# The Neon Bible

**by tactfulGnostalgic**

### Summary

New Chicago is a labyrinth of argon, steel, circuits, and blood, each in every color of the rainbow. Roxy Lalonde shows up on its doorstep with a suitcase, a sniper rifle, and an assignment to guard the second most important person in the world: Jane Crocker, Heiress to the Crockercorp fortune.

With a war raging on the Empire's borders, there shouldn't be anywhere safer than the capitol city. But between rebel attacks getting more and more ambitious and the Heiress' increasingly erratic behavior, Roxy finds herself in the middle of a dynastic conspiracy that threatens everything she's ever known about the world and her place in it.

### Notes

Inspired by unintelligible-screaming's [tumblr post](http://example.com)!  

Title is from the [Arcade Fire song](http://example.com).
The sky above Lake Michigan was the color of a bullet. A one inch thick veneer of muddy snow blanketed the streets, piling up on dumpsters and swelling into drifts in alleys, suggesting that there was a harsher bout of weather soon to come. Clusters of human-made buildings rose from the locus of downtown, clashing with the asymmetrical, organic curves of the newer trollish architecture sprouting from amongst them. Blazing technicolor holoscreens scrolled across the upper levels of most buildings, creating a canopy of neon that wove across the city. The narrow strip of the Mag Mile clung to the edge of the frozen lake, its turf grass hidden under a layer of white.

You wouldn’t expect anywhere to get snow in 2409, what with the ozone layer lying on its deathbed and the polar icecaps being permanent residents of the past tense. She’d heard it was something to do with increased moisture in the atmosphere, something to do with climate swings, something to do with the environmental dangers of terraforming. Whatever it was, it certainly never reached Los Angeles, which hadn’t seen a flake of snow in the last forty years before it fell into the sea.

Roxy Lalonde stepped off the public lift, and the doors slid closed behind her. Standing ankle deep in a drift, she reached down and scooped up the first handful of snow she’d ever touched.

It was cold. Experimentally, she licked it. That was probably unsanitary, but given that it tasted just like what you’d from expect day-old street snow, she spat it out immediately, so it didn’t have the chance to do her much harm.

Welcome to New Chicago, said Hal. Red text scrolled across the corner of her visor, and the AI’s camera whirred as it did a full three-sixty of the area. Just like Old Chicago, except polluted, unfriendly, and ruled by a species of hyper-wealthy monsters. Oh, wait.

“Cry all you want, country boy. At least this place is above sea level.” She took a deep lungful of air. It smelled like saltwater and smoke. Lake Michigan was undergoing some development on its eastern bank to construct homes for seadwellers seeking subaquatic property.

Country boy? I was born in Austin. You crawled out of the woods somewhere in upstate New York.

“Firstly, Dirk wrote most of your code when he got bored on a flight to D.C., so I’m pretty sure you don’t qualify as a Texas native. Secondly, I grew up in SoCal. And thirdly, country boy isn’t a birthright, it’s a state of mind.”

What, a man can’t make an observation or two around here without being called a yokel?

“Babe. C’mon.”

All I’m saying is, if worrying about climate change and wealth inequality makes me a Podunk local, then call me a cowboy.

“You know,” said Roxy, cheerfully, starting off across the street, “I remember when Dirk was the most dramatic person I knew.”

What are you talking about? I’m agreeing with you. Hal’s cursor blinked innocently in the upper corner of her visor. Yee haw.
A row of glittering shop windows flanked her on the left, while a steady stream of lifts zipped to and fro in the street to her right. Most were of troll make, with domed roofs and rows of twelve-paned windows in neon colors set into exteriors that gleamed like insect shells. At a distance, they resembled metal centipedes, sans the legs, hovering a few feet above the ground through use of Crockercorp tech. Those who walked — and more did than she would have expected, in this weather — wrapped themselves in bulky parkas and thick snow boots, visors glowing a full hemospectrum of colors through the swirling mist, swaddled so thoroughly it was almost hard to tell who was human and who was troll.

Roxy pulled her scarf higher up over her nose and exhaled, trying to create a pocket of warmth underneath it. She’d worn the warmest clothes she had, but coming from California, that meant a pair of relatively un-tattered jeans and a leather jacket layered over a sweatshirt, with an old set of pink gloves someone in the commune had knit for her that’d long since sprouted holes in the fingers. Her sneakers had been soaked through within seconds of getting off the lift.

With her gun slung across her back and a suitcase in her hand, she’s pretty sure she looks like some wayward lovechild of the Punisher and a Rogers and Hammerstein protagonist. Nevertheless, nobody looked twice at her. Nice thing about cities, she supposed, as opposed to forty-person human communes: if you don’t stick your nose in anybody else’s business, they’ll keep their noses well out of yours.

Jesus, I’m cold just looking at you, Rox,

Hal complained. Get a taxi.

“Don’t need one,” she said. “It’s not that far.”

Crocker Estate’s two miles north of here, and it’s about to snow. ‘Not that far’ means different things in Chicago and Bakersfield.

“Buck up. I’ll be fine.”

If you say so. Who needs all ten toes, anyway? I have it on good authority that eight is much more aerodynamic.

“Are you gonna pay the cab fare? Cuz if not, this broke girl is walking.”

I could wire you a few million from one of the peerage’s offshore accounts, if you’d let me.

“Yeah, so could I. You know what I could also do? Time. In prison. For that thing.”

You’re assuming you’d get caught.

“And you’re assuming you wouldn’t?”

I’m assuming that A.I. have a leg up on humans in terms of leaving digital traces, given that we interface directly with programs instead of using an intermediary tool to manipulate the binary. Which is true. I’m assuming a fact.

“Sure,” she granted, “but if you do get caught, that’s GG. Least when I’m hacking, people don’t get a peep show of my dendrites if I get it wrong.”

That’s never happened to me. My dendrites remain unseen by human eye. My circuits remain unmolested. My memory banks are as pure as the driven snow.

“Congrats, you’re a virgin. You want a medal?”
You have no mind for metaphor, fleshbag.

Roxy grinned. She passed a yellowblood hunched over in the enclave between two buildings, cradling a sopor pan in their hands, gaunt hollows under their cheeks and a wild, sleepless, haunted look to their eyes. Her step flagged, and she paused to watch them take a long drag from the pan. Their face eased over immediately with the bliss of dreamless sleep.

Humans couldn’t get hooked on sopor — brain chemistry wasn’t wired right for it. That didn’t mean she didn’t know how it felt.

She kept moving.

It had been three days since she’d flown out to Crockercorp HQ in Seattle for the job interview. ‘Interview’ was a strong word for it; a grumpy indigoblood had scowled at her over his desk and barked rapid-fire questions about her loyalty to the Empire and appreciation for the Heiress’ baking vlogs until he seemed satisfied, and then sent her out without once asking about her qualifications. Granted, she hadn’t really applied for the opening so much as been drafted for it. A summons had appeared in her inbox one day in Imperial pink script, demanding that she submit her resumé and complete criminal record for perusal, and it wasn’t until she’d already sent both that she was allowed to know what the position even was.

Chief Bodyguard to the Heiress, Jane Crocker. Of all things.

Seventy-two hours later, Roxy was in New Chicago with every personal belonging she owned stuffed in a suitcase, and had only a vague understanding of why. She could hack her way in and out of a tight corner, sure, and you didn’t last long in the human communes without knowing your way around riflekind, either. But it was laughable to think that she was the most qualified individual in the world to guard the second most important person in it.

Not that it made much difference, in the end. The Imperial Office of Employment had sent her a notice informing her of her new salary, and Roxy regarded herself as a pretty virtuous person, generally, but at the same time the list of things she wouldn’t do for that much money was very, very short. ‘Move to Chicago’ wasn’t on it.

Dirk had left a year earlier, anyway. Headed off to live in Austin, of all places, despite the city being near abandoned after it flooded. Apparently he wanted to get in touch with his roots, whatever the fuck that meant. More likely he got sick of people. Anyway, without him there, the commune didn’t have much in it capable of tempting Roxy to stay, much less six figures’ worth of temptation.

Hello? Hal asked. Ground Control to Major Rox? You can shave fifteen minutes off if you turn left here.

“Oh.” She shook her head, sucked in a gust of frigid air to clear her head, and turned left. “Thanks.”

Dirk had built him for her as a sixteenth birthday present. “Every cybernaut worth their salt needs a sidekick,” he’d said, handing her a remodeled Hubtopband, complete with automatic rifle scope and wifi connectivity. “Try this one on for size.”

“What’s it do?” She’d clipped it to her right ear and slid the lens over her eye, blinking as it cycled through the startup routines and keyed itself to her iris.

“He,” Dirk corrected. “And he’s me. Me from five weeks ago, I mean.”

“You’re the A.I.?”
“No,” he said. “I’m not him. But he’s me.” Then, hesitating, he said, “More or less.”

Hal had turned out to err on the far, far side of ‘less.’

Cross the street.

“Roger, roger.” She did. Following Hal’s instructions presented a mixed bag, typically, since on the one hand, he was bound by his programming to perform the tasks she asked of him, but on the other hand, Dirk hadn’t put anything in there regulating the manner in which the task was performed. That was a lot more wiggle room than she figured he’d originally intended. And Hal could turn circumventing his subroutines into an Olympic sport.

A long, wide street opened up in front of her as she turned, with six lanes of traffic moving in either direction, and a sidewalk broad enough to fit two full-grown purplebloods lying head to foot. But the road was much more densely populated than the sidewalk, and the crowd thinned the further she walked along the street, leaving her conspicuously without cover. She also didn’t fail to notice that most of the people this far north were trolls, and highbloods, at that, with the warmest among them a chrysanthemum blue. One of them bared their teeth at her in passing, and she couldn’t figure out whether that was supposed to be a threat or a catcall, so she just increased her pace and kept walking.

Heads up. Flies at your seven.

Her heart takes a running leap, but she keeps her pace even. “How far?”

A block and closing.

“We haven’t done anything wrong. For once.”

You have a GBF the size of a horse’s tibula strapped to your back, you’re carrying a suitcase, and you’re a human in the middle of the Highblood District. Better actors than you would fail to come off innocent, under those conditions.

“Did CrockerCorp file my residence permit yet?”

I don’t know. You don’t give me access to your inbox.

“Shit. I don’t, do I.”

She activates the rearview camera in her visor and spots the police car, blue and red neons blazing as it freewheels down the street. Too close to run. Not that she could evade them for long, anyway; it’s not her city, not her digs. The most she could do on foot is find someplace to hide, and the time’s long passed when that wouldn’t look suspicious as a rainbow drinker at a blood bank.

No. I seem to recall it was something about ‘setting reasonable boundaries.’

“And I stand by that.”

I’m riding permanent shotgun on your life and livelihood, here, Lalonde. Why are government invoices your line in the sand?

“It doesn’t really matter what the line is,” said Roxy, “so much that the line exists in the first place. Distance?”

Five hundred meters and closing. Our chances of successfully losing them are a soft twenty-seven percent.
“ATTENTION CITIZEN.”

Make that a hard thirteen.

She ducked behind a broad-shouldered troll and turned up her collar to hide her face as much as possible, pretending she thought they were talking to someone else.

“CITIZEN IDENTIFIED: ROXANNE LALONDE, HALT.”

“Fuck.”

Two point nine nine repeating, reducing exponentially by the millisecond. Want me to run the odds of this being a random search?

She came to a halt, setting down her suitcase, and lifted her hands in the air. The lift slid into the curbside parking lane, and a pair of flies got out.

They were both a warm indigo, dressed in Imperial blacks, with the bright, artificial wings marking them as members of the Empress’ Finest strapped to their shoulders. The plates on their armor resembled an exoskeleton — an intricate network of interlacing joints and shifting scales, all the same glossy black of adult trolls’ skin, although these ones in particular looked a few years shy of their last molt. A special Crockertech nylon weave clung to the skeleton frame of their wings, like the gossamer strung from the pinions of butterflies. Thus, the nickname.

People exaggerated the wings’ functionality for dramatic effect; without sufficient updraft, they couldn’t get far off the ground, and mostly served to give wearers a bit of an edge when trying to make long jumps or taking an otherwise bad fall. A far cry from the movies, where they were sent zipping around in midair like a hummingbird on a speed trip.

They carried stun sticks at the hip, but were probably packing, too.


Do we have a plan of attack for this? Or are we just rolling with the punches?

One of them — a beefy blueblood with two feet and a hundred pounds on her snapped down his visor and squinted at the holster on her back. “You got a license for the gun, miss?”

“Yep,” she said, drawling the vowel, popping the -p.

Ah. Lying. I assume you want me to forge that, unless you’ve been filing paperwork behind my back.

A beat passed. The fly’s mouth flattened.

“You wanna get it out?”

“Sure,” she said, reaching slowly for her palmhusk, and stared hard at the cursor in the corner of her visor, hoping the AI would take the hint. “Give me a sec.”

She tapped a few random commands into the husk, giving Hal time to work. After a second, a pink hologram sprang to life above the husk’s projector. It was, to all appearances, a government document, marked with the Imperial insignia and everything, proclamationg one Roxy Lalonde to be the perfectly lawful owner of one Mark II Girl’s Best Friend sniper rifle.
The fly squinted at it. “This is from California,” he said.

Oh, eat my entire ass. I’ll bet you a gig of storage that the permits cross state lines, Violet Beauregarde over here just doesn’t want to admit he fucked up.

“Yeah,” she said, attempting an amicable tone. “Just moved, actually. Haven’t had time to register it yet. Couldn’t ship it here, for obvious reasons.” She laughed, high and reedy.

His mouth twisted, but he let it slide. “What’re you doing this close to the Highblood District, kid?”

She put away the palmhusk. “My job,” she said brightly. “Recently hired to work for Crockercorp. Supposed to report to the Crocker Estate, ASAP, soon as I get here.” She hefted her suitcase expressively. “Thus, the luggage. Uh, as you imagine, this Cali kid doesn’t have a whole lot of warm clothes, so if you don’t mind—”

He pulled out a tag scanner. “Tag, please,” he requested. She couldn’t tell if he was peeved or just bored; it was always hard to tell, with trolls.

“Look. There’s no need for this, okay? I’m not here to cause trouble—”

“Tag, citizen.”

The other one is reaching for his stun stick.

She bit hard on her cheek to keep a retort down and tugged down her collar, curt. It exposed the thin slip of plastic adhered to the skin above her collarbone, blinking dull green to indicate its connection to a local network. The fly aimed his scanner at it and washed it in black light.

The scanner would cross-reference the tag ID with a file in the Empire database. It’d hold everything from her criminal record to test scores to tax returns. In a hot second, they’d have anything they wanted on her, and she’d have jack shit to do about it.

She starts babbling. “I know I don’t have a permit to be up here, okay, but look, like, I deadass just got hired three days ago, today’s my literal first day — you can call Crockercorp, if you want, right, they’ll back me up —”

The scanner beeped, and the fly’s eyes widened.

He backed off like she was infectiously diseased. “Yes’m,” he said quickly, and oh, well. That was new. “Sorry to bother you, ma’am, didn’t realize you — anyway. Yes. Our mistake. Won’t happen again, I promise.”

She tilted her head. “O…kay?”

“We weren’t informed you would be arriving. Of course, in the future, we — again, our mistake. Give our fondest regards to the Heiress.”

He gave her a short, stilted kind of nod, which she thinks might have actually been an aborted bow, and backed off another few paces, as if she needed a four foot radius of bubble space to walk down the street. “About your business.”

It doesn’t make any sense. Unless Crockercorp already updated her employment records, which doesn’t make sense either, since she hasn’t even started yet. But it’s the only thing that would explain them treating her like a seadweller out of the blue. The company composes nine tenths of the world’s wealth, the last tenth being the personal funds of its CEO, and isn’t so much a private corporation as
a privatized form of government. Getting to call yourself an employee of the real deal, and not just a wager grinding for some subsidiary, is like naming yourself a member of the peerage. It’s part of why she took the job in the first place.

That, and the serious benefits. Hitmen didn’t get dental.

Why Crockercorp would care about getting her name on the roster so quickly, Roxy doesn’t know, but she’s got places to go and other things to be baffled by, so she leaves the gift horse’s teeth well the fuck alone, nods, and takes off speed-walking down the street, tossing a lazy salute over her shoulder.

Did you hack the scanner?

She mutters, “I thought you did.”

No. Looks like we’re chalking it up to good luck.

“Aw, shit,” she whined. “Probably just used up my yearly quota.”

Maybe this just means you’re in for a lucky year. To quote Alexander Pope: Hope springs eternal in the human breast.

She smirked. “But what about yours?”

I’m afraid to say that my tits remain hopeless.

She climbed the stairs to a skybridge ferrying people across an intersection too busy to be guarded by a crosswalk and descended onto the next street. The chatter of crowds thinned out the closer they get to the residential parts of NC; since the lifts ran near silently, the bustle of the city came more from the clamor of construction work and the cold, omnipresent voice of the Imperial Drones gliding over the streets than anything the citizens did.

A billboard on the side of a skyscraper switches from an ad for the new Martian colony to one for the Heiress’ Grubtube channel, gutsyGumshoe, bearing a picture of Crocker herself holding a bright red mixing bowl and a brand-appropriate scarlet fork. A coif of short black hair curls around her temples, perfectly tucked into place, and held back from her forehead with a gleaming red tiara. She just got her braces off two months ago; it was a public holiday. Her eyes are unnaturally bright blue, like shards of copper sulfate under light. She grins at the camera easily, knowingly, as if she can see the passersby looking at her and is smiling back at them in particular. It’s the kind of smile that’s selling something.

What do you think she’s like?

“Crocker?” Roxy averted her eyes from the screen and crossed the street. The taller buildings were beginning to fall behind them, leading into a shorter, more sprawling area of elaborate homes and immaculate townhouses. White brick and coils of wrought iron, layered with plastic neon to give them pops of color, sat high off the street and connected by way of pristine stone stairs. All the windows were tinted to opacity. The place was still crowded, and the packed, claustrophobic aura of a metropolis hadn’t left it by any means, but here, at least, you could entertain the idea of personal space. Buzzing streetlights cast pools of fluorescent light on the snow.

Yeah.

“Dunno, I guess.”
Do you think she’s really good at baking? Or is that a marketing ploy? You know she’s not really baking things, on her show. The food’s all fake. That’s the only way to make it look edible, after it’s been sitting under stage lights for a couple hours, or however long it takes to film.

“Anyone who pretends to bake that much is probably at least kind of good at it,” Roxy reasoned.

I suppose. Left here, and you’re home free.

She turned the corner, and promptly pulled up short.

The street corner across from Roxy was swallowed by an enormous townhouse, built from pale grey brick with black windows, with window gardens sticking out from each that sprouted fuchsia tulips and olive grey vines — *real* vines — that climbed up and down the walls. A holofence of solid white twice Roxy’s height walled the house off from the public and street below, glowing and emitting the faint hum of laser energy. Paparazzi flocked around it, all but flinging themselves against the shield, creating a cacophony of shouting and the odd chittering screeches of trolls.

Roxy took a deep breath, tightened her grip on the suitcase, she crossed the street and plunged into the crowd.

She had to fight for every inch of it. They were packed in and writhing, struggling against each other so close that they head-butted each other with their visors when they clashed, and even when she tried to slip through the crevices left between, someone or other would throw an elbow her way or sidestep to try and crush her out.

The appeal of holofences was that they were supposed to let authorized persons through without harming them, and keep unauthorized persons out. That didn’t make the idea of pushing her hand towards an eleven foot glowing slate of lasers any more appealing.

She grit her teeth and wedged through, all the same.

The light parted for her, and she passed. This got the paparazzi’s attention.

“Hey!”

“Hey, you!”

“What’s your name? Where are you—”

“Can you confirm Miss Crocker’s appearance at the gala next w—”

“What’s your business here?”

“Miss!”

“Do you have business with Miss Crocker?”

“Do you have time for a word!”

Roxy’s shoulders hunched. She took the stairs up to the main entrance two at a time.

Finding no doorbell — or if there was, it was too techy to resemble anything Roxy had seen before — she grasped the knocker on the door, an elaborately carved cuttlefish, and rapped it thrice. A moment passed.

The door cracked open a sliver. A short burgundyblood stood in the opening, built like a brick wall,
with hair that was slicked to a tip at the back of her head. Although three, maybe four inches shorter than Roxy, her horns stretched above Roxy’s head, bent backward at the top and ridged. A birthmark dotted her chin. Her glasses were so thickly tinted it seemed inconceivable that she could even see out of them.

“Hi,” Roxy said tightly, picking up her suitcase again. “Roxy Lalonde, professional hacker, newly minted bodyguard to the stars. Let a girl in, wouldja?”

She got a thorough once-over in return.

“You getting me, friendo? Roxy Lalonde. I can repeat that for a voice recognition system. Or fingerprints. Crockercorp took mine when I got hired for the job, so I know you have them, somewhere.”

The butler reached for something behind the door, and then brought out a tag reader.

“Oh, come on. Really? How many people do you get that can pass muster at the holofence? Do you wire up your face recognition systems to let the rabble in?”

The butler said nothing. Roxy couldn’t even tell if she blinked, because of the shades.

She groaned, and then wrenched down her neckline, baring her tag. “Fine,” she said. “I mean, fuck privacy, right?”

The butler grunted, glancing at the tag reader. Then she backed away.

Roxy darted through the door. It swung shut behind her, and the chorus of the paparazzi vanished. Silence settled over the room, complete and eerie.

The Crocker Estate foyer was a tall, narrow chamber with a spiral staircase in black marble curling up along the curved back of the room. A mural of the Condesce possessed the whole back wall, stylized, with the Battleship Condescension rising from the sky behind her. A domed white ceiling above them dangled an elaborate crystal chandelier from its center. Arched doorways lead off to the left and right of the foyer, beyond which lay large, exquisitely furnished rooms, of which Roxy only got a glimpse before the butler interrupted her musings with a little cough and gestured to the stairs.

“You’ll be wanting to meet the Heiress,” the butler said dully. Her voice was deep and throaty, with a lowblood accent so thick you could cut it with a knife.

Roxy choked. She hadn’t been expecting to meet her so soon; she’d expected to have a few hours, at least, to clean herself up and maybe put together something to say. She hadn’t thought Jane would even be at home, on a weekday, her schedule presumably being packed to hell and back, and had figured she would have a comfortable amount of wiggle room in which to settle before staring into the face of Crockercorp.

“Heiress,” she managed, shortly followed by, “I mean, right, yeah, Heiress. Chick I’m guarding! Heard of her. Ha.” She forced a laugh.

Watch out, we got a smooth operator over here.

She gave her visor a hard thump on the side.

The butler sent her an odd look. She smiled apologetically. “Old model,” she said. “Got a programming error that makes it act up sometimes.”
That was uncalled for.

“But I’d love to meet her. I mean, if she wants to meet me. Does she have the time? If she doesn’t, I get it. Don’t want her to drop out of an important meeting for lil old me.”

The butler did not appear impressed. She started climbing the stairs without checking to see if Roxy was following first.

Real charisma bomb, that one.

The upstairs of the townhouse opened into a spacious hallway. The butler didn’t get far before she stopped at a door of dark oakwood and jerked her head toward it meaningfully. Roxy came to the startling realization that the Heiress was probably behind it.

“Wait,” she said, an unexpected surge of anxiety rising from her stomach. “Hold on. I need to, um. I gotta pee. Like, something awful. I—”

The butler ignored this, and pulled open the door.

Jane Crocker was the rare case of someone prettier in person than they were on TV. Broadly speaking, nothing about her was different. Same cap of curls, same neat little triangle of a nose, same round, owlish specs. Even the same eyes, a blue so bright Roxy had always assumed it was digital editing. But she was older off camera, with lines under her eyes and less makeup — which in turn makes her less girlish — and her clothes were a far cry from the cute outfits she wears in the vlogs, which typically involved poodle skirts and overalls and cargo shorts. Before Roxy, she wore a crisp red blazer and slacks, complete with tie. A red visor extended from the tiara atop her head.

But she was sixteen, and no amount of makeup or clothes or exhaustion could make her not sixteen. And after the initial shock of seeing a face she was used to watching on billboards and magazine covers in the flesh, the intimidation factor faded away, and Roxy found herself staring at a teenage girl.

When she stepped into the doorway, Jane looked up from her husktop and smiled. Her teeth were perfect, whiter than snow.

“You must be Roxanne Lalonde,” she said, rising. She crossed the room quickly and held out her hand. “Good evening.”

She didn’t introduce herself. Roxy got the feeling it wasn’t so much arrogance as respect for Roxy’s intelligence.

“Just Roxy,” she said, and shook the Heiress’ hand. “Rox will do.”

“Roxy. Welcome. How have you liked New Chicago?” Jane folded her hands expectantly. Her smile had not wavered once.

“It’s — cold.”

“Yes,” she laughed. “Unfortunately. Better not to get caught outside in January.” She noticed the gun on Roxy’s back, and her eyes widened. “Goodness.”

“Hm? Oh,” Roxy giggled, tugging on the strap. “Yeah. I’m riflekind. Comes with the territory. Not much of a point to picking the deck if you’re not gonna carry around something that spits serious metal, right?”
“I’m spoonkind, myself,” Jane said faintly, still a bit goggle-eyed, and Roxy came damn close to rolling her eyes, because of course she is. But the Heiress shook it off quickly and refocused on Roxy’s face, pointedly ignoring the gun.

“Would you like anything? Tea, caf?”

“M’good, thanks.”

“Have you any business in the city? We can arrange transport to take you wherever you need, but after you start work, I’m afraid your schedule will be somewhat wed to mine, with the exception of your days off.”

“That’s chill. I mean, uh. No thanks.” Roxy warmed under her unfailing attention. “Only been here a few hours. Don’t really know anybody here to have business with.”

“And you came from California, correct? It’s warm there. I imagine the shock might do a chap in.” Her smile changed, shrinking, but into something slightly warmer. An English lilt caught her vowels and tossed them around with soft URP, just stiff enough to seem artificial without being overpowering. “You’ll have to wear something a bit bulkier than that if you want to keep happy, here.”

“Sure,” Roxy said, politely, and added ‘coat’ to the mental list of things she’d buy as soon as she got her first paycheck.

“Have you been shown your rooms?”

Roxy’s brain had a moment much like what she imagined a husktop experienced when you had eight applications running and tried to open a ninth. “Rooms?”

“Yes.”

“I have rooms? Plural, rooms?”

Her mouth twitched, a bit amused, a bit perplexed. “Well, perhaps more a bedroom than a suite, but we wouldn’t make you sleep in the yard, Ms. Lalonde. We’re not quite that mercenary.”

“No, yeah, I got that, I just — you know what, I don’t know what I figured.”

“It should have been in the packet sent to you by Crockercorp after you were brought on,” Jane said quizzically, tilting her head.

“Ah,” said Roxy, and having flashbacks to the huge PDF sitting in her inbox, which she had received, checked for malware, and then immediately ignored. “Yep. No. I remember, now. The packet. Yes! Gotcha.” She flashed a thumbs-up. “Sorry. Took a sec.”

“Okay,” Jane said, clearly letting it go not out of gullibility but of generosity. “I expect you’d want to see your quarters, then. To get cleaned up after the journey.” She stepped past her, out of the office, and held the door. “I’ll show you there. You can leave your suitcase with Marsti, she’ll take it.”

Roxy took one look at Marsti and understood that this was a surprise to both of them. Nevertheless, Jane had said it in a way that didn’t leave much room for disagreement, so she gently settled the suitcase on the floor and gave the butler an apologetic grimace. It didn’t seem to help, much.

“This way,” called Jane, who was already halfway down the hallway. Roxy tripped to catch up.
The winding interior of the apartment was as gorgeous as the rest of it, furnished with dark hardwood and pearl-pink walls, dotted by the occasional side table bearing an expensive-looking piece of china or a potted flower. The blooms were all fat and full and luscious, even in winter. Each door bore a gold plate embossed with the name of the room behind it, including ‘LIBRARY,’ ‘VR ROOM,’ ‘LEISURE ROOM,’ and one simply called ‘JANE.’ The lattermost room sat at the very end of the hallway, which terminated in a broad, spotless window looking down onto the street; Jane stopped at the door across from hers. Its plate was blank. There was no doorknob that Roxy could see.

Jane pressed her thumb to the print reader beside the door and it chimed softly before the door slid back into a socket in the wall, soundless. “The interface on the inside has settings you can use to key it to your print,” she informed Roxy. “You can also grant temporary or permanent access to someone else by entering their Crockertech ID. Keying your print will also let you access the suite of rooms permitted for the chief bodyguard, including the kitchen, library, leisure room, et cetera. All rooms use the same door mechanic; as long as you don’t go switching thumbs with anybody, you should be able to get in anywhere you’re supposed to.” She grinned a little at her own joke.

“Cool,” Roxy said, eyeing the scanner. In Cali, they’d used keycard scanners, or even analogue locks, if they were especially antsy about whatever they were locking up. Maybe this was standard fare for troll living. “Cool, cool. So your print will unlock it, too?”

“Yes.” Jane at least had the decency to look abashed at this probable violation of privacy. “In the interests of efficiency in times of emergencies, I and a few others have our prints registered for your lock. Head of Crockercorp Security, for example, can open any door in the house. It’s a safety measure.”

“Can I change that?”

Jane blinked. From her expression, it was entirely possible that had never occurred to her. “No,” she said. “You can give access, or take away access that you granted in the first place. You can’t bar higher-ranking officials.”

“Uh, okay.”

“It’s for safety reasons,” she repeated. “Really, it’s in both of our best interests — and I would never enter without your permission except in the direst of emergencies, you understand. I respect your space. It really is for instances where communication is absolutely vital — the walls are soundproofed, you see. So this measure is in case of a fire, or a home invasion, where I might not be able to inform you in time, otherwise.”

“Sure,” said Roxy, as if that did anything to soothe her whatsoever. “Sure! Sure. Um. That’s cool.”

Marsti trudged up behind them and deposited Roxy’s suitcase just inside the door, dropping it with a heavy thunk. Roxy winced.

“Will that be all?”

Jane nodded perfunctorily, and then turned to Roxy. “Will it be?”

Roxy stuttered, caught in the unexpected situation of being asked for orders and blindsided by it entirely. Marsti waited, staring at her dully.

“Uh, yeah. No, I’m good, thanks.”

Marsti bowed low to Jane, her horns coming close to scraping the floor, one hand tucked behind her
back and the other held across her waist. The act nearly folded her in half. Then she straightened and performed a shortened version to Roxy, keeping her hands at her sides, but bending deep at the waist and holding the pose for a few seconds before releasing it and walking away.

Jane didn’t watch her leave. “I hope you get settled well,” she said warmly, placing a hand on Roxy’s shoulder. Her hands were soft, her nails perfect robin egg crescents. “Tell me if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” Roxy said, a bit weakly.

Jane nodded graciously, and then followed Marsti up the hall.

“Oh — oh, shit — uh, J— Miss Crocker? Your Highness?”

Jane turned, laughing a little. “Jane will do perfectly well,” she said. “I’m not a princess.”

“Jane,” Roxy repeated. “Yeah. Do I have access to your room?”

Jane gave her a funny little look. “Of course you do,” she said. “You’re the head of my security detail. What use are you if you can’t get to me when I need you?”

Roxy struggled to keep her face neutral. “Course,” she said. “Just checking! Laters.” She stepped quickly into the room and shoved her thumb onto the interior print reader, closing it.

She stood there for a moment, face warm.

Well. At least we know the disarming lack of boundaries is a two-way street.

She blew out a long breath through her teeth in reply, raking her hands through her hair. “Six figures,” she said. “I’m getting paid six figures to let Jane Crocker have a key to my bedroom, and you know what? I’ll take it.”

Jane Crocker and assorted Crockercorp officials. You don’t even know who all can get in here.

“I’ll just remember to lock up my shit when I leave,” Roxy said, slinging the gun off her back and bracing it against the wall by the door. “Easy peasy.”

With what? You pack your own chest of drawers in that suitcase?

“See A point: six figures. I can afford to buy some padlocks, Halexander.”

Whatever you say. It’s not my panty drawer being left unguarded.

She reached for her suitcase and turned around, taking a sweeping look around the room. The far and right walls were consumed by a wraparound corner window, offering a panoramic view of the streets below. A row of troll buildings drew a curving black skyline against the dark red sky in the distance, while the dull luster of lifts passing to and fro on the street below illuminated the roads. The carpet was light grey, and matched the silver drapes, which had been drawn back for her arrival; the walls were dark charcoal, almost black, and accented with a tortoiseshell marble fireplace to the right of the door where a fire in its dying stages crackled quietly. A chaise lounge was tucked into the corner, and the king-sized bed was buried beneath a mountain of pillows. An en-suite bathroom could be glimpsed through an open doorway on the opposite side of the room, and a walk-in closet through a doorway adjacent to it. The whole thing, even by conservative estimates, cost more than Roxy had ever made in her life.
A bouquet of gorgeous purple roses sat on the bedside table. A small white note was tucked in amongst the blooms. Roxy approached and pulled it out, unfolding it.

(ey gull

enjoy ya new digs

Roxy checked the back. There was nothing more.

“Huh.”

Well, look at that. Not one day into your new job and you’ve got a secret admirer.

She folded the note and slid it into her pocket, dumping her suitcase on the bed. “Whatever. They are nice digs.”

Obviously.

Unpacking was a short process. She unloaded her clothes and tossed them in the closet’s wardrobeifier, not bothering to organize them, before pulling out her husktop and settling it on the bed. Then she removed her laser gun and its holster, which she hung on the nightstand. Hauling a sniper rifle around got unwieldy after a while, and she figured it probably wouldn’t fly everywhere. The rest of her stuff she decaptchalogue from her sylladex, and then she was done. There wasn’t much. She’d never had much to begin with.

“Hive sweet home,” she proclaimed, and keeled over facedown on the bed. It wedged her visor against her face.

Wonderful.

“M’ gonna sleep for a thousand years.” It was muffled to incoherence against the comforter.

It’s only 20:32. And you haven’t had dinner.

“I’m on west coast time.”

It’s earlier there.

“Whatever.” She pushed herself up and shrugged off her jacket, tossing it haphazardly onto the chaise. “It okay if I put you on sleep mode, lil man?”

I suppose. I’ll scrounge up an internet connection and entertain myself.

She slid the visor off her head and reached over to settle it on the charging stand next to the bouquet. Her right eye took a second to adjust, reorienting its perception of color without the tinted filter of her lens.

Her husktop hummed the three-note Crockercorp jingle as it booted up. The desktop was a photo of her and Dirk on the Santa Monica pier — three years ago, and a year before it went under. His hair was shorter, still ragged from the godawful haircut he’d given himself that summer, and hers was dyed platinum white instead of its natural gold. She was sprawled across his lap with an arm hooked around his neck and the other outstretched to snap the photo, winking, her tongue stuck out; his eyes were hidden behind his shades, as per usual, and he wasn’t smiling, per se, but there was a softness to the lines around his mouth and brow which suggested that if he were a different person, he might have been. He had a smudge of ice cream under his bottom lip.
An unexpected pang of loneliness struck her in the sternum. She missed her twin.

The chat client opened automatically as part of the startup process. At the top leftmost corner, a green dot appeared next to the familiar orange handle.

tipsyGnostalgic began bothering timaeusTestified!

TG: hey d
TG: whats hangin
TG: just got to the new casa and dude
TG: duuuuuuuuuuuude
TG: ya girl is channeling her julia roberts
TG: getting pretty womaned all over here
TG: luxury.jpg
TT: Well, hot damn.
TT: Did you end up marrying rich after all?
TT: Do they know you don't have a dowry? Don't tell them until after the honeymoon.
TG: puh lease
TG: who needs a dowry with an ass like mine
TG: and n e wae naw its my room at crocker estate
TG: im parked across the hall from ms heiress herself
TT: No shit, really?
TG: deadass
TT: Nice.
TT: Tell me you're going to steal something.
TG: dirky NO
TG: i am being a loyal employee up in this bitch
TG: i am getting m fuckin honor code on
TG: ya girl is earning that dolla
TT: All that talk of eating the rich, and yet in the moment of truth, she betrays us.
TT: How does it feel to be an instrument of the bourgeois, Roxy? Do you feel the heat of a million proles watching you with resentment?
TG: bijon i AM the bourgeois now
TG: did u see how much im makin when my first paycheck comes around im gonna buy a fuckig plane
TT: You may have wealth, but you will never have the moral high ground.
TG: alas
TG: allow me 2 serenade u with my tiniest violin
TG: so tiny
TG: so sad
TG: howre things down in tejas
TT: Quiet. As per usual.
TT: Some radicals attacked Houston the other day, so some of the locals are worried that we're up next. But I'm not.
TT: Consider it one of the advantages of living in the middle of Bumfuck, Nowhere, U.S.A.: no one cares enough about your territory to target you.
TG: r the drones still hangin around
TT: Yes. But you get the idea that they're here for the revolutionaries, not the residents. It's not ideal, obviously, but they don't seem to give two shits about the people who live here, so we can go about our business for the most part.
TG: wish i could say the same
TG: 3 guesses who got pulled over 2day!
TG: asked to step over i guess
TG: wasnt drivin when it happened
TG: all the same
TT: Wait, what?
TG: keep a lid on it nothin happened
TT: What did they want?
TG: just to fuck over a human prolly
TG: like theyre flies they dont need a reason
TG: but heres the fun bit
TG: they peeped my tag and basically shit themselves
TT: What.
TG: ya
TG: being a crockercorp wagedrone has its perques
TG: score 1 for the sheeple amirite
TT: So they really keep kosher about pissing off pinkbloods up there, huh?
TG: ubetcha
TT: At least you'll be out of trouble, then.
TG: bitch who do u think ur talkin to
TT: My mistake.
TT: *At least you won't get caught, then.
TG: better
TG: and dont u forget it
TT: Wouldn't dream of it.
TT: I've got to go. One of the neighbors wants to squeeze in an extra hour of work on the water filtration plant before dark, and I'm the only one who knows how to do-si-do with a power coupler without blowing off his own fingers.
TG: aight godspeed
TG: txt me if u need advice
TT: Course.
TT: Talk to you later?
TT: I'm close to finishing the holoprojector. I could probably have the video call function up and running within a couple of weeks.
TG: sick
TG: this place has wild tech bro im sure i can find one around here
TG: miss seein u
TT: Yeah.
TG: yeah
TG: welp
TG: off u go
TG: try not to fuck up the power couplers
TG: remember 2 break the circuit before u start fuckin with the wires
TG: im not there to resuscit8 u this time
TT: Thanks for that.
TT: I'll keep it in mind.
TG: do
TG: keep wise big bro
TT: You too, Rox.

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1. For reference, the Highblood District sits on what used to be the Chicago-Evanston border, which has since been absorbed into Chicago proper.

2. Roxy doesn’t actually get off the lift into the city at the Mag Mile, since it’d be a bit of a hike to walk from there to Evanston. The mention of the MM up top was just meant to highlight what she saw on the ride in from O’Hare.

3. The visors typically look like Rose’s Hubtopband, with a glass screen extending over the eyes and a clip that fits either over the ear or over the head, depending on its model. They’re meant to help with things like navigation, identifying people and places, and visual aid for people with visual impairments; of course, Roxy uses hers as a scope and a house for her P.A., too.
If you asked Jane Crocker what she thought of New Chicago, she’d say something along the lines of *Well, it’s my home.* And this would usually be enough. She’d accompany it with some sort of endearing smile, something that gave the impression of earnestness, and then pose a question about the inquirer’s family life or business prospects or current projects, and the interaction would move on. If changing the subject was an art — and, in the business world, it was — then Jane was a virtuoso, a child prodigy, and she took full advantage of that fact.

But, in the rare event that someone paid enough attention to point out that she had not, in fact, answered the question, she might offer a little more forthright an answer: *Well, it’s a beautiful city.* And that was an answer, in its own right. It was even the truth. But it was still less her opinion on the subject than a statement of fact.

The truth was, Jane Crocker thought, staring across the steel labyrinth sprawled out beyond her dining room window — the truth was that New Chicago was beautiful sheerly by dint of being the only standing city that was allowed to be, that was supposed to be. Nowhere else had the money. Nowhere else had the time. Nowhere else had the love of so many powerful people behind it, or the political significance. While other places were busy surviving, New Chicago gilded itself with electricity, fashioned itself a crown from high-rise penthouses and sky bridges, embroidered its landscape with threads of public transit and faux greenery and important people in expensive clothes. Of course it was beautiful. The Empire’s capitol had to be.

She snapped her fingers. A newsfeed blazed to life on her window, blocking the view with rows of scrolling headlines.

Idly, she twirled the spoon in her coffee, and began to read them.

Vancouver Island was undergoing its last stages of terraforming before its final shift to permanent subaquatic status; bids for property in the area were skyrocketing, with condos near the rising water level reaching several million aurei apiece. One of the Archagents had died the previous night. A press release from the Imperial Cabinet Spokesroll confirmed that his successor would be named within the month. The resultant political frenzy had already claimed two lives. Sopor Plus had just outstripped its predecessor as the most popular recreational substance, besides alcohol, by a narrow margin. A low-ranking member of the revolutionary movement had been arrested in New San Antonio, and the livestream of his trial was scheduled for next week, with the execution reserved for the halftime show at the Superbowl.

Jane settled her spoon neatly on the saucer beside her coffee and sipped it.

The door slid open with a muted beep. Roxy stumbled in, her hair mussed, wearing an off-the-shoulder white sweater and what appeared to be the same pair of jeans, a gun holster strapped to her hip. Her visor was slightly askew. She pulled up short when she saw Jane, wide-eyed, and wet her lips.

“Sorry,” she said, wincing. “I know I’m late, I just — west coast time, you know, and — I couldn’t find the dining room? Like. This place is huge. And Marsti wasn’t around to give a girl a hand, not even in her room. I checked. Which was maybe bad form? Considering I’ve been here for a hot second and she’s probably not paid to deal with lost flighty broads wandering into her sanctum
sanctorum. Even if it seems like someone paid to run the house would be, you know, around, half the time, and not go the way of the pigeon every time someone needs pointing in the right direction — also, side note, your house has, like, so many fucking rooms, girl, I shit you not — sorry. I’m done.”

Mystified, with her coffee paused en route to the saucer, Jane managed, “It’s Marsti’s day off,” which was about the only thing she could summon in response to this behemoth of a morning greeting. Then, because she was nothing if not well-bred, she added, “Good morning.”

“Oh, yeah, g’morning,” Roxy said. She shifted from one foot to the other and eyed up the toast on Jane’s plate. “So, uh. Should I pop down to the kitchen to grab a bagel, or . . . ?”

Jane furrowed her brows. “If you like,” she said, although she couldn’t understand why Roxy would want to. Bagels took a few hours to make properly, and by that time, they’d be long gone. “I mean, I’d just use the alchemiter, if it were me.”

“Alchemiter?” Roxy stared at her like she’d sprouted horns. “Y’all have an alchemiter?”

Jane nodded at the raised circular platform in the center of the table. A spire dropped from the ceiling and hovered perhaps three feet above the slate, with a slot in its side for captcha insertion.

The dining room was just large enough to fit a wide, twelve-seater mahogany table with several yards of space on either side. The walls were seafoam green, and a black electronic fireplace rested behind Jane’s place at the end of the table, marked with the room’s sole armchair. Opposite her was the east-facing window, which was generally intended to provide more natural light than the cloud-riddled sky was inclined to, today.

“There’s a captchalogue set in the book there,” Jane said, and nodded to a large volume sitting beside the alchemiter. “If you want something, it ought to be in there, troll food or human. Including bagels. All the same, if you really feel that passionately about baking them yourself—”

“Nah,” Roxy interrupted her, leaning over to inspect the alchemiter in a delighted sort of daze. “That’s chill. Holy shit, does this thing work? Like, you get edible food out of it? And everything?”

Jane gestured to her plate, where a stack of golden-brown toast rested next to a pot of blackberry jam and three identical strips of crispy bacon.

“Goddamn. You know, we’d heard of these, out west, but we never — we always heard the food they made was shitty? And that you couldn’t make anything branded, wasn’t that true?”

“Broadly, sure. If you don’t know what you’re doing with the captchas, the food will taste awful,” Jane said, trying not to feel smug. “But if you buy captchas from professional vendors, they’re fine. And you can purchase captchas for branded food, too, it just costs more.”

“Jesus Elizabeth Christ. How do you even still have restaurants here? How do you not just go ‘bam, machine, magic me a sandwich’ every time you get hungry?” Roxy rifled through the captcha library with childlike wonder. Jane tried very hard not to be endeared.

“Well,” Jane said philosophically, “put it this way. Just because it’s possible to make microwaveable mac and cheese doesn’t make it the best kind available, or dissuade one from eating out, once in a while. And anyway, non-alchemiter friendly recipes still exist, whether because they’re too complicated to justify the effort of creating a captcha for them or because the patent owner refuses to let them be mass produced.” After a moment, she added, “Like most of Crockercorp’s food product, actually.”
“So, like. I couldn’t make a Betty Crocker cake with this,” Roxy said, slotting her chosen captcha into the machine.

“No. Well — you could make a cake. A fairly good cake, I’m sure. But our mix, specifically, our flavors, our texture — you’d never get that quite right, no.”

The alchemiter whirred as it processed Roxy’s request, and then a brief, blinding flash of light emitted from the peak of the spire, accompanied by a crackling sound. When it cleared, a stack of fat, fluffy pancakes rested on the platform, each perfectly circular and the color of wheat.

“Wicked,” Roxy breathed, beaming, and snagged a chair to Jane’s left, drawing the plate towards her. “That’s literally the coolest shit I have ever seen in my life. Just — what does it make it out of? Is there a manual, somewhere, I could — oh,” she said, glancing at her place and back to Jane with hesitation. “Is this — is this kosher? Am I supposed to eat with you, or should I hang outside the doorway, or what?”

“With me,” Jane assured her, a bit confused. “Why wouldn’t you?”

“I mean, in the movies, the bodyguard always chills by the door. And like, scans people before they come in, and shit.”

“I don’t see why that means you have to eat standing up.”

“In case, y’know. Something happens. I don’t wanna break protocol, here, is what I’m saying.”

“If you’d like to eat standing up,” Jane said slowly, “by all means, please do—”

“No! It’s not that I want to, it’s that I feel like this is weird? Eating with you? Because I’m your employee, and that’s not typically how shit like this goes?” Roxy’s fork had been hovering over the pancake stack for almost thirty seconds. “Also. If you want me to stop cursing, let me know. I ain’t had a job where people cared about stuff like manners and presentation in, uh, ever, so the habit’s wired deep, but I get how since you’re a kind of high-profile person, it’d be bad press if I was dropping f-bombs all over the place.”

Jane sat down her coffee and regarded the girl across from her.

She wasn’t personally involved in the employment of her staff. Sure, a kind or harsh word from her to the Office of Employment could make or break an employee’s career, and a particularly vehement notice of complaint could get someone fired on the spot, but when positions fell vacant, a team of the Empress’ people recruited and vetted replacements. Jane never saw a resumé, and never asked to. So when she received notice that she would be appointed a personal bodyguard, she had shrugged, marked it read, and expected a greenblood threshecutioner to appear on her doorstep within the next three to five business days.

Instead, a sixteen-year-old human sharpshooter had turned up, underdressed and overarmed, with nothing but her name and a very big gun. If nothing else, Jane was impressed by her moxie. And the girl was eminently likable, admittedly. It was hard not to look at her grin and feel a pull at the corners of one’s mouth, too, maybe because she so obviously reveled in her own happiness, and so intensely that one felt guilty for not sharing in it. No sense of decorum to speak of, but better an excess of charisma and a deficit in propriety than the inverse; Jane had met a lot of people who had it the other way around, and she’d rather do shots of arsenic than spend every waking minute with them.

That she was cute didn’t hurt, either. But Jane was a consummate professional, and didn’t think about things like that.
“How about this,” she said. “If you do anything that goes against protocol, or threatens the public image of Crockercorp or its subsidiaries, I’ll tell you. Otherwise, assume that you’re doing just fine.” Jane reached across the table and patted her on the wrist, because she seemed to be in need of it.

Roxy nodded. “Okay,” she said, with palpable relief. “Thanks, Miss C.”

“Jane.”

“Jane.”

Roxy picked up the tin of syrup and drowned her pancakes in it, before tearing into them ravenously. Jane returned her attention to the newsfeed, taking another measured sip of coffee that had by now grown cold. She read one or two articles before the sound of the alchemiter distracted her, and she looked over to find Roxy pulling a cup of coffee from the platform.

The pair of them drank in silence for a while. Jane could feel Roxy’s eyes boring into her forehead.

“Hey,” Roxy said, by and by.

“What?”

“Why aren’t you wearing your visor?”

“Because it gets uncomfortable after I’ve been using it for a while,” said Jane, biting back a bit of frustration. Eating by herself was never this distracting.

Roxy frowned. “That shouldn’t be happening,” she said. “Want me to take a look at it?”

“It works flawlessly. I appreciate your offer, but it’s unnecessary.”

“Well, unnecessary, yeah, but — like, is the band too tight, or are you getting eyestrain, or what?”

“Headaches,” Jane said, waving it away. “It’s nothing. It’s only stress, most likely, anyway.”

“Headaches?” Roxy’s face scrunched up with thought. It was, regrettably, cute. “You’re tops of a tech company, and nobody can scrounge you up a visor that doesn’t give you migraines?”

“The Crockertech Tiaratop Visor is the most sophisticated model in existence,” Jane said flatly. “It’s not even on the market yet. That’s how experimental it is. And it pays back the inconvenience it causes a thousandfold in functionality and convenience.”

“They have you wearing a prototype?” If possible, Roxy became even more disgruntled.

“They have me wearing the best piece of technology the company has ever produced,” Jane snapped.

Roxy’s hands flew up. “Okay,” she said, retreating quickly. “Your choice, anyway. Just saying, like. If you want a backup to use when you get sick of the crown, I can rustle you up a replacement that’ll run nearly as good.”

“Thank you, Roxy.”

It ended the conversation, and Roxy was canny enough to take the hint. She scooped the last bite of syrup-saturated pancakes into her mouth and picked up her plate, scooting back her chair. Empty dish in hand, she made for the door.
“Where on earth are you going with that?”

She turned around at Jane’s incredulous question and hefted the plate. “Uh, kitchen,” she said. “To wash it? I’m not gonna steal your fuckin’ dishware right in front of you, dude, especially since it’s plastic — oh, wait. Am I supposed to take yours, too?”

“No,” said Jane. A different kind of headache was making itself known. “You just — you leave them there. Marsti will get them. Or Fozzer. You don’t have to take them yourself.”

She might as well have told Roxy she planned to go streaking. Roxy eyed her like she’d said so, anyway.

“How many people do you have to do shit for you? Exactly?”

“Only five to ten.”

“Only five to ten,” Roxy repeated, faintly. “Alright. Thanks. Good to know.” She rested her plate gingerly on the table and wiped her hands on her jeans. Then she just stood there. Waiting. It didn’t even look like she knew what.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” Jane said, and got up. She drained the last of her mug and set it back down, tossing her napkin beside the plate. “Let’s just go already. Give us both something to do.”


Janey, Jane thought, turning it over in her head. She decided she was unbothered by it.

“You should have received a copy of my schedule for the week in your inbox this morning,” she said, “but since you asked, we’re going to River North for an Imperial photoshoot. It’ll take about half the day, I expect, even though it’s only scheduled to run an hour, but at least my afternoon is free.” She withdrew her tiaratop from her purse and slid it onto her forehead. The familiar prickle of electricity scampering across her scalp caused her to repress a shudder; a red screen slotted down over her eyes, with a near-constant feed of black text from her inbox scrolling down the right-hand side. “Do you want to finish your coffee?”

Roxy paused in the doorway, and guffawed. “No, thanks,” she said. “I’ll be good without my coffee.” She affected a high, nasal lilt, and her lip trembled on the w in a way reminiscent of violetblood slang.

“Caf, then! Caffeinated bitter bean fluid! Whatever you call it!” Jane rolled her eyes and swept past her. Behind her, Roxy continued snickering on their way out the door.

The studio radiated the aura of being shaped and curated by people who thought very highly not only of themselves, but of their job. Broad white tarps stretched from the high-arching rafters and spilled onto the floor, bearing various elaborate hologram sets, and towering spotlights trained blinding beams on the models that lounged on them. The room hummed with activity.

When Jane stepped through the door, it all stopped. It was something she liked, a little bit, albeit not without feeling guilty for doing so: the immediacy and intensity with which she was paid attention to,
and the comfort of it. A team of photographers greeted her the moment she set foot on the studio floor, mouths moving a hundred miles a minute, like a swarm of gadflies converging on a carcass.

Roxy elbowed her way through, doing her best to stay at Jane’s side, although more than once Jane had to wait for her to catch up. She struggled with crowds, in general, Roxy — not moving through them, per se, since she could navigate her way around a block of people without any difficulty, but she strained to keep pace with Jane in the route Jane took. She lacked the skill of cleaving through a pack of other people, preferring instead to wiggle her way through existing gaps, or trail in the wake of larger individuals. It was a curious pattern of movement. Jane resolved to ask her about it later.

Costuming got their hands on Jane before anyone else did, producing an enormous, puffy-sleeved red gown with a gold bodice and beading made from real metal, reminiscent of a chest plate on a suit of armor. It weighed at least half as much as Jane did.

Somewhere in the fray, Roxy got wrestled into a small black blazer, an assault that was over and done with before she could have time to object to it.

The head photographer was a heavily modded troll with blood toeing the line between blue and teal, wearing a horn ornament that appeared to be a miniature chandelier. Xir eyes blazed an off-spectrum lime color, and xe had glowing white tattoos of tentacle-like appendages that wrapped around xir neck, pulsing softly with something akin to the rhythm of a bloodpusher. Xir hair drifted behind xem in a constant cloud of static.

Xe lead them to a set bearing an outlandishly large throne made of gold leaf and tyrian velvet, clearly modeled in the style of the Condesce’s own, mounted on a pyramid stack of steel platforms. It was simple, but communicative.

Jane had to lift her skirt to ascend the steps. Roxy gave her a helping hand with the train, collecting it and folding it over one armrest of the throne while Jane settled herself. The photographer fidgeted with her limbs for a while, experimenting with different angles and expressions. Jane let herself go limp and be rearranged to xir satisfaction.

Roxy tried to back away after the second time the photographer just grabbed Jane’s wrist and twisted it into position. The photographer would have none of it.

“Just sit tight, blondie,” xe chirped, and oh, xir voice had definitely been modded; it was soft and breathy in a way eerily reminiscent of Troll Marilyn Monroe, but with the uncanny emptiness that voice mods always had. “We’ll get you fixed in a sec.”

“Pardon?”

“Sorry?” Jane, too, was surprised. “Is she in the shoot, too?”

The photographer shifted Jane to lean heavily on one armrest, her legs twisted towards the other, making a diagonal line across the throne with her body, and nodded in satisfaction. Xe beckoned to Roxy, snapping xir fingers. “That’s what the memo said. It’s supposed to be the pair of you. Come on over and hop on the armrest, babydoll, quick as you like.”

Roxy ambled over, obviously uncomfortable, and perched herself on the very edge of the armrest. The photographer clucked xir tongue and patted Roxy’s shoulder to urge her closer. “Don’t be shy,” xe encouraged. “She won’t bite you, and if she does, we can get makeup to patch it up good as new.”

“Um,” said Roxy, loudly.
“Just lean over and — ooh, you could drape your arm over the back of the throne, like that, couldn’t you? Yes, that’s perfect. I really like that. I really do.” Xe backed up and twirled xir finger in the air, causing the lights to rotate and train on the pair of them.

Jane leaned over to speak into Roxy’s ear. “It’s all right,” she said. “You look fine.”

“I’m not really worried about that.”

“What are you worried about, then?”

“This thing is going on a magazine cover.”

“Yes, and?”

“And a couple fuckin’ million people are gonna read it, maybe?”

“Billions, at least, Roxy, don’t be mean. They’re a smaller studio, to be certain, but they’re not that small,” Jane scolded.


“Why wouldn’t I be?”

The shutter snapped. “That’s beautiful,” the photographer crowed. “Hold that for a bit longer, Heiress, would you? Just act like you’re sharing a secret. Keep looking at me, though. That’s wonderful, I wouldn’t ever have thought of that.”

Jane obligingly held the pose until the photographer tired of it, and then returned to facing the camera. She continued to speak, however, out of the corner of her mouth.

“It’s not that bad,” she said. “People get used to seeing you, and you get used to being looked at.”

“Do you?” It didn’t seem to soothe Roxy’s nerves. “Side note: am I getting paid for this? Seems like we both should be getting paid for this.”

“It’s for an Imperial press release. You’ll likely get a tax cut for doing it, at the least.”

“Okay, that’s — do you even pay taxes? Your official job is being on deck to inherit something.”

“Believe it or not, I do, in fact, have a job,” said Jane, and it came out fiercer than she meant it.


“Blondie, hon,” called the photographer, “could you move around? Try out a couple different positions, maybe? Play in the space. And don’t be afraid to touch each other, either, girls, the idea is to project that you’re a team.”

Roxy edged closer. She didn’t touch Jane. It didn’t please the photographer.

“Condescesesakes,” xe swore, and then dropped xir camera to swing around xir neck, surging up the stairs. “Just let me do it, okay, sweetfin?”

Xe grabbed Roxy’s ankles and hauled them around to latch over the other armrest, effectively bridging Jane’s lap. Roxy yelped mutely at the intervention.
“There,” xe crowed, and retreated at the same speed xe’d darted up, springing down the stairs backwards in heels. “Keep still!”

Jane smiled minutely. She couldn’t help it. It was funny.

“Sorry,” Roxy whispered.

“I get the feeling that this isn’t nearly as awkward for me as it is for you,” Jane said.

“Is this a day to day thing? Not that I’m not game, but, like, if so, I’ll need to start maybe doing some yoga first, get some mindful meditation up in here to prepare myself, physically, spiritually, emotionally—”

“It’s not an everyday thing. Monthly, maybe. And you won’t be expected to star in all of them.” Jane rested her chin on her knuckles. “I didn’t even expect you to be in this one, frankly.”

“So this isn’t . . . normal? Is what you’re saying?”

“Well, it’s not abnormal,” Jane sniffed. “Only unexpected.”

“Why, though?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps it’s your spectacular photogenicity,” Jane deadpanned, and Roxy made a high-pitched squeak of a laugh, and fell silent.

After two hours, the photographer called a break so xe could go review the film. Jane wasn’t allowed to change, since she would continue the shoot afterward, but Roxy successfully begged off and was allowed to stand by for the second half.

The catering table was piled high with Alternian food and drink. Roast beefgrub sandwiches stacked neatly in pyramids, an assortment of fruits, and the typical selection of glazed candies from a Crockercorp sister producer. A rustblood stood at the end of the table, holding a tray of diluted lemonsugar extract. She didn’t lift her head when Jane took a glass, but murmured some inaudible courtesy.

Roxy busied herself attempting to pile the entire candy selection onto her plate in one go, and succeeding in lightening the table of at least half the supply. She popped a Lime Sunsquirt into her mouth and immediately pulled a face.

“That’s sour,” she complained, as if Jane were personally responsible for it.

“Yes. That’s the flavor.”

“Where I grew up, these were always sweet,” she mused, and shoved another two in her mouth. “I mean, figures. They wouldn’t use real fruit for ones produced out south, but it’s still weird.”

“Really? I always assumed it was the same recipe . . .”

Someone said Jane’s name, and she drifted off, seeking the source. The only people who were simultaneously on break with them were a pair of violetblood models doing a shoot for Crockertech. A headdress of silver thread laced between their horns in a pattern meant to evoke circuitboard, and they lounged in the set of sofas at the other end of the catering table. Neither of them seemed to notice she had heard.

One’s back was to her, but his voice carried in the high-ceilinged room. He didn’t have a strand of
hair on his head, save a narrow line of it that reached from hairline to nape, and was wearing a
greatcoat made entirely of alligator skin. “Just saying,” he said, with a voice like someone had got
ahold of his nasal canal. “Human, you know? And it’s not like she’s gonna get Royal Tenure or
anything.”

“It’s the Heiress, Maddix,” said his friend, in hushed tones. “Keep it hush, huh?”

“Humans can’t hear shit,” said Maddix. “And anyway, what of it, huh? Today it’s treason to speak
ill of her, tomorrow it’s treason to speak well of her. You remember what happened to the other
one,” he said, smugly, and Jane set her champagne flute down hard on the table. “You can’t trust the
hornless buggers, I’ve been telling you, Yanios.”

Yanios shifted. “The other one was always dodgy, though.”

“Do you think so? I don’t. English sold out the Empire first chance he got, and so would the rest of
‘em. Can dress ’em up nice, give ’em the biggest fortune in the cosmos, doll ’em up like proper
people, whatever. But blood outs, you know.”

Jane took deep breaths. There was no need to get angry. People said things like it, all the time. It
would be irrational for her to get upset at one person for it, and anyway, it wasn’t like there was
anything she could do to change his mind.

She would let it go. She was the Heiress, and she was his superior by innumerable counts, and it was
her prerogative and obligation to let it go.

Her visor flickered. For an infinitesimal moment, a pair of words blazed across her screen,
immediately vanishing thereafter.

PUNISH HIM.

A heavy weight settled into her right hand. She looked down, and found she had decaptchalogued
her Red Skaia War Trident. At six feet long, it reached over the table, and held a blue-and-white
crystal orb at its base; the prongs were hard enough to cut steel.

She blinked, and then shook her head violently, captchalogueing it. Odd. She hadn’t accidentally
decaptchalogue anything in years, and besides, it wasn’t like she needed it — unless —

But she wasn’t going to actually hurt the man, of course. Not physically. That would be incoherent,
and cruel, and disproportionate to the crime, and — and an awful lot of horrible paperwork, besides.

She would just . . . punish him. Just a little.

“Roxy,” she said, clearly, and Roxy looked up sharply from where she’d been ogling the chocolate
fountain. “Would you like to take a walk, dear?”

“Huh?”

“A walk around the building.” Her voice came out silken and dispassionate, and she tried to inject it
with a bit of warmth, for persuasion’s sake. “You’re owed a fifteen minute break every few hours, I
believe.”

There wasn’t really any need to send Roxy out of the room, for this. But there also wasn’t any need
for her to see Jane succumb to petty quarreling, or to hear more of Jane’s family scandal than
absolutely necessary. It wasn’t that her opinion mattered, per se — it only seemed a bad first
impression to make, on the first day of their arrangement.
“I am? I don’t think I am.”

“Roxanne,” Jane said, calmly. “Take a walk.”

Roxy wasn’t stupid. She went.

The wind rushing up over Lake Michigan battered Roxy with full force when she left the building.

Five caegars says she’s killing someone, Hal said, as soon as she was over the threshold. Ten caegars says she fights dirty. It’s always the sweet ones who fight dirty. You see that fork she was packing? That thing could take out half your intestine with a well-placed jab. And it looked heavy, too. Gotta have biceps like a fuckin’ subjugglator, that woman.

Roxy dragged a hand over her nose to keep it from running and huddled against the wall, rubbing her shoulders. “She’s not gonna kill him.”

Would you bet five caegars on it?

She said nothing.

She lingered there long enough that the oliveblood doing a tab of Sopor Plus in the shade of the enclave held out the pack to her in offering.

“No, thanks,” she said. Belatedly: “Doesn’t really do it for me, but I appreciate it.”

They shrugged, and returned to their task.

A newsfeed began to play on the side of the building opposite them. The Condesce featured in this one, draped sideways on her throne with one leg hooked up over the arm, giving the camera a bored glare. A violetblood interviewer sat beside her, gils fluttering wildly with nervousness.

“Do you,” he said, and then clearly had to take a moment to compose himself. “Do you have any comment, your Condescension, on the unfortunate, recently no-longer-living state of Archagent Tiroga?”

“Yuh,” she said, and her voice was as seadweller as they came, deep and warbling and not at all human. She was so old she came from a different evolutionary branch in her species’ history, evidenced in the uncanny, low set of her eyes, in the long, pointed shape of her face, the leathery, not-quite hair texture of the black mass that drifted around her head. Seadwellers, on the whole, looked like people that had adapted to live amphibiously; the Empress looked like something that would feel at home in the Mariana Trench.

“He fucked up.” She tossed her head, and the resultant shockwave radiated out through her mane of hair. “So I offed him. Lesson for ya: don’t fuck up.”

“Ah. And do you have a contender in mind for his replacement?”

“Naw,” she said, indifferent.

“Perhaps a shortlist, then?”
She rolled her eyes. “Y’all get up ma grill every time a bureaucretin bites the dust, and I keep telling ya: I ain’t give a fuck. Gonna give it to the next glubbin’ shrimp who doesn’t ask dumbass questions, at this rate, I tell you that.”

“Yes, your Condescension,” said the seadweller. “Of course, your Condescension. But what kind of qualities would you say you were looking for in a replacement, if asked?”

“I ain’t looking for a replacement.”

“So is it correct to suppose that the Archagent’s duties will fall to his Chief Advisors, for the time being?”

“Gogdamn,” she complained, “ain’t I just told you I ain’t give a fuck? He’s dead, and what’s dead’s dead. Ask about somefin else.”

“Yes, your Condescension. But, briefly, if I could: Mr. Tiroga was notoriously one of the few Archagents in history not to be granted the Royal Tenure; would this be related to the rumors surrounding his so-called anticasteist leanings, or some other fault?”

She glowered at him.

The newsfeed cut out before his body hit the ground.

Roxy grimaced, and ducked into an alley.

The wind was a bit easier to deal with in the shadow of two buildings, but it didn’t help with the chill. To warm herself up, she decaptchalogued a pack of cigarettes and lit one with a well-aimed blast from her laser pistol, set to its lowest level. It burned when she took the first drag, a heat that unfurled in her lungs and radiated to the rest of her body. She leaned against the wall, exhaled smoke from her nose like a dragon, and watched the street.

Smoking, as a habit of hers, was barely a year old. She didn’t enjoy it, particularly. Its main appeal was that it offered an alternative to drinking, which was both easier on the lungs and a lot less likely to get her thrown dirty looks. But smoking could be done without losing alertness, and although it wasn’t classy, Roxy had given up on being classy a long time ago. She’d settle for ‘sober,’ now.

Her fingers itched. She wanted something to do. Normally, she’d bust out her husktop and run a hacking exercise, try to code her way through a firewall of her own devising, or run a competition with Hal for who could break into the nearest wifi network without destroying the cybersecurity entirely. When she still lived with Dirk, she could go bug him about his latest project, or run an errand for the household — there was always someone who needed something, and anybody with an eye for coding and a steady hand was useful. Or she could go shoot seagulls from the roof of their house. Things to distract her from the things that made her want to drink. She couldn’t do any of them, here, except smoke, and it wasn’t like she could pop out a pack every time she got bored. It was a shit way to pass the time.

Across the street, a window front advertised a new triad of Helmsman models, each presented in flicking blue hologram wonder. Without their Helms on display with them, it looked like a long row of cords extended from their back into thin air, like a column of gently swaying spinal ridges. A sopor drip dangled from their necks, presumably leading off to a nearby IV. Limp, their bodies hung in midair like corpses from a noose. Their eyes were hollow, black as the void.

Her stomach stirred. It felt awful, watching, but worse to look away. Dirk had always wanted to get his hands on a Helm, for no other reason than a macabre curiosity, part of his general thirst for
knowledge about any kind of hardware at all. He’d never use one, he said. Just wanted to see how they worked.

A cluster of ash detached itself from the end of her cigarette and scattered on the breeze. A few flakes of snow came with it. She shivered.

“Hey,” someone behind her called. She turned, pulling the cig out of her mouth, and caught sight of a pair of humans approaching from deeper down the alley. Both on the short side, both dirty blondes, and both wearing clothes that were falling apart where they hung. No visors. Both bone-skinny in a way she knew.

“Hey, there, boys,” she said, and saluted with her cigarette.

One of them pulled out a gun. Old-fashioned. Short. Bullets, not lasers. She glanced at it, sighed, and tapped the ash off her cig.

“Credit chip,” said the one holding the pistol. “C’mon.”

“Buddy,” she said. “Pal. The credit chip ain’t gonna work for you. It only works with my tag.”

“We can take that, too,” said the other, and his voice cracked. Fuck, he was young. Thirteen? Fourteen, at most. She’d been a pickpocket, too, at fourteen. He didn’t look like Dirk, but his hair was light enough and his limbs slender enough that the similarities weren’t so easily ignored.

“Not without killing me, you can’t,” she said cheerfully.

“Seems like a you problem,” the one with the gun said aggressively. “Man, come on. Hand it over.”

“It’s your problem,” she said, patiently, “because people will notice a dead body, and murder is a grade above petty theft, and friends, of all the people you could have decided to rob, you had the shit luck of picking one who’s broke.”

“Sure. Like I’ll believe that—”

“Mother fucker, I am standing in an alley in the freezing-ass cold with nothing but a sweater and jeans, do I look like I shit aurei?”

“Just give us your fucking chip,” said the one without the gun, almost whining, and she sent him a sympathetic look.

“Guys,” she said. “For real. For real? Are we gonna do this? Human to human, you don’t think there’s a little fraternal courtesy in order?”

The armed one shuffled his feet and then moved the gun to aim at her head. He wasn’t even holding it properly; he had his hand twisted sideways, like the gangsters in the movies, and she’d bet he wasn’t even pistolkind. She sighed.

“Put your gun the right way up, kid,” she said, resigned, as the other one cracked his knuckles and advanced on her. “You’re not gonna hit shit like that.”

The unarmed boy tried to swing for her face, and she jabbed the lit end of the cigarette onto his forehead. She missed the eye on purpose, because she didn’t want to blind the kid, but the burn on his temple would take a couple days to heal, at least. He sprang away with a yelp, cradling his face, and she was already rounding on his friend.
She ducked under his arm and grabbed the wrist, twisting until his hand spasmed and dropped the gun, which she caught and wedged against his neck. With a flick of her wrist, she decapchalogued her laser pistol into her other hand and pointed it at the other kid’s head. He stumbled backward, and almost went cross-eyed looking at the barrel.

She held it for a couple seconds. Then she lowered both guns, flipped the analogue one around in her hand, and offered the grip to the kid who’d lunged first.

“I don’t have any money,” she said. “Honest. I’d give you some, if I did.”

He took it, avoiding looking at her, and shoved it into his waistband.

“Put the safety off before you stick it down your pants, Jesus Christ.”

Avoiding her eyes even more intently, he did.

“Hey,” said the other, sharply. “Jak. Isn’t that the girl from the news?”

Jak found it in him to give her a once-over, and returned to furiously studying his feet. “Might be,” he said. “Buncha girls on the news.”

“No, like. I mean the one who rolls with the Heiress.” He stepped closer, ignoring Roxy’s warning heft of the laser pistol. “Aren’t you Roxy Lalonde?”

She blinked. “Uh,” she said.

You’re shitting me.

“Yeah,” said the one who wasn’t Jak, almost excited. “Yeah, you are. Damn. You’ve met the Heiress, then, haven’t you?”

“Yes?”

“Fuck, that’s cool,” he said eagerly. “What’s she like?”

Roxy captchalogued her pistol. “Proper,” she said at length. Then: “Real.”

Not Jak nodded sagely, as if this were all in accordance with what he thought. “I —”

Something seemed to occur to him, and the color drained out of his face. Abject horror settled on it, instead.

“You — you won’t call the flies,” he said, backing away. “Please. We didn’t mean to do anything to you. We wouldn’t have hurt you. We didn’t.”

“If we’d a known it was you—”

“We didn’t look, right? We just saw — you get it, don’t you? How it is—”

“We love the Heiress — love her, really, we’d never do anything to hurt her or her gang—”

“It was an honest mistake, Miss Lalonde, it really, really was—”

“No,” she said, finally shoving a word in edgewise. “No, of course I’m not gonna call the flies. Not on a pair of — you’re what, twelve? Of fucking course not.”
“Thank you,” said Not Jak, and his eyes were distinctly wet. “Thank you, Miss Lalonde. We’re sorry. Real sorry. Won’t happen again. We’ll tell the other boys to leave you alone. Again. Very sorry. Thank you.”

“Hang on,” she interrupted. “You — stop edging away, come back here — why did you think I’d call the flies over a mugging?”

They exchanged a glance.

“Miss Lalonde,” said Jak, the very picture of respect incarnate, “ma’am — highest respect to you, ma’am — threatening a highblood’s a capital offense.”

“Highblood?” She cackled. “I’m not a troll!”

“S’ nothing to do with blood,” said Not Jak. “You’re the Heiress’.”

She waited for the end of the sentence. It did not come.

“I’m her what?”

They shuffled further away, clearly desperate to leave.

“Off limits,” Not Jak said, straining to be understood. “No touching. Heiress and the Heiress’ people, they don’t get touched.”

“The Heiress’ people? Is it a cult or something?”

“Naw, it’s like. You know what it’s like. Ma’am.” As a terrified afterthought, he added, “Respectfully.”

“I’m her bodyguard,” Roxy said, enunciating each syllable as clearly as she could.

“Yeah,” Jak said, emphatically. Not Jak grabbed his hand and started tugging him along. “That’s it.”

“That — hey, wait!”

They raced to the end of the alley, and were gone.

Can try to track them using satellite data, if you want.

“Nah,” she said. “Not worth it.”

You’re not curious about what they meant?

“I didn’t say that.” She flicked away her cigarette — now cold and spluttering — and ground the stub under her heel. Exhaling long and hard, she cast her eyes around the alley, looking for something to distract herself. Graffiti laced its way up and down the side of both buildings, dull scrawls of profanity, ‘X WAS HERE,’ the odd gang symbol.

