh Jensen, you're such a jerk: it's a good thing you're going to figure out how to be nicer in the coming chapters.

Lemme know what you think, & thanks for reading!
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

No need to let on that his life feels like a series of interconnected dissociative episodes.

"Truth" by Molly Nilsson

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Many things, good and bad alike, present themselves in sets of three. Political triumvirates. The rule of thirds in artistic composition. The Holy Trinity. He’d add another, but that’d break the pattern. Case in point: the sulphuric smell of extinguished electrical flames. The vinegar burn of stomach acid searing his oesophagus. The sense that someone has surgically implanted a pipe bomb at the forefront of his skull.

Fuzzy recollections supplant the disorientation of awaking in a strange place. He’s in a tent, in a bunker. The sounds emanating from beyond are made by Pritchard. He’s started referring to Pritchard as *Frank*. Of the lot, that last fact is the trickiest to come to terms with.

*Third time lucky. Third wheels. Triptychs.* It’s a bizarre anti-panic method, but he’s found it provides continuity when there is otherwise none.

His limbs are initially uncooperative, as if all those months of physiotherapy amounted to moot. A loss of coordination isn’t uncommon in moments after waking, or following bouts of stress: according to Vera Marcovic, it’s a brief but helpless-making event that afflicts those with organic brain disturbances, and now the biologically modified. *Conversion episodes,* she termed them. Instances of subcognitive malfunction that result in numbness, dissociation, depersonalisation, a stumble through the uncanny valley...

‘Such occurrences have commonalities with anterograde amnesia, though when the affected functions are primarily physical, they tend to pass faster,’ she’d reassured him. Adam had asked whether there was a causal link with flashbacks or recurring nightmares. ‘A correlation, yes.’ A glint of fascination at having him show his hand, substituted with pragmatism. ‘Are you experiencing flashbacks, Adam?’ He’d lied and said that he wasn’t. No need to let on that his life feels like a series of interconnected dissociative episodes. ‘Just interested, is all. When can you sign me off, doc?’ She’d smiled sadly, and changed the subject back to exercises for his fine motor skills.

But right now, unable to determine which way his knees are meant to bend: that comes down to the power surges that’ll hopefully cease when Pritchard works some of his techy-magic. Or, it could be that the painkillers are no longer blocking receptors from fizzing at the contact burns beneath bandages, overwhelming the pathways in his brain that tell his limbs to move. Or, the malaise of too many close calls in too short a time frame—and that whole thing where he’s being framed for murder and someone, as per, probably wants to dissect him for malevolent research purposes—could be the culprit. A combination of all the above? Doesn’t matter. He doesn’t care. He’s fine, really, all things considered.

*Ménage et trois. Three months to each season. The number of primary colours.*
The click of his metallic toes against uncovered floor do nothing to draw Pritchard’s attention, who stays bent, working on a complex linear array. He’s in as much the same position as Adam left him: jaw taut, the baggage under his eyes weighing heavy, hair haywire from where he’s patently pulled at it. Pritchard is coding blind, translating HTTPS and hashed text with practiced bilingualism and countering with input of his own. For all his hacking-aptitude, Adam couldn’t come close to that kind of prowess: he’d need the aid of graphics, nodes gleaming and stuttering as code ate through defences, prepared by stealth for newly generated modules to fend off the invasion.

“Was that a high score?” he asks, impressed when a firewall crumbles under the onslaught.

“About time.” Pritchard is, as always, blasé about eye contact ascribing an addressee; his voice flat and distracted. “I was going to set off a klaxon if you didn’t make an appearance soon.”

The clutter of cables has grown in the interim, signal boosters working overtime and modems whirring. “You been up all night?”

“No.” Pritchard goes on with what he’s doing, then slams the space bar to clarify. “We were up all night. I’ve been up all day.”

“You know what I meant. Taken a break lately?” Nothing thrives under artificial light except dysphoria and cabin fever. From the unintended contractions of muscle groups—radials flickering bare arms; deltoids set tense under the seams of t-shirt—and his jittery aspect, the hacker has a bad case of both. “Or, you know, ever?”

Pritchard uses the rote raise of his shoulders and tilts to scratch his ear, his hands staying stuck, marionette-like, to keys. “That’s irrelevant.”

Adam gives up prying before the reception become any terser. He can’t quite experience extremes of temperature as he once did, years before: he can distinguish environmental factors through the surface of his synthetic skin and compare the sensations of his remaining epidermis, then choose to persevere without regard for what the latter is telling him. Now he’s sore enough to draw the blanket tighter, filing away a future gripe about whether it would kill Pritchard to make this place fit for human habitation, computer efficiency be damned. On that note, how is Pritchard not freezing? And is that a tattoo on his upper bicep? Adam takes the easy route, and asks the time.

“Four-ish.”

So, a solid nine hours of sleep. That should be enough recuperation for him to make himself useful: if not as heavy artillery, then surely by some other means. “Can I help?”

“Unless you can stymie the next global crisis, not for the moment. Coffee’s over there,” Pritchard indicates with a jerk of his head. “Get me one while you’re at it. And leave my cigarettes alone: I’m low on provisions.”

Adam pokes around, shades manually retracted out of courtesy. No need: the hacker is easily preoccupied, busy hissing like an enraged snake at the monitor once more. Like hell he needs more caffeine. He’ll be hurling abuse at inanimate objects before long. Adam inspects mugs for gritty residue, swollen cigarette butts, and disconcerting rings of stain before he opts to drink straight from the pot. A half-carton of freeze-dried, vacuum-sealed coffee sachets are branded in a dialect he doesn’t recognise. The headway that’s been made—two-hundred-and-fifty serves minus a quarter of the box; divided by eight to ten cups per day, not including uppers—puts the start of Pritchard’s current arrangement in the ballpark of November. Well, that warrants a discussion; as does the presence of Pritchard’s motorcycle, carefully covered by a drop sheet at the back.
“Touch my bike and you forfeit your thumbs,” the hacker warns, tetchy with a six-sense that’s reserved for trespassers into the radius of his most prized possession.

“I’m nowhere near it.” Adam takes a step back, just to be on the safe side. “Settle down.”

“Keep it that way and I will.”

He gets a better look at the lair now that he’s crossed out of the aftermath and is stuck with pent-up restlessness. A demountable work desk in the shape of a long-stemmed, capital L occupies most of the space, tent situated at the crook. A door at the rear of the room leads to a storage area—lockers, their padlocks still intact, adjacent to a pilfered safe—then a toilet cubicle. The water from the tap is limey and tooth-achingly cold when he drinks, splashes some on his face. Fingers crossed it’s uncontaminated.

A tech store makes sense, he’ll give Pritchard that. Previous security would have been sturdy to prevent against theft, and the energy demands in a centre this size would provide a solid grid to cannibalise from. The vibe could use some improvement, though. Whoever ransacked the shop went to the effort of knocking down shelves that once held devices when they barreled through the glass storefront: there’s a buildup of shards and demolished fibroboard carpeting the base of reinforced roller shutters, swept half-heartedly into corners. A comet’s tail of ash skids across the ceiling, fluorescent panels cracked by the heat of an incendiary projectile. The burned-out husk of a punctured hairspray canister is right where he predicted it would be. He guesses many fingers were lost through guerrilla tactics and reckless improvisation.

He was provided an overhead of the 2029 riots—the then-impending Human Restoration Act spurring both sides to protest, turn violent, escalate to revolt—but it’s surreal seeing the results up close. The barricades during the weekend of turmoil were, predictably, at their strongest around Picus Media headquarters: Adam and the world watched via bird’s-eye as swarms of incensed montréalais stormed the streets, their garbled shouts of injustice lost amid torrents of tear gas. Police presence is now thick above ground to ward off a repeat of AUGust, as it’s reductively, presumptuously come to be known. The metro, once Montréal’s crowning achievement, has been streamlined to a skeleton; the express line developed largely to bypass stations that would be too costly to refurbish. RÉSO—the self-contained, mostly enclosed sprawl that spreads levels below the waterline; commonly referred to as The Underground City—was the first area to fall. All the subterranean transit corridors that fed commuters to adjoining office blocks, commercial districts, and campuses have been sealed: an unreasonable risk to continued civic safety were the last words before entrances and exits were bricked over, concreted, and red-taped. Some small businesses have gone mobile, hocking their wares from the trunks of cars and repurposed food carts that roam the narrow cobblestone alleys of Old Town, with limited success. No-one goes shopping when the zeitgeist can be summed up as terminal apathy.

Rates of unemployment have risen, rocket-like; neuropozyne’s scarcity and its matching price tag still contributing to growing impoverishment. Since ‘29’s bout of civil unrest, RÉSO has become residence to an enormous homeless population, whose numbers were many even prior to the latest mayhem. In turn, that’s seen publicly-sanctioned plans for what could amount to genocide: last Adam heard, one-third of voters stood for deterrence of threats to social stability through patrols and periodic pumping of carbon monoxide into the below-ground ventilation. Another third prefer the enforced relocation method, that would see thousands rounded up and shipped to Victoria Island off the western coast, to join those from the Winter Olympics prep-scheme in their derelict tent cities. The final third are calling for another solution, though none has been proffered yet. For now, the mirror-metropolis and its ostracised inhabitants remain in limbo.

It’s miserably ironic. Build an underground city so that consumerism can flourish in the frigid winter
months. Civilians stampede the stores that clothe and feed them, burning and plundering at the height of a heatwave. Once the dust has settled, deny the displaced their only haven through threat of extermination. When that’s met with significant enough resistance, lock the door and throw away the key.

*Liberté, égalité, fraternité.*

The riots were the last straw for bureaucrats who’d held firm to heritage acts and construction parameters. With infrastructure increasingly untenable since the turn of the century, the city has compensated through stacked high-rises while its already colossal suburbs push further past the banks of the Saint Lawrence. That’s what happens when an island is colonised: the population moves up and out, satellite centres fighting amongst themselves for resources and amenities. Montréal’s reinvention has drawn ire disguised as pithy commentary from south of the border for decades. *Manhattan Project 2.0. New-New York. Boomtown’s Rats: white-collar mob bosses work hard and play harder; give no word on when the substations will be able to keep up.*

Everywhere he goes is a war-zone waiting to happen.

*Just passing through,* he reminds himself. *Unlike some people.* There’s an unzipped duffel bag of clothes, one of its handles hooked around the desk’s metal leg. The hacker should get his priorities in order: bottles of immunosuppressant and a small chemist’s-worth of meds are collected on a cabinet in plain sight, interspersed with the remnants of a six-pack of beer. Those priorities, Adam can abide by. Then there’s the loaded stun gun and ammo cartridges within Pritchard’s reach. As long as it’s not pointed at him, Adam will regard that as a pro, not a con.

He runs through his assumptions. Pritchard rode here—just over eight hundred clicks from Detroit; doable in a day—approximately a month or so ago. As far as coincidences go, this isn’t simple serendipity: the timeframe fits too cleanly with Adam’s own arrival in the city. He can presume there’s been a professional breakdown of sorts, somewhere along the line: *‘I don’t do grudges’* is a little generous for someone whose career path has entailed righting wrongs with such enthusiasm that it’s indecipherable from vengeance. Most tellingly, Pritchard would only slum like this if things were desperate, and freelance hacking can’t have hit that much of a rough patch when it’s consistently on the up-and-up. This set-up is too low-tech for Pritchard’s tastes; those PC cobbled together out of necessity, not preference. Power sourcing is one thing, but to route a reliable signal this far underground would incur more inconvenience than it’s worth, unless the straits are dire.

He takes in Pritchard’s frazzled form: when he’s not aware he’s being watched, there’s an air of abject dread that circumvents the hacker’s fixated concentration. *Dire straits, indeed.* So, what is Pritchard doing here, generally speaking? “What are you doing?” Adam asks from afar, specifically.