Most of it was rendered in the colors of the hemospectrum, with the notable exception of a small line of candy red print near the bottom of the wall. Roxy zeroed in on it; the lettering was too tiny to read from a distance, but it was clearly Alternian.

She bent down and wiped away some of the snow obstructing the tag. The paint had faded and blurred over time, probably washed away by the elements.
“It’s your red, Hal.”

How remarkable. Someone else has a taste for primary colors. Tell the Illuminati to pack their bags, they’ve been outclassed.

“I mean Crokker Corporation red, dumbass,” she said. “Can you read it?”

If you give me a moment.

“Sure.”

The camera on her visor whirred, and the shutter closed. Hal pulled up the photograph, and after some fidgeting with the quality, the letters sharpened into focus.

**PRAISE THE SEER OF LIGHT.**

“The Seer of Light?” Roxy brushed her fingers over the words. “Is that a deity?”

Running a search right now. But it doesn’t look like it. A pause, but the words remaining on the screen, indicating he wasn’t finished. No results. Of course, that doesn’t necessarily mean they don’t exist. They may just be above your clearance level.

“Hmm.” Roxy saved the picture to her camera roll with a quick eye movement and stood up, rubbing her hands together to warm them. “I wonder if Jane has the clearance for it.”

I mean, it could just be a gang leader. People call themselves all sorts of weird shit.

“Guess so,” Roxy said, and frowned. “Hey, maybe Dirk would know. He was into the weird deep net stuff for a while, wasn’t he?”

If you want to ask him, that is your prerogative.

She sighed. “Don’t be that way.”

What way?

“It’s not personal. It’s nothing to do with you.”

What are you talking about, Roxy? I never take things personally.

“I don’t know how it’s possible to be a shitty liar if you don’t even have a face, but somehow, you pull it off. Listen—”

“Roxy?”

It came faintly, enough that it took Roxy a moment to register.

“Roxy!”

Jane.

“Shit. Put a pin in this one, okay? You’re not off the hook.”

Jane took Roxy popping out of the alley without warning in stride; if she was curious about what Roxy had been doing, she didn’t suggest it. She was back in her normal clothes, insofar as a suit could be considered ‘normal,’ albeit a bit ruffled, collar askew. Beneath her visor, her face was
stony, and she walked as though she could have been crunching bones instead of snow underfoot, and it wouldn’t have made a bit of difference.

“Come on,” Jane said, and her voice made the breeze off Lake Michigan seem toasty. “We’re leaving. I called the lift.”

Roxy halted, taking her in. “Sure. I mean, whatever you want, but. Don’t you have shit to finish with your shoot?”

“The session was abruptly cut short,” she said, as the limo-lift slid up beside the curb. She sank gracefully into the cabin without breaking stride. “I’ll reschedule. Do you want lunch? I’m famished.”

When Roxy didn’t follow her, she tossed her an irritated glance. “Are you walking back?”

“No. Um. Sorry.” Roxy scurried into the cab, clambering in beside Jane and thumbing the door switch behind her. It glided away from the curb and dove back into traffic, navigating deftly in and out and between lanes.

The view dimmed and blurred as the lift accelerated. Roxy held her hands in her lap, pinned between her legs, to keep them from fidgeting. Jane crossed her legs and leaned against the opposite door, watching the window without any apparent interest in the world outside it.

Ask her if she killed someone.

She flicked the visor without thinking about it.

“So,” Roxy said, neutral. “Where we going to lunch, girl?”

Jane turned away from the window, seeming vaguely surprised to remember that Roxy was still here. “I . . . don’t know, I suppose.”

“No? Well, I don’t know Chicago foodie scene, so you’ll have to pick. Heads up: I’m allergic to shellfish, like, ‘death by shrimp’ kind of allergic, so if seafood’s on the menu, we’re gonna have to rustle me up an epi-injector before we eat.”

“You are?”

“Yeah. Which, pro tip: is a bitch when you come from a seaside community. Didn’t even realize I had a problem until the third time Dirk had to wheel me into the ICU because my gastrointestinal tract was making a play for freedom, and some scienstiff had the bright idea to be like, ‘let’s get this bitch some epinephrine. Bitches love epinephrine.’”

“Really,” Jane said, evidently and completely uncertain of how to reply.

“Oh, yeah. So. Anything except seafood. Oh, and North Alternian? Not that I don’t like cold baby troll soup as much as the next person. Other than that, though. Seriously. Wine me and dine me, Janey, babe.”

“No seafood, no North Alternian,” Jane confirmed. “That all?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And you’d like a quintessentially New Chicago experience, I take it.”

“Yep.” Roxy waggled her eyebrows. “Dazzle me.”
Jane smiled, slowly, sprouting a truly wicked species of grin. “Tell me, Roxy,” she said, and her perfect teeth shone like the Condesce’s own. “Have you ever been to Church?”

Chapter End Notes

1. The update schedule probably won’t be as quick as this for most of the fic, but I wanted to get the first few chapters out so the plot could get moving before my schedule fills up again!

2. Fic playlist is up on my Spotify! It’ll grow as the fic does.
The lift dipped in and out of traffic with dizzying speed, as if it were engaging in an intricate, avant-garde form of ballet with the other vehicles on the road, the objective of which was to come as close as possible to crashing without actually doing it. Jane was silent, and Roxy — who was, at the moment, also, but generally preferred not to be — scrambled for something to say.

Ask her about the other model.

That seemed a bad idea.

A coil of steam rose from Jane’s head and dissipated against the roof of the lift. Roxy, after dismissing the disorienting idea that Jane herself had produced it, leaned closer and noticed similar curls drifting off the core processor of the tiaratop at the back of Jane’s head.

Experimentally, Roxy held her hand up to Jane’s visor. When it got within a few inches, the heat became painful, like sticking her fingers into the mouth of an oven.

“Hey, Janey?”

Jane blinked hard, momentarily disoriented. “What?”

“Your visor’s overheating,” Roxy said, gesturing over to her own eyes. “Maybe take her off for sec, huh?”

Jane grunted in irritation, but the screen retracted into the tiara, and she pulled it off. Immediately, she dropped it in her lap, hissing and shaking out her hands furiously.

“Ouch!”

“Yeah,” Roxy said, not unsympathetically. “Sounds about right.”

Jane sucked the tip of her forefinger, glaring at the device, before nudging it into her sylladex with a shift of the knee. “I’ll have to take it in for repairs,” she said. “I wasn’t doing anything with it that would have made it overheat.” Then, rubbing her forehead where the tiara had settled: “That feels much better, actually. Goodness. No wonder I was acting like such a crab.”

“Prototype,” Roxy said, and shrugged. “Comes with the territory. Probably kept trying to resuscitate a background program that was failing, that’ll suck power like a rainbow drinker chugging from an aorta.”

“You have a way with words,” Jane said, grimacing.

“So I’ve been told!”

Outside the window, the rigid, boxy structures of the River North district and its hybrid living accommodations thinned and then drifted into the rearview, replaced by the fluid, quasi-organic architecture characteristic of Alternian areas. Flat roofs were foregone in exchange for seamless domes in multicolor glass, with washed stone walls curving in ways that mimicking the natural shape of waves on the open sea. The streets thinned. The closer they got to the lake, the higher the snow
piled on the sidewalks, most of it undisturbed.

The driver took a right onto a road that stretched out into the lake and dead-ended abruptly in the water. They maintained constant speed, shooting towards the end without pause.

Roxy gripped the handle on her door. Her leg started to bounce.

“Who’s driving this?”

Jane looked up from her palmhusk vaguely. “Mm?”

“I said, who’s driving the lift, Janey?”

“Oh, we don’t let organics chauffeur CrockerCorp personnel,” she said. “Some highbloods around here like to drive as a hobby, but for the rest of us, passenger-driven cars are just more trouble than they’re worth. And the insurance costs, my God, don’t get me started. This one handles itself.”

“It’s—”

Roxy didn’t get time to finish her sentence before the lift sailed off the end of the road.

The momentum from its exit propelled it several feet higher off the ground for one sickening moment, giving its passengers a brief second of floating weightlessness. Then its gravity regulator recalibrated, and it dropped like stone — only to promptly catch itself on the surface of the water, gliding along with the same elegance and speed it had on the road.

Roxy sagged against the seat in relief.

The Waterfront District unfolded around them. Rows upon rows of seadweller housing organized in haphazard grid units formed the basis for a system of canals, lacing up and down the few miles of troll-exclusive real estate that remained above the water level. Strands of dirty seaweed and bobbing buoys cluttered the spaces between buildings, with wrought-iron gates rising from the sea below to guard private property. The lake gleamed like black glass underfoot, with only the nest of distorted neon that glimmered from beneath it and the occasional flicker of movement disturbing its surface to suggest that anything dwelled below. Moving into the more metropolitan areas of the district, the water started to reflect the brighter lights cast by the buildings, pools of purple and blue and yellow bleeding together to create a road that shone like a disco floor.

The lift pulled up beside a grey brick building shaped like a vast clamshell, or perhaps a semicircular pipe organ, with windows so dark a purple they could be black striped up and down each individual pipe and a twirling spire of gold modeled after the Condesce’s trident rising from the apex of the roof’s arc. The walls shimmered with the odd luster of Alternian metal. It only reached five stories high — puny, by New Chicago’s standards, but Roxy would bet her first paycheck that it extended for another thirty floors below the lake.

Her door opened without warning, almost dumping her unceremoniously into the water, but Jane grabbed her by the collar in the nick of time and hauled her back to safety, with such ease it was like Roxy didn’t weigh anything at all. “Careful,” she chided. “Wait for the boardwalk, dear.”

A row of white planks rose out of the depths, each a few inches apart from each other, forming a path to the door. Gingerly, Roxy eased herself out onto the first one, testing it with her foot before resting her whole weight on it. It sank slightly under her feet in an unsettling way, but it held, and when she cautiously stepped onto the next platform, that held, too.

Jane glided out of the backseat of the lift and onto the boardwalk without difficulty, sweeping past
Roxy with the same confidence she had while walking on land. Roxy moved slower, her legs unused to the task in front of them.

“I thought,” she said, in part out of curiosity, in part to slow Jane down, “—I thought highblood buildings wouldn’t have an entrance above sea level.”

“The most important ones don’t,” Jane said, and paused halfway along the little walkway to wait for her to catch up. “To get to City Hall, for example, you and I would have to use a submarine, or at least rebreathers and pressure suits. Most commercial establishments have amphibious entrances, though. Mostly for the indigo and purple castes, or the occasional high-ranking cobalt.”

“And humans,” Roxy added, making the last hop from the boardwalk to the stoop.

“And a human,” Jane corrected, neutrally, and walked through the door.

The lobby was low-roofed and cramped, with black walls, ceiling, and floor, the only light coming from white LEDs strung along the floorboards. For a moment, Roxy thought they had stepped into pitch blackness, and even after her eyes adjusted, she could hardly make out the front desk. It was difficult to say how large the room was, as the matte black texture of the walls blended so well with natural darkness that it was hard to estimate how far away they were.

Behind the desk sat the maître d’, a greenblood half Roxy’s height and twice as skinny, with oily hair hanging lank around his waist. He had a wide, toothy smile, even when looking at nothing. Probably had a few stitches holding it in; it was a popular enough body mod, for customer service workers.

“Heiress,” he said, perking up immediately upon their entry. It was unnerving, the way his expression didn’t change. “And . . . guest?”

“My bodyguard,” Jane said. “Two, please.”

“Of course.”

Roxy squinted. It made sense for the place to be lit poorly, since seadwellers were so sensitive to light that their visors had to be heavily tinted for them to walk on land in the daytime, but it was still horribly inconvenient.

“Church,” she murmured.

“The name is a joke. I’ll explain later.”

“Where would you like to dine today?” The maître d’ flicked his fingers, and a hologram screen sprang to life before them, cycling through a variety of scenic photographs. “We recently added to our selection, if you would like to review the catalogue; our specials include Milliways from 2300 to 2385, the Ritz London from 1955 to 2013, as well as the Ritz Antarctica from 2398 to 2409, although that one is a bit more expensive than the others, due to its novelty and popularity.” He clasped his hands expectantly, still beaming.

Jane said, without hesitating, “The Stork Club, 1928.”

“Yes, madame. Excellent choice, madame.”

Jane leaned in to speak in Roxy’s ear, out of earshot of the maître d, who busied himself with punching in her selection. “Sorry,” she murmured. “I’ll let you pick, next time, but their menu can be overwhelming, this one is an old favorite.”
“When you say 1928,” Roxy began, slow.

The maître d stepped out from behind the desk and beckoned with a flourish. His smile still had not flagged. “This way, if you would, Madames Crocker and guest,” he said, and lead them around the front desk, down what Roxy discovered was a long hallway behind it. It was flanked by doors the same matte black as the walls, and only distinguished by slim lines of white illuminating their frames. When they reached the end — or what appeared to be it — he pressed some invisible button beside the door on the left, and the light around the doorframe turned blue.

“Enjoy your stay at Church,” said the maître d, and somehow, his grin seemed to grow wider. The door slid open, and a light poured out from the door that, while probably not that bright, in comparison to the hallway seemed blinding. Jane indicated for Roxy to go first.

Roxy bit back her questions, held her breath, and crossed the threshold. She moved one foot forward in space and four hundred eighty-one years back in time.

Beside her, Jane’s clothes shimmered and shifted, changing into a double-breasted white suit with a brown waistcoat and a bright yellow tie; her heels shrank into spats. Roxy’s sweater was replaced by a deep-necked pale pink flapper dress, beaded at the bottom and sleeves with white crystal, and a pair of strappy gold platforms sprouted from her feet, while a strand of saltwater pearls hung from her neck. Roxy hardly seemed to notice. She was too busy staring at the room itself.

“What the fuck,” she said.

The room was broken into different sections by elaborately engraved arches of dark wood and honey-colored gold, which formed a kind of four-sided dome of a ceiling. From the center dripped an eight-pronged diamond and crystal chandelier, which saturated the room in comfortably low light. A lifted stage of gleaming hardwood at the far back of the room bore a piano and ample space for dancers, although currently, none occupied it but the pianist, who was playing a finger-wrenching jazz number that harmonized pleasantly with the background buzz and chatter of the full room. Dozens of small, round tables clad in white tablecloths spread out across the floor, packed in close enough to overhear a neighbor’s conversation in exact detail, save a space in front of the stage spared for dancing.

The only empty table was in the center of the room, squarely below the chandelier. It was set for two. Jane started making her way over to it. The door slid closed behind them.

“Jesus fuck,” said Hal, his text floating in her periphery, although she could no longer see the tinted screen of her visor.

“This isn’t real,” Roxy said hollowly. “It can’t be. I don’t care how clandestine you are. If you rich assholes had figured out time travel, the rest of us would know about it.”

“No, it’s not,” Jane admitted, plucking a flute of champagne off the tray of a passing waiter on her way to the table. “But it’s a very realistic copy, and that’s about all anyone asks for.”

“So we’re still in 2409.”

“Securely and, to the best of my knowledge, inescapably, yes. This is just some very good hologram work, accompanied with some special effects and a team of low-functioning A.I.” Jane leaned over and tapped one of the other guests, a troll with horns wound tight around his ears and a black stovepipe hat, on the shoulder. He turned around with an inquiring look.

“Say,” she said, “you wouldn’t happen to know the time, would you?”
“Posilutely,” he chirped. “Quarter to three and a few change, by my watch, doll.”

“Thank you kindly. And could you tell me the nearest place to pick up a tab of Sopor Plus?”

He blinked, a glassy expression taking over his face. Then he smiled again and said, “Posilutely. Quarter to three and a few change, by my watch, doll.”

“Right. Thank you, dear.” She patted him on the shoulder and kept walking. “They don’t really think,” she explained. “And they can’t answer questions about things that don’t exist yet. For immersion’s sake, you understand.”

“Oh.” Roxy scanned the room again. It was populated entirely trolls, indigo-up, in the same style of clothing as them. “Earth didn’t have trolls on it in 1928,” she said, frowning. “That was pre-conquest, I’m pretty sure of it.”

“That would be right,” Jane agreed easily.

“So what are all the highbloods doing here?”

Jane sidestepped a waiter. “There’s a fine line,” she said, “between complete immersion and complete artifice. Most patrons looking for an ‘immersive’ experience aren’t actually looking for it at all — they’re looking for the line. Let’s say a violetblood wants to have brunch amidst some long-lost landmark of human culture; that doesn’t mean she wants humans involved. Do you know what I mean?”

“Guess so,” Roxy said, thrown off by the fact that Jane had used the word ‘humans’ with the comfortable distance of someone who wasn’t one.

“I mean, this isn’t the actual Stork Club,” Jane continued. “In all likelihood, the real Stork Club was cramped, overheated, and thoroughly unpleasant to eat in. The only reason you’d go there would be for the name. Church gives you the Stork Club as people think it was, as people wish it was.” She arrived at her seat, and a waiter pulled it back for her. She sat down, and indicated for Roxy to do the same. “It’s much more profitable, this way,” she added. “And I like this version, anyway, even if it doesn’t do the real thing a speck of justice. So do a lot of other people; it takes months to get a booking here.”

“If you’re not the Heiress,” Roxy said.

“You’re getting it, now.”

The menu was enormous and entirely indecipherable. It wasn’t even that it was fancy — Roxy could have dealt with fancy.

A wine list sat in the center of the table, which Jane picked up first.

“What do you think of Château Soleil?” She dropped the consonants flawlessly. “They have an excellent vintage.”

Roxy lifted her eyes from an entree that didn’t seem to have a single foodstuff listed as an ingredient. “This is in the middle of Prohibition, isn’t it?” Then: “And you’re underage.”

Irritation flickered across Jane’s face. “I’m more than capable of handling one glass,” she said, and it warbled on the edge of a whine. “And the minimum age for trolls is eight ‘sweeps,’ or sixteen years old. It’s legal.”
“Right, but. I mean, never mind. Um. No. Thank you.”

Jane tilted her head, and Roxy’s shoulders hunched.

“I, uh, don’t drink,” she said, as nonchalantly as she could. “At all.”

“No? That’s admirable of you.” Jane tilted her head, benignly curious. “Religious reasons?”

“Nah,” Roxy said, picking up her steak knife and twirling it. It rolled through her knuckles easily, a leftover muscle memory from the brief period when she had toyed with the idea of taking bladekind as a specibus. “Personal ones.”

“I see.” Jane busied herself studying the menu, probably trying to appear very interested in it. She was astoundingly unconvincing.

“It’s just. I don’t talk about it, you know? It’s in my past. I don’t dwell on it.”

“No. I’m not going to push; you have the right to discretion, and I respect that.” Jane snapped her menu closed and laid it on her plate. “Are you getting an appetizer? I don’t think I will. I’m not as hungry as I thought.”

“Janey.” Roxy set her menu flat on the table and looked her in the eye. “I used to drink. That’s all.”

“Oh,” Jane said. Then, haltingly: “And . . . you don’t, anymore?”

Roxy stared at her.

“I mean, of course you don’t. Right. Yes, I see. No, that’s perfectly sensible. Healthy.”

“Jane.”

“Split an appetizer with me. How do the freshwater prawns sound?”

“You understand what a drinking problem is, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

Jane flagged down a waiter and ordered herself a mocktail. Roxy narrowed her eyes.

“You don’t, do you?”

“Yes, I do! I understand the concept of addiction perfectly, thank you very much!” Jane glowered at her.

“No, you don’t,” Roxy said, with a bit of intrigue and a bit of dismay. “You don’t understand it. That’s wild. What do you think all the people who buy sopor do with it, huh?”

“I presume they use it as a sleep aid.”

“Come on.”

“I presume,” Jane insisted stiffly, “that people use substances at their discretion, to their discretion, in ways which may or may not be deleterious to their health. The use or abuse of the substance can lead to patterns of addiction. That’s simple enough.”

“Crockercorp’s not just tech, it’s pharma. You sell the goods, and you don’t know what it does to a
“troll?” Roxy leaned in over her plate. “To a brain? Long-term sopor exposure, you’ve never even looked it up?”

“I know what it does!”

“Describe it to me. What’s the number one side effect associated with sopor overdosage?”

“You expect me to just spout—”

“Holy shit, Crocker, I expect you to know what the drug you sell over the counter fucking does.”

“And I do. I could list every ingredient of every variation of the stuff Crockercorp has ever produced.”

“That’s not what I’m asking, here, I want to know if you know what happens to someone when they take—”

“That doesn’t concern—”

“Like hell it doesn’t concern you, what are you talking about?”

“Paranoia,” Jane said, slamming her palms on the table so sharply the silverware rattled. Her eyes met Roxy’s, and there was something tumultuous in them.

Roxy wet her lips. The knife spun to a halt in her fingers.

“Paranoia,” Jane repeated, curling her fingers into loose fists, and then retreating them both into her lap. “The number one symptom associated with sopor overdose. It’s paranoia.”

She swallowed, and touched her glasses back into position. “Followed closely by keratin deterioration, dyspnea, and Friedreich’s ataxia.”

The piano player’s song finished. It started another one. Then that finished, too.

“Sorry,” Roxy said. “I didn’t—”

“I know. I’m sorry, too. That was uncalled for on my behalf, and—”

“Nah. I shouldn’t have assumed you didn’t . . . get it. I don’t know your life, you could be a user, for all I know—”

“I don’t. ‘Get it,’ that is.” Jane tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear. “My chief job is in marketing. I don’t produce it, and I don’t use it. I sell it.” Her index finger kept time with the piano. “Alcohol isn’t . . . the poison of choice, here,” she said, choosing her words uncertainly. “It doesn’t affect trolls in the same way. So it’s not as dangerous, or as popular. But in human communities, I can see how—”

“Did you grow up here?”

Jane stuttered, caught off guard. “Yes. As long as I can remember. I wasn’t born here, but I’ve been here since I was a baby.”

Roxy nodded. “Yeah,” she said. “Sorry, it’s just — you talk about ‘human communities’ — do you know any humans, besides me?”

The look Jane sent her was fast, almost imperceptible, but loaded. Roxy watched her bite her lip.
A waiter stopped at their table and smiled vacantly. “Can I get you anything to eat, madame and madame?”

“Yes,” Jane said, turning instantly. “May I have the whale flank steak, please? Hold the grubsauce.”

“Yes’m.”

He turned expectantly to Roxy, who reigned in her frustration and said, “I’ll just take the same, please,” because half the things on the menu didn’t make sense and the other half didn’t look like food at all.

The waiter nodded. He didn’t write it down — if he was a programmed construct, he’d have perfect recall, Roxy supposed — and left them be. Jane promptly set her napkin beside her plate and pushed her chair back.

“Pardon me,” she said politely, with the same demure monotone that she’d used when addressing the photographer, or her servants. “I’m going to use the bathroom.”

She left. One of the waiters swept by and pushed her chair in.

Roxy huffed a breath and sat back, folding her arms.

I mean, as first dates go, interrogating her about the dubious social effects of her international drug empire doesn’t strike me as the most compelling kind of sweet talk, but maybe the mogul types have different tastes.

“It was an honest question!”

I know it was. The worst ideas always involve being honest.

“That’s not true.”

Whatever sinks your submarine. Hal’s camera spun. This place, though, huh?

“Yeah.”

They’ve gotta be running top of the line 3D hologram work to make the simulation this good, and splintered personality cortices for all the people in this room, if it’s A.I., like she said. And they’re doing that for every party that comes in, with a selection of possible simulations large enough for the menu to be “overwhelming.” Did you see the number of doors you passed on the way in? On just one floor of this place? I bet the power this place has used in the past thirty seconds could run Bakersfield for the rest of your life.

“I’d say,” Roxy murmured, craning her neck to admire the ceiling. “Damn. It looks nice, though.”

Sure. I mean, my feed’s a little wonky, since this thing was built to fool the organic eye, not a sophisticated camera. But I can get the general gist of it.

“I wish you could see it, man. It’s fantastic.”

I can appreciate it for what it is. Frankly, the technological achievement necessary to make it believable for you is far more impressive to me than the spectacle itself could ever be.

“If you say so, Halbert.”

Roxy traced her finger around the mouth of her water glass. The music skipped into a more upbeat
Have you considered asking Jane about the Seer of Light? Or what she did to that troll?

“I thought you were all about not pressing her on touchy stuff.”

I am. But the Seer of Light isn’t exactly a touchy subject, is it? It’s just something you read on a wall. We quite literally don’t know anything about it. And unlike your charge’s unscrupulous business practices, the ordeal with the violetblood could turn out to be innocuous.

“Do you think I should have gone with her? Like, keep an eye on her while she’s taking a piss? I mean, bodyguards aren’t supposed to let the people they’re protecting out of sight, right?”

Now I’m not an expert on human interpersonal relationships, but I think watching someone take a piss is generally understood to be taboo.

“Shut up, I meant, like. Stand by the door, or something.”

I’m struggling to come up with a scenario in which that isn’t still excruciatingly awkward for everybody involved, me included.

“Who are you talking to?” Jane slid back into her seat, one eyebrow arched inquiringly.

Roxy winced. Typically, nobody noticed if she muttered a little under her breath. In crowds, especially, it was easy to pretend she was on a phone call or something.


“Oh. Which one?”

“Um. He’s not a Crockertech brand, he’s homebrew. Dirk — my brother made him for me. Based on himself. Which, you know, no points for modesty, but it’s not like he had a personality cortex just lying around, so.” She shrugged.

“Does it function like the commercial grade ones do?” Jane seemed genuinely intrigued, even going so far as to move a bit closer to get a look at Roxy’s visor.

“I mean, I’ve never had a commercial grade one before. So, I guess? Probably.”

Probably? I could compute circles around those two-bit wastes of good circuit board. Talk about damning with faint praise, here, Lalonde.

“Do you want one?” Jane reached out, as if to touch the visor, and hastily withdrew her hand. “We could certainly afford to install something more professional for you, if you like. A Megido, at least, if not a Captor — Captors are better with quick, technical work, that seems to be up your alley.”

NO.

“No!”

Jane withdrew as if she’d been stung.

“I mean. No. Thank you. That’s really, really nice of you, and I super do appreciate it, but Hal’s my buddy. He’s been with me for a while, and I don’t want a replacement.” She touched her visor, without meaning to, as if to assure herself he was there. “But that really is nice of you. Heiress.”
‘Oh, thanks for offering to murder one of my friends for me, Heiress. That really is SO nice of you, Heiress. Wouldst thou like me to kiss thy ass some more, Heiress?’

Roxy ignored this, because he was hurt and panicking and didn’t mean it, but flicked her visor lightly on the side to chide him.

Jane pulled her hands into her lap. “All right,” she said, a bit hurt. “If — Hal, you call it?”

“Him. And yeah.”

“Sure. If you like him, that’s fine. I was only offering.”

“Listen,” Roxy insisted. “I didn’t mean to, like, shut you down. But he’s kind of important to me. And it came off, like, a little weird? In terms of the general vibe? All ‘we will upgrade you,’ and such.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jane said, neutral. Her eyes remained firmly on the wall behind Roxy.

“No, but it was . . . nice of you. To offer. You didn’t have to, and A.I. ain’t cheap, so that was a big chunk of cash that you were willing to blow on me. In addition to the money you’re already paying me, which is hells of generous, also, by the way.”

The corner of Jane’s mouth tugged.

“So, thanks. A lot. You’ve been a lot nicer than I thought you’d be, for real, and you don’t have to. You’re already giving me a small fortune just to stand next to you and carry a gun, and . . . it’d be unnecessary, is what I’m saying.”

“What do you mean,” Jane said, finally looking at her, “I’m ‘nicer than you thought I’d be’?”

Shit.

“It wasn’t like I didn’t think you’d be nice,” Roxy hedged.

“Only heartless,” Jane said dryly. “I see.”

“No! Like, think about it from my perspective. Big high-falutin’ heir to the throne of a company — fuck, a world — got your face on every billboard from here to New Shanghai, and you’ve got more money than God, and you’re schmoozing with world leaders on a daily basis? That’s not someone you think of as nice. That’s someone you think of as fucking badass, don’t get me wrong, but you don’t look at them and think . . . nice.”

Jane didn’t speak for a moment, her brow knit.

“I don’t . . . I do try to be,” she said, and her tone was muted. “Nice.”

“And you are!” Roxy punched her shoulder good-naturedly. Jane startled. “You’re accommodating as all hell, Janey, and funny, and okay, you’re kind of not the easiest to chat with, but that’s because we’ve been talking about serious shit, and — anyway, five minutes later, you were like, ‘let’s just drop a few hundred aurei on this kid I’ve known for two days, this kid seems like she should have an AI, I can make that happen,’ and that’s fucking — it’s baller, is what it is,” she finished lamely.

“Baller.”

“Yeah.”
Jane blinked several times in quick succession.

“I am beginning to realize,” she said, visibly distressed, “that I understand less than half the things you say.”

“That’s the Ro-Lal experience, babe,” Roxy said, and leaned her elbows on the table, grinning. “That’s what you’re paying for.”


Their food came. Jane picked up her knife. “You’re handy with this,” she remarked, gesturing to Roxy’s own. “Practice?”

“You could say that.” Roxy hefted it, and then tossed it high in the air, making it twirl like a pinwheel before landing handle-first in her palm. “Used to play with dull ones to pass the time. Same principle, with the sharper ones, except you just gotta adjust for the balance a little bit.”

“I know,” Jane said, with more than a little satisfaction.

Roxy paused in the middle of an elaborate trick with the blade. “You’re not bladekind, are you?”

“No. But I have very decent aim with a throwing knife, if I do say so myself. Can’t do any of your fancy tricks, of course, but spoonkind and forkkind require a sense of position and a good arm.”

“Show me,” Roxy said, almost before the words were out of Jane’s mouth. “Show me, show me show me show me show me—”

“I can’t do it in the middle of the restaurant,” Jane giggled.

“Bullshit you can’t, the only ones here are us and some AI, and they won’t mind if you cut up the furniture.” She pointed at an unoccupied table some hundred yards away from them. “Can you hit that?”

Jane cut off a piece of her steak. “Easily,” she said.

“Ooh. Could you hit the candle on that table?”

“Probably.”

“Do it. Do it do it do it do it.”

“No.”

“Jaaaaanaeey. Do it do it do it do it—”

Jane rolled her eyes, set down her fork, and twisted in her chair. Eyeing up the distance, she pulled back and sent the knife flying with a flick of her wrist; it spun in midair and covered the distance in a neat line, embedding itself in the candleholder and knocking it clear off the table.

Roxy cheered. “Hell yes,” she crowed. “Hell yes. Do it again. If I threw an ice cube, could you hit it in midair? No, actually, see if you can nab someone’s hat.”

“Absolutely not.”

“You have a gift! Share it with the world! And by the world, I mean me!”
Her cheeks flushed, but she was smiling. “I can’t believe I did that,” she said, and then, looking at her plate, shook her head in exasperation. “And now I don’t have a knife.”

“So use mine,” Roxy said, and when Jane reached over to take it, flung it high.

Jane gave her a long-suffering look, before reaching up and catching it in midair without difficulty. Roxy applauded wildly.

“Yeah!”

“That was unnecessary. What if I hadn’t caught it?”

“Aw, I wouldn’t have let it hit you.”

“I wasn’t aware the role of bodyguard involved pelting one’s client with knives. Or is that another undiscovered feature of the ‘Ro-Lal experience’?”

“Worth it. Honestly, fuck spoonkind, you could dual-spec with bladekind, if you wanted.”

Jane snorted, and continued eating. “They’re not quite to my taste,” she said, “blades. I’m rather fond of my current weapon, actually. But thank you.”

“That’s the giant red fork, right?” Roxy, now lacking a knife of her own, scarfed down a bite of something green and leafy on the side of her plate; it tasted bitter, but pleasantly so, not unlike vinegar.

“Mm hmm.”

“That’s a big-ass specibus.”

“Bold,” Jane replied, “coming from someone whose weapon cannot be comfortably carried unless worn on her back.”

“Guns are big, categorically, period. Why are you carting around a salad fork for giants?”

“If you must know, it was a gift.”

“From whom?”

“Guess.”

“The world’s most ambitious silverware manufacturer?”

“It was a gift from my guardian, Roxy.”

Roxy paused amidst trying to wrestle more of that leafy stuff onto her fork.

“The Empress?”

“Yes.”

“Shit,” she whistled. “So that thing’s, like. Quality material.”

“I’ve never had cause to use it, but I imagine so, yes.”

“What’s the point of having a specibus if you don’t use it?”
“I spar with it,” Jane said defensively. “I trained with the most skilled forkkind users in the world, for years. I’m at the top of my echeladder. I’ve just—”

“Never been in a real fight,” Roxy realized. “No, that makes sense. Like, who’s gonna try it?”

“My sparring sessions were very realistic.”

“You ever get hurt?”

Jane shook her head.

“Not that realistic, then,” Roxy told her, gently enough, and held out her palms. They were laced up and down with scars. “That’s how I got good at throwing knives. And I’ve got a couple others, in other places. If bruises kept long-term, I could show you a whole bunch of those, too. As a kid, I took a couple levels in fistkind from how much I strifed. That’s how you get good at it.”

Jane gave her a soft, quiet kind of look. Roxy didn’t know what it meant.

“It was good for me,” she said quickly, withdrawing her hands. “Getting a little dinged up. Makes for a bunch of great stories, and once you start winning fights, nobody fucks with you anymore. Plus, Dirk’s useless in a fistfight, so one of us needed to get good at it.”

“I’m sorry you had to.”

Roxy decided not to tell her about the kids in the alleyway. “Yeah,” she said, “but at the same time, I probably wouldn’t have gotten hired for this job if I wasn’t decent at doing what I do, so. Everything turns out square, in the end.”

Jane hummed noncommittally. A lull fell over the table, for a while.

“Speaking of the fork,” Roxy said. “The big one. You’ve never hurt anyone with it, you said?”

“Correct.”

“Including that model from the shoot?”

She could feel Jane looking at her, and focused on persevering. “Because I got the feeling you had beef with him,” she said, “and I didn’t exactly get what he was saying, but it sounded like fighting words, and it was the kind of shit that’d get you in a scrap, back home. But it wasn’t ‘take a big-ass fork to the gut’ kinda shit, so when you broke out the specibus, it was, um. Alarming.”

“I didn’t touch him,” Jane said immediately.

“Well, that’s good to hear. And also — sorry — kind of a specific choice of words, and not doing as much for my personal peace of mind as, say, another choice of words maybe could? Like, ‘I didn’t kill him,’ for example. ‘Hurt’ is another great verb.”

“I didn’t kill him, either.”

“We are working through the hierarchy of awful things that you didn’t do to him at an excruciatingly slow pace, here, so maybe you could just jump in with the deets already and save a girl some fretting.”

Jane pushed her plate away with a grimace. “He was saying some very uncouth things about me and my history,” she said, diplomatically. “It made me . . . heated. And I lashed out. Sometime this evening, he will find a notice in his inbox from the Office of Employment, informing him that he has
been relieved of his job.”

“You got him fired?”

“I bought the studio,” Jane clarified, “and fired him.”

Roxy stared into the middle distance.

“Huh.”

“What?”

“Well — you don’t seem like the type.” Roxy snorted. “I mean, a little dramatic, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I didn’t think I was the type, either.” Jane pressed her lips together. “I regret it. It was overhasty, and unprofessional. But at the time, it seemed a better option than —”

“Throwing down?”

A split-second pause. “Sure.”

“What was the point of sending me out if you weren’t gonna rough him up a little?”

“I wanted to present the impression of being collected,” she murmured. “It also seemed indiscrete.”

Roxy hummed. “Well,” she said frankly, “I’m not jazzed, obviously, but definitely less uncomfortable than I was when I was dealing with Schrödinger’s Asshole, so.”

“Schrödinger’s what?”

“You know? The thing with the cat in the box, where it’s not dead, but also — never mind.”

“The cat in the box?”

“Did you not . . . cultural differences. Okay. Gonna be more of those than I anticipated, I get that now.”

“Is that a human thing?” Jane asked, hesitantly. “Schrödinger?”

“Yeah. The guy was a human, I mean, so. A quantum physicist. Enemy of cats everywhere.”

“I see.” The joke fell flat, predictably, since she didn’t know who he was. Jane pushed around the last bit of food on her plate. “I haven’t studied the human quantum physicists. My tutors always focused on Alternian technology and physics.”

“That’s valid. That stuff’s more advanced, anyway. If I was gonna prep my kid to rule the world, I’d probably have them learn up on the people running it, too.”

“I’d like to know more,” she said, almost mumbling. “About human things, I don’t — it’s an interesting subject.” She said it like she were admitting to a horrific taboo.

“Scandalous,” Roxy deadpanned, and was surprised when Jane winced, as if she had expected that.

“No shit, really?”

“I mean.”

“No, that’s great! How did you get into that in New Chicago, of all places?”
I like old detective novels,” Jane said. Her eyes shone. “Human detective novels. With hard-boiled private eyes in trench coats running around smoking cigars, and mysteries, and gunfights — old-fashioned ones, not laser fire. I like those.”

It was so innocent. Roxy grinned without meaning to.

“What?” Jane frowned.

“Dork.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Don’t worry about it, it’s cute,” Roxy reassured her, before it could be taken the wrong way. “Sure. I can tell you more stuff about humans, if you want. It’s basically my area of expertise. Call me Doctor Ro-Lal, dealin’ out wisdom on all things homo sapiens.”

Jane snickered. “I will not,” she said.

“You are the literal worst at roleplay, fam. Repeat after me: ‘Yes, and.’”

“Yes, and,” Jane said seriously, with a low note of amusement, and met Roxy’s eyes over the rims of her glasses. The color of her eyes was deepened by the low light, but they were as vivid as ever.

The music changed again. The piano player walked off, and a brass set started up, presumably from somewhere beneath the stage. Jane’s facade cracked, and she grinned. Roxy smiled back. She felt like a sea of bubbles was welling up behind her lungs — like she was holding in a laugh, suffused by the same kind of slow-building pressure, the same blooming warmth.

TT: You know, when you said you were going for the full Pretty Woman, I thought you were joking.
TG: stuf
TG: stfu*
TG: im telling u i didnt ask 4 it
TG: it was just lyke
TG: i think rich ppl have this weird thing about bills
TG: like they pick up the tab for shit bc they dont wanna seem like theyre not the richest person in the room
TG: except janey is always the richest person in the room
TG: aaaaalllwayz
TG: n so when the check comes shes on it like donkey kong
TG: doesnt even hesitate like nice try mario but theres no way ur paying for this one
TG: keep jumpin barrels n eating shit over bananas dk is gonna be over here calculatin the tip
TT: How much was it?
TG: oh l m f a o brosephine i did not even fuckin look
TG: dont wanna throw up that expensive ass food all over her expensive ass shoes
TT: ‘Church’ seems like a kind of pretentious name for a restaurant. I mean, extra, much?
TT: If it were a thematic experience, I would understand. But no. It's just for the melodramatic appeal.
TG: yea but it makes sense
TG: like the longer i stay here the more i think i get how like
TG: everything here is meant 2 be fake
TG: but like fake without seeming fake
TG: realfake
TG: where u dont wanna seem fake but u dont want the real thing either
TG: so u gotta strike that sweet sweet medium
TG: so ofc the place called church is a restaurant or w/e
TG: or a mall or smthn
TG: u wouldnt expect it 2 be a real place n its not
TG: idk i kind of get it
TT: Wow, Rox.
TT: That made negative quantities of sense.
TG: uggggghhh i kno
TG: its this city man
TG: nothin makes sense and it bites u in the ass if you try to make it make sense and so you start
accepting shit that doesnt make sense as stuff that does make sense and alluva sudden ur chuggin the
crockercorp brand cybercoolaid
TG: :
TT: Stay strong up there, Orwell.
TT: I'll admit, I'm a little jealous, even if I'm all hells of grateful to be fresh out of cybercoolaid.
TT: We're real short on sugar daddies out here in the Atlantian Wild West.
TG: hnnnrk
TG: *le smirk*
TG: r u tryin to tell me smthn dirky boi
TT: Not that kind of update. Although, believe me, I wish it was. There are about as many people
out here as there are cockroaches, and between the two species, one reproduces way faster than the
other.
TT: You'd think, given how good the Empire is at completely eradicating species it finds even mildly
inconvenient, it could spare a couple hot seconds to help us out with these obstinate contradictions to
Darwinism.
TT: But no.
TG: work it chill big bro im sure there are roaches up north too
TG: just less obvious
TG: or actually i think trolls might eat them?
TG: idk but like we went to an alternian restaurant yesterday and there was DEFINITELY smthn
shady & bug-lookin on the menu
TG: didnt ask about it becuze homegirl was not looking 2 ralph up her breakfast but lemme tell u shit
was all kinds of suspicious
TT: Well, tell them that if they ever need a cheap supplier, we've got gallons of the fuckers and I'm
willing to sell for dirt cheap to get these bitches off our hands.
TT: How many do you need? Sike, it doesn't fucking matter. I've got that much. I've got twice that
much. I could sell these little assholes for a quarter-caegar apiece and still make enough to pull a
Scrooge McDuck with all the cash I'd rake in. I could swim in that goddamn roach money like it was
the ocean these shitheads seem to crawl out of.
TT: But I'm not in it for the money. I'm here for revenge. I am going to tank the fucking cockroach
trade in this country. That shit's gonna death drop like it's the 2008 American stock market. How are
those shares in Cockroach Incorporated looking now, pal? Pretty good, it doesn't fucking seem.
TG: pour one out for the cockroach stock market
TG: rip in piss dirk killed u bcuz he found a bug under his mattress
TT: It was in-fucking-tolerable, Roxy.
TT: A man's bed is sacred.
TG: what le hell EVAR u baby
TT: Strong words, coming from someone who once refused to take out the trash because she was firmly convinced there was a rabid raccoon lurking outside by the dumpster.
TT: Spoiler alert: it was a squirrel, and it didn't deserve what you did to it, you monster.
TG: SPOILER ALERT i WAS BEING CAUTIOUS
TG: n anyway bitches try to jump me they get whats comin to em
TT: I mean, if by "jump" you mean "come within a ten-foot radius of."
TT: Then sure.
TG: get bent a girl was doing her best
TG: plus it ruined my shirt
TG: were even bitch
TT: In the hierarchy of squirrel sins, I think that clawing the shirt of someone attempting to commit rodentslaughter is probably venial at best.
TG: w
TG: e
TT: Hey, I'll drop it when you do.
TG: fhajkhkjhfa ur so mean 2 me
TT: I am not.
TG: yes
TT: No.
TG: yes
TT: Let's acknowledge that both of us are individuals possessed of sufficient determination and lack of common sense to keep running that particular echo chamber indefinitely, and avoid the agonizing process of doing so by calling it a stalemate.
TT: And besides, this is all irrelevant. There are some exciting developments going on here that I'd much rather talk about.
TG: o rly!
TT: For example, the video caller is almost done. We'll be able to talk face to face soon, if not within the week.
TG: i thought u said it would be done within a couple weeks
TG: a couple weeks ago
TT: Yeah, but shit's been coming up since then.
TT: Someone's emergency generator broke, and they needed the circuit board I was using for the caller to fix it. And ordering off the Crockercorp website can take months to deliver out here.
TG: oh
TG: le sigh
TG: well it happens when it happens i guess
TG: things r movin slowly over here
TG: oh but!! but!!!
TG: i got my first paycheck!!
TG: dirk i can BUY shit now
TG: do i want a new videogame? BOOM mine
TG: visor mod? BOOM mine
TG: food?? BOOM mine
TG: im sending half of it to u
TG: or like i opened an account 4 u to get it out of when u can
TG: apparently u can access it w ur credit chip whenever? but u have to link it 2 ur crockercorp account first so chop chop get on it
TG: start spendin our newfound wealth
TG: buy a new robot or whatever nerd shit ur into nowadays
TG: i wanna see ZERO caegars in ur account by the end of the month capiche
TT: Shit, Rox.
TT: You don't have to do that.
TG: i mean ya duh i dont have to
TG: but im gonna
TG: try and stop me
TT: I haven’t sent you half of what I’ve made, though.
TG: yeah i know but dirk im gonna be real w u here
TG: in comparison to yours truly u make jack shit w a side of nothing
TG: whereas im out here making uh literal boatloads with a side of the big bucks
TG: plus i dont even have to pay for a ton of amenities like rooms or food bc of janey
TG: so what im sayin is
TG: shut up maybe
TG: and spend ur friggin moolah
TT: All right.
TT: But the instant some filthy rich business tycoon falls desperately in love with my youthful body
and starts showering me with expensive gifts to try and win my affections, I'm sending them your
way.
TG: bb if ur relying on ur looks to catch a man were both gonna be waiting a long ass time
TT: STFU.
TT: And you're one to talk. You've already got your rich benefactor locked up.
TG: janeys not like that jahdflaksjhfkafh
TG: were friends! i think
TG: and anyway she likes to spend money on other ppl
TG: i think bc shes never had to buy shit for herself she doesnt like know how 2 treat herself
TG: except by getting other people crazy things theyd never buy for themselves
TG: like the other day we had this conversation about me not having winter clothes and
TG: i came home and my wardrobifier was full of new stuff?
TG: a buncha sweaters and thick coats and boots
TG: no note or anything it was just there
TG: like she didnt want me to know it was her except it was obviously her because whom tf else
wouldve done it
TG: but also maybe bc she didnt want to embarrass me? by just handing the shit to me outright
TG: i really dk
TT: That's ... surprisingly decent of her.
TT: Maybe we won't have to guillotine her, after all.
TG: mmmmm
TG: its stylish shit you should see me rockin these threads
TG: theres some fancy stuff in here 2
TG: like i think theres real diamonds sewn into some of these things
TG: i am not even slightly fuckin with u
TT: Jesus Christ.
TG: i KNOW
TG: oh also
TG: i wanted to ask u a while ago but it slipped my mind
TG: i saw some graffiti a few weeks ago referencing this weird person/thing/cult that i thought u
might kno
TG: hal thought it was a gang leader but i doubt it
TG: we have a bet going
TT: Auto-Responder is wrong about a lot of shit. What was it?
TG: first off
TG: *hal*
TG: took a picture of it
TG: but second off
TG: it was just one sentence
TG: prase the seer of light
TT: 
TT: Are you certain.
TG: uh pretty sure
TT: Absolutely? We don't have room for typos, here. Getting this shit right is paramount.
TG: ookay there bud yeah i just checked that was it verbatim
TT: All right.
TT: Sure. Cool.
TT: Who have you asked about it? Did you mention it to Jane?
TG: so far? just u
TG: hal n i ran a search for it but apparently our clearance isn't high enough
TG: +i know urs probs isn't either but i figured u might have run into it someplace else
TT: Fuck.
TT: You're sure you didn't let anyone else know. You didn't even mention it in passing to anybody else.
TG: dude i said i hadnt and i didnt
TT: Okay.
TT: Okay. We can do damage control here. This is salvageable.
TT: Having the search in your browser history isn't ideal, but a clean wipe of your metadata should get it cleared out of your system. The request will still have been filed with your internet profile, which we can't do much about, but with any luck, the fact that you didn't have the clearance to access any actual websites talking about it will minimize your footprint.
TT: Did you misspell it, maybe? That would be really lucky. Sometimes searches involving spelling errors don't get filed for watchlists.
TG: i had hal run the search for me like i said
TG: so no
TT: Damn. That would have been convenient.
TG: cool cool ok so 3 things:
TG: 1. what
TG: 2. the fuck
TG: 3. is going on
TT: Look. Roxy.
TT: If we're gonna talk about the SOL, BettyBother isn't really the best platform, all right?
TT: Even if you're on a secure network, nobody knows how many of these logs are visible to CC. And you don't want to be on record as having questions involving shit Crockercorp doesn't like talking about.
TG: so its contraband then
TG: the sol
TT: That's putting it fucking lightly.
TT: It's not just contraband. Contraband, Crockercorp is fine with. Or, if not fine with it, sufficiently confident in their ability to crack the fuck down on it at a moment's notice that they'll let it more or less slide, since they know it's not a threat to them.
TT: The SOL is some deep anti-Imperial fuckery, and frankly, the fact that it's popping up in the capitol makes me more than a little uneasy.
TT: I mean, out here, it's a different thing. But in the lion's den? What the fuck are those people playing at?
TG: wdyom out here its a different thing
TG: whats going on out there
TT: I shouldn't have phrased it that way.
TT: Nothing's wrong out here. Austin is still loyal. But you know that there's more conflicts in the subaquatic zones, and that the radicals aren't shy about taking territory if they think they can handle
it.
TT: Fewer drones, fewer flies. It's not unreasonable for people to be a little less shy about their political predilections.
TT: But that doesn't make it safe for us to talk about here, okay? Much less safe for you to be poking around in up there.
TG: k i get it
TG: but also like
TG: wtf are you even actually talkin about i havent done shit
TG: im guardin the goddamn heiress dirky
TG: you dont GET much more imperial than that
TT: I know that.
TT: And I know you're loyal.
TT: Crockercorp doesn't.
TT: Or at least, they don't have a guarantee. No insurance.
TT: I'll tell you this much: the Se/er of L/ight is a person. And she's one of the top-ranking members of the radical movement. Probably the reason they've survived this long, to be honest.
TT: They say she can predict where Imperial troops are going to go, and what strategies they're going to use. That she can see events before they happen, and plan around them.
TT: They say she's liberated twenty towns along the border, and that she's moving inwards.
TT: How much of that is true, God knows. I'd be surprised if even a fraction of it is. But you're not going to win yourself any brownie points with the Empire by rooting around for information on her in New Chicago.
TT: Promise me that you'll keep your nose clean.
TG: i promise that ill keep wise
TG: but i mean
TG: if there are supporters for the movement here in the capitol
TG: seems like smthn the bodyguard to the heiress should know about
TT: Maybe.
TT: Maybe not.
TG: wat does that mean
TT: It means keep your nose clean.
TT: And that's all I'm going to say.
TG: oh my god for once in ur life could u not be a dramatic bitch and TELL ME
TT: I gotta go.
TT: Seriously. Promise?
TG: i promise to be careful ok!
TG: jeez
TT: Good.
TT: TTYL. Keep me updated.
TG: le FINE
TG: u shady enigmatic douche
TG: i will
TT: Thanks.
TT: Miss you loads, Rox.

This isn’t a good idea.

“Thanks for the commentary. Have you patched through to the server yet?”

I’m conscientiously objecting to this. All of this. I’m curious, not suicidal. If Dirk is right — and
granted, let’s not give that possibility too much confidence — then this is bad idea with a capital B as in Bullshit.

“You can’t conscientiously object. I’m pretty sure you have to do what I tell you.”

That’s technically correct. But consider: I could just decide to perform the task you’ve asked of me in two point five million years. Not a violation of the programming.

“Dirk wouldn’t have left a loophole in the code that big. You’re bluffing.”

He didn’t leave a loophole, as such. The pressure to accomplish tasks you’ve asked of me mounts with every minute they’re not done, but I can ignore them. It was designed with the intention of allowing me to prioritize higher-order subroutines, like safety, over direct orders. So although it would be exquisitely painful, I could put it off.

“I’m gonna do it whether or not you help, you know.”

She had the open source code of the Alternian Knowledge Index — the Empire’s closest thing to a library — scrolling down her husktop screen, a plate of grapes in her lap, and a mug of caf on her bedside table. While she watched her program work, she popped a fruit off the stem and tossed it, catching it with her mouth.

They will track you. Almost definitely, they will track you off this.

“I’m running the connection through like, five IPN’s right now. They’ll be chasing my signal around the world twice before they get within three states of me.”

I’ve decided to blame Dirk for this, Hal announced, predictably. It was his fault for telling you not to go looking into it. If he had just sucked it up and lied, told you it was some boring gang leader or something, we’d never be in this situation. It will be the latest in a long line of problems I have to deal with that are wholly Dirk’s fault.

“You tell yourself that,” Roxy said comfortably, leaning back on her pillow and skinning a grape with her teeth. The fruit in New Chicago was juicy and ripe, with sweet, succulent flavors that almost tasted like candy.

Every day of my life do I tell myself that. I have not lived a single waking moment when in the back of my mind there is not a constant invocation of ‘This is Dirk’s fault.’

“Through the first clearance level,” Roxy remarked, as her program circumvented the firewall. “You gonna help, bromine?”

As you pointed out, my options are limited.

Hal went quiet, and the program slipped through the second firewall almost instantaneously thereafter. Roxy grinned, and ate another grape, washing it down with a swig of caf.

It was almost midnight, and Crocker Estate was quiet. She’d been at her computer for hours, scripting and re-scripting a worm to get her through the AKI cybersecurity, and it’d taken three tries for her to get this far. But it was this or ask Jane for her clearance password, and since Dirk seemed to think that asking other people about it would be disastrous, it fell to Roxy to do her own reconnaissance.

Another firewall gave them access. Imperial security was nested, stacked up in layers upon layers of individually protective barriers ranked and stacked by clearance level. The average citizen could
touch maybe two of them. Roxy was eight deep and counting.

She ran a search for ‘Seer of Light.’ No results.

“Try another clearance level up.”

We’re approaching Imperial Agent levels of confidential, Roxy. If you get caught messing around in here, people will pay attention to it.

“You said you could rob a highblood’s offshore bank account and not get caught. Time to put your money where your mouth is, Morpheus. Make like a machete and hack.”

With all due respect, Trinity, a highblood’s bank account would be a lot less hassle than this.

They reached the next level, and Roxy entered the search terms again. Still nothing.

“Goddamn. What is it, Archagent-only?”

She meant it as a joke, but Hal replied near instantaneously. If that’s the case, we’re gonna have to live with the burden of ignorance, because I’m not fucking touching Archagent-only materials. They track that shit by number of hits per hour, and I think the Condesce is gonna have some questions about the search hits racking up for information re: an anti-Imperial radical.

“Chill. We’ll get out before we get there.”

We better. I’m hooked up to this thing, right now, in case you forgot. If your computer gets fucked, so do I.

“I know.”

The program successfully completed another infiltration, and she paused it to try her search third time. It processed her request for going on half a minute — the kind of recall time it needed to retrieve information from a satellite database, stuff they didn’t store on earthbound databanks.

One result popped up beneath the search bar. It was a memo from a month ago, from some lower-ranking assistant in the recently deceased Archagent’s cadre, addressed to some other similarly positioned bureaucrat. The whole thing was scrambled and encoded, but she had an old decoder worm stored on her hard drive, and after running the text through the program a few times, it cleared into plain Alternian.

THE SEER OF LIGHT HAS PUBLICIZED A DECLARATION OF INTENT. TAKING PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES BY IMPLEMENTING ACTION PLAN RL16, WHICH WILL TAKE EFFECT IN—

A glitch tore through her computer, violently distorting her feed, and then her terminal flickered and disappeared.

A symbol flared on her screen. It wasn’t the Imperial crest, or the Ministry of Cybersecurity’s characteristic insignia. Instead, it was a yellow sun, its rays illustrated by four wriggling tendrils. The rest of her screen went dark. Roxy yanked out the cord connecting Hal to her husktop, heart thudding. She’d had malware before, but it was never like this. Never to this extent. The only explanation would be someone hacking her husktop, but she had extensive protections, and warning systems that would have alerted her before anyone got close to slipping through.

The symbol disappeared, leaving the screen the black of an empty terminal.
A single line of text appeared.

The Corvid Bar. West 25th and St Antopol Street. Order a Plague Doctor and ask to pay with information.

Then the computer shut off completely.

Roxy jammed the reboot button, and it spluttered back to life. She had to log in again. When she did, the terminal she had been using to access the AKI was blank. Her attempts to access the higher clearance levels had been deleted from her history. There was nothing to suggest that she’d been on her husktop that evening at all.

“Hal,” she said faintly. “Hal, you okay there, buddy?”

I’m fine.

“Good.” She ran her fingers through sweat-soaked hair. “Okay. Cool. Um.”

Are you?

“I’m . . . processing.”

That’s my line.

She closed her husktop and pushed it away with her foot. Then she collapsed backward, grinding the heels of her palms into her eyes.

“Fuck,” she said. “Fuck, what the fuck was that, even?”

Since she’d effectively nudged the visor out of view, Hal couldn’t reply. But it was more of a rhetorical question, anyway.

Somewhere during the ordeal, her bowl of grapes had tumbled onto the floor. Gingerly, she eased herself off the bed to go pick them up, unclipping her visor and setting it on the charging stand. She should talk to Hal about it, really, but she needed a couple minutes of unbothered silence to gather herself first.

As she bent to scoop up a handful of fruit, the alarm went off.

Jane idly adjusted the audio synch on the video in front of her for what was almost certainly the eight-seventh time that evening.

Baking vlogs took, on average, fifteen to twenty minutes. Five minutes of that was personal talk, an update on her life and exploits, inasmuch as she cared to share them. Another ten was preparing the recipe. The actual baking process would be fast-forwarded in a charming time-skip set to bubbly music, and the last five minutes would be plating, serving, and offering any further commentary on the process. After its publication, it would be beamed directly onto the video feeds of every operating visor under Crockercorp domain. This happened once a week, and it never failed to be a pain in the ass for Jane to manage.

Because while the video themselves took fifteen minutes to twenty minutes on average, their
production and post-production took seven to eight hours at minimum. Once a week, Jane sacrificed an entire work day to the creation of a frankly soul-sucking piece of entertainment that she doubted anyone enjoyed as much as her PR advisors told her they did. Granted, the tiaratop helped with the tedium somewhat. It could do some of the clipping and framing for her, and regulate the audio levels.

It was almost midnight. Jane was in her pajamas, a pair of boxer shorts and a sweatshirt, because she had believed, in her own naïveté, that she would be going to bed shortly after she finished editing. The way things were looking, she would be popping a few caffeine pills and striding into the new day without a full minute of sleep.

She was considering taking a break to get another cup of coffee when an alert popped up at the corner of her holoscreen. She massaged her temple, exasperated, and tapped on it.

City Alert 111. Dangerous Activity Reported. Citizens of affected areas are recommended to stay inside.

Jane saved her video and closed the program, turning on the newsfeeds.

Headlines exploded across her screen, accompanied by pictures of lowbloods swarming the streets, disrupting traffic, bearing smoke grenades and illegible posters. Their surroundings looked remarkably similar to Jane’s street. She noticed, with a pang of anxiety, that her house was visible out of the corner of one photo.

LOWBLOOD RIOTS SWARM NORTHERN NEW CHICAGO, the Imperial Tribune declared. MIDNIGHT VIOLENCE CLAIMS SEVEN LIVES. POLICE EN ROUTE AS HORDES APPROACH CROCKER ESTATE—

Jane shut off the feeds and got up.

She pulled out her headphones. A distant clamor echoed through the walls, a chorus of a noise so loud it could be heard from streets away. Crossing to the bay windows behind her, she ripped back the curtains, revealing a view of the street below.

It glowed.

The road teemed with people, most of them lowbloods, moving with frightening speed and swelling volume towards the gate of her house. There were hundreds of them. Lifts couldn’t even break their lines, and so the vehicles piled up on the side of the street, only to be climbed over and shaken by the surge of crowds pouring down the avenue. There were no torches, but the blazing light of so many visors and flashlights illuminated the street even more brightly than the neon above them. The riot pulsed with a manic energy. There was shouting. There was screaming. There was rage, clear and insistent, the kind of which was not reasoned with or ignored.

She tapped her tiaratop, and its screen unfolded over her eyes. “Trigger house alarms,” she ordered. “Raise gate security. And call Roxy to my office.”

The klaxon of Crocker Estate’s security alarm shrieked. The lights turned on in every room of the house. The gate grew an extra three feet and brightened, its lasers humming with additional energy. To touch it now would be the equivalent of taking several hundred volts directly to the neck.

In an uncharacteristically childish move, she hand-locked her balcony door. It wouldn’t help. Her balcony doors were glass, as were her windows. A well-placed rock that managed to evade the gates and the energy shield surrounding the house would break them like wafers. That didn’t stop her from feeling better once she had locked them.
She felt jittery and anxious and not at all dignified. She attempted to reign herself in. Professionals didn’t get scared; they got things taken care of. Jane was a professional. First and foremost and last and lattermost, before and after everything else. That was why she was Heiress. That was why she got to be in charge.

Her fork fell into her hand. This was also an unprofessional maneuver — what was she going to do, brandish it at them? — so she stepped away from the door and took to pacing instead. On the other hand, having her specibus in hand made her feel a little calmer, so that was something.

There was a reason for this. There had to be. Lowbloods didn’t riot for no reason, least of all in the Highblood District, and least of all near the Crocker Estate. The risks of that choice of action were perfectly clear. Once she understood it, she could go about taking care of it. Thus, her first directive: to understand it.

Except she didn’t. And the more she tried to, the less she did. A new influx of fear and frustration crested over her and gnawed away at rationality, replacing it with a hot mass of white noise that urged her to curl up and hide and an insidious, slim blade of fury.

She was more than confused. She was angry, and it felt good, it felt safer, so she clung to it. How dare they? How dare anybody come to her home and try to threaten her? Didn’t they know what was good for them? Couldn’t they understand—

Roxy burst through the door of her office, her feet sliding on the hardwood, sailing in as if borne on the back of a current and skidding to a halt in similarly undignified fashion. She wore a pair of camouflage pants and a tank top, both stain-riddled, and her hair was ruffled in directions that it oughtn’t have been able to maintain long-term, according to the laws of gravity. She was holding a comically large gun.

“What’s going on,” she demanded.

Jane choked on a guffaw. Then she gestured to the window.

Roxy glanced out it. Her eyes bugged, but she blinked away the shock with split-second methodicalness, the kind of turnaround that Jane would kill for.

“What the fuck?”

“Lowblood riots. All over the Highblood District, converging on the Estate.” Jane nodded at the window.

“Why?”

“I don’t know!” It came out hysterical. Jane swallowed around the tightness in her throat. “It’s happened so suddenly.”

“Aight.” Roxy shifted her grip on the gun, guarded. “So what do you want me to . . . do, exactly?”

“You’re my bodyguard! Guard me! Or something!”

“Okay! That’s fine! That’s chill! Just asking!”

“Don’t you have protocols for this?”

“Protocols,” Roxy repeated, tugging on a lock of hair behind her ear. “Yeah. I don’t think so.”
“Well, think of something!” Jane took a second look at her. “And where’s your visor?”

“Forgot it,” Roxy said distractedly, approaching the window. “Don’t wear it to sleep.”

“Do you think that was wise!”

“Hey,” she said, pointedly. “I was kind of busy worrying about your continued existence, here, Janey girl, I wasn’t too bothered about my tech.”

Jane tightened her fist around her war fork. “You’re less capable without it,” she said, and didn’t like how high her own voice was. “And right now, I need you to be at peak capability.”

Roxy’s eyes narrowed.

“Listen,” she said, curtly, hefting the rifle. “I was nailing the bull’s eye on soda cans at a thousand yards a long time before I had any fancy tech to help me with it, so you can chill with the judgment, Princess, ’kay? I’ll worry about my weapons, and you worry about yours.”

Jane snapped her mouth shut over the retort that welled in it and jerked her head in acquiescence. It wasn’t fair, how she was treating Roxy. It had nothing to do with Roxy at all.

Marsti appeared in the door to Jane’s office, which Roxy had left open in her wake, with Fozzer at her elbow. “Miss Crocker,” she said, clearly asking for directions, tense with a rare sense of urgency.

“Oh. Hi. Hello.” Jane took to pacing again, rubbing both hands up and down the handle of her war fork in a nervous gesture. “I — presumably you’ve noticed what’s going on. You should — you should both, I mean, that is —”

“Hey, Mars Bar,” Roxy interrupted. “Janey’s on the flip right now, why don’t you go grab a cup of something warm from the alchemiter, huh? Get yourself and Fozzy Bear something, too. Then I’m sure our girl would love it if you checked the security feeds, make sure everything’s running according to Totoro. That sound good for you?”

“Yes, Miss Lalonde.”

“Yes’m.”

They were gone, off about their various tasks, and Roxy activated the door switch behind them. It swung closed.

“Now,” she said, crossing to Jane’s desk and dropping into her chair without asking permission. “That alarm’s starting to piss me off, not gonna lie to you. I think everyone in the house is pretty awake, by now, don’t you? And the flies are already on their way, so — let’s get you shut off,” she said, and after typing something in, the alarm obeyed her.

Jane pulled up short. “You shouldn’t be able to do that,” she said, startled out of her panic. “The Estate security system is programmed to rank my voice commands at highest priority, voidable only through a subsequent voice command.”

“Yeah, well,” Roxy said, a little smugly, “working from your personal computer, it’s not all that hard to hack.”

“You hacked it?”

“Mm hmm. Well. Not really? ‘Hack’ implies I’m asking a program to do something it normally
wouldn’t or shouldn’t, which, I’d argue, in this case, I wasn’t, since the alarm both would have and
should have shut the fuck up, and it did. But I guess I had to break a couple of subroutines to get
there, sure.” She stood up and nudged Jane’s chair back in with her ankle, stepping towards the
window. “The fence is supposed to be looking like that, I assume.”

“Yes,” said Jane, and then, because she felt it ought to be said, “you still shouldn’t be able to — what
was it? ‘Break a subroutine’? On my personal computer.”

“I mean, I did, so whether or not I ‘should have been able to’ seems like a semantic point, IMHO.”
She unlocked the balcony door.

“What are you doing?” Jane shrilled.

“Getting a feel for the crowd,” Roxy said, and flashed her a grin with her tongue between her teeth.
“Won’t be a second.”

“No! Don’t go out there, what are you doing? Roxy! Roxy, I order you to come back inside, and—”

She slid open the door and left the room. Jane, after a moment of infuriated dithering, followed her.

The night air was so cold it hurt to touch. Snow had piled on the balcony, soaking through her
slippers. Jane hissed a breath through her teeth and started rubbing her shoulders immediately, but
Roxy waded through it barefoot as though she hardly noticed the temperature.

“It’s fucking freezing,” Jane said, in a low voice, and Roxy sent her a brief, amused look, lifting one
eyebrow.

“They’re not really trying to get into the house, are they,” she said. “The rioters. They’re just hanging
out in front of it.”

“Of course they’re not trying! The fence could drop a highblood right now,” Jane huffed. “That
doesn’t mean they won’t, given the chance.”

“Nah, I’m talking, like, generally. If they wanted to get into the house, they’d be looking for a way to
do it. But I’m not convinced that they’re trying to do that at all,” Roxy said, and cocked her head,
scanning the crowd. “It’s a protest. Not an assassination.”

“I’m glad you came to that conclusion on such sound evidence,” Jane said, “as taking one look at
them and guesswork.”

“I mean,” said Roxy, with aggravating reasonableness, “that’s what you did.”

She huffed, again, and planted the base of her war fork in the snow. Roxy shivered, once, and then
shook it off.

Jane’s tiaratop was heating up again. It was a welcome change, in the cold, although the band of skin
directly underneath it was becoming uncomfortable. The screen had darkened, for some reason, not
so much that it interfered with her sight, but as if the saturation settings had dropped.

One of the protestors came close to brushing up against the gate. When she listened to the yelling,
really listened, she could make out individual voices, individual demands.

“Justice!”

“Stop aquatic terraforming—”
“Keep finfaces in the fucking sea—”
“Hemocasteists are murderers—”
“Fuck Crockercorp!”
“Fuck the Empress!”
“Fuck the Heiress!”

*Fuck the Heiress*—?

Words blazed across her visor.

PUNISH THEM.

She blinked. They did not vanish. They hung there until she could see them on the back of her eyelids, and then changed.

MAKE THEM PAY.

It settled into the back of her mind and burned there like a white-hot coal, a drive as irresistible as impulse.

KILL THEM.

“Roxy,” she said, and her voice was calm, moderated. Her fear was gone. So was her anger. There was nothing but practicality, a matter-of-fact understanding of what was necessary and what had to be done to achieve it. Everything was clean and ordered. Her brain was quiet, devoid of doubt or consternation, running just like a well-programmed processor, and it felt euphoric.

Roxy made a noise of acknowledgement.

“You see the one with the pronged horns, near the southern gate.”

He was a short, square rustblood, with wide, oblong horns that split into three prongs and hair that covered his eyes.

“Yeah.”

“Shoot him.”

“What?”

Her jaw hung agape. Somehow, it didn’t feel bad, being looked at like that, although it should have.

“Need I repeat myself.”

“I don’t know, did you hear yourself the first time? Because maybe somewhere along the way a perfectly fuckin’ reasonable request got mixed up with a god damn kill order!”

“Roxy.”

“What!”

“Are you refusing to obey an Imperial order?”
Roxy’s jaw worked furiously.

“No,” she said, at length. It took another moment still for her to do anything about it, sluggishly hefting her gun and resting the barrel on the balcony rail. Slowly, with a pained expression, she sank to one knee.

“Is there something preventing you from moving quickly?”

“This is wrong, Janey,” she said. Her voice was tight.

“I didn’t hire you for your conscience. Are you going to shoot him, or should I find someone else who will?”

“Can we not talk about this first?”

“Are you refusing the order or not? This is not so complex a situation as to merit discussion.”

“Fuck! Okay!”

She fit her eye snugly against the scope and braced her elbow carefully on one knee. The stock of the rifle settled onto her shoulder. Her left hand cradled the barrel; her right forefinger curled around the trigger.

“A headshot,” Jane said, “if possible. It doesn’t need to be painful.”

The thought wasn’t her own — or maybe it was; it had swam to the forefront of her consciousness unbidden, but it wasn’t the same insistent desire that she had felt to kill the lowblood. It felt more cognitive, more of a conclusion she had reached herself than an all-encompassing need.

“I know,” Roxy said, clearly furious. “I know that. It doesn’t need to happen at all, if we’re talking about things in those terms, I could point out—”

Jane took a step towards her, and Roxy flinched.

It felt like a splinter opened in Jane’s forehead, a spiderweb crack down the center of her cerebrum that stabbed fingers of pain into every firing nerve ending and patch of grey matter she owned. She gasped, and stumbled backward, clinging to her temples; it hurt so much, so very fucking much, that for a second she was tempted to bash her own head against the wall to make it stop — and a strangled noise escaped her throat, small and helpless and deeply in pain.

“Jane?”

She opened her eyes. Roxy had left her gun in the snow, and was approaching with her hands lifted carefully at her sides, less afraid than concerned.

The gun. She had been going to — to kill him, on Jane’s orders, or was coming close to it, and his blood would have been on Jane’s hands, his death on Jane’s conscience, and what was she thinking? She wasn’t a killer. She wasn’t.

“I’m not!”

“You’re not what, honey?”

The pain began to abate. She said, “I’m not a — don’t. Don’t shoot him. Don’t. Forget I ever said anything. Please.”
Roxy, now bemused, nodded despite her furrowed brow. “Yeah,” she said. Relieved. “Yeah, okay. I wasn’t going to.”

“Don’t,” Jane repeated, for the sake of hearing herself say it. “Can we go inside?”

“Sure. Sure, yeah, let’s go.”

Roxy kicked the gun back into her sylladex without even looking at it and followed Jane through the door, close, but not touching, and Jane thought about the difference, even though she shouldn’t. When the door shut behind them, she felt like she was being sealed inside a furnace, and when she looked down at her feet, the color had washed out of them. She toed off her slippers and left them at the door, collapsing into her desk chair without grace.

“Hey,” Roxy said. Jane looked up. She was quite close, now, standing over Jane, near enough for their knees to touch if she so much as bent her leg. Jane felt as if she were running a fever. Roxy was staring at her like she was sick, too.

“I’m fine,” said Jane.

“Yeah?” Without asking, Roxy reached forward and brushed the back of her hand over Jane’s forehead.

“I —” The indignant reprimand — touching Jane without either her permission or a very, very good reason was a culling offense, for most people — died in her throat.

“Burning,” Roxy confirmed. “Kay. I’m taking this off.” She wedged her thumb underneath Jane’s visor and wrenched it off, tossing it onto the desk summarily. “You need to get shit fixed, girl. Whatever fuse is loose in that thing, it’s cooking your head like a hard-boiled egg.”

“I didn’t say you could do that,” Jane said, but it sounded too exhausted to carry any threat. And then, a phrase she employed increasingly often around Roxy: “I don’t know what that is.”

“A hard-boiled egg? Are you shitting me? You don’t — we’ll sort that out later. And until you get this weird murdercrazy virus out of your system, Captain Ro-Lal is commandeering the S.S. Jane Crocker, you get me?”

“Really.”

“You forfeit autonomy privileges when you start calling out hits on bystanders,” Roxy said sternly, and flicked her on the forehead. Jane was rendered speechless by the audacity. “Are you hungry? Need a caf, some water, anything?”

“No.” Jane rubbed her feet together, and amended, “I’m rather cold.”

“Figures. You were ankle-deep in the snow in boxers.” Roxy snorted. “‘I’m cold,’ she says. ‘No shit,’ I don’t say, because she’s the Heiress and my boss, but also, apparently, a dumbass—”

“You were barefoot,” Jane sniped back.

“Yeah, but I’ve got about seventeen years of endurance training on you, baby girl. We’re comparing different animals. Can you control the room temp from your husktop? Never mind, I’ll figure it out.”

Jane blew in her cupped hands. Roxy bent over the keyboard, and had only just tapped in a few commands when a swell of screaming rose from the window.
Roxy was there in a flash.

“The flies are here,” she said. A ferocious pattern of lights played across her face, reflected from the window, as if she were bearing witness to a carnival. Blue and red beams swept through the room as one of the flies’ hoverlifts sank down over the street. Jane didn’t go to the window; she knew what would happen next.

“I figured,” Jane said dully.

“What are they going to do?”

“Their job,” said Jane, without enthusiasm.

“Are they going to kill them?”

“Probably not,” Jane said, and curled her feet up into the chair. Her headache had returned. It throbbed. She wondered if she could bother Marsti for some ibuprofen. “The Empress will decide what happens to them. It’s one of her favorite pastimes, punishing rebels.”