“Wishing you’d cease with the twenty-questions shtick,” Pritchard snaps back, hand lifting to his mouth as if to drag at a cigarette, then falling slack when he remembers he’s without. “I’ll give you my undivided attention in a second, Jensen.”

“I can hardly contain my excitement, Francis.”

Adam takes up pacing the same tracks Pritchard made the night before, stopping at the midway point of their black light mindmap to gather his thoughts. It’s only been a day but his investigations to date seem distant, as if it all occurred in a dream. His motivation is waning as pain stages a sudden comeback: he goes with Hypostim for clarity, and chews down a few pills to push through. His own version of a thought-wall had a local map in its layout, the names of the missing individuals connected by threads to their last known location.

Ten people, ranging in age from twenty-two to sixty-four, victims of a snatch-and-run spree that began with the final blue skies of summer and has continued, sporadic, since then. The police files were offensively brief: recent photos and descriptions, along with statements from friends, family, co-workers, or neighbours who reported potential abductions. Adam had found the folders in back rooms, stuffed carelessly out of sight and out of mind; in the dust-lined drawers of pre-retirement detectives, spending their days on paperwork in wait for their pensions; collected under Aug-Related Crime—victims and perpetrators intermingled—and classed as cold before any moves had been made to investigate. Dimitriou was the last to drop off the radar, just as Adam had started working the case. That had been the evening of Halloween, the streets all the more morbid in their desolation, glaringly bereft of costumed children.


They hail from differing social strata, backgrounds, cultural heritages; work across disparate industries; bear nothing in common except their status as Augmented, and their previous attendance to the same LIMB Clinic. That was to be his next port of call: dig through medical records, find anything that could shed light on their sudden disappearances. Were they, like so many, recipients of Hugh Darrow’s chip? There’ve been class-action lawsuits brought forward against anyone who could be held accountable, all tried and failed. But there’s no indication that these ten people knew each other, and with things as they are, no lawyer would represent a malpractice case on behalf of the willingly-Augmented, even if they were inclined to make noise.

One theory that tentatively fits is that all ten could have been made casualties of revenge masquerading as organised vigilantism. The Incident is a brutal wound, still infecting and affecting the present: there are many who had everything taken away from them that day, and are searching for someone to blame. Grief does terrible things to the conscience. He’s heard enough of the atrocities during the ensuing mass-psychosis that are beyond comprehension, though detailed enough to rationalise the rage that festers in some. But empathise, even sympathise? Fuck, it could have been anyone, anywhere, who was tormented into losing control. It could have been Pritchard, had Adam not given him a head’s-up. He shudders. It could have been him.

Focus. Portrait, then back out again.

Though Montréal remains progressive when compared to many places, anti-Augmented sentiments are running rife. Conservative vitriol is leaching into the collective consciousness of Canada, supported by segregation bills that have taken Europe as their model. Before this, Adam was forced to checked into an Aug’s Only hotel on the outskirts of town, retinal scans lodged as part of his entry into the guest ledger. He flouted subway guidelines just to gauge how far the guards would go, and conscientiously disposed of the resulting fine while they looked on, the heels of their hands on the butt of their guns. It takes a baby-steps, not a leap, to go from stop-and-frisk to shooting on sight: history has shown as much, time and time again. In this kind of climate, those with a desire to see justice done in any form are emboldened to take matters into their own hands. He can’t disregard hate as a motive: bodies dumped by highways, wrapped in plastic, buried with wet cement and without ceremony.

Adam shudders again. He may have embellished when he claimed he was onto this case for how much higher up it may go, and he’d fooled himself that this would be easier. He can cope with shouldering the future of the world, as it’s abstracted, amorphous in its complexity; an unknown equation that may be unsolvable. The future for the individual is bleak and finite. \( 1 - 1 = 0 \).
Okay, the payments. They fall within disturbing proximity—forty-eight hours, give or take—to the dates of the disappearances. That bodes sinister. The first twenty-four on the clock are the most important: after then, the likelihood of finding someone alive diminishes to that of a miracle. It’s been three months since the first, and five weeks after the last. Adam doesn’t need to calculate those statistics: in effect, he’s already failed each of them. Add to that the eight murders in Smolynec & Co., and it’s clear he’s leaving devastation in his wake...

*Focus, for fuck’s sake.*

Two million credits per head, making twenty million in total. That’s no small figure, and it’s an inordinately large amount of money to be moving through a business with a staff of fresh-faced graduates and lifers who deal predominantly in tax returns and refinancing. Unless there’s an insurance scam being run on the side: a team of accountants could cook the books as easily as tying their laces. He’s already entertained the idea that the missing were a part of a getaway ploy. Since the dawn of identity fraud, life-savings have been forked out in return for a passport, a one-way ticket to Venezuela, an open-and-shut case. Hire a professional to help fake your own death, then start over: rip the bandaid off, as it were.

But it was a round sum in each instance, not a penny-pinched payout from an insurance company. And there’d be blood if this were a straight-cut series of escapes: a litre taken at intervals and kept on ice until there’s enough to stage exsanguination and paint a condo red; augments with identifying serial numbers circulating the black market. Any semblance of foul play, some premise of fatality. Instead, *nothing*. Just a gap left behind, unexplained, an absence like an abyss.

There’s an unknown party in play: the same who knew he was on his way to Smolynec & Co., who tipped off the press; perhaps the same who drew him here in the first place, with multiple kidnappings and the whiff of conspiracy as their chosen bait. The firm, front or not, was collateral to get to him, and he walked right into the trap. Eighteen people, either presumed or confirmed deceased, plus twenty million credits. That’s how much he’s worth.

*You’re a ghost. You’re a fucking tragedy. Everything you touch—everything that touches you—dies.*

He can’t remain impartial, emotions compartmentalised, focussed. A prickling at the nape of his neck brings the feeling that he’s being watched; droning in his ears has him jumping at the most innocuous of noises; aborted visual input morphs into potential threats. Being augmented has its drawbacks—foremost for him, the recurrent shame of lost autonomy that gives way to self-loathing; not so easily brushed off as prejudice and bigotry—but the benefits are all the more apparent when he’s without them. He’d be of no use if the bunker were breached. He may get a few punches in, only to be taken down by a final headshot. No, they want him alive: he’d be forced to watch on, helpless, as Pritchard was dealt the headshot.

Cabin fever and dysphoria can be joined by futility. He’s at risk of being dragged off the deep end along with his unstable companion.

‘*Codependency is comorbid with trauma,*’ Delara Auzenne would proclaim, if Adam were to share his thoughts with her. ‘*You say your friend is prone to paranoia. In his line of work, is that really unreasonable?*’ Adam would keep his arms folded, his gaze unwavering. ‘*I never said that he’s my friend,*’ he’d point out. ‘*And in my line of work, it’s unreasonable to expect any. Pritchard doesn’t want me to die, but he’d be happier if we never met.*’ Auzenne would nod slowly, counter quickly. ‘*You’re outdoing yourself with the defensiveness today, Adam. What I hear you saying is that you can’t allow yourself to become attached to those around you for fear of putting them in harm’s way. Am I correct?’*

Adam takes stock with another hit of Hypostim. He’s conducting an imaginary conversation with his
former psychologist—a card-carrying member of The Illuminati—to determine whether he and Pritchard are officially friends. This is a new low, but he goes with it, sneaking a stare at the other man: hunched, fingers flying over keys, cheeks sucked in. Pritchard is consistent when it comes to coming to Adam’s rescue. Straining beyond where he should let up, as he’s wont to do. Aiding when all Adam wants is to insist that Pritchard stop, get as far away from me as you can and stay there. Don’t you know by now what happens if you hang around?

Adam burrows into the barber chair, ill with guilt and regret. In the scheme of things, he’s caused more disaster than he’s averted; been responsible by proxy for more suffering than he’s deterred; set so many machinations in motion that there’s no way to brake, reverse, go back.

The Niña. The Pinta. The Santa María.

He can be certain of one thing: he needs to leave before anyone else gets hurt.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the crazy-long delay on this chapter. The past fortnight has been tough for me (‘tis the season for mental health blow-outs!) which is partially why I just hit you all up with an info-dump & the beginning of the dark night of Adam Jensen's soul. You write what you know, right?

Anyway, thank you to everyone who's been reading & commenting. This fic is a refuge from my real life, so that fact that you're enjoying it is bloody wonderful :)
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The longer he stays, the harder it'll be to leave.

"One Step Ahead" by Amiel

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Conjecture like molasses, thick and tempting. The most compelling worst-case scenario is also the most possible: if they have his biometric signature, then they can find him. And if they find him, then they can use Pritchard—under threat of death—as leverage. The longer he stays, the higher the likelihood of that happening, and the harder it'll be to leave.

It’s unwise to return to street-level, but there are miles of tunnel and trans-river train lines to utilise. He’ll have to scrub his GPL chip so that the hacker can’t come after him, livid. ‘No note? No ‘Thanks Frank, but I have to sacrifice myself for the safety of others?’ You goddamn bastard. You thankless, selfish, stupid bastard.’ If C.A.S.I.E. were working he could convince Pritchard to let him go; put those teenage-debating abilities to use, to argue that this will end with the pair of them dragged down and into the line of fire. Say, ‘Thanks Frank, but I have to sacrifice myself for the safety of others.’ Who is he kidding? Even with a functioning social-enhancer, Pritchard would feign patience only to backhand him when he wrapped up. ‘What, that didn’t knock any sense into you? You’re not going anywhere, you head-case.’ No, Adam will bide his time—grind down some sedatives and spike the coffee if need be—and pack up. Pen a short farewell: Thanks Frank, but I have to sacrifice myself for the safety of others, again.

There’s humour in truth, though not much.

He’s been just as consistent in cutting Pritchard off as Pritchard has been in not backing off. Hanging up before he can be exposed to anything aside from mild-dislike and smug superiority. Telling Pritchard in no uncertain terms to stop contacting him. To stop trying to help. To just fucking stop, Francis. Maybe he should employ reverse psychology: if Adam requested help, Pritchard may refuse. But if he didn’t turn up moribund and out of his depth, would there any impetus to test that hypothesis?

Don’t get sidetracked. Ten people missing, eight people dead.

The bunker is better lit than before, though not by much: the bulk of the overhead fluoros are dim if they’re not dangling. He should smash the black light bulb so in the event that the trail leads back here, Pritchard won’t be implicated in Adam’s issues. No, he’ll smear their mindmap with engine oil: messier, but for all his savantism, the hacker doesn’t have an eidetic memory. That’ll give Adam a head-start, and kill two birds with the one stone. That's a little like rubbing abandonment in his face. Okay, he’ll hide the lamp in a filing cabinet and take the key.

He trusts that he’ll be allowed keep on with research, which gives him the opportunity to wipe whatever data has been gathered. That’s bringing a knife to a gun fight, though a nasty virus should delay Pritchard while Adam goes to ground. No need to disable the hacker’s primary conduit to the
outside world, but it needn’t be too easy for him, either. Adam peruses the rickety stacks of disks with eyes alone: striped green, orange, grey; a menagerie of Trojans and Nukes and Overclocks, and other more exotic beasts. If this is Pritchard’s zoo, then there’ll be an antivenom for each. That’s not factoring in the probability that the hacker—channelling his only-just-inner mad genius—invented these virus drives for the hell of it; spliced code and sequences to develop chimeras and new species. Which disk will unleash a digital pathogen, and which will devour the mainframe? Adam’s hedging his bets on said-gun fight.