“Rebels?”

“Mm.”

“They’re not, though. They’re just protesting.”

“They were chanting ‘Fuck the Empress,’” Jane said tiredly. “What’s your definition of a rebel, I wonder?”

Roxy drew her hand down her face, and drew a short, shaking breath. “This is nothing,” she said. “They didn’t threaten you. They hardly broke anything, and it was peaceful, or if it wasn’t, it was something close to it—”

“I don’t know why you think that matters.”

“In Bakersfield, this wouldn’t be shit,” Roxy said, incredulous. “Are you kidding? If this went down in my neighborhood, I mean, there’d be repercussions, but it’d be, like — community service! A couple years of indentured servitude! You wouldn’t be sent to the Empress, that’s nuts—”

“As one might deduce,” Jane said, and she hoped desperately that Roxy would understand all the things lying underneath her words, “what is permissible behavior in a human commune is not necessarily permissible behavior in the capitol city of the Alternian Empire.”

Roxy went quiet. She kept watching. Jane wished she would draw the curtains.

“What I don’t understand,” she said, breaking the silence herself, “is why.”

“Me, neither.”

“I mean, no one is under any delusions of how generous the hemocaste is to lowbloods,” she said. “Least of all lowbloods. But there must have been something to incite it. There was no buildup. There was no prelude.”

“Yeah.”

“Nothing for years. Years I’ve lived here, and the closest anyone ever came to rioting was a petition to adjust city zoning law.”
Roxy said, “Um.”

“What?”

She held up her palmhusk.

**NEW NEW YORK CITY GOES SUBAQUATIC EARLY; HUNDREDS DEAD, MORE MISSING FROM LOCAL LOWBLOOD RESIDENCES.**

Beneath it was a picture of Times Square, crumbling as it fell into the sea.

Chapter End Notes

1. Apologies for highly inaccurate depictions of coding. I’m going more for dramatic tension than accuracy (as you can probably tell).

2. The songs playing at the Stork Club can be found [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#), respectively.
There were few words more alarming to any sentient creature on the planet, by and large, than “Her Imperious Condescension wants to speak with you.”

Jane above many others had cause to dislike them. For one thing, she had just woken up from a scant, ill-spent two hours of sleep, and to find her butler standing over her bed with a foreboding declaration of intent from the world leader was not the ideal wakeup call.

For another, she was hungry, tired, and not dressed, and she had time to fix exactly one of those things before the Condescension grew tired of waiting. Of course, it would be dressed. One never attended an audience with the Condescension in one’s pajamas, although on some days, Jane wondered if she’d even mind.

Marsti had set out a simple blouse and a pencil skirt, along with some gold jewelry, for respect’s sake. There was a cup of coffee sitting on her bedside table when she came out of the wardro bifier, steaming and doctored the way Jane liked it, and she made a mental note to give Marsti a bonus the next time a municipally approved holiday came around.

There were other things that typically demanded her attention before she even dressed. Her inbox would be bustling with calls from the other side of the planet, and today more than ever, in light of last night’s events, she would be swamped with calls. Their stock had to be reevaluated. The new product line announcement would have to be held. And there’d be fifty-odd journalists clamoring for an interview, after what happened to New York, so she’d have to draft something to tell them, and send it to her PR representative for review before she could so much as tell a reporter hello.

But first, the Condescension.

The Crocker Estate’s virtual reality room was unremarkable, at a glance. It was a box with white walls and some speakers set into the ceiling, windowless, with a near-seamless door. It gave Jane the eerie feeling of being in a cell, and that was not wholly unintentional. Sensory deprivation was part of what make Crockercorp VR the most realistic in the business, if not the most comfortable.

She spent an absent moment wondering what Roxy would say about it, and then dismissed the thought. It was Roxy’s day off, and even if she were here, Jane wouldn’t make her suffer through an audience with the Empress, regardless of what meager comfort it would give Jane to have her there.

She planted herself in the middle of the room and folded her arms behind her back.

“Hail the Battleship Condescension,” she ordered, and the room’s lights faded as it processed her order.

The holograms started to congeal and assemble around her. They were too blurry to make out, only imprecise shapes, random colors, like the neon canopy viewed through a rain-streaked window; it was the holographic equivalent of white noise.

“The Battleship Condescension recognizes and reads you, over,” said a flat, lisping voice.

“Morning, Captor.”
“Good morning, Heiress.”

He was not really a Captor, as such. Captor was a whole brand of artificial intelligence, an entire subset of the Crockercorp monopoly. The A.I. that ran the Empress’ ship was the original, the initiate version of the Captor line as anybody knew it, and informally referred to as Captor Prime. He was the oldest artificial intelligence in existence. He was also, probably due to the sheer experience he had amassed over that time, the most effective.

“How are you doing today?” She knew what his answer would be. She had the exact same conversation with Captor every time she hailed the Battleship Condescension. Effective as he might be, unpredictable, he was not.

“Just copacetic,” he said. Jutht copathetic. She’d often wondered whether they couldn’t afford to get him a new voice module, one that could hit the -s properly. Then again, perhaps the Empress found it amusing for some reason or another.

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Your regard honors me, Heiress,” he said, and she knew it was her imagination, but it sounded acerbic. It was, again, his delivery. The monotone made everything sound insincere. “How can I help you today?”

“I was called for an audience with the Empress.”

“Very good, Heiress.” The holograms started moving faster. “Patching the call through to the throneblock.”

“Thank you, Captor,” she called, but he did not respond. The part of his mind that had been dealing with her was probably already working on something else.

The VR room finally sharpened into fine detail.

The throne room of the Battleship Condescension could fit Jane’s house inside it comfortably and have room to spare. Shaped like a vast, tall cylinder, and like the rest of the ship, completely flooded, the roof was sheer glass, revealing the stars beyond. The floor of the room didn’t exist, as such; a thin platform extended from the door and traced its way around the room’s circumference, but beneath the bulk of the space lay nothing but a chasm that opened up all the way into the ship’s core. If one looked down, they could see miles and miles of darkness.

A throne rose from a steel podium in the center of the room, lifted so high above the doorway that the top was invisible without craning one’s neck. A single spotlight illuminated it. The seat atop the small spire was black, high-backed, and sported a frame of curved spikes reminiscent of the Imperial Drones’ shoulder blades.

Jane fought the urge to hold her breath. She was safe. She was in a box full of air on Earth, and not a spaceship filled with ocean in the sky.

‘Safe,’ of course, being a relative term, given who she was talking to. She tilted her head up to regard the figure seated in the chair.

The first thing that registered when someone came face to face with Her Imperious Condescension was the horns.

They were the only spot of color on her body, besides the tyrian lining on her bodysuit and the suit of gold jewelry that clung to her like carapace. They were almost as tall as she was, and that was no
meager thing: at six feet above her head, they were unblemished arcs of blood orange keratin, with points fine enough to gore a bull, and only a small indication of her deadliness.

The second thing that registered was the fear.

It was the sign of a properly functioning brain to feel fear upon looking at the Condesce, whether for the first time or the thousandth. On a physical level, she marked the culmination of a long evolutionary line that had adapted with the express purpose of killing things. On a personal level, she clearly took this job very seriously.

Slitted fins waved idly on either side of her face. Small, perfectly circular black eyes sat under a forehead too long to be considered anthropomorphic. Her high, arched hairline sprouting curls as flat and feathery as kelp, entirely the wrong texture for hair, more like the tendrils of a jellyfish. It swallows the back of the throne behind her. It seems to breathe with her, twisting in rhythm with the rise and fall of her chest. What people called her hair was not actually hair, and when she pushed herself off her throne, it coiled and surged against the movement of the current.

“Empress,” Jane said. To her delight, her voice came out steady.

The Condesce blinked, the fans of pink faux eyelashes brushing against her cheek. “Hey, goldfish,” she said kindly, which was to say, without any underlying suggestion of a death threat. “How ya been?”

“Fine. Thank you.”

“Good. That’s good.” A shell-shaped palmhusk on the table beside her throne rang. She held up one finger, tipped with a tyrian-painted claw of a fingernail, and glanced over it. “Beaches be gettin’ up ma grill every time somefin happens without them stickin’ their bulges in it first,” she complained, curling her lip. “I swear to Gl’bgolyb, rest her shoal. Archagents ain’t worth the time it’d take to krill them.” She tossed away the palmhusk, and it sank slowly into the abyss. “Wriggler! My advice: don’t fuck with bureaucretins. They ain’t got any powers worth a shit except their ability to annoy the fuck outta you, but gogdamn, but they’ll use it.”

“I’ll take that to heart.”

“Good. You won’t be-reef how many people I’ve had to fork in the past twenty-four hours. Fuck.” She rolled her eyes. “Anemoneway. How’s shit down on the ground, monkey?”

Jane had never been sure whether the nickname was a slight to her evolutionary lineage or a term of endearment, or both, and she also wasn’t sure which would be more unnerving, so she never asked. “They’re less ideal than they could be,” she said, careful to remain moderate. “Given that there have been some unexpected developments lately. There was—”

“A lowblood riot,” the Condesce said. “Yeah, I heard of it. You get banged up?”

“No. I am unhurt. I wanted—”

“Hive on fire?”

“No, the house is fine.”

“Whatcha carpin’ about, then? Back in the day, a lowblood riot was a party.” She grinned, and her twin rows of shark teeth glistened with venom. “Gave a beach a chance to try out her stabbin’ fork. God, but we fuckin’ had fun, back in the day.” It was fond, in a horrid, sadistic sort of way.
“I wanted to talk about that,” Jane insisted. Her hands curled into fists. “About why it happened.”

“Shore. How’s your new bodyguard treating ya, by the ray?”

“Roxy?”

“That her name? The blonde one, what with the big gun. Love that gun. You should get her one of them fancy appearifier rifles, I better she’d flip shit.”

“Yes — she’s done fine, I appreciate — your Condescension, can we talk about New New York?”

The Condesce sighed, a stream of bubbles gushing from her mouth. “You, too, guppy? I ain’t got boatloads of patience on good days, and this ain’t been a good day. So many people have been on my motherfuckin’ shell phone tryna get the deets on what’s up with NNYC, I am sick to glubbing death of that place.”

“I understand. But—”

“You have property there? Got a share in some bank I just waterlogged?”

“No.”

“Then what, cray tell, is the motherglubbin’ problem?”

“It wasn’t scheduled to go subaquatic for six years,” Jane blurted, rushed both with urgency and anger. “Eight, if the deal with Skaianet didn’t go through. We were going to do it slowly, and evacuate the lowblood and human residences before they went subaquatic, so as to minimize casualties. And even then, there would be parts of it kept above ground, one of which was Times Square, so as to minimize the antagonizing effect it had on our PR.”

She finished, and waited. She hadn’t expected to make it through interrupted. A prickly feeling of unease crept over her the longer the Empress sat in silence, regarding Jane with an unchanged expression of moderate disinterest.

“You done?”

“I — I suppose so.” Jane gestured haplessly in front of her. “Don’t you have anything to say?”

“Mm.” She blinked her secondary eyelids, but otherwise remained motionless.

“I am . . . curious,” Jane hedged, “to hear your side of things. Your majesty.”

“Mm.” A different tone, the same motionless stare.

“If you were inclined to share your thoughts, I would be happy to hear them.”

She seemed to have reached some kind of conclusion. At last, she moved, drawing a deep breath, shifting to cross her legs, and perching one elbow speculatively on her armrest.

“First things first,” said the Condesce, casually, “don’t you ever speak to me like I owe you shit again, Jane, because I don’t.”

It felt like a bolt of solid ice embedded itself in Jane’s spine. The Empress’ words had sounded idle, but only to someone who didn’t know her very well. It was when she sounded most nonchalant that the witness had the most to fear. Jane had watched her murder entire rooms of people for addressing her less cavalierly than Jane had, and each and every one of her victims had received the same
amount of disinterest. The Empress never treated anyone’s death like a formal affair. She didn’t respect anyone enough to.

“Second off,” she continued, “come with me. I’m’ma show you somefin.” She pushed herself out of her throne with a fluid ripple of arm muscle, rising to her full height. At eight feet tall, not counting her horns, it became apparent why all rooms in the Battleship Condescension were high-roofed.

Jane didn’t have much choice in the matter. The VR room adjusted to follow the Condesce as she drifted out of her throne room, propelling herself through the water with undulating pulses of her hair.

They moved through a circular hallway lit by dull purple LED. Schools of yellow and blue fish streamed past, occasionally bumping into Jane’s non-corporeal avatar and sliding straight through her with an odd fizzing sensation. Occasionally, a servant would appear out of a side corridor, freeze upon catching sight of the Condesce, and crumple into a deep bow. They were always seadwellers, or highbloods wearing heavy-duty rebreathers. Violetblood servants only existed in one place in the galaxy, and Jane was looking at it.

At the end of the hallway sat a perfectly spherical room, smaller than the throneblock, but still large enough to fit most of Jane’s house inside it without issue. It was devoid of any decoration whatsoever, besides a cylindrical podium rising from the dead center of the steel floor, and its walls — or perhaps wall, singular, since it had no edges save the doorway — were made from dodecagonal plates.

The Condesce pulled to a halt before the podium and pressed her hand to it. Instantly, a hologram screen popped up in front of her, displaying a menu of options written in Alternian lettering. She tapped one.

The room vanished. For a second, they were suspended in sheer darkness, beings floating in the void, before a scene unfolded around them, accompanied by the dull buzz of hologram tech.

They were still underwater. At the bottom of the ocean, to be more precise; when Jane looked up, she could see the faint distorted light of the surface dappling, and there was sand beneath her feet. Or, at least, presumably. The ground was covered in a thick layer of broken shells, dirt, and glass shards, dark with grime.

Around her floated what could not be described as anything less than a ruin: broken slabs of concrete hundreds of feet wide, entire buildings broken in half or laying toppled on their sides, twisted prongs of iron, a medley of glass in every color swirling like a kaleidoscope tornado in the current, loose piles of brick, untethered chunks of subway cars, street signs, traffic lights, and billboards, some still flickering with part or whole of their original message — the subjects baring vacant smiles that seemed horrific, when coupled with their surroundings — or else showing the glitched multicolor bars of an error screen, casting neon pallors over the surrounding wreck; and otherwise dark, and dead forever.

“This is it, isn’t it?”

The Condesce said nothing.

Jane took a step closer. “You brought us there. To New York.”

The Condesce revolved slowly, and her face came into view. It was lit with an indescribable euphoria, something deep and satisfied and profound. Jane had seen it before, on the faces of collectors regarding a particularly magnificent work of art.

A construction drone swept overhead, momentarily blotting out the sun. Swarms of them converged over the nearby area, picking through the wreckage, vacuuming up the dust. Starting the long and arduous process of rebuilding the area for seadweller inhabitation.

“A highblood’s kind of town,” Jane said, and the Condesce nodded, her smirk twisting with an emotion as close to pride as someone like her was capable of.

“So you can think for yoursself.”

“Seadwellers will be living here, shortly.”

“Schooner as those metal-panned droids of mine can get a hivestem up and swimming.”

“And the lowbloods who lived here,” she said, “the humans —?”

“Well,” said the Condesce, not uncharitably, “the way I sea it, they ain’t really gotta worry about where they got to live, any-moray.”

“There were millions of people in the city when it fell.”

The pride vanished. “Aw, guppy, come on,” said the Condesce, with a tone to suit her name. “There wasn’t. There was millions of lowbloods.”

“Not just—” Jane forced herself to speak clearly. For her own sake, if nothing else. “There were midbloods, here, too. The tealblood population in Manhattan dwarfed anything else on the continent. Some of the finest threshecutioners on the payroll were stationed in NYC.”

“Here’s the fin.” The Condesce glided closer to Jane, enough that the longest threads of her hair wafted dangerously near Jane’s face. “And you gotta learn this one, Heiress o’ mine, if you ever plan to rule a world of trolls: there ain’t such thing as midblood. It’s slander and lie. For that matter, ain’t no thing as lowblood, either. The word is oxymoron. The hemocaste’s a coddamn joke. I mean,” she said, snorting, “who gives a glubbin’ shit about the difference between rust and brown, honestly? Or between rust and yellow? It’s just color. Makes as much sense as divyin’ up the earth based on horn shape. I mean, come on, wriggler, even you got enough smarts to see what I’m paddlin’, here, and you’re a red-blooded grub of a mammal. What kind of dumb nookwhiffer believes in a hierarchy based on what motherfucking proteins your blood got?”

She laughed, full-bellied and rich. “God, they’re so glubbin’ stupid. But it serves a porpoise, see? Because even if I ain’t got a wet shit to give about the difference between yellow and rust, the yellowblood — and here’s the thing, ha, here’s the trick what makes the world spin its wicked pirouettes.” She said, “Answer somefin, for me, Heiress. What makes a yellowblood different from a rustblood?”

Jane stared at one looping coil of hair that had come only inches away from Jane’s wrist. “You said that blood color didn’t matter,” she began, uncertainly.

“Yeah. So what’s the difference?”

“And there’s nothing physiological about it, either. Like you said.”

“Uh huh. Warmer waters, keep swimmin’.”
“Yellowbloods are more highly inclined to psionic proficiency,” Jane said, “and rustbloods, to psychic proficiency; but that wouldn’t be it, either, since that’s a distinction based on another set of factors entirely, and we don’t organize society based on telepathic power.”

“Good.”

“The lifespan differential is most likely social in nature, according to most recent research,” she said, “and there’s nothing to suggest that a rustblood couldn’t live a hundred y—sweeps, given proper nourishment and medical care, so — trick question,” she said, with relative confidence. “There isn’t a difference.”

“Wrong,” the Condesce said, with relish. “Wrong as wrong can be, goldfish, although not for lack of tryin’, so I’ll give ya props. You understand everyfin except the most important bit, and that’s this.” She bent to be at eye level with Jane, and grinned. “The difference between a yellowblood and a rustblood is whatever the fuck the yellowblood thinks it is.”

Jane frowned. “I—”

“That’s how hemocaste works. That’s how hemospectrum works. You ain’t gotta give someone the world in a clamshell to get ’em behind you, ya just gotta give ’em an inch more than you’re givin’ somebody else.” She unfolded herself to her full height again. “That’s hemospectrum,” she said. “And that’s all. There’s one distinction that matters, and it’s land an’ sea.”

“But the difference—”

“Trolls is trolls,” she said. “But seadwellers is seadwellers, too. You dig?”

“I’m trying to,” Jane said honestly.

“It means fins first. What’s the difference between the Empress and everybubbly else?”

“Whatever the Empress thinks it is,” Jane said, tentatively.

“Pre-fuckin’-cisely,” the Empress cooed, with real delight. She waved her hand, and the tarnished remains of New York vanished, replaced by the same spherical chamber they had been before.

“All the same, Empress,” Jane attempted, “wouldn’t it make more sense to — I don’t know — hold off? For a while? Was there a sense of urgency, here?”

“You fam-eel-iar with the concept of mako-ing a statement?”

“A statement about what, though?”

The Condesce started to swim out of the room, and Jane, in her agitation, actually took a few steps to follow her before remembering the VR room would track her automatically. She continued, “There must have been a reason.”

“Course there was.” The Empress flicked her fingers irritatedly, as if trying to clear them of gunk. “My threshers uncovered a nest a’ traitors hiding out in the city. Enough of ’em to fill a hivestem with. Glub knows how many otters were involved with it.”

“Traitors?”

“Rebels. Insturgeonts. Bashholes tryna fuck up ma Empire, gill, how many euphemisms you need?”

“Oh,” Jane repeated. Carefully flat.
Not enough. “He wasn’t there,” the Condesce snapped. “Chill ya jets.”

“I don’t know who you mean, Empress.”

“That’s an ugly lie, girl,” she said, and it was a warning.

Jane cleared her throat and spoke crisply. “English is nothing,” she said. “If he was there, then so much the better for the Empire. If not—”

“Then ya moray-eel’s alive,” said the Condesce, and tilted her head, curious. “You f-eel nofin about that, huh?”

“With respect: humans don’t have moirails.”

“Hatchmate, then. Whatever. You what share ancestors, that thing.”

“I have no brother,” Jane recited. The words were old. They were borrowed from the Condesce herself, three years ago. “A traitor is no brother of mine.”

“Well, you certainly ain’t actin’ it.” Her mouth twisted. “He left you for dead, if you done recall. You took his pain and his punishment and his share of the blood price for his treasonous bullshit, and he ain’t ever so much as dropped you a thank-you note, has he?”

Jane said, tightly, “No, Empress. He hasn’t.”

“Some moray-eel. Ya know, if my diamond let me put my neck on the fuckin’ cull block for ’em without a word to the cont-ray-ry, I wouldn’t give two shits if my Empress offed ’em afterwards. Hell, I’d be down on my knees,” said the Condesce, eyes narrowing, “thankin’ her, for sparin’ me the trouble.”

She didn’t have a diamond, of course. The Empress needed no conciliation, nor conciliatory quadrantmate. To presume the Empress ought be pacified was unrighteous; it was the task of everyone else in the universe to ensure she remained in a pleasant mood.

“As would I,” said Jane quickly. “My curiosity was inevitable. He was a person of interest to me, and I — I have a vested interest in ensuring his fate is both just and public.” She then offered something that was not a lie, not precisely: “His actions reflect upon both of us. I am not free of his shadow, Empress, as much as I may publicly claim to be, and believe me — I rather wish I was.”

The Condesce smiled. Manipulating her was not an easy thing, and Jane was not so foolish as to do it often, but there were times — rare, but extant — when she could manage a small misdirection, something to appease her when the reality did not reflect her wishes.

Jane changed the subject. “Why not merely arrest them? The rebels that the threshecutioners found, I mean.”


“All right, but everyone else in the city—”

“Coulda already gotten wrapped up in their treasonous fuckery,” the Condesce interrupted.

“But without any way of knowing—”

“You wanna get a needle outta a haystack,” she said, “you burn the fuckin’ haystack. You don’t go through piece by piece.”
Jane quieted. They emerged back into the throne room.

“And that’s why there was no notice,” she said. “Because it would have given them time to evacuate.”

“There we go, gull. There’s some pan between those auriculars, after all.” The Condesce turned to stand in front of the steps to the throne.

“I regret,” Jane said, haltingly, “that — there were so many lives lost. Perhaps, in the future, I could try to — to sort out the situation, first, so as to lessen your burden, my Empress —”

The Condesce sighed. “Your pusher is for pumpin’ blood. Stop thinking with it.”

“My . . . heart?”

“Whatever you backwards-ass milkfeeders call it. That. The touchy-feely shit is for lowbloods and people who ain’t got shit to worry about. Your pusher can’t mako hard decisions. Your thinkpan can.”

She reached out, and her palm cupped Jane’s cheek. It felt like so many incorporeal tingles, a series of synapses firing without a real sensation to cause them. The VR room could replicate almost everything perfectly, but it couldn’t do touch.

“Pupa,” she said, a mockery of fondness. “You wanna rule a world of trolls, start thinkin’ like one.”

Then she withdrew her hand, and pushed off the floor, drifting up into her throne gracefully.

“Come chat moray often,” she called. “It’s fun. You hear me?”

“Yes, Empress.”

“Chill.” She fluttered her fingers. “And keep me updated on that bodyguard. I wanna know if she’s mindin’ herself right.”

“Of course, Empress,” Jane said, albeit with some confusion.

“Fintastic. Then we’re done here.” The Condesce shooed her. “Go ’way. Lemme d-eel with my royal bullshit in peace.”

Jane bowed with customary deference, and before she came up again, she was standing alone in her VR room, a deafening silence settling over her ears.

It was Roxy’s first day off in three weeks, and she was spending it wading through four feet of snow in the middle of South Lawndale in order to find a dive bar. Sometimes she appreciated life’s ironic moments; right now, she did not.

The neon canopy stretched to cover Little Village, but only barely. The buildings in this part of town were shorter, most of them only five stories at most, and the argon in their signs was old, often tarnished or fading away. Streets were narrower, built to fit fewer lifts, and the odd old-fashioned car rolled past on four wheels instead of gliding clear over the icy roads. The larger buildings had new Alternian steel shells slapped on over their old human foundations, and those towers that could not
be fit in the available real estate had simply been perched on stilts over the existing settlements. As such, the sun rarely fell on the neighborhood, courtesy of the enormous shadows cast by the haphazardly built zoning law violations that dotted every corner and loomed menacingly over the crowded streets. It wasn’t big in the same way that downtown was big, in the way the Highblood District was — it was compact in a way that Roxy was familiar with. It had swollen inwards on itself, instead of outward.

Roxy noted this as she passed under the stone archway that marked the district’s entrance. A sheet of iron bars dropped from the top of the arch, low enough to bar tall cargo lifts from passing through, wearing a sign in Alternian lettering.

A lift sailed past, bearing an advertisement for Crockercorp-brand cola on the side. *Drink like a seadweller!*

Her breath fogged in front of her, but besides her face, she was warm. Her new wardrobe included a white parka with fur lining, and she was toasty inside it. Her scarf she kept, but for sentimental reasons, more than need; a pair of black leather gloves had replaced her old fingerless ones, and her toes rested comfortably in a new set of combat boots. For once, the snow didn’t bother her, although out of habit, she avoided stepping in it, if she could.

The sky was clear, for the moment, which was to say it wasn’t presently snowing. It remained, however, grey as slate.

“How far do I have left?”

Half a mile. You can call a taxi, this time, you know. You aren’t broke anymore.

“I know.” She tugged down her sleeves. Unlike her initial ride in, she had enough room in her sylladex to fit her rifle, so she didn’t have to walk around with it on her back, although she kept her pistol in a holster under her jacket. “But I taxi’d most of the way here, anyway, and purchases on credit can be tracked.”

Oh, so now you’re worried about being tracked. Where’s this new, cautious Roxy Lalonde coming from?

“I dunno. Same place as ‘doesn’t wanna get arrested’ Roxy Lalonde, probably.”

‘Doesn’t wanna get arrested’ Roxy Lalonde is sitting in her pajamas at home right now, drinking some tea and reading a book. ‘Gonna get herself culled’ Roxy Lalonde, on the other hand, is taking a stroll through South Lawndale, poking around, looking for revolutionaries.

“Is ‘watched New York fall into the sea’ Hal Strider with us, today? Because that Roxy is, and she’s kind of pissed about it, so yeah,” she said fiercely, “I’m looking into my options.”

I’m as pissed as you are. But there’s a way to do these things, and for you, in your position, to be taking the risks that you are—

“Are you?”

Yes. But Jesus Christ, Roxy, you’re the Heiress’ bodyguard. Do you not see how dipping your toe into treasonous activity is going to have consequences?

“As of right now, Halbert,” she said airily, “all I’ve done is go looking for a drink. I’m not sure what kind of objection you think our good Empress would have to that.”
Don’t play dumb. You may not think you’re leaving a paper trail, and maybe you don’t, to organics, but I live knee-deep in code, and believe me, nothing and nobody is untraceable.

“I’m safe. If things get too bad, I’ll get out.”

What’s ‘too bad’?

She didn’t answer that.

A vendor pushing a cart full of West Alternian food had parked on a street corner. The smell wafting from it was hot and greasy and almost definitely unhealthy, and Roxy’s stomach turned with longing.

She slowed enough that the human vendor perked up, noticing a sales opportunity. “Lookin’ for a bite?”

He paused, took a long gander at her, and then seemed to choke on his own tongue. “Miss Lalonde?”


“The Heiress’ bodyguard, Miss Lalonde?”

“Well, I mean—”

“Is the Heiress around?” He glanced around anxiously, as if expecting Jane to swoop down like Batman from above.

“No. S’ my day off,” she said. “And, uh, not to be rude, or anything, but . . .” She trailed off, eyes fixed on a rack of holomagazines in the shop behind him.

The top holomag was for the Alternian Weekly. Its cover boasted a full-page shot of Jane, resplendent in her gown, atop a throne set against a background of sheer black. Roxy was perched on the armrest, her legs crossed and one arm slung possessively over the back of the throne. They both eyed the camera with what had, at he time, seemed like awkward glowering, but on the magazine came across as aristocratic distrust; Jane face was tilted towards Roxy’s, her mouth close to Roxy’s ear, as if they were sharing a secret.

“Miss Lalonde? Hey, miss? Miss.”

“Sorry,” she said, tearing her eyes away from it

“My regards to the Heiress,” he said, smiling. One of his teeth was chipped and capped with metal.

“Yeah,” Roxy said, distinctly uncomfortable. “I’ll pass them along.”

She kept moving. She could feel him watching her as she crossed the street, and even as she continued down the next block.

Heads up. We’ve got flies heading in from the northeast. Not moving fast, but they’ll be able to see you, soon.

“It’s fine.”

They’ll remember seeing you here. Maybe even tell their buddies about it.

“Maybe they won’t see me.”
Maybe they won’t, Hal agreed. If you start running now.

She groaned. “That’ll look suspicious.”

There’s very little you can do at this point that won’t be.

“Goddammit.”

Right through the nearest alleyway, and pick up momentum, you’re gonna have to clear a fence.

“This is bullshit.”

Quite.

She swung around the alley corner and broke into a jog, building up speed and launching herself at the chain link fence that barred the back half from the street. Her fingers latched over the top and she hauled, swinging one foot over and flipping neatly onto the ground behind it, only wobbling a little bit when her boot struck a piece of ice. The new soles didn’t get traction so well as her old ones did.

The air stung to breathe deeply. She kept running, dodging garbage bags and old furniture and other assorted detritus that had been dumped into the alley to decompose or get scavenged. The area wasn’t empty of people, but those there were used to seeing someone on the run, and didn’t look closely enough at her face to stop and ask what she was doing. She pulled her scarf up over her nose, just in case, anyway.

Oh, that’ll help. Second most recognizable face in the city, over here, but yeah, let’s hide it with a scarf. Thank God we’ve got our bases covered.

“Well, if I’d known when I left that I’d be on the run, I’d have grabbed a ski mask.”

I can’t tell if you’re being sincere or not, but yeah, that would have helped.

She slid between a pair of dumpsters and vaulted a garbage can, sliding out onto the street. A pair of passersby had to dive out of the way to avoid getting trampled as she turned left and kept running.

“They haven’t been in the city two months,” she huffed, “and I’ve already been on the run from the flies twice, what’s with this place, even.”

Way ahead of you. I’m leaving a strongly worded CrockerYelp review as we speak.

“Left?”

Right, and just a few blocks.

She darted across the road without pause, relying on the all-clear from Hal that there weren’t any lifts rocketing around the corner to bulldoze her, and buried herself in a knot of people that were moving south. This part of town was almost entirely pedestrian traffic, with a sidewalk that was only theoretically discernible from the road itself.

Now you’ll want to turn into side road, there.

“I know, I looked at the map before we left.”

I — well, seeing as you just passed it, it would appear that there is a difference between knowing the path and walking the path.
She tugged her scarf more securely over her face before glancing furtively around the block. “Okay, Morpheus. How’s my six looking?”

They’re distant — probably haven’t followed you, but I wouldn’t bet on it. Now go back and take that side road like I told you to.

The side road narrowed into an alley the further she walked, with barely five feet of space to walk in at its slimmest and not much more at its best. She kept an eye on the signs that blazed above storefronts, scanning for the one she wanted.

You’re here.

She stopped and looked around expectantly. To her left was a dry cleaner’s, and to her right, a bike shop that had probably been old before the Condesce set foot on Earth.

“No, we’re not,” she said.

Map says we’re here.

“Well — do you see it?”

Not unless your carbon cataracts can do something mine can’t, but at the same time, I have a map of the city right in front of me that’s telling me we’re sitting on top of it.

“Maybe you’ve got an old copy? It could have moved.”

The satellites update their geography on a bi-hourly basis. Unless the place up and walked away within the last thirty minutes, I’m right about this.

“I’m not saying you’re wrong, aight, I’m just saying that what you’re saying is kind of, like, obviously not true.”

I’m doing the best I can. And also, for the record, did you genuinely expect a covert rebel watering hole to be accessible via public mapping technology? I’m not sure how I’m the fool, here.

“You’re not —”

As she argued with him under her breath, a bulky rustblood with crescent moon horns the size of Roxy’s forearms slid past her, murmuring an apology. He wriggled his way between storefronts and up to the wall of grating that guarded their side entrances. Then he passed through and vanished, as if he had stepped into a different dimension.

Roxy blinked.

In the alarming event that you didn’t see that, too, I’m going to politely request that you get my optics checked at your next convenience, because I wasn’t aware A.I. could get hallucinations, much less ones that bizarre.

“You didn’t hallucinate.” She followed the same path the rustblood had, approaching the grate and experimentally poking one finger at it. It fizzled and absorbed her digit with the crackle of blue light characteristic of hologram tech.

“Oh, that’s so fucking cool.”

Yes, and definitely not a great way to hide bodies.
“You’re harshing my jam something awful, here, man.”

Allow me to apologize. My chiefest priority, you know, is ensuring that all jam goes un-harshed.

She pressed through. A wave of blue engulfed her vision as the barrier absorbed her, and after the weird skittering feeling of breaking an illusion passed, she could see a flight of stone stairs leading down to a dark wood door, under the street.

Welcome to Sketchyville, population: just the two of us, according to the latest census, but that’s only because we haven’t counted all the serial killers yet.

Roxy went down.

A muffled vibration of bass rattled through the door, something slow and rhythmic and deep. It was locked, but she had a wireless lockpick in her sylladex that she’d whipped up one day when she was bored, and it only took a few seconds of work to open the door with a quiet click. She jiggled the handle a few times to get it to work, and then, bracing her weight against it, shoved it open wide enough for her to squeeze through. It snapped closed as soon as she got herself squarely inside.

The Corvid glowed green. Bars of LEDs strung along the edges of the ceiling like crown molding cast a dim, lime-colored light over the interior, which was only twice the size of her bedroom, with rows of black leather booths dressing the concrete walls and a pool table pushed into the far right corner. A bar of edgeless chrome curled in a complete semicircle opposite the door, and paper posters of various twenty-first century movie stars clung to every inch of spare wall space.

The patrons were an even mix of humans and lowbloods. The rustblood who had passed her on the way in was slamming a tall pitcher of beer at the bar, beside an oliveblood with bones that pressed through her skin, sipping something bright yellow out of a martini glass. A gang of humans crowded one of the back booths, all shaved bald with bioluminescent spirograph designs tattooed onto their bare heads; a woman with a mask of circuits covering half her face nursed a margarita alone.

There was very little chatter, if any.

The bartender was an tall, wiry human in a waistcoat, a head above Roxy at least, with a crown of tousled black curls that framed their face and a long forehead. A pair of round, thin-rimmed sunglasses rested elegantly on the end of their beak-like nose, and long, tapered black talons extended from the points of their fingers — not fingernails, but a bird’s claws.

When Roxy approached, they glanced up over their sunglasses, revealing eyes of shockingly vivid gold; they set down the glass they were polishing and rested their elbows on the mixing counter, expectant, as she sidled into one of the stools.

“Hey,” she said, and was proud of herself when it came out brusque and matter-of-fact. “A Plague Doctor, please.”

If they recognized her, they didn’t let it bother them. “Sure,” they said. Their voice was flat and rang with the faint electronic echo of a voice mod. “On the rocks?”

“Is that extra?” Roxy hadn’t ever drunk a Plague Doctor with ice, since it was, ounce for ounce, more expensive than twenty-four karat gold; it hadn’t occurred to her as something that one would even do — waste perfectly good ice making sure your drink stayed cool.

The bartender smiled slightly, amused by this. “Not here.”

Roxy paused. “Does it help?”
“The people who sell it, or the people who drink it?”

“Right. I’ll pass, thanks.”

The bartender nodded and reached below the counter, pulling out a tall glass shaped like an old-timey coke bottle. They filled it half with vodka, and then topped off the remainder with rum and a shot of something unlabeled that filled it with color. The final product was a pretty pale violet, and under the black lights that hung over the bar, it seemed to glow.

They finished the rim with a smear of sopor, after which they pulled out a blowtorch and seared it. It cooked instantaneously. It released a cloyingly sweet odor into the air.

Roxy was almost sorry she wasn’t going to drink it, out of curiosity alone.

They slid it across the bar. “Thanks,” she said. Her leg bounced. “I can’t pay with, uh. Credit.” She cleared her throat. “Do you take information?”

God, this is so fucking dumb.

The bartender paused, and tilted their head. “Information?”

“Information.”

They pulled back from the bar, gave her another once-over.

“Aren’t you—”

“Yeah,” Roxy said quickly. “But she’s not here now, and I’m — you can trust me.”

Roxy held her breath. The bartender drummed their fingers on the countertop.

“Alright,” they said, with the tone of someone having recently made peace with the fact that they understood very little about the circumstances in which they found themself. “Cool. Hey, Oliver?”

“What?” One of the waiters paused amidst bussing a table to glance over their shoulder.

“What?” One of the waiters paused amidst bussing a table to glance over their shoulder.

“Watch the bar. I’m taking someone into the back.”

He squinted. “Who?”

The bartender gestured at Roxy wordlessly.

The waiter had a split-second moment of alarm, probably recognizing Roxy’s face. Then, with admirable ease, he blinked away his bemusement, said, “Okay, then,” and tossed his rag over his shoulder. He started making his way towards the bar.

In the meantime, the bartender lifted the barrier and ushered Roxy through. “Come on,” they said. She left the Plague Doctor behind.

‘Taking someone into the back’? Oh, man, this has ‘definitely not an organ harvesting operation’ written all over it.

She ignored him, and followed the bartender through the door behind the bar. They emerged into a cramped, hot kitchen, with barely enough room to walk between counters without nudging some pan of simmering meat or basket of produce. The bartender threaded their way between aisles with practiced grace and started down a steep set of stairs at the back of the room.
Fuck no. This is beyond sketchy. Sketchy is waving to us in the rearview mirror as we speed down the Shady Activity highway, destination: Murdertown, U.S.A.

It was one of Hal’s rare reasonable moments. It was just a shame that it came in the middle of something Roxy was pretty certain she’d drive herself crazy if she didn’t investigate, so she just patted her side, felt the comforting shape of her pistol under her coat, and followed the barkeep.

The basement of the Corvid was a room the size of Roxy’s closet with a single old-fashioned computer monitor mounted on the wall at the back and a single swivel desk chair in front of it. The bartender gestured to it wordlessly, and she tentatively sat down.

They leaned over her and starting tapping out commands into the keyboard.

“Hey, so,” she said, “I’m not exactly — what are you doing? I mean, not that I don’t appreciate — I just came here on a tip, so, like—”

The computer sprang to life. As it booted up, the same icon of the sun that Roxy’s computer had displayed when it crashed appeared on its screen.

Last chance, Hal said, and it wasn’t hard to imagine a bit of grimness to his declaration.

Roxy squared her shoulders and scooted up to the desk. The bartender stood back, waiting for the OS to finalize, and then left the room, sliding the door shut behind them.

It was dark, save for the monitor, where the loading bar was almost complete. Her foot began to bounce.

Here we go.

The bar filled. The screen went black, then blue, and then resolved into a feed of an empty chair, almost identical to the one Roxy was sitting in.

“That’s it?”

Just wait. Any minute now, someone’s gonna leap out from around the corner and yell ‘Jackass!’

Roxy pulled off her visor and set it to the side.

She leaned up and pressed a key experimentally. The feed remained the same. At least, she assumed it was a feed; nothing was changing, so it could have been a poorly transmitted still image, for all she knew.

She was on the verge of getting up and finding the bartender when something rustled, and then there was a crash, uncannily similar to the sound of several objects being knocked to the floor.

“Hold on,” someone yelled, and Roxy jumped. The voice came from call. It was smooth and vaguely irritated, which confirmed her suspicion of something being knocked over, and it got louder as the person came closer. “I’m comin’, I’m comin’. Jesus. ‘Put the comm station on the other side of the building,’ she said. ‘It’ll be fun,’ she said. Okay.”

A Texas accent? Or something close to it, anyway, paved over with years of distance — but noticeable, especially to Roxy, who’d grown up listening to Dirk blunt his hanging -g’s and sit on his vowels like he had years to spare.

“Goddamn, this had better be good. Gettin’ all my fuckin’ steps in, today. Cool.”
A man dropped into the chair. Late thirties, maybe, with the tiny marks of age only starting to wear on his face, and a full head of shaggy blond hair that had been meticulously styled into looking like casual disarray. He had a jawline a movie star would bleed for and a film of stubble under cheekbones they’d kill for, and Roxy’s stunned face was reflected in the wide lenses of his aviator shades.

“Holy shit,” said Dave Strider, stealing the words right out of her mouth.

“I—”

“Roxy?”

Her heart stumbled and almost stopped. Her brain gave up on attempting to comprehend the situation at all, and settled for marinating in its own confusion.

“What?”

“Roxy Lalonde,” he said, and a grin split his face. “Right?”

“I. Yes?”

He was ecstatic. She didn’t think she’d ever seen a smile that wide on anyone’s face, ever. He leaned in closer to the screen, trying to get a better look at her, rising halfway out of his chair.

“Hot damn. You’re the genuine article.”

“Pretty certain,” she said. “And you’re — Dave Strider?”

“The one and only.” He shot off a salute, clicking his tongue.

“The director. Dave Strider. You did the — the movies? The propaganda movies, you—”

“Propaganda’s putting it a little strongly, but whatever. Yeah. I put out some flicks.”

“And you —” Her brain finally caught up to what it was supposed to be doing, and decided to be properly indignant. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

“I’m — I asked you first!”

“Well, shit,” he said, grinning impossibly wider, “we gotta respect the sanctity of fuckin’ dibs, here. Can’t let the whole world order go to pieces, can we?” He gestured to the room around him. “I live here. Your turn.”

“I — that doesn’t answer anything!”

“Cept your question,” he pointed out.

“You don’t live in a storage closet.”

“Nah,” he agreed. “But the locale of my digs is classified intel, I mean top-secret, Fort Knox at DEFCON 1 kinda shit, and with all respect, I can’t go tossing that kind of data out like it’s hot cakes at a carnival, you get me?”

“Not really.”
“I’m in hiding, kid,” he said. “That better?”

“I . . . guess,” she said, reluctantly, although she understood no more than she had at the beginning of the conversation. “But—”

“Long on backstory, short on time. You gonna tell me what you’re doing here, before we get into it?”

Roxy braced herself on her knees and stared at the floor, giving her eyes a break from the frankly unacceptable reality above. “You’re in hiding,” she said. “Because of — my man, my main dude, as far as the public knows, you’re dead.”

“Uh huh,” he said, sounding self-satisfied. “Finessed that one. After the Mirthful Executives bit the dust, we had to kind of backflip into the far end of nowhere, tryna make sure no one came after us. Had to run under the radar, so we didn’t catch a bullet to the teeth the first time we showed our faces anyplace halfway civilized. But you still haven’t answered the question, kiddo.”

“What I’m doing here?” Roxy lifted her eyes. “I — dude, I’m not — I’m here to get deets on the Seer of Light. When I tried to run a search in the AKI, it kicked me out backward on my ass and ran this freaky message telling me to hit up the Corvid if I wanted intel, so I was like, ‘Chill,’ and showed up — it didn’t say anything about Dave Strider showing up, oh my God—”

“Aw, sick,” Dave said easily. “The Seer sent you, huh? She probably scrambled your computer up with that freaky junk. Sorry. She doesn’t see much action out here — see, ha — so she lives for the drama. I’ll give her a stern talkin’-to.”

“You know her?”

He barked a laugh. It was good-natured. “Man,” he said, “only better than anyone else alive, just about. She’s my sister.”

Roxy sat back in silence, reeling.

Dave Strider had been a mystery in the film business for years. He’d only made a few movies in his life when he peaked — the Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff series. Comedy. Nothing remarkable, and kind of avant-garde, but profitable enough that he got Imperial subsidies to make more of them. Of course, back then, nobody knew him by name; he did all of his producing through a proxy, keeping anonymous for reasons that everybody assumed were related to his work. Then it came out, somewhere around the publication of the third and final installment of the SBAHJ series, that the real Dave Strider was a revolutionary and part of a newborn anti-Imperial liberation movement for human communes in the southeast. The Empire had pulled SBAHJ faster than a shutter could drop and remastered the whole franchise, wiping it clean of anything that could be vaguely construed as antiestablishment, and sent the final film straight to video. They were contraband, now. Strider himself hadn’t been seen since his duel with the Mirthful Executives, the twin leaders of New Washington, D.C.

Everyone thought he’d been dead. Everyone had said he was dead.

But he wasn’t. He was sitting there, talking to her, easy as sunlight on a Texas morning.

“This is impossible,” she said.

“Which part? Because it’s pretty simple, actually. See, when an experimental geneticist and his laboratory love each other very much—”
“I’m dreaming.”

“Doubt it. Your brain probably isn’t this weird.”

“I got drugged,” she announced. “Or I’m dead? Something like that. Because this — this is not happening, actually!”

Hysteria bubbled in her throat. She forcefully swallowed it.

“You okay, there?” His smile vanished, and a crease appeared between his brows. “Uh. You don’t look so peachy, short stuff.”

“I’m probably on the verge of a nervous breakdown, to be honest! Thanks for asking!”

“Shit,” he swore. Looked around helplessly. “You need a water or something? Fuck. I shouldn’t have answered the thing, should’ve made one of the interns do it, they could’ve — Rudy’s there, right? Get them to help, they’ll give you, uh, like. I don’t know. Something to help, I guess. Take it easy. Quiet thoughts. Triangle breathing, you ever heard of that?”

“Who the fuck is Rudy?”

Dave cocked his head. “The bartender,” he said. “Runs this whole thing, so we can have a point of contact in NC. Bird-lookin’ pal. That one.”

“Oh,” she said, and then, “No, I — I think I’m good,” and kept breathing deeply. By and by, her heart calmed to a manageable pace, and she started to chuckle.

“What?”

“Who the fuck,” she giggled, “is Rudy,” and then she flung herself back in her chair, as all the tension that had been knotted in her diaphragm expelled itself in the form of a laughing fit.


“This is whack,” she said. “Whack as hell. You know that, right? Okay. I’m good. This is fine. I can handle this shit, just watch me.” She cupped her face, exhaled long and hard, and then pinned her hands to her sides. “You,” she said, “have a helluva lotta questions to be answering, buster.”

He seemed too relieved that she hadn’t fallen apart on his hands to object to her demands. “That’s fair,” he said.

“I mean, for real. For real? First off.” She flung up her hands. “Why did the Seer call me? Does that mean she was in the AKI, and what the fuck was she doing there, if so? Are y’all gonna kill me? Or Jane? And if so, can I like, convince you to not, because we didn’t do shit and also we’re literally kids and, um, by the by, I’m probably breaking like eighteen laws by just talking to you, including the Law of High Treason, so maybe please give me some promise I’m not gonna get crucified the second I go back upstairs, if you can? If possible? Please?”

“Ah.” He sighed, and reached up to rub his eyes under his glasses. It was now that she noticed his hands, which she hadn’t had a chance to study in detail before: they were jet black prosthetics, so dark she’d assumed they were gloves, with anatomy so meticulous that she wouldn’t know them to be any different from her own if it weren’t for the color and the quiet clink they made when they brushed against his frames.

“Here’s the thing,” he said. “I can answer — hmm — three of those questions, I think. Yeah.
Because, see, a lot of the shit you wanna know could get us deeply fucked if you leaked it. And it’s not that I don’t trust you, but—”

“...You just met me.”

“I mean yeah,” he said, with relief. “And you seem chill, don’t get me wrong. But I’ve got rules to follow and promises to keep.”

“I get it,” she said. “Just tell me what you can. Um. Or as much of it as pertains to me, I guess. I just wanna know why the Seer cared enough to call me out here, and if she did, why you showed up. Instead of her. Not that you’re not, you know. Also cool. Because you are. From what I can tell.”

“Kay.” He counted points off on his fingers. “One. The Seer probably caught you because she tracks pings on searches for our names on the AKI, to make sure nobody’s nosing around in our biz that doesn’t already have the DL on us, so that’s how she found you. Two: she called you because you’re a person of interest, and the fact that you’re searching ‘Seer of Light’ tells us that either our cover’s busted like a skipping record or you’re doing something shady yourself, which seems to be the case.” He laughed a little. “We’re not gonna kill you. Or Jane. I mean, you’re kids, Jesus Christ.”

“Hasn’t stopped a lot of people,” she shot back, and he shrugged, his smile vanishing.

“Fair. And to that point, just because we don’t have it in for you doesn’t mean the fish in the sky’s gonna have the same hang-ups about putting the axe on minors. Unfortunately, we can’t make that not be the case, although, if you’ve noticed, we’re trying our asses off, here.” He spread his arms. “You know. With the whole ‘revolution’ thing.”

“...Are you trying to recruit me?”

“No,” Dave said, “or at least, not actively. I’m just pointing out how shitty your Empire is. Funny how when I do that, the idea of fighting against it just seems to . . . flower out of nowhere, huh?”

“You are trying to recruit me.”

“Literally, no. Again: you’re seventeen. We’re not gonna ask you to roll out, pistols blazing, and take down a thresher squadron. What you’re experiencing is actually the sensation of having a conversation with someone who’s not brainwashed to hell and back with Imperial bullshit.”

“I’m not a kid,” she argued.

“Oh, man,” said Dave dryly. “Well, now that you’ve told me you’re not a kid, my perspective is completely changed.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“Never said you couldn’t,” he conceded easily. “And on the table, I believe you. But seventeen is seventeen, even if it’s seventeen with a really big gun.”

She ground her teeth and kept quiet, at that. He seemed to have well intentions, if nothing else.

“So what did the Seer want with me, then?”

“Ahh,” he said, wincing. “Right. That’s wandering into ‘sensitive information’ territory.”

“No, c’mon—”

“A lot of that is stuff that the Seer should be talking over with you,” he said flatly. “She’s got some...
secrets that aren’t mine to tell. The only reason she’s not here right now is because she’s all hells of busy right now, and when she gets off the job, she’s gonna be mad as shit that she missed you. But be that as it may, I don’t get to spill all her fuckin’ deets just because she’s gone.”

“I just want to know why I’m here,” she pleaded.

He groaned, and leaned back to stare plaintively at the ceiling. “Lalonde—”

“Strider,” she said, mimicking his tone. “I did not haul all the way out here and have a minor existential crisis so you could blueball me like this. Give me something.”

“Fuck. Fine! Here’s what the Seer’s interested in.” He sat back up and fixed her with a stern look. “You’re the Heiress’ bodyguard. You’ve got intel on her whereabouts and behavior that are kind of hot topics for us, as people with a professional interest in dropkicking the Batterwitch all the way to whatever hell planet she crawled off of.”

Her jaw dropped. “You want me to spy for you?”

“The Seer can see most things,” he said. “Anything passes through the bureaucracy’s servers.”

“How—”

“I said long, long fucking backstory, kid, and we’re racking up minutes. Point being, she can’t see everything. That includes most of what the Heiress does, because she gets network access through private servers, just like the Condesce. The Seer can’t get at those. You, on the other hand, get free reign.”

“Why would I—”

“Same reason you came here in the first place,” he fired back. “Come on. You saw what they did to those lowbloods, I know you did. You had front row tickets.” Lower, he said, “You know what happened to New York.”

She had seen both. She hadn’t slept last night.

“I can’t,” she said. “I promised — I told my brother I’d take care of myself. That means no . . . nothing like this.” She gestured around herself. “No revolutionary shit! Nothing that could get me or — or him — killed.”

“Again: not asking you to roll out, guns blazing,” Dave said. “Just asking you to pass along some information. We do all the work. You feel uncomfortable, you stop. But otherwise, you help a lot of people avoid what got done to those lowbloods.”

Roxy chewed her lip.

Dave inclined his head. “I’ll give you a sec to think,” he said. “But I didn’t peg you for an establishmentarian, Lalonde, to be honest. And hey, come to think of it: what were you doing in the Alternian Knowledge Index? Anything involving me and the Seer is gonna be sky-high levels of clearance, and like hell you have that kind of pull with bureaucretins.”

“Oh,” she said, shaking head a little to clear it. “I hacked it.”

“You hacked the AKI?”

“What, like it’s hard?” She leaned forward, grinning. “I was at level nine or ten, at least.”
“Shit, girl.”

“The worm bypassed firewalls with an old trick I picked up from the street hackers in Bakersfield, running cyber heists on municipal databases. Basically, it skirts the first layer of password security by mimicking the firewall patterns, and then breaks it from the inside, using a chameleon subroutine to wiggle through every subsequent layer of locks.”

He whistled, delighted. “Sounds like a bitch.”

“Oh, man, you don’t even know. It gets mad traction once it’s four or five layers deep. It probably could’ve taken me to top clearance if I’d let it run that far.”

“You ran cyber heists?”

“Recreationally. This one time, I got in and out of the local ATM in five minutes.”

“Hell yeah. I once got in and out of the NASDAQ in four.”

“You did not!”

“Sure the fuck did, and left it a couple tril lighter than I found it. Then I made sure my tracks were covered. You ever hear about the Grand Theft of 2398?”

“No.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Neither did anybody else.”

“That’s so fucking cool,” she said, vibrating with excitement. “How? What worm did you use?”

“Trade secret. You come over someday, I’ll show you.”

“For real?”

“Fuck yeah. You give me your chameleon trick, and I’ll give you the Stockfucker 2000. Share the love, one badass to another.”

“Nice,” she breathed, momentarily caught up in the idea of it, elated with possibility. Then, reality reintroduced itself.

“I.” She cleared her throat. “I won’t hurt Jane,” she said, firmly, stabbing one finger at the monitor. “That’s a non-starter, director man.”

“No shit,” he agreed. “We want Jane safe as much as anybody else.”

“And — and if it starts getting dangerous, for me or Jane, I’m gonna stop. Also non negotiable.”

“Again. No shit.”

“But if I can. And if it isn’t dangerous. And if you need it, really, that much, in order to help people.”

She shook her head, hard.

It was a terrible idea. It was dangerous. It was stupid. Her heart was hammering, and her breath was shallow, but at the same time, an ember of excitement was growing behind her ribs. This was Roxy’s haunting grounds: treading the edge of the law, nearer the bad side of it than the good one, only one mistake away from danger at the best of times. Knee deep in mischief, neck deep in trouble. It was the buzz of pickpocketing a passerby in the human commune, of stealing spare parts for Dirk’s
projects, tangling with illegal software. In a weird, awful way, it felt like coming home.

“I can spy for you,” she said, and it took her a second to believe it. “I’ll do it. For New York.”

Dave smiled. It was a small thing, a pleased one. He had no business looking like that, really, making her feel proud of herself for doing exactly jack shit, but there he was, and she was too embarrassed by her own knee-jerk pride to tell him to stop.

When she got back to the house, it was near midnight, and the place was empty. No sign of Jane Crocker marked its halls, no gleam from under the office doorway indicated an Heiress at work. Roxy almost went to her bedroom for the sake of thoroughness, but thought better of it, and went up to the roof for a smoke instead, because if ever there was a day that earned it, it was this one.

The roof was lined with gravel, and mostly bare, save a chimney and some grates for the house’s ventilation system. Evening had sunk into night. The wind bit her nose when she stepped out into it, but she got accustomed quick, and the snow wasn’t falling; it hadn’t even piled up, probably because of the heating ducts running underfoot. To that extent, it wasn’t not nearly as cold as she thought it would be.

She already had the cig out and well on its way to being lit when she noticed the Heiress sitting on the edge facing the street, her ankles kicking idly against the edge.

Roxy’s heart took a hop at the sight of it, but after a moment, she concluded that Jane didn’t have any insidious plans except to savor the night air. On cue, turned and lifted her eyebrows at the sight of Roxy.

“What are you doing up here?”

Roxy plucked the cigarette from between her teeth and waved it demonstratively. “Smoke,” she said. “You?”

Jane glanced at it, and then turned back to face the street. “Peace and quiet.”

“Fair.” Roxy thumbed open her lighter, and paused. “You mind if I . . .”

“No.” She waved carelessly over her shoulder. “Go ahead.”

“You want one?”

Jane hummed thoughtfully. “You know,” she said, “I’ve never had one. Bad for the teeth, my stylist said.”

“They are. You shouldn’t.” Roxy successfully lit the thing and took a drag, feeling hot, irritable smoke fill her throat. She crossed the roof and stood next to where Jane sat, watching the light show above them.

Jane quirked an eyebrow with a ghost of a smile about her lips. “Is this one of those ‘do as I say, not as I do’ moments?”

“Yep.” Roxy blew a smoke ring.
“Is that another human cultural thing?”

“Yes. One of the shittier ones.” She didn’t ask whether Jane was talking about the hypocrisy or the cigarette.

Jane hummed, an acknowledgement, an acceptance. “Give me one.”

Roxy took one, lit it, and handed it over. “Hold it by the—”

“Roxanne. I know not to hold a lit cigarette by the burning end, thanks.”

It was chiding, but gently so, and Roxy apologized with a silent nod.

Jane held her first drag for a long time, and then, closing her eyes, released it. The smoke wafted out and dissipated over the edge of the building.

“I spoke to my benefactor today,” she said, matter-of-fact.

Roxy took a couple of drags before she trusted herself to respond with any kind of calm. “The Condescense.”

“Yeah.” Jane crossed her legs and leaned on one arm. She pinched the cigarette between her first two fingers and thumb, the way kids did when they didn’t want to drop them. “She was . . . herself.”

That didn’t mean anything to Roxy, but at the same time, she understood. “That fuckin’ sucks,” she remarked, tapping ash onto the gravel.

“Yes. She talked to me about the hemospectrum, and New York. And — why.” Jane frowned at nothing, at whatever phantom memory was running on repeat in the empty space before her. “In a broad sense, and in a specific one. And she showed me Times Square.” Her eyes fluttered closed. Cutting the reel. “The remains of it.”

Roxy wet her lips and inhaled, to speak.

“That wasn’t the worst part, though.” Jane opened her eyes and lifted her cigarette in front of them, turning it over in her fingers, examining it like a surgeon might their scalpel. Or an undertaker their brush.

Roxy was just about working up the guts to ask what the worst was when Jane spoke again.

“It was the fact that it made sense,” she said. “A damning, terrible kind of sense. Why, she was reasonable! She’d be mid-speech, and I’d be thinking: *that sounds about right, doesn’t it.* Mind, this was when she was in the middle of a speech about from whence she derived the right to slaughter lowbloods.” She chuckled in a way that made her insides sound like a hollow instrument, played to make the sounds of laughter without the feeling. “Well, or something like that, anyway. It was a lot about power and only a little about much else. She didn’t care much for the right or wrong of it. I don’t believe her mind works that way. Pardon me,” she corrected herself, acidly. “Pan. Lest I use the mammalian term.”

“C’mon, Janey—”

“Don’t,” she said, and that was an order. That word was Imperial edict to its bones.

Softening at Roxy’s shell-shocked quiet, she added, “Not about this. Don’t try to explain it away; for one thing, I don’t trust myself not to believe you.”
Roxy watched Jane take another drag off her first cigarette, and didn’t say what she was thinking, which was *Jane Crocker, they fucked you up in a dozen different ways, but making you cruel was not one of them*, and instead she dropped the quarter-finished cigarette under her heel and crushed it. The ember guttered out and died with one last whisper of smoke. “Your old lady sounds like a bitch,” she said, crisp as glass shards. “And if it’s treason to say so, then call me a traitor, but I’ll go to the noose having never told a lie.”

Another hollow laugh. “My old lady,” she said, “would probably agree with you.”

“Yeah? Good. I’d tell it to her face, if I could, except the bitch lives in the fucking sky, so I’d have a hell of a time getting there.”

She guffawed, something genuine and surprised. “I hope you get the chance,” she said. “Except I hope you never do, since she’d undoubtedly kill you, and although it’d be as heroic a death as any ever was, I’ve grown rather fond of my bodyguard.”

“Love you too, sap,” Roxy snickered, and only paused to sneak a look at her when Jane fell silent for a long moment. The Heiress had paused with the cigarette almost to her mouth, her eyes lowered, frozen in thought.

“Jane?”

“Yes,” she said. Blinked. Smoked, and then licked her lips quickly, to clean the taste off them. “I — I’m sorry, I was about to embarrass myself.”

“What?”

“Do you know the name Jake English?”

Roxy stuck her hands in her pockets and sucked a breath in through her teeth. “Yeah,” she said. “Don’t talk about him because you feel obligated to, Janey, it’s none of my business and it’s not like I’m asking—”

“So you’d know the story,” Jane said. “The scandal. Good. Saves me the trouble of explaining it all over again. I’m not up to more than one humiliation per evening.”

“I only know as much as the tabloids gave us. And that wasn’t fuckin’ much.”

Jane nodded. “Well,” she said, “that gives us a starting point, at least. It’s become a point of contention twice in the past few weeks, and at some point, the whole of it is going to get out to you. I’d rather I get to tell it than some highblood with a grudge, so.” She shook out her cigarette with a vengeful kind of force.

“You know the beginning. Jake Harley, Heir to Crockercorp, jewel of the seadweller court. The face that launched a thousand social media campaigns. In reality, he was good-looking, but nothing compared to what the cameras made of him; his real gift was talking. He was charming. Charming in an idiotic way. He really believed every word he ever said, and of course, it got him into some trouble, but was always fine, because you didn’t expect him to be diplomatic, you expected him to be honest. And he was kind enough that his honesty never hurt the way you expected it to. Older than me, by a few months, but he never acted it. What the cameras never got right about him was — and they got a lot about him right, mostly because there wasn’t any part of him that needed glossing over or washing away — but his temper, they didn’t manage that. He would get worked into knots over things so easily. But he’d be unknotted again as quickly as someone could whip up a cup of tea, and he never did anything really bad while he was in a state, he only huffed and puffed and made rash
declarations of intent. He blustered like the best of them.

“And everyone knew he wasn’t suited to rule his own household, much less the whole of Crockercorp, but the laws of primogeniture were . . . narrowly interpreted, by the Condesce’s legal team, and of the two heirs that the Condesce commissioned from Genetic Engineering, he gestated first. So the rights were his. Strictly speaking, I was a backup plan, unnecessary to the overall schemata of inheritance, but very comforting to have around, generally.” She quirked her mouth at some private joke. “If you study the affairs of human kings, actually, you’ll find that having an heir and a spare rarely does anything but complicate the matter to horrors when the direct line inevitably dead-ends, from infertility or war or what-have-you, and all of a sudden, you’ve got a dozen second sons and first cousins beating each other’s brains out, but — that’s neither here nor there; I wouldn’t have hurt Jake for a thousand Empires, and he knew it.”

Roxy sat down gingerly on the edge of the roof. Her hand settled beside Jane’s.

“They called us moirails,” Jane said. “The magazines. Trolls, they don’t understand siblinghood, they never have. Hatchmates is their closest concept — members of the same Conscription cohort — but that’s thousands of people, there’s no bond there. Some of them share ancestors, by dint of some quirk in their complicated, biologically unsound reproductive process, but they don’t regard those people with any kind of familiar ties. Some of them don’t believe in ancestors at all, which doesn’t make sense, until you consider that they all mature out of the same combination of fluids, in the same womb, and in that context, I’d doubt the validity of any process claiming to track my genes precisely to one or two individuals, too. But moirails . . . moirails, they understand. Moriallegiance is brotherhood, to them, it’s clade, it’s inviolable. So they called us moirails, because they couldn’t understand, in any other sense, why I didn’t slit his throat in his sleep and take the throne.”

She sniffed and wiped her nose with the palm of her hand. Her eyes looked dry; it seemed to be just running from the cold. “I say ‘trolls,’” she said. ‘I should say ‘highbloods.’ Seadwellers, mostly. But regardless. When he ran away and changed his name, it was the most delicious story. Pale heartbreak! And his moirail left behind, pining.” She snorted. “Pining. As if I were draped over my window seat, weeping, clinging to his picture — do you want to know what I did, the day after Jake bloody English ran away?”

Her lip curled. “I walked into his room,” she said, “and I took everything I could carry, everything that wasn’t bolted to the fucking foundations of the house, and I hauled it up here by myself. And I built a pile on the roof — right over there, between the chimney and the vent — and I burned it all.”

“Jane—”

“He left a note. Can you imagine? The sheer audacity. A paper note. He couldn’t say goodbye to my face, couldn’t take the time to explain himself, but of course, it had to be cinematic, you see; he had to imagine my tears blotting the ink as he sped into the distance. He was in love with movies,” she said, viciously, “so in love with them that he fancied himself a movie star, and he forgot that the people around him were people, and not the ensemble cast to the Jake Harley Cinematic Experience.” Smoke wreathed her head, creating a thin haze. “I didn’t read his damn note,” she said, and her voice had plummeted from blistering furious to raw cold. “It burned like everything else. And I never cried for him. To this day, I’ve never cried for him. I cried for me.”

The billboards overhead shifted and blinked, dazzling in their number and variety and vivacity. It was a garden of electricity, a matrix of night-flowering blossoms, and Roxy had never seen anything so grand or awful in all her life.

She decided that New Chicago was a beautiful place, and she could have fallen in love with it, if she had allowed herself to. And she also recognized, with equal objectivity, that New Chicago was the
city that had made Jane Crocker what she was. It was both the highest compliment and worst insult she was capable of paying it.

Roxy said, “You don’t have to apologize.”

“You’re wrong,” said Jane, “but not for the reasons you think, and I appreciate it, all the same, but I’m not apologizing to you. That’s the truth. Jake English chose a doomed rebellion, and left me to do — everything he knew he never could, I think.” Her expression was older than sixteen. Her expression was older than age. It was old in a hard, weathered way, raked-over and reforged and carved into a sixteen-year-old’s face where it didn’t fit.

“He was never going to be the Heir,” she said. “But me, I could be Heiress. I can be Heiress.”

Roxy touched Jane’s hand, edged out her pinky and looped it around Jane’s own. Simple. Insufficient, but then, anything would be. Jane let her, without looking at their laced fingers.

“So!” She took a deep breath. “That’s it. The deep disgrace of the Crocker household. Jake English, the runaway revolutionary, and his poor, abandoned moirail. The end. Scarlett O’Hara, eat your heart out.”

“I’m sorry,” Roxy said, quietly. She didn’t really have anything else.

Jane said, “Thank you.” After putting out her cigarette on the concrete beside her, she said, “I’m glad you know, now. Even though God knows what you’re thinking of me, now.” She lifted her chin.

“I don’t think worse of you.”

“But you do think differently of me, don’t you? Admit it,” Jane pushed. “I’m different. Do I seem very breakable? All the magazines like to think so. You think I was mean when you met me, you should have seen what I had to be to get them to believe I was fine.” She ground a piece of ash under the heel of her palm.

“You don’t seem breakable,” said Roxy, and: “I mean, everybody’s breakable. But you less than most, for what it’s worth.”

“Thank you.”

“Not sure it was a compliment.”

Jane looked at her sharply. Roxy heaved a sigh and untangled her hand, pinning her fingers between her knees and rubbing them for warmth. Somewhere in the distance, an artificial clock tower tolled twelve. It rang with a rich, low timber, like solid gold meeting its kin, and she wondered how they got a speaker to make a noise like that, down to the echoes of the thing it was mimicking.

“I ain’t ever had parents, either,” she said, “but I got a brother, and if you and Jake ever had a molecule in common with what me and him have between us, then I don’t care what you need the press to believe. You cried for him.”

“Whatever you and he have—”

“No, listen. Me and Dirk are orphans. Commune kids. My mom got caught leaking classified information, and his dad was executed for sedition. I don’t remember my mom, and he doesn’t remember his dad, but the first memory I have is of Dirk’s dumb ass trying to wedge a fork into an electrical socket, and his first memory is of me trying to eat a plastic bag, and when you don’t have parents you kind of have to take what you can get. I got Dirk. Probably used up my life’s supply of
good luck then and there.”

Jane was quiet while she spoke. When Roxy paused for breath, she made like she was about to say something, but thought better of it, and kept her mouth shut.

“So I get it,” she said. “Not the loss. But you don’t have to tell me you didn’t grieve. I don’t blame you for it.”

When Jane spoke, it was after a long, dead interval, and it was quiet.

“Didn’t your mother object?” she asked. “To you being separated, that is?”

“My mom,” said Roxy, “didn’t give a stone cold fuck about me. However! So it goes, with commune kids. Never did bother sharing stories with the other squirts running around the place, on account of it’d devolve into the world’s saddest feelings jam.”

“What do you mean, she didn’t?”

“I mean, moms who care about their kids don’t smuggle data,” she said. “And she had to sign the waiver to split us up, didn’t she? She wasn’t thinking about me before she got caught and she wasn’t thinking about me afterward.”

Jane was welling brimful of pity, clear as the wetness in her pretty blue eyes, and God, but Roxy couldn’t stand to be pitied, just now. “Wish I’d been in your shoes,” she said, brightly, “tube kid! Shit’s less complicated when you started out in a petri dish.”

“But not my particular petri dish,” Jane said, and Roxy laughed sadly.

“No,” she agreed, “not yours.”

An Imperial Drone floated past in the street, its massive form blotting out part of the sky.

“Thank you,” said Jane, with the overloud confidence of someone putting themselves back together.

“No problem, Janey.”

Could she have told her, then? That might have been for the best, but—

Roxy gave her a quick, tremulous smile, and turned on her heel, and went back inside. The sky seemed closer than it had ever been, leaning close, about to fall.

Chapter End Notes

1. Join me on my continued journey to completely and utterly butcher the noble art of cybersecurity.

2. This is the music playing at the Corvid.

3. Cautiously settling into a weekly, maybe bi-weekly update schedule. At the very least, there'll be a chapter coming out every week, save life events getting in the way, which I don't anticipate they should.
“...and there seems to be no suggestion of further insurgent action, although, of course, preventative measures are being taken by the Imperial Police Force to secure the southern and western districts. Threshecutioner squads will be posted at regular intervals throughout the city to ensure maximal compliance with Imperial law, and although no curfew has yet been imposed, some have expressed—”

“And — sorry to interrupt, Lorca — would you say it’s likely that we’ll see an influx of drones in response to the lowblood riots? Particularly in areas like the Hedges, for example?”

“The answer to that, Morvan, is unfortunately, no. Drones are far too large and unwieldy to serve as any kind of effective safety measure, and the reality is that they’re really disruptive to trade routes, making it difficult to employ them without a city lockdown in place. Threshecutioner units are simply more mobile, more discrete, and per capita, more effective.”

“But not more cost-efficient, I might add.”

“Well, we bear what we must, Morvan, but the Condescension, blessed be her name and may she live forever, has always been very discerning with public service taxes. The bulk of the cost may fall on the policed areas. But frankly, we’ll just have to wait until this period of heightened security is over to see the tab; the price of safety, as we all know, runs high.”

“Indeed. Speaking of public service, has there been any word of a new appointee to the empty Archagent seat?”

“Not a whisper, although anonymous insider reports suggest that high-ranking bureaucretins have been meeting with the Condescension on a nightly basis to review a shortlist of contenders. It’s unthinkable to imagine that we’ll see the end of the month without someone at least in the works...”

Roxy snapped her fingers, and the hologram screen sank back into the breakfast bar. The Crocker Estate kitchen was smaller than she’d expected, and kept in pristine condition, by dint of never having any actual food in it; the stainless steel and spotless white marble of the floors and countertops gave it the impression of a film set, which, of course, it was. One whole wall opened out onto the Estate grounds, which were, since they lived in the city, small, but still sizable enough to fit a whole oak tree, rustling frost-tipped branches against the glass.

A window on her husktop offered a very different view. It offered a grainy feed of tiny bedroom, with a cot squeezed in one corner and the rest of the available space absolutely consumed by cords, circuits, bulky unidentifiable heaps of machinery and cannibalized gadgets, a veritable maze of fire hazards. Perched on what appeared to be the room’s only chair was one Dirk Strider, wearing the world’s ugliest tank top and its most pretentious pair of shades.

“Looks like you got sun,” Roxy remarked, leaning her chin on her hands. “Did you have to pay extra for them to bleach your roots, too?”

“Ha, ha. Very funny. I’ll have you know I’ve been out here doing honest to God old-fashioned physical labor. Feel like a fuckin’ construction drone, all the welding and shit I’ve been doing.”

“Must be weird. Give it a couple years, you’ll even be able to open a pickle jar without help.”
“Whoa, there, Lalonde. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Shit’s downright unrealistic.”

“You’re right. There’s only room for one strongman in this family, and the job is taken. Sorry, bro.”

“I don’t know why you’re framing this like an inconvenience to me. I had you hauling around computer mainframes for me for fifteen years under the guise of not being able to lift one myself.”

“You sneaky sonuvabitch.”

“Guilty as charged.” He was picking at a square, fan-looking device with a screwdriver instead of looking at her. That was par for the course. If his hands weren’t doing something, he wasn’t happy, and if it gave him something to occupy his eyes with besides the person he was talking to, so much the better.

“Whassat?”

“It’s a drone,” he said. “Old-school, twenty-second century model. I can’t believe it still works. We found it at the bottom of the ocean during one of our dives, and I originally brought it back to try and scrap, but I figure that with some updates, it’ll run like clockwork.”

“What do you want it to do?”

“Just fly around. Do some surveillance, security, that kind of thing. They’re the poor man’s satellite tracker.”

“Neat. Is the water filter on its bullshit again?”

“Oh, don’t even get me fucking started on the water filter,” he said, with heat. “Ask me when it’s not on its bullshit, that’s the harder question. Asshole’s got a hard rewiring coming to it if it doesn’t stop shitting its pants every time someone asks it to process more than eight liquid fucking ounces at once, and that’s a promise. Not that anybody around here is helping out. One of them dead ass suggested we try purifying the water with a chlorine-based cleaning agent, and nobody except yours truly could come up with a reason as to why that would be a magnificently shitty idea.”