It’s a fair assumption that there’ll be a vent in the back room or bathroom, behind the lockers, likely. Navigating the detritus on the floor and the cramp of scavenged furniture will necessitate stealth: nothing he hasn’t done before, but inertia has his mind racing and his limbs uninterested in lifting. He wants to go back to yesterday morning, knowing what he knows now, and do it all differently. Avoid the grenade and the resulting casualties by not going to Smolynec & Co.; reassess the case and cover all bases; keep his head down until he has a handle on what the hell is going on.

Another round of painkillers goes down dry, bringing a buzz more placebo than codeine: a shoddy substitute for a drink and a smoke and a do-over. The bottle of pills can come with him, since there are plenty more lying around, their caps ajar. Adam’s not so mean as to steal the only two substances he’s seen Pritchard ingest, but a couple of spare Biocells wouldn’t go amiss. That, and some miscellanea, should be recompense for the inadvertent break in his tradition of alienation and kamikaze missions.

‘An angle you considered for the disappearances: insurance fraud,’ comes Auzenne’s unwanted reflection. ‘You used the idiom, ‘rip the bandaid off.’’

That was prescient. I’m not proud of being a coward, if I need to own up to that. Cowards cut and run: the brave stay and stand their ground. His brain is being contrary, second-guesses given by guilt. And maybe he’s not just ruminating on now, but on a night back in Prague…

‘Owning your behaviour is positive,’ she proceeds, a daydreamed deconstruction of his decisions. As in reality, she’s both coy and cutthroat in her provoking. ‘You’d be amazed how many of my patients invoke the bandaid metaphor when rationalising the impulse to end their lives.’

Don’t patronise me. I know where this is going, and we’re not going there.

‘You continually allude to recent events through what you think and do, only to place a moratorium on the subject.’ There’s no rejoinder available—she’s not wrong—which leaves his jugular open for attack. ‘Your recent vein of ideation provides a permanent solution to a temporary problem: the problem of sentient existence, as transient as it is.’

Yeah, yeah. Nirvana is freedom from the cycle of Samsara; there’s no inherent importance in anything. I’m not a nihilist, nor a Buddhist, so don’t hit me with any of that shit.

Not that he hasn’t entertained the philosophical implications of modern reincarnation. He’s always being born again, always almost dying; will either die very soon or never will. Will witness the world tear itself to pieces to be rebuilt on the mounds of thousands of corpses, in as much the way as he is destroyed and restored: sewn up of scar tissue and scientifically prophetic weaponry, each time leaving less of him that is his and more that is machine. How long until he’s more android than cyborg? If he’s forever resurrected, will he ever be allowed to rest, or will he become an automaton in the image of the man Adam Jensen?

‘You expend a lot of energy contemplating your mortality. Or immortality, as it may be.’ And is Auzenne his conscience speaking, or a stand-in for a real confidant?
Better contemplating than actualising my mortality. That’s what you’re alluding to, Delara, but I didn’t go through with it.

‘Adam, you must address what transpired that night,’ she objects. ‘It will eat you alive otherwise.’ His cause of death, listed on a certificate: self-cannibalism from the inside out.

That’s one way to go.

“I’ve been through Sarif’s correspondence, and it’s banal,” Pritchard announces at five, kicking away from the desk and setting the chair in a slow spin. “No Machiavellian evidence whatsoever.”

He’ll have to keep up the act of keeping the hacker in the loop, and continue with the snark. “His cybersec wasn’t up to your standards, Francis, but Sarif wouldn’t leave a mail-trail behind. He’s wily. We’ve seen how much firsthand.”

“As I’ve been telling everyone for years, cybersec is anything from locking the laptop at your workstation when you go out for lunch, and up. Infosec is more complex, hence my being in demand.” The back-door-in-the-firewall saga is quickly skipped over in favour of the finicky semantics of what Pritchard does, and how he’s grossly underappreciated. They’re acquainted with this territory. “And the operative word was correspondence.”

“You went through his Infolink records and didn’t bother with popcorn?” Adam tuts. Give a neighbour a copy of your key, and they’ll let themselves in when you’re away. “You know what they say about voyeurism: overexposure breeds desensitisation.”

“Spoken like a pro.” Pritchard goes on with his listless spinning, extending an elbow to stretch stiff muscles. “Do you bring a pre-popped bag when you’re peeping into apartments, or do you find that the kernels go soggy?”

“I prefer cereal. The trick is keeping it zip-locked.”

“Child.”

“Snob.”

“Subsisting off more than Magic Gnome and Surly Welshman isn’t snobbery, it’s having a modicum of self-respect.”

Adam will grant that much. It’s a juvenile act of rebellion, to foster vices so prosaic they’re laughable; the little rituals that make him feel like a real boy. “Chastise me later. What else have you got?”

“A lead on your informant.” The spinning changes from clockwise to anticlockwise, Pritchard’s ankles crossed at a diagonal to the floor to propel around. “There was a phrase embedded in the metadata, kind of like the imprint of handwriting on a notepad. A Chinese proverb: ’Death and life have their determined appointments.’ Mean anything to you?”

Adam coughs on the dregs of his coffee. That means something, all right: he said it, three years ago, in a Lower-Hengsha LIMB Clinic. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I’m not in the mood for jokes. What does Confucius have to do with this?”

There’s a fine line dividing how much and how little he can give away without Pritchard getting immersed, or becoming leery. The less he knows, the better. “It’s a long story.”
“Spare me the sordid details for a plot outline. It’s only fair when I’m doing all the work around here.”

“Malik was involved,” Adam says, defensive and deflecting. He’s met with a quirked eyebrow. *Oh.* That landed wrong, and way off the mark. “She had me pull a favour in Hengsha, since she trusted me to keep it quiet.”

“Huh. Even Faridah digs your heroics.” There’s a wisp of bitterness to the words. Adam can’t recall an occasion when Pritchard and Malik were in the same room, let alone on a first-name basis: his moody loner-ism excluded him from subjects such as co-workers’ personal lives. *Does Nucl3ar Snake have a thing for Fly Girl?* That’d be... understandable. Malik’s cool. Clever. Attractive. And above all, trustworthy.

“The proverb was a password this hacktivist-wannabe had me use,” Adam allows. He’s resisting too much, and that’s a sure-fire way to raise suspicion; not to mention Pritchard’s hackles.

“Ooh, how Nouveau-Masonic. And?”

“He gave me the file I was after before he asked for credits, so I told him that was a lesson he should learn: don’t play your hand before you’ve weighed up the stakes. Guess he didn’t take it on board.”

“Guess not. Name?”

“When I met him, he went by Anonymous X.”

It’s Pritchard’s turn to splutter. “That idiot? Who bragged so loudly about his DDOS attack on TYM that he alerted their security before he’d even hit the switch? Whose greatest claim to fame was phishing the elderly out of their pensions? Who wouldn’t know how to establish a botnet—”

“Yeah, sounds like the same idiot. Mutual acquaintance?”

“More like a mutual pain in the ass.” Pritchard rises to begin his pacing anew, in loops around the room. “Raymond Liang. He was exiled from hacking-hubs after he instigated a series of flame wars. Baseless vendettas were his favourite pastime, which would be all well and good if he could code worth a Bitcoin.”

“Now *that* doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“What, Bitcoin? It was an early form of crypto-currency: its value boomed then depleted in the blink —” Pritchard loses his direction midsentence; turns with a heavy exhale. “Oh, you’re hilarious, Jensen.”

Adam chuckles. Of all the things that are still foggy to him, the hacker’s financial missteps are unforgettable. “I’m not the only SI staffer whose deep background check was kept on record.”

“I make one poor investment... Urgh. Anyway, what are Liang’s reasons for sending you evidence out of the blue?”

“An elaborate prank? Though I met him face-to-face, no names exchanged. He’d have to go to great lengths to find out who I am, just to have me pursue a case that could get me killed.”

“If he had the skill to track you down, then I’d agree with you.”

“I’m waiting for the *but*...”“
“The Pi-Crypt fits his modus operandi: he’d use a meme thinking it was genius.”

And the information was legitimate. “Could have left an impression on him,” Adam suggests doubtfully.

“Super-sleuth saviour of the downtrodden.” Fingers curl into apostrophes in the air, while Pritchard’s lips curl into a disparaging sneer. “He’s not associated with the Rippers, and the Juggernauts don’t take braggarts into the fold. From memory, he was told to cease and desist by the NSF.”

Okay, that gives Adam something to go on. Entertaining benevolence is pointless, but it’s not a bad disguise for stalling. “Say, for elimination’s sake, not-so-Anonymous X is the token middle-man here. He could have blown the whistle if he figured out how big this is.”

“You look for the good in everyone,” Pritchard frowns. “Don’t. If he’s jumped the spectrum from black hat to grey-for-pay, he’s probably baiting you on behalf of an employer.”

“Just trying to keep an open mind. How much of a cyber-pariah is Liang, exactly?”

“It’s not exactly exact. There’s an unofficial three-strikes-and-you’re-out system on the majority of boards, to keep some semblance of a conduct code. Having your identity revealed in those circles is the equivalent of social prosecution: it would be guilt by association to be connected to him. And I doubt there’s a person left on the planet he hasn’t pissed off.”

“So, Liang’s the lowest of low rungs on the ladder, or he’s a faux-informant,” Adam mulls, playing with his pocket secretary. Picus’ latest take blurs into dyslexia—First Responder Give Gruesome Detail on Office ‘Bloodbath’—as the pad of his thumb picks up invisible cracks. Those might be from his fall; could be from when he threw the device at the wall of his apartment. Some gadgets are built to withstand a beating. “That’s a lot of effort to go to: erase everything except for a single identifying footprint.”

“It’s more plausible that someone’s sending you a message. And with Picus in the mix, and that personalised-EMP—”

A tinny alert chimes from a laptop. Adam gives Pritchard a questioning look, who throws himself in his swivel chair, defeated. “Just you wait.” A minute later the fluorescent bars above stutter out, leaving them in near darkness. “So fucking punctual.” Pritchard flips a finger at the ceiling. “I feel like a punch line. How many hackers does it take to change a light bulb?”

“You could try turning them on and off again.”

The finger is flipped back at Adam. “Whereas your solution would be to shoot holes through the roof.” Pritchard sighs tiredly. “An hour-and-a-quarter after sundown, and the local grid goes offline. What did these imbeciles expect, voting in a conservative government? They ask for no more Augs, and they get fossil fuels as a bonus. I hope they’re very happy in their refrigerated homes.”

That’s politics for you: every cloud lined with lead. “Your network isn’t affected?”

“That’s politics for you: every cloud lined with lead. “Your network isn’t affected?”

“I’m making do with run-off from the metro to keep the computers juiced, but the non-essentials are rerouted from too many sources to withstand peak usage. No way to reset the mains power, either: the regional switchboards are under guard at the Berri-Uquam junction, and ambience isn’t worth being zapped with a cattle prod.”

“You don’t sound too worried about the patrols,” Adam observes.

“Superstition about this area of the mall being haunted has scared off the other residents, so there’s
no-one to harass.” The hacker shrugs at Adam’s incredulous expression. “A few carefully placed
holos, range-activated resonance alarms, and voilà! Poltergeists.”

While it’s reassuring that Pritchard can stay under the radar, this vagrant-by-volition gig needs to
stop, soon. The guy needs to get himself into regular therapy, or have a holiday; preferably both. Eat
and sleep once in a while. Find a profession that won’t have him rubbing shoulders with criminals,
and greasing the cogs of the corrupt. Make some acquaintances whose presence isn’t a death-
sentence.

Under the glare of monitors, Pritchard’s cheekbones are so pronounced they cast shadows; the line of
his chin skeletal; a web of blue veins beneath china-white and two black eyes. Sunken and sallow, a
sliver of his former self. He’s curled up, knees tucked against his chest, arms hugging his shins,
jacket folded at his cheek.

“You’re making me tired just looking at you,” Adam says after a time.

“Don’t look at me then,” Pritchard yawns; rubs at his eyelids. His pupils are blank, as if he’s seconds
from nodding off. “Maybe I’ve broken through to the fifth dimension. It’s been the same day for a
week now.”

“That’s what happens when you don’t sleep from one Wednesday to the next, Francis. You’re
exhausted.”

“And you’re stating the obvious. I hate when you do that.” He snags the blanket from Adam—not
bothering with the politesse of a request—and buries himself under its folds. “Now, if you can go
twenty minutes without getting in trouble...”

There’s a lower likelihood of being caught in the act of leaving if Pritchard takes the tent. “Your
neck is going to hate you for that in a while,” he points out.

“My neck and I are never on good terms, and I’ll rest easier near the consoles.”

This must be what addicts feel like when they’re denied their fix. Antsy and restless, fuse fizzing
when anyone gets in their way; prepared to bargain their way through hurdles; weasel out of
situations under the guise of errands. Adam wonders what Pritchard would say if he excused himself
to search for cigarettes. Probably call his bluff: ‘That’s what good-for-nothing fathers used to say
before they ran off, never to pay alimony again. Don’t be a trope.’

Instead he keeps quiet, assuming the hacker has drifted off until he hears a mumbled, “Hey, Jensen?”

“Yeah?”

Pritchard scrabbles with his jacket, stuffing his hand in its inner breast pocket before he throws the
squashed box of Holy Smokes Adam’s way. “I ordered another carton through my connection. Keep
keeping your chin up.”

Kindness stings: Adam’s unaccustomed to it nowadays, or else reads into its subtext. The ill intent
behind words, smiles, the proffering of what he needs, and Pritchard has to break the pattern—along
with his history of prickishness—by being friendly. He slides a cigarette free; leaves it unlit. “Thanks
Frank.”

“Don’t mention it.” An indolent wave of hand in his direction. “Literally. Be quiet.”

If he was accurate in his estimate of how long it’s been since he slept, then the hacker will be out for
hours. Even when his breathing has evened, face calmed of creases, there are still jitters coursing
through his form: a result of glitching optical implants, or micro-expressions made clearer with stillness. A hologram, dim and flickering, in higher definition than the render Adam met with in Prague.

*Ten people missing, eight dead. Don’t add Pritchard to that number.*

Chapter End Notes

I’M BAAACK

This chapter went in a hundred different directions until it was flabby, bloated nonsense, & then I lost approx. 20,000 words worth of stuff that I’d pre-written (back up your work kids, don't be dumb like me). The upside is that starting virtually from scratch has streamlined this work into something closer to what I was aiming for.

Thank you all for your patience & support. Happy reading!

PS. "grey-for-pay" was the hypothetical Pritchard quote that started this wonderfully fun disaster. Whoops.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Easier said than done.

"Subterraneans" by David Bowie

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It should simply be a matter of giving those proximity mines a wide berth, then retracing his steps to the metro.

Easier said than done.

The aisle beyond hums subharmonic, exposed frontispiece wiring dragged into zip-tied bundles. LED icons blink like eyes in the pitch: Adam counts a dozen in total. Overkill on Pritchard’s part, but then, the hacker didn’t get his reputation as reigning lord of paranoia for nothing.

The overhead crawl-space proves its use until Adam becomes lost, taking a zigzag detour through the sewer. The round stone walls are greased with age and echo voices from afar: two—no, three—people arguing over a Riezene syrette. He leaves them be, finding signs of a patrol circuit when the air grows sharp like exhaust fumes in an enclosed garage. Deterrence protocols enacted on the sly, and ahead of schedule. Now’s not the time to test if his rebreather is still up and running.

Down again, into a maintenance hall identical to the one he took to the tech store. He’s lead along the centre’s southern boundary and into a freight elevator, the car caught between levels. Folding through the gap, he busts open the roof-access panel and hauls himself into the shaft, but the vent is almost a reach too far with the tight sting of day-old contact burns beneath bandages. Hopefully Sentinel will kick back in and save his skin: he’s getting out of breath with each wincing pivot, unfamilarly claustrophobic in the confined space. Nothing for it but to drop back into the labyrinthine shopping mall, tracking to the left of the region.

If the sub-centre beneath Palais des congrès is Pritchard’s neck of the woods, then the foot-traffic corridors will be where he’s placed his ghost-holos. Adam’s reached the western vestibule joining this sector to the next, so rolls a broken bottle through an arch: high-frequency feedback that would make dogs whine indicates he’s right. If that’s not enough to drive off would-be intruders, then the visual disruption behind a newspaper dispenser—emerging as a man, his natural limb torn free and toted like a firearm by prosthesis—makes it clear that passers-through are unwelcome.

The sentry is horrifying, mesmerisingly so. A render at quarter-speed, unsaturated, yet instantly recognisable for what it evokes: sinew wriggling at the socket of its shoulder and face contorted in agony, it moves with the anguished gait of a victim of The Incident. Pupils roam repeatedly to his hiding spot, but at least it doesn’t speak. Adam’s mind provides a monologue from memory.

‘Please, it hurts. It hurts. The pain. Make it stop, please.’

When the figure crosses the threshold of an information booth he skirts the far wall, centre of gravity
low to the ground. He needs to be quick without cloaking capabilities, so resorts to a staggered sprint
to hurdle debris: a fallen row of pamphlet shelves that provided a barrier between public and police
putting distance between him and the image. He freezes, watching pixelated outline suffuse with dust
particles, edges nebulous, ectoplasmic; the hologram emanated rather than projected.

‘Please, I don’t want to die.’

More digitised-ghouls appear once he’s in range, agape mouths synchronised with increasing
morphic resonance until the passageway screams like tinnitus. Drawn from gruesome details of what
people were compelled to do to themselves—what he saw himself—one has chattering teeth, as if
hypothermic; another crawls bestially on hands and knees, head held at an unnatural angle. Yet
another throws itself against a window, slamming forehead-first without a sound until it collapses in a
fit. A chill lances up his spine. ShadowChild was right: Pritchard could use a psych eval, stat.

Knowing the hacker, the ghosts will be linked with an alarm, and staying put will certainly set it off.
Adam lob a milk crate back where he came from, running when the holograms turn to the source of
the sound. Five hundred steps to the exit, four, three, two...

A dead-end awaits him, the escalators to the metro tangled with razor wire. This is getting hellish:
like Dante, he’ll have to go deeper to get out. Vents again.

Though his ears ring, Infolink stays resoundingly silent. Pritchard mustn’t have read the message
Adam left yet. Aiming for firmly-worded finality under a roundabout apology, he hastily backspaced
advice to Get out of RÉSO before it’s blitzed; dithered with whether to keep the request to Be careful,
finally deciding not to be trite. By then, he was left with F—Can’t have you tagging along, not this
time. I’ll wire you some credits for new shoes. Aside from that, let’s not keep in touch—A.

The unwritten post-script, as always: Unless it’s an emergency.

But if Adam’s woes aren’t going to be made anyone else’s, then the same applies vice versa.
Pritchard’s tough: he’ll get out of whatever shit he’s in unscathed, if bitter for being left behind. He’ll
be better off without an ever-growing circle of danger infringing on his life, and with one less reason
to lose sleep.

‘It seems that you’re trying to justify your choice, having already made it.’

Not now, Delara.

Adam’s problem will be finding an augment specialist who’ll fix him up and won’t rat him out to the
authorities, while keeping on a case no-one but he is interested in solving. And ideally, remaining
alive and somewhat sane in the process.

He doubles back when he discovers all outlets to the sewer have been welded shut and cemented for
good measure. Screw this. Re-crossing a catwalk the width of a tightrope to go rung by rung down a
central—and thankfully empty—water-purification column, he lands on a ledge to nearly tread on a
corpse.

The range of spatter, now rust brown on metal interior, says the young man didn’t suffer; deceased
over a year by the degree of desiccation. Death by misadventure—amateur parkour—from the
fingerless gloves and smashed action-cam strapped over crushed skull. Adam disturbs the body as
little as he can, checking for a wallet. A few creased cinema ticket stubs; a poc-sec, its lone entry a
playlist entitled Old Songs for Amy. According to the ID the young man should have recently
celebrated coming of age, and instead he’s here, in the loneliest of resting places.
Adam pockets the probationary license, the kid’s next of kin listed on the back, and seals the vent against vermin behind him.

On the home-straight from point A to B—a four-way intersection of corridors—he heads north. Prior tourism-as-reconnaissance and reading up on council rulings make him steer clear of the rest of RÉSO, particularly the nearby 1000 Atrium. The ice may have melted from its skating rink, its stores shuttered, and sightseers redirected up Mount Royal’s funicular, but the scraper itself still thrums with VersaLife’s corporate energy. Bound to be swarming with Tarvos operatives, and he’d rather not take a shortcut just to be sighted in the reticule of a carbine rifle.

With any luck the Orange Line carriages will be operating at reduced capacity as on his way here. He stays under CCTV-lenses’ line of sight, leaping the tracks to gain a glimpse of the platforms further up the tunnel: the rush-hour crush has dispersed from Victoria Station, leaving more PMC agents and police than passengers. Okay, he can work with that. Any minute now a train will pull through: next stop Namur, then on to Côte-des-Neiges. He has to see for himself what Picus is writing about.

As the adage holds, perps always return to the scene of the crime.

Chapter End Notes

Old Songs for Amy:

1. "Hairspray Heart" by Black Moth Super Rainbow
2. "Strawberry Skies" by Games
3. "Half Mast" by Empire of the Sun
4. "Keeps" by Millionyoung
5. "Local Joke" by Neon Indian
6. "Carry Me" by Bombay Bicycle Club
7. "Corinne" by Metronomy
8. "Live It Up" by Ariel Pink's Haunted Graffiti
9. "Magnets" by Disclosure feat. Lorde
10. "Embracing Me" by Safia
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Frank Pritchard is asked a favour; goes on a road-trip; considers Sarif's request; plays chess; goes on a guilt-trip.

"The Combine" - "Keep Pushing On" - "The Law" by John Maus

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

3 Months Ago

Ten years Frank had been working for David Sarif, and the rifts grew wider by the day.

The earth trembled occasionally with shockwaves, foundations laid then swallowed by the shifting dunes. A shadow crossed the room—the sun’s ascent interrupted, eclipsed—as gargantuan mechanical arms swept overhead, kilometres from where they stood.

A decade, and for what? he wondered, watching his client preside over this latest domain. The Rabi’ah complex swelled ever further into the desert, Santeau pressing on through the setbacks and sandstorms to build an oasis like an island. Like the Norfolk Installation, or Alcatraz.

There was order in the court as he sneered down the marble stairs to the lounge. A difference of fifteen-degrees between the recycled air of the penthouse and the parched world beyond: inside it was morgue-like, gilded and gleaming and resoundingly quiet. The house staff had fled elsewhere—probably having heard that the computer guy was on his way—which suited him fine. He’d never liked to be reminded of hierarchies.

“I have a favour to ask,” Sarif started over the rim of his old-fashioned, then dropped his shoulders and spread his hands, imploring. A touch impatient. “Could you at least lemme ask before you give me that look?”

Before he didn’t buy what Sarif was selling: now the bargaining made Frank bite his tongue, directing the look towards the floor. “I don’t do favours. But ask away.”

SI’s plummeting stocks stole his investments and dragged his credit-rating down with them; keeping a low profile in the ruins of Detroit gutted his accounts to the husk. If he subtracted the big boss’ coma while Rome burned, they nearly broke even on the unclocked overtime. There was still the issue of the fidelity bond, but he’d been assured the debt would be repaid. He didn’t believe that for a moment.

Are those flakes in the pavers—? Jesus, even the ground on which this man walked was twenty-four carat.