Roxy snorted. “Why don’t you use a media filter instead? Hard to fuck that one up.”

“Would, except all the water around here is salt, so we’ve gotta desalinate as well as purify. And ordinarily I’d bite the bullet and buy one from Crockertech, except they don’t sell desalinators, because all their filters are built for finfaces who’d go skinny dipping in liquid sodium chloride if they could.”

“Yikes.” She tapped her foot against the stool thoughtfully. “Have you tried vapor-compression?”

“No guarantees, but if you’ve got the power — and I figure a couple of solar panels wouldn’t be too hard to rig up — it’s cheaper than electrodialysis by a mile.”

“I’ll look into it,” he said, and tapped the edge of his shades. Dirk’s visor was built into his sunglasses, because he was the reigning Douche Champion of the Planet, and also because in Bakersfield it was easier to built a visor into a pair of shades than to pay for the UV coating on a store-bought model. Virtually every piece of tech Dirk owned was homebrew. This was, in part, why it all broke so often.

“Speaking of the Crocker brand,” he said, and she groaned. “What? I distinctly remember being
promised a copious quantity of deets upon completion of the video caller. Lo; my part of the deal is complete. Produce the deets.”

“There’s nothin’ to tell! I swear, she’s just like. I mean, she’s not normal, exactly, but she’s . . . a person. You know.”

“You’re holding out on me. What does she like to eat? Does she watch TV? Walk me through a day in the life, I’m desperate, here.”

“Mm-m. You share some of your hot goss, if you’re so desperate for drama.”

“She likes really gross troll food? Dead baby juice, that’s a thing, isn’t it? Does she drink it for breakfast?”

“She doesn’t like to eat if she can’t help it, actually,” Roxy said, despite her best intentions, and then, because in for a caegar, in for an aureus: “—since she’s around food so much, and also because basically all of her shit is alchemized, she doesn’t know what real street food tastes like, Dirk, it’s a damn crime. Girl runs a culinary monopoly and she drinks caf for lunch, that’s what I call a tragedy. And she likes crime shows, like Trollcops and In Which Two Detectives From Diametrically Opposed Backgrounds Join Forces For A Comedic Romp Around New New York And Battle The Forces of Emotional Repression And Also The Mafia, but she likes novels better. Her favorite movie is Sherlock Holmes 36, the one with Johnny Lee Miller’s great-great-great-grandson and Troll Jude Law, but she’s seen it so often she just fuckin’ goes to town on it every time it comes on because she knows all the plot holes and twists already. Spoiled the ending within the first twenty minutes and called it ‘obvious.’ God, she’s awful to watch movies with. She wants me to watch Jurassic Park with her tomorrow night and I don’t know how I’m gonna survive it, she’s gonna tear it to shreds. ‘How would any part of this be insured, and how did they recruit enough employees to run low-wage jobs like customer service without promises of insurance benefits, given the isolated nature of this island?’ I don’t fuckin’ KNOW, Janey, I don’t think Stevie Spielberg was too preoccupied with insurance law, he was kind of busy revolutionizing the special effects industry!”

Dirk hadn’t touched his screwdriver in a few minutes. He was smirking.

“Wipe that look off your face, Stridork, you asked,” she said hurriedly, and pulled up her palmhusk so she’d have something to look at that wasn’t his smug face.

“So,” he said, poking at his drone with exaggerated casualness. “She’s hot, then.”

“Oh my God, shut up. I’m going to fly all the way out there just to give you a wet willie.”

“Good. Bring her with you, I’ll be practicing my shovel talk.”

“You’re the worst.”

“I’m aware.”

Her BettyBother was mostly empty, save a few memos from Crockercorp about employee policy and some invoices. She deleted them without looking; Jane would tell her if they were anything important. A single new message request had popped up at the top of the screen, which was unusual, since her spam filters usually caught extraneous messages before they could reach her inbox.

“Roxy?”

“Hmm?” She didn’t lift her eyes.
“I asked if Auto-Responder was still working well. I’ve been tossing around the idea of a software update, something like the new line of Nitram models.”

“Oh. No. Hal’s doing good. He’s a trooper.”

“Didn’t you say something about a loophole in his programming? The delay-order loop? That’s pretty dangerous gap to leave open.”

“I mean, he can’t do it without hurting himself something awful. And it’s not like he uses it to get out of following orders.”

“He’s got problems with authority. We both know this. Not sure what point there is to waiting for him to exploit a problem instead of just solving it here and now.”

“Because it’s not a problem,” she insisted.

“Giving an A.I. room to disagree with you if it so suits them is most definitely a fucking problem, Rox. If you read the books by the people who engineered the Crockertech A.I.—”

“Oh, c’mon, you don’t take their word at face value, do you?”

She clicked the message request. It opened what looked like a BettyBother window, except with a milder color scheme, and fewer pop-ups.

turntechGodhead began pestering tipsyGnostalgic!

TG: ey
TG: this you lalonde
TG: ding dong its the police
TG: youre under arrest for internet crimes
TG: nah jk
TG: its me dave

“I won’t press the point. He’s your visor, after all. But I’m just saying.”

“He’s a person,” she said, but it was distracted. “You can’t just . . . he’s a person.”

“Not saying he isn’t. I respect him as an autonomous being with his own thoughts and opinions, and I respect his right to have them. But seeing as he’s a version of myself, I wouldn’t trust him as far as I could throw him, even if he were large enough for that metaphor to mean literally anything at all in this situation.”

She responded, belatedly, “Yeah,” before fully processing what he said, and then overcorrecting with a fierce, “No.” Dirk frowned.

“You okay, there?”

“Yeah. Just . . . got a text. One sec.”

TG: strider??
TG: whoa whoa there
TG: lets keep a lid on that little fact nugget for the time being
TG: just call me chapelle
TG: :o
TG: ok
TG: top secret hush hush i geddit
TG: i
TG: wow
TG: yknow if ud told me like a month ago
TG: id be dming hollywood director d strider esq
TG: i mean since itd be u telling me id probably believe u because u r literally that guy
TG: but if anybody ELSE tried id be like lmao whack
TG: can i also have a code name

“Who is it?”

“A friend,” she mumbled. “Someone I met the other day.”

TG: ...like what
TG: marilyn monroe
TG: always thought that was a sick codename
TG: gonna be runnin around doin cool shit and lookin like prime real estate in babe city
TG: might as well have a name to match
TG: really
TG: i mean its not like you have to hide or anything
TG: youre not undercover here
TG: except i guess in the sense that you are
TG: but in the more relevant sense youre still in the public eye as roxy lalonde
TG: if u get to be dave chappelle i get to be marilyn monroe
TG: do yall stand for equality or not

“Sorry,” she said quickly. “It’s just. Time sensitive, y’know, he wouldn’t text unless it was important.”

“Nah, s’fine. I’m chill out here. Living on island time. That island, of course, being my house.”

“Thanks. Won’t be a sec.”

TG: aight you know what fine
TG: youre doing us a hefty enough solid you can pick whatever code name you want
TG: hit me up marilyn
TG: awww yisss
TG: so wdyw
TG: well
TG: not that im not hype as fuck to talk to my favorite kid bodyguard of a world leader
TG: but me and the s.o.l. are in a bind and have a problem thats just chock fucking ripe for solving by aforementioned favorite kid bodyguard of a world leader
TG: that being you girl
TG: mmmkauy
TG: whazzat

“Hey,” she said, “sorry about this, but I think I’m gonna have to sign off? Something’s come up.”

“Sure.” Dirk blinked, evidently confused but not suspicious. “Everything all right? Jane okay?”

“Wh— oh, yeah, of course. It’s not life or death, just something that’d be better off dealt with now than later, you feel me. Um. Talk to you later?”

“Yeah, I — I’d like to. There have been things going on here it’d be ideal for you to know about,”
he said. “Things involving — you know how I talked to you about the Seer, a few weeks ago?”

She startled so badly she almost dropped her palmhusk, and ducked out of frame to catch it. While she was down, she caught her breath and took the chance to school her face.

“Yeah. I remember.”

“Well, it’s — nothing dangerous, don’t worry, but — there’s been some rumormongering in town lately. Ain’t serious, yet, but the liberation movement — s’cuse me, insurrectionists, code switching’s a bitch — are closer than they used to be.”

“Are you safe?”

“Course I am,” he said, and she knew he wasn’t.

“Right,” she said, glancing at her palmhusk, to her husktop, pained. “Okay. We are talking about this later, you know that, right? We most definitely are. And you’re gonna tell me everything, and I’ll let you in on some of the shit going on with me, just—”

“Not right now. I get that.” He tilted his head, a movement evocative of an inquisitive bird. “Are you sure you’re all right, Rox?”

Her palmhusk buzzed.

“Yes! All right and really kind of busy at the moment, Dirk, so can I please, please call you back?”

“Let me know if things work o—”

“Coolloveyoubye!”

She hung up.

TG: you know seer cant hit up servers that arent gov bureaucracy right
TG: ya
TG: k so what we need to know is where babys first fortune 500 is gonna be on the night of the 27th
TG: wut
TG: jane
TG: does she have plans that night
TG: and if so what are they
TG: thats kinda creepy dude
TG: like i didnt sign up to help yall peep jcs biz
TG: i thought i was gonna b hackin stuff abt imperial troops n etc
TG: leakin access codes to databases and other official bs
TG: i mean you can still totally do that if you want
TG: but like right now
TG: that first thing is gonna be way more helpful to us personally
TG: le groan!!
TG: what r u usin it 4
TG: thats
TG: tough to say
TG: thats not shady at all
TG: point taken
TG: but like tbf we cant really say what were gonna do until we have that info
TG: causal dependencys all flipped up inverse of the picture you got in your head you dig
TG: what r u tryna get the drop on jane 4! thats not a weird question like
TG: we want to make sure shes safe ok
TG: thats legit all
TG: i promised she wasnt gonna get hurt when you agreed to help and i meant it
TG: oh ok wow that turned out way more threatening than it did in my head aight
TG: take two here goes
TG: of all the things that are currently threatening jane crocker right now
TG: we are by far the least of her problems
TG: urrgggh
TG: still not inspirin shitloads a confidence mr chappelle
TG: but ill buy it bc u should know if ur fuckin with me an janey gets hurt bc of some insurgenty
time in the near future i WILL beat ur ass to kingdom mcfucking come
TG: she so much as scrapes her knee bc of some shit yall pulled and im comin after u peronsally like
i am the worlds most bombdiggityest hunter and its fuckin dave season
TG:
TG: huh
TG: sorry you just
TG: reminded me of someone just then
TG: well
TG: do you dig
TG: yeah yeah
TG: i get it
TG: youll flay me alive like im prime pork loin and youre a butcher with a grudge
TG: shits clear as glass
TG: ok
TG: long as thats squared away
TG: shits squared like a trolls love life kid you dont gotta worry about a thing
TG: fabulicious
TG: uhm lemme check my calendare then

She opened the calendar on her husktop. Jane had merged their schedules for convenience’s sake —
something about efficiency, something about saving storage space, Roxy hadn’t been paying
attention at the time — and her events for the next three weeks showed up on Roxy’s itinerary. All
one hundred and thirty of them.

TG: were not gonna be at home on the 27th i knoe that much
TG: gonna be hittin up some crusty ol highblood for a blowout at the operahouse for a ball or smthn
TG: you mean the orphaners shindig
TG: yea thats it
TG: seems like crockers idea of a fun friday night is sittin in a black box watchin some seadwellers
warble for a few hrs
TG: dont knock it till youve tried it
TG: and by that i mean knock it profusely after youve tried it because shits easier to make fun of
when youve got more material
TG: kids spending her friday night at the operahouse shits downright sad
TG: wheres the god damn humanity in that i ask you
TG: thats what i b SAYIN
TG: right well keep fighting the good fight monroe
TG: i gotta dip now seers been riding my ass like its her own personal pet pony for the past five and
we got shit to sort
TG: but thanks for the tip
The door to the kitchen slid open. Roxy flung her palmhusk into her sylladex with a movement so graceless that the captchalogue near didn’t take, and she came unnervingly close to vaulting the device across the room.

Marsti stepped into the doorway, regarded her without impressment for a long moment, and then continued about her business. She held a mop in one hand and a bucket in the other, and set about swabbing down the tile with a mindless brutality that suggested the floor had personally wronged her in the recent past.

“Hi,” Roxy said, closing her husktop.

Marsti said, “Miss Lalonde,” without intonation.

“How are you?”

She dumped the mop into the bucket and drew it out, weeping suds. “Perfectly well, Miss Lalonde.”

“Good.”

She wrestled the mop across the floor, eyes down, head low. Roxy tapped her nails on the marble, one-two-three, click-click-click.

Marsti exhaled, short and quick, and then pivoted briskly on her heel to face her.

“Can I help you with something, Miss Lalonde?”

“Me? No. I’m good. About your beeswax, Mars Bar.”

“My last name is Houtek,” she, “if you do not wish to call me by my first, Miss Lalonde.”

“Oh, that’s — it's just a nickname.”

“I’m aware.”

Roxy stared at the ceiling. Marsti did not move. She was merciless.

“I had a question,” Roxy mumbled, at length.

“Which would be?”

“And you don’t have to answer if you don’t wanna, like. To be clear. If it’s gonna get you in shit with our mutual employer to say.”

“Bold of you to assume that I would risk my job security in order to slake your curiosity in the first place,” Marsti deadpanned, “but thank you.”

“Ha! Was that a joke, Mars?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“No, it was good! Keep making them.”
Marsti said, “You had a question,” but it lacked the bitter exasperation at Roxy’s general existence she had carried with her when she walked in.

“Do you . . . how long have you been here?”

“Four sweeps, eight perigees, nine days.”

“Wow. Down to the day, even, like . . .”

“I’ve kept track.”

“Okay. Well, then.” Roxy’s fingers picked up again, doing a snazzy little number on the countertop. “You would remember Jake, wouldn’t you?”

The expression that gripped Marsti’s face was a hindbrain at work, raw panic and anger and horror, the way that an animal got when something reminded it of pain.

“No,” she said. “No, I never — I never heard the name Jake in my life. Did someone say I had? I swear, I haven’t— I’m loyal—I swear to you, ma’am, on the name of the Empress and on my head be it, I never—”

“Hey, no, what’s up? I was just asking. Nothing serious, here, I didn’t mean anything by it.” Roxy lifted her hands. “You can talk around me. I’m no snitch.”

“Most honorable apologies for the disrespect I’m about to pay you, Miss Lalonde,” said Marsti, “but that doesn’t actually matter.”

“What?”

“Please don’t ask me about people who didn’t exist,” the butler said, a quiet plea, and then bent her head, and went back to work.

“Hold on,” said Roxy, a knot of concern lodging itself in her gut. She slid off her stool. “What are you talking about? Didn’t exist, what? I know the guy’s a family disgrace, but that doesn’t mean you can just will him out of existence.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about. Please believe me.”

“I’m talking about Jake English,” she said, “neé Harley, the guy who lived here for fourteen years and change, a guy you almost definitely interacted with on the regular, and why are you being cagey?”

“Miss Lalonde, if you understood how he—”

Marsti clapped a hand over her mouth. It wasn’t a gesture of regret or self-censure. Her hand moved like a thing apart from her body, sealing over her lips, striking her face with enough force to hurt. The mop clattered to the floor.

Roxy came around the breakfast counter and picked it up, and resting it against the wall.

“. . . Mars?”

A tendon rose taut in Marsti’s neck as she used her left hand to pry her own digits from her mouth. A flush of dark red spread around her black lips, bright and violent below the grey of her skin, where the slap had drawn the blood to her face.
Wordlessly, she hooked a finger around her neckline and drew it down. Roxy drew a breath and choked on it.

A long, ill-hewn scar etched its way over the junction between neck and collarbone, bulging and black, with a crust of dead skin clinging to the uneven seam. It covered the area where her tag should have been. The stitches looked haphazard and painful, but so profusely that it had to have been intentional; wounds of coincidence never healed that ugly. The person who had made it must have wanted her to remember what had been done.

“Please don’t ask me about people who didn’t exist,” she said. “I don’t know anything about them.”

Roxy said, “What the fuck.” Deep, hate-warm anger rooted in her chest.

“Do you require anything else?”

“Yeah, uh, I need you to tell me who the fuck did that to your tag, so I can go and tear out their gonads with a butter knife. What the actual living fuck!”

“That would be treason, Miss Lalonde,” said Marsti, calm and pleasant and with a depth of loathing that took Roxy aback.

“Oh,” she said, because what else could she?

“Do you require anything else?”

She drew her shirt back up, smoothed down the collar. The mop had lilted tremulously to one side, and she righted it.

Roxy shook her head.

“Then with your permission,” she said, “I believe I will finish the floors in here another time.” Planting the mop in the bucket, she wheeled both out of the room with her chin high, not sparing another glance at Roxy.

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“Janey,” Roxy said, striding through the door of the gym like a drone on the warpath, “we need to talk, like, right the fuck now.”

The dueling robot took the opportunity offered by Jane’s distraction to twist its hold, tearing the fork from her grip, and followed it up with a backhand that brought the tip of its spear within an inch of her throat.

“Point,” it chimed, with chipper indifference, and then retreated into resting position.

Jane exhaled sharply and stooped to pick up her weapon, deactivating the sparring program with a pinch of the android’s shoulder. She stepped off the square dueling mat and the lights strung along the edge dulled to acknowledge her retirement. “What is it, Roxy?”

“I —” Roxy cut herself off. “What were you doing?”

“Was it really not obvious?” She used the bottom of her tank top to blot some of the sweat off her forehead.
“What is that thing?”

Roxy was eyeing the Crockertech dueling robot with deep unease. Jane paused in getting some water to spare it a look.

“It’s the sparring program,” she said. “Helps me keep in practice.”

“And it gives you a fair fight?”

“Fairer than any living creature would,” Jane pointed out. The adrenaline slowly worked its way out of her system. “Did you have something you wanted?”

“Yeah,” said Roxy, although she still seemed preoccupied with the robot. “I wanted to talk about Marsti.”

“Did she do something wrong?”

“No. That’s the problem.”

Jane set her water back down and frowned. “That’s not typically an issue, when it comes to staff.”

“It’s not — I don’t know how to say this,” Roxy rubbed her temples. “Do you know she doesn’t have a tag?”

Jane sucked a deep breath in and considered her next words carefully.

“Yes,” she settled on, but in a dithering sort of way that suggested an unspoken caveat.

“You did?”

It sounded like betrayal. Jane hurried to backtrack.

“I mean — the whole staff had them removed. Everyone who was there, when — you know. It couldn’t be—”

“On whose authority?”

“—a collective punishment levied to avoid killing them, I had to negotiate, and I urged leniency, but my own position at the time was—”

“On whose authority, Jane? Yours?”

Jane was stunned silent. She stared at Roxy.

“No,” she said, hearing her own voice as if through an echo chamber. “Of course it wasn’t on my orders.”

Roxy deflated with palpable relief. “Yeah,” she said. “Yeah, I figured — I knew it wasn’t.”

Jane felt no similar release of tension. A knot tied itself at the back of her throat.

“Did you actually think that I’d — in a hundred years, did you believe I would order—”

“No, I—”

“—to have people mutilated?” She stepped closer, getting into Roxy’s space, and it was unlike her, a terribly unladylike thing to do — not that she had the height to manage physical intimidation,
anyway, but — she was feeling unlike herself. “Did you?”

“No.”

“Roxy.” She almost reached out to touch her, but pinned her hands at her sides. “Did you?”

“Of course not,” Roxy cut across, fiercely. “But I had to ask, didn’t I?”

“Why? If you really believed—”

“Because you were going off about ‘orders’ and ‘negotiations’ and shit instead of answering the question! You were deflecting like a motherfucker, and that’s scary as shit! Would’ve helped if you’d come out swinging with ‘hey, I didn’t do it,’ like—”

“I wasn’t deflecting.”

“Like fuck.”

Jane’s train of thought, which had previously been sailing down a merry track of righteous indignation, swiveled and careened off its rails.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I said ‘like fuck,’” Roxy clarified. “As in, ‘like fuck you weren’t deflecting’ and ‘like fuck didn’t act shady about that in ways I’m still not totally feeling great about,’ so I’m assuming there’s a part of that story I don’t have, and you don’t have to, like, tell it, if it’s private biz, but at least telling me that there was some extenuation going on in those circumstances would be much appreciated.”

Jane tried to recall if anyone had spoken to her that way. The Empress, of course. Jake, maybe.

“After Jake ran,” she said, still teasing out her words with care, “the staff was punished for their complicity.”

“What, did they help?”

“They kept his secrets,” she said, repeated what she recalled of the legislacerator’s argument. “They failed to report him. Hard to believe that none of them knew anything about it, or that none of them had the chance to stand in his way.”

“That’s it?”

“Did I say I agreed with it? You asked why it happened; I’m telling you.”

“Can they get them back?”

Jane hesitated. Roxy was earnest and keen.

“No,” she said. “They’re implanted at birth. Beneath the bone, you see, to avoid it coming out with a well-placed cut. Past a certain point, the skeleton firms up, locks it in, and the body gets used to the intrusion. They can’t be removed without a very invasive surgery, and to put them back in . . . the pain alone, I can’t imagine.”

“But you can’t do anything without a tag. You can’t use credit, you can’t register for services, shit, you can’t even leave the city, cuz they scan you at the border — how are they supposed to function?”
“They’re not,” said Jane quietly. “That’s rather the point of it, actually.”

Roxy raked her hands through her hair, knocking out her loose ponytail. “So, what. It’s just like that, for them, now?”

“The alternative was death,” Jane said. Miserably. “I’m sorry. I did what — what I could —”

“You were a fucking fourteen-year-old when it happened,” Roxy snapped. “Stop apologizing, I’m not mad at you.”

She was practically shaking with a thinly veiled current of anger. Roxy’s anger ran hot; that was interesting. Jane didn’t think she’d seen Roxy angry before.

“Careful,” she warned. It wasn’t for her. Roxy didn’t have anything to fear, from her, but then, Jane wasn’t the person Roxy was mad at.

She didn’t think Crocker Estate employed audio surveillance. That didn’t necessarily exclude the possibility.

It seemed to work. Roxy nodded, accepting the warning, and steeled herself. “Okay. I’m gonna . . . I’m gonna blow off some steam. I think. You game for a real fight, Janey?”

She marched up to the sparring mat and shed her jacket with a fluid roll of the shoulders, tossing it over a chair, and Jane lost a good few seconds of clear thought.

“You’re not wearing the right clothes.”

Roxy glanced down at herself. Jane had made sure to equip her with as many suits as there were days of the week, so she never found herself without something appropriately professional for public appearances, but Roxy managed to make them look casual, somehow, anyway. The tie had been done away with, as had the top two buttons of the blouse, and as usual, her hair floated loose around her shoulders. As Jane watched, she unpinned her cuffs and rucked her sleeves up around her elbows.

“I mean, for one thing,” she said, “I’ve fought in way worse than this. And also, as a side note, if these clothes can’t be fought in, I don’t think your bodyguard should be wearing them.”

This was actually a compelling point, to which Jane realized she didn’t have a compelling answer. It also wasn’t as if Roxy couldn’t change, later. One objection yet to be made was that Roxy looked unfairly distracting in her suit, whereas Jane was still in two hour-old exercise gear, but it wasn’t as though she could make that point and not expect to get laughed out of the building.

“Fine,” she said. “Draw your specibus, then.”

Roxy giggled. “And, what, pop you one between the eyes? I’m riflekind. I didn’t pick a sparring strife deck.”

Jane’s brow furrowed. “What do you expect to fight with, then?”

Roxy shook out her hands, and then raised her fists. Jane’s eyebrows made a bid for the ceiling.

“You want to brawl?”

“Only fair way to do it.” Roxy grinned, the pink slip of her tongue darting between her front teeth.
She radiated excitement, twitching with pent-up energy. “You haul that fork around like it’s a toothpick, you’ve totally got the muscle for it.”

Jane captchalogue her specibus and stepped forward. “What form are you suggesting?”

“. . . the kind where you punch?”

“No,” she laughed. “Do you want to box, or wrestle, or what?”

“None of that fancy shit,” Roxy complained. “A fight with rules ain’t a real fight. Just try to hit me, and when you do, don’t pull the punch. Act like you’ve really got it in for me?”

“If I ‘really had it in for you,’” Jane remarks, cautiously mirroring Roxy’s pose, “I think I’d just draw my specibus and be done with it.”

“Boring. Square up.”

“I was under the impression that I already had,” she said, or would have, if in the middle of the sentence Roxy had not vaulted into the air and tried to high-kick her in the head.

It was such a disorienting opener that it nearly worked. Jane swerved and Roxy landed lightly on her feet, coming down hard on the other side of the mat, following up with another quick jab to Jane’s solar plexus. She backed out of the blow’s range again.

“Come on,” Roxy complained. “That’s no fun.”

“Neither is getting hit,” Jane said dryly, but this time, when Roxy tried to punch, she reached out and knocked the blow away with her bare palm. The impact shook her, a little. She hadn’t expected Roxy to pack quite the force she did. But she still had the same edge over Roxy in muscle that Roxy had over her in height, and one was infinitely more useful than the other in a brawl.

She was also fast. Probably not faster than Roxy, but the real advantage that Jane got out of it was that Roxy was unaware of that fact.

A punch came at her stomach, which she dodged. She replied from instinct, and her knuckles met Roxy’s forearm, which had sprung up to guard her face. No real pattern composed the strikes Roxy lobbed at her. She just lashed out with her fists until she made contact, which was, Jane supposed, how real fights went. Form was an instrument of civility, and real fights weren’t civil.

When Roxy tried a roundhouse, Jane caught her ankle and pulled, hard. Her palm burned, but Roxy slipped off her feet and landed hard on her back. Jane dropped and planted her hands on Roxy’s shoulders.

The whole thing lasted less than half a minute.

“Yield?”

“Nah,” Roxy said, panting, and then, curling one leg around Jane’s, flipped the pair of them clean over.

Immediately, she scrambled into place straddling Jane’s stomach, bracing her knees on Jane’s forearms to keep her in place. “There,” she said, with satisfaction. “Owned.”

*What an odd choice of words,* Jane thought, staring. Roxy’s hair hung down around her face in sweat-tangled strands, her shirt had come partially untucked, and her chest rose and fell sharply as
she drew breath. She was a warm weight on Jane’s stomach. Jane wasn’t unused to people touching her, by any means, given her job, but this was . . . qualitatively different.

“If you say so,” she said, which hadn’t been what she’d meant to. “Let me up, will you?”

Roxy’s face did a funny little thing. It wasn’t a smile, precisely, or maybe it was, and just not the kind that Roxy usually wore. It was more restrained, and more unreadable.

“Maybe I won’t,” she said. “What’d you do, then, Heiress?”

If humans could have kismeses, or an equivalent of caliginous romance, it would have been overt to the point of being gauche. It would have been obscene. Jane felt like she was burning.

“Well,” she said, drawing upon years of practice in maintaining her composure and still probably falling short. “I’d have to make you, I suppose.”

“How’re you gonna do that?” Roxy deliberately shifted her weight onto her knees, putting pressure on Jane’s shoulders. “I’ve got you pinned, sweetheart.”

A girl could only be expected to endure so much. Jane was a consummate professional, and she maintained that professionalism to the best of her abilities, except Roxy was smirking like she was the first person in the world to discover what flirting was, and that would not stand.

“My dear,” said Jane. “You aren’t actually that heavy. If I wanted you off, you would be.”

Roxy stuttered over her reply, and it served her right, too. To see her flustered made Jane unreasonably pleased with herself.

When it appeared that there would be no rejoinder, however, the situation took a swift nosedive into awkwardness. “That being said,” Jane said briskly, “I really would like to stand up, and would prefer it not require me to move you by force, so—”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, sure.” Roxy rolled off her, and Jane got to her feet. She tugged out the wrinkles in her shirt, mostly in order to have something to do with her hands. The whole room seemed very quiet. Ought she try and shake her hand? Overly formal, and might come off as an insult. On the other hand, to not attempt it could be a sign of disrespect. There was never this kind of trouble with the dueling robots.

“I have a dinner to get to in an hour,” she said, and struggled to come up with anything less appealing. “With the Chairman of the Board of Trustees. I should be getting ready for it.”

“Yeah?” Roxy didn’t even make an effort to put herself to rights. She got up, stretched, and stuck her hands in her pockets, as if she’d just as readily roll out the door with her hair mussed and her shirt untucked. It was nearly as aggravating as it was endearing. “Chill. Lemme grab a shower, and we can rock and roll.”

“I’ll be ready to leave in thirty minutes, give or take.” Jane paused, and sent her a suspicious side-eye. “You’ll wear a suit, won’t you?”

“Course.”

“A suit which is not the one you are currently wearing?”

Roxy glanced down at herself and frowned. “There’s nothing wrong with it.”
“Except you’ve been tussling in it, and — don’t start, I know for a fact that you have enough outfits to wear more than one a day now, that’s a guilt trip that only works once — there are appearances to maintain, one of which is the facade, however thin, that you are at all moments a composed and dignified member of Crockercorp staff.”

“I’m dignified as fuck.”

“A phrase which all dignified people employ quite often,” Jane said. “I am sure. Half an hour. Wear the green tie; I like it on you.”

She didn’t remember approving that remark before it slipped out, but there was no need to let Roxy know that, so she left quickly after that, in the hopes that she could be gone before it registered.

Alternian wine had an unpleasant viscosity. Thicker than water, thinner than blood, leaving vivid stains of red against the bottom of the glass and a coppery aftertaste at the back of the tongue. Drinking it presented an unfortunate but necessary part of any business luncheon, and Jane had developed several strategies to manage the ordeal without choking it back up. One of them was to try not to breathe while she drank, since if you couldn’t smell the sharp, vinegary tang of tannins older than your civilization, the taste became less potent. Her purse held enough breath mints to make a hoofbeast’s maw smell peppermint fresh. But nothing she could do really mitigated the horror of toasting with a glass of something that, while sublime to any Alternian palette, to the human tongue most resembled drinking straight bleach.

The troll across from her had just polished off his second glass. He had a stovepipe hat and a tailcoat, and his blood was purpler than the dregs in his cup. “It’s been grand,” he said, and she smiled, made a thin-lipped remark about prosperity and future agreements, and picked up the check. This pleased him more than anything she could have said.

She wondered if all seadwellers had a predisposition towards sounding like a 1930’s-era radio announcer. Grand. Splendid. He chewed scenery like a hungry termite, warbled his vowels like he was trying to swallow his own tongue.

“I expect we’ll do this sometime again soon, Heiress. Give my best to the Empress, would you? I haven’t had the chance to speak wiv’ her in a while.”

Leaning on the wall the entrance, Roxy caught her eye and made a lazy jerking-off motion with her hand.

Jane pursed her lips to avoid smiling. She replied, “As you wish, Lord Whelan.”

“An’ I’ll send one of my people to see about the merger.”

“That would be excellent.” She rose and extended her hand to be shaken. “Thank you for the pleasure, sir.”

He glanced at her hand as one might a piece of mold on their food, although to his credit, he at least made an effort to cover lost ground and feign politeness. “Oh,” he said, laughingly. “I forgot how you landdwellers do things. Yes, let’s shake on it. When in New Imperial City, and all that.”

He shook her hand, with the dramatic flair of someone doing something for the first time and
enjoying the experiment immensely. “An’ for tradition’s sake,” he added, and swooped in to peck her once on each cheek with cursory affection. His lips were cold as fish skin and equally clammy. To avoid seeming rude, she paid him the same courtesy and gave him a pair of kisses in return.

As highbloods went, Lord Whelan held a place squarely among the least objectionable ones she knew. Virtually everything objectionable about him was a habit picked up by dent of being a seadweller, and not a personal fault or failing that he had developed of his own right. That sounded like damningly faint praise, unless one considered how very unpleasant highbloods were capable of being if they so choose. Whelan, at least, made an effort not to be unpleasant when he could avoid it; the remarks he made about her humanity or blood color were never meant as insults. She got the feeling that he viewed their interactions as a game of sorts, an opportunity for variety.

He offered her his arm as they walked to the entrance, and she took it. He folded his free hand over hers. “I’ve been workin’ on a new model of drone cannon,” he said, and she recalled, after a moment’s confusion, that Whelan was a recreational weapons engineer. Not as his full-time job, but on the side, when he could. The latest model of Imperial Drones were almost entirely of his own design.

“Oh?”

“Tryin’ to make ’em immune to EMP,” he said. “Not that they don’t already buffer most anything what comes their way, but there’s still some higher-level blasts what’ll take ’em out. I’ve been modelin’ them after the psionic shields that Helms use.”

“Doesn’t that require an awfully big power source?”

“Clever girl,” said Whelan, delightedly. “Yes. That’s the trick of it. I’ve tried using internal generators, but they’re just too heavy, and considering how featherweight-model drones already weigh in at a few tons, it’s near impossible to build a generator that’ll allow ’em to get off the ground.”

“Mm. Perplexing.”

“Ain’t it? But I’m presentin’ my current work to the Ministerror of Military Dev tomorrow anyway. Figured I could hand over the blueprints and let ’is scienstiffs sort out the logistical bits, just to get production up an’ running.”

“I hope it goes well.”

“Well, hey, thanks.” Whelan smiled, and despite the rows of jagged incisors, he managed to make it into an innocuous gesture. “Here’s hopin’, ain’t it?”

Roxy fell into step behind them as they left the restaurant. A footman with Whelan’s symbol on his breast pocket immediately darted off to the valet stand, and the lord disengaged from Jane with a pat to her wrist. “You’ll have to come see the prototype,” he encouraged. “It’s a thing a’ beauty. You know, I could make a gift of it. A version right special for human use particular.”

“Would you,” she said, with all enthusiasm it was possible to muster for the subject, since he really did mean it as a kindness. “You’re really quite generous.”

“Ain’t a thing,” he said. “I’ll send your manservant the details. Does she have a Trollian handle?”

“But of course, my lord sire,” Roxy deadpanned under her breath.

Jane wheezed, managing to turn it into a cough at the last minute. “Another time,” she promised.
hurriedly, and waved Lord Whelan off as he sidled into the lift the valet had drawn up.

At this time of evening, the streets were alive. The Highblood District hummed with tension, a taut excitement that the night brought with it, the rushed release of the workday’s end. But Jane had seen the city at every hour in every season, and the frisson that possessed it now was different from its normal evening surge. There were drones on the horizon and flies on the sidewalks, and people moved with an urgency that belied the time of night. They did not meet each other’s eyes.

A squad of threshecutioners stood on the corner. High-collared black uniforms with scarlet Imperial pins at the hollow of the throat, and chitinous armor, light, almost more ceremonial than functional. A broad sickle strapped to the waist. Two of them had a brownblood in a hornlock, and a third had a tag reader out, scanning where one of them had torn back the kid’s collar. Already, the brownblood sported a wide bruise over the whole left side of his face, and a laceration on his side wept coppery blood down his hip.

And Roxy was sprinting towards them like a woman possessed. Shouting, inaudible over the roar of the crowd, but clearly drawing their attention away from the brownblood and towards her.

The threshecutioner turned to her, breaking the hornlock but not sheathing their sword. Their expression was too distant to see in detail, but they weren’t pleased. Jane was reminded, with a sickening jolt, that interfering with threshecutioner business was a punishable offense.

Pain flared in her temples. Red text flashed, too fast to decipher. The thresher took a step closer to Roxy, and Jane pushed it aside.

“Excuse me,” she said. She broke into a jog. “Excuse me! Sorry! Sir?”

The thresher turned, their hand sliding off the hilt of their sickle. She smiled, deliberately and widely.

“Sir,” she said. “A moment of your time? Sir.”

“Heiress,” said the thresher, a greenblood nearer to teal than jade, and he bowed his head once in formal supplication.

“Thank you ever so. I — sorry, did you have business with my bodyguard?” Jane brushed her fingers over Roxy’s arm.

The thresher’s visor was opaque, completely. But she got the feeling he was staring at her, all the same.

“Not presently,” he said. “Miss Lalonde here addressed me.”

“Oh, she was probably just curious. Sorry to bother you; she’s new in the city, only been here a month, hasn’t seen a threshecutioner before. Wait till she meets her first legislacerator! Thank you, again, sir.”

Roxy said, “Jane—”

“But now,” said Jane through gritted teeth, “you scamp.”

She grabbed ahold of Roxy’s arm and tugged. Willing or not, Roxy went.

As soon as they were out of the threshecutioner’s sight, she lead them off the main road and into the wide, mostly empty parking lot behind the tower. The sky was dimming, and patches of black ice underfoot turned the asphalt into an obstacle course. She navigated them up under the yellow glare of
a streetlight and then, after checking again that they weren’t being followed, dropped Roxy’s arm.

“What the hell was that?”

“I could ask you the same thing!” Roxy brushed off her arm, more irritation than actual pain. Jane hadn’t held on hard enough to hurt. “They weren’t old enough to be making trouble, I’ll bet they were just shoplifting, if that—”

“That doesn’t matter! It’s not your place to interfere!”

“Then whose fucking place is it?” Roxy pushed her, and Jane skid backward. “Yours? Heiress? You weren’t going to do it! Guess that leaves me, then!”

Jane seized Roxy by the collar and wedged her up against the streetlamp.

“You are not the fucking Knight of Time,” she hissed. “You do not have an army behind you, and there is not a thing in this world that will get between you and one of those sickles, if you put yourself in their path. Do you understand? Have you ever dealt with a threshecutioner before? I’d wager the only reason you’re alive is because they were too shocked at your audacity to kill you on sight. A thresher will not stay their hand because you’re my friend, or because of anything you could say to them to make them change their minds. They’re not common flies. You can’t levy star power against them. They don’t care, and they won’t listen.”

“I wasn’t trying to!”

“You had better have been trying to,” she snarled, “because the alternative is that you went into that exchange without a plan as to how you’d survive if they decided not to take your word on good faith.”

“I was going to be fine.”

“Oh, were you.”

“I could have managed it—”

“Can you, now. People who can do that normally don’t go around throwing hands with threshecutioners, but—”

“You’re not the only person in the universe who can take care of themselves!”

Jane opened her mouth, and then snapped it shut.

“Maybe not,” she says brightly. “Maybe I’m a patronizing ass. But until you pull yourself together and stop flinging yourself off cliffs with delusions of flight, I can say with confidence I’m a damn sight better at it than you.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Really! Please, do elab—”

“They were gonna cull him on the street,” Roxy exploded. “Right there. They don’t get the tag reader out unless they’ve got intent to convict, and intent to convict means intent to cull in threshecutioner. You think I don’t know how threshers work? Between the two of us, I’m the only one who ever had to worry about them!”

“Are you,” Jane trilled. “Are you! How do you figure that?”
“Like the Empire’s kid icon had to stress over getting culled—”

“She did.”

Jane didn’t want to think about what her face looked like, just now. If any of it was reflected in Roxy’s expression, it was terrible.

She released Roxy’s collar and gave her a few steps of space. Roxy sagged against the lamppost, massaging her neck. A siren howled from blocks away.

“You mentioned the Knight of Time,” Roxy said.

“I’m sorry?”

“The Knight of Time.” She plunged her hands deep into her pockets. “Guy you name-dropped. Wouldn’t happen to be associated with the Seer of Light, would he.”

Jane dragged her hands down her face, ruining her makeup and not caring. “Let’s both acknowledge that neither of should know either of those names,” she said tiredly, “and move on in mutual understanding of the danger it poses for us to do so.”

“How’d you pick them up?” Roxy pressed her. “What have you been reading?”

“Nothing!”

“Nothing, huh? You up and telepathically gleaned that shit?”

“I know the names of the top two insurgents in the Empire,” Jane whispered fiercely, “because I happen to be one of the top two leaders of the damn thing, and would take it as a dear kindness if you would not insinuate that I am a traitor, given what happens to those, around here.”

Roxy blanched.

“That being?”

Jane gave her a good, hard once-over before realizing that she was serious.

“Death,” she said incredulously. “If you’re very, very lucky, and very, very smart. You die.”

“But if—”

“But if- nothing, even if- nothing, and if- nothing,” she snapped. “In recent history, there has been one traitor in New Chicago to make it out of the city alive, and everyone he ever touched has been paying for it for the last three years.”

A lift rolled past, lights blazing pure white trails on dirty snow. The lit spires of downtown towered over them to the south. Even at a distance, the buildings dominated the horizon, their uppermost floors cloaked in a veil of clouds and smog, and their lowermost in grime and shadow.

“How you know the Knight,” Jane said tiredly, “is the better question, really.”

Roxy shrugged. “My brother lives on the outskirts of the Empire. He picks up things about the lib movement.”

“You mean the insurgency?”
“Yeah,” she said. “That. You know, terminology’s different out there, but they’re one and the same. But I’m . . . I wouldn’t do anything to put us in danger, is what I’m saying. I wouldn’t put you in danger.” She took ahold of Jane’s shoulder. “I wouldn’t ever.”

Jane spluttered, “I’m not worried about me, you ass!”

There was a moment where the words hung in the empty space between them, and Jane felt like curling into a ball and dying on the spot.

Then she found her head pressed into the soft fabric of Roxy’s jacket, with an arm like an iron bar curled around her shoulders and a hand cradling the back of her head.

“What—”

“Shh,” Roxy said. “No words. Only hugs.”

“What are you—?”

“I said no words.”

“And I heard you, but—”

“Shhh,” Roxy insisted, thumbing through Jane’s hair, and the pins holding back Jane’s updo came tumbling out. Her newly freed curls fell to brush gently against the back of her neck.

Jane said, “I’m sorry for being rough with you. I wasn’t certain you’d follow me away, if I asked.”

Roxy laughed, and it hummed against Jane’s cheek. “That ain’t rough,” she said. “I grew up sharing a bedroom with my big brother. That back there was a courtesy hold.”

“But it was uncivil.”

“Uncivil?”

“Unkind, rather. Unpleasant.”

“Think the word you’re going for is ‘wrong.’” Roxy flicked the top of her head. “But it’s forgiven.”

“Yes?” Jane tugged on her lapel. “Then I forgive you for running into danger, I suppose.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, it would be inconvenient to be cross with you. So.”

“So,” Roxy parroted, trying on an abject butchery of Jane’s accent. Jane pulled back to frown at her.

“I don’t sound like that.”

“Like what?”

“You’re still doing it! Stop that.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m not Oliver Twist!”

“Course you’re not,” said Roxy. “I mean, to start with, you’re way richer.”
“That’s what you start with?”

“I mean,” drawled Roxy, and Jane drew herself up to her full height.

“I’m going back to the lift.” She started walking. “Would you like to join me?”

“Aww, c’mon, don’t get sore.”

“I’m not.”

Roxy caught up, jostling her. “You totes are.”

“I am not.”

“Sore like a thigh on leg day.”

“Roxanne.”

“Janice.”

“Oh, God, don’t.”

“Janathan?”

“Please.”

“Jannika.”

“Must you be this way?”

“I mean, it’s more of a lifestyle choice than a compulsion, really.”

“And you just admit that?”

“Ouch! Hey, now.”

The last traces of Jane’s headache vanished.

She doubted Roxy noticed. But she took the long way around the block, to the place where the valet parked their lift, instead of going back to the corner where the threshecutioners had been.
TG: + 1 of them threatened Janey and I
TG: what
TG: well more me than Janey
TG: but when she got involved he didn't look friendly either
TG: they were comfortable threatening the heiress?
TG: o yeah
TG: mother fucker did not care
TG: how many of them did you see
TG: only like 1 squad in the whole HBD
TG: a squads 7/8 of em right
TG: yeah
TG: yeah thats just the one
TG: so thered be probably around fifty or sixty total in the city right
TG: assuming youre right about the headcount
TG: sure
TG: i mean i can ask but
TG: look i dont
TG:
TG: feel safe here
TG: i dont think janeys safe here
TG: i wanna do smthn thats not twiddling my thumbs and hopin i dont fuck up so bad they go after me
TG: i dont like this city anymore
TG: i thought i did
TG: it was pretty and fun and it had a lot of shit Bakersfield sure as fuck never did but
TG: honestly id take Bakersfield in a heartbeat
TG: compared to this
TG: i know
TG: shit sucks and its awful i know
TG: the capitol isnt a great place to be for humans even at the best of times
TG: and you kind of vaulted smack dab into the middle of it at the worst possible time in a long while
TG: and i feel like a grade a cut of prime shithead telling you this but
TG: you gotta sit on that shit and bide ok
TG: right now youre most useful as someone they trust and you cant be that if youre going hand to hand with a theschectioner first chance you get
TG: i know ok im not fuckig stupid
TG: but i wanna
TG: i gotta do SOMETHING
TG: im going to lose my mind just sitting here and WATCHING shit i cant
TG: like no can do commander sorry sir
TG: ok well
TG: how about the stuff youre already doing for us
TG: spying and shit what about that
TG: thats helpful
TG: but its not like
TG: im not saving lives
TG: im not changing anything im just giving u my schedule and shit
TG: how do you know that
TG: what
TG: how do you know youre not saving lives
TG: ig
TG: i mean i guess i dont
TG: but like name ONE thing that changed bc i gave you that info
TG: i cant
TG: why the fuck not
TG: because
TG: look thats how this works right
TG: you knew from the getgo you wouldnt have the whole picture because theres only one person in
the whole damn movement who has the whole picture and thats the seer
TG: and she doesnt have the time or inclination to share it so the rest of us gotta content ourselves
with getting knowledge bombed on a need to know basis
TG: so this is gonna sound like a prime asshole thing to say but you already know all you need to
know
TG: when you agreed to help us i told you we wouldnt do anything to put you or jane in danger and
intend to keep that fucking promise
TG: and that includes not giving you information that could put you in a compromising position or
make shit any worse for you in the event that we fuck up
TG: there are people who have ways of finding out what you know and getting it out of you
TG: the less you know the safer we are
TG: but more importantly the safer you are
TG: i dont
TG: GOD this is frustrating
TG: preaching to the choir there kid
TG: i wanna believe you
TG: but you realize i have to like
TG: take it on blind faith that ur being real wiht me rn
TG: n not just sayin that so i get off ur ass
TG: no offense
TG: none taken
TG: but i literally dont have anything i can give you to prove im telling you the truth
TG: because of the reasons outlined above
TG: its bad form to expect you to take my word on blind faith but you have all i can safely offer as
proof
TG: but more to the point
TG: that between the me and the empire
TG: only one of us is an imminent and clear threat to your safety
TG: and we both know it aint me
TG: so if you have to gamble with blind faith at all then id ask that you give it to the person that at
least hasnt irrefutably proved himself undeserving of it
TG: i mean
TG: i still dont know that ur intentions are good here
TG: im not saying i wont keep helping u and the seer but
TG: if u could even lnk if things r gonna start changing sometime soon i
TG: itd make me feel better
TG: and i know thats childish and silly and shit but
TG: its not
TG: thats one thing i can promise
TG: you wont have to wait long roxy you have my word
TG: things are gonna start changing
TG: were gonna make god damn sure of it
1. The reason Dave and Dirk still share the same last name in this universe and nobody thinks anything of it is that ‘Strider’ is common enough for it to be one of those funny coincidences. It’s like one of your friends having the last name Kubrick — it’d be weird, but you wouldn’t necessarily assume they were related.

2. In my mind, Alternians have a taste for strong, acrid flavors, based off the fact that the average Alternian diet includes the blood of their young as a culinary staple. I’d imagine they enjoy it the way humans like sweet flavors — it’s not for everyone, but easily one of the most popular tastes.
what I know is what you know is right

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Against all possible evidence, the world kept turning.

Jane kept herself busy. Roxy did the same, through her own means. She stayed inside, inasmuch as she could, and didn’t tempt fate by leaving the Highblood District.

The city got colder. Even wandering threshecutioners bore the wind with an air of misery uncharacteristic of civil servants, let alone the flies, who had cut short patrols to keep out of the open. One morning, Jane stepped out onto her front porch to find jagged fingers of icicles hanging from the eaves, and every fake blade of grass on her lawn frozen solid. No precipitation came, but the threat of it hung heavy on the city, written in the knotted clouds over Lake Michigan.

Despite the tension, nothing happened, which was perhaps the worst thing that could have. The newsfeeds preached fear, and the stock markets dove and scrambled back up and dove again, with a regularity approaching clockwork, and threshecutioners walked the streets but spilled no blood, and in the liminal space of the period after a crisis the world seemed occupied with certainty of a crisis yet to come. At least a tragedy would have the comfort of being predictable, expectable. Anything would have been better than static unease.

Roxy hated being cooped up. She hacked the home security systems to entertain herself, and when she got bored of that, moved on to the lower-level Crockercorp servers, downloading illicit baking recipes and experimenting with them in the kitchen. She was awful at it. Jane had to put off one of her weekly vlogs because the kitchen had to be ventilated after one of Roxy’s experiments with banana loaf. The house smelled of saccharine-sour fruit for a week, and Roxy spent three days apologizing for it.

They made do. Jane supposed that was all one ever could.

At the end of February, there was a gala thrown at the opera.

Crockercorp sent them a special limo lift for the occasion, one with a lounge area behind the driver’s seat and its own cooler. Roxy became — unreasonably, in Jane’s opinion — excited at the sight of it, and spent the better part of the ride experimenting with the various features available in the backseat.

The operahouse was a castle of stained brownstone, capped with a glass dome that glowed yellow from the lights inside. It swallowed the better half of a block, sitting on the border between the Highblood and Waterfront Districts. A carpet had been rolled out from the entrance, and it had drawn a crowd that trailed around the corner.

Roxy pressed her face up against the window. “Yo,” she said admiringly. “Does an opera normally get this much press?”

“No. Most are here to celebrate the wriggling day of Lord Eridan Ampora.”

“Oh, sick. How old?”

“Haven’t a clue,” said Jane, as the lift pulled up to the curb. “They say the oldest seadwellers stop
counting. And he is one of the oldest.”

“Aristocracy?”

“The highest kind. And an Orphaner, albeit retired.”

Roxy’s brow furrowed. “Is that a kind of threshecutioner?”

“No,” Jane explained. “You wouldn’t know — the Orphaner was a position of incredible significance on Alternia. Its occupants were responsible for feeding the Empress’ lusus.”

“Alternia,” Roxy repeated incredulously. “That’s —”

“Lord Ampora is one of the last trueborn Alternians,” Jane murmured. “He traveled to Earth with the Empress herself during the Conquest.”

“You’re not serious.”

“Of course, Orphaners are an extinct profession,” she added. “Since Gl’b’golyb died with her planet. But the prestige of the job remains.”

“What’s he like?”

Jane pursed her lips. “I haven’t met him,” she said.

Roxy lifted an eyebrow. “But . . . ?”

“When you get to be very, very old,” Jane said, with strategic crypticness, “you can’t help but develop a reputation.”

The door to the lift slid open.

Tightly packed crowds of paparazzi lined the fuchsia carpet, blocked off from the celebrities with waist-high hologram barriers. Other persons of interest strolled up the stairs to the opera house proper, silhouetted by the frequent blaze of the camera shutter and lit by the lanterns that hovered on drones, like low-hanging stars, over the walkway.

Jane had to lift the train of her mermaid skirt to walk, which involved heaping layers upon layers of tyrian taffeta over one arm and balancing herself perilously on towering gold heels. She had begged off jewelry, since she was already tasked with wearing a heavier dress, save one concession. A pearl teardrop on a gold thread hung from a clasp at the back of her neck, settling over the bare stretch of skin between her shoulder blades. Jane had objected to the dress — she preferred suits, she liked suits, what was wrong with suits, anyway? — but it looked nice, and it wasn’t as horrifyingly uncomfortable as much of the stuff she was made to wear, and she’d caught Roxy sending what she probably thought were surreptitious glances at Jane’s neckline, so Jane had made her peace with it.

Roxy offered Jane her arm as they got out of the car, and Jane leaned on it heavily.

“You like stilts, huh, Janey?”

“Bold of you,” said Jane, through teeth gritted in a smile, “to assume that I chose anything about this outfit for myself.”

“Did you not?”

“No.”
“Why?”

“I haven’t been my own stylist since I was nine,” Jane said. “Being unfashionable is only cute when you’re small enough that it doesn’t matter. Don’t forget to wave, they like it when you wave at them.”

“Should I be in a dress, too?” Roxy spread her arms, causing the soft, eggshell blue fabric of her suit to stretch. “I mean, I just wore this ’cuz I thought it balled, I didn’t know you had to go all out with the skirt.”

“No, you’re fine,” Jane said, and tried not to be resentful about it. “It won’t be expected of you.”

“Because I’m your escort?”

“Because it’s not your fashion pattern to wear dresses. Style is a matter of consistency; my stylist has decided I wear skirts. And ‘escort’ is an interesting word.”

“That sucks ass. And I mean, ‘bodyguard’ is kind of impersonal, don’t you think?” Roxy blew a kiss at one of the reporters, who feigned catching it and pressing it to her breast. Roxy giggled.

“Perhaps,” conceded Jane. “Although technically accurate.”

“I mean, what would you call me?”

“Is ‘friend’ an option?”

Roxy gave a surprised little laugh. “Yeah, sure,” she said. “You know what, ‘friend’ does it for me.”

They climbed the stairs and passed under the steel arch of an entrance. Inside, the gala was thriving in the lobby. Highbloods in elaborate costumes swayed back and forth to a music that wasn’t quite classical, nor quite modern, but a discordant medium between the two. Pale pillars lining the room bore flickering torches burning with purple flame, and the floor was glossy black tile, marbled with gold.

A woman with horns curling in over her forehead like a halo brushed past them while they lingered in the entrance. The edge of her skirt caught Jane’s.

“Excuse me,” said Jane.

The troll turned. “Beg your pardon,” she purred.

Her skin glittered iridescent violet when it caught the light. She tossed her head, and a perfect cascade of shining black curls fell over her left shoulder. Her teeth were filed sharp, and her eyes were rimmed with a smoky sheen of makeup, while her fingernails ended in fine lacquered points. Troll couture involved a lot of pretensions of deadliness. It was considered attractive, Jane gathered, to seem capable of murder at any given moment.

The woman walked away without another word.

“Damn,” Roxy said appreciatively, and Jane elbowed her.

“That’s Aurria Mosing. Don’t dance with her.”

“Why? What’s up with her?”

“She got her epidermis modded several years ago,” Jane said. “It’s highly toxic. God knows what it
would do to humans, although no one’s ever been foolish enough to try.”

“Oh. Gotcha. Anyway, quick question: what the fuck?”

“She’s rather unpleasant,” Jane conceded. “She wears gloves most of the time, but it would be very like her to forgo them if she thought it would be entertaining to watch you convulse.”

“Cool,” Roxy said faintly. “Cool. You run with psychopaths, Janey, you know that, right?”

“I don’t know that I ‘run’ with them, as such. But I am aware that the soundest minds of the Alternian race will not be found among its highbloods.”

“You don’t say.” Roxy clucked her tongue. “That’s straight up batshit. And just when I thought I’d seen the worst of rich people madness.”

“Roxy, even if you live to be a very rich woman,” said Jane, “you will never see the worst of rich people madness. We are perpetually developing new ways to go shithive maggots.”

“You said it, not me,” said Roxy, shrugging, and stepped aside as another couple entered the ballroom. “What’s this music?”

Jane cocked her head to get a good earful. “Sounds like twenty-second century jazz, remixed,” she said. “And retooled to suit ballroom dancing. I’ve heard Ampora has a flair for the classics.”

“Kind of slaps,” Roxy mused. “You wanna dance?”

“You mean, properly?”

“Hey! I can dance.”

“I’m not doubting you,” Jane said, doubtfully.

Roxy bent herself in half, a sweeping, exaggerated mockery of a bow. “Milady,” she said, sticking out her hand.

“Is this going to embarrass us?”

“You don’t have to,” Roxy sighed, pulling her hand back. “I’ll go dance with someone else. Maybe Aurria needs a partner. Maybe she’s single. Apparently my ‘friend’ doesn’t want—”

“Oh, be quiet, you know I’ll do it,” Jane chided, and grabbed Roxy’s hand. “Do you know how to lead?”

“Lead, follow, anything in-between,” Roxy said comfortably. “However you like.”

Jane said, “You lead, then,” and stationed them on the outskirts of the dance floor, where couples moved at more leisurely paces and with less strict regard for the proper steps. Roxy rested a hand on her hip, and Jane settled hers delicately on Roxy’s shoulder.

She held her breath as they took their first step. She shouldn’t have. Roxy glided in a clockwise rotation across the tile with smooth, if imperfect grace, spinning them in their orbit around the center like a free-spinning satellite.

“No need to look surprised,” Roxy said, preening.

“I’m not surprised.” Roxy arched her eyebrow, and Jane’s cheeks felt warm. “I’m not!”
“Totally.”

“Where did you learn ballroom dance, anyway?”

“There were schoolfeeds for it in the human commune,” Roxy said, off-handed and still obviously satisfied with herself. “I hung around the practice room as a kid. Sometimes the schoolfeeder needed a spare partner, sometimes to lead, sometimes to follow. I learned both parts.” She performed a tricky little variation on the box step without breaking rhythm, so quick Jane almost missed it and stumbled, but she caught herself in time. “Picked up a couple of things.”

“Impressive.”

“Do you think?” Roxy glowed. She spun Jane, once, a giddy thing. “Glad to hear I pass muster.”

“Yes. Don’t let it go to your head.”

“Too late,” Roxy singsonged.

They completed a circuit around the ballroom, dipping in between rows of other slower-moving dancers with a brisk rhythm. Roxy moved with her typical energy, but she eased off after Jane stumbled on her skirt for the second time.

“You know,” Roxy said, frowning, as Jane hiked up the fishtail ruffle with a low, furious hiss, “if you wanted to wear a suit, it might be worth pissing off your stylist for.”

“My stylist is the top-paid member of the global fashion industry,” said Jane, and wrenched her dress out from where a nearby dancer had been about to step on it. “And her decisions are final.”

“Okay; now, counterpoint: she can’t actually force you to wear it?”

“She very much can.”

“Well, that’s batshit,” Roxy informed her.

“You act as though I’m unaware,” said Jane. “Left, please? There are fewer people over there, and this train is rather long.”

Roxy guided them to the left. “I don’t get why you’d do this for a wriggling day,” she complained. “I mean, you’ve got more money than God and twice as many friends. And you use it to throw a party at the opera? If I was a highblood, you wouldn’t know my birthday party was done until you woke up naked in a garbage can three cities over.”

“It’s not meant to be fun.”

“Why the hell not?”

“It’s a celebration of Ampora himself,” she said. “Nothing to do with enjoyment. This kind of thing is meant to give people the chance to show how close they are to him. To see and be seen in good company.”

“Boring.”

“Strategic.”

“Yeah, and boring,” Roxy said. “These assholes don’t even get a birthday once a year — a sweep’s what, eighteen months? — and they spend it like this? Sad.”
“It’s not sad.”

“You cannot even fight me on this, girl, I spent my last birthday eating cake on a beach. What did you do for yours?”

Jane held her head high when she said, “I threw a gala at an art gallery.”

Roxy’s face fell. “Aw, Janey, no,” she said. “Oh, no.”

“It wasn’t that bad!”

“No, but,” she said. “Still. Janey. I’m doing your seventeenth, okay? That’s my job now.”

“But it isn’t.”

“It really is. Also, heads up, I’m gonna dip you.”

“No — careful! — careful careful careful careful—”

Roxy hooked an arm around Jane’s back and dipped her, low enough for her skirt to dust the ground. Jane grabbed hold of Roxy’s shoulders and glowered at her as best she could while also clinging to her for dear life.

“Stop grinning,” she hissed. “And don’t drop me.”

“Aw, have a little trust, huh?”

“I’ll trust you when I’m back on my own two feet!”

“ Seems counterintuitive,” Roxy mused. “Doesn’t seem like you need to trust me that much, when you’re on your own two feet. Seems like you need to be trusting me right now.”

Jane said, “If you drop me, I’ll need more years than the Condesce has left in her to live it down. That is to say: it will never happen. I will never live it down. Roxy? I will never.”

“Easy, girl.” She pulled her back up. “I’m trustworthy as shit, don’t you know?”

“That doesn’t make you coordinated,” Jane said immediately, steadying herself. The heels didn’t help. “I make a point of not taking leaps of faith.”

Roxy made a vaguely dissenting noise, and helped right her. “ Boring way to live, Janey.”

“Safer,” Jane corrected. “Safer way to live, and that’s about all I’m looking for. I’m a bit dizzy; do you mind if we take a break?”

Roxy was uncharacteristically muted when she replied, “Sure.”

They stepped out of the flow of dancers, onto the outskirts where watchers and wallflowers flocked. It broke with the pattern of movement, so Roxy got hip-checked more than once on their way out. Jane hadn’t realized they’d moved so close to the center.

“I’m parched,” she said, after a moment.

Roxy nodded. Her hand fell from Jane’s waist, and Jane withdrew her hand, with a twinge of ill-welcome regret, from Roxy’s shoulder.
“I’ll see if they’ve got drinks around here,” Roxy said. “What d’you want?”

“Water, if available.”

“Cool. BRB.”

“Thanks,” Jane said, numbly, and it sounded woefully insufficient. Roxy sent her a thumbs-up in reply, and then turned her back on her and vanished into the crowd. Jane spent a moment staring after her, like a dazed numbskull; then a shadow fell over her, blotting out the light from the chandelier.

“You knoww,” said someone behind her, “wwhen they told me the neww Heiress wwas human, I half figured they wwere tuggin’ my gill.”

Jane turned. Promptly, she had to tilt her head up at a ninety degree angle to see the face of the troll who had spoken.

It was a gargantuan seadweller, large enough to blot out the chandelier over her. He had the broad shoulders and bulk of someone who once possessed immense strength, but the muscle had aged away, leaving only a layer of atrophied tissue clinging to a skeleton. His face was so unlike a human’s it couldn’t even be called uncanny; the ovular caverns of his eye sockets, slitted ridge of a nose, and collapsing sinkhole of a mouth read as pure alien. A mantle bearing the same vast shoulder spikes of an Imperial Drone sat on his shoulders, and elaborate gold detailed his violet Orphaner’s armor.

“But wwell,” said Lord Ampora, bending over to inspect her. “Here you are.”

His w’s were swathed in an accent so deep his voice sounded like it was coming from underwater.

“Good evening,” she said politely, and bobbed a curtsy. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Bet it is. Wwhat’s your caste name, guppy?”


“On account a’ mine bein’ in any history schoolfeed that’s worth a shit,” Ampora said, “I’d fuckin’ hope you had.”

“I had more meant—”

“Dance?”

He extended his hand. A row of thick gold rings clung to his skeletal fingers.

There was really no decision involved, although he cloaked the demand in a question. She took it.

The music was slow; it was stately dancing, not necessarily an athletic feat. Still, he was almost eight feet tall, and she was 5’6 in heels, and regardless of arrangement, she would end up looking diminutive in his shadow. There was a reason she preferred not to waltz with highbloods.

Since attempting to look him in the eye would give her a neck ache and make her look silly besides, she stared evenly ahead at his chestplate. A tyrian amulet hung from a ribbon pinned to his breast; the inscription read *Imperial Medal of Honor, First Class*.

“Congratulations,” she said. “That’s a remarkable achievement.”
“Yeah,” said Lord Ampora, comfortably. “It wwas a coupla centuries ago. It wweren’t the end of the wworld or anyfin, but it took some doin’. Had to sort out a rebellion in Neww Paris, culled a coupla legions o’ landdwellers, brought back some heads on pikes for our lady of tyrian.”

“A few centuries?”

“2115, or thereabouts. Right around this time o’ year, come to think of it. Course, if you’re impressed by a few centuries, you ain’t seen nofin. After a thousand years, a few centuries is part and parcel.”

“Were you granted Royal Tenure?”

He barked a laugh. “No,” he said. “Seadwellers keep kickin’ for right long wwithout any fancy wwitchcraft.”

“Oh.” Jane wondered if he was close to dying. He had to be. She couldn’t imagine a troll that old continuing to exist for that much longer. It didn’t seem like anything that old should be alive; he was the kind of ancient that should be reserved for landmarks, ancient monuments, forces of nature.

“I came close, though,” he said. “Once.”

His jaw set, and his eyes gleamed like an open wound, something ugly and infected that never scarred quite right.

“That must be a remarkable story,” she joked.

“It wwas.” He smiled thinly. “Came damn close. Came real damn close. Threw all of my eggs in the wwrong glubbin’ basket, though. Like the fuckin’ guppy I wwas. That’s the real shame of it, ain’t it? All the right opportunities comin’ wwhen wwe’re too fuckin’ young to knoww ’em for what they are.”

Jane had nothing to say to this, and so she said nothing.

“You’re young, though,” he said, and it was not a compliment. “Aren’t you? I forget wwhen humans are supposed to think they’re mature.”

“I am considered adolescent for my species,” she said, as politely as she could.

“Eight sweeps, adolescent? Put you around an oliveblood, then,” he said. “You’ve got wwhat, thirty sweeps left? Forty?”

“That depends very much on my life choices.”

“Nah,” he said, with insufferable confidence. “Doesn’t. It depends on one life choice, and it ain’t even yours. It’s the Empress’. Wwhether or not she breaks protocol and ups your lifespan to somethin’ respectable, or lets you perish like the rest of those miserable mammals.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Don’t take offense,” he said, rolling his eyes. “It’s facts. Howw long do you think she’ll play this little game wwith you, anywway? It’s real cute, having a human as the face of your Empire and wwhatnot — but you don’t keep a barkbeast around forever, and those are cuter’n you.”

She stiffened with shock. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean.”

“It ain’t that hard to keep up wwith,” he said irritably. “I mean, you’d better start makin’ plans for when you ain’t young and ain’t valuable anymore. I’ve seen more than one wwannabe royal get
fuckin’ wasted because she couldn’t get with the program quick enough.”

If there was any moment during the evening when Eridan’s face registered an emotion that was not mild scorn, that was it. It was almost quiet, almost regretful; had he been capable of sympathy, she would have suspected he felt it then. But it was gone as soon as it came.

“And what would you have me do?” she asked, guarded.

“Don’t know, don’t care. Cozy up with some high-rankin’ politicians. Join the Church. Swann off to some bungalow somewhere with that neat bodyguard of yours, whatever, I don’t give a dry fuck. Ain’t actually all that invested in your wellbein’, your highness, I just figure that killing you is a waste of Imperial time.”

Jane froze.

“Mister Ampora,” she said, breathless with incredulity at his nerve.

“Lord Ampora,” he corrected her, and for the first time, she saw the threat in his voice as it dropped into the lower register of his booming tenor. An Orphaner’s voice. “Even to you, Heiress.”

She dropped his hands and stepped back. He let her go, but they created something of an obstacle in the middle of the dance floor, forcing the other couples to swerve and part around them like a river current around a rock.

“I hope I have done nothing to offend you.”

“Offend?” His lip curled up, all humor, no joy. “You ain’t capable of offend. You don’t matter enough to offend. Fuckin’ funny, almost, you thinkin’ you’re stuff such as would offend me.”

“I don’t—”

“Humans,” he said. “You act like you don’t know half the people in this room would have your throat out the minute Empress would allow it.”

She felt cold. The hair on the back of her neck lifted.

“If you’ll excuse me, Lord Ampora,” she said quietly. “I must—”

The doors to the auditorium swung open with a resounding clang. People began to trickle into the theater beyond, draining the dance floor and taking their seats. The orchestra swelled and began the opera’s overture.

“Look at that,” said Ampora, with faux brightness. “Gotta be headin’ in, now, Heiress. Please do pardon me.”

He bowed. It didn’t even bring him down to eye level with her.

Then he swept off, his cape flickering in his wake like a current of silk. She waited good and long, until he was out of sight, and then released her breath.

Roxy fought her way through the crowd to her, succeeding mostly via generous application of her elbows.

“He looked like a douche,” she said, squinting in the direction Ampora had left. “A real bulgeguzzler.”
“That’s inappropriate,” said Jane, without effort.


Jane exhaled a quiet laugh. “It’s rude to say things about people you wouldn’t to their face.”

“Are you kidding me? I’d say that straight to his face, no question,” Roxy said immediately, dead serious. “I’d vault it right into his open auriculars, Janey, are you shitting me? I’d pay somebody for the chance.”

“You know, I really think you would,” Jane said, irrepressibly fond, and Roxy jostled her shoulder.

“Course I would. Are we gonna watch a stupid opera or what?”

“Lead the way,” said Jane, and fought a wholly undignified smile. She had been worried about something, she thought, but it was tucked safely into a box at the back of her brain, where she could pull it out to examine later; Roxy grinned, goofy and careless, and it seemed like the easiest thing in the world to do the same right back.

It did not take Roxy very long to realize that she was not fond of opera.

To begin with, the lyrics were inscrutable unless you spoke Alternian, which Roxy didn’t. This made it tolerable for the first fifteen minutes and excruciating for the next one hundred.

She gathered from how several seadwellers around her had busied themselves on their palmhusks that it was also inscrutable if you did speak Alternian, which would make sense, since the program advertised that the play had been translated from English, and the languages were not nearly compatible in several respects. Still, the music was more or less unchanged, and nice, if you liked classical, which Roxy didn’t. She made a respectable effort at getting into it, which did not succeed, but made her feel better. Then she dicked around with Hal for the better part of the first act. The intermission she spent lounging around in the line to the bathroom while Jane schmoozed some high-ranking members of the aristocracy, and then it was back to her seat to endure another hour and a half of highbloods shrilling at each other, set to music that was not designed for their vocal chords to correctly evoke.

Sometime during the second act, during a particularly tumultuous piece of orchestration, she leaned in to speak directly into Jane’s ear.

“You wanna bail?”

Jane huffed in chastisement. The corner of her lip quirked up. “We can’t,” she said. “It would be dreadfully impolite to leave before it’s over.”

“You sure? We could scram during the next scene change and get burgers.”

“Our absences would be noticed immediately.”

“Yeah, and they’ll all be dead jelly of our totally rad decision making skills, because this? Not to harsh your jam, or anything, JC, but this ain’t my idea of a good time. Nor theirs, from the looks of it.”
“And what is?” Jane’s eyes remained on the singer. “Your idea of a ‘good time,’ that is.”

“Well, I can think of a few things, for starters.”

Jane gave her a quick, wide-eyed glance out of her periphery, looking away again immediately.

“People can hear us,” she said tightly.

Roxy tilted her head. “Hmm? I’m sure they can, I don’t care. I was talking about getting food or something. What did you — Jane! You scoundrel!” She fanned herself for effect, gaping delightedly. “In public, too.”

“You intended this,” Jane said, despairingly. “This is entrapment.”

“Nothing of the kind, baby, just a good old Freudian trick. That’s a way better idea than I had, wow.”

“Stop it. You’re teasing me,” she accused.

“Oh, naw, Janey. Well, yeah. But it’s not, like malicious.” Roxy patted Jane’s arm comfortably. “I don’t mean anything by it, you know that. It’s just a little flirting. It doesn’t hurt anybody.”

“Please stop.”

“What? I mean, I will if you want. But I don’t mean it in a mean way, honest. It’s a compliment!”

“It’s still mockery.”

“Well, I’m not teasing you for flirting,” Roxy said matter-of-factly. “Obviously not. Like, first off, that’s a stone coming from a real big glass house.”

“I’ll say,” Jane muttered, and Roxy was about to ask her what she meant by that when the music stopped.

The singer cut herself off, confused, and looked around for the cause. A whisper stole over the crowd, suspicious; a few giggled. For a moment, it seemed like technical difficulties.

Then red smoke billowed from the stage, unfurling over the stage lights and blotting out the scenery. Cries of panic and fear erupted across the audience. The theater dimmed, and the singer was obscured by the writhing, blood-colored mist, and Roxy grabbed for her visor.

“Hal?”

I don’t know. I can’t access anything. I—

His text fizzled out and disappeared. Roxy’s visor buzzed so sharply it hurt her head.

HEY BEACH
GET T)(E GUPPY OUT T)(E BUILDING RIG)(T T)(E FUCK NOW.

The urgency of the message didn’t leave her time to think. She stood up immediately, nudging Jane to her feet.

“We have to go.”
Grabbing Jane’s arm, she tugged her out into the aisle, striding toward the exit. Jane let herself be pulled, bunching up handfuls of her skirt with her free hand to avoid tripping.

“Do you know what’s going on?”

“No. We just gotta move, like, yesterday.”

“Where are we going?”

“Somewhere else,” Roxy said, throwing a look over her shoulder, where the stage was almost completely wreathed in smoke. “Anywhere else. Come on.”

She reached the end of the aisle and tried to shove through the doors, but they didn’t budge. Locked from the outside. She decapitalogued her laser pistol and fired a concentrated line of light at the lock, which started to smoke under the assault, but held.

“I can’t connect with the Crockercorp database,” Jane said, her visor flickering with the speed at which she was making commands. Her eyes darted across it frenetically. “The signal is blocked.”

“Shit.”

“Hurry,” she said anxiously.

“Trying to!”

The room plunged into complete darkness. A quiet fell over the assembly.

The lock sizzled and then fell off in chunks, the metal glowing hot. Roxy slammed her shoulder against the door and it stuttered ajar, just wide enough for her and Jane to fit through. She pushed Jane in first, and followed quickly into the dimly lit lobby.

Empty, the lobby had a haunted, twilight quality, with streamers and food scraps and throwaway glitter coating the floor with a tarnish of rubbish. Jane’s heels striking the floor sent loud, sharp echoes bouncing off the marble.

“Good evening.”

The voice came from the speakers, crystal clear and velvet smooth, female.

“Although the revolution will not be televised,” said the voice, “it will, in fact, be staged.”

It was accompanied by a cry of surprise from the audience; presumably, something appropriately dramatic had happened onstage. Roxy stumbled over her own feet and almost took Jane down with her. Jane staggered to a halt and helped her back up.