“Not a favour, then.” Sarif examined the cubes clinking on glass: imported ice from the New Zealand alps. The fine grit got into everything here, and the artesian basin had been mined dry; the
estuaries polluted past desalinating. “A request.”

The most effective way to get Frank to follow orders was to phrase them as problems to be solved, puzzles to be cracked. He’d had ideas planted in his head without need for rhetoric: provide the options and let lateral thinking and the process of elimination do the rest.

“So, a demand. Do it quickly, or do it quick-smart.” He should have bitten harder.

The drone of machinery printing megatons of fibreglass and dense-packed polystyrene persisted, background sound, but otherwise there was silence. He was pushing his luck, willing it to break; seeing what he could get away with now that their dynamic had altered, a globe spun off its axis.

Elbows propped on the countertop, ankles and features crossed: lackadaisic as his host idled at the floor-to-vaulted-ceiling window.

“How’s that long-con of yours coming along, Frank?” An archaic inside-joke, couched in threat. Never get too comfortable, or else he’d be put in his place. Never get too uppity, or he’d be coerced into shape.

For the first time in a long time, he was feeling rebellious; noticed the silt he tracked in with him. “You’ll be the first to know when it comes to fruition, David.”

A smile that was all incisor whipped his way. Surface tension on a body of water, and a tumult beneath: something’s gotta give.

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1 Year Ago

After the breach of the Palisades Blade, Frank wrote heroism off as a pipe-dream.

Hackers were being pinpointed with greater precision to prevent a repeat performance of what had transpired in Prague, while freelancing ground at his resolve. With no tangible goal and no guarantee he wouldn’t be subject to entrapment, his lack of prospects was unnerving, so much so that cracking the lava wall began to feel less like an accomplishment and more like a crime.

Ill-ease among the malcontent and maladjusted was the goal of the powers that be: congratulations to the man may have been in order. He chided himself for his spinelessness.

Months spent poring over what they’d unleashed into the Under Net had him inclined to agree with Jensen’s conspiracy theorising. Not that he’d admit to that aloud, but his list of clients underwent a cut-back: better to be safe than sorry and wind up working for an offshoot of the very organisations who’d like him and his ilk exterminated.

Frank was over his turncoat-status; severed connections with those in the business of shadow-stabbing and cloak-and-dagger clusterfucking across corporate networks. The means didn’t always justify the ends, but it was a bad idea to wear a black hat when the odds were stacked, and what he achieved seemed to amount to so little.

He could have summoned some motivation if the frontrunners of The Revolution™ weren’t so heavily invested in sound-bites over affirmative action. If he had a dollar for every time he’d heard
that capitalism was evil, he’d be rich. *Mechanical apartheid* made him cringe: how goddamn facile; too close to the bone. *When do we get to the ‘organise and mobilise’ part of our scheduled programming?* he thought, as yet another protest ended with police brutality and a swathe of arrests.

*When you decide to get involved. When you quit being contemptible and useless. When you do something decent for a change.*

He forked out for forged papers and fiddled with his implant so that, if scanned, it would register as a stabiliser for neuro-chemical imbalances. That afforded him some peace of mind: a stop-gap against immediate deportation, while he self-medicated on the sly. He was humble enough not to fuck with his tenuous serotonin and dopamine receptors, even when riding the bipolar-coaster was wearing him down. If someone could invent an augment to cure ennui and existential crises, he’d be set.

He could cotton-wool and bubble-wrap his paltry existence to keep safe from boogeymen and a nervous breakdown, though nothing could lessen the impact of the Human Restoration Act’s passing. So, this was it, then: the end Jensen had seen coming when they parted ways.

The cynic in him said that this was just society descending into chaos as usual, while factions and fringe-movements fought amongst themselves rather than against an identifiable enemy. Nihilism would have that it didn’t matter—nothing mattered—or that may have been newfound hopelessness; *How dare you care when I don’t* wanting to supersede wondering, *How exactly am I meant to take care of myself, Jensen?* His self-preservation encouraged him to dial down software and pack away hardware after making multiple backups; keep one eye over his shoulder for task forces and suits and alphabet agents. He’d hated when his worst fears were vindicated in the past, and disliked self-fulfilling prophecies even more. Longevity should have earned him a semblance of confidence, though with the world heading the way it was, thrashing in its death throes...

Whatever. The apocalypse could wait until he was good and ready, and done with his detour. If this was the end, he’d be taking the scenic route.

Smart move leaving the land of the free when he did, if they were still calling themselves that: the country was a disaster-zone from coast to coast. Michigan was a mausoleum for the life he’d once lived. California was underwater where it counted, and where it wasn’t igniting into wildfires. New York had returned to pre-Giuliani crime rates and post-9/11 martial law. Concord was preserved, garishly embalmed like a corpse in an open-casket: he hadn’t been home since his father’s funeral. He wasn’t sure what he’d hoped to find, but there was nothing left and no-one waiting for him when he arrived. Freedom, et al were in short supply these days.

He stored the Shintaro and the rest of his possessions in a secure unit on the US side of the falls when he reached Niagara. A decent vantage point to pick a side: he contemplated tossing to choose, then lamented his lack of static currency. Lamented a lot of things.

*As if you were destined for greatness: you can’t even manage to be good. As if you were ever going to be a hero.*

ShadowChild’s send-off repeated itself over the roar of the river. “Either you help, or you get help.” She was rarely obtuse, so he said as much. She’d exploded. “You would sacrifice your life to save your face, Snake.”

It was then that she’d signed out, and he’d conceded that she wasn’t necessarily wrong. He’d never taken anyone’s advice to heart, and he wasn’t about to start now.
3 Months Ago

“I say it’s high-time to clear the air,” Sarif meandered, ever the diplomat after he’d downed his drink. “Let bygones be bygones. Water under the bridge, kid. Water under the bridge.”

Paternalism didn’t fly with the hacker as it had with other employees, though having his ego used against him from the get-go had worn his edges blunt. Bolstered him then brought him down, clipped his claws. He was house-trained enough not to light the cigarette tucked behind his ear; inspected his fingernails, sickled with orange grime from the ride here.

“I mean—well, who else could I be talking about?”

His head snapped up, ears pricked and interest piqued. Bared his teeth in disbelief. *He wouldn’t have the gall.*

Frank knew he hadn’t been beckoned all this way simply to secure digital assets—to install Fort Knox firewalls and an holistic environmental-intelligence nexus—but Sarif had overstepped, even by his bullish standards; trampled past a lasting boundary with this Chinese Whispers bullshit.

“He still trusts you,” was the rationale when two tickets were pressed into his palm: one round-trip, the other one-way. Commercial on the first leg—use the coming-flood into Utelek as a cover—and private charter on return, to give them some space from prying eyes. *Of course he has the goddamn gall.*

He folded the tickets away with a sniff. “Doesn’t mean he’ll listen to me.”

That was all the agreement he would give, though he’d already entertained the idea of dropping by in his lower moments. *You hung up on me, and I didn’t quite catch that quip.* He was advised against calling back and laying it all on the line—“Pritch, that’d be the tequila talking”—so made do with daydreams of filling cereal boxes with sawdust.

*Careful what you wish for, Francis. It might just come knocking.*

“You can be pretty convincing when you—ah, ha—agree to disagree, for the greater good.” A clap on the back to conclude, and to steer him outside. “Can’t beat ‘em? Join ‘em.”

10 Years Ago

The visitor’s table was flanked by bodyguards and an audience of inmates who’d pay—and had, in White Ox and contraband—to see Snake lose his cool. The most surreal and protracted job interviews he’d had to date, but he had the sense that his opponent was into gallows humour.

“Don’t play with your food,” he yawned. “It’s gross.”

Funny, as he was winning as always: planned to flick his castle to capsize the black bishop, side-
swipe the king, and smirk through the ensuing bedlam. This had nothing on the round he’d quickly sacrificed his queen and told his combatant to ‘come at me, motherfucker’ in as many words, nor when he rearranged the opposing pieces so that he himself was at a disadvantage, but not every match could be so extravagant.

“You’re a smart kid—” Sarif, not yet grey at the temples, magnanimously began.

“That was backhanded.”

“And your pigheadedness could be put to effective use, instead of being...” An arch of manicured brow at his expectant glower, and the piece took its place. A cautious maneuver, which was Sarif’s stratagem summed up. “Well, hubris.”

Frank was nursing busted ribs and a bruised ego. He didn’t have anything scheduled other than condescension, so slid in his chair; gave a curt nod. Go on, then. Illuminate me.

“You’re holding out for the masterstroke,” the polycarbon hand gestured across the board, then retreated to steeple with its natural companion. “Oblique, but! I can admire determination when I see it.”

There was a lot hingeing on the game: his place on the bottom bunk; his stash of caffeine sticks and smokes; his hard-fought truce with the skinheads after he’d been trounced, and he’d prefer his skull weren’t bounced off the yard again. “Make the move.” His plan-B was busted, so he doubled down on the sore loser ruse, drawling bored. “This is becoming too Tyrellian for my tastes.”

Sarif blinked at the reference, though there was blood-thirst as his knight danced downwards, knocking white pawns in its wake. “That’s what you think of me? Hell, I’m flattered.”

Frank hadn’t been surprised when his victim came to visit, chessboard under filigreed augment. Unsurprised and unimpressed: didn’t you get the message that I despise you when my friends and I tried to rob you blind? But the benevolence of Detroit’s finest knew no bounds, his gloating had no time limit, and Frank was a charity case if ever there was one. The first time they’d faced-off his eye-sOCKET was broken, lid swollen closed so that he had limited sense of depth. It was shortly afterwards that the guards had formed a betting pool on what injuries he’d receive next.

“I’ve heard it said that white collars are the uniform of the ultimate long-con.” After half-an-hour spent sulking, he came up with that off the cuff. “Though it’s rude to spread rumours.”

Usually he got through these meetings without uttering much more than an aside—hello, goodbye, don’t let the gate hit you on your way out—but this round he was determined to prove how unafraid and disaffected he was.

The gossip was stopped at its source when it went ignored. “What’s this streak reached?” Sarif asked, and a chorus of numbers answered, spiralling upwards into the hundreds. “Hey, no matter. We’ve still got—what’s a match per week, multiplied by whatever’s remaining of your stint?”

One of the lugs breathing down Frank’s neck fixed him with a stare. Leon purportedly wasn’t all there in the smarts-department: too many bad batches and he was a goldfish set loose in the sewers, bald and scarred and fucking scary; was enlisted as muscle by the highest bidder, but generally forgot who he was supposed to intimidate. Amnesic or not, he was doing a impressive job of it now.

Frank sunk lower until he was almost under the table, affecting apathy. “Still not bored of being beaten at your own game?”

He needed a reason to call off the cavalry. With overcrowding in gen-pop and the warden’s
approach to prisoners whose presence begat unrest, there had been a spate of expedited sentences where necessary. A win-win, ish: convicts fostered by businesses, made indentured to deter from recidivism and to make use of their unique skill-sets. Perhaps he could put his pigheadedness to better use before he got himself killed.

Sarif granted the opening he’d been waiting for. “You know what they say about those you can’t beat.”

_They throw you to the wolves_, Frank thought. No more holding out for the masterstroke: caution had never been his strong suit. “Remind me,” he said.

“Up the stakes.” Black defenceless in three moves; two separate paths through to victory. “Or change the rules.”

He wasn’t sore enough not to see the subtext. A few of his crew had had been approached by competitors; made arrangements with employers and assigned sole responsibility to the two of them who were still stuck on the inside. “I’m pretty sure that’s not how the saying goes.”

“I enjoy a good platitude,” Sarif grinned insipid as the white queen was decapitated. “You win some, you lose some, right kid?”

“You’re only saying that because you’ve improved.” He rolled the crown between his fingers, fighting the instinct to outwit, outfox, or flip the board and storm off.