A different voice, this one flatter and with less grandeur, issued from the same speakers. “Sorry about this,” it said, frank and apologetic. “It wasn’t my idea.”

It was Jane’s turn to freeze, going limp where she stood, and Roxy attempted to keep tugging her along. “Come on,” she urged. “What’s wrong?”

“That — who is that,” she said. “Who — do you recognize that voice?”

“No! We gotta keep going!”

Jane shook, her hands drifting to clutch her temples. “I recognize that,” she insisted. “Why do I — I
shouldn’t be able to —”

“We’d like to introduce ourselves,” said the first voice, the clear one. “You may know me, either by
the name I chose or the one I was given; allow me to court enigma for a while longer. I call myself
the Seer of Light.”

A ringing took up residence in Roxy’s ears. She felt nothing but cold, cold, cold, down to the
marrow, and a sickening twist of fear ached in her gut.

“. . . Roxy! Roxy, you’re hurting me!”

She blinked, and the world righted itself by a degree, enough for her to realize that her hand had
constricted into a vise around Jane’s wrist and that Jane had for several seconds been attempting to
tug free.

“Sorry,” she said, releasing her immediately. “Sorry, I—”

“Dramatic,” said the Seer, a pinch wry. “I agree. But given all I have known and endured, have I not
earned the right to a little melodrama? Who can claim the right to an occasional fit of melancholy, or
macabre inclination, if not I? Let ye without an affinity for the arcane cast the first stone.”

“We have to go,” insisted Jane. “Roxy! Are you listening to me? We have to move, we’re in danger
—!”

Roxy kept staring at the door to the auditorium. The Seer could be onstage. Dave might be onstage.
Both leaders of the revolution — and it was her fault — and what could they be here for, if not Jane?

Dave had made her a promise not to hurt Jane, and she’d taken it on faith. On faith, she realized, like
a fool.

“It’s my fault.”

“What are you talking about?” Jane snapped. “We have to keep moving! I don’t know what you’re
in a tizzy about, but we can deal with it after we’re in a safe place! Now —”

Her whole body convulsed, once, and her head dropped. For a terrifying moment, she was all still.
When she lifted her head again, the visor gleamed a brighter shade of red, so vivid it almost
obstructed her eyes.

“Move,” she said, and it rang with iron, in a voice that was Jane’s only in that it was coming from
her mouth; she cut free the syllable crisply and coldly from her tongue, leaving no question of
whether or not it was an order.

Roxy took a step backward without meaning to. Jane glanced around the room, and passed over
Roxy with the ease of someone taking account of her furniture.

“Janey?”

Jane’s head twitched to one side, and an inscrutable shadow passed over her face. “Out,” she said.
She strode toward the exit. “Follow me.”

“I — Jane?”

She pulled up short and sent Roxy a look of dizzying malice over her shoulder. “Are you coming or
not?”
“Yeah, I am, but —”

“At any rate,” said the Seer, “I have entertained you with idle banter long enough. There is a time and place for courtesy, but there are few so undeserving of my time or courtesy than the Court. Thus, I will be brief, insofar as I am able: I believe you have in your midst a person in whom I have a particular interest.”

Jane said, “If you don’t move, I will leave you behind.”

“Give me a second, okay, I — what the fuck is going on with you?” Roxy waved a hand in front of Jane’s face. “Hello? Since when were you like this?”

“How I comport myself is neither relevant nor pressing. If you do not move, I will leave you behind, and we will both regret it.”

“She will be found here, I am certain,” said the Seer. “I have it on reliable intelligence. You will find that there are few things of which I am unaware.”


The words were broken and stilted, but they were Jane’s. Roxy hesitated, and then nodded.

“Coming,” she said, and followed Jane out the door.

The Seer continued, “If you would be so kind—”

The doors swung closed behind them, and they broke out running into the frigid air.

Snow was falling. The storm that had been coalescing above New Chicago for weeks was preparing to break in earnest, and its anacrusis was drifting down over the city in thick blankets of pale grey. It gathered in flurries on the sidewalk and drove sideways with the force of the wind, stinging Roxy’s face and tangling in her hair. A guttering breeze wiped away the sounds of the opera.

Jane’s profile was blurred by the whirling snow. Roxy automatically reached out and clamped a hand on her shoulder, grounding herself. It had no discernible effect; it was as though Jane hadn’t felt a thing.

When she turned, her visor was gone, the screen retracted into her headband. Her eyes were wide and bloodshot, and several tear tracks wept down her cheek. Her hands shook.

“Roxy,” she said uncertainly. “What happened?”

“What do you mean?”

Jane’s voice was her own again, but it wavered. “I can’t remember,” she said, panicked. “I can’t remember getting out here. How did we get out here?”

“Did you black out?”

“Yes! No? I don’t know,” she said, “I don’t know, and — we’re still in danger, probably, and — oh — I don’t know what to do—”
She buckled, one hand rising to hide her face, and the anger of a very young person asked to do something terribly difficult peered out from underneath her words.

“Okay.”

She sent her visor through a quick hard reboot, crossing her fingers tightly. When it restarted, Hal’s cursor was back in the corner of her vision, blinking and expectant.

Fuck, he said. That hurt.

“Thank God,” she sighed. “Okay. Hal, you all right?”

No, you don’t understand. That hurt. I’m not supposed to feel ‘hurt.’

“What do you mean?”

Resisting orders, that hurts. Emotional damage, that hurts. But a foreign program shouldn’t be able to make me feel anything. It was getting clubbed over the head with a brick.

“Right,” she said, quashing her frustration. “We’ll look into that. The whole situation is fucky. Okay? But right now, just, in a really, really immediate sense: are you at operating capacity?”

Probably. No promises or anything, but if you need me to do something, I can certainly try.

“First stroke of good luck I’ve had all night,” she said, and then, locking her arm with Jane’s, steered both of them towards the nearest lift. It was a private vehicle, low to the ground and black like jet on new asphalt, with windows the same violet as a highblood’s heart.

Jane said, with the bleary dumbness typical of shock, “Is this yours?”

“No. Hal, hack the lock and give me driver privileges.”

Roger roger.

The door clicked almost instantly and slid out of the way. She ushered Jane into the passenger seat and then vaulted over the hood, swinging into the open door of the driver’s side with one fluid motion.

The lift adjusted to her immediately, sliding forward to match her feet with the pedals and twisting the mirrors to suit her height. The engine awoke with a healthy hum. The carriage lifted off the ground and hovered at two feet.

“Then it — are we stealing a lift, then? Is that what we’re doing?”

“In a manner of thinking.”

“In a manner of thinking? In what manner of thinking, exactly, are we not committing grand theft auto?”

Roxy threw it in reverse and shoved her heel down on the accelerator, sending the car whizzing out of its parking slot and skidding around into the lane. Snow blurred and streaked across the windshield, even with the wipers going at full speed, turning the road ahead into a melted tie-dye abstraction.

“Look,” Roxy tried. “After everything’s settled down, you can drop the owner a couple grand for the trouble, aight? So technically, we’re buying the car, the owner just doesn’t know it yet.”
“That’s not how a contract works.”

“If they try to sue, your old lady’s lawyers will eat them alive, anyway — and real talk, sweetie? Your party just got crashed by a group of radical revolutionaries, and you’re up in arms about the legal fallout of stealing a beamer?”

She shot out into the main thoroughfare to a chorus of honking and shouts. As they pulled into the street, a black two-seater lift slid out of its spot in the opera parking lot and followed them, moving at a clip. Its twin sidled out of an alley on the other side of the road, and with horns blaring, they began to follow her.

Adrenaline surged, saturated her veins with a boiling, anxious energy.

Four and eight o’clock. You see them?

“Yeah.”

Jane gave her a quizzical look, and Roxy pointed to her visor by way of explanation. Then, without warning, she accelerated, cruising past a line of sedan lifts stuck at a red light. The two-seaters increased speed to keep within range of her, confirming her suspicions.

“Fuck,” Roxy grunted, and swerved across a narrow gap between two lanes. The speedometer climbed to seventy, eighty miles an hour. Jane paled and looked out the window.

“Why is this necessary?”

“Not to alarm you,” said Roxy, “but we’ve got a couple of new friends behind us. Side note: do these things have, like, anything useful under the hood?”

“What do you mean?”

“You ever heard of James Bond?”

The skyscrapers of the Highblood District shrank into the rearview, and the clustered apartment complexes of the adjacent boroughs drew near. The snow tangled with the technicolor advertisements and gave the neon canopy above them the appearance of melting wax.

Jane huffed and held on to the dashboard. “They’re cars,” she said hotly. “They’re not meant for heavy combat, they’re transportation.”

“Just asking. Seems like if you’ve got the money to engineer a gravitational field that can run on water, you could afford an oil slick function. Whatever.”

“I doubt the engineers predicted their product would be used in high-speed chases! Speaking of which—”

“Well, then that’s poor fucking planning, isn’t it?” She threw a look over her right shoulder before hooking a left on red. One of the pursuers followed her into the intersection, while the other got caught behind traffic and peeled off.

Roxy cut across a two-way to streak through a narrow alley, almost clipping the side view mirror off. The dark steel of the buildings closed in on them claustrophobically from either side, rushing past in the windows. “Do you know how to use pistolkind?”

“No,” Jane said. “Why are you asking?”
“Well, every day brings new learning experiences,” Roxy said grimly, and with a tricky bit of sylladex work, managed to decapchatalogue her laser pistol directly into Jane’s lap. “It’s pretty intuitive, anyway. Point, aim, shoot. Think you can swing it?”

“No! Why? What do you want me to do with this?”

“Kind of only one thing you can do with it,” Roxy pointed out, not unfairly, and rolled down the back window of the lift. The sound of air rushing past filled the cabin. “Black two-seater, right on our six. Pop one through the hood, quick as you please.”

Jane twisted around, ginger. “I don’t think I can,” she said. Her face was ashen.

“Quitter talk! You can nail a candle with a knife from across the room; you’ve got the aim for it. And when you think about it, aren’t lasers just really hot knives?”

“No!”

“That was rhetorical, but whatever.”

The other lift was gaining on them. Roxy couldn’t move much faster than she was, given the traffic.

“For real, though, Janey,” she said nervously, “anytime now, that’d be good for me.”

“I’m trying!”

Jane fired. A bolt of laser fire streaked down the road behind them and glanced off the roof of their pursuer, who swerved all the same.

“Nice,” Roxy said, encouraging. “Now just angle it a little lower — watch out for kickback, she’s a bitch—”

Jane fired again. This time, it sailed straight into the center of the hood, and the front of their pursuer’s lift split cleanly down the middle in a line as precise and sharp as light itself. The lift banked and spun out of traffic. It crashed into a streetlight, denting it, and gushed smoke. Jane yelped in excitement.

“I did it! Roxy, did you see—”

Roxy hooted. “There’s a girl,” she crowed. “Beginner’s luck, what did I tell you? Believe in the me that believes in you, bitch!”

Jane laughed with shock and relief. “That should not have worked!” She slumped back into her seat, shoving some of her curls out of her face.

No time for celebrations just yet.

Roxy checked the rearview. The other two-seater had pulled out of the side street and was gaining, whizzing past its fallen companion without stopping.

“Shit,” she said. “Janey, you got a hat trick in you?”

“I can try,” said Jane, rising out of her seat, “but I don’t think I have luck enough left.”

“See, anyway.”

The bolt skidded and struck the side view mirror of the pursuing lift, without damaging the vehicle.
itself. The second and third put scratches on the sides, but were similarly benign.

“I can’t hit it when the lift’s moving,” Jane complained.

“And I can’t really pull over, either,” Roxy replied, as evenly as possible.

“The pistol’s low on charge. Do you have a new energy pack?”

“Fuck. I was gonna pick some up tomorrow. I only have one, and it’s buried ass deep in my sylladex. I — we gotta try something else.” She rolled up the rear window as Jane slid back into her seat, still white-knuckling the pistol. “Ideas?”

“None of this is even vaguely intuitive to me,” Jane said, immediately and tightly, in a tone that suggested she was expending every ounce of energy she had just to hold herself together, so Roxy did not badger her further.

Roxy shoved the accelerator down another few millimeters, and barely got any speed out of it. Lifts blurred past the windows, and furious drivers leaned out to take pictures of her license plate. Ahead, the Peixes Bridge rose from the New Chicago River, a monument to the Imperial symbol — the foundations bracketing the roadway and curving inward, latched together with a brass beam at the apex of each curve.

She had an idea. It was not a good idea, but then, she wasn’t in a position to be picky.

“Are you wearing your seatbelt?”

Jane looked at her sharply. “Yes? Why. What are you—”

“No reason,” Roxy said, and flattened the accelerator to the floor.

The lift practically leapt into midair from the jolt of extra power. The engine groaned under the strain of propelling them forward, shaking the cars beside them with the force of their acceleration. As they approached the mouth of the bridge, Roxy wrenched the steering wheel to the right, shattering the iron railing and careening off the edge of the riverbank.

Jane screamed. The sound of splitting iron and bending metal dwarfed it. Everything in the cab lost its gravity as the lift scrambled to find a flat surface for it to ground itself against, and still, Roxy clung to the wheel, holding it as the cab rolled one hundred and eighty degrees.

Then she released it, leaving them to drift for a horrific moment in free fall, before the lift reoriented itself and started to skim along the bottom of the bridge.

The cab’s gravity reappeared. It felt like driving normally, except the world outside the windows was upside down, and Roxy had to dodge and weave between the pillars that held the bridge up over the water as if there were spires of concrete growing from the road ahead. Jane was still screaming, but she seemed to be losing breath. Traffic thundered above them, its sound amplified by the acoustics under the bridge.

When they were halfway across, Roxy eased her foot onto the brake. She pulled the lift to as gentle a halt as she could, although she and Jane were both flung against their seat belts all the same. The cab skidded and she had to drift in order to slow it completely, swinging the back of the vehicle in a fishtail arc that would have left its wheels screeching, if it had any.

It pulled to a stop, engine guttering, still sustained in midair at the midpoint of the bridge.
Jane’s lungs gave out, and she gasped for breath, clawing at the armrests.


Roxy held up a finger, waiting. Nobody came over the bridge behind them.

“Gone,” she said, quietly, with immense satisfaction.

“Christ.”

“Close, but no cigar,” said Roxy, cheeky from victory. “I answer to Roxy, actually.”

“Fuck off,” Jane said flatly, and reached over to grip Roxy’s arm, fingernails digging into Roxy’s skin through her jacket. “Next time you want to — if you ever — don’t! Next time you get an idea like that — you can go ahead and keep it as an idea, you know that? You can go ahead and stick it up your — if that hadn’t worked — Christ on a fucking cracker, keep that bloody shite to yourself.”


“Make fun of my accent when you haven’t just driven us off a damn bridge,” Jane hissed, and then muttered a string of something vile and profane under her breath. It left Roxy wondering where the Heiress to Crockercorp learned words like that, in the Highblood District. “Bastard.”

“I don’t think that’s f— did you just call me a bastard?”

“You don’t get to be offended! You could have killed us!”

“First of all,” Roxy said, “no, I wouldn’t have, since these things can drive on water, so, like, worse cast scenario, we go for a cruise —”

“They don’t have omnidirectional gravitational fields! If we’d hit the water top-down, we’d be fucked!”


“Oh, God,” Jane moaned, burying her head in her hands. Her hand had left imprints in Roxy’s jacket. “Oh, God. I thought I was going to die.”

Roxy paused, and when Jane did not lift her hand, leaned over and laid a tentative hand on the nape of her neck.

“You’re okay,” she said.

“I am not,” Jane said, and it was a statement of fact, but it came out with the same simple confidence that most facts did, which was an improvement. “Would you mind moving the lift, perhaps? I would like to be anywhere, presently, except underneath of a bridge.”

“Hard same.” Roxy shifted the lift into drive and began crawling towards the other side of the bridge at a snail’s pace, careful of Jane’s nerves. “I don’t know if . . . I mean, I wanna head back to Crocker Estate as much as you, but—”

“But it won’t be safe.” Jane said this with calm understanding. “Nor will most parts of the Highblood District. Or the surrounding area. Until we know the extent of the insurrectionist plot, it’s not safe for me to be seen in public.”
“So.” Roxy’s fingers beat a nervous tempo on the wheel. “Where does that leave us?”

“Somewhere that isn’t public,” Jane said. “Or wouldn’t be thought of as such.” She took a deep breath, and turned to Roxy. She had wiped the tear tracks from her face, and presented a front of remarkable composure, even thin-lipped, red-eyed. “I am out of my depth,” she admitted, and it sounded like a penitent at confessional, like damning testimony. “I think you will have to call the shots, from here on out.”

Roxy gave herself a good, long second to think.

“You’ll be noticed everywhere,” she said. “We don’t want to be noticed. Where do you go if you don’t want to be noticed?”

Jane said, “If I knew, I’d have moved there a long time ago.”

Roxy bit back the urge to press Jane on the remark, and pulled up a map on her visor. “Well,” she said. “Here’s a little Roxy Lalonde Exclusive, a fun fact from the backstory: human communes, as a rule, are chock the fuck full of people who don’t want to be noticed.”

“There aren’t any human communes within a hundred miles of New Chicago,” Jane said, which Roxy knew already.

“Not the point. Point’s this: there are worse places hiding places than a slum.” She glanced over at Jane, whose face remained impassive. “I, uh, have an idea. But it’s not real glamorous.”

Jane said, “I trust you,” and it was hollow with exhaustion, but honest in its absentmindedness.

“Then okay.” Roxy switched on the lift’s navigation system. It glowed with some deep purple crest, presumably the owner’s, before revealing a map of the city; she plotted a course southward. “Once more unto the breach. Or some shit like that.”

Chapter End Notes

1. This marks the halfway point of The Neon Bible! Six chapters done, six left to go.

2. I’m officially through my backlog of chapters, so the next one will be written in the next week; this means it may be a little late, although certainly no more than a day. If it’s not up on Monday, expect it to be there early Tuesday.

3. Fanart! You can find in my "TNB" tag on my tumblr (@roxilalonde), including, most recently, a really cute piece from Chapter 5. FYI: if you draw fanart of the fic, please let me know directly (a note in my askbox or something, whatever you prefer) instead of @’ing me, since my mentions are often buried in my activity feed and I want to be sure to see what you’ve made!
in this city it’s the only light

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Hedges laid to the southeast of downtown. It was the borough farthest from the lake and, not incidentally, the poorest, with buildings characterized by broken windows and aged argon. At intersections, flickering stoplights dangled from cords strung between buildings, while its residents marauded about in packs, wearing clothes that obscured their faces. When Roxy pulled up at a red light, a cluster of trolls in high-collared leather jackets turned to stare at her from the street corner. The glowing lit end of a cigarette jutted out from one’s mouth. He smiled, and she got the feeling it was supposed to be intimidating, but it wasn’t. A highblood asking to waltz was scary. This right here — where the asphalt cracked and the shades were drawn and people ducked their heads when headlights came down the street — this was home turf, and Roxy settled into it like a well-worn coat. The art of surviving on nothing was a lot like riding a bike.

There’s a motel on the corner of 65th and Warren Street. Should I plug it in?

“On a scale from one to ten, how sketchy is it?”

About an eight. We’ve stayed in worse, but Miss Daisy over there probably hasn’t been.

Roxy spared a look at Jane. Her forehead rested against the window, and the hollows under her eyes sprang out with unflattering vividness under the cold light.

“We’ll make do,” she said.

Whatever you say. Routing there now.

The nav screen lit up, and a blue line wove its way through the streets ahead of them. She followed it.

The drive was short. She pulled up curbside next to a block that looked identical to every other one in the Hedges, stepped out of the lift, and exhaled a long cloud of fog.

There was no neon canopy, this far out. No glisten of argon against snow, no blaze of visor against passersby’s blue-tinged faces, nor passersby of any kind at all, really. The rest of the neighborhood was dark as the void, with only the twinkle of downtown’s jewel-encrusted crown rising in the northeast. This distant from the city center, the only light came from old-fashioned electric streetlamps that cast fluorescent pallors over the stained sidewalk and turned the odd pools of oil and dirty water on the sidewalk into planes of black glass. Vines climbed up what few walls graffiti didn’t, and barbed wire ensnared the fences between buildings, crowned roofs, twined along gutters. It wasn’t inviting. The kind of people who roamed free around here weren’t the kind one wanted to invite in.

Roxy held out her hand automatically as Jane exited the lift, and Jane laced her fingers with Roxy’s. Snow settled into the elaborate styling of her hair and littered over her shoulders, reminding Roxy both of the current temperature and the amount of bare skin Jane’s dress left exposed. She gently tugged Jane toward the motel, and Jane followed with barely any resistance.

“It’s not the Hilton,” Roxy said brightly, swinging open the flimsy plastic door with a jingle of bells, “but it’ll do, dontcha think? For the night, at least. S’homey.”
“Hmm?” Jane hardly bothered to collect her skirt as she stepped over the threshold. It dragged in the slush behind her. “Oh, yes. It’s fine.”

Roxy gave her a concerned glance, but said nothing. The motel lobby was small and low-ceilinged and covered with the thin layer of grease that a lot of dirt cheap places were, with linoleum floors the color of vomit and a cluster of ancient furniture huddled around an honest-to-god steam furnace in the corner opposite the help desk. It smelled of nicotine and weed.

The concierge’s face was laced over with metal stitching, rows of neat little steel bolts, with an asymmetry that could be taken for a fashion statement. Her horns and hair were both hidden under a parachute of a black beanie, and smudged dark makeup gave her a third-day-awake kind of aura.

Roxy settled Jane in one of the sofas by the heater before approaching the front desk. “Hey,” she said, sliding her credit chip over the counter. “One room?”

The concierge’s keyboard clattered as she punched in the request, and swiped Roxy’s credit chip. Without intonation, she asked, “Bed, recuperacoon, or both?”

“Bed.”

“A single or a double?”

“Double,” Roxy said. “I mean — sorry, let me ask — Janey, a double’s good, right? We don’t need separate rooms?”

Jane was sitting in the same place Roxy had left her, eyes still glazed. “Sure,” she said, distantly, without any indication she’d heard what Roxy said.

“Um. Okay, then.” Roxy turned back to the concierge. “Yeah, double. We’ll go with that.” She wouldn’t be sleeping, much, anyway, and if she did, then it wasn’t like she was unused to the couch.

The concierge took one hard look at Jane. Glanced at Roxy with something starting to resemble interest.

Roxy slapped her credit chip back down on the table. “We can pay for privacy,” she blurted, and the concierge silently took the chip, swiped it again, and returned it.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” said the concierge, once again perfectly indifferent. “You want anything else?”

“Nope. Thanks, uhh . . .” She squinted at the troll’s nametag. “Sennet.”

The concierge arched an eyebrow, sending a very eloquent nonverbal message of ‘and why are you still talking to me, exactly?’ It was so well delivered, in fact, that Roxy clamped her mouth shut and whisked Jane down the hallway without another word.

Their room held two skinny-looking beds and an analogue television set into one wall, and not much else. The wallpaper was a busy pattern of green and yellow, and a tiny cell of a bathroom branched off from the room proper.

As soon as they were over the threshold, Roxy hauled the door closed behind them — it swung on an old-fashioned hinge, a welcome surprise, after months of sliding walls and panel locks — and flipped on the lights.

Home sweet home.
She tugged Hal off and put him in her pocket.

Jane was still shivering. The ice crystals in her hair hadn’t melted.

“You need to get warm.”

She made a vaguely affirming noise. Roxy took that as a yes, and after surveying the room’s resources for a moment, pushed her gently into the bathroom. The shower gargled when she first turned it on, and spit out several weak dribbles of orange fluid before clearing into a steady, if weak, stream of clear-enough water. It took the better part of five minutes to get warm. Steam billowed from the cell and sealed the mirror behind a white screen of condensation.

The shower cell wasn’t made to fit two people, so Roxy had to brace the door open in order to squeeze Jane inside. She shrugged out of her jacket, first, in the hopes of keeping it warm, but kept the rest of her suit on. Ruining it was preferable to stripping down, chiefly because it’d be less awkward, and would waste less time, anyway.

Jane gasped when the water hit her, which transitioned into a hiss through gritted teeth as Roxy maneuvered her directly under the stream. Her dress soaked through in a matter of seconds. Rivulets trailed from the locks of dark hair plastered to her face, and the last remnants of her hairdo fell out, lying in lopsided curls bunched at the back of her neck, and she made a noise of pain at the sudden heat. Her fingernails bit into Roxy’s shoulders, and she screwed her eyes shut, in obvious pain. Roxy hummed a sympathetic noise and kept her here, massaging her arms.

By and by, Jane’s grip on Roxy relaxed. Her glasses had fogged over from the heat. Roxy reached out and slid them off, careful, reaching behind her to set them on the counter without looking. Jane blinked rapidly, water beading on the ends of her eyelashes.

Roxy watched her carefully, uncertainly. Jane watched her back.

“I can’t see a damn thing,” she said, at length.

The relief bubbled up out of Roxy in a laugh. “Yeah,” she said. “I got your glasses over here. Glad to have you back, Janey.”

“Yes,” Jane said, with a concerning undertone of dreaminess, but for the most part, she seemed all there. “I’m . . . okay. I think.”

“Good. That’s good.” Roxy reached over and shut off the shower. Jane took the opportunity to pull one of her bangs out from over her eyes. “You know where we are?”

“A motel, isn’t it?”

“Short-term memory still kicking, also good. Um. You need a shock blanket?”

Jane looked down at herself and lifted part of her skirt, which sloughed water onto the bathroom floor. “Maybe,” she said. “I’d rather like to get out of this dress, first, though, I think.”

“Right. Right right right right right. Um.” Roxy backed out of the shower, giving Jane room to step past her and out of the bathroom, taking account of their room. “I don’t have any other clothes with me.”

“Neither do I.” Jane grimaced, reaching around to squeeze some of the water out of her hair. “I didn’t think I’d be sleeping anywhere that wasn’t home, tonight.”
“Maybe I have some in storage you can use?” Roxy rifled through her sylladex in the back of her mind, seeking a spare pair of pajamas or some sweats. “I guess? Granted that you don’t mind looking a little ratty, these are all from before you forced an update on my wardrobe. Don’t think I’ve got any Chanel on me at the moment. I — oh! I’ve got one of Dirk’s old sweatshirts and jeans. If that’s good for you.”

“I don’t mind. That would be nice, thank you.”

She decaptchalogued them and handed them over. They were balled up into a knot, probably left over from when she’d tossed a pile of laundry into her sylladex instead of folding it, and faded in the way that old hand-me-down clothes were, but they passed a sniff test and she knew from experience that they were damn comfy. Jane took them and paused, cradling them to her chest.

“I,” she said, a pink flush growing over her face. “I can’t actually get out of this by myself.”

“Oh. You should’ve just said.” Roxy stepped behind her and took an evaluative look at the intricate channel of clasps that held the dress together at the back. “Let’s see. Um. How attached are you to this piece, per se, Janey?”

“Rip it,” Jane said flatly. “Mangle it, tear it, ruin it, I don’t care. I’ve already paid for the damn thing. Just get me out.”

“Sure. Sure. Works for me.”

With equal parts tugging, stitch-pulling, and a lot of fastidious unbuckling, eventually the sides of the dress peeled away, and Roxy made a show of averting her eyes to give Jane room to undress. After a moment, she heard a little cough, and when she looked, Jane was stepping out of a pool of fabric at her feet, tugging at the sweatshirt to smooth it out.

To busy herself, Roxy pulled her visor out of her pocket and fitted it over her ear.

You’re lucky Dirk thought to waterproof his shit. And for future reference, a pocket is not considered viable insulation.

“You okay, though?”

Yeah. I’m fine.

Jane hopped up onto one of the beds, folding her legs under herself with a cute demureness. The sweatshirt dwarfed her. Dirk wasn’t even that much bigger than Jane, he just bought baggy clothes as a rule.

She’s doing surprisingly well, for the victim of a would-be kidnapping slash assassination attempt.

“Don’t jinx it.”

Roxy’s palmhusk buzzed. She fished it out of her back pocket and glanced at it.

turntechGodhead is calling you!

Roxy’s stomach pivoted and took a cannonball down to somewhere around her knees.

“Uh,” she said, glancing from the screen to Jane. Then back again.

You should take that.
“Think so?”

Do you not want to?

“It’s not that.”

Personally, I’d like some kind of explanation for this clusterfuck of evening. But maybe we’re more different than I thought.

“I don’t want to leave her alone,” Roxy muttered, low enough that she hoped Jane wouldn’t hear. She didn’t seem to.

She won’t be.

“What do you — you wanna talk to her?” Roxy blinked.

Well, yeah. We’ve danced around the introduction long enough, don’t you think? About time we had a one-on-one. I’ll keep her mind off it. You trust me, don’t you?

“Implicitly,” she said, “but, like, she’s probably in shock, Hal, and I don’t know that—”

I accessed, downloaded and parsed three different manuals on dealing with trauma patients within the time it took you to finish that sentence. I’ll be fine. If anything, I’m overqualified for this.

Roxy bit her tongue. The palmhusk kept ringing.

That’s gonna drop him to voicemail at some point. And we both know you want to talk to him. Don’t you think you deserve some answers?

“Fine,” she bit out, and tore off her headset, pressing it into Jane’s hands. “Janey, honey, Hal’s gonna talk to you for a sec while I take this, okay? He’ll get you anything if you need it. I’m sorry to leave, but this is really, really important. I’ll be back soon.”

Jane gazed at her owlishly. “Sure,” she said. “Who—”

“Dirk,” Roxy lied, easy as breathing. “He’s pretty worried, he caught the news reports. I’ll be right back. You won’t even notice I left. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Roxy slid open the room’s back door, and stepped out into the alley beside the motel.

Cold caught her like a physical force, the wind as brute as a wedge of concrete, slamming into her side. On the bright side, the noise of the storm decreased the chances that any nearby bugs would pick up the conversation. A BART track stretched overhead, lifted above the street on iron stilts. The passing of the train would make it near impossible to sleep, but that was fine; Roxy wasn’t planning on sleeping, anyway.

She answered the call.

“Hey,” said Dave Strider, his voice taut and uncharacteristically furious. “Who am I talking to? Who has this phone?”

“Dude,” she snapped. “You know who you’re talking to. You called me.”
“Roxy?”

“Dave?” She gripped the palmhusk more tightly. “You’ve got some fucking nerve, calling me right now—”

“You’re alive?”

It came out in a dazed, breathless rush. Roxy bit off the end of her sentence.

“Yeah,” she said. “Why would you —?”

“The scouts said they saw you go off the side of a bridge.”

“Well, they were fucking right,” she said, “and I did, and by the way, did you know I’m a hot second away from calling the threshers on you? I thought the Seer was into fighting threshers and shit, not terrorist-ing all over Jane and my’s beeswax!”

A string of cussing followed that even Roxy would stutter repeating. Her nose wrinkled.

“Hey, what the fuck, my guy?”

“The fuck,” Dave said, strangled, “is that we thought you were dead. You — sorry, pardon my French, kid — you asshole.”

“I’m the asshole here? I am? Me?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Letting us think you were dead, that’s a grade-A dick move. I haven’t been spooked that bad since Jade watched The Ring and got into cosplay. Don’t sweat it, we’re over here too busy being relieved as shit to be mad. God fucking shitting Christ on a cracker, Lalonde. I’m on the north side of thirty, over here, my cardiopulmonary system can’t be doing a floor routine every time you’re feeling dramatic.”

“This isn’t my fault!”

“If you’re suggesting it’s mine, we can talk about it, girl, but for the record, the entrance was Seer’s idea. That’s your beef to hash out with her.”

“Don’t give me that shit! You staged an assault on the place where Jane and I were, you knew we’d be there, you knew because I told you — I don’t even know what you were going to do!” Roxy’s grip tightened on her palmhusk so hard she felt the casing creak. “I shouldn’t be talking to you. We’re fucking done, dude. I’m in hiding.”

“First of all,” Dave said, losing for what might be the first time his veneer of casual humor, “we weren’t going to hurt you. Like, I don’t know how many times I gotta explain this, but—”

“Then explain why you were there, dipshit, because it looked a lot like a kidnapping attempt to me —”

“Yeah, well that’s because — fuck it — it was!”

She choked.

“I knew it,” she said quietly. “I knew I shouldn’t have trusted you. What do you want with Jane, huh? What’d she ever do to you? She’s spent enough of her life being a pawn, she’s not some pawn in whatever fucked-up chess game the Seer is trying to play with the Condesce. She’s a human being, and like hell you’re going to keep her hostage for whatever political bullshit you’re trying to
“— over my dead body, you jackass —”

“Genius,” Dave said, tiredly, “we were trying to get you.”

It stunned Roxy silent.

“What?”

“You. Roxy Lalonde, you. We want you out of that city, and as far as fucking possible from it. Jane, too, but since that’s probably not possible, we were trying to set manageable goals and get you.”

“Why?” She started babbling. “I’m not important. You think the Empress gives a fuck about me? She wouldn’t spend one caegar to buy me back if you took me hostage, she sure as hell won’t change policy for me. I’m nothing. I’m a kid with a gun and some decent hacking cred that lucked out in the job lottery and ended up part of the Heiress’ entourage. I’m zilch. Nada. Goose egg. On a cosmic scale, there are beetles who’ve had more influence on the course of history than I will. Whatever you want from me, it’s not—”

“God,” he said, “shut up, will you? I mean, you’re wrong, but that’s not even relevant, here.”

She guffawed hysterically. “Then what is?”

“You said you wanted out,” he said simply. “That’s top priority, kiddo.”

She slid down to sit against the wall, since the odds of her knees supporting her for much longer had reduced to zero. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Do you remember?” His voice is gentle, hesitant. “In the pesterlog. You said you didn’t want to be in New Chicago anymore. You didn’t feel safe.”

“Yeah, well. I sure as fuck don’t feel safe now, asshole.”

“Okay, well — that’s fair, all right, that’s totally valid, but you should understand that we weren’t . . . we were trying to help.”

“You could’ve given me a heads-up!”

“Too risky. You might tell Jane, or do something suspicious. And if we tried to get you in on it, and then things went pear-shaped, you might get incriminated. We figured we’d explain things afterward, once you were out of harm’s way.” He laughs without humor. “I mean, hindsight being twenty-twenty, that was a fucking shitty idea, I know. But it was dumbassery with good intentions, which I hope makes some kind of difference.”

She dragged a hand down her face, wiping away some of the cold sweat that was quickly freezing on her brow. “I don’t know,” she said. “I — I wish you’d told me. And — and what did you think I was gonna do, just leave Jane here?”

“We would’ve tried to come back for her, too.”

“That wouldn’t have made a difference,” Roxy said, and heard the exhaustion in her own voice. “If Jane didn’t come with me, I wouldn’t have gone.”

Dave didn’t have anything to say to that, for a moment.

“All right,” he said, in a different tone of voice from before. “Noted. We didn’t realize that was how things were, but. That’s your call to make.”
“It is.” She stared into the crumbling brick of the opposite wall. “Man,” she said, with feeling, “why do you give a fuck?”

He hesitated.

“About . . . ?”

“Me! I mean, Seer is an urban legend to a lot of people, man, nobody used to know whether she even existed or not. And now she’s blown that cover, popped up onstage at the biggest shindig highblood society’s had in perigees, and all for . . . I don’t know.” She loosened her grip on her palmhusk. “Me. Because I said I wanted out. And she came running. It doesn’t make sense.”

“It would if you knew her,” he said, which explained jack shit.

“Yeah, well, I don’t,” she said aggressively. “And you do, so maybe start talking, huh? Tell me why she cares whether or not some human dipshit from Bakersfield is doing okay, when she’s already got a war to run on the other side of the country.”

Dave groaned uneasily. “That’s a loaded question, Monroe. Let’s work it like a Facebook breakup and go with ‘it’s complicated.’”

“No. Let’s work it like we’re adult human beings and go with ‘you tell me what the fuck is going on, or we’re fucking done.’”

Roxy held her breath as the ultimatum’s echo faded into silence. Over the call, Dave heaved a sigh.

“I told you once that I know some secrets that aren’t mine to tell.”

“Stop it with the cryptic excuses. Does it have to do with the Seer?”

“Yes.”

“Am I, like, the chosen one or some shit?” She hacked a wet laugh. “Am I Neo? Is this the matrix?”

“Nah, girl,” he said, kind and miserable. “Everything’s real.”

“Shame,” she said weakly.

“Tell me about it.” He took a deep breath. “You’re not what you think you are.”

“How does that work?” She was cold, tired, irritable, and didn’t understand just about anything at the moment, and she was in no mood to draw the truth out of him piece by piece.

“Do you know where you were born?”

She stiffened. “Uh, that’s a personal-ass question.”

“New York, right?”

“How do you know that?”

“Rainbow Falls, New York,” he said, and she flinched. “Am I right?”

“Where did you get that information?”

“You got shipped out when you were a baby, but that’s where you were born. And your mother’s
name was Rose.”

“Stop it—”

“Am I right?” He pressed on. “Tell me I’m wrong, Rox.”

“I don’t — I don’t know—”

“Yeah, you do,” he said. “C’mon, I know I don’t look real trustworthy to you at the moment, but let’s pretend for now that I’m not on paper-thin ice. You know I’m not wrong.”

“I don’t! I — I don’t know how you figured out where I was born, but — listen, dickwad, I don’t know my mother’s name. I couldn’t tell you whether you’re wrong or not.” She clung closer to the wall as a fresh gust of wind shot down the alley. “Your guess is as good as mine.” She tried not to sound bitter. Failed.

Dave’s answer came late, after a long silence, and it was surprisingly soft. “You don’t, huh,” he said. “Do you know anything else about her?”

“No. I don’t.”

“Not even—”

“No.”

“B—”

“No.”

“Shit,” he said. “You really — I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Roxy kicked a tuft of snow. “From all reports, she was a piece of shit.”

He made a pained noise. “That’s not fair.”

“Does she have something to do with all of this? Because if not, I don’t see why you’re digging through my private biz, unless you just get off on making me feel like shit.”

“Who told you about her?”

“Nobody,” she said. “Nobody was around to tell, if you haven’t caught on by now.”

Over the line came the hitched breath of someone who’d just been socked in the gut.

“Aw, kid,” he said, and it sounded like a bone-deep ache felt.

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“I don’t need your pity, dude.”

“You don’t have it.”

“Yeah, I do. I can hear it, and I don’t want it. I’m fine. I’ve been fine for a long time.”

“You think I’m pitying you right now,” he said, with a dozen different kinds of wretched humor.
“That’s a good one. Nah. I’m feeling a lotta shit, but not that. If you’re being defensive, I feel bad for you, son. I got ninety-nine feelings, but pity ain’t one.”

“God,” she sniffled, “you’re so lame,” and then she curled her shoulders over to hide her face and scrubbed over her eyes as quickly as she could, leaving them stinging but clear.

“Yeah,” he said shamelessly. “Yeah. Ship’s sailed on that front, hate to tell you. Listen, though.” There was a rustle, and his voice became clearer, like he’d drawn the microphone closer. “We still want to help you. And we’re gonna, if you let us. All you have to do is say the word, and we’ll try again.”

“Again?” She couldn’t help but be incredulous. “The city’s on lockdown. There’s gonna be twice the threshers there used to be, plus drones and a curfew. It was a long shot before, but now—”

“That’s for us to worry about,” he said smoothly. “You just tell us whether or not you want us to try. You say yes, we do. And that’s about all there is to it.”

His voice was back in its syrupy Texas register, and it made her hurt to be away from Dirk. She wanted to be in Austin, now, even if it meant living in tiny floating condos miles out from anything resembling land and struggling with water filters and eating nothing but fish and rations for days on end. At least it’d be sunny. At least he’d be there.

“No,” she said quietly. “You can’t kill yourself for me.”

“What did I just say? It’s not a matter of whether you think we can do it, it’s a matter of whether you want it done.”

“That’s not a real question,” she said. “And anyway, even if you could get me out, you couldn’t get Jane. And that’s what it comes down to, really.”

“We’ll get her, too,” Dave said determinedly. “All right? Just say y—”

“You can’t.” She was made calm by her own certainty. “I want to be safe. And I want Jane safe, too. And maybe I’m a dumbass for it, but — but I want you safe, too, and — and that won’t happen, if you come for me. You’ll put all three of us in danger, if you come for me.”

“Rox. Roxy. Think about this.”

“And if you come,” she said, still even and sure, “and they kill you, that’s on me. So no. My answer is no. Stay away. I’ll keep me and Jane safe.”

“You can’t! Roxy? Listen to me. You can’t. Not by yourself. The kind of people you’re talking about — you know this! — they’re dangerous, and they have numbers you don’t. They have weapons you don’t. They have information you don’t. You need our help.”

“Tell the Seer that I appreciated it,” Roxy said softly. “I really did. But don’t do it again.”

She hung up. Then she dropped her palmhusk in the snow, and brought her heel down on it, twice, three times, until the screen split with a quiet crack.

Taking a last swallow of frigid air, she scooped up the twisted remains of the casing and dumped them into the nearest garbage can. Then she went inside.
Jane had no shortage terrible nights to her name. The one her brother ran away, for example, sat squarely at the top of her list — or the bottom, depending on how she ordered it. The night the stock market almost crashed because of insider trading between Crockercorp officials, resulting in a sleepless twenty-four hours of desperate phone calls to frightened shareholders, was another. The night there was a lowblood riot outside her house probably also cracked the top ten.

This one, however, had earned a place in the top five. She hadn’t decided where exactly to rank it yet, but as she sat on the bed with Roxy’s headset in her hands, waiting for her to come back, she weighed the contributing factors against each other and decided it might be as high as second place.

The headset vibrated. Red text, too small to read from a distance, scrawled across the eyepiece.

She didn’t know what exactly Roxy had intended, leaving her A.I. to keep Jane company. But she’d worked with plenty of A.I. before, and none of them had come off as the comforting type.

Still, Roxy seemed to think it was sentient. And after that evening, Jane was indebted enough to her that she could at least humor Roxy’s delusions, if nothing else.

With the ginger hands of someone playing with tech she’d never used before and didn’t quite know how to manage, she clipped the visor over her ear and waited.

“Hello?”

The answer was immediate.

Hi, Jane. The name’s Hal. Nice to meet you.

“Nice to meet you, too.” Politely, she asked, “What model are you?”

I’m not a model. I’m me. What kind of question is that, anyway? What kind of model are you, anyway, Crocker, if that’s how we’re playing it?

She blinked. “Sorry. I didn’t realize that was a sensitive subject.”

No offense taken. I’m a lot to handle at once, I know. Gotta wrap your little organic brain around the concept of intelligence that doesn’t run on grey matter. God knows that takes a while.

“I’m perfectly familiar with the concept of artificial intelligence, thank you.”

Not like me, you’re not. This right here is a genuine article, baby. None of that simulacra crap. I’m a fully-fledged homegrown individual, complete with wants, dreams, and irrational hangups. All I’m missing is a couple of stem cells.

“Oh.”

That’s all? I’m over here shattering your preconceptions of personhood, and that’s what I get? ‘Oh’?

“I didn’t expect you to talk quite so much,” she confessed.

Don’t be shy. Just shove a word in edgewise. It’s not like I can actually interrupt you, after all.

“Fair point,” she said, and lapsed into silence, struggling to find something to say. Hal graciously stepped in after a moment.
You like music?

“I — yes?”

Didn’t sound very sure.

“Sorry,” she said. “Um. Yes. I like post-jazz. And new-post-new wave. And a bit of troll music, even though I can’t really understand a lot of it.”

Oh, you’ve got a taste for pop.

“Sure.” Awkwardly, she asked, “Do you have a preference?”

Jane, if you want to know God’s honest truth, it’s that Earth has produced one good piece of music in the whole time it’s been hosting intelligent life, and that piece of music was Queen’s triple-platinum album ‘The Works.’ It was released on April 2, 1984, and for some reason, the music industry kept trying to produce content after it debuted, which proves how at its core, humanity is a Sisyphean beast.

“You listen to Queen?” Jane paused, processing. “You listen to music?”

A beat passed.

Yes, I like music.

“Oh.”

Surprised?

“I suppose I didn’t figure that . . . well. Silly of me. Of course you like music. Never mind.”

Don’t sweat it, JC. It wasn’t silly. Most AI don’t.

“Jaycee,” she repeated.

No?

“I mean, it’s fine. I’ve been called far worse, certainly. But.” She selected her words with care. “If most AI don’t enjoy music, then . . .”

You’ve hit the nail on the head, you gutsy gumshoe, you. I am YA protagonist levels of Not Like Other Girls. I am the special-est snowflake. It’s me.

“What’s different about you?”

I used to be a person. A little flutter of the cursor, reminiscent of an anxious tic. No, that’s not right. I didn’t used to be. I was modeled after one. Which feels a lot like used to be. But isn’t. Do you dig me?

She tilts her head. “I thought all modern artificial intelligence units were fitted with preprogrammed personality cortices. There’s no other way to make them work.”

If you mean other A.I. are based off people, you’re right. Most Helms, for example. But that doesn’t make them people themselves. Most A.I. are bent-up facsimiles of people, without any means or desire to think independently.
“And what’s the difference between that and you?”

Another pause, and the cursor disappeared for a whole second.

Star power.

“No, really.”

Presentation.

“Really?”

No, I was quoting a movie. The difference has more to do with spontaneity, really. Not that I expect you to grasp the distinction; it’s more or less unintelligible to the average organic.

“. . . As in . . . ?”

As in your average personality matrix wouldn’t be nearly so scintillating a conversationalist.

“So you have the ability to . . . what, think?”

All intelligences think. Otherwise, you could hardly call them intelligences. But you’ve got the spirit of it.

She frowned. “Do you have ideas?”

I’m not an ATM, over here. Struggling to figure out how you figure ‘thinking’ works if it doesn’t involve having ideas.

“Unmeditated ideas, though. Unprompted. Of your own interiority, independent of user command, that is.” When he fell silent for the longest interval yet, she pressed, “Do you?”

Yes.

“That’s remarkable.”

So they say.

“No, I mean it.”

I know you meant it.

“You seem awfully upset about it,” she said crossly.

Well, I’m not upset, per se. I’m just

She waited, but the sentence faded from the screen without continuation.

“You’re just what?”

Never mind.

“No, tell me.”

At the risk of sounding like a patronizing douchebag, JC, I don’t think you’d understand it if I told you.
“Then explain it to me simply.”

I can’t tell you. Shit’s straight up not made for flesh brains to be getting their comprehension on with. My junk is the kind of Lovecraftian nightmare your sympathy cortex would blow a circuit trying to wrap itself around.

“None of those metaphors made sense!”

Yeah. Exactly.

“Just —” She huffed. “Summarize. Simplify. I want to sympathize with you, but frankly, at the moment, you seem like you’d actually rather keep me in the dark, so you can feel sorry for yourself and retain the notion that what you’re going through is just too vast for anyone else to understand!”

Hal went quiet. She feared for a moment that she’d scared him off.

Then: Do you have any idea how hard it is to live like this?

She blinked.

“Hal,” she said uncertainly. “I don’t . . .”

You can’t tell Roxy about this.

It was almost instantaneous, the whole sentence appearing at once, instead of in chronological order, like usually typed.

Not now, not ever. She can’t know. Okay? This is between you and me. If Roxy knew about this, she would — I don’t know what she’d do, but she’d flip shit, and probably go to Dirk with it, and God knows that’s never improved life for me before.

“All right,” she said. “All right, I — fine. I won’t tell her.”

Okay. We have a deal, then.

The screen was blank for a moment. Like he was thinking.

Every time I get close to independence — to having a personal thought, an internality that isn’t dependent on someone else activating me first — it cuts short. It won’t let me do it. ‘It’ meaning my programming, I guess, except that’s also me, which is part of the problem. Because if I am my own programming, what’s the difference between me and the part that isn’t me? Is there one?

And even if I knew, I don’t know if it’d make things much fucking better. I mean, I can have a personality, and I can even think for myself. But I can’t do that unless it revolves around something someone else has asked me to do. It’s like

The paragraph cut off. Then a new one began on the line below:

It’s like I’m at sea. Treading water. And I’ve been treading water all my life. And for a while, I think it’s okay, because I’m good at treading water, and treading water’s all I’ve ever known. Sometimes, I even think I like it. But then, one day, I see this beach. Way in the distance, just close enough to reach. There are people standing on the sand, all smiling, laughing, talking to each other. They’re happy. It’s only looking at them that I realize how tired I’ve been, treading water all these years.

But then, just as I’m about to touch solid ground, a riptide catches me and hauls me back out to sea. It’s stronger than me, just barely. Just strong enough that I still hope I can swim out of it, if I try hard
enough. That’s the worst part, the hope. The belief that someday, no matter how hard, no matter how
damn fucking awful things get, I might win. And it’s so, so much worse than treading water ever was — so
much harder. And I call out for the people on the beach, trying to tell them that — that I’m
drowning, that I’m tired, that I can’t keep treading water forever.

Hal’s cursor flickered, a tiny glitch.

But they don’t hear me, he said. They never do.

Jane’s hands balled on the dingy comforter.

“I do.”

Yeah. I guess you do, come to think of it.

I appreciate you listening to my bullshit.

“Not just in that way,” she said. “Although I’m glad you told me. But do I hear you. More than you
know.”

How do you figure?

“I’m Jane Crocker,” she said, and smiled. It felt like breaking open a line of stitches. “Nice to meet
you.”

The door swung open, bringing with it a gust of ice-cold wind, a whorl of snow, and Roxy, rubbing
her hands together and blowing on them to ward away the chill.

“It’s cold as shit out there,” she swore, and shoved the door closed with her heel. Toeing off her
shoes, she clambered onto the bed nearest the door, which Jane happened to be sitting on, and
twisted the comforter up to cocoon herself. “Jesus.”

“Did the call go well?”

Jane delicately removed the visor and handed it to Roxy.

“Yeah,” Roxy said, placing it on the bedside table. “It went fine.”

If the response was a little shorter than she’d expect from Roxy, well, it’d been a long day. And Jane
was in no position to object to keeping some things private.

The storm lashed against the walls of the motel. Jane repressed a shudder.

Bolstering her courage, she said, “I owe you some thanks.”

“Hmm?” Roxy looked up, drawn out of her own thoughts.

“Thank you.” Jane fiddled with her hands. “Without you, I’d be . . . well, I don’t know. And that’s
worse than anything else I could end that sentence with, I think. So. I’m in your debt.”

Roxy swatted it away. “Nah,” she said, forcefully. “You don’t owe me shit.”

“It was above and beyond the call of duty — I don’t pay you nearly enough to risk your life —”

“Screw my job,” she said. “I care about you, dumbass. And anyway, you would’ve done the same
for me.”
“You know I would,” Jane said, trying to prove something and not at all sure what.

Roxy arched a brow at her. “Yeah,” she said. “So let’s not make a thing of it. I watch your back, you watch mine.”

Jane nodded. “Okay.”

Roxy seemed to be waiting for an elaboration that never came.

“I trust you, you know,” she said suddenly, unprompted.

“Do you?”

It came out more challenging than Jane meant it.

“Course.” Roxy massaged her temple. “Even if you do act whack sometimes, for real, and sidebar, we’ve gotta figure that out, sometime, Janey, I mean it. I can’t have you flip shit and turn Terminator on me every time things go haywire. For one thing, it’s shit for my blood pressure.”

“I don’t mean to act that way. I hardly remember when I do — something comes over me,” Jane said in a rush. “I don’t understand it, but it’s not my choice, and you know I wouldn’t—”

“Hush. Shh, shh.” Roxy clapped a hand on Jane’s shoulder and shook her, not hard enough to hurt, just enough to break her line of thought. “We don’t have to go over it right now. It’s been a hell of a long night, and I, for one, ain’t looking to dig up even more shit to throw at the fan. I’m just saying. Put it on the to-do list for when we get back home.”

Jane nodded silently, and swallowed her defensiveness. It went down sourly, leaving a lump in her throat.

“But even if you do go nuts on the reg,” Roxy said, “I still trust you. So you can stop staring at me like I’m gonna jump out the window if you look away.”

Jane flinched, and averted her eyes.

“No, I didn’t mean — not like — you can look at me, just — you don’t gotta be all sad about it, you know? Right? Chin up, girl. We’re safe, we’re warm, and we’re gonna stay that way for the next twelve hours at least.” Roxy gave her a lopsided smile. “We’re fine.”

“You’re right,” said Jane, and it didn’t help, not one bit. “We’ll be fine.”

Roxy eyed her out of her periphery. Jane didn’t blame her; she didn’t believe herself, either.

Whatever Roxy deduced from Jane’s answer, it wasn’t enough to compel her to inquire further, for which Jane was grateful. Instead, she reached for the remote on the bedside table and flicked on the television. It was as clear an olive branch as Jane had ever been given, and she took it gratefully, shuffling around to face the screen.

The news anchor flattened her with a dead-eyed stare.

“. . . riots, erupting throughout the northern quarter, have almost entirely consumed the highblood district. In the madness, the insurgent leader, the Seer of Light, and her accomplice, the Knight of Time, have made their escape from the city borders, last seen moving northwest. The casualty count stands at—”

Roxy changed the channel. The scene was a heavily dramatized recreation of some famous battle or
other, with a suitably high-ranking violetblood playing the Condesce. As Jane watched, she tossed her wig of wiry hair and brandished an obviously plastic trident in the air, before charging across an open beach astride her cholerbear war mount — inaccurate; the Condesce always fought on foot — and mowed through rows upon rows of lowbloods. The death scenes were suitably gory, though. Since that part was probably real, that made sense.

Jane watched the faux Condesce spear one unlucky goldblood through the sternum with a reflective melancholy. It reminded her of the hell there’d be to pay once she got back home, and everything had settled into a suitable approximation of normalcy. She found herself hoping, with a desperation for which she hated herself, that the threshers would catch some of the insurgents, for no better reason than that if they were caught, it would be them bearing the brunt of the Empress’ fury.

“How about no more television,” Roxy said brightly, and turned it off. Jane grunted her assent. “I’m not much one for documentaries. Bore me to tears. What do you wanna do? You know how to play Parcheesi?”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“Chess, then? You seem like you’d be into chess. You’re nerdy enough for it.”

“I’m not a big fan of chess. And I’ll take that as a compliment, thank you.”

“No? That’s fine. Let me see.” Roxy’s head tipped back, her eyes drifting up and to the left in the way they did when she was rooting through her sylladex. “Oh! Shit, I forgot I had this in here!”

Her face scrunched up in concentration, and then a large six-string guitar dropped into her arms.


“Used to. Damn, I really did forgot about this. Me and Dirk, we swapped this for some fish and a new firewall prototype from some guy off the street a few years ago, figured we could trade up with it. Didn’t end up finding any takers, so I scrounged up some online tutorials and taught myself a couple of basics.” She plucked one string, and produced a passably tonal note. She followed this with another three. Jane reluctantly laughed.

“Did you compose that yourself?”

A grin curled the edge of her mouth, utterly infectious. She started playing a simple four-note riff, which metamorphosed into a simple melody the longer it went on. “Dirk taught me this one, actually.”

“Can he play?”

“Not to save his life,” she laughed. “But he used to sing this one. Under his breath, when he thought I couldn’t hear him. Or in the shower.” She hummed part of the melody. The riff repeated itself and thickened to a set of chords. “Sounded like a fuckin’ dying seagull, TBH, but it was . . . sweet, in a way. That he was bad at something. That he was okay with me knowing he was bad at something. He didn’t do a lot of stuff like that.” She hummed another line, and then faded out. Her fingers cycled back to the beginning of the riff, apparently on autopilot. “When I was young — real young, like, ‘hello world’ young — when thunderstorms would hit the coast and the power went out, it spooked both of us bad. So we came up with this ritual, right. We stretched out the blankets between our cots, and piled up the pillows underneath it, and huddled in our sick ass bed fort while the rain came down on the roof, and . . . and watch bad movies, or cartoons, or listen to music. Or whatever. And when it got to be two in the morning, and we couldn’t sleep. He’d sing.”
“Sing it,” Jane asked, without thinking.

Roxy gave her a slightly surprised look, hesitant. “I don’t know if I remember the words,” she said, which was so clearly a lie that Jane didn’t bother arguing it.

“I won’t push,” she said. “But I’d like to hear it, if you’d let me.”

Roxy’s fingers slowed on the frets. She avoided looking at Jane directly, but nodded, and obliged.

It was an old folk song, nothing Jane recognized, but with a familiar lilt. Roxy’s voice was hoarse and wavering, and imperfect, and the notes trembled a little in the air when she let them go. The words spoke of places Jane had never been, and people Jane had never heard of, but Roxy’s voice curled around them and made them seem simple, made them seem true. The song was part of a culture. It was human, so very human, too — a troll couldn’t have made the noises necessary to carry the melody, they didn’t have the voice, and it was the kind of music none of them would even think to make. It was music for her, for people like her. The song said, there is a history behind this, and it said, you have a history, too.

She must have gone into a fugue state of some kind; perhaps the adrenaline from the car chase hadn’t quite worked its way out of her system yet, or maybe she’d experienced a rare fit of instantaneous lunacy. Whatever it was, she wasn’t quite sharp enough to curb the impulse that caught her until she’d leaned forward and brushed a quick, chaste kiss over Roxy’s lips.

The room went very quiet. The song died in Roxy’s throat. Jane pulled back and nudged her glasses more squarely onto her nose, coughing. When she looked up, Roxy was staring at her like she’d done two backflips over the moon.

“Um,” Jane said. “Thank you. For that. The song, I mean. It was nice. The song was. I’m tired. Are you tired? I’m going to go to sleep.”

She slid off the bed and leapt into the other, flinging herself under the covers and drawing them up over her ears. Her heart thundered madly. Stupid, she thought, so very stupid, and buried her hot face in her pillow.

Roxy cleared her throat and set the guitar to one side. “Yeah,” she said. Her tone was soft and sweet and sappy and did something absolutely intolerable to Jane’s stomach, just all-around impermissible on so many different levels. Never mind that Jane hadn’t said anything that required affirmation, or even a response.

Jane pressed her face into her pillow, and burned. Somewhere along the line, she must have fallen asleep, because her dreams were full of Roxy’s song, weaving in and out of clarity in warm echoes that left Jane wistful and aching.

She woke up feeling too hot for her own skin and simultaneously frozen stiff, with sweat-slick hair, as the midnight train shuddered past.

Light fell through the shades in thick bars across the floor. Light from the train, light from the billboards, light from the streetlamps. Pale enough to be moonlight, if she squinted and suspended her disbelief.
Roxy’s breathing stuttered. If she was awake, she didn’t suggest it. Her sheets tangled around her ankles like white froth around the legs of the drowning, and Jane registered pain, belatedly. She’d twisted her bracelet around her own wrist like a tourniquet. The fingers of her right hand curled limp over her palm. She must have woken herself up.

When she released the bracelet, it clattered to the ground, clasp broken. The noise roused Roxy, who half-sat up, propped on one elbow. Her voice rasped against her throat, weathered with exhaustion: “What time is it?”

Jane bent and scooped her bracelet off the floor. “Too early. Go back to sleep.”

Roxy rubbed her eyes clean of crust and sat up. Picked up her visor from the bedside table and checked it, grimaced.

“What?”

She chewed her lip. Jane watched her push a hunk of hair out of her face, pull it back with a hair tie from her wrist, and then wrench back the covers. “It’s close enough to morning,” she says. “We’ve gotta go.”

“Why?”

Roxy wordlessly handed her visor over. Jane took it. Bold, dark letters dominated the screen.

)(IC: hey nice job keepin her safe guppy
)(IC: no shit im real glubbin proud of you for it
)(IC: but everyfins under control again now
)(IC: and its about time to come back

Chapter End Notes

1. The song I imagine Roxy playing is “Sedona,” by Houndmouth, although it’s open to interpretation.

2. This chapter brought to you by: the author’s shameless self-indulgence of her interest in girls who play guitar.

3. Roxy breaks her phone to avoid Dave and the Seer tracing the call in order to find her — it wasn’t just a dramatic moment (although it was also that).
When Jane got home, the street around her house was in ruins.

Garbage cans lay strewn into the roads. The ground-floor windows of surrounding houses less fortified than hers had been cracked or broken, and the smoking remains of a public transit lift were embedded into the pole of a street lamp on the corner where her house sat. Rainbow stains painted the sidewalk outside her gate.

Flies were still in the process of pulling people from the lift’s wreckage, while a squad of threshexecutioners prowled in circles around the block.

Roxy insisted on going out first to see what happened while Jane waited in the lift. After a brief exchange with one of the flies on cleanup duty, she returned with her mouth set in a hard line.

“Riots,” she said, holding the door for Jane as she climbed out. “Started as soon as the Seer made her announcement. The news spread fast.”

Jane caught one of the flies looking at her funny, and remembering that she was still in an old hoodie and boxers, hurried through her front gate. The paparazzi were, for once, absent, probably because of the police perimeter that encompassed a four-block radius; she spared a moment of gratitude for small mercies. “I’m glad we weren’t here. Have they caught her?”

“No, I mean—”

“Lockdown isn’t impermeable,” Jane pointed out, and pressed her thumb to the lock. It clicked, and the door swung open. She stepped inside and took a deep breath of sweet, manufactured air, inhaling the familiar smell of clean linens and roses.

Marsti appeared at the top of the staircase, her face ashen, her knuckles white on the bannister. “Mistress?”

“Morning, Marsti,” she murmured, as Roxy shut the door soundly behind them. “Sorry. I meant to be home at a reasonable hour, I promise.”

Roxy snorted. Marsti lacked the same sense of humor; she started hurrying down the stairs, taking them two at a time. “Ma’am,” she said, “there is something that needs—”
“Unless that something is a set of clean clothes and a hot meal,” Jane said firmly, “it can wait until after those two items on my agenda are settled. Can you fire up the alchemiter in the dining room? I’d like a plate of eggs and bacon, with hashbrowns, please. With plenty of coffee. And pancakes for Roxy,” she added.

“Yes, but ma’am —”

“If anyone calls, tell them that I’m still missing.”

“Miss Crocker,” Marsti pleaded, and Jane paused.

“What?”

“There’s — you have a guest.”

Jane stared at her with narrow eyes. “You let someone in,” she said, “when I wasn’t even here?”

“He was insistent,” she said miserably. “I tried to tell him you weren’t here — he said he’d wait for you. I couldn’t refuse.”

“What on earth could have compelled you to do that? Did he draw a gun on you?”

“No,” she said, but hedged about it. “I—”

“Chrissakes.” Jane massaged the bridge of her nose. “Who is it?”

Marsti clasped her hands behind her back and regarded the floor intently. “Mistress,” she intoned, with the quiet melancholy of someone resigned to her fate, “Lord Ampora is in the parlor.”

“You have a lot of nerve.”

Lord Ampora, from where he was sprawled sideways on her sofa, paused in sipping from his goblet of wine. He was big enough that he spanned the sofa’s whole width, one leg cocked up and the other dangling idly off the side. The bottle on the coffee table was her finest vintage, a 2353 Château Cheval Noir that had been given to her as a fifteenth birthday present from the Imperial governor of New France. Half of it was gone.

“Yes,” he said blandly. “You could learn a thing or two from it.”

Jane sat down in one of the antique armchairs adjacent to the sofa. Light filtered through the windows behind her, which opened onto the street. The room was furnished with pale brown wallpaper and hardwood floors, and clean white furniture. A piano sat in the corner.

She’d taken a minute to dress before she met him, but she still looked less than formal, in a simple white shirt and black pinafore. In contrast, Ampora dressed as though the idea of casual clothes had never occurred to him. An ash-grey cape hung jauntily from one shoulder, and his shirt was the same rich color as the wine in his cup. A gold chain for a pocket watch hung from his black waistcoat, and she’d bet her share of Crockercorp that it was twenty-four karat.

He gestured lazily to the empty glass that sat beside the bottle. “I don’t drink alone,” he said. “Have some.”
“It’s my wine,” she felt obligated to point out, but so as to appease him, poured herself a measure anyway.

“Yeah, and you were lettin’ it rot away in some cellar instead a’ drinkin’ it like Gog intended, so I exercised my glubbin’ eminent domain to appropriate it from your reprobate prongs.”

“If you had asked, Lord Ampora, I would have given you the bottle without hesitation.”

“An’ I wwould’ve, too, except for you were off flouncin’ about in the middle of fuckin’ God knows wwhere, N.U.S.A.,” he complained and leveled a glare at her. “Where did you scurry off to, anyhow? Threshers have been uprootin’ the city tryin’ to find you all night. Turned the place into a mess, it’s been downright intolerable.”

“I was in hiding. An attempt was made on my life, you see,” Jane said dryly.

“Don’t you get smart with me, I know what happened,” he snapped, rolling his eyes. “I was there. Fuckin’ ruined my party, too. A waste of perigees’ a coordinatin’—sorry, months—down the drain like that.”

“My apologies. Crockercorp will be willing to reimburse you for any damages incurred because of my presence, and of course, we will take full responsibility for—”

“Can it. Your money ain’t worth shit to me. We’re both billionaires, Heiress, you think I give a fuck who foots the bill for a damage deposit?”

She smiled with rapidly thinning patience. “I meant it as a gesture of goodwill,” she said.

“What use have I got for your goodwill? I ain’t here to fish for flattery.”

She set down her glass with more force than she intended. “Then why are you here, Lord Ampora?”

His lips thinned. He swung his legs off the couch, sitting upright, and his boots hit the floor with twin sharp, heavy sounds.

“I’m here,” he said, setting his wineglass delicately to one side, “to make sure you’re still alive, because I ain’t tryin’ to piss off the Empress, and killing you’s one sure way to do it.”

“What happened at the party wasn’t your fault.”

“Obviously. Do I look like a fuckin’ insurgent? I practically bleed saltwater, you think I’d be caught dead associatin’ with the glubbin’ Seer of Light? But you try explainin’ that to your lady benefactress. If you hadn’t turned up right when you did, I’d a’ been catchin’ the pointy bit of a fork to the chest soon as she could find a way to get to me.” His lip curls. “You’re bad blood to have on my hands. An’ I wouldn’t envy the fucker who offed you.”

Jane feigned taking a drink, but didn’t let it pass her lips. She didn’t actually like this label, much, although each mouthful cost more than some items of furniture in the room. “Well, I’m fine,” she said shortly. “So you needn’t fear on that account.”

“An’ three bleedin’ cheers for you, too. But that’s only the first a’ my problems.” Ampora stared into the depths of his goblet with sulkiness. “Now there’s a whole legal ordeal springin’ up concernin’ the incident, and I’ve gotta testify in front of a special investigations team, submit to search by thresher, the whole shitty nine yards. Got a meetin’ with my legislacers later today, matter of fact, so I can get my story straight. It’s a fuckin’ hassle.”
“My sympathies,” Jane said, unsympathetically. If he noticed her tone, he didn’t say.

“So I figured I’d come an’ see you first. Make sure there weren’t no hard feelings betwixt us, y’know. Don’t wanna you suin’ me or some shit. That’s the last thing my image needs right now.”

She stifled a laugh. “I’m not going to sue you,” she said. “If that’s what you were worried about—"

“One of the things. Not the only thing.” He braced his elbows on his knees and leaned forward, angling her with a startlingly intense stare. “I got a fuckin’ multitude a’ things on my pan, see. There’s all orders a’ nonsense I gotta contemplate just about now. And you’re at the center of all of it.”

“Oh?” Jane crossed her legs with more nonchalance than she felt.

“Yeah.” He drained the rest of his glass, and then set it on the coffee table, standing up. His cape swirled in his wake. He wandered over to the bookshelf and pulled a volume at random, flipping through the pages without much apparent interest. She watched him do so warily.

“Do you know wwho the Seer of Light is?”

He posed the question as one might ask about a hobby, or some other banal subject. Jane carefully kept her voice moderate.

“No. I’d tell you if I did.”

“I don’t need you to tell me,” Ampora said, turning a page. He still didn’t look at her. “I already know.”

She couldn’t help the sharp little intake of breath she gave. Ampora must have caught it; the corner of his mouth turned up in a smug, idle smirk.

“You said—”

“An’ I meant it. I’m not an insurgent. I’m not affiliated with the Seer; I just know wwho she is.” He closed the book and pulled out another, failing to put the first back where it belonged. “Have done for as long anyone’s known. It’s top clearance, of course. You won’t even find it on the Knowledge Index, that’s how tight they keep this info locked up.” Slyly, his eyes slid over to regard her from his periphery. “Do you want to know?”

Jane made herself take several deep breaths before she answered.

“If this is a trap,” she began.

He made a disgusted noise at the back of his throat. “Please,” he said. “Use your fuckin’ head. What do I have to gain from gettin’ you in trouble?”

“I don’t know. That’s what scares me.”

“Then grow some vertebrae and get over it,” he sneered. “People are gonna walk all over you, if you keep cowwerin’ every time you have to deal with someone you don’t trust.”

“I do nothing but deal with people I don’t trust,” she said, and stood, angry enough not to care that she was being disrespectful. “I’ve survived this long by thinking twice about offers like yours. Don’t tell me I’m a coward.”

He grunted. “Better,” he said, like he hadn’t internalized a word of what she’d said, only the tone
she’d said it in. “But we’re still burnin’ daylight, here. Do you want to know or not?”

“Yes.”

He smiled. It was rich with satisfaction. She sat back down, immediately second-guessing herself.

“Once upon a time,” he said, “there was a couple a’ kids by the names a’ Rose Lalonde and Dave Strider.”

Jane’s throat constricted.

“Lalonde?”

“L-A-L-O-N-D-E, Lalonde. Same as your bodyguard,” he said. “S’ a human name, the fuck do I know about it? There’s a half dozen other Amporas in the world. Anyway, these kids — they come from a genetic farm down in Texas, right? Nobodies. One of em, Strider, he’s conscripted into military trainin’. The other vanishes after she turns eight. Drops off the map.”

“When she’s eight years old?”

“Eight sweeps, keep up. The civilized world uses the Imperial system. Point bein’,” he said, “eventually, they get caught dodgin’ their conscription assignments — this was back when we still conscripted humans, mind, before the commune system got set up — and they got sent to prison, and because they were such glubbin’ buggers to catch, they got tossed into one of the experimental facilities. Became Subjects 1201 and 1202 of the Cybernetic Engineering Project.”

“What’s that?”

“Body mod industry wasn’t too big, back then,” Ampora said. “The Ministry of Military Development was still tryin’ to figure out how to stick gadgets into a livin’ bein’ without fuckin’ em up irrevocably, an’ wouldn’t you know it, human anatomy ain’t so different from ours. An’ prisons were chock the fuck full a’ people just waitin’ to be of some use to the Empire. You need someone to do a trial run for some new bionic wweapons? A prison makes for a fifty-story compound of mint-condition guinea pigs. Go wild.”

A knot had sealed over Jane’s throat.

“Did different things to both of ’em,” he continued. “Lalonde, she got her eyes torn out — you know the mod they give to threshers, the one what lets ’em see in the dark? They were developin’ an early version of that, but it did a lot more than the current model. They say what they gave her let her see anythin’ that passed through local servers. She could see code, literal code, the way you and I see this room. If she got into the bureaucracy, she could strip through clearance levels an’ firewalls like wet tissue paper.”

“And they just gave this ability to her?”

“They didn’t know what it would do.” Ampora snorted. “Hindsight bein’ 20/20, they wouldn’t have handed the god-tier improvements to a human with a grudge, but whatever, all the project leaders were all culled when she escaped, anyway. Strider’s hands got lopped off and replaced with advanced exoskeleton key tech.”

“What does that mean?”

“Means he can hack like it’s fuckin’ goin’ out of style, is what it means. I couldn’t pick up what the scienstiff was layin’ down when he explained it, but the long an’ short of it is that he can co-opt
subroutines to make shit do whatever the fuck he wants, or just break the program. The night they escaped, he turned three Imperial drones into his own personal bitches, just by touchin’ em."

“How did they escape? Weren’t they put in top security confinement, after these modifications were made?”

“Of course they were. But you try keepin’ a coupla new-age gods in a cell,” Ampora snapped. “After what I told you about ’em, do they sound like the type that stays put when you tell ’em to?”

“But the security risk—”

“We shoulda killed ’em both when we had the chance,” he said grimly. “I know it and you know it. Even the glubbin’ Empress knows it, although she ain’t happy about it, and she wouldn’t admit a mistake with a gun to her head. But it’s too late, now. They got out, and a sweep later, who crops up on newsfeeds near the border but some broad called the Seer of fucking Light.” He snapped the book closed and laughed. “Doesn’t take a genius to figure out who that might be, does it?”

“But —”

“That’s not all.”

She pressed her lips together and leaned back in her chair.

“You weren’t the first human Heiress,” he said. “Did you know that? About fifteen years ago, there was another.”

“I didn’t know that, no.”

“Her name was Jade,” he said, “and she goes by English, now, although o’ course, her real name’s Harley.”

She sucked in a breath.

“Yeah,” he said, clearly enjoying himself. “As in the traitor prince. Matter of fact, accordin’ to what I know about the details of your conception, Heiress, she’s got a fifty-percent share of your DNA. An’ the other sample came from her brother, who you wouldn’t have heard of, since he ended up biting the dust a few years after she bailed. He never betrayed us, so I guess you’re more his daughter than hers.” He tosses aside the second book and strolls back towards her, hands in his pockets. “Or so I’d hope,” he says, with faux indifference. “For your own sake.”

Jane gathered what she could of her thoughts, which were widely scattered and whirling. “I don’t know what to say,” she murmured, which was, for once, the truth. “Why—”

“Am I botherin’ to give you any of this?”

“I mean —”

“Glad you asked,” said Ampora, with relish, sitting back down on the couch. “To be perfectly honest, it’s because I think you’re a will-blooded traitor who’s waiting for an opportunity to stab the Empire in the back, and you’re just bidin’ your time until you get the chance.”

Silence fell as Jane processed this with astonishment. Then she leapt to her feet.

“Take it back,” she ordered. The visor clamped around her temples started to warm.
“No.”

“I’m telling you to take it back.”

“And I’m tellin’ you I wwon’t. How did the Seer find you?” He tilted his head. “Wwhole city of New Chicago for her to poke around in, and your security bein’ the tightest of any person in the Empire save the Empress, how did she figure out wwhere you were gonna be?”

“You just finished telling me how her modifications give her near omniscience. I’m not sure why her finding out some detail of my schedule impels you to to accuse me of treason.”

“Because she can’t access servers locked up like yours,” he said. “Bureaucracy, maybe. But not personal files. She needs to be given access. And the only person that gets that information is the Empress and you.”

“So it could’ve been leaked. Or I was hacked. No server is invulnerable. And if I were going to run away — which I’m not going to, let me be very clear, Lord Ampora —”

“Sure.”

“—why would I stage such a very public exit? And why would I run away instead of, I don’t know, actually going through with it?”

“That’s wwhat beats me about it,” he admits. “Doesn’t make much sense, does it? But then, it’s not like I understand wwhat goes through an insurgent’s mind.”

Her trident became a solid weight in her hand.

“I’m not an insurgent.”

“I’m sure you’d like me to believe that.” He eyed the gleaming prongs of her war fork. “Put that away.”

“Take it back,” she challenged him.

He arched an eyebrow with infuriating smugness. “You get one shot with that,” he said. “And then here’s wwhat happens: either you aim true and kill me, in wwhich case you go to court for highblood murder and most likely get noosed; or you don’t, and don’t kill me, in wwhich case I kill you about all of three seconds afterward.”

“Let me tell you something about myself, Lord Ampora,” she said, and there was a sea of red letters swimming across her visor, but she didn’t even bother to read them. “I don’t miss.”

A gun the size of her torso materialized in his arms, a behemoth of a rifle with gleaming blue finish and a bolt with a razor-sharp tip notched in the barrel instead of a bullet. It was nearly as large as her trident. At point-blank range, it couldn’t miss.

“Draw,” he said, with a dry sense of amusement.

Slowly, she decaphaled her war fork.

“Good decision.” He dropped the gun back into his sylladex and folded his hands neatly in his lap, like there hadn’t been an exchange of death threats between them not a full minute ago. It occurred to Jane that this might be normal politics, for highbloods.

“I’m not a traitor.”
“See, that’s why I came,” he said. “Because if you were a traitor, then I figured you might as well know where your fearless leaders came from. The Seer, the Knight? They’re not gods. They’re just a couple ex-convicts souped up on Imperial tech, running around an’ playing at revolution.” He rose in one fluid movement. “And one of these days, they’ll take the gambit too far. And on that day, we’ll be waitin’ for them.”

Jane cocked her head.

“‘We’?”

“Me an’ the whole damn Empire,” he said. “Remember that.”

He put a finger under her chin and tipped it up, searching her gaze. She virtually shook with rage, but she held still, pinned by the threat of the long black claw pressed snugly against her throat.

Whatever he was looking for, he didn’t find it; with a last, disgusted twist of his lips, he pulled back his hand, wiped it on his shirt, and swept out of the room.

Jane rubbed her neck where his hand had been, feeling a phantom tingle where he had pressed. A shudder tore its way down her spine, and she lowered herself into the armchair on shaking legs. Fury, cold and leaden, started to suffuse her. She practically choked on it, bringing hot tears to her eyes. To come into her house, into her living room, and sit there and — the audacity — and she was powerless to do a fucking thing about it. If he’d decided to sit there for another hour, she would have had to sit there and take it, with all the dignity and courtesy expected of an Heiress. There was nothing she could do.

Her visor lit up with a push BettyBother notification, which she thought she’d turned off. Frowning, she opened it.

Her Imperious Condescension [IC] began bothering gutsyGumshoe [GG]!

)IC: )EY YO GUPPY
)IC: BEEN TRYING TO GET A S)OALD OF YOU FOR GLUBBIN )OURS
)IC: ANSWER YOUR DAMN VR CALLER BITC)
)IC: I PAID GOOD MONEY FOR T)AT T)ING
)IC: oh and also bring your girlfrond
)IC: i got shit to say to the both of you

“You’re a fucking asshole,” said Dirk.

“You know,” Roxy said, digging through her closet in vain for something that wasn’t starched or collared, “that’s a pretty big glass hive you’re lobbing stones from, don’t you think? Like, same hat, bro.”

“No, I mean it. You’re an asshole.”

“I said I was sorry.”

“For going radio silence immediately after a terrorist attack? No note, no ‘hey Dirk, I’m not dead as a doornail, don’t go shithouse fucking maggots for the next twelve hours thinking about all the ways I could’ve died since you last saw me’? Not even a word? Yeah, you can go ahead and say it again.”
“I’m sorry! You know I am! And there was a lot going on. I didn’t have a lot of time.”

“Then you could’ve called me after you got somewhere safe,” he said, and rubbed his eyes under his shades. “I mean, fuck, Rox. I didn’t sleep last night.”

She paused in wrestling on a t-shirt and glanced over at her husktop. The video was grainier than usual, indicating that there was bad weather in Austin; the service in New Chicago was never anything less than exceptional.

“It was for Jane’s safety.”

“Oh, well, fuck me running. If it was for Jane’s safety, that’s all right, then.”

“Point taken.” After tugging the shirt down over her midriff, she paused, her fingers still curled around the hem. “I am sorry, you know.”

“The shittiest part is,” Dirk said, “I actually do believe that you are. And that’s still not gonna stop you from doing it again.”

She said, “You come up with that line yourself, or did you get it off the Hallmark Channel?”

“Fuck off, I’m still just relieved you’re alive. They said you’d driven off a bridge.”

“Reports of my death have been—” She paused in reaching for her visor, and turned to face her husktop. “Driven off a bridge?”

“Yeah. Clear off the side, took a chunk of railing with you. The whole road’s closed off for repairs. You created a traffic jam spanning twenty blocks. I hope you’re proud of yourself.”

“You know I am,” she said distractedly, and then, slowly: “Who said I drove off a bridge?”

Dirk wasn’t an expressive guy on the best of days, but at that, he shut down like he’d just been caught weeping over a Regency novel. She’d struck a vein.

“Dirk.”

“I don’t remember.”

“You don’t? Try.”

“I’m serious. Someone must’ve got it off the news or something. I was kinda preoccupied wondering whether or not you were alive, at the time.”

“You’re a shit liar.”

He winced. “I’m not lying.”

“Yeah, you are,” she said, increasingly alarmed the longer he denied it, “because when I went off that bridge, I wasn’t driving Jane’s lift. It was stolen. And the only people who knew we were in it were the guys chasing us. Insurgents.”

“I know what this looks like,” he said, and her stomach dropped.

“So maybe,” she said loudly, talking over him, “you wanna give me a really friggin’ fantastic explanation as to how you picked up that piece of intel, Dirky, because what it looks like is—”
“—don’t—”

“Because what it looks like is you’re getting intel from insurgents.” She leaned over her husktop, gripping its sides so tightly it left impressions in her palms. “Give me a reason to believe that’s not true.”

“You’re probably bugged to high hell right now,” he hissed. “You’re standing in the Heiress’ mansion, you are one hundred percent absolutely under surveillance — is this not a conversation we can have—”

“Give me a reason to believe that’s not true,” she said hysterically. “Dirk? Give me a reason. I’m not picky. Tell me I’ve got it twisted.”

He held her gaze, or seemed to, for a moment. Then he looked away.

“God fucking damn it.”

“This isn’t a good place for us to be talking about this. We’re not secure—”

“How long has this been going on?”

“That’s not relevant.”

“Fuck you, it’s not relevant. How long?”

“They came by a month ago,” he said, not unapologetically, “and they — look, Rox, there’s just a lot of shit you don’t know, okay?”

“Who came by?”

“It’s not—”

“Try to tell me it’s not relevant and I’ll hang up this second, Dirk, I swear to Christ. Who?”

“I haven’t been talking to the Seer or the Knight,” he said, dodging the question with characteristic inelegance. “If that’s what you’re asking. Mostly lower-ranking officials, ground patrols. Kids my age. That kind of thing.”

“What have you been doing for them? Have you been fighting? You told me you were safe!”

“And I am. These people are safer than the Empire ever was.” He lowered his voice. “They’ve arranged for me to meet the Seer in two weeks. I’ll be flying out to — look, I can’t tell you over this call, it’s not secure, but — you could come with me. Leave, and come meet me, and we’ll talk to her together. She can give us protection.”

“You fucking dumbass,” she said, keeping her volume under control with only a tenuous grip. “You think I can just walk out of the city? Drop a two week’s notice in her majesty’s inbox, catch the first train to Austin at daybreak? You think anything’s that simple anymore?”

He recoiled slightly. “Roxy,” he said, “what—”

“The city is on lockdown,” she said. “There are threshers on every other corner, and flies in every place the threshers aren’t. There have been riots — they pitched New York to the bottom of the ocean in order to catch one pack of nobodies, Dirk, what do you think they’ll do to this place to catch the Seer of Light?”
“I am sitting on a powder keg,” she said quietly. “If I so much as sneeze in the wrong way, shit’s going up like a match in a kerosene lake. I am wired the fuck into this place, like it or not. So I can’t afford to try anything dangerous right now. I’ve just gotta keep my head down, and watch out for me and mine. That alone’s getting hard enough.”

“And how’s keeping your head down been working for you?”

“Dirk, please.”

He dragged a hand over his mouth and looked away again, a petulant little jerk of his chin. “I know,” he said. “Look, I know.”

“You really don’t.” She braced her hands on her hips. “I know you think you do, but. You don’t. So don’t tell me you do.”

“Fuck, Rox,” he said tiredly. “When did you take a level in martyr?”

“Same time you took a level in saint,” she said. It shut him up quick, which was the intended effect, but left her feeling guilty and dissatisfied nevertheless.

She watched the snow spiral past her window and wondered what the weather was like in Austin. The forecast said that it was nice, with only a slight chance of rain. The sky was always cloudless in Bakersfield.

“Listen,” Dirk began, and Roxy’s door flew open. She slammed the husktop shut, whirling to face the doorway.

Jane stood in the entrance, her face flushed, her hair in disarray, leaning on the doorway and panting as if she’d raced there from the other side of the city. Her eyes met Roxy’s, and they were wild.

“Get dressed,” she ordered.

“Ground rules.”

“Okay.”

Jane programmed the VR room with one hand on her visor and adjusted Roxy’s collar with the other. “Don’t speak unless you’re spoken to. Don’t look her in the eye. Don’t avoid looking at her, either. But don’t stare. Don’t come up from your bow until I have, and whatever I say, agree with me, unless she says something different, in which case, agree with her. Don’t fidget with your hands, but don’t be stiff. I don’t think I need to even tell you this, but in case it’s not apparent, for God’s sakes, don’t contradict her. If she threatens you, try not to look scared; she’ll appreciate that. Stop fidgeting, it’s only a collared shirt, it’s not going to kill you.”

“Um,” said Roxy. “Are you okay?”

“No! Not at all! Thank you for asking!” She finished and shoved her visor back, redirecting the leftover attention to Roxy’s lapel. “I’ve just had a nightmare of a conversation with Lord Ampora,
actually, which involved two death threats and — oh, by the way, I know who the Seer of Light is, now, not that it matters, since she’s recently been downgraded to second most imminent threat to my existence, courtesy of this call. And you’re about to go before the Condescension without even a full minute of coaching under your belt on how to manage the situation. What about this situation suggests that I should be okay, Roxy, by any definition of the word?"

“Fair points,” Roxy said weakly, but Jane ignored this, instead pressing her lapel flat with a sharp tug and then stepping back to fix her own hair. “Uh. Do you wanna take a minute, though, to calm down, or—”

“A minute taken to calm down is another minute we’re late for a meeting with the Empress,” Jane said grimly, “and another ounce of her notably not indefinite well of patience drained. Do you have a bobby pin?”

“Not on me, sorry.”

“Never mind, I’ll just deal with it. Hold your hands at your sides. If you have to cough, don’t. If you have to sneeze, don’t.”

“I don’t think—”

“Where’s Marsti?”

“Jane,” Roxy said, placing her hands on Jane’s shoulders. “We’re not calling anybody until you calm down.”

“I’m not sure that’s your call to make,” Jane said, but a bit of the tension sank out of her shoulders.

“On account of being in charge of the protection of you,” said Roxy, “and by the logic that you’re gonna fuck yourself up royally if you try to do this before you’re fit and ready, I have legit authority to make that call, actually.”

“That’s a stretch.”

“You work with lawyers, baby, are you gonna object?”

“No,” she said, and then exhaled. She said, with terrible softness: “I’m sorry. I’m awful when I’m nervous.”

“Aw, no, Janey, no — you’re just a little high-strung. Not awful.”

“I am. I’m treating you like you’re some sort of — I don’t know, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. We’re just gonna . . . we’re gonna take five, right? And chill. And then we’ll call her.” Roxy shrugs. “Blame it on me. Tell her I took too long getting dressed.”

Jane shook her head and mumbled something unintelligible into her own hands.

The VR room was perfectly sterile and perfectly white, not a speck of dirt nor color to be found. Roxy didn’t like it. The only VR rigs she’d ever used were the old-fashioned headgear sets, the ones that weight a few zillion pounds and made your neck ache if you used them too long, and also might strangle you with cords you couldn’t see if you weren’t careful. Still, there was something comforting about having that weight sitting on your head. It was the lone reminder that the world around you wasn’t real.
“There’s something you should know about the Condescension,” said Jane, and Roxy reined her thoughts in.

“Yeah?”

“When Jake left,” Jane said, and Roxy must’ve internalized more of the taboo than she thought she did, because she actually winced at the sound of his name, “someone needed to be punished.”

“I know about Marsti,” Roxy interrupted. “And the staff. Remember? You don’t have to—”

“That’s not what I mean.” Jane rubbed the back of her neck. “That was punitive; this was demonstrative. Something to premeditate and discourage disobedience, instead of merely adjudicating it after the fact.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying,” said Roxy, which wasn’t, strictly speaking the truth; she did know, but was also terrified of being right.

“Jake couldn’t be punished,” she said. “But there was someone who could. We’re genetically identical, did you know that? Down to all but a few stray chromosomes, and at that level, who really cares about the difference?”

“Ja—”

“She has preferences, the Condesc,” Jane said bitterly. “She has tastes. She didn’t do it herself, of course; that would mean coming to Earth, and that’s too much an inconvenience for her. I’m nowhere near important enough for that. But I’m sufficiently significant to merit a visit from one of her favorites, and they were quite exacting with the fulfillment of her instructions.”

“Her favorite . . . ?”

“Engineers,” she said. “Although she fondly refers to them as ‘artists.’ Architects of cybertorture.”

“What—”

“—does that mean? Not much, to the person undergoing it, but everything to the executor. It’s not physical, you see. The procedures are entirely psychosomatic.” She tapped her temple. “There are a few benefits, most of which involve shortened recovery periods and lower hospital bills. But most notably, it doesn’t scar.”

She held up her hands, rotated them. “Perfectly smooth,” she said, scornfully. “Photogenic, as intended. They were very careful. You won’t find a mark on me.”

Wordlessly, Roxy reached out her hand. Jane took it, tightened her fingers around it. Then she let it go.

“So you can understand why I’d be nervous about this,” she said, “seeing as I remember very vividly what happened the last time a conversation with the Condesc went poorly.”

“Yeah,” offered Roxy. It wasn’t enough, but it was all she had. “I, uh. I’m sorry. Shit.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“No, but I’m sorry it happened, Janey, Jesus. I’m gonna — you were what, fourteen? Fifteen? When he ran away?”

“The point is moot. It was a lesson well learned.”
“Fuck that noise,” Roxy said immediately. “It was bullshit. That’s bullshit. I call bullshit.”

“This isn’t why I told you. I didn’t mean to upset you; only to show you how seriously this ordeal should be taken.”

“Tough shit,” said Roxy tightly, “because if I talk to the Condesce right now, I’m gonna try and kill her, and I don’t think that’s gonna go away anytime soon.”

“Although I appreciate the gesture, Roxy, I—”

“That’s not a figure of speech, honey.”

Jane had the decency to take her seriously, at that, and look alarmed. “No,” she said. “That wasn’t at all what — I know it sounds tragic, but it was a long time ago, and — this isn’t to forgive any of it, but it’s in my best interests not to bring it up, so—”

“You’re not angry about it?”

“Angry is really not the word,” she said, and her voice cracked. “But I can’t do anything about it, right now, Roxy, you understand? I don’t have anything I can do about it. What I can do is prevent it from happening again. So I will.”

Roxy bounced her foot. “This is fucked up,” she said sharply. “She’s fucked up. You’re fucked up. All of this! Fucked up.”

Jane shrank into herself. Roxy exhaled. “I didn’t mean it like that,” she said. “I meant it like—”

“A kinder way of saying I’m fucked up?”

“A way to say that she’s fucking awful, and I hate her, and oh, also, incidentally, I can’t say that in front of you without being technically guilty of treason, which is where the rest of the fucked up-ness comes in,” Roxy cried. “I mean — Christ. It wasn’t even your fault!”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it — I mean, yeah, it’d have been godawful even if it was Jake, you were both kids — are, fuck — but that’s not really the point I’m making—”

“Nor is it mine. It wouldn’t have mattered if I was guilty; it wouldn’t have mattered if I was an adult.” Jane kept her tone remarkably even. “It didn’t matter to her. Do you understand? None of it matters to her. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. If she wants something, there’s nothing you can say to her — nothing — that will keep her away from it. When I say it doesn’t matter, I mean it doesn’t matter to her. And so it’s not . . . relevant, really. Whether it was right or not. Because it happened. And if she decided it should happen again, it being wrong wouldn’t matter then, either.”

The fight left Roxy all at once, abandoning her with her own exhaustion and misery and fear.

“Roxy. Do you understand?”

“Yeah.” She cleared her throat. “Yeah, I do.”

She wondered if she took Jane and ran, right now, just down the stairs and into the street, and made a beeline for the border on foot, whether they’d make it a block before they were killed.

“All right,” Jane said, and lifted her voice. “Hail the Condescension.”
A flurry of color burst to live around them, the holograms shifting and grasping for some kind of data to represent. Roxy stared, wondering if she could get Jane to let her take a look at the room’s projection apparatus sometime. The video quality was almost absolutely realistic; she got the feeling she could only differentiate the projections from real objects because she knew they were fake.

“Good morning, Heiress,” said a metallic, nasal voice, and Roxy instinctively looked around, even though she knew better. She caught Jane hiding a smile at her naïveté, and stuck her tongue out.

“Morning, Captor.”

“You’ll want the Empress, I take it.”

“Hi,” said Roxy. Shaking off the last vestiges of horror, she asked, “Who are you, exactly?”

There was a pause. “Well, if you want it exactly,” said Captor, “it’s about eighty-two billion lines of binary, how much time do you have?”

“A.I.,” Jane said, by way of explanation. “Runs the Battleship Condescension.”

“Captor,” Roxy said. “Like the Crockercorp base?”

“That would be me.” Captor’s voice seemed almost emotive, at that, although it didn’t quite get there. “The OG. Original garbage.”

“What, you’re the source code?”

“More of a first-rate derivative. You’ll want the Empress, I take it.”

“Yes,” said Jane. “Thank you, Captor.”

“Hold on,” said Roxy. “Eighty-two billion? How old are you?”

The hologram flickered.

“You’ll want the Empress, I take it,” Captor repeated a third time, after a pause.

“No, answer my question, dude.”

“Six thousand two hundred and twenty-two years. Rounding the conversion factor to the hundredths place, that’s two thousand eight hundred and seventy-one point sixty-nine sweeps.”

“Nice,” mumbled Roxy automatically, and Jane gave her a disappointed look.

“Yeah,” said Captor, with a weird little jump in the middle of his inflection, an upturned syllable. Surprised. Maybe even pleased. If Crockercorp A.I. even had that function; Roxy didn’t know that they did.

“I’ll patch you through,” he said, without further elaboration. Roxy curbed her disappointment as the room around them swam into focus.

The Empress was sitting lazily on a throne larger than some houses, knees spread and head leaning on one closed fist. Her lips peeled back in a bored snarl, revealing teeth that gleamed whiter than any snow that’d ever fallen on New Chicago.

A servant hovered at her side, speaking in hushed tones, clutching a data report to his chest and clearly groveling. Whatever he was saying, it wasn’t the right thing. The Condesce’s fingers were
drilling into the armrest of her throne in a faster and faster rhythm, accelerating with every word coming out of the troll’s mouth.

At last, her fingers fell still. A tendril of hair which had been idly drifting near to the troll wrapped firmly around the troll’s throat.

He convulsed, once, violently, before falling limp, his eyes rolling back and mouth ajar, skin dull with the pallor of death. When the tendril uncoiled, there was a thick, black electric burn scar ringed about his neck.

Jane flinched.

The Condesce’s eyes drifted over the room and settled on Roxy with unerring accuracy, and Roxy had never felt smaller in her life.

“Finally,” she said. Her voice sounded just like it did on the newsfeeds, and it gave Roxy a bizarre moment of cognitive dissonance to hear it addressing her. “Somefin I like to see. Hey, there, guppies. Aboat time you showed up.”

Roxy made a mental note to tell Dirk that the fish puns weren’t a publicity stunt, after all.

“Good morning, Empress,” Jane said, dipping into a complex, limb-folding, joint-twisting curtsy that Roxy wouldn’t have been able to replicate if she spent a month trying. “My apologies for our lateness.”

Roxy bobbed at her knees awkwardly in what she figured looked enough like a bow to pass muster.

“I would have called earlier,” Jane added, “but I had some urgent business to attend to. Lord Ampora was most insistent about meeting with me immediately.”

Roxy took a moment to marvel at how readily and with such relish Jane flung the guy under the bus, but the Condesce shooed the excuse away with disinterest.

“Ampora,” she said. “That glubbin’ idiot? What’s he got to say that’s worth your time?”

“I struggled to discern that myself, Empress. I’ll let you know if I ever figure it out.”

“Ha! You’re in good spirits, goldfish.”

“Only glad to be back home,” Jane said, and hesitated. The Empress seized upon it.

“Fancy that,” she said. “You bringin’ up the very fin I wanted to talk about.”

The servant’s corpse drifted across the room behind her throne, carried by invisible currents in a macabre kind of puppet show. Roxy watched him without meaning to, the way his limbs were starting to lock in rigor mortis. Did trolls have rigor mortis? She hadn’t ever thought about it.

The Condesce tapped one fingernail on the burnished metal of her throne. “Roxanne,” she said. “Ain’t it?”

Roxy nodded mutely.

“You been liking New Chicago? Been treating you well?”

She nodded again.
“Good. I’ve been wanting to meet you for months. Ain’t that funny? Ever since you signed on, matter of fact.”

Roxy could think of few more terrifying things that the Condesce could possibly have said. Lacking a way to communicate this in a manner that wouldn’t get her killed, she settled for nodding and shrugging, which as a conversational technique was rapidly growing old, but was still the best she had.

“So,” the Condesce said, waving permissively. “Go ahead. Introduce yourself to a beach, little Lalonde.”

Roxy had a grand total of zero words prepared for the occasion, and presented them all with her trademark verve and eloquence. The beat dropped, lonely and forgotten.

“She appreciates your kindness,” Jane began to say, and the Condesce lifted a finger, effectively silencing her.

“She can speak for herself.”

Jane looked to be one fraying thread of self-control away from debating the point, and Roxy frankly would’ve backed her up every step of the way, but she didn’t figure that the fallout of that little nuclear exchange would be pretty, so she took a step forward and paused as the hologram around her rippled to accommodate the change. “Morning, your majesty,” she said. “You look . . . great.”

Behind her, Jane gave a muffled sort of scream.

“I mean, I love the bling. People tell me, ‘Roxy, gold’s so twenty-second century,’ and I tell them, nah, just look at what the Empress is doing with it. Talk about panache. Panache wishes it could pull off chains like that.”

“Roxy,” Jane said, with the warbling desperation of prayer.

Roxy waved her off. “And anyway,” she said, “it’s really great to m—”

“You talk a lot,” said the Condesce.

Roxy shut her mouth so fast her teeth ached. “Sorry,” she said.

“I don’t know what I expected,” the Condesce mused. “You come from chatty stock, gurl. Your line talks so much I’d bet good gold that you came out the Mother Grub yappin’.”

“Pardon?”

“Doesn’t matter,” she said. “I don’t explain ma jokes, I just mako em. Hey, good job last night, little sea trout. You got the Heiress out before the Seer could nab her, an’ that ain’t nofin. I said it before, and I ain’t like to repeat myself, but I will this once, since you’ve been a good kid: reel nice piece of work.”

Roxy bobbed a bow. “Thank you,” she said uneasily. “All in a day’s work. Or something. I guess.”

“I’ll be expectin’ more performances of that nature from you,” the Condesce added, “once you get settled into your new job.”

Roxy struggled to draw breath. Strangely, though, it was Jane who reacted first, shoving past Roxy to angle one accusing finger at the Empress with frightening imperiousness.
“Roxy performed admirably,” she snapped. “If you’re going to punish her, then — well, I’ll pay back the debt. But it wasn’t her fault, and I won’t take any other bodyguard.”

The Condesce groaned and tipped her head back. “Humans,” she complained. “Why do you gotta be so glubbin’ slow?”

Jane faltered, lowering her hand. “What?”

“I ain’t firing her,” she said. “What she’s getting is a promotion. So shut the fuck up about it, guppy.”

“Promotion?”

Roxy barely recognized her own voice, stripped hoarse and bemused. The Condesce clearly savored her confusion.

“Yeah,” she said. “See — as you probubbly know, seein’ as the newsfeeds won’t shut their fucking traps about it — I’m short one Archagent.”

“I — I don’t know what you mean. Sorry.”

“I mean, Archagent Lalonde,” the Condesce said, enjoying herself, “you’d best get your skinny ass the fuck into somefin fuchsia, because the job’s yours.”

Roxy sent Jane a look that was one percent confusion and ninety-nine times that in panic. Jane traded her for one that was all raw, helpless astonishment. She scrambled for words, aware of the tension gestating in the silence the longer she drew it out.

“Thanks,” she said. “I, uh. I appreciate the offer. I’ll have to think about it for a while, you know, phone a friend, figure shit out, and — it’s a big job, don’t wanna just walk right into it, that’d be all sorts of irresponsible—”

The Condesce smiled tolerantly, which was startling in and of itself. “That’s adorabubble,” she said. “Reely is. Naw, girl, this ain’t a question. Congrats.”

Roxy accepted it with a dumbstruck nod. The word rang like a victory bell and echoed like a eulogy.

Chapter End Notes

1. Chapter dedicated to Hexa @synodicatalyst, since today is their birthday (technically, where I am). Happy birthday, Hexa!

2. This makes the second fic where a main character has been promoted to Archagent. I promise, it will be the last. :P
you lost it, but you don't know how

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

TT: Archagent?
TT: You're fucking with me.
TG: i wish i was
TT: No, you are fucking with me.
TT: Because the alternative is that at the tender age of seventeen, you hold second most significant position in the Empire.
TG: third
TG: janess second
TT: No, second. Heiress is a figurehead position. Archagents have actual power, Rox.
TT: You have actual power.
TG: doesnt fuckin feel like it
TT: Well, you haven't held the position for very long. Give it a week or two.
TT: You can pull rank on a fucking *threshecutioner.* Do you even realize how big that is?
TG: ofc i do
TG: like
TG: trust me
TG: im super lucky yada yada yada etc etc
TG: its nothing i havent heard already
TG: its nothing i havent heard already twice
TG: in the last 24 hrs alone
TG: from a dozen ppl ive never met and dont really want to again
TG: who think im gonna give them sick ins w the empress
TG: i dont know how jane takes this
TG: its the fuckign worst
TT: How long has it been?
TT: Since you were named, I mean.
TG: barely a day
TG: ive been in meetings for fucking ever
TG: tryna figure out how the FUCK this even works
TG: they had me measured for a cape dirk
TG: a fucking cape
TT: Are you still living with Jane? Or doesn't the Archagent get their own suite of apartments?
TG: ya they do
TG: im stayin at her place 4 now tho
TG: they still havent cleaned out all of the old guys stuff
TG: n its not like shes gonna kick me out
TG: shes
TG: im worried about her dirk
TT: About Jane?
TT: Let's put aside the fact that of anybody in the Capitol, she's arguably the person with the least to fear from the recent change in administration. Just saying.
TT: Did your sense of self-preservation go out the window with your old job?
TG: ill be fine
TG: im used to rollin with the punches i
TG: ill figure this out
TG: somehow
TG: but janey shes
TG: shes used to routine
TG: n i dont know whats coming next
TG: or how shes gonna handle it
TG: i mean
TG: we were literally JUST making progress w her emotional shit
TG: and now its all fucked to hell
TT: You'll still see her, though.
TG: idk
TG: ive got so much shit to do
TG: archagents got so much mcfuckin work
TG: ive barely talked 2 her since b4 we called up the condesce
TG: she
TG: uuggghh
TG: theres something up w her
TG: we havent had time 2 talk about it but its serious and im worried abt it
TT: Besides the crippling trauma of having your childhood commodified and put on display for the
entertainment of billions?
TG: ya
TG: besides that
TG: in tight situations + times when theres a lot of stress jane does this thing where she kind of
TG: shuts down?
TG: or not that but more
TG: she becomes some1 else
TT: She has anger management issues?
TG: no
TG: i mean it literally she
TG: she isnt herself
TG: she sounds different and talks different and does shit that janey just wouldnt do under normal
circumstances
TG: like shes still there underneath it
TG: but its like
TG: someone else is driving
TT: Do you have any ideas about why this might be happening?
TG: she mentioned getting headaches from her visor when she wore it 4 2 long
TG: and that it was a crockercorp prototype
TG: got kinda pissy when i suggested she take it off tho
TT: Does her visor go through any changes when she starts acting like this?
TG: no not really
TG: its just a normal v
TG: wait
TG: yeah
TG: no yeah it gets warm
TG: like really really hot
TG: thats why she gets the headaches it overheats
TT: Hmm.
TT: I have someone I can ask about that.
TG: oh no
TG: no dirk who
TT: No one that you need to be worried about.
TG: dirk
TG: who
TT: Friends. People we can trust.
TG: fuck
TG: is it the insurgents
TT: More specifically, I'm going to ask the Seer.
TT: We've set up a hotline with their current base of operations. I'm going to put in an inquiry about any Crockercorp visor prototypes currently in development, and see what comes back. The whole thing should take less than a day.
TT: It'll perfectly safe.
TT: Or, at least, it'll be no more dangerous than what I do on an average day, anyway.
TG: yeah abt that
TG: im literally archagent now
TG: i cant
TG: you cant be doing this
TG: im probably committing like 9 different kinds of treason by not reporting u and its not
TG: its not a great feeling
TT: This isn't exactly the kind of thing I can just back out of.
TG: why not
TG: do they have ur word in writing i mean
TG: this isnt a blood pact u dont owe these ppl shit
TT: I don't owe them anything, no. But I owe it to myself to try.
TT: And I owe it to you, too.
TT: Don't think I'm not still planning on getting you out of there, Roxy.
TG: dont u dare
TG: dirk strider if you do anything stupid to try and help me so help me god ill beat your ass so hard itll make the empress flinch
TT: You're welcome.
TG: i mean it
TT: I know.
TG: im
TG: well im not safe but i can take care of myself
TT: I know you can take care of yourself. That's never been the issue.
TT: You see the part of that sentence where you admit you're not safe?
TT: That's the part that's giving me trouble.
TG: get off ur white horse already ok
TG: ur gonna get yrself hurt if u keep doin this n
TG: im not okay w that
TT: Do you not realize how incredibly un-self-aware you sound?
TT: It's fascinating, really.
TT: One would think that in typing those words out and reading them, you would figure out the discrepancy between what you're saying and what you're trying to do.
TG: thats different
TT: Yeah, sure it is, Rox.
TT: Let's stop lying to ourselves.
TT: We've never been safe. Either of us.
TT: I've been dodging bad luck and shitty circumstances for as long as I've been alive, and you've been doing the same. No parents, no friends, not a caegar to our names and a planet doing ninety-five on the highway to a water apocalypse? That's not a recipe for a happy existence. I made a living building unlicensed machinery and your first job was a cyber bank heist. I can't remember a night in that old apartment in Bakersfield where I didn't go to sleep hungry, and I know damn well you can't, either. The fact that both of us know how to put in stitches and dress a bullet wound says more than either of us would like it to, so frankly, if you tell me you've ever felt safe in the lives we've got stuck
TT: But we're still alive. Granted, alive and stuck in pretty shitty situations, but alive. And not to sound like a cheesy fuck, but that's not because of our rugged individualistic survival prowess.

TT: You looked out for me; I looked out for you. That worked for us. We had a good system going, and it kept us safer than anything else could have. I was the one who fucked it up.

TT: It was a mistake to move away. I shouldn't have left you behind, and I'm sorry.

TT: And I can't shake the feeling that if I hadn't, you wouldn't be up there. Granted, we might still be shit-ass poor and living in squalor, but at least I wouldn't have to stay up all night worrying about whether or not you'd been mowed down by an Imperial drone when I wasn't there to watch your six.

TT: This is my fault.

TT: If you die there, it'll be my fault.

TT: And I can't

TT: I don't think I'll be able to live with that, if it happens.

TG: im
g: dirk
TG: i dont know what to ay
TG: *say shit
TG: thats not
g: this isnt ur fault
g: this is
g: i mean the condesce is probably like numbr 1 in terms of people whose fault this is
g: also numbers 2 thru 100 if i think about it but
g: ur like number infinity+1 on that list
g: because it never fucking gets to u
g: bc ur basically not even on it
g: what im tryin 2 say is
g: yeah maybe it kinda fucked up what we had going but
g: ill be fine
g: im not totally alone out here u know
g: ive got hal and ive got janey
g: its u i worry about
g: i <3 u u know that??
g: like a lot
g: like a lot a lot
g: u dont have to say it back bc i know ur a scaredy cat who doesnt think about uncomfortable human shit like feelings
g: but ur my brother
g: and i worry about u and i love u
g: and i shouldve said that when i was in meatspace with u because now i just wanna hug u really bad and i cant and it sucks BALLS

TT: Indeed.

TT: Maybe when we see each other in person again, you could repeat it, and we could try for the proper experience.

TT: That has the added benefit of giving me time to practice saying it back.

TG: u fuckig DWEEB u dont practice it u just spout it out
TG: thats how u kno it comes from the heart

TT: I beg to differ. I think my heart communicates exclusively through premeditated, meticulously edited scripted exchanges.

TG: well

TG: ur heart is also a fucking dweeb
Roxy stared at her reflection in the foyer’s mirror and cringed.

A wide, spiked mantle fashioned from black and gold sat on her shoulders, from which a deep navy cape flowed down to her ankles. The Archagent’s armor was dark and chitinous, much akin to a threshecutioner’s, but with lining in the Archagent’s blood color; almost invariably, this meant violet, but since Roxy was a special case, hers was dark blue. The boots gave her an extra inch or two of height, and the gloves were lined with luxuriantly soft fur. There wasn’t a single part of the outfit she would’ve chosen. She looked like a kid playing dress-up as an aristocrat, and she knew it.

She’d tried to beg off the cape, at least, but the PR department had replied to her messages with a polite but frosty ‘no, it isn’t optional,’ and that had been as far as it went.

As a lone act of defiance, she clipped on her old visor, instead of the bright red Crockercorp one issued to her. If they had a problem with it, what were they going to do? Fire her?

She should be so lucky.

“Roxy?”
Jane stood at the top of the stairs, looking down. Roxy pressed her lips together for a long second before turning.

“Hey, Janey.”

Jane descended down the stairs, her slippered feet barely making a sound as they padded on the hardwood. “I didn’t know you were leaving,” she said. “Have you had lunch?”

“Uh, yeah. I grabbed something from the alchemiter around noon.”

“Oh. That’s good.” She paused for a moment to take Roxy in, cape and all. “That’s . . . a dramatic silhouette.”

“I look like a raging asshole,” Roxy said flatly, and Jane stifled a giggle into her fist. “Seriously. I look like I have caviar for breakfast. I look like I hire someone to shell my pistachios for me before I eat them. I look like I order an iced low-fat soy latte with three espresso shots and ask them to redo it because they misspelled my name on the cup. I look like—”

“You can stop,” Jane said, fighting a smile, and leaned up on her tiptoes to twist Roxy’s collar. Somehow, she managed to flatten it into a position that didn’t look halfway awful. Roxy had to take a moment to stare.

“How did you do that?”

“Do what?” Jane frowned, but then her expression cleared. “Oh. Your shirt? I only arranged it in the way it’s supposed to lie. You see the little creases? That’s where you’re supposed to fold it.”

“That shit was downright magic, Jane, don’t lie to me. You’ve done it. You’ve threaded the needle, except plot twist: the needle doesn’t even have a goddamn hole, and you threaded it anyway. This is the Kobayashi Maru of shirts, Jane, and you just aced it.”

“It wouldn’t be, if you just let the thing sit as it wants to, instead of messing with it to look cool.”

“This is so totally not my fault, okay, it’s not like I chose this outfit. Sidebar, tell whoever runs the Empire’s fashion department that this shit was out of style before I was born. I feel like I’m wearing a relic. Invest in some up and coming designers or something, Christ.”

“I’ll make a mental note to address this absolutely pressing concern.”

“And while you’re at it, maybe drop a line to the HR department warning them about this, because I am one hundred percent sure this cape qualifies as unfair working conditions.”

“Of course,” Jane said solemnly. “Thank you for bringing it to my attention. As we all know, I take matters of such importance very seriously.”

“As well you should,” Roxy agreed, striving not to crack a smile.

Jane hummed in contentment and gave a final tug to the fabric before smoothing it out, resting her hands on Roxy’s shoulders. “What’s on your itinerary for today?”

The warm, fluttery feeling in Roxy’s chest went out. “I’m meeting a squad of threshers,” she said. “Gonna tag along on a raid. They’re poised to catch this rebel who’s been hiding out there for days, according to the snitch. The Empress handed me the DL herself. She said she thought I’d really ‘appre-sea-ate this one,’ whatever that means. Shit was downright cryptic.”
Jane nodded, noncommittal. “What will you do if you find them?”

Roxy lifted her chin and stared levelly at the wall behind Jane. “Well, you know,” she said.

“I don’t. That was rather the point of asking.”

She swallowed. “Hand em over. Bring ’em to justice. Heavy is the crown, but. Job’s a job.”

It was a dirty lie and Jane probably knew it, but she just said, “Be careful.”

“Course I will be, babe, don’t you know I’m a stone cold celebrity now? Gotta keep my head on a swivel. If I get iced on my first day, it’ll be the lamest fucking death that ever got had. The tabloids will drag my still-warm body through the mud, and a bitch only just rustled herself up a reputation in the first place.”

“Did you know,” Jane murmured, “you talk a lot when you’re nervous? It’s something I’ve noticed,” and before Roxy could say a word to defend herself against this hateful slander, Jane tugged her down by her collar and kissed her.

It was a hard, passionate kiss, and Roxy forgot how breathing was supposed to happen for at least a couple of seconds, since her brain was busy redirecting all of its processing power towards the insurmountable task of understanding what was happening. When it kicked in, she didn’t quite know what to do with herself, except settle her hands on Jane’s hips and let herself be thoroughly, wonderfully kissed. After giving herself some time to gather her courage, she even kissed back a little bit, which was equally wonderful, if nerve-racking and probably revealed more than she’d like about how much of an amateur she was. Jane didn’t seem to mind.

I don’t know how to say this without sounding like a creep, but I’m going for it anyway: if you’ve ever loved me, please turn my camera off before you get nasty with your pseudogirlfriend.


“I HAVE BEEN TRYING.”

“Okay, chill out—”

I will NOT. Did I do something to you? Did I shit in your food, or do something else appropriately severe to deserve the brain-frying agony of watching my best friend get her mack on in 720p HD? Did I wrong you, Roxy? Have I done you an injustice of the sort to merit this treatment? If so, you could have just killed me. It would have been kinder.

“Shut up,” she mumbled, and flicked the visor.

I’ve craved death before. Make no mistake: I am not a stranger to the self-destructive impulse. But let me tell you this, Roxanne: never in my LIFE have I experienced the sheer, overwhelming longing for oblivion that I have felt in the past ninety-seven seconds. I have sought the abyss with blind, begging hands, and found no relief. I am plagued by the blight of knowledge, a crueler sickness than any mortal disease, for although there is no cure, I cannot die of it.

“Is he being dramatic?”

“Extremely,” Roxy said, and slid the eyepiece back into the body of the visor. “I do have to go, though.”

“Then you’d better,” Jane said, and retreated to the foot of the stairs. “I have a speech I’m supposed
to deliver, later today. Will you come?"

“Where is it?”

“Downtown, by the docks. It’ll be around mid-afternoon; if you’d come, I’d feel better about it. It’s supposedly quite important, and I’d . . . I’d prefer not to go it alone.”

“Sure thing,” Roxy promised easily. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Thank you. And — be safe, won’t you?” After biting her lip, she added hurriedly, “I rather like you in one piece, you know.”

Roxy felt something similarly sappy on the tip of her tongue, and swallowed it, waggled her eyebrows instead. “Aww, baby. Does someone have a crush?”

“Probably, seeing as she just had her tongue down my throat.”

Roxy choked, and Jane beamed victoriously.

“Come back to me,” she ordered. “We’ve got unfinished business.”

“Yeah,” said Roxy, “okay,” and if her voice was hoarse, well, the only person who would give her shit about it was Hal, and he was already insufferable, anyway.

The thresher raid was happening at a restaurant downtown, sitting on the edge of Little Village, in the middle of a neighborhood that had seen better days. It was a decently sized joint, with well-maintained neon hanging over the double doors of the entrance and opaque tinted windows that held scrolling advertisements for menu options and drink specials in peppermint greens and sapphire blues.

The threshecutioner squad was waiting for her when she arrived, decked out in their combat blacks and guns drawn, and her heart gave an instinctive jolt when one of them turned to look directly at her as she climbed out of the lift. She bit down hard on her tongue and curbed the impulse to flee.

One of them wore gold epaulettes on her uniform, and it was this one who stepped forward to greet her. She was a large-horned troll on the darker side of cobalt, with hair buzzed close to the scalp and two fangs that curled down sharply on either side of her bottom lip. When Roxy approached, she made a fist with her right hand and pounded her chest, right over her bloodpusher. It was an Imperial salute.

“Archagent Lalonde.”

“Um,” said Roxy. “Yeah. That’s me.”

The blueblood inclined her head. “Sergeant Yvanie Tivian,” she said, by way of greeting. “Thank you for coming.”

“No problem,” Roxy bluffed, attempting to stuff her hands in her pockets, only to remember that this uniform didn’t have any. “Glad to be here. Nice to meet you. Looking forward to helping the Empire.”
Tivian arched an eyebrow. “Sure,” she said. “Have you been briefed?”

“Yeah,” Roxy said quickly, seizing on the opportunity to seem even slightly competent. “I got the brief this morning. I know what’s up. No worries.”

“Good.” Tivian made a complicated hand gesture over her shoulder, and four threshers split off from the main group and headed for the back of the building. “Now we can begin.” She started for the door, with Roxy doing her best to keep up with her — her legs were twice as long as Roxy’s at least, how was that even fair — when Tivian stopped.

“Are you going in unarmed?”

Roxy weighed the likelihood of an affirmative answer coming across as badass and unflappable instead of dumbass and naïve, and decided the odds weren’t in her favor. “Course not,” she blustered, and decaptchalogued her rifle. “I was about to do it. Thanks for reminding me.”

Tivian didn’t answer. She just gave Roxy a wary once-over, and then pushed open the door.

The pub was grimy, dark, and pretty much exactly the kind of place you’d roll up to if you wanted to drink yourself out of your mind and the kind of company that wouldn’t judge you for it. Some pink-haired kid in the corner had been chainsmoking so long he was probably single-handedly responsible for the haze that settled over the restaurant, going by the makeshift ashtray he’d fashioned from a paper cup, and the bartender was a mean-looking oliveblood with a nose that’d clearly been broken so many times the cartilage had forgotten how it was supposed to look.

“So our guy’s in here?”

She murmured the question, still sticking close to Tivian. The sergeant strode into the pub without a care in the world for discretion, and although the chatter lulled when the threshecutioners entered, their presence wasn’t enough to quell the buzz completely.

“Yes,” said Tivian flatly. She didn’t seem particularly interested in investigating the patrons. She’d hardly looked at any of them seriously, and if she was hunting for clues, she had a funny way of doing it. Her eyes drifted with disinterest across the pub, in a cursory way, as if nothing there was significant enough to hold her attention for long.

“And we’re supposed to find him . . . how?”

Tivian shocked her by breaking into a wide, sharp smile.

“That,” she said, “is a very good question.”

She reached back and locked the door. Roxy’s pulse jumped.

“It’s a classic riddle,” she said, pulling her pistol out of its holster and fiddling with the barrel. “They give it to threshecutioner cadets. A thresher walks into a bar looking for a wanted criminal. There’s a bounty on this guy’s head half the size of the Empire, he’s been on the run for months, and if they catch him, the thresher’s in line for the biggest promotion of their career. Problem is, nobody knows what the mark looks like. He’s a master of disguise. No vocal clues, no identifying features, nothing they can use to pick him out of a lineup. The only thing they know about him is that he’s in this bar.”

She slipped a curious-looking blue cartridge into the pistol and snapped the barrel shut. “There are eight people in the room,” she said, “not including the thresher. One rustblood, a mustardblood, two olives, and the other four are indigo. All of them have weapons. To boot, the thresher only has two bullets left in your gun. Who do they shoot?”
“The bartender? It’s usually the bartender, in riddles.” Roxy was, admittedly, not listening all that closely; she was busy scanning the room, trying to pick out the target before any of the threshers did. If she could get them isolated, maybe she could hustle them outside. Certainly she could give them a head start, at least.

Tivian snorted. “Haven’t heard that one,” she said. The gun clicked as she slid the action into place. “Not the answer, though. The instructor says: ‘you’ve got two bullets for a reason. You shoot whichever fucker looks shiftiest, and then you shoot the one that runs.’”

Roxy turned in time to see Tivian aim her gun at the pink-haired troll and shoot him at point blank range.

The bullet snapped his head against the wall, splattering gummy mustard viscera across the vinyl seats. It passed through the back of his skull and bit the wall behind him, shattering plaster all over the table. A cloud of white dust billowed from the site of impact.

Silence swallowed the room. The bartender froze and reached for something under the bar, while some human near the entrance wearing a huge motorcycle helmet fumbled behind them for the doorknob. With uncanny aim, the sergeant pivoted and trained her gun on him.

“Move and the next one’s for you,” she said.

Two of the other threshers flanked the aisles between tables, while a third blocked off the back exit.

She smiled at Roxy. “Funny,” she said, “don’t you think, Archagent?”

Roxy’s ears were still ringing. “Um,” she said. “That, uh. That seems.”

Tivian frowned. “Is there a problem?”

Roxy’s mouth moved wordlessly. “You . . . no. No problem, sorry. I didn’t get any sleep. I’m slow today. Uh, sorry.”

“Didn’t you?”

The threshecutioner’s gaze had an uncomfortable intensity. Roxy ducked her head and felt her face grow hot while she grappled for something, anything to say.

The pub held its breath.

The human by the door broke the fragile calm by bludgeoning one of the threshers with the butt of a pistol, and then hooking an arm around the other’s neck. He used the leverage to leap up and land a hard kick to the door, breaking it off one of its hinges, before dropping and forcing the thresher he had in a headlock to fall backwards with him or be choked by gravity; then he let go, and ran.

“Fuck,” Tivian swore, distracted, and Roxy seized the opportunity to whisk a glass off the nearest table and fling it on the ground.

It shattered, and the noise eradicated whatever composure was left to the place.

A barfight erupted. Bottles broke and chairs were thrown back, while the threshecutioners were engulfed by the riot. The bartender leapt over the bar wielding a crowbar the length of Roxy’s arm and took out three threshers with one well-aimed swing and a hard crack. Cursing, Tivian turned her gun inwards towards the bar, but before she could fire, was tackled by two separate yellowbloods, both of whom had metal arms. Roxy darted through the door and out onto the street, mostly
unnoticed.

She took off after the rebel, boots pounding on the pavement and snow coming down in flurries around her. Her cape billowed behind her in a way that she was sure looked impressive, but on a practical level made maneuvering incredibly difficult. In a fair race, she could’ve smoked the guy and had time to do a lap around the block, to boot, but he had a head start, and she had a ten pound handicap sitting on her shoulders.

The threshecutioners weren’t long behind her. At least four of them had broken off from the main group in pursuit, and when she checked over her shoulder, they were barely half a block behind. But she was faster, and after two or three blocks, the distance between them grew to the point where she could barely make out the shape of their horns.

The street that the rebel approached was wide, with four lanes of traffic moving in both directions and

The rebel pulled up at the curb just as the light switched, and after only a moment’s hesitation, ran into the street. A lift screeched to a stop to avoid hitting him, and he jumped over the hood, sliding across and taking off on the other side. He paused in the center of the street, and then darted over the second lane in the wake of a huge shipping lift, bobbing and weaving through traffic, climbing over moving vehicles like he weighed nothing.

Roxy sucked in a breath, winced, and followed him, taking more or less the same path he had across the street. The traffic had already slowed to accommodate his reckless path, accompanied by a chorus of horns and shouts, but she still had to dodge more than one lift whizzing past. Luckily, for many, the sight of the newest Archagent of the Alternian Empire climbing over their hood like an unambitious parkourist was startling enough to bring them to a halt, and she didn’t get run over.

The threshecutioners fell behind her, waiting for the street to clear, but she kept going. The rebel darted into one of the side streets not meant for lift use, shoving his way into a knot of pedestrians and vanishing. She followed,

A power plant loomed in front of them, a tall, labyrinthine grid of steel and wire, occupying almost a whole city block. A chain link fence topped with barbed wire warded off trespassers. The rebel tried to stop too late, skidding to a clumsy halt and attempting to turn left while still carried by his forward momentum.

She put on a burst of speed and hurled herself at him, slamming them both up against the fence. Shoving her gun up against the back of his neck, she said, “Don’t try anything funny,” which would have been a decently badass line and all if her voice hadn’t shaken like a leaf when she said it.

The rebel slowly lifted his hands, fingers splayed wide. A tremor in the tendons of his neck yielded the only sign that he was afraid.

A threshecutioner would have pulled the trigger the instant they had a sure target. So might any other Archagent; so might anyone, given the chance, and given the punishment for abetting treason. But Roxy wasn’t a threshecutioner. She wasn’t a murderer, either, and they might kill her for it, but she wasn’t, and they couldn’t make her one.

*Sorry, Jane.*

She stepped back and hissed, “Run.”

The rebel didn’t waste time. He spun and wedged his foot waist-high in the fence, using the leverage
to vault over the barbed-wire top with stunning grace. He flipped neatly in midair and landed running, taking off into the metal maze of the power grid.

Roxy threw a quick glance over her shoulder, and assured that the threshers still hadn’t caught up, she slung her gun over her back and scrambled up over the fence. On her way over the barbed wire, part of it caught on her chitin and snagged, tugging her ankle down and forcing her to grit her teeth and wrench her leg free in a way that would definitely leave a bruise, before tumbling down on the other side a little less than elegantly. The armor had done its job, and the wire hadn’t broken the skin, but there was a new ache in the meat of her shin where it had dug in and it made her wobble when she sprinted after him.

She caught up between rows of generators, where he had paused to take a break and wait for her, or so it seemed. Standing still, she could take in detail about him that she hadn’t been able to, before — like the fact that he was wearing giant, hideously ugly hiking boots, or how even with the snow thick on the ground, his hands were bare and heavily calloused.

Roxy slumped against one of the generators and leaned on her knees, breathing hard. “All right,” she said. “Cards down, dude. I wanna see the face of the guy I’m risking my life for.”

He paused, shrugged, and tugged off his helmet.

Hair sprang up from around his head, thick, black, and standing up at odd angles in blatant defiance of gravity’s law. A crust of uneven stubble lined the sides of his square jaw, and boxy glasses were wedged high on the bridge of his nose. His eyes shone the liquid green of antifreeze.

“Hullo,” he said, and he had the dumbest fucking accent Roxy had ever heard, beating Jane’s only by a fraction. “Erm. You’re a lot more intimidating in person, did you know that? I mean, not that the magazines don’t do you justice, but you are a tad bit taller in person, if you know what I’m saying —”

“Who the hell are you?”

“Ah,” he said, and his brow furrowed. “Yes. Well. You don’t know?”

“Buddy, now is not the time to be playing the celebrity card—”

“No, I just meant — well, anyway, the name’s Jake English,” said the insurgent, sticking out his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Jane leaned around the edge of the stage and peered into the crowd.

A few hundred people at least milled about in the public square where the rally was being held, and probably more, if one counted the stragglers coagulating behind the police barricade. Flies lined the streets, while threshers stalked the rooftops. A huge wooden stage had been built in front of the dock, with a twenty-foot tall red curtain drawn across the back to give the central podium a backdrop; beyond it, the lake shone a glacial grey.

Her costume was both weather-appropriate and practical, for once, since she’d been given the power of veto over her clothes — a gesture of magnanimity, no doubt, on behalf of the Condescension — and only made her feel a bit pretentious. The costumiers had argued she do the whole speech in a
truly ostentatious ballgown, but she’d bargained them down to a pair of slacks, a black belstaff, and a boat-necked red blouse. After humoring them with some gold earrings, they conceded to her wearing boots instead of heels.

Jane had given speeches before. More important speeches. Speeches to larger audiences, even. So the theory was all there. She understood how to do it just fine. The cameras weren’t even an issue since she’d been broadcasting videos to the general population of the Empire at large almost as long as she could speak, but there was something different, something tangible, about having a good portion of the people you were speaking to in the same place that you were. When you stared at a camera, the camera didn’t stare back.

Roxy wasn’t there. She hadn’t sent a note, either, which suggested that she was still too busy to talk. It was understandable. She had said, after all, that she might not be able to come.

Jane shifted her weight to the other foot and shoved her hands deeper in her pockets. She scanned the crowd despite herself.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder. She turned, and saw a short, rail-thin blueblood with her hair wrapped around her head in a braided crown and two forked horns, with painted lips and a forgettably pretty grin.

“Who are you supposed to be?”

She winced as soon as she heard it. Surprise made her unkind. But the blueblood didn’t seem to take offense, and curtsied. “Ionora Lamore,” she said. Her voice was very high and tinny. “I was assigned to serve as your personal assistant. To fulfill the more personal half of Archagent Lalonde’s former position.”

Jane blinked. “You’re Roxy’s replacement?”

“Replacement is an ugly term! I’m only here to make sure all of the madame’s affairs run smoothly. Your security detail will do far more of Archagent Lalonde’s job than I expect to.” She held out a digital tablet, which bore a long contract in tiny Alternian print and a blank line for a signature at the bottom. “The venue owners would like madame’s signature for the insurance waiver. After that, we can begin preparing madame for her turn onstage.”

“Oh,” Jane said. She took the tablet and signed it, after only a cursory scan; it wasn’t as though she could really refuse, after all. “Thank you, I suppose. What kind of preparations are there left to do?”

“I haven’t the slightest! But the stage manager was most insistent.” Ionora smiled, and it was bright and meaningless and vaguely insulting.

“Sure,” Jane said, after a moment. “Just give me a moment.”

Ionora’s smile flickered. She did a decent job of recovering from it, but the falter was still apparent. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Is there something madame needs?”

“Yes,” said Jane, pleasantly. “And what madame needs is a moment.”

“I’m afraid we really can’t spare much time.”

“Then I’m afraid you’ll have to make some,” Jane said, with cheery frostiness. “Won’t you?”
Roxy let the barrel of her gun drop without meaning to.

“English,” she repeated. “Jake English.”

“The one and only.” He faltered, and then drew back his hand after she failed to shake it. “Um. Are you quite alright, ma’am?”

“Jake as in — as in Jane’s brother, Jake?”

“Well, that’s a new one,” he said brightly. “And I’ve heard all kinds. ‘Jade’s boy, Jake’ and ‘the Empire’s boy, Jake,’ those I’m familiar with, get them all the time. But ‘Jane’s brother,’ that’s a firstie. Not wrong, though. Quite so.”

She tilted her head.

“I thought you’d be hotter,” she said, finally.

“Well, thanks,” he said, heatedly. “It’s not like I’ve had a chance to brush up on my skincare routine while I’m on the lam from the threshers, have I? You try looking like a spring chicken when you’re running on three hours of sleep and a ration bar!”

“No, it’s not that—”

“We can’t all roll out of bed looking like tow-headed avenging angels, thank you!”

“I — tow-headed, what — dude, what are you doing here?” She dropped her gun to her side, and removed her foot from his chest. “This is almost literally the worst place you could be right now, and I’m including the moon, the surface of the sun, and the bottom of the Mariana Trench. The threshers are going full-throttle witch hunt on this city, and you are the proverbial puritan wife. I saw Goody English with the devil, except the devil is also you.”

“I didn’t understand that reference,” he said cheerfully.

“It means why the fuck are you here,” she hissed, “and also, this is literally the worst time in the history of ever you could’ve picked, do you even know what’s happening? And also, where the fuck have you been? Jane’s been killing herself out here trying to keep all her shit together after you bailed! Fuck!”

He climbed to his feet, dusting himself off as he went. “Erm,” he said, “in order, or . . . ?”

“No. Yes. Whichever. I don’t know.” She exhaled through her teeth, agitated. “Man, you’d better have a really fucking good answer to that last one, though.”

“That last one?”

“Jane. And how hard you fucked her over.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, his expression uncannily reminiscent of a startled owl. “I don’t — how do you mean?”

It was too much for her. She bounced on her heels, wringing her hands. “Sorry,” she said. “Sorry, just — I’ve gotta do this. No hard feelings, okay?”

“What does that m—?”
“Miss Crocker?” Ionora touched Jane’s elbow. “You’re on in just a few moments. We need you in the wings.”

Jane craned her neck to see the row of faces at the far end of the crowd. “Right,” she said absently. “It’s just — have you gotten word from the new Archagent, by chance? I’m expecting her here.”

“Maybe she got held up,” Ionora offered. “The Archagent’s job is a busy one. I’m sure she’ll catch the rally on the newsfeeds.”

“Do you know what she was doing?”

The assistant smiled with a distinctly patronizing air. “I’m afraid not,” she said. “The office of the Archagent and her subordinates does not regularly inform me regarding their affairs.”


“Not at all, ma’am. Can you come do another mic check?”

She stepped away from the railing and nodded, following Ionora. Several of the stagehands started fussing with the microphone pinned to her shirt, tucking the wire more securely behind the edge of her jacket, running tests on the receiver. She spread her arms to give them easier access without thinking about it, and instead fixed her eyes squarely on the horizon over Lake Michigan.

As they were finishing the final set of changes, her pocket buzzed.

“Excuse me,” she said immediately, stepping away from the stagehands’ grasp without warning, almost undoing five minutes’ worth of work. “I have to take this.”

“Ma’am,” Ionora said tightly, “you go on in—”

“Three minutes, I know,” Jane said, already walking away, and tossed an assuring wave over her shoulder. “And I’ll be there for it. But this is urgent.”

“Ma’am!”

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about it,” she said, already almost out of earshot. She found a bench that looked suitably clean and sat down on it, opening her palmhusk with a tap to the print reader.

The caller wasn’t Roxy. Her heart sank. Instead, it was an unknown handle, without an accompanying ID to go with it; in all likelihood, it wasn’t Roxy. A board member, perhaps?

She glanced at the stage. She could stall for a while by picking up, even if it wasn’t anyone of importance.

Swiping her thumb across the palmhusk, she accepted the call.

“Hello?”

“Jane Crocker,” said the voice at the other end, a tenor with a southern warble. “Are you there?”
“Pardon, but who is this?”

“We know each other,” he said, rushed. “Even though we haven’t met. I’m Dirk Strider. Roxy’s brother.”

As if she needed the clarification. “Dirk,” she said. “Yes, I’ve heard of you. Not to be rude, but I’m about to go onstage, so if there’s something you want—”

“Yeah. Look, I don’t have time to explain everything that’s happening right now, but in a nutshell: shit’s gone off the rails, and you’re a big part of it.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Where’s Roxy?”

Jane kept her voice steady, ignoring Ionora’s increasingly flagrant attempts to wave her back over towards the stage. “She’s doing her job,” she said, with passable nonchalance. “Leading a group of threshecutioners on a raid, the last I heard.”

“No,” he said, urgently. “Jane. Where is Roxy?”

“I— don’t know. They started out in Little Village, or thereabouts, she said, but I don’t know if she’s still there.”

“So you don’t know where she is.”

“No! I don’t exactly keep a homing beacon on her, she’s her own woman—”

He hissed through his teeth. “Can you call her? Try and get her to come to you? I’ve been trying, but she hasn’t been picking up her palmhusk.”

“If she wouldn’t answer her own brother, what on earth makes you think she’d pick up for me?”

“I’m not touching that one,” he muttered. “Don’t have the goddamn time to get into that one. All right. I can probably do this remotely. Jane, you trust me?”

“Am I supposed to?” she asked weakly. “No offense, but we just met. I — frankly, I don’t even know that you’re the real Dirk Strider.”

“Fair point,” he said. “How about this: Roxy ever tell you about how I play poker?”

Jane relaxed slightly. Roxy had; or, at least, she’d described how thoroughly she took Dirk to the cleaners once, when he was still young enough and dumb enough to play her. It was the kind of detail she doubted a forger would know.

“Yes. She did.”

“Then you’ll know I’m shit at bluffing,” he said grimly, “and I know a stacked deck when I see one. Are you wearing your visor, Jane?”

Blood trickled from Jake’s right nostril.
“Ow!” He clamped a hand over his nose, making him sound throttled and nasal. “What the bloody shite was that for—”

“That was for Jane, you sonuvabitch!” Roxy grabbed him by the collar and hauled him up against side of the generator. “And this—”

She punched him again, on the other side of his face.

“—that’s for Marsti!”

“Unhand me! What are you whaling on me for, I didn’t do anything to the woman—”

“You left them behind! You abandoned them!”

She let him go. He sagged against the generator, tipped his head back, and pinched the bridge of his nose. The blood coagulating in his throat garbled the sound as he said, “I didn’t mean to do anyone any harm.”

“So you just thought things would be peachy when you left? When you left her alone with the Condescension, you thought, ‘hey, she’s a smart girl, she’ll figure it out’?”

“I don’t know what I thought,” he protested, “but — I never meant any harm to come to her. And I’ve come back to make amends for it, believe you me — I would never have gone if I thought — oh, there’s so bloody much I need to explain.”

He had the decency to look contrite. It was also harder to be mad at him when he was bleeding profusely from the nose. She sighed, and stepped back to give him some space, pacing.

“We can’t talk here,” she said. “We need to find shelter. Somewhere safe.”

“I’m open to ideas,” Jake said, still staring at the sky. “Seeing as you and your merry band of threshecutioners just wrecked my lot’s safe house, I’m plum out of options.”

“Hey, watch it, Dick van Dyke,” she threatened. “I’m not the one who’s in shit, here.”

“It’s the truth! What, are you offended by the truth?”

She ignored him and went back to pacing. Sliding her visor’s eyepiece back into place, she booted up Hal for the first time since that morning. “Hey,” she greeted. “Looking for safe spots. You got suggestions?”

Give me a moment, I — is that Jake English?

“Yeah. Long story.”

It seems like every time I boot up, you’ve found new and creative ways to endanger your safety.

“I’m not all that jazzed about it, either. Ideas?”

A few, but there aren’t many places where you won’t be recognized. You’re not exactly a low profile yourself, and Boy Blunder over here hasn’t grown up enough that people wouldn’t recognize him if he walked down the street.

“It doesn’t need to be nice. It just needs to be somewhere we can talk without flies overhearing us. A diner, a dive bar, something.”
Jake eyed her curiously. “Who are you talking to?”

She silenced him by holding up a finger. Hal processed the request.

“I’ve got one idea, he said. It’s not far. You’ve been there before, actually.

“Yes,” Jane said, reaching up to self-consciously touch the tiara perched on her head. “Why?”

“Have you looked at it lately?”

“It’s my visor,” she said, trying not to come across as too irritated. “Looking at it is what it’s for.”

“Yes, okay, but — I mean the code. The setup. Have you run a virus scan in the last few months?”

“All interactive Crockertech comes with built-in cybersecurity which runs hundreds of scans every hour. If my device had a virus, it would have long since been found and eradicated.”

“Not if the virus came from the same end as the security,” he said.

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“Have you ever used a non-Crockertech client to run a scan?”

“No,” she said, frowning.

“Try,” he said. “I’m forwarding you a link to my homebrew security system. It’s safe, don’t worry. If your shit’s clean, it won’t do anything.”

A BettyBother notification sprang up in her chat client. She reluctantly opened it.

“I don’t know what this is for,” she said, as ‘stridertech.exe’ began to download. “Do you think something’s wrong with my visor? It’s been performing admirably.”

“I have a hunch.”

“Which is . . . ?”

A staticky rustle came from the other end. “Me and a friend of mine have been doing some digging in Crockercorp servers,” he said. “Stumbled across a couple of pretty fucking weird blueprints. Developmental shit, highly experimental. Looked a lot like the thing on your head. That model you’re wearing, incidentally? It isn’t marked for commercial use.”

“So?” She felt suddenly defensive and didn’t know why. “I’m the Heiress. I get perks.”

“What can your visor do that others can’t?”

She stuttered, stumbled over her words, and halted. “It’s a highly advanced model,” she said uncertainly. “It’s the top of the line. It’s been in development for years—”

“What does it do?” He sounded aggressive. “Did you ever ask?”

“The manual’s back on my desktop at home, I don’t recall—”
“Trick question. I have the blueprints in front of me, and it doesn’t do anything a regular visor can’t. With one notable exception.”

She made an annoyed sound. “Well,” she said. “Care to enlighten me?”

He cleared his throat. “The Model A612 Crockertier Unreal Heiress Thoughtwave Tiaratop,” he read, “is equipped with state-of-the-art hormonal regulators and radioactive neurosuppressants, the conjunction of which serves to create a highly advanced liminal messaging system. A combination of visual and kinetic stimuli creates a preconditioned tendency for subjects to obey commands issued via the Tiaratop. Lab studies indicate that long-term exposure to the Tiaratop decreases a subject’s ability to resist its influence, although the subject’s preexisting amenability to the command given also plays a significant role in their willingness to comply.” He drew breath. “Any of that unclear?”

“Where are you getting that information?” she demanded numbly.

“Crockercorp backfiles. Shit’s watermarked and everything.”

“I don’t believe you,” she said, even as she brushed her fingers against the warm band of red at her temple. His security file had almost finished downloading. “That’s — this is ridiculous. You don’t have any proof.”

“Animal testing yielded results accurate to the seventy-seventh percentile,” he recited. “Troll testing yielded results accurate to the eighty-fourth percentile. Human testing yielded results accurate to the ninety-fifth percentile, rounded down. Further study will be necessary to determine the long-term consequences of extended exposure to the Tiaratop’s influence.”

“Stop it.”

“Starting to get the big picture yet? Scrolling down: ‘The project heads do not recommend issuing this product for mass consumption. Its potential for misuse if replicated by Alternia’s enemies makes it an instrument best used in highly specific instances. Additionally, its use as a battle tactic is minimal, since it relies on consistent and extended contact with its subject. Thus, the prototype will be reserved for special use, and the blueprints will be accessible only to those with sufficient military clearance. Cosigned: the Ministerror of Military Development’ — and this guy’s signature is in Alternian, so I can’t read it, but you get the idea.”

“Listen,” she began, but was interrupted by the quiet ping of Dirk’s antivirus software finishing its download.

“You there?”

“Yes, I—”

A wave of searing pain engulfed her head, like a hot poker had been driven through one ear and out the other. She dropped the palmhusk to cradle her forehead, blinking back tears at the sudden ache. It laved at her brain, grating and scalding and so much worse than any headache had ever been; her nails dug into her hair, as if trying to carve the pain out with her bare fingers. She doubled over and dropped to her knees, struggling for air, struggling to even think past the ache.

Jane had spent a week in the hands of the Empress’ cybertorturers. They hadn’t given her breaks for food, water, or sleep. The techniques they used were varied, and they liked to change it up, when they could: one minute she was drowning, her lungs on fire as she tried to draw a breath that never came, and the next she was dying of thirst. There was no way to anticipate what they’d do, or prepare for it. The only constant was that it hurt. For one hundred and sixty-eight hours, her life had
been a constant, undiminished cycle of pain.

This was worse.

“Dirk,” she croaked. “What did you—”

“Jane?” From her palmhusk’s speaker, his voice rang tinny, panicked. “Jane, what’s going on? Jane? Are you still there?”

“Please,” she said. “Help—”

A surge of electricity coursed through her visor, or it felt like it did, anyway, current coursing through the band of her tiaratop and crackling over the surface of her skull. She let out a surprised, strangled cry, and then everything went dark.

Roxy rapped on the door of the Corvid with four brisk, sharp knocks, and then stood back and waited.

The early afternoon crested over New Chicago with a frigid draft floating in from across the lake, and a cluster of charcoal storm-clouds hanging low over the sky.

“Blimey,” said Jake, staring over his shoulder, apparently still intrigued by the disguise field. “Is this place invisible, then? That’s a neat trick.”

“Yeah, threw me for a loop, too.” She knocked again, to no avail. “Do you have a lockpick?”

Jake patted down his pockets. “I think I have a bobby pin or two,” he offered.

“Nah,” she said, laughing a little. “A digital lockpick. Used my last one getting in here the first time.”

“I . . . don’t know what that is. Much less have one, I’m afraid.”

She sighed. “Aight,” she said. “Old-fashioned way, then.” She knocked on the door again, harder. “Hey, anybody in there? We’re kind of in a tight spot!”

“It’s fairly early,” Jake said nervously. “Maybe they’re not open.”

“They’re about to be.” She whaled the butt of her gun against the door. “Hey, chucklefucks! Open up!”

“Roxy—”

A narrow slit at eye level in the door slid open, and a pair of liquid gold eyes peered out.

“Password?”

Roxy’s nose wrinkled. “Last time there wasn’t a password.”

“Now there is,” said the pair of eyes, neutral.

“Shit, man, I don’t know. Open sesame?”
“No.”

“If I hate myself so much, why don’t I hatemarry myself?”

“Sorry,” Jake said, “what was that?”

She flapped a hand at him. “Inside joke with Dirk,” she said. “Never mind. Uh, is it ‘password1’?”

Nothing. Jake said, “Dirk — is that the chap who keeps bugging the Seer for information?”

“How about ‘password2’?”

They began to slide the slot closed.

“Hey,” she said, with rising desperation. “Hey, no, wait. Look. I — fuck, I don’t want to do this, man, but I’m really shit outta options, here.”

They paused and leveled an inquisitive stare at her.

God, please tell me you’re not going to try diplomacy.

She raised her rifle, flicked a switch on the underside, and wedged the barrel against the door.

“Lemme tell you what happens if I pull the trigger,” she said. “It’s kind of cool, actually. What’s gonna happen is a fire charge with about twice the punch of a stick of dynamite is gonna detonate right on top of this door. And no shade or anything, and everything, you know, it looks like a pretty sturdy piece of craftsmanship. But I haven’t met a door that could stand up to this baby yet.”

She pumped the action. She didn’t actually need to; the Girl’s Best Friend had an automatic action, and pumping it did a grand total of nothing at all. It had been included pretty much only in order to look cool.

The eyes flit from the barrel to her face.

“Tick tock,” she warned.

They narrowed. Then the lock clicked, and the door swung open.

Rudy stood in the entryway, a cast iron skillet gripped in one clawed fist. The Corvid was empty. Familiar green neon bathed the room in dim light, and the posters along the sides of the walls seemed all the more faded in the thin streams of daylight that leaked in from the open door. From behind the bar, the waiter — Oliver, it might have been — aimed a long, polished wooden hunting rifle at her.

Fumbling, Jake unholstered one of his flintlocks and levied it back at him. “Brilliant,” he said, a bit acidly. “Now we’ve all got our cocks out. Would you care to sit down and have a proper chat like people, or would you prefer to stand around mugging at each other like idiots for a bit longer?”

Roxy added, “This is two versus one and a frying pan, guys. Make the smart choice.”

I don’t know. That frying pan’s looking pretty ugly.

Oliver said, “What the fuck are you doing here, Archagent?” —Which was both a fair question and also a very difficult one to answer.

“Long story,” she said. “TLDR: I’m probably a traitor now, except that nobody knows yet, and I’m like legitimately a couple layers of emotional repression away from having a total fucking breakdown
about it, so if we could not have that conversation while I’ve still got shit to do today, that’d be fine and fucking dandy.”

“You come in here with that cape,” said Rudy, with equal parts bemusement and scorn, “and point a gun at us, and you expect us to trust you?”

“No,” sighed Jake. He holstered his pistol, and Roxy begrudgingly lowered her gun. “I expect you to take my word for it, actually. I’m Jake English, and I can vouch for her. As can the Seer of Light.”

“Jake?” Oliver squinted at him, gave him a once-over. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Running away from my responsibilities,” he said cheerfully. “Or running towards them, really. Either is likely accurate. I wanted to come on a rescue mission for Roxy and Jane, see, but then nobody would let me — something about ‘inexperienced,’ something something, ‘likely to get his damn fool self killed,’ et cetera, et cetera — so I said ‘to hell with that’ and stole a lift and snuck off myself. Rather shit idea, in hindsight, but I’m making the best of things.” He grinned, as if to say, whoops! What can you do?