_Is death really worth the last word?_ Before his arrest, he’d believed that it was. All those lofty notions seemed highfalutin in hindsight; ill-informed, borne from a comfortable upbringing and a conviction that he had nothing to lose. Nothing except everything, as it happened.

An uproar when he was cornered, then a smack upside the head when his remaining infantry were captured, and warning bells over loud-speakers when he was checked. The winner was sportsman enough not to comment; smoothed lapels and adjusted cufflinks, calm amid the chaos. Winked at Frank as if to say, _you're playing the long-con, kid._

“I’m not gonna be able to make it for a while,” Sarif said as the board was cleared, preparing to make his exit before a riot could erupt. “Gotta practice, since it’s been paying off. I’d tell ya not to go anywhere, but that’d be redundant.”

The smug fucker had the audacity to smirk at his own joke.

“Windows ‘97 chess,” Frank called after him, seething. “We could set up an online match: see if you can’t get your own streak going.”

Oh, the things he could do with a dinosaur PC and a dial-up modem...

On anyone else, he’d say that expression was equal parts respect for having the guts to throw the game, and sympathy for what that meant for him in the short-term. “Nice try, kiddo,” Sarif laughed as he left.

Couldn’t blame Frank for his wishful thinking: for the foreseeable future, he was screwed. The skinheads would be by to collect with interest later, followed by others who caught the smell of blood.

“Three-hundred-and-fifty-nine,” he heard when he stayed slouched in his seat, and almost startled out of his skin.
“Really?”

Leon nodded, stepping back as Frank stood. “You’ve played one-hundred-and-sixty-one.”

His cellmate claimed the first eighteen-months were the hardest. ‘Then it’s a breeze, baby: smooth sailing.’ Three years and he was still waiting for the wind to change. “It sounds like a lot when you put it like that.”

“Almost a third.” A wonky smile made worse by the patina of scar tissue. “Not so many.”

Well, he could count on a big imposing bastard whose hobbies were breaking bones and calculating sums on the spot for understanding. Now he just had to reckon with the rest of them...

He landed in sol-con for the last four weeks of his imprisonment. Sarif must have pulled some strings, so Frank could reflect on what he’d done without distractions. A month was just enough for him to exhume his anger: not for committing fraud, but for being caught, and he wouldn’t make the same mistake twice.

The tactical selection of reading material helped pass the time in isolation: it’d take quite the legal team to knock out a contract with enough subsections and subtleties that the twenty-three hours per day flew by. He’d be on the hook at SI until 2030, or he could take his chances with the seven years he had left in here. Hah. Seven years was optimistic in the extreme. At this rate he’d be lucky if he reached his thirtieth birthday.

“So, just to be clear,” he clicked the barrel of the monogrammed pen, debating his latest, greatest life choice. “I can keep my firstborn child?”

“No ritual blood-letting planned,” Sarif cackled; allowed Frank his final chance to be a brat before he signed himself free of a cell and into an office cubicle. There were several clauses that would see his pay docked if he didn’t toe the line, just to keep him from becoming a HR nightmare. He’d have to find other ways to stick it to the man.

“Yeah, yeah.” He wasn’t a sell-out: he just held a pen like one as he cut a deal with the devil. “There’s no river that doesn’t contain a bend.”

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3 Months Ago

Frank scowled at the memory, then his host. He no longer had patience for tabletop games.

He was ushered out and into an enclosed conservatory that served as a terrace—lush with potted palms and dripping with fers—then through to where a skeleton-crew of Bedouin workers were grouting millions of solar beads along waveform arches.

There were hopes that the mass of coolant-lined structures would have a terraforming effect on the Shariqa Sands, but autumn in Oman brought drought. No matter what Nathaniel Brown may claim, the Khareef monsoon would continue blow along the Gulf’s southern coastline, not north and inland: all cloud-seeding had accomplished was mud.

He and Sarif received whispers in greeting. They were the only Augmented hanging around this
section of the complex, and as soon as it was completed, Rabi’ah’s residents would be the only living souls for hundreds of kilometres. Segregation was segregation, no matter the packaging and PR-spin.

“Y’know I wouldn’t put you up to this if you couldn’t handle it.” A rhetorical statement: Sarif had him sold.

This is what happens when you keep tabs on people from the past, he reminded himself. They come back to haunt you. The Wayfarers slid into place, taking the edge off the glare. “And I know you don’t take no for answer.”

He was flashed a pearly grin as bright as the midday sun before he was ordered to, “Go get our golden boy back, Frank.”

The nostalgic overture overcame him. All it took nowadays was a vague allusion, a pointed insinuation, to have his mind racing; snarling at himself by way of others.

You didn’t lift a finger when Jensen went under the knife, an (in)action you justified by passing off responsibility and citing ‘contractual agreements’ which was a lie since you knew where the loopholes lay; where there was wriggle-room between a rock and a hard place—you exploited the loopholes and leeway in your own contract—which makes you complicit (a bystander; an accessory to the act; aiding and abetting by not intervening) therefore you had a hand in creating this generation’s Kitty Genovese which is compounded by the irrefutable truth that Jensen would have fought tooth and nail to stop Sarif if roles were reversed because it was the right thing to do and you didn’t do the right thing because you never do.

“Jensen’s not—” he argued as the door shut behind him. “Ours.”

He’d attempted to snap that Jensen was no golden boy, but something twisted his tongue.

Chapter End Notes

I’m so bad at updating, hope FWP makes up for the wait!
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Frank Pritchard’s best intentions in three acts.

“Idioteque” - “Climbing Up the Walls” - “Life in a Glasshouse” by Radiohead

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2 ½ Months Ago

As with all of his solo-ventures, Frank hoped he wouldn’t find himself here. Hoped, knowing that he inevitably would: all roads led to hell lately, and he knew what they were paved with.

The police state, as had been variously reported and paraded, had progressed from dystopian to full-blown fire and brimstone. He gave up counting the number of beatings he witnessed peripherally after his second day in sunny Praha; not so simple to wash off the sliminess that came with slipping by the barricades unscathed. Sure, his pre-emptive tweaking was sufficient, in so far that his LinguafrancAug and its hidden add-ons weren’t extracted where he stood: it was only the credits tucked in with his falsified transit papers that took him through the checkpoints.

Thanks be to his benefactor for buying his right to travel.

He’d briefly considered hiding out in ShadowChild’s old digs, but knew she’d disapprove his running errands for an overlord; would remind him how his mantra was once No Gods, No Masters. Instead he holed up in the Red Light district, because if he knew Jensen—and he did, more than most and more than he’d like to—there was no chance humanity’s self-elected saviour would be caught window-shopping.

They had their near-misses nonetheless, the nearest when Jensen stepped into the Naturals car to stand within insult-distance. Frank could pass if he kept his hood up and his head down, and he nearly barked out a laugh at the display of conscientious objection. Considered sidling up with a line like, ‘Have you still not learned what the symbols designate? They’ve actually gotten bigger since last we met.’

Last time they’d seen each other in person, Jensen had been single-minded, and all the more unhinged for it. Last time they’d seen each other through a screen, Jensen had been abrupt, and inconsiderate enough to hang up. This time Frank was on Jensen’s down-trodden turf, and he’d have to tread carefully not to be caught out.

He avoided crossing paths with his target by demarcating their trajectories, unwilling to add another wrinkle by being seen in the field. Spent his evenings watching Tigers reruns through the telescopic contact lenses that had collected dust in the bottom of his messenger bag, boring himself into brain-fog. All except confirmed the location of TF29’s headquarters in the Čistá district—possibility of some crummy children’s food and top-shelf booze being shipped to the Republic by the tonne
notwithstanding—which told him Interpol weren’t yet finished with the other man, nor the other man with Interpol. Kept close tabs on Sentinel, debating where the line lay between a top-of-the-range health system and freakish DNA. He was up to date with the latter after Jensen fled Detroit: probable that the Juggernauts, to add insult to injury, had beaten him to the punch with that revelation.

“Thanks so much for keeping me in the loop, asshole,” he muttered, spying via Infolink on an exchange with a Collective member—not Vega, thankfully: he doubted her second impression of him would be quite so positive—regarding Janus’ agreement to meet. Sounded like that plan was up in the air for as long as the operative would stay on the line.

He eavesdropped when Jensen met up with some young punk who was almost as extensively augmented—remote bio-scans reading blue to indicate a detachable skull-plate, limbs, what looked like a barrel of monkeys for a backbone—in the secret cellar of a rambling, bombed-out bookshop.

“Koller, listen to me. You’ve gotta get out of here. Dvali or no, this place isn’t safe anymore.”

“Jensen, man, better the shit-hole you know than the one you don’t.” A pause, filled with—yes, that was the unmistakable purl of a recreational carburettor. Quintessentially rebellious Gen Z’s and their puerile chemical remedies. “Are you keeping up your knight-with-dermal-armour act? Haven’t seen you since you last came to my rescue.”

According the good doctor and favourite patient patois, Jensen had gotten himself a little mechanised-sidekick for patch-ups, criminal intel, and obscure pulp paperbacks in the interim. Probably paid his specialist in grass and protection for services rendered. Probably liked that this Václav character didn’t snipe and gripe as much as Frank had when he was Jensen’s go-to-guy. Probably gave his wind-up vaporizer a pat on the head on the way out the secret exit through the sewers.

Frank’s implant buzzed as if in reprimand, right eye blinded for a span of several seconds; relayed pain from the opposite hemisphere and an angry twinge at the access port. Damn thing had been jerry-rigged to perform innumerable background duties on the down-low since its installation, and hadn’t had the best record when it came to not being knocked around. He’d need to reassess its damage on his return to safer moorings—doubtful that his DIY would cut it for much longer—but he wasn’t keen on what he’d find. Irreparable technical errors, irresponsible sub-routines, inoperable glial-tissue buildup…

“And thank you, Humanity Front.”

He was usually so good at keeping his feelings in check. A round of four-dimensional Tetris would have been a welcome distraction, to douse down the resentment. The undue sense of betrayal. The curdling, nauseating wholesomeness of Jensen having made a friend.

Christ, where was his warning to bail along with the rest of the rats?

In the basement Koller loaded a fresh THC cartridge, while in the back room of a brothel Frank rested his temple on a folded forearm, recalling his trigger-happy reaction to poor old Stacks’ post-traumatic episode. A mordant reminder of the extent of his moral destitution; how self-serving and narrow-minded his outlook had become. How he could never discern where self-preservation ended and selfishness began, just as the other man never ceased mistaking self-sacrifice for justice.

The trip wouldn’t be for nothing, whether or not he’d talk Jensen around to rejoining the old guard at the round-table. He’d tell numbskull to pack up and get out of Prague before it became any more militant; throw in an apology for being a prick in the past, on the condition he was given one in return.
But, yeah. Clear the air. Let bygones be bygones. Make sure the water really was beneath the bridge.

4 Years Ago

> By all means, don’t listen to ME. I’m just the one who’ll have to clean up after this flatfoot when he refuses to cooperate <

The reply came quick-fire. He’d picked his opportunity outside office hours when the CEO would be sitting down to a whisky, Audio-Scribe ever at the ready. The program Athene insisted on having installed to deal with Sarif’s endless dictating had the added benefit of making Frank’s periodic idea-bouncing unavoidable: miles more reliable than Infolink, too.

>> I hear what you’re saying, Frank, but the guy is no mall cop. Both BA and Associates in Criminal Justice. Nearly fifteen years in the force. A heap of commendations, and medals enough to jangle. I’m looking at his credentials this very second and I’m telling you, he fits the bill <<

Frank had already taken the he’s inexperienced route to its conclusion, to little hypothetical success. SI’s potential recruit was qualified, with expertise that would meet the most exacting standards. No, knowing one’s way around a shotgun and practice in tactical procedures wasn’t the problem. The problem was where others saw a liability, Sarif was envisioning opportunity. Goddamn emperors and their new clothes.