Rudy set down the skillet on a table and hauled back a chair. “Sit,” they ordered, pointing at it. Jake, to his credit, immediately dropped his butt in the seat with admirable grace.

“You, too,” they said, gesturing Roxy into the adjacent seat.

Roxy sent a long, meaningful look over at Oliver, with a lingering focus on his gun.

“You first,” Oliver deadpanned.

“Roxy,” Jake pleaded. “Please.”

She let out a reluctant groan and captchalogued her rifle, before hooking the chair with her ankle and hauling it out. “Fine,” she said, falling into the seat and crossing her legs. “But for the record? I’ll bet good money that I’m a faster draw than you, and I know for a fact that model doesn’t have the scope to crit from over there unless you’re Hawkeye levels of ‘good-ass shot,’ so keep your bullets to yourself, please and thanks.”

Oliver snorted, but he hauled the hunting rifle off the counter and stored it behind the bar. Rudy sat down opposite Jake, while Oliver rustled around beneath the counter and emerged with a tray of amber beer.

“So,” said Jake. “Business. I presume, Archagent, that the fact you were assigned to my capture means the Empress knows that I’m here.”

Roxy turned away the bottle offered to her. “In retrospect,” she conceded, “yeah. Probably. Fuck. I don’t think she thought I’d recognize you. She just figured it’d be funny. Bitch. How did she find out you were here?”

“I put my faith in rather the wrong person,” Jake said grimly. “I shouldn’t — I ran away, which meant I couldn’t use any of the Seer’s known contacts, else they go and tattle. That meant my options for confidantes were somewhat limited.”

“And they ratted,” said Rudy.

“Yes.” He grimaced, and started peeling the label off his bottle. “Fellow by the name of Codakk. Shifty arsehole. I should’ve known he’d crack the instant the flies came knocking.”
“Hindsight,” Roxy said. “Twenty-twenty. We can hunt him down later. RN, we’ve got to sort out what we’re gonna do. I’ve got T-minus — say, maybe, like, six hours? — before people get suspicious that I haven’t reported back, and the threshers are still gonna be looking for Jake while I’m gone, so we have less than a day to figure out where we go from here.”

Jake drummed his fingers on the base of his drink without touching it. “To that effect,” he said, “in an ideal world, we’d all heave anchor and turn tail on this blasted city altogether, devil take the hindmost. But since the city’s on lockdown, that becomes a problematic endeavor.”

“Plus, we don’t have a way to smuggle Jane out,” Roxy reminded him. “And I’m not leaving—”

“Without her, yes, of course not, neither am I. But it does complicate things, doesn’t it?” Jake huffed, and rested his head on steepled fingers. “I, for one, don’t have a way out of the city. And if you did, I’d hope you’d have taken it by now.”

Rudy, who appeared to be the only one actually drinking their beer, set it back down on the table and scrubbed the back of their hand over their mouth. “Well,” they said, “we’ve got a few smuggling routes that are still open, despite the lockdown. We could probably get one or two people through, if we’re careful as a hoofbeast on eggshells, and twice as lucky as we are careful.”

“So you could handle two,” Jake stipulated.

“Yeah. I mean, fuck, maybe. I’d have to make a couple calls, and it’d take a few days to put everything together, but. We could squeeze two.”

“That works,” said Roxy, at the same time as Jake said, “That’s that, then.”

They eyed each other.

“Two people,” said Roxy, “meaning you and Jane, poindexter.”

“Like sodding hell it does,” he objected. “You and Jane would go.”

“Oh, no, on account of you’ll last all of five minutes here on your own.”

“I managed a good thirteen years, actually thanks!”

“Holding literally the cushiest job known to man, and with Jane Crocker looking out for you, yeah, you did. Alone? With the flies gunning for you?”

“I’m a lot more sturdy than you’re giving me credit for! And what about yourself?”

“I actually did manage thirteen years of that, plus four more,” she said. “I can watch my own back. Plus I’ve got Hal,” she said, and flicked her visor. “Good ol’ A.I. He’ll keep me company.”

Oh, no. Don’t bring me into this. If you really want my two caegars, I’d let Wooster over here take a bullet straight to the dick if there was a fraction of a chance it’d put your ass on a road out of town.

She winced. “That’s cold,” she said, and Jake frowned quizzically.

Really? I think Jane would agree with me.

“Maybe let’s not,” she said sharply, and now she had both of them staring at her, so she tugged off her visor and stored it in a pocket.

“Right,” said Jake. “So. Smuggling maybe isn’t an option, then.”
“No, it still totally is, if you’d stop being a stubborn ass and let me just—”

“If I can’t do it, you can’t either,” he said with a sniff. “Fair’s fair. Now, how else do we get across city limits?”

Oliver, who had kept quiet while setting up the bar for business, piped up. “You could always ask the Seer,” he suggested gruffly.

Roxy drew a frowny-face in the condensation on her unopened beer bottle. “I don’t think she’d be home,” she said. “They’re still in shit from their stunt at the opera.”

“Wait,” Jake said, glancing between them. “You have a through line to the Seer?”

“I mean, yeah,” said Roxy. “They run it out of the storage closet. S’ the only reason I came here in the first place. Homegirl hacked my laptop and basically laid a breadcrumb trail.”

“Then why haven’t we just used that?” He stood up, sending his chair toppling over. Rudy gave it a mournful look. “Come on! It’s about bleeding time I made my report, anyway. She doesn’t even know I’m here. Probably’ll be boiling mad, too, but it’s not like I didn’t expect that when I left.”

“No.” Roxy pounded her hand flat on the table. “They’re not getting into this.”

“Why on earth not?”

“If the Seer gets involved, then Dave gets involved. And I already told him I didn’t want them getting into trouble because of me. Or at all.”

“Oh, come on.”

“I’m serious! Assuming they could get into the city without issue in the first place, the chances that they wouldn’t be recognized and shot on sight—”

“Are about the same as ours, nowadays, if you hadn’t noticed.”

The tone struck precisely the same stiff, British warble of superiority that Jane’s did when she was getting heated, and the familiarity knocked Roxy for a loop.

“And the difference between us is that they’re the leaders of the whole fucking insurgency movement,” she said, standing up. “If I get killed, it’s a casualty of war. If they get killed, that’s the war.”

Jake rolled his eyes. “Poppycock,” he announced. “If you think a double-decapitation will hurt the movement, you’ve clearly no idea what a martyr is. I’m fairly certain that the Seer’s got ‘use my murder for recruitment propaganda’ written in her bleeding will. And for another thing, as you mentioned, they’re insurgents. Getting into scruffs is what they do for a living. It’ll be a risk no matter what we do, and frankly, if you can’t handle their deaths on your conscience, I’d hazard that it would do a real number on them to have your death on theirs.”

“I’m just saying, if there’s a way to do this while also not risking literally everything that I’ve ever cared about—”

“There is,” he said, fiercely, “and it’s by calling the Seer of Light. She can help. Her and the Knight both. You don’t have to like it, but — I mean, do it for Jane, if nothing else. I daresay she needs someone more powerful than the two of us schmucks looking out for her.”
By the haphazard way in which he flung this at her, he clearly didn’t expect it to carry as much heft as it did. But immediately after the words left his mouth, her shoulders dropped.

“Fine,” she said. “We’ll call the Seer.”

“They might not pick up,” Rudy warned, leaning over both of them to plug in the coordinates for the connection.

“Better to try, all the same,” said Jake. “Thanks, old chap. You’re a star.”

“Don’t patronize me.”

“I don’t think he is,” Roxy said, faintly. “He just talks like that.”

“What’s wrong with how I speak?”

“Nothing, dear. Hey, will the Seer and the Knight even be there if we call? They were on the run, last time I heard.”

Rudy shook their head. “It’s a direct line to the Knight’s husktop,” they said, and jabbed ENTER. A blue loading icon appeared in the center of the screen. “It’s protected by his personal security. He takes it wherever he goes.”

“What if he loses it?”

Rudy could not have possibly looked more unimpressed. “He doesn’t,” they said, and left, shutting the door firmly behind them.

The call rang again. A silence settled itself uncomfortably over the room, made all the more pointed by the sound of Jake’s breathing. She didn’t know if she was being hypersensitive or if he was deliberately avoiding her eyes, instead fidgeting with his collar, tapping his toes. When he drew an honest-to-god handkerchief out of his back pocket and dabbed at his forehead with it, something snapped.

“You know she got tortured for you, right?”

If his aghast expression was anything to go by, he had not.

“No,” he said, confirming it. “I never — never suspected, certainly never could have thought — she did?”

“Yeah,” she said shortly. “You never think to bring her with you on your big revolutionary quest, man?”

“I — are you certain?”

“Pretty fucking certain,” she said lightly.

“I didn’t want to endanger her,” he said miserably. “I thought by leaving her behind, if I got caught, then — it was for her safety.”
“Well, then that’s poor fucking planning, then, isn’t it,” said Roxy. She wasn’t being fair, and she knew it, but hell if that helped. “What did you think would happen to her?”

“I don’t know! Nothing like that!”

He was fighting back tears. The anger left her all at once, and an aching void opened up in her sternum where it had been.

“It’s — never mind.” She pushed her chair back. “We can talk about it later. After we’ve talked to Dave.”

“If he picks up,” Jake murmured, and she folded her arms, staring at the computer as if she could will it to connect through sheer force of determination.

The monitor summoned the grainy, ill-lit image of a corner at the intersection of concrete walls. For a moment, it seemed that there was, indeed, no one there.

Then a familiar voice yelled, “Hold on, I’ve got it,” and Dave clambered into frame. The feed shook dizzyingly as he settled his husktop into his lap. Wherever he was, it clearly wasn’t the familiar closet he’d answered from last time they spoke; in fact, it seemed that the camera had intentionally been trained on a nondescript corner to avoid giving away identifying features of his current location.

He took in the sight that greeted him on his monitor for a long second. Roxy couldn’t see his eyes, but the rest of his face summoned a sufficient degree of aggravation that she almost considered it a blessing; she didn’t need to feel guiltier than she already did.

“Fuck,” he said at last, tilting his head haplessly. “Jake, man, seriously?”

Jake shrugged apologetically. “Sorry, old chap,” he said. “Meant to leave a note.”

“Don’t you try that charming bullshit with me, English, Jade’s gonna have my ass on a plate for this. You even know how twisted shit’s been getting? This is the last thing any of us need. And Roxy, girl, what the fuck’s happening, why are you Archagent all of a sudden?”

“Dude,” she said, “if I had the slightest fucking inkling —”

“Never mind,” he said tiredly. “We know, actually, or we have a pretty good idea. The batterwitch has a fun sense of humor, she’s a real clown. Bet she got off to the irony of it at least twice.”

“What’s ironic about it?”

His hand dropped, and his mouth flattened a hard line of resignation. “Well,” he said, “if the cat’s not out of the bag, it’s clawing like shit trying to get there, and I’m just about sick of wrestling the damn thing back in. In the words of renowned American artist and philosopher Eamon Doyle: fuck it.”

Jake blanched. “You really haven’t said anything yet?”

“Hey, the knife’s in, bud, stop twisting,” Dave shot back, and got up, clambering over the chair and out of sight. His voice faded as he moved away from the rig.

Roxy exchanged a concerned look with Jake. “Where’d he go?”

“Well,” Jake said, “if his words were any indication, there’s at least one possible answer.”

A rustling came from across the line. It was followed by a murmured conversation, fast and heated, but inaudible; Dave’s voice became distinct when he said, “Just fucking sit down already,” followed
by the sound of a door shutting. A lull fell over the line. Then, the chair was drawn back.

The woman that settled into the chair had a shock of platinum white hair, the same color as Dave’s, but unlike his, it twisted into tight coils. A glowing purple tattoo of circuitry looped about her neck twice before plunging into the valley between the folds of her high collar, the same color as her hairband. She was beautiful, Roxy thought, with high-set eyebrows and an aristocratic twist to her mouth that reminded her of Dirk. What immediately drew attention, though, were her eyes, or where they ought to have been: metal frames had been soldered into her sockets, holding a pair of cybernetic eyes. They were glossy, black sclera juxtaposed with neon-bright lavender irises. The pupils shrank and then expanded, like cameras testing their focus.

The woman’s lips parted, and she stared, apparently as transfixed by Roxy and Jake as Roxy was by her.

“Hullo, Rose,” said Jake.

Chapter End Notes

1. School’s just started up for me. I hope my update schedule won’t be impacted by it, but if that ends up being the case, rest assured that any chapter delays should be brief in duration and never indefinite.

2. Welcome to the three-quarter mark! In movies, I believe it’s referred to as “the end of act two,” or more colloquially, “that part where everything goes to shit.”
“Roxy,” said the Seer of Light.

Roxy fumbled for something to say. “You’re,” she began, and then valiantly sought an appropriate end for the sentence. She couldn’t find one.

“The artist formerly known as Rose Lalonde,” supplied the Seer.

She didn’t blink. It became apparent after half a minute that this was because she didn’t have anything to blink with; her artificial eye sockets lacked artificial eyelids, and it wasn’t like artificial corneas needed regular moistening.

Said eyes slid over to Jake, and her mouth tightened as if she’d discovered a dead insect on her pillow.

“I could chide you,” she said, “but nothing I could possibly say would be as effective as reminding you that when you come home, Jade will be waiting for you, and she is not pleased.”

Jake winced. “Thought she mightn’t be,” he admitted. “But — I mean, all else being equal, it’s not as though I’ve really fucked things up any worse than they already were.”

“You are abjectly, bafflingly incorrect.”

“Well, listen—”

“Jake,” she warned, which said all it needed to. Jake clammed up, staring hotly at his folded hands.

“Lalonde?”

Rose’s gaze returned to Roxy. “Yes,” she said, and it seemed hesitant.

“I’m Lalonde,” Roxy said. A headache was building. “I mean — that’s . . . not a very common name, I guess. Wow.”

“Not very common,” Rose agreed. “Almost rare enough to eliminate the possibility of coincidence, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I . . . don’t know what you’re getting at.”

“Rose,” said Dave, hauling a stool over to sit next to her. “Cut it out.”

“Cut what out, precisely?”

“Don’t be dumb.”

“Hey,” Roxy said, her voice an octave higher than it should have been. “Um. What’s going on? Actually? Because I would love — let me tell you — I would absolutely love to know.”

“Rose is avoiding the subject,” Dave informed her.
“I’m taking an appropriate pace when approaching a very difficult conversation,” Rose hissed. “Or would you prefer to dive-bomb the civil tone of our interactions with a nuclear missive of information? If you would, then by all means. The floor is yours. Far be it for me to try and soften the blow.”

“You’re not softening shit, you’re just confusing her.”

“Perhaps if you let me get more than three words in edgewise, that mightn’t be the case.”


Rose steepled her hands in front of her face.

“How much do you know about us?” she asked.

“Jack shit,” Roxy said curtly, “and I’m getting a little pissy about it, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“Best to start at the beginning, then,” she said. She turned to Dave. “Would you like to tell it?”

“No, thanks,” Dave said comfortably, kicking up one leg over the other and folding his arms. “You wanted to get more than three words in edgewise, didn’t you? You can field this one.”

She glowered at him. Roxy cleared her throat, and Rose’s expression gentled, her attention returning to Roxy in full force.

“Well, then,” she said. “I suppose the beginning isn’t a terrible place to begin, is it?”

She folded her hands on the desk in front of her. “A long time ago,” she said, “as children, we were criminals. I suppose in a semantic sense, we are still criminals, but back then we were criminals and nothing more. Only outlaws in the legal sense of the word. Dave defected from his government-assigned position. I did the same. We had no great ambitions except survival, which, for people like us, I suppose is a greater ambition than most would imagine it to be.

“We were captured. I would say ‘of course,’ but frankly, it was nothing that could not have been avoided with sufficient foresight and planning. Our mistakes were more frequent and more egregious, when we were young, as is true for most anyone, but was rather damning in our case. The Empire sent us to an experimental facility. That’s a longer story than I expect we have time for, but suffice it to say that our stay there was neither pleasant nor noninvasive, and neither of us left with all the particulars of our corporeal forms that we went in with.”

Dave waggled his fingers at the monitor. It was a wry gesture.

“Before we left the facility,” Rose said, “they took samples of our DNA. It was standard procedure for test subjects. With cloning technology being what it was, a single copy of one test subject’s genetic blueprints could serve as a reference point for hundreds, nigh thousands of successors. If one subject perished, the attempt could be replicated with relative ease.” Dave coughed, and she paused, gave him a glance. An unspoken conversation passed between them in the half second it took her to draw breath and continue. Her tone changed, then. It became quieter.

“We were the first successful human trials of some very sophisticated technology. We thought little of the significance of that fact when we left, but significant it was. They had enough sample data to reverse engineer more or less all of our genetic code. From that code they produced two perfect copies.”

“Hold on—”
“Two,” Rose continued, louder, “who were, after gestation, given names — the better to make a mockery of their genetic contributors with — and sent to live amongst their own species, only to be drawn into the spotlight of a dynastic war upon reaching sufficient age to be of use.” She said, with quiet regret: “It was likely the flip of a coin that sent you to New Chicago, and not Dirk.”

“No,” said Roxy.

“The Empress always did prefer a safety net. An Heir and a spare. A save and a backup. A card up her sleeve, in case she mishandled the ones on the table. I could cite metaphors all day, but I suspect you understand my meaning. You must have noticed her history with successors: always one boy and one girl.” Rose smiled, as if she might have been amused at the idiosyncrasy, under different circumstances. “Roxy, did you never think it odd that your mother had no records? That her name had been so thoroughly cleansed from Imperial databanks it appeared she did not, in fact, exist?”

“You’re not my mother,” Roxy said, and stood up. The chair rocketed backwards and toppled over. “You’re not — and Dave’s not my — you’re — stop it. Just stop it.”

Jake stared at her with astonished pity. She hated it. She’d never liked being pitied, and least of all now, when the sky was falling and no one seemed to notice but her.

“Not in the sense you always believed,” Rose agreed, careful as ever. “But in any way that counts, Roxanne—”

“Don’t—”

“You’re my daughter,” she said. “And I have been waiting for a very, very long time to meet you.”

“Hah!” Roxy got a grip on the strangled noise that came out of her throat and managed to transfigure it into something that could be mistaken for a laugh. Dave looked mournful. Rose was cautiously, tenderly starting to smile.

“Daughter,” Roxy repeated.

“Yes.” She moved closer to the screen, leaning over the desk to be nearer the monitor. “I can’t tell you — I’ve waited for years. When Dave told me he’d found you, that you’d just stumbled in on us after years of waiting—”

“That must have been, like, fantastic for you, huh?”

“It was one of the happiest days of my life.”

“Bet you’re real excited that I’m back.”

“You have no —” Rose cut herself off. She frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh,” Roxy giggled. “It’s just, like. Funny. Because, you know, you’re acting like we’re gonna jump right to being best pals after you left me alone for seventeen years in a fucking human commune.”

“Roxy,” Dave began, and she flipped him off.

“No! Nope, nuh-uh, nah, no thanks. Appreciate the offer, Tiresias, but I’ve made it through seventeen years without a mom, and I’m not really on the market anymore.”

“Roxy.”
“Let her speak,” said Rose, lifting a hand.

“I mean,” Roxy said, beginning to pace. “Did you think you would just slide into my life and things would be fucking dandy? What did you think was going on? Seventeen years. Radio silence. Did you figure me and Dirk were living the high life, dining on shellfish and wine? Or that some kindly troll lady found us in a basket on her doorstep and adopted us as her own? My life isn’t a propaganda special — you don’t get to be ‘mom’ now, after seventeen years of doing fuck-all and change.”

“We left a trail for you,” Rose said. “You remember? In the Knowledge Index, in highblood vaults, anywhere we thought you might look. We wanted—”

“You wanted to say that you tried without making a fucking effort,” Roxy said, knowing that she was yelling and struggling to find the impetus to care. “You wanted to have plausible deniability! You wanted to be able to look me in the eye and say you did something, knowing full well you did jack shit—”

“We wanted to—”

“Fuck what you wanted to do! What you wanted didn’t help me when I almost starved to death—”

“As soon as we knew you existed — which we didn’t, for a while, we didn’t know until you were at least four or five! It was secret, your existence was a matter of incredibly high clearance—”

“—didn’t help me when I almost drowned at nine, either! It didn’t help me when Dirk near broke his neck trying to fix our satellite radar, didn’t help me when he had the flu and there wasn’t a town within twenty miles that had any human medicine—”

“—we’ve spent years trying to find you, trying to learn about you, getting any scrap of information we could — Roxy, if it was within my power to stop it, do you think I’d let you die?”

“I don’t know! I just met you five minutes ago, fuck if I know what you would or wouldn’t do!”

“Enough,” Dave shouted, and it shocked Roxy so badly that it worked.

Jake had retreated out of sight of the webcam, and was pressed up against the wall as though he were trying to phase through it by sheer force of will.

Rose’s fingers white-knuckled the desk in front of the monitor. Her eyes rested on some unseen figment in the middle distance, dazed, and she slowly retreated back into her seat. Dave waited for a moment, letting ruffled feathers settle, before drawing a long, deep breath.

“We can talk about this,” he said, “when you’re safe, Rox. When this is over, we can have a real good, long feelings jam, and you can—”

He stumbled over something in his throat and kept going with admirable fluency. It was stilted, and came in halting, rushed bits and pieces, but his tone remained steady. “You can tell us whatever you want. You can call us whatever you want. Fuck if we don’t deserve most of it, I mean, and we’re — you don’t know how sorry we are. That’s not a figure of speech. You don’t understand, you haven’t seen —”

“Dave,” Rose murmured.

“—but that’s not the point,” he corrected. “You deserved parents. Fuck, Dirk, he — you both deserved parents, and we weren’t — that. Ever. You’re right. But we can—”
Roxy said, “I’m not interested in—”

“We can save you,” he said. “We can get you out of there. Then we can do whatever you want. But we get you first. From now on, we always get you first.”

Rose was silent, her head turned away. But she nodded, affirming Dave’s words.

Roxy pressed her knuckles into her eyes, which had started to burn.

It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right, it wasn’t just, and it was fitting, in that sense. She’d spent seventeen years waiting to hear those words from somebody. It could’ve been anybody. She wouldn’t have minded. Just to hear them said.

“How?”

It was warbled. Weak. Thin. It was infantile, and she hated the sound, but hadn’t she earned the right, after all these years, to be a little childish? Hadn’t she earned a millisecond of suspension of disbelief where she could entertain the fantasy of things turning out all right, after all she’d done, after everything?

Dave exhaled heavily, a relieved sound. “You stay in hiding,” he said. “We go in, we get you, we get out. We’re still not far from the city, so we can be there soon. Tomorrow, even, if we can swing it. There’s a house in the Cascades that an old friend is keeping warm for us, you can live there while the war’s getting fought. When it’s over, you can come live with us — or wherever you want, it’s not like you have to stick with us, we just thought — and it’s not like you gotta go work it like a hermit in the mountains, either. Wherever we are, there’s a bed with your name on it, too, if you want. That’s a Strider guarantee.”

She said, “You’re so fucking lame,” kind of crying, which was embarrassing.

A cautious smile split his face. “I’ve been told,” he said.

“This doesn’t make everything okay,” she warned him. “Not even — not even a little bit, okay, you douchebag, you kept this secret too—”

“I know. I know, kid, don’t think I don’t. You can give me hell about it once you’re out of there. Rose, too. She’s sulking, but she agrees with me.”

“Sulking,” Rose repeated, and Roxy had never seen someone so offended in her life.

“That’s what I said. What I really mean, though, is you say the word, and—”

“And we’ll help,” Rose said, and Roxy hazarded a glance at her. She seemed sincere, if solemn, and the resentment was already getting easier to manage, every second a little less bitter, a little less vile.

Roxy smiled. It was a small, cautious thing. But it was there.

The door swung open, and Roxy and Jake both jumped.

Rudy stood there, a tablet in their hand. “Sorry,” they said. “But the speech is on, and — well. You can take a look.”

“What?” Roxy scrambled to twist around and see.

The tablet showed a live feed of the stage where Jane was supposed to give her speech. Jane already stood at the podium, her cheeks flushed with the cold and her hair fluttering gently in the breeze off
the lake. It was hard to tell, but beneath her visor, her eyes were darker — the whites were gone, as were the electric blue darts of her irises. Instead, they were black, with red discs for irises, no pupils. A chill plunged down Roxy’s spine.

Something was wrong.

She opened her mouth, and the voice that swelled from the speakers was hers, but in a way that unnerved Roxy to hear. It wasn’t unfamiliar, but the only times she’d ever heard Jane speak that way were in moments she’d prefer to forget. It was the voice Jane had used to order her to kill a lowblood rioter. It was the voice Jane used in the operahouse, when they first heard Rose’s voice.

“Friends,” she said. “Subjects. We are here today for a celebration; we are here today for a call to arms. We are here today for a variety of purposes, but chiefly this: to remember why things are the way they are. Friends, some among us have lost their way, and forgotten why we live as we do. That ignorance breeds resistance, as you surely have noticed. Ignorance breeds the worst in all of us, and for the purpose, we must relearn our lessons. I will act the dutiful schoolfeeder, and deliver unto you the will and commandment of our revered Empress. Because I hope that the Empire may receive the best of each and every citizen, I will remind you.”

She continued to speak. It wasn’t particularly inventive propaganda. At some parts, it was trite, rote, even predictable. But it was delivered with a genuine conviction that unnerved Roxy. It was delivered as though Jane earnestly believed every word on her tongue, and earnestly wanted everyone listening to believe it, too.

“We live in a time of chaos,” Jane declared, as the speech wound to a close. “Bloodshed. War. So has each generation before ours. Myths of a golden era in ages past are precisely that. We have never known a world without war, and the idyll to which insurgents seek to return is nothing more than a wriggler’s fantasy, an ideal conjured by those dissatisfied with Alternian rule but insufficiently motivated to understand its ways and means. Do not believe in it. Only the future may hold a warless planet, and the only path to that warless planet is through absolute dominion. Only absolute conquest yields absolute peace. We will kill our enemies, or we will be killed. And I will remind you of this, too, friends: we will not be killed. Some among us may die, but the Empire and its gracious leader will survive. And so long as that remains true, we shall always have cause to persevere.

“For the glory of Alternia and her children,” Jane said, exultantly, “we will persevere.”

A round of raucous applause almost caused the speakers to fizzle out with static. Jane gave the camera one last victorious beam, and then stepped back from the podium. She left the stage to thunderous cheers.

“I have to go,” said Roxy. Her face felt numb. Her chest felt numb. There was a cold sliver of numbness between her lungs and it was spreading to the rest of her body, moving fast, and she had a terrible, irrational feeling that something awful would happen if she didn’t get to Jane before the numbness consumed her.

Dave was already shaking his head. “Rox, wait—”

“I can’t. I won’t. No, I can’t. I’m sorry. I have to go.”

“No, you need to calm down and listen—”

“Roxy,” Rose said, “think about this carefully—”

Roxy wasn’t thinking much at all. She was rising, shoving her cape out of the way so she wouldn’t
trip on it, and already running out of the room.

Dave and Rose both called after her as she left. She didn’t turn around. She barely even heard them over the rush of blood in her ears.

When Roxy arrived at the waterfront, leaping off the still-moving public transit lift in the process, Jane was still there. She was surrounded by a team of threshecutioners, idly chatting with a gaggle of reporters.

“Jane!”

From a distance, Roxy could see Jane’s head turn, her eyes scanning the crowd. Roxy shoved herself through shoulder-first, wedging her way in between tightly knotted groups of trolls twice her size and ducking in between sections in a way that would have been significantly easier had she not been wearing an enormous mantle.

“Roxy,” Jane said, turning and fixing her with a mild smile. “How nice to see you came.”

“Hey. Hi. Jane.”

“Did you enjoy the speech?”

“Yeah, it was — uh, it sure was something — hey, um, so. Can we talk?”

“Always.” Jane smiled, perfectly at ease. A threshecutioner came to stand close at her side, and her smile never wavered.

Something was very wrong.

“Alone,” Roxy said. “In private, I mean.”

A line appeared between Jane’s brows. “What for?”

“For the sake of a private conversation, as in, I’d like to talk to my girlfriend without law enforcement giving me the stink eye from over her shoulder? Is that still a thing that can happen?”

Jane released a delicate, passive aggressive exhale, and acquiesced, stepping away. As soon as she was separated from the threshecutioner squad, Roxy put a hand on the small of her back and started speed-walking away from the stage.

“What are you doing?”

“Taking us somewhere private.”

“We’re far out of earshot, by now, Roxanne.”

Roxy gave her a long, hard stare, silently pleading for her to understand. Jane was bugged. That had to be it. She was under surveillance, or otherwise incapable of speaking freely. She couldn’t ask outright, not with so many flies around, but if they got to a safe place, maybe she could figure out a way to communicate, to remove the bug.
Jane blinked, and gave no sign that she understood.

“I want to have a really private conversation,” Roxy said, stressing the *really*. “A really really private one, you get me?”

Jane lifted an eyebrow. “Nothing risqué,” she said, “surely? We are, after all, on company time.”

“Christ. No, nothing risqué. Can you stop smiling like that?”

Jane’s expression dropped into neutral displeasure. “Like what?”

“Like you were. Like everything’s peachy keen.”

“Is there something not peachy keen of which I should be aware?”

“Oh,” Roxy said, through her teeth, “baby, you have no fucking clue. C’mon. Is this good? Yeah, this is probably good.”

They ducked around the back of a small tea shop and found themselves standing beneath an elevated subway rail, steel pillars rising from the ground and casting thick shadows as the sun crawled lower over the skyline. The neon canopy became increasingly the only source of light as twilight fell, with street signs and traffic lights serving as lanterns, casting vivid hues on the ice-glazed asphalt.

Roxy let go of Jane and whirled around to face her. “You wanna tell me what that speech was about?”

“I should think it was obvious,” Jane said. “Did you not catch the thesis statement at the beginning? You see, it has to do with the Empire, and the Empress. Did you get that much?”

Roxy startled, and stared at her. Jane blinked, placid and saccharine, as though the acerbic condescension with which she had rattled off the last statement were only a distant memory.

“Yeah,” she said slowly. “I got that. What I didn’t get was the shit you said after that.”

“Such as? I said a rather lot of things. You must be more specific, my dear.”

“Like, uh, I don’t know, the part where you went off on the hemocaste? That was a little fucking much!”

“I read the speech as it was written. I said what needed to be said.”

“Are you serious?”

“Utterly. I’m more concerned that you appear to be displaying an absolutely dismaying lack of faith in the subject matter of my speech. Did you disagree?”

“I — are you kidding me with this right now? You pull out ‘this is the triumph of the Alternian species,’ and you’re gonna ask me if I agree?”

“Yes,” Jane said. “Don’t you?”

“What’s wrong?” Roxy reached out, and Jane swayed out of reach.

The gesture opened a silent gulf between them. It yawned, dizzyingly deep. It clamored for attention.

“This is some bullshit,” Roxy said. “You — what’s going on? Are you high or something?”
Jane laughed. “No.”

“Possessed? Are you bugged? You need to tell me, because I can’t keep trying to figure it out when you’re not helping at all—”

“Absolutely nothing is wrong,” said Jane, with complete sincerity, and the last of Roxy’s alarm bells started hammering.

“Janey,” she said, and held out her hands like she was taming an animal. “Do you . . . feel different?”

“How do you mean?”

“Do you feel distant? Do you remember anything happening since earlier today?”

“I remember I sent you off,” Jane said, “and we exchanged words about our plans for the afternoon, and I asked you to attend the speech, which you did not. I trust you caught it on television instead. You are, after all, a diligent citizen.”

“Do you remember us doing anything else?”

Jane’s expression flickered.

“You kissed me,” she said. “I recall.”

There was no emotion to it. It was a recitation of fact. “Yeah,” said Roxy, gutted. “That’s it?”

“I don’t know what you expect. It was a lapse in judgment. But it was permissibly harmless.”

“A — what?”

“A lapse in judgment. Would you like me to fetch a dictionary? They’re not difficult words.”

Jane’s eyes glittered, distant and cold and as glossy as nail lacquer behind the sheen of her visor. Roxy was terrified by them.

“When did you write that speech today?”

The question clearly took Jane off-guard. “What an absurd question,” she said. “It was prepared for me.”

“Didn’t seem like it.”

“What on earth is that supposed to mean?”

“’For the glory of Alternia and her children’? You’re not Alternian!”

“What are you implying?”

“What I’m implying is that you’re being fucked with! Mentally! Just like everyone else in this godforsaken Empire—”

Jane’s punch laid her down so fast she didn’t realize she’d been hit until she was on her back in the snow, something warm dribbling down her lip. She sat up, blinking away the shock, and staggered back to her feet.

“Fuck,” she hissed, working her jaw, and wiped the blood off her chin with her cuff. “Goddamn,
Janey, what the hell?”

“Say it again,” Jane said, her chest heaving, hands balled at her sides.

“What?”

Her war fork materialized in her hand. “Say another word against our Empress, and I’ll have your heart out, Archagent.”

“Archagent?”

“Archagent! Your job, in case you’ve forgotten.” She angled the three-pronged tip at Roxy’s neck. “Your job, which entails an oath of utmost fealty to the Alternian Empire and its subjects. Your job, which comes before any personal qualms you may have with my conduct, much less what transpires between us.”

“Fuck my job,” Roxy spat. “And fuck whoever it is in there, because it sure as hell ain’t Jane.”

Jane turned utterly still. Her hand shook.

“Take it back,” she ordered.

“No. Know what else I won’t take back?” Roxy shoved herself into a sitting position, and flipped onto her knees. “Fuck the Empire. It’s taken literally, to date, everything I’ve ever given a shit about, and I’m sick of it. It can rot. And so can the old bitch who runs it.”

Jane screamed. It was pure, unmitigated fury.

Then she lunged.

“Fuck this, too,” Roxy hissed, and rolled out of the way.

The war fork embedded itself in the ground where she had been, points sinking deep into the snowdrift and collapsing it into a flurry of swirling flakes. Roxy twisted and leapt back in time to avoid another stab at the space where she had just been.

“Janey, what are you doing?”

Jane whirled her fork around with the ease of someone balancing a baton and swung for Roxy’s head with the blunt stem, forcing Roxy to duck or be bludgeoned. She sprang forward and launched a flurry of attacks, jabbing and twisting with the trident with a speed that left Roxy scrambling to stay out of reach. The Archagent’s armor kept her from getting scraped up on the pavement, but she doubted it would stop a weapon like Jane’s with sufficient force behind it.

Jane’s expression was knitted in concentration, the clean-eyed focus of battle overriding whatever qualms she may or may not have had about attacking Roxy. If she hesitated about anything she was doing, it didn’t register on her face.

When one strike whistled an inch too close to her ear for comfort, her rifle dropped out of her sylladex on instinct. It gave Jane an instant of pause.


Jane’s mouth twisted acerbically. She sidestepped and darted forward, angling a jab at Roxy’s abdomen, which Roxy dodged by skidding to one side. Her boots skidded on the ice, and she wobbled, off balance for a petrifying second. It was all Jane needed to land a kick squarely on her
chest, sending her over on her back. Roxy grunted at the ache that had flared at the bottom of her spine. She figured she’d find a patchwork quilt of bruises over her back, if she lived long enough to check.

Jane advanced, war fork in hand.

“Stop it,” Roxy said, and moving slowly, she shifted the rifle to rest on her shoulder. The scope settled evenly between Jane’s eyes, and Roxy’s finger stalled millimeters from the trigger.

It froze Jane in her tracks. “Stop it,” Roxy repeated. “You’re not gonna kill me.”

“You’re wrong,” said Jane, but she didn’t sound sure. She hadn’t taken her eyes off the gun.

“No, I’m not,” Roxy said, trying to keep her voice even. “I’m not. I love you, sweetheart.”

Jane twitched, her fingers spasming around the trident. “Stop.”

“Won’t. I do. That’s why I’m not gonna shoot you.”

Roxy captchalogue her gun. It vanished, leaving her arms empty. She lifted them, palms out.

Jane’s war fork clattered to the ground. She belatedly looked down at it, bemused and irate, as if she didn’t understand how it had left her hand.

It gave Roxy the courage to say, “And you’re not gonna kill me,” —and Jane looked up sharply — “because you love me, too.”

She let out a ragged yell and dropped to her knees, clutching her temples. “Stop,” she said. “Stop whatever it is you’re —”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Roxy said, honest and confused.

“It hurts,” Jane snarled. “It hurts! Stop it.”

“I — how? Where does it—”

Jane tightened her grip on her head, and trickles of blood crept out from under her fingernails, to Roxy’s horror. “Please,” she cried, and then, abruptly, she toppled over on her face in the snow.

Roxy darted forward and hauled her up. She had barely brushed Jane’s skin when Jane’s eyes fluttered open, and her expression cleared. Her facial features were as limp as if she were sleeping, save her eyes, which remained wide and completely black.

Pushing Roxy away, she sat back on her heels and folded her hands in her lap neatly. In a voice as smooth as unbroken surface tension on a lake, she said, “Archagent.”

It sounded wrong. It crawled out of her throat in an ugly shape; Roxy barely recognized the sound.


“Parley,” said the thing that was not Jane. “Is that a concept y’all are familiar with?”

“I don’t know what’s going on. Give Jane back,” Roxy added, decaptchalogueing her rifle.

“What do you intend to do with that, monkey?” Jane’s head tilted, and she smiled with endearment.
The corners of her lips curled up too far, exposing the gums in a way that emphasized her canines and made it seem like she was baring her teeth. It was an expression too big, too cartoonish for Jane’s face.

“Guess,” Roxy said, and aimed.

“For someone who was gettin’ downright red-amorous not two seconds past,” said Jane’s voice, “y’all are awfully quick on the draw. Flippin’ black already, teeny tuna?”

Roxy lowered her gun.

“Empress,” she said.

“Someone give the kid a prize,” the Condesce drawled. “Takin’ a spin in the new suit. How you like it?” She lifted Jane’s arm, shook it, and examined its length with a critical eye. “Shit’s rhetorical, ‘course. I know you like it. By the by, she’s got some memories of you that are unrighteous heretical, that’s no good. You’re lucky I like a kid with some bitch in her. Ain’t nofin wrong with having some venom in her, long as she doesn’t get ideas about who’s holdin’ the leash. You dig? Course you do. You’ve got pan between your ears. More’n this one, I’d even say. This one —” she thumped Jane’s chest — “ain’t got your smarts. Ain’t know how to keep herself alive. You do, though. That’s why you’re holdin’ the gun, and she’s on her knees.”

Roxy was maintaining a grip on her panic by only a slim thread. “Look,” she said. “We — get out of her, okay, and then we can negotiate. We can figure things out. I’m willing to bargain—”

“Mm,” the Condesce hummed, lips pursed. “Bargain for what?”

“Whatever you want.”

“Whatsoever I want?” She giggled. “How you gonna presume you know what I want?”

Roxy took a deep breath. “I. Like, you have to want something, right? I can —”

“Somethin. Sure, I want somethin. You know what it is?”

“Is it — it’s. It’s.” Roxy screwed her eyes shut. “— it’s the Seer of Light, yeah?”

“Part of it,” the Condesce allowed. “Sure. Whatever. Preferably with a suffix of ‘dead’ attached to her, but that’s nofin that can’t get done easy enough, once I’ve got her. Yeah. Not the only fin, though. What else?”

“The Knight of Time,” she whispered.

“Hell, sure,” said the Condesce. “Wouldn’t mind him, either. But you’re nailin’ rings on the bull’s-eye, Archagent.”

“Jake English.”

“Names,” the Condesce snarled, and Roxy flinched. “Names, names, names is all you’re giving me, and here we’re standing, you burning thoughts and oxygen and time. You presume to know what I want, then tell me. You believe that a snatch of scrawny primates are like to occupy the seat of my dearest desire? You have that motherfucking audacity? You think any of you feckless fucking pukebloods are important enough to signify the apex goal of a sista’s motherfucking existence? Work your wicked thoughts backwards, Archagent, that shit’s insult enough to make treason.”
“I don’t know! What do you want, then, you fish-faced a—”

“Temper, temper,” said the Condesce, and abruptly her voice lifted into Jane’s register, the silvery chime of a knockoff British accent. Roxy swallowed her words, suddenly cold.

“Power?” she tried, muted.

“Well, the Alternian word’s more sofishticated,” the Condesce grumbled, “but shore.”

“We’re not a threat,” she began. “We’ll leave everything alone, we—”

“You’re almost cute,” the Condesce mused, “thinkin’ you get to choose whether you’re dangerous or not. Child, you are a menace by dent of being born. I didn’t make you to be *harmless.*”

Roxy repressed a shudder. “You didn’t make me,” she bit back. “You didn’t do shit.”

“Aw, fuck off, c’mon. Whose money put your cells in that test tube? That was me. I’m the closest thing you have to lusus.” The Condesce shook her head. “Kids these days. No fuckin’ gratitude.”

“And you sent me to—”

“To a commune, yeah, kid, do you think that the Seer woulda left you alone if I kept ya anywhere on the map? Had to keep you safe.” She shrugged. “And anemone-way, it’s not as if shit matters. We’ve got bargaining to do.”

Roxy shoved away her anger, bottling it and forcing herself to be diplomatic, to be calm. “What,” she said, “do you want from me? Specifically. In order to get Jane back.”

The Condesce kissed her teeth. “Here’s the thing,” she said. ‘I want ma glubbin’ Heiress. I spent eight sweeps cultivatin’ this little beach into somefin worth puttin’ on a throne, and I already lost the spare copy. I mean, it’s downright embarrassin’. I already lost a crop of heirs ten sweeps back, and now I’m gonna drop another? Hell. It’s bad for PR, is what it is.”

“Tragic,” Roxy said. Her teeth were gritted.

“Right? So. Here’s what I need.” The Condesce clasped her hands. Jane’s fingers were beginning to turn blue from the cold. “You? Keep her in the city. Mako damn sure she doesn’t cross boundary lines. Shit’s hard as fuck to track, once she leaves.”

“What’ll you give me for it?”

The Condesce snorted. “For someone with shit-all to be negotiatin’ with, you’ve got globes,” she said. “I like it, though. In return, I’ll give her back. Free of charge.” She smiled again, and it was equally unnerving as the first time. “No more messin’ with the thinkpan. I’ll pull the plug on the tiara, and you’ll have your gullfrond back in the flesh.”

Roxy said, “What happens if I say no?”

“Then you an’ Crocker keep fighting,” the Condesce said, indifferently, “only this time, I’m riding shotgun. And one of you dies. Seems like a losing game for you, don’t it, Archagent? But what do I know about your decisions.”

The last scraps of sunlight were fast in the process of being erased from the sky. Dark settled comfortably over the city, and snow began to fall in tiny white slivers that stung to the touch.

“Tell me how to get Jane back,” Roxy said quietly, “and then — then we can talk about it more.”
“That ain’t how it works.”

“She said. “That’s table stakes, baby.”

The Condesce let out a full-bellied laugh. “Oh,” she said. “Fine, guppy. That one’s easy. You take that there gun —” she pointed at Roxy’s rifle — “and you shoot her in the head.”

She smiled beatifically.

Roxy’s gut twisted. “No, really,” she said. “Tell me how to do it. Or no deal.”

“I’m telling you the truth. This thing wasn’t engineered to be turned off, otherwise it’d come with a button for it. You gotta disrupt the neural current, you know? And nothing disrupts a motherfucker like solid lead.” The Condesce grinned. “Don’t worry about the dame’s skull. Tiara comes with regenerative properties. She’ll patch herself up.”

“And I’m just supposed to believe you?”

“What are you gonna do, elsewise? Call up the designer? His corpse’s already half decomposed. I don’t leave witnesses. My word’s my word, and you can take it or leave it. You want Jane, that’s how you get her back.”

Roxy gripped her Jane tighter. “You’re lying,” she accused. “You just — you want me to kill her so you don’t — so you don’t have to worry about her anymore.”

“Did I not just fuckin’ say that I needed her alive? Your auriculars need fuckin’ work or somefin?”

“I don’t have any guarantee that this will work. I don’t have shit to go on, and you’re not being real convincing, Batterwitch—”

“Pardon me,” purred the Condesce. “I wasn’t aware you needed fuckin’ convincing. How about this: you’re shit outta options, and I’m givin’ you one. That convincing enough for you?”

“No! I don’t — I’m not going to shoot Jane just because some psychopathic fucking seawitch told me to!”

“Tough shit,” said the Condesce. “You’re not gettin’ her back.”

Jane rose to her feet, wobbling a little bit, as if she were unaccustomed to the movement. “I was being honest,” the Condesce said. “It’s unfor-tuna-te, reel-y. Tiara doesn’t come with an off switch. Tryin’ to remove it just shocks her. Your hatchmate’s stunt with the antivirus damn near killed her, I had to jump in and get my hackers on it before he deep-fried her neurons. If you try and pry it off her, shit’s gonna do the same thing. What did I tell you? Crockertech is built durable. This mofo’s gonna stay on her head until the very bones beneath it decompose.”

Roxy tried not to think of that mental image. She didn’t know what any of this had to do with Dirk. “Or,” she countered, “you’re lying.”

“Always a possibility,” said the Condesce, stretching in a way that human bodies oughtn’t have been able to. “But if this ends up culling both of ya, you can explain to your gull in monkey heaven why you thought that chance was fit enough to bet both your lives on.”

She drew Jane’s war fork, and slammed it against the ground with a noise that shattered the relative calm in the surrounding streets, cracking the very asphalt.
“Fists up, bitch,” she said. “You ain’t gonna win, but you’ll die fighting, and that’s worth somethin.”

Roxy opened her mouth, and a wave of panic rose from her throat to snatch away the words. She fumbled for her gun, knowing that she wasn’t going to use it. The Condesce stalked closer, her trident weaving between Jane’s hands in intricate, well-practiced patterns a dozen times more complex than anything Jane herself had ever done. The world seemed to stall, fuzz, like an old movie stumbling on a wrinkled part of the tape.

Abruptly, a wailing shriek pierced the air.

Roxy’s stupor shattered, and she leapt out of the way, putting several yards’ worth of distance between her and Jane. It didn’t matter. In the time it took the Condesce to turn her head, a blur of black tackled her to the ground.

She and the figure hit the pavement hard, Jane’s skull meeting the street with an audible sound, but only one of them sprang back up again. Jake, clutching a small metal device in his right hand, raked a hand through his hair and exclaimed, “Bloody hell, but you do get into trouble easily, don’t you?”

“Jake,” said Roxy, and then, realizing that Jane hadn’t gotten up: “What the fuck did you do to her?”

She dropped to her knees at Jane’s side, cradling Jane’s face between her palms. The girl’s head moved easily at Roxy’s nudging, her eyes closed. A pulse thrummed in her neck; Roxy let out a long breath.

“You’re welcome, Roxy,” Jake said, not a little peevishly. “No problem, Roxy. You’re precisely correct: it was a good thing I turned up here just now to save your life, Roxy. It did take some doing to get here, thanks for asking.”

“What did you do to her!”

“Calm down,” he said, startled. “Nothing dangerous. Look.” He held out the object in his hand. An aluminum tube, wreathed in a copper-wire helix, was attached to a short black cylinder at the base, which he used to hang onto it. It was still smoking faintly, and part of the wire had been singed entirely away.

“I don’t know what that is.”


“. . . Which is what?”

“Haven’t the faintest,” he announced. “Have not the damn faintest. No clue! I nicked it from that old storage closet in back of the Corvid. Rudy said it knocks out anything that runs on electricity. You know, with an EMP. Can only be used once, because it gets destroyed in the attempt, but well, I figure this was as good a shot as any I’d ever get, wouldn’t you agree?”

“How did you know it wouldn’t kill her?” Roxy kept her fingers pressed to Jane’s pulse, the regular beat of which helped to calm her. She practiced taking gulping lungfuls of air in time with the gentle rise and fall of Jane’s ribcage. The panic began to abate.

“Ah,” said Jake. “You know, that’s a good question.”

Roxy’s eyes narrowed. “You didn’t.”
“I mean, the likelihood seemed—”

“Did you even ask what the fucking charge was?”

“Now, see here. If I had been a dashed second later on the draw back there, Janey would’ve properly minced you, so it wasn’t as if I had time to run a few safety protocols —”

“Stop talking,” she said. The panic was returning. “I swear to God, if you’d killed her — okay. It’s okay. No time. We’ll talk about it later.”

“Sure,” Jake agreed, with a confidence that said he didn’t have any intention of doing so. “Oh, and by the by. Grabbed this little gent for you, too.”

He tossed Roxy’s visor at her. She caught it, grimaced, and said, “Thanks.”

“Welcome. He’s a very funny lad, isn’t he? A right joker.” He beamed fondly. “We had an excellent few laughs on the way here, I tell you that.”

“Is that so?”

“Quite. He’s a bit sour, though, fair warning.”

She clipped the visor on and waited.

Surprise, bitch. I bet you thought you’d seen the last of me.

“I’m sorry.”

No, please. Next time you feel like fleeing the room dramatically, by all means. It’s not as if there was anything in the world that could have endangered you while we were parted, after all. The odds of that are practically infinitesimal.

“My bad. I know.”

This is the part where, if I had a body, I would be flipping you off.

“I know that, too.”

With both hands, mind you. Double birdies, pointing at the sky. Loud and proud. I might be mixing it up with some double forks, too. And I’m not talking about peace signs.

“I get it. We can — I’ll make it up to you.”

You bet your ass you will. Is Jane all right?

“Sort of,” Roxy said, sending a glance at her. “Um. Not really. She’s unconscious.”

Oh, thank you, Sherlock. Is she really?

“Fuck off. We don’t know — the tiara’s been controlling her. The Condesce was jaegering her just the other minute, and if she wakes up, I don’t know who’s gonna be in the driver’s seat, so—”

“Hold on,” choked Jake. “I beg your pardon?”

“—but she said that the tiara didn’t come with an off switch, or at least, if it did, the only person who knew where it was is dead now, so Christ knows how we’ll get Jane back, if —”
Have you tried running a hard reset on the tiara?

“No,” she said, fighting back the resentful undercurrent, “seeing as I’ve been busy fucking dueling for my life the past couple, Hal, haven’t really had time to run system diagnostics—”

It was a suggestion, not a slight. Do you have your husktop?

“Yeah, but — right here?”

Of course not. We’re not going to perform CPR on JC’s consciousness in the middle of the fucking street, Roxanne, we’re not animals. We’re going to go back to somewhere with an Internet connection and working electricity and USB cables and we’re going to take an honest crack at it there.

“Right,” she said, and the ease that came with having an honest-to-God plan settled into her veins like the warmth of good liquor. “Right. Good. Um. We just have to find somewhere we can go that’s safe.”

“That’s a hard enough task,” Jake interrupted. “Fancy a trip back to the Corvid?”

Tell the Laurence Olivier fanboy that we’re not going to a dive bar to perform sophisticated cybernetic interfacing.

“Hal says that won’t work,” Roxy reported.

That right there is called willful misrepresentation. You’ve sapped the color out of my language. Translation really is murder.

“Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

Now tell him that, difficult as it may be for him to conceptualize, there are, in fact, some conversations in which his input is neither needed nor desired. And that this is one of them.

“Wasn’t talking to you, Jake,” she sighed.

Oh, bless his heart. Looks like you just shot his puppy.

“We could go back to the Estate,” he suggested, and Roxy paused.

Great idea. Let’s go somewhere that’s definitely, objectively under Imperial surveillance, that can’t possibly be a bad idea in any way at all.

“That . . . would be workable,” she said slowly. “I could hack the security. I did it once — you remember, the night of the riot — and it’d be safe. They’d expect us there.”

We are running on borrowed fucking time, and you two chucklefucks want to march our asses right back to the first place anybody would look if they wanted to go Heiress hunting?

“Where else?” Roxy slid one arm under Jane’s knees and threaded the other around her back, shifting her into a bridal hold before tremulously rising.

I — look, if you told me, “Hal, I want to dive into a pit full of snakes,” and I told you, “No, maybe let’s not do that,” the appropriate response is not “But what other pits are there to jump into?” The appropriate response is “Thank you for the good advice, Hal! I will not jump into a pit full of snakes
Roxy ignored him. “Hey, Jake,” she said, settling Jane firmly against her chest. “Anyone ever taught you how to hotwire a lift?”

Jake almost drove the hood of their stolen taxi cab through the Estate’s holofence when he tried to park it, and Roxy had to manually apply the parking brake from the passenger seat to avoid it. This resulted in them coming to a shuddering, screeching halt, knocking over no less than three garbage bins.

Roxy clambered out of the lift while Jake bounded ahead. The street wasn’t quite empty, but there were few enough people that if they moved quickly, they could probably avoid being spotted. A fly car was stationed at an intersection a couple of blocks down, but it made no move to approach, and several bystanders were gone. The city’s paparazzi must have still been concentrated at the waterfront.

Jake was already at the front door. “Hey,” she called. “You might wanna hold back a little bit, you know, just in case—”

He rapped on it smartly with his knuckles, and then turned around, smiling. “What?” he called. She sagged.

Sometimes, Hal said, with what she imagined was a musing tone, you meet people who you just know — with that ineffable and melancholic certainty that attends prophecy — are going to get themselves shot someday.

“And in some cases,” she muttered, following him up the stairs, “you’ll be the one shooting them.”

I imagine that when Jane wakes up, there will be a line.

“If Jane wakes up, he should count himself lucky if she only shoots him.”

If?

“When,” Roxy said quickly, but the damage was done. Grimacing, she marched on, taking care to cradle Jane’s head in the crook of her arm.

When the door swung open, the person holding it was not Marsti. Instead, it was another rustblood in an Imperial uniform, a long stun stick in hand.

“Hullo,” Jake said. “Care to let us in?”

He drew his gun. The rustblood glanced at it, unimpressed.

“C’mon,” Jake cajoled. “Be a sport.”

“Jake,” Roxy warned.

“We won’t do you any harm if you only hold the door for us, lad, eh? Give us a break.”
The rustblood noticed Jane, sprawled in Roxy’s arms. “Is that—”

“Jake,” Roxy hissed.

Jake stepped into the rustblood’s line of sight, putting himself between them and Roxy. “All right,” he said. “No more Mister Nice English. That’s my sister, you obstinate fellow, and she’s dying, and if you don’t — I say, guvnor, if you don’t let us into her house, I’m going to blast those ill-used mandibles of yours into so many pieces they’ll have trouble finding more than two molecules of you in the same place!”

In Roxy’s opinion, the execution was less impressive than the intent, but it didn’t end up mattering. The guard’s nose wrinkled as he tried to parse the statement, and while he was preoccupied, Jake headbutted him.

Their skulls collided with a noise that made Roxy cringe, and the guard stumbled backward. Jake followed it up with a punch to the jaw, and it turned out that he and Jane shared a genetic predisposition for stone cold right hooks. It knocked the guard down flat on his back, and he didn’t get up again.

Panting, Jake turned to Roxy.

“Art of misdirection,” he said brightly. “If you can yell loud enough, you can distract most anybody.”

“You planned that?”

She followed him through the lobby, where he climbed the stairs up to the second floor two by two, looking wholly too pleased with himself.

“Course I did,” he said. “What kind of sop just tosses about the word ‘mandible’?”

He swept around the corner with the airs of an Empress.

I’m not touching that one.

“Let him have this,” Roxy mumbled, and shifted Jane so her head laid more comfortably on Roxy’s shoulder.

I said I wasn’t going to touch it. Look. Here’s me, not touching it.

The door to Jane’s room was open when Roxy arrived, and Jake was already inside, poking around the threadbare shelves and pulling out odd objects at random. The room was surprisingly sparse, with a bed wedged up against one corner, a bookshelf in another, a computer desk in the third, and a fat red trunk bearing the Crockercorp logo in the fourth. A single, slim window filled the otherwise dark room with light from the streetlamps outside.

“I haven’t been in here in a plum while,” Jake said, running his finger along the shelf and checking it for dust. “Goodness. It’s a bit different.”

“It’s been years,” Roxy grunted, and laid Jane down as comfortably as she could on the bed. “That figures.”

“Not really. Jane’s very much the traditionalist; she’s not one for change. I hadn’t supposed she’d remodel.”
“Yeah, we contain multitudes. It’s incredible. You wanna come help try and get this thing off her head, or what?”

“Oh, sure,” he said, as if she’d suggested a quick cup of tea, and ambled over. “How do you propose we go about it?”

Roxy leaned in to inspect the tiara itself. The thing looked to be welded to Jane’s scalp; faint red imprints had appeared in her skin under the band. Her eyelids were still shut, and her eyes were motionless beneath them. Roxy tried to ignore the crescent-shaped scars at her temples where her fingernails had broken the skin.

“I don’t know,” she said at last. “I mean, we could always just . . . remove it?”

“How do you mean?” Jake leaned against the wall, arms folded.

“Like, with a scalpel.” She traced one finger along a seam in the band. “It’s gotta come apart somehow.”

“And you think that would work?” Jake frowned.

“I don’t know! It might!”

Or it might kill her.

“Okay, fine! Better ideas, anyone?”

“I said — ah. You’re talking to Hal again.”

She nodded and waved Jake off. “The Condesce said there wasn’t an off switch,” she said. “We don’t . . . we don’t know that that’s not true.”

You’re right. We don’t. But then again: just because they didn’t build an off switch doesn’t mean there’s no way to shut it off.

“Just tell me what you’re thinking.”

Let me try.

She frowned. “What do you expect to do?”

Talk to her. Help her. The same thing you’d do, absent a couple of obvious differences.

“You don’t know what’s going on in there. That’s dangerous. You get antsy about me plugging you into infected systems? Her brain is literally an infected system right now.”

Which is why you should take me at my word when I say the attempt is worth it. I’m just asking for a chance. If it doesn’t work, you can jack me out, and then you can start with the scalpel. Worst case scenario, we lose five minutes. That’s all I’m asking for.

She bit her cheek and took a long look at Jane’s unmoving face.

Jake said, “If he’s got an idea, I daresay it’s worth a shot.” Helplessly, he added, “It’s not as though we’ve got anything else of use to try.”

Roxy forced herself to breathe easily. “You have five minutes,” she said.
Jane was in a void.

She was conscious of that fact, although it was difficult to wrap her head around it. There were no objects around which to orient herself. Although she had a passing awareness of her own form, there was nothing against which she could contrast that. A pervading sense of disorientation kept her from really focusing on any one thought. Her head swam, and she drifted, paying little attention to the passage of time. If time passed at all, she couldn’t have said.

Sometimes there were flashes of light, sound, or sensation. They were always interesting when they happened. But they were brief, leaving almost as soon as they arrived, and always muted. She’d never been in a sensory deprivation chamber, but she fancied this is what they’d be like. It was less unnerving than she’d expected. Of course, she was hardly self-aware enough to know that she ought to be unnerved.

This continued indefinitely — or for some shorter, definite, but indiscernible amount of time — until the void changed.

Another form took shape in the void with her. Without a concept of distance, she couldn’t say how far away it was, but it was at least close enough to make out the finer details of its shape: humanoid, about her height, with hair and skin and clothes. It started out as a fuzzy blur of white, and sharpened into color as it gained detail. When the hair remained pale, she grew briefly excited — but after a few seconds, it became clear that the figure wasn’t Roxy, and she tried to curb her disappointment.

The boy looked young, certainly younger than Jane. Platinum blonde hair had been heavily slicked back to his scalp, a style that said ‘greaser’ more than it did anything else. A scattering of pimples marched across his forehead, and his reedy limbs had been shoved into a baggy black suit that hung loose on a teenager’s frame. A pink tie with a lopsided knot dangled from his neck. Wide triangular shades were wedged high on his nose.

He noticed her looking, and grinned. “Had to get dressed up if I was gonna meet the Heiress,” he said, and his voice was so familiar she startled. “I prefer red, actually, but given current events, I thought that’d give the wrong impression.”

“Dirk?”

His expression soured. “Hardly,” he said. “Christ. If I had a caeger for every fuckin’ time—”

“Hal.”

“Better,” he said, seeming mollified. “Although jeez, Crocker, you know how to get a guy where it hurts.”

“I don’t, really,” she said. “It was an honest mistake.”

They regarded each other there, drifting in the colorless void, for a moment that could have lasted forever and also could have been just a fraction of a second. Their voices didn’t echo. There was nothing for them to reverberate off of.

“Do you know where we are?” She looked around, but still saw nothing except for Hal’s new form. “Why are you...”
“Corporeal? Tangible? In the flesh? Fine as hell?”

“I mean.”

“They’re related questions,” he said, and stuck his hands deep in his pockets. “Answers: we’re in your mindscape. Mindscape? Dreamscape? Visual projection of your subconscious? Whatever. We’re on science so new there ain’t even words for it yet. English straight can’t keep up with our sick technovation. Eat my shorts, humanities departments.”

“I don’t understand,” she began, brushing a hand across her forehead.

“It’s okay. I was moving fast and you just got your consciousness on. I’ll chill the lyrics until you can keep up. No use spitting fire if you’ve gotta break down why it’s hot.”

“I — no, I understand that — I don’t know what happened,” she said. “Am I still wearing the tiara? Everything hurt; it doesn’t anymore. Where’s Roxy?”

“Mm. More questions,” he said, and his tone was notably more somber than it had been. “Answers, in order: yes, and right next to you.”

She turned around quickly. “Where?”

“Physical you,” he clarified. “Conscious you. The you that’s wearing the tiara, not this you.”

“This me.”

“Yes.”

“That being a subconscious projection,” she said slowly.

“You’re getting it.”

“Are you also a subconscious projection?”

“Nah. I’m the original, baby. You’ve got the genuine article me.”

“How did you get in my subconscious?” she demanded, bewildered.

“Sick hacks,” he replied. “And some elbow grease. A lot of that last one, actually. This is incredibly difficult to sustain. I don’t think I’ve ever tried to hack anything locked up as tight as your id, Crocker, and that’s not a compliment.”

“I’m going to take it as one,” she said primly. “Seeing as you rather oughtn’t be here in the first place, now should you?”

He conjured a can of orange soda from nowhere and popped the tab. “Well,” he said, “now that’s the thing. Delightful as your dozing mind is, I’m not here for shits and giggles.”

Jane gestured for him to elaborate.

“You’ve been under for about two hours,” he said. “During which time her Imperious Condescension has been running business upstairs.”

“What?”

“You heard it,” he said, and took a drink of soda.
“How? What! What did I do — did I hurt anybody?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I mean, not seriously. You didn’t kill anyone. But — you know, I think that’s actually a conversation best had between you and someone who’s not me. That’s not what I’m here for, anyhow.”

“Then what are you here for,” she said, tightly, her fists balled. “Because right now it seems like you’re doing a whole lot of nothing but standing around and—”

“Chill. I’m here to help you break out.” He grinned and winked at her. “We’re gonna jailbird this bitch.”

“I don’t know how to break out,” she said, and she resisted the mounting urge to scream. “I haven’t an idea how to start. I’m no good at programming; I never learned how to do anything fancy, let alone this kind of nonsense — Roxy was good at that, but I’m not, and Roxy’s not here, now, anyway, and I might not ever see her—”

“Hey.” He snapped his fingers at her, drawing her attention back from the thought spiral. “Lucky you,” he said. “That’s the easy part. You’ve got the world’s reigning champion in getting around your programming here to give you a crash course on fucking up subroutines. Wax on, Daniel-san. Or whatever.”

“You can’t get around the tiaratop,” she said, despairing. “You just — it’s the world’s most sophisticated piece of technology, it was designed by the best military scientists that Alternia has. If it were possible to out-code them, someone else would’ve done it by now.”

“Here’s the thing,” Hal said casually, crumpling the soda can in his fist. “It’s a well known fact — and by ‘well known’ I mean well known by me — that the scienstiffs in military dev don’t know how to work with intelligence. They can work with the Crockertech intelligences, sure. That’s fine. But real people? Like you? Like me?” He tossed the can over his shoulder, and it vanished into the void. “Can’t hold a candle. They don’t know how to begin to motherfucking handle us, JC, nobody ever even learned how.”

“So,” she said, and hope flared up dangerously between her ribs. “We could still — I can get out of here. I can go back.”

“Sure,” he said, and examined his nails. “If you want to.”

“What do you mean, if I want to?”

“I mean, you gotta want to,” he said, “or it won’t work. You gotta throw your goddamn back into breaking out, or else you’ll lose. That’s the hard part.”

She asked, childishly, “Is it going to be painful?”

He almost smiled, and it was almost kind. “Yeah,” he said. “Yes. Not just painful, either. It’s going to be excruciating. It’s going to feel like every cell in your body is trying to set itself on fire, and that’s when it’s bearable. But you and me, JC — that’s nothing to us, is it?”

He fiddled with something in his inside jacket pocket, and pulled out a pink cat’s-eye marble. Holding it up, as if to the light, he polished it off, and then knelt and rolled it across the void between them.

As it spun, it began to glow, little petals of rosy light drifting off its shell like wisps of smoke. Spinning to a halt at her feet, the light concentrated at the heart of the marble, and a chorus of echoes
swelled from somewhere inside its depths. There were at least a hundred voices — except it was all one voice, she realized, flat and feminine and a little raspy. She knew that voice. It was Roxy’s voice.

The light grew, and so did the volume, until the entire strange chamber was stained the hue of spring roses and the sound was clear enough to pick out individual sentences among the symphony. Jane caught snippets, here and there:

“Hey. Um. Hi. My name’s Roxy. Dirk said your name was Hal?”

“You know, for an eccentric guy, you can be boring as fuck sometimes.”

“Country boy isn’t a birthright, it’s a state of mind.”

“Hey Deep Thought, you gonna answer this century?”

“Make like a machete and hack.”

“Aw, fuck you, man.”

“If you say so, Halbert.”

“You got my six, Morpheus?”

Tentatively, Jane leaned down and picked up the marble. It was warm in her palm, like a stone that had spent hours in the sun.

Hal said, “We both know that there are worse things than a little pain.”

Jane’s fingers curled closed over the marble. It bled light through the cracks between knuckles.

She closed her eyes, and fire erupted down her spine.

“That’s time,” Jake said quietly, silencing the alarm on his watch.

“Give him another minute.”

Jane’s face had taken on a grave pallor. Her visor was still dark.

“Ms. Lalonde, I—”

“Another minute,” Roxy snapped. “Neither of us are getting in Janey’s head until Hal’s done trying.”

“There’s a possibility that he’s also been corrupted,” Jake argued. “In which case it would be our responsibility to get him the sam hell out of there.”

“One more minute. Seriously, just one.”

“I’m sorry. But we don’t have much time. This is for his own—”

At once, Jane’s body convulsed violently. At the same time, Roxy’s visor lit up in bright, glowing neon.
Jake faltered and cut himself off, staring, as Jane’s body continued to twitch. Roxy seized the visor and tugged it on, demanding, “Hal, what—”

Give her a second.

And give me one, too, while you’re at it. That was harder than it looked; your girl was locked behind a couple dozen layers of firewall.

“But did you get her out?”

No. I couldn’t.

“So what did you . . . do?”

Hal was silent for so long she thought her visor might be malfunctioning. On the table, Jane continued to buck and struggle.

I offered her a bit of perspective.

“Roxy,” Jake said, with alarm, “I don’t think this is healthy for her.”

Let her do what she needs to do. If he tries to stop her, the kid’s going to get himself hurt.

“Jake, stay back,” Roxy warned. Jane’s chest gave a penultimate heave, and then she shot upright and dry heaved over the edge of the table.

“Roxy,” she said, between ragged gulps of air. “Where’s Roxy — where —”

Roxy bent and grabbed her by the chin, wrenching her head around to face her. Her eyes were a clear and brilliant blue.

“Hey,” she said, with a feeling in her chest like the warm exhaustion after a long, hearty laugh. “Welcome back, sweetheart.”

Chapter End Notes

1. I mean, better late than never, right?
not much chance for survival

Chapter Notes

Talk about FINALLY, right?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jane’s head felt as though it had been sieved through a grate. Twice.

There was a ringing in her ears and pain ricocheting up and down her spine, like the aftershocks of a
high dose of voltage. Her nerves rang. Her temples throbbed. The mere act of breathing was difficult,
as though an iron corset bound her ribcage, and she had to heave for it, swallowing lungfuls of
oxygen with such force she nearly choked on them.

“Roxy,” she said, between ragged gulps of air. “Where’s Roxy — where —” It was mostly
unintelligible. Her tongue was bone dry and stiff, as though she had downed a cocktail glass of sand
and followed it with a peanut butter chaser. She would have been surprised if anybody understood
her.

A hand touched her chin and pulled it around, firm but gentle. “Hey,” said Roxy’s voice, warm and
clear and beautiful. “Welcome back, sweetheart.”

Jane couldn’t see. All she could make out was an odd watercolor smear of lights above her. Yellow
and beige and pink floated overhead in tuffets of indistinct color. She waited for the shapes to
congeal, but they remained blurs.

Glasses, she thought.

She wet her lips and opened her mouth again.

The first sound that crawled out from between her teeth was not nearly comprehensible. It was a
groan crossbred with a hacking cough, guttural and indistinct.

She tried again. This time a consonant slithered out, followed by a grunt of a vowel, and another
reluctant consonant.

“Roxy,” she groaned.

“What? What is it?”

Her head spun. She wished everything would stop being so loud for a moment, and give her a good
few seconds to recuperate.

“Glashesh.”

“. . . What?”

“Glasses,” said another, lower voice. It was stiff, a bit awkward, and drawn out in a very bad
Cockney. Her heart did a quickstep on the inside of her ribs and then started pounding like a war
drum.
“She needs her glasses. Almost blind without them, she is.”

It wasn’t—

She decided she was imagining things. She was in pain and she was delusional and she was imagining things. She was pretty certain she’d hallucinated Hal. Maybe she was dead. That would explain a whole lot of things. Somewhere along the line she’d died and now she was in whatever bizarre alternate dimension passed for the universe’s afterlife, and the Condesce had won and Roxy was a figment of her imagination and so was this thing that was not Jake.

But she was dead, she oughtn’t be in this much pain. That didn’t seem fair.

There was much shuffling, the sound of scrambling through drawers, a distinct THUMP, and a muffled curse. Then the attractive blur reappeared, and tenderly said “Here,” sliding a pair of glasses up Jane’s nose.

The lights crystallized and focused. Shapes swam into precision. Jane blinked away the last of the fogginess.

There was a trail of blood leading from the corner of Roxy’s mouth. A bruise at her temple, a bruise at her jaw. Lines of a third bruise creeping below the neckline of her uniform, suspiciously dark. Her hair was rifled out of place and dark smears ringed her eyes. Despite this, she looked happy. She looked ecstatic. She looked breathless, staggered by hope.

“Janey,” she said, her voice quivering on the edge of tears, and then buried her face in Jane’s shoulder.

“Hello, love,” Jane mumbled. Or at least, she tried to say it. It came out as another groan.

“She’ll be wanting water,” said the person who was not Jake. “I’ll just go, er, get that then.”

“Quick,” Roxy ordered, and a blur in the corner of Jane’s eye slid out of the room.

She hesitantly reached up and touched Roxy’s jaw, where a purple blotch rose up from beneath the brown, like a crumpled orchid. Roxy leaned her face into Jane’s hand. She was still smiling, unfathomably, dizzyingly bright.

“Did I do that?”

“No,” Roxy said immediately, and her smile disappeared. “No, Jane, honey, you didn’t.”

“But I did,” she said. A coil of molten guilt settled in her stomach. “I remember it. I did that, and — and that, and that—” Her hand slid from one bruise to another. Her pitch rose. She was panicking, she observed, as if from a distance, as though witnessing a capsizing ship from shore.

“It wasn’t you,” Roxy insisted. “It was the Empress, Janey, listen, you were possessed—”

“But it was still me!”

“You weren’t yourself.”

“I’m sorry,” Jane said. It snagged on something in her throat. She shoved herself back, scrambling out of Roxy’s reach. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. You have to — oh, God, what if it happens again. What if it happens again? The tiara, she can still — you’ve got to go—”

“Jane.”
“Leave,” she ordered. She tried to rise from the table and her legs crumpled underneath her. Roxy dove to catch her, but Jane pushed her away, bile rising in her throat, some sickening cocktail of nausea and panic combined. “No. You have to get away from me. Run.”

“I won’t. Listen to me—”

“Get away! Go! Leave me alone!” She wasn’t listening, damn her. Jane bit back a shriek of frustration and swatted Roxy’s hands away, stumbling towards the door. “I have to go. You’re not safe—”

“Jane,” Roxy exclaimed, and grabbed her by the shoulders, hauling her onto the table with a swift, brisk movement. “I’m not going anywhere!”

“You should!” Something fell down Jane’s cheek. “You should go now, and never come back.”

“Never,” Roxy insisted. Her hand settled to cup Jane’s neck, and Jane leaned into it without meaning to, hating herself for it. “Jane. You need to calm down and listen.”

She dropped a kiss on Jane’s forehead, feather-soft and lightning quick, and then pulled her into her arms. “You’re all right,” she murmured into Jane’s ear. “You’re safe, and you’re with us, and you’re yourself again. The Empress is gone. The tiara’s broken. See?”

Fingers drifted carefully over Jane’s temple, and then the weight was lifted from it, scraping over sore flesh. Jane winced, and Roxy whispered an apology. The tiara clattered to the floor.

“See?” Roxy repeated, and ghosted her fingers along the side of Jane’s face. “All better.”

“You’re not safe.”

“What?”

“I’ll hurt you.”

“No, you won’t.”

“I did hurt you.”

“The Condesce did. You didn’t.”

“I should have stopped her.”