> He’s nice and shiny on paper until you reach the bit where he was dismissed after Mexicantown for not following orders, and then we see his negligence and recklessness aren’t just drawbacks, but lead to a MASSACRE. Not the best precedent to set, or do you know something I don’t? <

Arguments of that sort were on the nose even for him, but tact was a useless virtue when arguing with Sarif. An augmented fifteen-year-old was gunned down by a second-rate SWAT officer because the best and brightest wouldn’t take the shot: next minute there were citywide riots, the likes of which hadn’t been seen since the 1960’s. Picus were trying to christen villains in the midst of a travesty, but Frank didn’t think there was anything heroic about refusing to blow a child’s head off. If that was the standard for righteousness, perhaps he could cut himself some slack for signing his soul away.

>> QUIT. We’re not in the business of giving Taggart’s sympathisers the time of day, let alone a high-rank position and responsibility for staff welfare. Though it’s not easy to stay on top of who’s preparing to defect these days. Hell, last Friday we had to lay off a couple at the manufacturing plant with some nasty propaganda stashed in their personnel lockers... <<

He tuned out—checked his email, then his fingernails—half-listening to the superfluous waffling Sarif spun to deflect, leave adversaries shadow-boxing, and concussed with tangents. He knew the united-we-stand spiel verbatim, having heard it recited from the boardroom to the watercooler since his days as a lowly IT manager, and barreled on once the grandstanding had turned to soliloquising.

> How am I supposed to work with someone who won’t play by the rules? This idiot sounds like he spins to his own moral compass. All the participation awards in the world won’t keep him from starting a coup <
That may or may not be what prompted his objections to this guy being hired: Frank didn’t want to be within close-quarters of a man whose very presence may drive him to mutiny; didn’t want to question the status quo when he’d accepted it as inflexible. There was a very good chance that he might let on some views he’d come to regret, those notions he’d kept buried deep and had betrayed to keep afloat.

>> I hired you didn’t I <<

Now, that right there was less a question than a kick in the ribs, and the program didn’t need to catch the absence of inflection. No chance to formulate an answer: others so loved kicking him when he was down, his fuming no doubt felt from eighty-odd floors up.

>> Dr. Reed can vouch for him. Are you doubting her judgement too? <<

Good parry on Sarif’s part. Manslaughter and questionable character references aside, if the head of infosec began bitching about the company’s star researcher stepping on toes he’d be accused of misogyny, or petty jealousy. Shifting the blame to predictable human error was a fairer bet, and removed of emotions.

> I realise nepotism comes with the territory, but recruiting conquests is an ethical grey area, not to mention scandal-fodder. I look forward to HR responding to our secondary security chief playing grab-ass in an elevator <

Human error, human nature. Same difference.

>> Frank, don’t pretend you care about intra-office relationships unless you’re using them to shout about poor work ethics. And the title will be ‘dual.’ Yin and yang, kiddo <<

More like Cain and Abel. They could debate prefixes at a later date: Sarif was leading them off topic, towards muddy territory where they’d be bogged down. He’d concede he was prone to throwing what little weight he had around and pulling rank on his subordinates, but he wouldn’t be mocked for going above his paygrade while others coasted through like disorganised, confused children. He was above this. Leagues above this.

> Hire some cowboy prone to heroics and next thing you know you have a rogue on your hands: executive calls being made left, right, and centre. Your authority would be the FIRST he called into question <

A minute passed without response, likely spent topping up a low-ball—his boss wouldn’t be the first person Frank had driven to drink—and then Sarif snapped back, reading as if he were sick of the unwanted input.

>> OR I can rely on him to do his goddamned job without micromanagement from on high. You want to play babysitter, kid, be my guest. Kinda thought we were beyond hand-holding around here <<

The text-box minimised: a resounding end to the discussion. If Frank kept on ranting he’d appear even more paranoid than normal, and he was loathe to talk to the walls any more than he did on a daily basis.

No-one ever listened to him, and he never learned his lesson.
It was last-minute when he decided to swallow his pride, having kept his distance while he dithered. He’d looked upon the beacon of the Blade from across the turbid Bohemian Sea, when before he traversed its vaults and firewalls as a vector. He’d walked streets he’d visited in dreams, having suffered nightmares drawn from news stories and his own curious research about where Jensen ended up; whether the place was a bad as Frank heard. From what he’d observed, it was worse.

He’d nearly sought out Laura Vale, as he said he would if they were ever again in the same city. She’d pulled his script from the Picus servers then off the ground, and would surely have some interesting theories, conspiracy zealot that she was… But no. He was well-past going to convoluted lengths to get laid, and the rooms of The Red Queen were adequate comfort.

He’d listened in on a call detailing another of Koller’s close-shaves, grass-roots insurrection efforts, and the inescapable Utelek Complex. Jensen claimed he’d see what he could swing on the final front, but Frank could recognise a hopeless case: the doctor and all his augs were as good as scrap, and Jensen wouldn’t always be around to save the day. Not for much longer if the boss won out.

From what Frank could gather, Sarif wasn’t so much throwing in with Santeau as keeping his friends close and his enemies under contract. Taking point on the energy infrastructure for Rabi’ah was a venture that regained the sway he once had: the pull to employ as many individuals as needed, with apartments to house the lot; carte blanche to offer up a tabula rasa, those daunting if enticing reassurances that “There’s always a place for you here, kid. For the pair of you.”

The pair of them. Yeah. The concept had its merits, all of them imaginary. Dynamic duo reunited and under the same roof. Cohabiting co-workers. The odd couple.

He lit a smoke, getting ahead of himself. If it were up to him he’d throw the ball of Interpol’s Muscat Station and the rise of nearby Iran to the centre of the economic world, both drawcards for cadres; sit back and watch Jensen chase his tail, work in circles, spirals.

The implant threw another tantrum—half-a-dozen since he arrived, for fuck’s sake—and Frank accepted that the prospect of watching the other man getting nowhere was a little too cruel. A bit too mean. Something he’d wish on his enemies. Not Jensen, whose floundering wasn’t as terrible as Frank feared it might be, and who wasn’t progressing as fast he’d like. The other man was keeping it together when everything else was falling apart, but that wasn’t living. There’s more to life than just surviving.

“You want things to go back to how they were?” Jensen asked him in the rubble of the Rialto, “with you getting shaken down by gang members and doing petty cyber crime just to keep your head above water?”

How much Frank meant by it when he said that nothing he did was petty.

Staying in Detroit after the rats swam for safety was penance to last a lifetime, atoning for what he’d done and what he hadn’t and what he should’ve. He’d stuck around when the chips were down because he was obligated to, not because he wanted to. Jensen needed someone there to provide a lay of the land, but Frank’s best intentions at that time amounted to a six month gap in his memory, a fistful of broken fingers, and his dignity in disrepair.
From then on it was easy to reason with his own lack of traction. Anarchy was for script-kiddies, while activism was for the blindly optimistic and the woefully ignorant: being none of the above, he reckoned he’d done his part for the moment. He was too worn out to throw in for the war and to fight these losing battles; would like to put his feet up for a while, rest his weary hands and head while he still had full use of them. Enjoy the simple things in life, like not dying. That much was a rarity in this day and at his age.

*What are you waiting for, Francis? An embossed invitation?*

An outright rejection, more like. Three years since the Incident and Frank was still waiting for the wind to change: tempted to latch onto whatever he could to keep from going under, cast adrift without a purpose. Figures he’d end up here, cowering under the eaves against the downpour, trying to psychically goad the man of the house to take pity and let him in. At least have the decency to turn him away face-to-face.

Elysian hinged on his going through with the demand: playing enabler to in a tense and teary tête-à-tête, a *War-and-Peace-and-Paradise-Lost*-esque retelling of betrayal and manipulation and backstabbing. Sarif wasn’t above turning on the waterworks after the fall of his empire, as Frank had uncomfortably discovered: he’d caved before the Palisades and informed Big Boss of Golden Boy’s whereabouts just so the awkwardness would abate, on the strict proviso he wasn’t made a topic of conversation; helped Malik wreak inconvenience on his behalf by sending the necessary coordinates and an address to source sawdust. Naturally she’d ignored his idea, and instead secreted a miniature VTOL into a box of cereal.

“Had to be a pretty damn adorable gift to compete with the signed screenplay, Pritch. I’m surprised you didn’t dedicate the whole movie to him…”

Yes, well. So much for that olive branch when he’d offered it: this stick wouldn’t be so easy to dodge.

He checked then rechecked the geo-locator, just in case the I-Line lenses were playing tricks on him. Directed a few zipped-packages of garbage data five metres to the right, to go unread in a cluttered inbox. Surpassed stalking when he wormed into the entertainment system’s visuals once more, but necessary to uphold his standard of impeccably timed interruptions. Unprecedently creepy when he sent a message by Morse Code—[•••• ••], a simple *HI*—that went unnoticed, the radio’s fuzzy dots and dashes mistaken for the ringtone of a passerby or a random transmission; the central lights that blinked overhead passed off as austerity measures in effect.

He’d have to go analogue, then.

He tugged his sleeve over the wrist-mounted keyboard. Anxiously scraped at his other forearm—an old itch he usually refused to scratch—as yet another cigarette hissed out on the brick at his back. Rubbed his tired eyes, vision ringed with a faint golden glow, like a corona of clouds around a blood moon. Counted to a hundred and rapped his knuckles hard enough that there was no way he could be ignored.

“Jensen, open up, you asshole!”

Chapter End Notes

Haha thank god that chapter is done. Better late than never I guess.
Thanks for everyone for bearing with me, I've been living surrounded by cardboard boxes like our guy.

As usual your comments are pure gold to me & you lot keep me young <3
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Frank Pritchard picks a side(kick).

"Blind Trust" by Cabaret Nocturne

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

2 Months Ago

“Here’s the deal,” he sneered. “You take the ticket, or you take your chances in Golem City.”

It was a straightforward choice: stay and stick to your guns and run the risk of shooting yourself in the foot, or go against your ideals for a shot at a longer life. Only a short-sighted moron would choose the former.

Koller, of course, was yet to be convinced, regarding him sceptically down the barrel of a fully-juiced Buzzkill. “The David Sarif, you say?”

How Frank hated having to repeat himself. “Multiple times now,” amid placating gestures and reassurances that he came in peace. His implant, episodically schizophrenic as it was, decided he came bearing gifts; caught snatches of Czech, Russian, and Yiddish so profane they registered as errors rather than translations.

The hacker was especially temperamental when he barged into the basement—soaked to the bone from standing on a stoop for several hours, sniffing and miserable and short-fused—and therefore considered it predictable, if not ideal, to have a weapon levelled at his chest. Plans ran smoother when he could enact them with key combinations and didn’t rely on goddamn human interaction to get things done: proceeding unscathed from meet-and-greet to the gist of his visit had an already last-ditch stop-off cutting it much too close, the debacle of the past few hours having sent his itinerary straight to hell along with his best intentions.

At this rate, sceptical was a step in the right direction. “What does he want with me?”

Nothing too nefarious nor dastardly if Sarif had learned from his trespasses; with a knowing associate there to keep him in check. “Recruitment spiels are a waste of breath,” sneering now paired with an eye roll. Playing the part of head-hunter didn’t mean Frank had to pretend to like it. “What use could a down-and-out visionary have with a snot-nosed prodigy?”

In person said-prodigy seemed atrociously young, a stubbled and bloodshot stoner who screamed generalised anxiety under the metal-headed grunge, while the lab coat with its sleeves torn free, emblazoned with studs and safety pins and badges, may as well have had KICK ME stitched into it. None of which was surprising from someone who’d endanger their life for the sake of a literary joke, the literal cellar door accessible through moving a tome on phonaesthetics.
“Look, assuming you make it as far as Útulek, you won’t survive. From your devastatingly insufficient security upstairs, your skills clearly don’t include self-defence.” He wasn’t about to explain how best to hold the stun gun, either—prosthetic fingers away from the pulse generator unless you want to tase them, too—instead gesturing to the mismatched arms and legs that dangled from the ceiling, ownerless limbs that made the Time Machine’s tenant appear more pack rat than puppeteer. “My advice, if you’re a sucker for punishment: sell this gear to a memorial museum. Bulk up on turrets with armour-piercing ammo. Make the PCR really work for it before they drag you out kicking and screaming to throw you to the wolves.”

‘Come with me if you want to live’ was neither elegant nor eloquent, but surely it was an appealing alternative to escaping the pot just to perish in the fire. Or so he reasoned, wrestling with the knowledge that the offer was less altruism than opportunism; trying to shake the feeling of having done this before, whether it be déjà vu or an unwanted, not unwarranted sense of affinity.

“I didn’t live through the reign of Radich Nikoladze without picking up a few tricks,” said with all the conviction Koller could summon; with the chin up, chest out stance that Frank knew all too well, having assumed it himself since his bloody induction into prison. “Since you’re not from around here, don’t worry about my prospects. The Dvali come calling, you answer, volané číslo neexistuje.”

A pang of pity that this naïf assumed staying on here came down to knowing whose back to scratch and who to steer clear of. “Your prospects must be pretty limited since your supplier disappeared into thin air and your revenue streams dried up. Could be a coincidence, but I’d bet your number’s up, Václav.”

Failures in basic cyberscience were a universal constant, and syndicates were no exception: Frank had tapped into several pertinent email chains while rooming in Dvali territory insinuating that whatever deal Jensen had made to keep the gangs at bay was ready to be reneged on. The who’s-who of the underworld were busy devising how and when to stake claim in residential areas as the final Augs were evicted, and plotting expansion efforts into the complex, ground that could be gained since ARC splintered and WHO evacuated their officers. Tossing up ideas on what to do with the bookshop that didn’t include compensation for its owner; invariably ranting about the audacity of running multiple business ventures in a manmade disaster zone, without adequate recompense to the many and varied unofficial landlords. Questioning why Praxis Kits and Stem Processor Chips were trickling in through the gaps in their network, the Kadlek clan narrowing down distributors like a noose tightening around the doctor’s neck.

Replace Georgian mobsters with skinheads, trade Prague for the prison city of Coldwater, and Frank knew just how bleak this kid’s outlook was. He raised his hands in surrender. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but you should be prepared for a bounty on your head any day now. The kind you can’t weasel out of by hiding.”

Koller didn’t challenge him; looked a little shaken, as if Frank were the one with the gun. He probably gave a piss-poor impression of stability in his current state, a tiny network of sensors that kept his pupils perpetually dilated, micro-filaments drying out his eyes while his wetware fritzed at intervals like a personalised Milgram Test.

“These are the perils of obedience, he chided himself. Sarif told you to jump and now you’ll have to ask, ‘is this high enough?’ ShadowChild would say this was his latest way to save face, and Malik wouldn’t hear word from him, because Frank would never hear the end of it: she’d undoubtedly sum up his actions as ‘Jensen was rude to you so you kidnapped his surgeon.’

Didn’t matter what anyone thought of him and his back-up plan, whether it proved or disproved him as contemptible and useless. Didn’t matter what his hastily updated motivations were—equal and
opposite recourse after the most resounding rejection he’d received to date, and the most hurtful; duplicating his own ultimatum by becoming the newest wolf in sheep’s clothing; the very last vestiges of his empathy in play—when all roads led to Rome. Didn’t matter, because nihilistically, nothing did.

“If it’ll encourage you to point that thing somewhere else, think of this as a favour from a friend,” he tried. Any ounce of charity nowadays came with a catch, though there was a definite spark of intrigue behind the defiance that Frank could roll with. “About yay tall, flashy augs and fancy facial hair. Wears his designer duster and his sunglasses at night and indoors.”

He sighed at the suspicious squint: that description could come straight from surveillance, or a certain action movie doing the rounds. Fine. “Brooding do-gooder outfitted with mil-spec Sarif Series everything, doesn’t need Nu-poz, has saved your life at least twice, doesn’t let on much but will answer to Adam Jensen,” he amended.

He’d vowed he’d only namedrop as a last resort, ego injured enough without outsourcing legitimacy; not keen for his chief claim to fame to be ‘I know a guy,’ especially when that guy was a permanent thorn in his side and the bane of his paltry existence.

The Buzzkill clattered as it was discarded in a blood-stained surgical tray, the tray clanging as it met the floor. “Jesus, man,” the doctor said in a rush, clutching at his chest theatrically and indicating that Frank should take a seat. “You seriously should have lead with that.”

Frank elected to stand. He should have had that damnable C.A.S.I.E. Mod installed all those years ago—he knew a fellow Omega when he saw one, and pheromone-based persuasion and autonomic conversational cues would make for easier dealings—but hindsight’s a bitch.

(Would that have worked, he wondered, if he’d jailbroken the apartment and hit its occupant with a chemical aggregate? A double-dose attractant to have Jensen under his thrall, to sit and listen, hear him out; trail-hormones to make the other man follow after him like a stray, an epideixis augment the only way to get anywhere...

No way to know, now.)

He took in the peeling posters adorning the walls as Koller set about lighting up, unable to begrudge that much when he too had his heart set on being high for the flight, and it’d improve his mood if his companion were quiet for a while. Gazed at the excess tech piled in no particular order on every available surface, similar to his own set-up before he was forced into minimalism. And though responsible for some grisly backroom operations judging by the sticky tack of blood and oil, this kid would be an addition preferable to the likes of Vadim Orlov, who even Sarif had considered unethical. Likened the scientist to a shark—‘Didn’t blink when he told me and Meg the Geneva Convention were mere goddamn guidelines’—if memory served. Frank couldn’t in good conscience waste the ticket, and could only hope bringing the doctor along would be better than returning empty handed, only to be turned out on his ear.

He wouldn’t let the fact that Rabi’ah was brimming with high-functioning sociopaths send him further into apathy. The only way he’d exchange someone else’s independence for his livelihood and still live with himself would be to tip the scales on the sly, then spend the rest of his tenure ensuring they were in alignment. Run constant interference between Boy Wonder and Big Boss, stuck baby-sitting a wayward co-worker to keep them from the same defanged fate as he, while acting as a barrier against the CEO’s more manipulative tendencies.

Same old, same old. Even without Jensen it’d be business as usual.
“I’m not saying I hate the idea,” Koller started, sat in the makeshift theatre chair as if it weren’t the most unhygienic item of furniture in here, markedly calmer after taking his medicine. “Sarif is a master artist. The Michelangelo of augmentation. But I mean, you work for him. You know. Man, what’s it like working for him?”

God, Frank could imagine the gawking when Jensen first stalked into the underground: all slick and sleek and state of the art, packed to the back teeth with such an array of weaponry and gadgetry that Koller must have been convinced he’d hit the jackpot of tech to tinker with and brains to pick through. Stoic, lonerish Jensen, who evidently hadn’t divulged the dirty details if the doctor still had Sarif on a pedestal.

That error in judgement would correct itself, and Frank had enough hero worship of his own to reckon with. He shrugged. “Why not find out for yourself?”

A tentative “Yeah,” followed by a minute of hand-wringing and fidgeting: any excuse for this brat to drag his feet. “But Rabi’ah? When the rest of us don’t have a hope? That’s a lot like running away.”

His temple throbbed in response, the golden glow of earlier quickly becoming the angry pulse of a migraine aura. Desperate times meant desperate measures; had him feigning patience through gritted teeth. “I get that you’re a radical, and I couldn’t care less what you choose to do once we’ve landed. Bioengineer a band of augmented Übermensch and give the Coalition a new lease on life. Take down the one-percent from the inside. Steal from the rich and give to the poor, do something honourable or memorable, whatever.” So many noble causes he’d have once assisted with, incompatible with his priorities of peace and quiet; better left to the young and stupid. “You can’t start a revolution if you’re dead. Keep that in mind, unless you’re really keen to join the 27 Club.”

Koller grinned feebly. “I’d be in good company if I wasn’t twenty-eight.”

How eerily familiar this situation was, drawing him uneasily back to when he’d been offered an out from the big house; a mirror image with the roles reversed of his decision to join SI. At least he was being more forthcoming than Sarif ever was with him, laying out the options and where they lead. “Great: now you can aim for thirty. The dumb die young but the smart make wise life-choices. Like this one, idiot.”

The doctor gauged his honesty before taking the ticket: “Only because it’s a favour.”

He’d put the airfare to some use, for sure. Shepherd Jensen’s little friend off to greener pastures—somewhere wunderkind would be safe and sound and able to aid the hopeful who were pouring into every port from Kuwait to Colombo—and allow revolutionary sentiments to flourish right under Nathaniel Brown’s nose. Intervene if and when it came to that, unwilling to watch on as another would-be hero was brought to heel. Sleep soundly knowing he’d done everything short of breaking and entering.

“So...” Koller steepled those mismatched fingers beneath his scruffy chin. “I have to know. You and Jensen are friends, or were friends, or did you have a falling-out and now I’m part of a plot to screw up his support network and leave him high-and-dry without a specialist?”

Not so much fell out as never really fell in. Telemetry where the could have been symmetry. A cliffhanger when he needed closure. He’d swallowed his pride just to almost choke on it: laughed harshly around the lump in his throat. “Would I be in one piece if we’d left things on bad terms?”

“That’s a point.” A thoughtful frown. “I got the sense I was the only one he had in this corner of the world. And now he’s going to have another man in Oman...”
Another throb from the LinguafrancAug made him think twice before speaking. If today had proven anything it was that if he was anyone, it was just another person from the past who wouldn’t stay where he belonged. Kept at arm’s length, preferably further, and certainly not welcome to turn up on Jensen’s doorstep without warning.

“Pack,” Frank said as he lit his last cigarette. “We have a plane to catch.”

He supposed the sole upside of having Koller in tow would help him run with the ruse that Jensen had politely declined and offered a substitute rather than refused to even speak with him. He’d had such great expectations, aspirations, not that they’d meant much.

He’d intended to argue that there was more to the pair of them than genetics and capabilities. That there were things to stay alive for outside of concepts of duty, items smaller but more important than humanity’s plight, and seriously, cut yourself some slack. That he was there, willing to help even when he pretended or proclaimed not to want to. All the mawkish rubbish he’d have come out with if he hadn’t been cut off with the touch of a button the year before; thoughts that had haunted him, everything he would have said if the figure he cut by thermal imaging and his shouting hadn’t been deemed unworthy of attention, let alone the effort it’d take to open the door.

When had it ever helped for him to intend anything?

He shot off a message to the boss regarding the legalities of importing medical and mechanical equipment into Oman on short-notice, while wiping Jensen’s footprint from the map as diligently as he could. Activated the bounce-satellite placed on a neighbouring rooftop so that incoming frequencies from the Middle East would be met with volané číslo neexistuje: the number you have called does not exist. Began mentally preparing the excuses he’d have to make, explanations to hold off on the welcoming party for a while longer that involved Interpol and deep-cover and a subtext of Jensen isn’t (y)ours. Typed out a final, uncomplicated and uncompromising farewell—[––••• –•– – •]; BYE—more for his own sake that the other man’s, to dissuade himself from calling on an ill-conceived whim.

Misery loves company, so he hoped Jensen was content to be left alone.

Chapter End Notes

Someone start a crowdfund for more hours in my day or more serotonin molecules in my brain or less drama in my life? Patreon for my everyday well-being idk

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