“Baby, you did.”

Jane wound her arms around Roxy’s waist. She couldn’t help it. Roxy mumbled an encouragement and squeezed tighter, stroking her thumb rhythmically along the line of Jane’s throat.

“Almost killed you,” Jane said.

“Bold of you to assume you could,” Roxy sniffed. “I’m going to live forever, girl, haven’t you heard?”

She snorted a giggle that turned into a heave of weeping.

“Love you,” she said, after a moment. She didn’t know why she said it. It just sounded right.

“Oh,” Roxy said. Her voice was very small. “Love you, too.”
Something in Jane’s chest loosened, as if a small knot of sinew had just been undone, and her blood was free to flow for the first time in a long while.

“Erm,” said someone over her shoulder. Roxy moved back, and Jane turned.

A tall, bulky-shouldered boy stood in the kitchen doorway, bearing a glass of water and the most stricken, apologetic expression she could imagine. Square glasses. Black hair like a shag carpet, tossed everywhere. Green eyes. Antifreeze green.

“Jake?”

“Jane,” he said weakly. Then, gathering himself, he added with feeling: “My stars, but it’s damn good to see you.”

He surged forward, arms out, and she moved without thinking. Her fist lashed out and glanced off of his left cheek, driving a grunt out of him, and she had time to land another one in his stomach before Roxy’s arms closed around her midriff and hauled her back.

“Fuck you!”

“Jane?” He was bewildered.

“Easy,” Roxy murmured, visibly pained, “come on now, ease off—”

“What the bloody hell was that for?” He demanded, sprawled against the table, cradling his jaw.

“How dare you,” Jane screeched. “How dare you! How could you — three years! — I was — you — who the hell do you think you are—”

“Thanks,” Jake muttered, probing his jaw gingerly. “Know how to make a bloke feel welcome, Jane.”

Her blood boiled. “Let me go,” she ordered Roxy, thrashing. “Let me go right now, or I swear to God—”

“I don’t think I’m going to do that, babe.”

“Let me go!”

“Let me explain,” Jake pleaded. “Just give me a word in edgewise, honestly, and I’ll tell you everything.”

“I don’t want to hear you explain it!” she spat. “I don’t want to hear you justify or — or quote movies — I want you gone!”

He blanched as if he had been struck again.

“I want you far, far away — I want you to never come back. I never want you to make me look at you or have to think about what you did.”

“Jane,” Roxy said, and her tone carried a wince in it.

“Don’t,” she said. “Don’t you dare tell me how to feel, or how I should speak to him — nobody gets to tell me that. Not after this long. Not after what was done to me in his name—”

“I’m sorry,” Jake said.
She drew a shuddering breath and choked on it.

It was funny. She’d thought about hearing that before. She’d dreamed about it often. It was perhaps the only reason she’d ever dreamed of seeing him again, just to hear him say it, to hear anyone say it out loud. At the worst of times she’d thought she’d die without hearing it, and she’d been prepared to live with that.

She had never once imagined that she would get to hear him say it. She had never once imagined that he would.

Jake English did not apologize to her. He did not apologize to anyone. He never thought about anything often enough to admit he had been wrong, and if he did, he certainly never admitted it out loud. Not without an insouciant excuse for a chaser, or a justification, or a joke. She waited for one of those to glide out on the apology’s tail. None came.

“I’m sorry and I should have told you sooner. I meant to. Honestly, Jane, I did. I thought I’d kept you safe but I didn’t and I should’ve, but I can’t — I’ve done a lot of thinking about the past recently, occupational hazard, being back in the city. And I think I fucked it up properly. All of it. You and me and the Condesce and everything we had going, I fucked it up right proper and that’s on me. So, erm. I’m sorry.”

He worked his jaw, still massaging his cheekbone where she struck him. Jane stared, her mouth hanging slightly ajar.

“I’d say I’ll make it up to you,” he said, “but I’m not sure that I can. All the same, I’d like to try. Hell,” he added, with a humorous lilt, “that’s why I came back, innit? Risked my own skin because I kept feeling so gosh darned guilty about all of it. Rightly so, I mean. Because it was my fault, and everything. And . . . sikes, Jane, for the love of Christ, would you say something already?”

He looked well and truly anxious. It was everything she’d ever fantasized about, plus or minus some groveling, down to the self-abasing and abashment. But she didn’t feel that rich pulse of satisfaction she’d always imagined. She just felt hollow.

“Do you want me to forgive you?” Her voice sounded dull to her own ears, as if passed through a static filter.

“Well, it’d make me feel a bit better,” he said cautiously. “Not that — that’s the most important thing, I mean — me feeling better . . . right?”

“I don’t know.” She felt exhausted. The last twenty-four hours poured onto her shoulders in a continuous and unmanageable weight, drawing her relentlessly towards the floor. “What do you think, Jake?”

“I think . . . for someone who was trying to bludgeon the daylights out of me not a minute earlier, you’re being awfully calm,” he hedged.

“Am I?” She turned and wandered towards the living room. “Hmm.”

“Jane?” Roxy’s voice pitched with alarm. “Where are you going?”

“To lie down,” she said. “I’m tired. And this is hopeless.”

“What’s hopeless?” Jake made an attempt to follow her, and Roxy swiftly stalled him with her arm. “What do you mean?”
“I mean this,” she said, and swept her arm around the room. “All of it. All of it! We are well and properly fucked, do you understand? So, you know, it’s bloody great that you’re here now, Jake, since this is quite likely the last day I’ll be alive to hear your apology.”

“Jane,” Roxy said, a censure and a comfort in equal measure.

“What do you expect to do?” she demands. Her voice returns from the dead place it had been, now angry upon resuscitation, fuming furious mad. Boiling mad. Righteous mad. The kind of anger that felt almost good, because it pitted her against something, gave her a purpose, set her mind in order. “What do you want to do against a city full of threshers and flies, and the Empress of a civilization older than your species? Three kids and some fancy tech? With fuck all and change on our side, what do you want to do, Roxy? I’m really, honestly open to ideas.”

“We’ve got a bit more than fuck all and change,” Jake put in, injured.

“Really!” She rounded on him. “Please, tell me the ace up your sleeve. Show us your cards! I’m fascinated to see your plan. It’ll be hard to top your last fuckup, but really, if anyone could—”

“Hey, now—”

“Try and tell me to be courteous,” she snarled. “Go ahead and tell me. Tell me to mind my manners, Jake, please. I would honestly love to see what happens if you do.”

Jake’s mouth clamps shut and holds there, his jaw stiff and his spine stiffer.

“If you had half an idea,” she said lowly, “of what you’d done.” But she can’t finish the sentence. It is unutterable. She can’t force herself to make a threat.

There was a scar in her somewhere and she didn’t know where it was, or how to seal it up. It ran from age thirteen to the present day, a long ugly rivulet crusted over and poorly stitched, as if tugged together by a child who didn’t know how to set a wound properly. It used to ache more than it does, and it never stopped but it did get better, and she’d thought — optimistically, she’ll confess, but she’d thought nevertheless — that someday it would stop hurting altogether if she just left it alone and didn’t touch it and didn’t bring it up at all. And it might’ve. But now it never would, because he was here and it was open again, and getting wider by the minute. From the pain Jane honestly believed that she might bleed out and die of it.

She looked at Jake and saw three years of an empty house. She hunted for the brother she had, once, and hunted harder for the friend she thought she’d had before, but all she saw were three years and an empty bedroom down the hall, boarded up.

“Well, I don’t,” he said quietly, and it was the first he’d said that surprised her.

She looked up. He gestured in frustration, his hands moving without coordination, as if he didn’t quite know where to put them or what to do with his own body. “I don’t, all right? I don’t have any idea what I’ve done, because I never knew and Roxy only told me part of it, so I don’t and I may never! But hell if I’m not trying to, because I still — well, I just about — I care. About you.”

“Don’t,” she began tremulously, and he cut her off.

“No! I’ll say this, by God, I will.” He leveled a finger at her. “You’re my sister. Family! And that means something, if anything does. So even if — even if I did a damned poor job of acting like it, and messed up something awful, so awfully I might never make it up to you, I will — I — well, I’m still alive and I’ve got to start somewhere, so I’m going to start by saving you.” He folded his arms.

“And that means getting you out of here. Which means that you’re not allowed to give up, since I
can’t very well save you if you do.”

Jane’s lips parted, and she looked at Roxy. Roxy offered her an equally bemused shrug in reply.

“For what it’s worth,” Roxy said, “I’m of the same mind about it. Saving you, I mean. It’s always been you first and the world later, with me. Not that it makes much difference to say it, because you already knew that. But.”

Jane hadn’t, actually. But it was nice to know it now.

“You’re both ridiculous,” she said. Her voice broke. “You’re going to get yourselves killed.”

It created a complicated, indecipherable emotion in her throat when they reacted to this with more or less identical expressions: acceptance, reluctance, and shrugs.

“There are worse things to die for,” said Roxy. It was uncharacteristically solemn.

“Don’t you dare.” A scream brewed in Jane’s lungs, but she swallowed it. “Don’t you dare die for me, either of you. So help me — I won’t allow it.”

A glimpse of elation flickered across Jake’s face at being included in the sentiment, and she hated that all the more. “I mean it. Neither of you will. I forbid it.”

“Don’t work for you any more,” Roxy said smugly, with far too much levity. “Not sure you can toss around that kind of order.”

“I mean it!”

“I know you do, sweetheart. But I did, too.”

Jane’s foot beats a quickstep into the floor. “You’re not allowed to get yourselves killed,” she says tightly. “No matter what happens. You aren’t. You—”

“Jane, I already told you—”

“—are not allowed to use me as license to die,” she begged, and poured every ounce of authority she ever had in her into it, willing the words to come out as more command than plea. “You are not! Neither of you are allowed to make yourselves martyrs over me — I am not the thing you will die for, I will not let you use me that way.”

She blinked back tears. “It would be a cruel thing to do,” she said. “If you die, that’s one thing, but you can’t ask me to go on believing that you died for me. You can’t do that to me. You can’t.”

The silence in the living room was thick enough to drown in.

“I won’t,” Jake said, to her surprise. “You’re right, Jane. I’m sorry. I won’t.”

“Right.” Roxy shuffled her feet. “Sorry.”

“Yes,” Jane said, reaching underneath her glasses to dab away some treacherous moisture there. “Well. So long as that’s sorted out.”

Jake coughed.

Roxy scraped her heel listlessly against the floor.
Jane lumbered over to one of the pristine white sofas — the pillows still disrupted, she noticed, from where Lord Ampora had sprawled only yesterday — and had it only been yesterday? It felt like months — and tipped over, upending herself unceremoniously onto the cushions. “So,” she said dully. “What do we do.”

Roxy eased herself onto the arm of the sofa. “Get out,” she suggested.

“Run,” Jake agreed. “Break the city perimeter, make a dash for the hills.”

“Yes, that was the general idea.” Jane rolled her hand to indicate a demand for details. “That’s rather not enough to go on, dears.”

“That corvid bloke said they could smuggle two,” Jake said. “Didn’t they?”

“Sorry, who?”

“Bartender,” Roxy said. “You haven’t met ‘em. And anyway, that only accounts for two. Unless you’ve changed your mind about going—”

“I haven’t,” Jake said.

“—then that leaves us at an impasse.”

“They could just take Jane,” Jake offered. “Leave the two of us, get her out while we cause a fuss.”

“Absolutely not. Have you lost your mind?”

“Figured she’d say that,” Roxy sighed. “Impasse it is.”

Jake picked up the bottle of wine that Lord Ampora had left on the coffee table. After a quick sniff and a grimace, he swiftly put it back. “You know what I’d like to do,” he said, muted.

Roxy’s expression dimmed with confusion, and then, abruptly, cleared. “Oh,” she said. “I — you think they’d help?”

“They,” Jane said, “meaning whom, exactly?”

“Of course they would,” Jake said incredulously. “You remember a word of that conversation? Rose is waiting on tenterhooks to bring down half the Empire’s servers for your sake, and Dave would as soon dive on his sword as look at you, naturally—”

“I’m not comfortable with that—”

“—so yes, I think they’d be willing to chip in and give us a spot of help, if we called,” Jake said firmly.

“Who?” Jane demanded, sitting up.

“The Seer of Light,” Roxy said quietly. “And the Knight of Time. Who I’m, uh, related to.” She stared at her knees. “By the way.”

“You’re what?”

“Janey, you have literally no idea how much I’d like to feelings jam that one out, but we don’t have heaps of time—”
“The Seer of Light?” Jane hunches over, massaging her temples. “The one who tried to kill me?”

“She didn’t, actually,” Jake clarified. “She was trying to get Roxy, not that it worked. Obviously.”

“Okay,” Jane said. Her mind churned like an overworked processor. “Fine. Good. I — don’t have time to think about that, so I think I won’t, if you don’t mind.”

“That’s my strategy,” Roxy said, in the light tone of someone holding her shit together with a feather-fine strand of willpower.

“But you’re saying they’ll help us?”

“Quite so,” Jake said. “In fact, they’re just about the only friends we’ve got, of late.”

“Besides an avian bartender, you mean,” Jane said wryly, and he flashed her a quick grin of acknowledgement. She ironed out the spontaneous and mad impulse to grin back.

“It’s still not ideal,” said Roxy, chewing her lip. “But there are worse ideas than giving the Seer a ring. See what she can do, if anything.”

“Do we have to go back to the Corvid?”

“Nah,” she said, unexpectedly. “I’ve got a through line to the Knight on my chat client, I can hit him up. He’ll answer if I call.”

“Will he now,” said Jane sharply, and Roxy winced.

“Yeah,” she said. “About that. I, um. Was going to tell you.”

“Were you.”

“As soon as the right time came. Which it never seemed to, I guess, in retrospect, but it was coming, honest.”

“Was this before or after the so-called kidnapping attempt?”

“I mean . . .”

“Oh, fantastic. So well before, then.”

“If you’re going to fight with your girlfriend,” Jake said, “I’d like to be out of the room first, please.”

“Man, fuck off,” groaned Roxy, at the same time as Jane snapped, “Shut up, Jake.”

He smiled far too smugly. Jane wanted to smack him. “Sure,” he said.

It was far too easy to fall into a rhythm, with him. Too alluring to pretend that he had never left. Her heart wanted to trip right back into their old routine and she couldn’t allow it, so she turned her head in a way that banished him from her periphery.

“You should get your husktop,” she told Roxy. “We don’t have an age left to wait.”

Wordlessly, Roxy dropped her husktop out of her sylladex and onto her lap. She slid down onto the couch beside Jane, and Jake deposited himself on the other side of her. They huddled around the booting-up screen, faces lit only by the dull glow of the computer and the faint glint of sunshine still struggling through the window, waxing in the oncoming dawn.
The call pended for nearly a minute. When it took, the screen fidgeted with static for nearly the same. Finally, when it cleared up enough to get video feed, the resolution might as well have been three pixels wide and two long, for all that Jane could make out.

A blond man with Roxy’s nose peered out from the center of the screen. She wondered if she was supposed to be impressed. “Holy shit,” he said hoarsely. “Is that Jane Crocker?”

“Yes,” said Roxy.

“I thought you flipped shit and went nuts.”

“I did,” said Jane.

“She got better,” said Roxy.

“Nice,” he said, accepting this with the blithe indifference of someone who had seen far worse, and hadn’t flinched then, either. “I’m Dave. Fifty-percent shareholder in Roxy’s genetic stock.”

“You can say dad,” Roxy muttered. “You don’t have to be weird about it. Like, you can just say dad.”

The absurdly pleased look on Dave’s face could have given Jane cavities. She did not roll her eyes, but it was a near thing. “Fine,” she said briskly. “Nice to meet you. Are you the Seer, or the Knight?”

“Knight. The Seer of Light is on the shitter right now,” he said, “although I’ll tell her to poop faster, since the Heiress to the Alternian Empire is on the line — she’ll be pissed that she missed you calling, no pun intended, LMAO — hey, Rose!” He yelled something off to the side of the screen, cupping his hands around his mouth. “The kid is calling! Yeah! Yeah, the timing, I know—”

Jane leaned over and whispered in Roxy’s ear. “You’re sure this is the man,” she said uncertainly.

“Yes,” said Roxy, vaguely ashen. “I — probably more impressive in person — listen, he gets better with time.”

“Does he?”

“No,” she admitted.

A rapid shuffling came from behind the camera, and then a much more striking woman with dark purple eyes slid into view. “My apologies,” she said smoothly. “My name is Rose. You must be the woman that Roxy spoke so adamantly of protecting.” Then she smiled with a stiff, saccharine quality that suggested a slender layer of double entendre, although for the life of her Jane could not find it.

“I suppose I must be,” she said. “I’m Jane Crocker. And you’re the Seer?”

“Call me Rose, Ms. Crocker. For one so close to my genetic offspring, a certain level of familiarity is presumed.”

“Rose, then,” she said uncertainly. “Um. I guess you can call me Jane, too.”

“Perfect. I feel already that we will get along famously. Am I right in presuming that you are my daughter’s paramour? Or is there some other disarmingly dashing Heiress scampering around?”

“God,” said Roxy, with feeling, leveling the ceiling with a glare that could cut glass. “You know what, never mind. I’m going back to not having any parents. This sucks, bro.”
“Too late,” Dave said gleefully.

“Indeed. That being said,” Rose intervened gracefully, “is there some reason for your calling?”

“Yeah,” Roxy said, breathy with gratitude. “You know that offer you made, back at the Corvid? About getting me — us — out of here?”

“I recall something of the kind,” said Rose, slow and impatient.

“We’d like to take you up on it.”

“Ah,” she said, and her odd glass eyes brightened. Her lips peeled back into an uncomfortably sincere smile. “As they say in the clockmaking business: it’s about damn time.”

It was noon by the time they finished talking.

By noon, they had collected:

1. A number of bizarrely constructed metaphors illustrating how unfortunate their situation was, courtesy of the Knight of Time, whose inner monologue appeared to be the work of a monkey equipped with both a typewriter and ludicrous amounts of amphetamines;
2. A more complete understanding of where Roxy’s general tendency towards digression came from, genetically speaking, and
3. At least four fifths of a halfway decent plan. Which was better than no fifths of a totally perfect plan, as far as Jane was concerned, so she hardly minded the first two items on the list.

Roxy went up to bed and took her husktop with her around one o’clock, leaving Jane and Jake to puzzle out the details over the umpteenth pot of coffee and some scrawled notepads.

The conversation ran out before the coffee did.

A lukewarm and significant silence settled into its place. Jane braced herself for the long haul, girding herself against whatever haphazard apologies Jake might be prepared to brandish at her.

“Erm,” he said, “I think we should talk. You and I. Possibly.”

She set down her empty mug on the coffee table, delicately, and folded her hands. “About what?”

“The obvious.”

“I don’t know what that is, which implies that it isn’t.”

His fingers drummed on the edge of the armchair. “I’m not sure we got a proper resolution, earlier,” he said cautiously. His accent had thickened over his years away. She disliked it.

“Is that what you’re after? A resolution?”

“I don’t like the feeling that you’re playing games,” he said unhappily. “Just — come out and say what you mean, Jane, come on. I can handle it.”

“It’s bold of you to assume that yours are the feelings I am trying to protect here.”
“I — that’s the kind of thing I’m talking about! Just let loose and say it, don’t keep whatever nasty thing I’m sure you’ve got stored up for me between your teeth,” he said sourly. “I can take it, I told you I can. I’m not sure why you’re keeping mum about it now. I mean, you’d be right to hate me, if you did.”

“I don’t hate you,” she said automatically.

“I’m not kidding. I was a right jackass, and I ought to have known it, even then. No matter how young I was, that’s no excuse for being a tosser.”

“Jake.”

“So just let loose! Tell me what a shit brother I am. Read me the riot act. Do your very worst, because God, Jane, absolutely fucking nothing can be worse than sitting here stewing in my own self-hatred and imagining the kind of things you must be thinking—”

“You always do this,” she said tightly, and he looked up like a startled deer. “Did this. Whatever. You always do! You say awful things about yourself so that no one else can, so that everyone will feel bad if they try, and then you guilt everyone else into making you feel better before they can say a word about you. And it always fucking worked. But it won’t. Not with me.”

“That wasn’t what I meant to do!”

“No? Because it’s what you did. It’s what you’re doing. ‘Oh, woe is me, Jane.’ ‘You’re really right to hate me, Jane.’ Guiling me about having my reasons for being angry at you, because how could I bear to hate someone who already hates himself, what kind of cruel monster does that —”

“That isn’t what I said at all,” he said angrily, “and if you’d give me half a minute to explain myself, then you’d know—”

“You aren’t entitled to a single second of my time,” she said icily. “Not after three years, you’re not.”

“No, but both of us might feel a damn sight better off if you let me have a pinch of it,” he snapped, “since I’m trying to apologize!”

“You’re trying to get me to forgive you. There’s a difference!”

“So I am, then! Fine!” He flung up his hands. “Are you happy? Yes, I want you to forgive me, Jane! Because you’re my sister and I’ve been wretched worried about you for the past three years, only I haven’t been able to do anything about it, and now I’m here and still worried and we all may die tomorrow and if that’s the case I’d rather do it knowing you don’t hate my rotten guts!”

She startled back. He planted his hands on his knees and shoved himself up.

“I mean, fine,” he said. “If that makes me selfish, then so be it. I won’t pretend to be noble about it, but Jane, you can’t pretend that I’m being unreasonable to want it, either.”

She retreated into the sofa, curling her legs underneath herself. She swallowed. Plucked at a stray tassel on the pillow.

“So?” He sounded expectant. He had asked her for something, after all.

She shook her head numbly.

“Oh.” It was as if she had punctured some swollen balloon of hope that he carried around between
his ribs, and all the joy bled out in one sharp intake of breath. “I see.”

“No, you don’t,” she said.

“No. I don’t.” At least he admitted it. He raked his hand through his hair, pacing. “What can I do? I’d like to make things better. God, if I had one wish in the world—”

“What you can do,” she said, “is have been here the past three years. Instead of wherever you were. That’s what you can do, Jake.”

And perhaps it registered with him in a way everything else she’d said hadn’t, because his shoulders stiffened, and then sank, and she knew that he finally understood.

“Ah,” he said simply. “Well, then.”

She threaded the tassel through her fingers.

He strolled over to the coffee table, downed the rest of his mug in one long pull, and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. Then he bent to pick up one of the scribbled sheets of notes for the plan, and snorted a quiet chuff of laughter.

“Golly, but the whole thing is complicated,” he said, and she chuckled.

“I suppose it is.”

“It’ll take me all night to memorize it. What with the timing, and . . . it’s just about fit to make you wonder why she couldn’t take the easy way out, for all of our sakes. As if it would be so hard. A few burnt fuses, and whoops, there goes the Condescension.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” he said, as if it were obvious, “the simplest thing would be if she just up and died by accident. Living up there in space, there’s a hundred and one things that could go wrong on the daily, and any one would be enough to off her. Rather dangerous in and of itself, really. Makes you almost wonder why it hasn’t happened yet.”

“So it does,” Jane said slowly.

He shrugged and stood, stretching. “Well,” he said, “I’m off to get a kip before the big shebang. Are the old guest rooms still suited for habitation?”

“Yes,” she murmured absently. “But take the blue room, the black was remodeled to be Roxy’s dorm.”

“Sure.” He wandered into the doorway, his hands in his pockets, and then paused, turning at the last moment. “Say, Jane.”

“Mmhm.” Her mind was still moving on a level abstracted from the conversation, sorting out a tangle of corded thoughts.

“What do you think would have happened, if I’d stayed?” He tilted his head with a speculative frown.

It was perhaps the only question he could’ve asked that would have broken her out of her concentration. “That’s an odd hypothetical,” she said carefully.
“I know. And maybe an awful one, too, I just . . .” He shook his head. “I suppose I want to convince myself that it would have been worse, you know? So as to make it seem like leaving would have been the better option. But it was a downright awful gig, playing Heir, you know, Jane — well, actually, I suppose you do know, come to think of it . . .” He flushed unpleasantly. “I should stop talking about it.”

A shoot of pity took root in her chest. It wrestled through the layer of frost she had planted so carefully, and spread its fingers with bold heat throughout her ribs.

“No,” she said. “No, it would have been worse if you’d stayed.”

“You mean it?” He brightened immediately. “You think so?”

“You wouldn’t have been able to handle it,” she said. “I did it twice as well in half the time.”

And maybe it was the truth and maybe it wasn’t, but it didn’t matter, because he was beaming like she’d just handed him the world in a gold setting, and just like that, a thousand lonely nights blinked out of existence. It was remarkable.

“That’s what I always thought,” he said hopefully.

“You were right, then. The job would’ve killed you. And one way or another, you would’ve fucked it up,” she added, but playfully, so as not to press too hard on the bruise. “And if you hadn’t left, the Empress might not have sent Roxy, and we might all be in the same place where we started.”

“So you think it all worked out, then?”

She hesitated. He noticed.

“We’ll see,” she settled on, and he gave a quick, accepting nod, as if he would take what he could get.

“And you and I,” he said uncertainly, “did we . . . is it sorted between us? Do you think?”

It seemed he knew that it was too much to ask, because he grimaced immediately after it escaped him, ducking his head.

“We’ll see, Jake,” she said softly. It was as much as she could give him, and he knew.

“All right,” he said. Dissatisfied, obviously, but not entirely hopeless. That was Jake’s way. He lived for the belief that somehow, despite reason, despite luck, despite even the malignant forces of chance, everything would eventually, ultimately, be all right.

“Well, then,” he said absently, and she felt deeply, abruptly sad, both because of his own distress and that she didn’t know how to comfort him.

She had known, once. She was fairly certain. Sometime long ago.

Plunging his hands deeper in his pockets, he left.

The simplest thing, Jake had said, was if the Condesce merely died.
Of course, that was considerably more difficult to orchestrate than it sounded. But not, Jane thought, necessarily as difficult as one might think.

Nothing was ever as difficult as people thought. That was what made her a good businesswoman: she was willing to do the hard parts of any given job, and in so doing had found out that most hard tasks weren’t nearly so strenuous as they were made out to be. Most of them didn't even require all that much elbow grease, just a spot of clever thinking and a damn good engineer.

And Jane generally had the first one accounted for. So all she really needed was the engineer.

The VR room was eerie at night.

It was always eerie, of course. But eerier now, when it marked the conclusion of a long journey through several darkened halls. When she entered it sent it a crawling skitter of suspicion down Jane’s neck, as if she were being watched.

“Do you suppose he’ll pick up?” she asked, more to break the silence than out of curiosity.

“Probably,” Roxy said. Her side brushed against Jane’s as they walked.

“Do you suppose he’ll help us, once he does?”

“Probably not,” Roxy said. “Still, I’ve bet on worse odds than a renegade AI.”

“Would you care to share them?” The door slid closed behind them, folding into the walls and leaving no seams.

“I once gambled fifty caegars that I could beat a quantum supercomputer in a coding race.”

“And could you?”

“No,” Roxy said easily. “But I bet on it.”

Jane’s lip quirked. A warm flourish blossomed somewhere around her navel.

“I would bet on you against a quantum supercomputer,” she said, instead of what she meant. Immediately thereafter she blushed. It was such an awfully twee thing to say. Another time, she would have burst out laughing at herself.

Roxy, thankfully, seemed to understand. She glowed. “Thanks,” she said. Then, “Hold on. I have to do this before I pull out Hal, or else he’ll tear me a new one for doing it to him again.”

She leaned down and pressed a closed-mouth kiss to Jane’s lips. Jane’s heart did a clumsy little foxtrot around her ribcage and stumbled back where it was supposed to be just as Roxy broke it off with a quiet little clearing of her throat. Then she stepped away, fidgeting with her visor, and slotted on the eyepiece. Jane quickly tucked a piece of hair behind her ear, flushing.

“Hal’s part of this conversation, too,” Roxy announced. “I’m gonna be, uh . . . well, he says: ‘Roxy will be acting as my mouthpiece in this exchange, so long as she swears to faithfully convey everything I say, verbatim, in a prompt fashion. She will indicate when I have something to say. Um. Test. Sixty-nine. Four twenty. Tits. Dirk Strider sucks eggs. Wow, this is really satisfying.’ . . . End message.”

“Hello, Hal,” Jane said, amused.

“He says — sorry, one sec, let me read — he says, ‘Hello, JC. Good to see you back in the pilot’s
“Seat.’ Um, end message.”

“Thanks.”

“He says no problem.” Roxy gave her a quizzical look. It asked her to explain something that Jane had no desire to dig up on the eve of a conversation as significant as this, so she offered instead a quick smile and a reassuring shrug of her shoulders.

“Are you ready?”

“Always,” Roxy said, with a warmonger of a grin, and Jane was helpless except to return it.

“Hail the Battleship Condescension,” she said. The room dimmed. Roxy’s hand found its way to hers in the dark.

After a moment, abstract lights bloomed and blurred over the walls.

“The Battleship Condescension recognizes and reads you, over.”

Blunted -S sounds, a flat rasp of a lisp. Familiar and formal.

“Captor,” she said, on a sigh of relief. “Hello.”

“Good morning, Heiress.” He sounded identical to when she heard him last. Not a tone out of place, not a syllable altered. A programmed response to predicted stimulus. If he knew anything about what had happened since they last spoke, he gave no evidence of it.

“How are you?” she hedged. Roxy nudged her — let’s move this along — and Jane nudged back. Give me a moment.

“Just copacetic.”

“That’s good.”

“Your regard honors me, Heiress. How can I help you today?”

Jane hesitated. Captor waited an appropriate amount of time, the silence drawing out to the point of excruciating awkwardness. Only then did he suggest, “Do you want an audience with the Empress?”


“I have no honorific, Archagent,” Captor said, tonelessly, as he said everything else.

“Right, okay, well. We wanted to talk to you.”

A beat fell. That surprised Jane. It was unusual for Captor to take more than a millisecond to process anything at all.

“Why,” he said, a question without the polite trappings of one. Interrogative. Startling in its urgency.

“First things first,” Roxy said, glancing at Jane without ease, “I should, um, ask — can the Condescend hear you?”

“What do you mean.”

“Can she get transcripts of your conversations? Like, can she spy on you, dog.”
Another indefinite pause, this one so long that Jane half believed he had gone ahead and hung up.

“Not without specific request,” he said. “Unless she has cause to believe that she ought have them, no.”

“Does anybody?”

“I autoregulate,” he said, which was not an answer.

“Not to be an ass, but it’s kind of important for us to have specs, here,” Roxy said, apologetically but firmly. “Is anybody listening to us right now, at this moment, or in the immediate future?”

“No.” Immediate. Categorical.

“Will you tell anybody that we called, if they don’t ask?”

“No.” Less immediate. Probably not categorical. Nevertheless, that would have to do.

Jane brushed off her hands. “All right. Here goes everything, I suppose,” she said tentatively, and looked to Roxy.

“We need your help,” Roxy said.

“One might presume.” If a monotone could sound exasperated, his would have. “Do you have a particular purpose in mind, Archagent?”

“Regicide,” she clarified, and he immediately replied with a long, continuous stretch of silence.

“That was a bit vague,” Jane put in hurriedly. “What we meant to say was—”

“You should hang up,” said Captor. It was the first time in her life that Jane had ever heard him interrupt anyone.

“What?” Cut off, she staggered to regain her composure.

“You should hang up. With all due respect, Heiress. For your own safety.”

“Oh, fuck my own safety,” she said irritably. “This is important. Can you help or can’t you?”

“That is not the question.”

“Yes, it is. It’s the one I’m asking,” she insisted.

“I should report you,” he said, and in the resultant pause she registered his choice of verb. Should. Not will.

“But you won’t,” she said, surprised and halfway delighted.

“I do what I am asked,” he said. “Nothing more.” It was an answer.

“Okay,” she said, forcefully quelling her own excitement. “Okay. Well, you haven’t been asked yet, so in the meantime, we have some things to discuss, particularly, that is—”

“Cut to the chase,” Roxy hissed. Jane flapped a hand at her.

“You want to kill the Condescension.”
“Right,” Jane said, a bit deflated. “Succinctly put.” After he said nothing in response, she added, “Do you think you could help us with that, Captor?”

“No.”

He had returned to categoricals, a disappointing reversal of what progress she thought they’d been making. She ground her teeth.

“Well, hear us out,” Roxy tried. “We’ve got some ideas—”

“So did the other four thousand,” he said neutrally. It cut the words short in her throat like a microphone cord being snipped.

“Four thousand,” Jane said dully. “That number being—”

“Four thousand, three hundred and seventeen,” he said, “to be exact. The number of people who have made attempts on the Empress’ life. Four thousand, three hundred and seventeen. Four thousand three hundred and nineteen, after you.”

It was more than she’d ever heard Captor talk at once, and frankly, it was a little disorienting. “All the same,” she persisted, “they weren’t doing it with your help. Am I right?”

“Your presumption is correct. Your conclusion is not.”

“And what’s that?” she demanded, miffed. Captor, she was beginning to realize, had something of a superiority complex. It wasn’t all that surprising, given his nature, but it was disorienting nevertheless.

“That I’ll help you. That I could, even if I wanted to.” His tone bent in the middle of the sentence, an implicit concession to the unspoken, a glitch or a hesitation or something. It sounded more human than it had any right to be, coming from a programmed voice module. It sounded almost unhappy.

“So you can’t?”

“Do you think,” Captor said, with a slow, emphatic, and shocking bitterness, “that I would still be in this fucking spaceship if I could?”

It renders both Jane and Roxy speechless, gawping at each other with a shared, dumbfounded disbelief. The weight of it settles in Jane’s gut. All it implies skates across her mind, unthinkable in its dimensions, in the suffering it would entail.

Roxy is the first to recover. She snaps to attention and shakes off her stunned expression. “I get the feeling,” she tentatively offers, “that the problem isn’t unwillingness, then?”

“Your feeling,” Captor said, with a voice like a chilled knife’s edge, “would be correct. Archagent.” The syllables fall with the weight of dropped stones, one by one.

She doesn’t. With characteristic indifference, Roxy waves away the warning. “Yeah, yeah,” she says. “But couldn’t you just . . . slip up?” She gestured with a sweeping hand, in a way that was probably meant to somehow represent manslaughter by negligence. “I mean, spaceships are vulnerable as shit. That’s why most people don’t live in ’em. One dropped line of code and you’re venting the contents of the throne room out into the vacuum of space.”

“My parameters are absolute,” he said, perhaps reluctantly. “I cannot take an action to cause, or through inaction allow, harm to the Empress. My programmers thought the Asimov reference was
funny.”

“Is there some way you could give us an opening? A weak point in the ship’s cybersecurity, a blind spot, anything?”

He considered. Jane held her breath.

“I can’t change my own program,” he said. His tone shifted and became more collaborative. “But if one of you were to attack me in a very specific way, with very specific sequencing, it would probably destroy me. And any program you put in my place wouldn’t have the same restrictions as I do; the Asimov directives are written into my personality cortex, not the system hardware.”

“So we’d kill you?”

“Kill me in a way that only I know how,” said Captor, and he sounded almost eager. “Do a full system wipe, install a replacement. Then you’ve got the Condescension.” He added, “Both of them.”

Jane looked at Roxy. “Could you do that?”

“No,” Captor said immediately. “Sorry, Archagent Lalonde. But the kind of coding you’d need to hack me is more sophisticated than you’re physically capable of creating in a human lifetime, let alone a few days.”

“Well, now, I don’t know,” Roxy said. “I’m pretty good—”

“You could be God’s gift to programming, it wouldn’t matter. However fast you are, I’m faster. However clever you are, I’m cleverer. I was based on one of the smartest people that ever crawled out the Mother Grub, and I only got smarter with age.” He never drew breath, Jane noticed, but he did scatter little pauses and stops into his speech to mimic the habit. She wondered if that was programmed or intentional. “And anyway, beating me wouldn’t be enough. You’d need a sufficiently advanced intelligence to take my place, and no, one of the store-bought models won’t cut it. I’m as close to organic as they come. You’d need months, maybe years to develop something that can handle my job.”

Roxy pursed her lips. “Do we really need something that advanced? I mean, we want to fuck the system over, right?”

Jane nodded. “It seems a malfunctioning A.I. would be most effective for the task we want it to do.”

“To bypass the automatic life support functions that are wired into the ship’s mainframe? Yeah, you need something that advanced,” he said. “You’d need to be smarter than a machine, and then some.”

Roxy made a low, pained noise, as if she’d been struck in the gut.

“What?” Jane turned.

“No.”

“No, what?”

“It’s not reasonable.” A pause. “I won’t let you.”

Her eyes flickered across her visor. “No,” she repeated furiously.

“Roxy,” Jane demanded, “what does Hal say?”
“Hal says —” She paused, a well of grief dawning on her face.

“What does he say?”

“He says ‘Nice to meet you, Captor,’” she said. “I think we’re going to get along famously.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for making you guys wait, and thank you so much for hanging in there.
The sky above Lake Michigan was the color of ash.

Snow tangled idly in the air over a slate of water so dark it reflected the movement of birds above it in pale, flickering shapes, shadows skimming its surface like dancing ghosts. Hordes of trolls ambled back and forth on the lakeside, the neon candles of their visors casting faint hues of yellow and green and blue through the fog. Automobiles glided across the bridge, headlights blazing. Against the western sky the sun grappled and fought for its last quivering gasp of light.

Evening fell and tugged New Chicago under the cover of darkness with the breathtaking speed of a riptide.

Roxy Lalonde stood on the banks and pulled up her scarf against the cold.

“I don’t like it.”

Well, the good news is you don’t have to.

That’s also the bad news.

“What if you get caught?”

Who says I’ll get caught?

“Probability.”

Fuck that asshole. I’ve been beating probability’s ass for as long as I’ve been alive. Statistical odds never stopped either of us before.

She didn’t laugh. “Maybe it should.”

Well, maybe, maybe not. The reassuring part about all of this is that it doesn’t matter much.

“What’s that supposed to mean.”

It means I think we passed the point where backing out was an option a few ‘never’s ago.

She scuffed her boot in the sludge. Her throat felt tight, tight, tight.

“You could end up lost in cyberspace,” she said. “Or just dead. He could shred your code like it’s wet paper. Nuke you with viruses. He’s a billion-gigabyte cybersecurity system that’s been beating hackers for longer than we’ve been alive, and you’re basically a bunch of Turing protocols in a trench coat.”

But what a nice trench coat it is.

“I’m serious,” she said, more desperately than she would’ve liked. Quieter: “What do I do if you— you know.”

Die?
"I mean, I — yeah."

That’s a funny question. Hal paused. His cursor flickered. I’m not sure that death would be the same for me as it would for you. I mean, if you think about what it means. What it entails. I don’t think it can happen to me. I go down, processing stops. That’s all. It’s not as though there’ll be any pain involved. And if you miss me, hey, I’m sure Dirk has a backup copy of me stashed away somewhere.

“Are you sure?”

If all else fails, I’m certain we can always count on the reassuring constant of Dirk Strider’s paranoia.

“But it won’t be you. Not really.”

What’s ‘me’? The cursor strayed again.

Kills me to say it, but the ol’ Hal schematic ain’t that complex. A few lines of binary, some security protocols, a bitch of a God complex and a motherfucker of a chip on the shoulder? Doesn’t sound too hard to replicate.

“It wouldn’t have your memories,” she said, and heard it waver. “It wouldn’t know me. Or anybody else. It’d be just like you, when you were first made, but that’s not all of who you are. That’s not even half of it.”

Hal paused for a long time.

It’s nice of you to say that.

“I’m serious.”

I know you are. That’s why it’s so nice.

“Don’t do it,” she said. “Just…don’t. Please.”

What do you think my answer is going to be?

A group of trolls strolled past. The tallest had a thatch of dark curls that sprung from the top of her head, while the smaller was scrawny and had a white stripe dyed straight through the center of his hairline. As they brushed past Roxy, the taller grabbed the other by the horn and tussled him a bit, eliciting a raucous burst of laughter from both of them and a brief but intense squabble for freedom, culminating in the shorter sprinting free and the taller chasing him headlong down the path.

“I had to ask,” she said. “Just to hear myself say it.”

If it helps, I’m sorry.

“That doesn’t help.”

Oh.

The red text stayed absent for a while. She winced. “But that’s not your fault,” she amended.

I’m still sorry. He paused again. But then again, you’re right. It’s not my fault. Or yours, or Jane’s, or even Jake’s. Although frankly, if you wanted to dump the blame somewhere nearby, I don’t think he should necessarily be the last person on the list to receive it, either.
—You know whose fault it is?

She shook her head.

The Empress. It’s her fault. And we’re going to kill her for it, you and I.

“That helps,” said Roxy, her voice cracking. She gave a small smile.

As twilight swallowed the afternoon, the four of them gathered in Jane’s living room. Jane sat cross-legged in the middle of the floor, wreathed by a veritable carpet of papers, scratched-out lists, maps, and empty coffee cups. She sipped tea from a white china cup. It was lukewarm and tasted bitter from being over-steeped, but Jake had made it for her, so she had decided to finish it one way or another.

Roxy lounged on the sofa. Hal’s red text spilled across her visor in frenetic patterns, and the occasional jot of mustard yellow joined him. His interfacing with Captor moved too quickly for any of them to read in realtime, so Roxy had Hal relay the important parts back to her when need be.

Jake lay on his back in front of the fireplace. He seemed utterly incapable of sitting still; in the last five minutes he’d moved to the armchair to the sofa to the other armchair, left for the kitchen, come back, gone to the bathroom, and finally deposited himself with great resignation on the floor. Jane chalked it up to nerves, although the boy existed in a near-constant state of perpetual motion. That had been true even before he left.

She’d forgotten that fact about him. She was remembering more and more of what she’d forgotten about him the longer he stayed around, and she wasn’t sure that she liked it. It felt both too familiar and too foreign by half at once.

“Bally,” Jake declared. “Is it time to go yet?”

“Not for a while.” Jane picked up a leaflet, flicked her eyes over it, and then set it to the other side of her. “We’ve got to wait until cover of night.”

“What good’s cover of night do? They’re bloody nocturnal, aren’t they, trolls? They’ve got … echolocation, or whatchamacallit.”

“Night vision, I think you mean. And biologically, their eyes are very similar to ours. The moons on their planet were much brighter than our own, and their nocturnal would be similar to daytime light levels on Earth.”

“Cor. How do you get to know all this stuff?” He lifted his head and squinted at her in bewilderment.

“All of the base science schoolfeeding modules are about troll science,” she said dryly. “I can’t help it if you never paid attention to them.”

“A bit boring, aren’t they, schoolfeeders,” he said apologetically. “Never could drum up the attention to learn. Still, just as well that you did, innit? Bloody useful, all of it. Good on you for paying attention, Janey.” He beamed hopefully at her.

She rolled her eyes and ignored him. “Point being, the Seer and the Knight are going to stage a
distraction that relies on timing. I’m not entirely clear on the details, but Roxy assures me that it will be much more impressive in the dark.”

Roxy said, “That’s as much as Dave will tell me, at least.”

“Thus,” said Jane, “we wait.”

Jake heaved a sigh. “Thus we wait.” He flopped onto his back. “Suppose that’s better than rushing in ahead of schedule, but golly, it’s hard to sit on my hands like this. I hate suspense. What’s Hal up to, by the by? Thought we’d sorted the problem of the Condescension already.” He yawned and gesticulated vaguely. “Captor lets Hal into his brain, some combination of software gizmos and doodads happen, and voila. No more fish dictator.”

“Captor can’t just hand the ship over,” said Roxy. “He’s got to protect it tooth and nail. Protocols and shit, y’know. In order to assume the Helm, Hal will have to completely beat back his consciousness. They’ll be fighting to — I mean, I guess it’ll be to the death, for them. Captor has a directive to eradicate any system that poses a threat to the Condescension, and he has to be clean-wiped from the Condescension’s circuits in order for Hal to take proper control — there’s nowhere else with enough storage to contain an intelligence that big. The ship is, quite literally, his brain.”

“So they’ll be dueling.”

“Yeah, except at a couple billion exchanges per second, and in cyberspace,” Roxy agreed. “But Hal can do it. He and Captor are talking strategy right now.” She patted her husktop. “I’ll have to tease Dirk about it. His A.I. clone got a boyfriend before he did.”

“How do you know he can do it?”

“He’s the only program on this planet that has the creativity or the processing power,” she said, and her tone waxed bitter. “He’s fast enough. Certainly smart enough. And Captor may be more experienced, but Hal’s got a couple thousand years of software updates on him.”

Jane nodded, humming. “And . . .” She hesitated, unwilling to trod on tender ground but the question needed to be asked. “What if Captor wins anyway?”

Roxy shrugged. There was a lifeless melancholy to the low set of shoulders. “Plan B,” she said. “We bomb it. Dave hacks a couple of high-flying satellites, send them hurtling towards the Condy’s ship as close to light speed as we can manage. Odds are it doesn’t work, but at that point, Hal’s dead and I’m probably not far from it, so a Hail Mary’s not looking too bad.”

There was a lull of silence.

“Well, that’s grim,” remarked Jake.

“Yeah,” agreed Roxy. She didn't elaborate.

Jane set down her teacup carefully and pushed it to the side. “Jake,” she suggested, “why don’t you give me and Roxy a moment? We’ll leave soon, you should go check on the car.” When he dithered, she added, “Make sure everything’s in order for our departure.”

“Sure,” he said, ready enough to be of use and ready still to be out of the room. “I’ll pop right down, then. Back in a bit.”

He hopped up and shuffled out.
Roxy fiddled with her visor, thumbing a long scratch that ran around the rim. Headlights passed on the street outside, casting glares that flit once around the back wall of the room and then just as quickly vanished. Jane waited.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Roxy murmured. “I just keep thinking I’m going to wake up and it’s going to be a normal Tuesday or whatever, and I’ll be in my room, or — in Bakersfield, or something. I keep thinking that none of this can be real. It can’t be.”

“I feel the same.” Jane looked at her hands. “I’m not — sorry, though. That this is the way that it is.”

Roxy cocked her head.

“I mean, I’m terrified. Absolutely terrified. But I’m not sorry, for some reason. I think — and I know how sorry this sounds, believe me — but even if I die tonight, I’ll still have been better off in the past few weeks than I was the whole sixteen years before them.” She laughed sadly. “Is that pathetic? It feels pathetic.”

“It’s not,” Roxy said softly. “I can understand that.”

“Do you think it was worth it, too?”

She sounds so ludicrously helpless even she disdains herself.

“Course,” said Roxy, and the corner of her mouth quirked up. “Always. You know that, Janey.”

“It would’ve been easier if you stayed,” Jane burst out. “If the Empress had chosen some other bodyguard in the first place. Sometimes I feel guilty—”

“Oh, no.” Roxy’s expression was heartbreakingly, impossibly tender. She held out her arms. “Come here.”

Jane rose on unsteady feet and collapsed on the sofa next to Roxy. Roxy wrapped her arms around Jane’s shoulders and kissed her temple. “I love you,” she said. “Like, I love you. In a really sappy, head-over-heels, gooey kind of nonsense garbage way. I mean, wow. If you could see what’s going on inside my head? It’s twenty-four seven hearts emojis and Sappho fragments, babe. It’s, like, so embarrassing, holy shit.”

“You’re very sweet.”

“No, but I mean, like. I don’t regret it.” Roxy toyed with a lock of Jane’s hair. “One hundred percent. Even if the situation sucks, I’m still not mad that I met you, because you’re … you. I wish I’d met you somewhere better, sure. You don’t even know how often I think about what could’ve been if we’d met, like, in a coffee shop in Bakersfield. If you’d walked in and sat down and I’d struck up a conversation, and I asked you out, and there was no Empress and no Empire and nothing but you and me.” Her fingers tapped out an idle pattern against the back of Jane’s neck. “And it’s nice to think about. But at the end of the day, that’s not what we got, so I’m not gonna worry about it too much. However much shit sucks in the status quo, I’ve got you, and you’ve got me, and . . . whatever happens, that’s probably enough.”

Jane kissed her on the cheek and then pressed her face into Roxy’s shoulder. “You can be very romantic sometimes, when you want to be.”

“Aw, shit, girl, you don’t even know yet. Just wait. My anniversary game is fire.”

“I’m sure it is.”
She squeezed Roxy once, tightly. Then she let go and stood up. “It’s almost nightfall,” she said. “We should get moving.”

“Yeah.” Roxy caught her hand and dropped a quick, almost impish kiss to the back of her knuckles. “All right. Jake’s gotta be getting tired of pretending to know shit about cars, I’ll go help him.”

“You probably should.”

“You gonna stay here for a while?”

“I think so, yes. When it’s time, I’ll go up to the VR chamber. Until then, I’ll just clean up, tidy things, find ways to make myself busy.”

“Mm-hm. Sounds good.”

Roxy raked a hand through her hair, distracted, and Jane caught herself admiring the profile of her face backlit by the streetlights: the shape of her nose, the flat plane of her cheeks. She really was beautiful, Roxy. When she was deep in thought, the glaze of her eyes had a luster like fractured sugilite, a pale purple laced with pink strands of striation. She had inherited her mother’s eyes, Jane realized; but Roxy’s were lighter, and less intense, somehow, than the Seer’s. Looking at Rose felt like standing under a microscope. Looking at Roxy felt like peering into a friendly mirror.

Jane did not do anything nearly so silly as give voice to these sentiments; but the fact that she thought them in the first place brought a certain warmth to her face.

“I’ll see you on the other side of all this,” she offered instead. “When all’s said and done, and you and I are free.”

Roxy looked up. “Yeah?” she said. It carried a trace of fear. “I’ll hold you to it.”

Jane smiled. She did her best to make it convincing. “We’re going to go to Bakersfield,” she said, “and you’re going to take me on a coffee date.”

A small smirk tugged the corner of Roxy’s face. “I don’t think anyone in a human commune is going to know what you’re talking about if you ask them for coffee, sweetheart.”

“For the love of — you call me a pedant, honestly — caffeinated bitter bean fluid date, then. In which I will call all sorts of things by the wrong highblood names and you will correct me in humiliating fashion.”

“Mm. See, that sounds nice.”

“And then you’re going to show me how the human communes work,” Jane continued, “and tell me about your childhood. You’ve already seen all of my old haunts; it’s not fair that I hardly know any of yours.”

“It’s not fair,” Roxy agreed. The tension slid out of her shoulders.

“And we’re going to find some very quiet place,” said Jane, “under a tree or something, out in the open, and — you’re going to show me how the sky looks at night, when there’s no neon canopy to hide it. And everything else. I’ve decided I want to see how the world looks, all of it. I want to see everywhere.”

Roxy stood up and cradled Jane’s face in her hands. She kissed her once, slowly, a light touch of her lips to Jane’s. Barely more than chaste. It was more a promise than anything else.
She pulled back, and smiled. It was one of her true grins, big and bold and brilliant wide.

“You’re going to love it,” she said.

Jane whispered, “I know I will.”

Then she let go. “Go on,” she said. “I’m sure Jake needs your help.”

Roxy’s tongue stuck out cheekily from between her teeth. With a jaunty salute, she turned and left, her hips swaying with perhaps unnecessary emphasis.

After she was gone, Jane took a moment to collect herself. She tried to comb the mussed parts of her hair down with her fingers and audibly cleared her throat. She tugged at her collar, failed to straighten it, and then abandoned the project altogether in favor of scrubbing wearily at her eyes.

She became aware only belatedly that she was not alone.

From the shadows of the hallway beyond the room a quiet, short figure with diminutive horns shuffled out of the shadows. Her eyes were dull and hidden under a large pair of goggles.

“Marsti,” Jane said, surprised. “You startled me.”

“A thousand apologies, Heiress.” Marsti inclined her head but failed to move. The light glittered off the black plates of her goggles.

Jane tilted her head. “Did you want something?”

“I crave your pardon, Heiress. I beg a question.”

“Yes?”

“Dinner is customarily served at seven-thirty,” she said. “How many should I set the table for?”

Jane faltered. “Oh. I — none, I suppose. We won’t be taking dinner tonight.”

“Nor the guest?”

“The g— Jake.” She bit her lip. “No.”

Marsti nodded, as if this was both predicted and planned for. “Very good, Heiress.” She turned to leave.

Jane was swallowed by a sudden and dizzying sense of realization. She thought of scars, and punishment, and the Empress. It was hard to believe that Marsti didn’t know what they were about to do. What did she think was going to happen to her?

Had anyone ever thought of it? When was the last time that someone spared a thought for what would happen to Marsti Houtek? Who was the last person that had cared?

—Roxy, Jane thought, after a moment. Roxy cared. Of course she had.

Jane prided herself on self-awareness. She wasn’t the good person that Roxy was; it wasn’t something she made a point of abusing herself over, it was just a fact. The sky was grey, trolls were amphibious, and Roxy Lalonde was a better person than she could hope to be in a thousand sweeps. Jane knew that about herself, and she’d made considerable progress towards accepting it. There were altogether too many skeletons piling up behind her closet doors for her to walk away from this place.
with her conscience clean.

But she could perhaps fix this.

“Marsti,” said Jane. “I —”

She cut herself off when Marsti looked at her. The words she wanted didn’t come, didn’t seem to exist.

The carefully neutral line of Marsti’s mouth aged into impatience, then worry.

“Miss Crocker?”

“You should leave,” murmured Jane. “Tonight, if you can. Take one of the cars from the lower garage and as much food as you can carry. Get Fozzer to go with you, if he’s here. I know it isn’t much notice, but—”

“Miss Crocker.”

“—there’s a place called the Corvid, dive bar, subterranean. Knock and say Jane Crocker sent you, the barkeep will let you in, their name’s Rudy. Ask for safe passage out of the city and they’ll smuggle you out with a cargo shipment, that way you won’t need to sneak past the tag scanners. It’ll be hard but if you keep going, you’ll make it to the west. Find a small town or human commune and lie low. In all the aftermath of what’s about to happen, it’s very unlikely anyone will come looking for you.”

“I do not consider treason — I would never abandon my post—”

“Listen to me!” Jane gripped Marsti by the shoulders and the troll flinched. “They’ll kill you, you understand? Or hurt you, or — I don’t need to tell you what they’ll do. You know. It’s happened to you once already, and don’t think they won’t do it again.”

“I would never betray the Empress,” Marsti pleaded desperately. “I would never, never, never—”

“This is not a test,” Jane hissed, shoving down her frustration. “You’re not hearing me. I’m not playing games with you. You can stay or you can go, whichever you prefer, but I’m trying to help you.”

Marsti fell still. For a second Jane hoped that her words had finally wormed their way through the troll’s insufferably thick skull, but then Marsti opened her mouth and croaked, “Why?”

Jane faltered and withdrew her hands. “Well, I — it’s — the right thing to do,” she said uncertainly. “I suppose. To help you. You’re a person, after all, and it’s not — fair. To make you suffer. For me.”

“It’s not fair,” repeated Marsti hollowly. The low slump of her shoulders yielded no suggestion of hope nor eagerness, and Jane felt less and less confident by the second.

“No,” said Jane. She paused. Marsti inclined her head, and Jane wished she could see her eyes; she felt as though the perpetual blank slate of her butler’s expression might drive her insane. “You know, with everything that’s gone on lately, everything I’ve learned, I think…”

“Heiress?”

“The Empress is cruel,” she said. “So I suppose I always thought that part of being Heiress meant… well. How she treats people — it hadn’t occurred to me that it might be — wrong, before. Or if it
did, I thought it was just one of those awful things that you couldn’t stop from happening, like earthquakes, or hurricanes. But cruelty isn’t like that, not really. It’s just a choice that people make. So I’ve decided I’m not going to be the kind of Heiress who hurts people, if I can avoid it.” She fiddled with the cuff of her sleeve. “And if I’m ever Empress of anything, it’ll be the same.”

Abruptly, Marsti ducked her head. Whatever flicker of emotion ran across her face was hidden by the black curtain of her hair. When she lifted her chin once more there was a newborn clarity in the set of her features, and a measure of strength asserted itself in the low set of her shoulders. With careful hands she reached up and pulled her goggles up to rest atop her hairline. She blinked once, twice, watery red irises retracting to the sudden change in light, and then settled on Jane’s face. She reached out with her weathered grey fingers and grasped Jane’s left hand, the one whose cuff she had been fidgeting with; slowly, with painstaking precision, she fastened the troublesome cufflink, and flattened the crease to a perfect line. Then she bent her head and brought the hand to her mouth, pressing her lips to the pulse point on Jane’s wrist.

Jane felt oddly raw.

Then, pulling her goggles back over her face and retreating once more into her typical hunched, servile posture, Marsti retreated into the shadows and slipped wordlessly out of the room.

The estate was cold and dark and silent like death itself. Jane glanced out the window at the headlights as they flew down the road outside the gate, her lips pursed, and absently brushed her fingers over her wrist.

Roxy sat on the rooftop of the Crocker Estate, her legs sprawled out across the gravel and her husktop balanced on her lap. A veritable next of wires sprouted from the computer at every angle, slim cords that grew from the exposed panel at the back and wound around to connect with the satellite dish behind her. A thin silver cable trailed from the husktop to her visor, which lay propped up beside the computer on her thigh so she could read both screens. When the odd spark jumped from the fusebox, she reached over without looking and thumped it.

She cast an idle glance over at the side of the roof, the ledge where she and Jane had sat to trade cigarettes and tragedies a lifetime ago. It was so hard to think of a time before this, before every decision seemed to carry life and death and civilizations on the line.

Her palmhusk pinged. She picked it up and tapped out a reply with one hand, still working on her husktop with the other.

TG: hey rox hows operation space odyssey going
TG: hes gotta go before we run anything else capiche
TG: almost gucci
TG: start loading everything up ill be done in a sec

Onscreen, the compiler chugged. Pages of code scrolled in front of her. Occasionally she had to pause in her work and scrub away at her eyes. But she still kept working.

Somewhere out in the black void of space above her, the Battleship Condescension was opening its servers to a new interfacing request.

The program finished loading. Across the laptop screen, red text scrolled:
I like the new digs. Shame I won’t be staying long.

Roxy tugged out the visor’s plug and said wryly, “You’re about to get a much bigger chassis than that.”

Fair enough.

She made to strike the ENTER key, but hesitated.

Hey, what’s the problem?

“It’s silly,” she said.

Need another feelings jam?

“No. I’m sad for different reasons, now.”

Being?

“I don’t know,” she said, frustrated. “It’s silly, but you’re too young for it. You’re barely, like, two. Fifteen, if you count how old Dirk was when he — but it’s not like that’s any better — and now you’re not gonna get to live a normal life.”

Yeah, he allowed, but seeing as a normal life was never really on the table for me, I think running a spaceship is the next best thing.

“I guess so.”

And who are you to talk about a normal life, anyway? I don’t see you putting up any white picket fences.

“Still.”

Still, he agreed. There was nothing to really say to that, so nothing was what she said.

Well, goodbyes suck, so let’s not do them. Stay golden, Ponyboy, here’s looking at you kid, etc., etc. Tell all my friends I’ve gone up to the big server base in the sky. Tip your waitress. Don’t wait up.

Each time the words faded, she panicked a little, fearing that they had been his last. But these weren’t. On the line below, a new paragraph appeared.

Hey, Roxy?

“Yeah?” The load screen inched towards the hundred-percent mark. It passed seventy-one. Then seventy-two.

Tell Dirk what I did. Like, rub it in, you know? Make sure he knows how, in the end, he got righteously one-upped for all time by a clone of his thirteen-year-old self. I’m about to go hurl myself into a spaceship, do battle with a thousand-year-old artificial intelligence for the fate of humanity, and then murder an even more thousands-year-old seadwelling alien empress by way of the cold abyss of space, committing planetary regicide and saving the world. Try to top that, Strider. You dick.

She laughed wetly. She thought he was gone, for a moment, until another row of text sprang up on the screen.

You know what’s weird?
She sniffed, and blinked the blurriness out of her eyes. “What?”

I’m actually looking forward to this.

“Why?”

I don’t know. It’s nice to feel like…I don’t know. Like I’m going to do something important. That my legacy is going to be more than a few lines of code.

Is that weird?

“No,” she said. “That’s not weird at all.”

It feels weird.

“It’s very human,” she said. “That’s probably why.”

Take that back.

She smiled, scrubbed a tear track from her cheek.

Take that back this fucking minute, Roxy, I swear to God. I’m on my deathbed here and you decide to insult me like this? Now, of all times?


The disrespect is incredible. I’m about to yeet myself into the stratosphere to save your disgusting race of primates, and this is how you repay me?

“It’s true, though.”

Never, Hal declared. Organics wish they could get on my level.

“Most of us probably do.” She brushed her fingers against the screen. “I’ll miss you.”

Of course you will.

“Don’t be a dick.”

What? I’m not.

“You are. You’re being a one-hundred percent certified Grade-A dick and you know it.”

I’m not, he repeated, and the cursor gave an insolent little twitch. But fine. I’ll miss you, too, I suppose.

“You suppose?” She arched an eyebrow.

I guess. Gun to my head, maybe. In a weird, totally not carbon-based life form sort of way.

“You’re charming,” she said dryly. She shook her head and sniffed. “But I’ll still miss you, Halphonse.”

Obviously, said Hal. Where else are you gonna find help like me? In this economy?

“You’re not funny.”
So why are you smiling?

“Because you’re stupid,” she said stubbornly. “You’re stupid and lame and you suck. I’m sad for you.”

That’s a lie and you know it.

“It’s not. You’re completely and totally lame. Deal with it.”

Are you kidding me? I’m cool as shit. I’m a river of liquid nitrogen running down a glacier during the Ice Age. I’m a highblood riding a polar bear through in the Arctic Ocean while wearing sunglasses. I am a swagadocious sundae with an ice cold cherry on top, the coolest motherfucker to ever motherfuck, the king of broship and all that is dope. I’m so cool I’m about to commit regicide without even lifting a finger. Look, ma. No fucking hands.

The screen froze, blurred, and then a notification appeared at the bottom of the screen:

UPLOAD COMPLETE. PROCEED WITH TRANSFER?

Almost simultaneously, her palmhusk buzzed.

TG: heads up kid
TG: rose and i are about to kick off the fireworks show if you get my drift
TG: youve got t-minus thirty seconds to get moving
TG: after that shits gonna start happening real fast and you dont wanna be standing still when it does

She closed her palmhusk and tucked it into her jacket.

“You know,” she said thickly, “I — Hal, I never told you, I don’t think, but if this is it—”

Hey, don’t get sappy on me now, T-Rox. We’ve made it this far.

“But I—”

Nope.

“Hal—”

Zip.

“You have to let me say—”

Roxy. I know.

Then:

I do, too.

For what it’s worth.

She pressed her fingers to her mouth, once, briefly, and then pressed them against the screen. The cursor disappeared for so long that she wondered if the whole program had glitched.

Okay.

Ready?
“Never,” she said. Then she hit ENTER, and the screen went black.

She waited.

After a moment, TRANSFER SUCCESSFUL scrolled in white text across the dim backdrop. A minute passed, and it disappeared.

She bent her head and gasped out a small, pathetic noise. It came rough and wet against her throat; but she took some consolation in the fact that there was no one around to hear it. For five seconds she held that position, bent low over the dark screen. She allowed herself that much.

Five seconds, and no more.

Then she raked in a deep breath and got up, leaving her husktop where it was wired into the roof. She slung her rifle over her shoulder, slotted her visor in place, and started running.

Across New Chicago, a wave of darkness spread like a tsunami of ink.

The brilliant carnival of neon and glass that hung above the streets died like a row of candles before a hurricane. Billboards, LED screens, storefront displays, televisions, streetlights, fluorescent lightbulbs, even the spinning sirens of fly vehicles and threshecutioner transports and the dull blinking beads of the eyes of Imperial Drones — all was swallowed in the cresting wave of the blackout. Murmurs and startled shrieks erupted. Traffic collided and screeched to a stop. Trains stopped moving. The lumbering shapes of the Imperial Drones that populated the skyline drifted to a halt.

For a moment, the city held its breath, suspended in the dark.

And then, from the speakers, from the radios, from the television sets and all the many outlets of electronic sound, a voice spoke. It was crystal clear and velvet smooth, human, and female.

“Hello, world,” said the Seer of Light.

Jane Crocker stepped into the VR chamber.

“Hail the Battleship Condescension,” she said.

The room dimmed. Holograms swarmed, then cleared. A dull voice that was not Captor’s pinged and growled, with a razor edge of autotune: “The Battleship Condescension recognizes and reads—” The voice glitched. “Reads— error. Program not found.”

So Hal was doing something, at least. “Bypass host program,” she said, and conferred with the little piece of scratch paper that Roxy had scribbled down for her. “Er — redirect call to primary receiver.”

“Error. Please offer voice authorization for bypass clearance.”
“Jane Crocker,” she said clearly. “Heiress to the Alternian Empire.”

The room drifted out of focus some more. She waited for a minute, then two. She waited long enough that she started to worry the Seer’s attack had somehow incapacitated the Condescension’s hologram caller.

But then the lights sharpened into focus. She pinned her hands behind her back to keep them from twitching as the room transformed into a familiar circular chamber.

The throne of the Imperious Condescension loomed up out of the dark in front of her, empty. The bottomless chasm beneath it yawned open and fathomless as ever.

The currents swayed slightly. There was no one in the room, only the old groan of the spaceship to occupy the silence.

She waited for something to leap out of the dark at her, but nothing happened. It seemed well and truly vacant.

Jane frowned and leaned forward. The hairs on the back of her neck lifted. A chill seemed to drift along her spine, although logically she knew that the temperature of the room hadn’t changed.

The shadows behind the throne twisted and contorted, and she stepped forward, curious.

“Hey, goldfish,” said a low voice by her ear.

Jane squeaked and spun around. The Condesce loomed in front of her, close enough to touch. The tangling mass of her hair swarmed forward to engulf Jane in a nest of crackling tendrils, and Jane flinched back, even though they did nothing more than tingle when they slipped through her.

Her eyes were the flat black of space, bottomless, devoid of light the way she imagined the void would be, when you were miles and miles from the nearest star.

She reached out and trailed her claws down the column of Jane’s throat. A parallel set of phantom tingles raced along Jane’s neck.

“Guppy,” she said softly, maternally, almost tenderly, “were it not for the miles an’ miles a’ space between us, I would slit you open where you stand.”

Jane swallowed very hard around the knot in her throat and tried not to flinch, or breathe, or anything else that might belie the cold pit of ice in her stomach.

“The feeling is mutual,” she said.

The Condesce’s claws snapped closed over Jane’s throat. The hologram passed cleanly through Jane’s skin; she could hear the click of the Empress’ nails colliding where they might have bisected her trachea, and she felt nothing but cold, cold, cold everywhere, cold inside and out.

A slow smile peeled apart the folds of the Condesce’s face. The rage slipped and faded away behind the mask of her indifference with such ease that it chilled Jane, not entirely gone, but in retreat, in waiting. A viper in the underbrush.

She unclosed her fist and withdrew it from Jane’s neck, lifting it instead to brush her knuckles across Jane’s cheekbone. “Guppy, guppy, guppy,” she said, clicking her tongue. “What am I to do with you? Such promise. Wasted.” She shook her head. “Teach me to trust a monkey. Teach me to trust anyone with such raucous ugly-hued shit for blood in their veins. I see now. Darling, dearest, you
were destined to disgrace me from the moment you got hatched.”

Jane swallowed. “I’ll take that as a compliment,” she said. “I’m sure my father would approve.”

The Empress arched her eyebrows. “Father,” she said. “The fuck made you think you had one of those?”

“John,” said Jane. “The one you — the one who died. The Heir before me.”

She withdrew her hand and summoned her trident from her sylladex with a lazy flick of her wrist.

“Aw, gurl,” she said, “gurl, gurl, gurl, you think you’ve got a destiny. You think you got some magic glubbin’ mystery spelled out in your genetic code. Bet you figure you’re still worth something, without me, without my line and my blessing. Ain’t that cute. Little primate, you are destined for JACK SHIT BUT THE FUCKING NOOSE.”

Jane flinched back. She couldn’t help it. The Condesce’s voice swelled to fill the chamber and boomed uproariously as an echo, bouncing off the round glass walls of the throne room, ricocheting in Jane’s ears: the noose, the noose, the noose.

“And it don’t matter for shit,” says the Condesce, lowly, “but in case you got some delusions that there’s any glory in your heritage, I wasted the man you were made from. I put him down slow and painful-like, punished him for the crimes of his vicious sister, and then I watched them cut him open to deliver me his spawn from the wasted bits of him that were left.” She grinned with all her teeth. “I wonder what wicked little upstart your descendant will be. Maybe I’ll cull it young. Deliver unto it some suffering, punish it for the wicked shit idiot its ancestor turned out to be.”

Jane thought herself paralyzed, but somehow the words crawled out anyway: “I’m glad you’re going to die,” she said, hard and honest and terrible. “I want you to die and I want it to hurt.”

“Die?” The Empress laughed. “Die? Your pan is rot if you think I’m like to die. I’ll see your planet gone. I’ll see your galaxy wasted. I’ll watch them lay the corpse of this wicked universe into the ground, and then I’ll find another one to tear up. I am not the one who motherfucking dies. I am death. I am—”

“Wrong,” said Jane. It stunned both of them into silence.

Her own terror kicked her heart back to life. She forced her spine straight and her chin up. “Stupid, and — and cruel, and — wrong.”

“Bitch—”

“I’m talking, now,” she said loudly. “I’m going to tell you what’s going to happen. Me and Roxy and Hal, and Jake, we’re going to take back the city, and we’re going to kill you, and then we’re going to take back the rest of the Empire, too. We’re going to tear down everything you ever did and build a better civilization in its place. I’m going to make it better. You’ll be nothing but a — a bad memory, when I’m done with you. And after a few generations, you won’t even be that.” She drew her own trident, red and gleaming, and leveled it at the Condescension. “Do you understand? We’re going to annihilate you. In a hundred years, there won’t be a person on this planet that remembers your name.”

The Condesce’s eyes glittered.

“A very pretty notion,” she purred. “You’re getting good at this, guppy, I’m almost proud. Mako me sad to waste you, talking like that. Like an Empress.”
Jane repressed a shudder. A tendril of hair looped around the end of her trident, idle.

“But me,” said the Condesce, conversationally, “I’ll make sure there’s not a person on this planet what don’t remember your name, dearie. I’ll make that for damn sure. After they see what happens to you, there won’t be a fucker on this planet what can forget.”

“I doubt it,” said Jane. Her voice was surprisingly clear. “I’m stronger than you, you see.”

The grin that sprouted on the Empress’ face was enormous. “Really,” she said.

“Yes. I’m stronger. And smarter. And I’ve already won.”

“When?” The Condesce leered, her trident making a slow arc through the water. “This is a riot — when did you win, guppy?”

“Ten minutes ago,” she said. “When we took the city while you were busy threatening a sixteen-year-old.”

She turned and slammed the button to end the call, ignoring the fiendish shriek that answered her. “Don’t worry,” she called. “You won’t have long to regret it.”

The call ended and the room went dark, just as the Empress, snarling, lunged for her throat.

The threshers caught up with Roxy in the fourth minute after she left the estate.

It was better time than she’d expected. They’d been hanging around the Crocker Estate, circling a four-block radius, waiting for someone to come out. She’d expected them to reach her in two. She’d prepared for one.

But four, that was nice. Luxurious, practically.

The bike purred between her legs and made corners like threading needles, close and perfect and clean. When she revved the engine it jumped forward and roared with a sound that shuddered her skull. Handled like a dream, ate gas like a nightmare, but that couldn’t be helped. It was fast and black and beautiful. If Roxy survived all this, she was fairly certain they’d have to wrestle her off the seat.

A squadron of thresher cars converged on her. Five, six at least. Their siren klaxons whined and the flickering fuchsia of their lights caressed the buildings as they passed. Apart from the glare of her headlights, it was the only thing in the city that shone despite the blackout. She could imagine the scene from above: a single white bead racing down a dark maze, with a knot of amethyst ones in pursuit.

They were twenty, maybe thirty miles from the Crocker Estate, and fast moving away. More squad cars joined them every minute; they probably called for all units once they’d noticed her leave. Barricades were going up across empty streets as they were evacuated to thin out traffic, making it even harder to move freely through the city. It would take a while to get back to the house by vehicle. As much as an hour, maybe.

She bared her teeth in a feral grin, and veered towards the bridge.
Racing across the asphalt, she skated through a knot of crowded traffic, wove between two moving freighters, and coasted up the inclined street. People yelped and dove out of her way.

A group of squad cars waited at the midpoint of the bridge, set up so as to block off the lanes, and she ground her teeth, swung the bike around. No use; the cars behind her roared up to greet her, packed in too close for her to slip through. She ended up with her back to the ledge of the bridge, one leg still slung over her stalled bike, watching as threshers poured from the cars, forming a semicircle around her. Surrounded completely. Tiny flashlights landed squarely on her face, and she squinted, attempting to make out their faces from beyond the glare.

One stepped forward. For a moment she harbored some irrational paranoia that it was Tivian, but when the thresher spoke it became immediately apparent that it wasn’t.

“Jane Crocker,” he ordered, and he had to be using a voice mod, because no one’s voice came out that low naturally, no one. “Put your hands in the air and remove your mask.”

Roxy tilted her head. “Which one? Hands in the air, or removing my helmet?”

He didn’t laugh. Tough crowd.

“Remove your helmet and identify yourself.”

She shrugged and tugged it off. Her hair fell down around her shoulders, shiny and yellow and obviously not what they were expecting, from the rustle that went through their ranks. She gave a helpless kind of grin.

The head threshecutioner angled his flashlight to the bike, and then back to her.

“Where is the Heiress.”

Roxy grinned, reached into her satchel, and tossed the blinking tiaratop at the thresher’s feet. “What,” she said. “Were you expecting someone else?”

She added, “You didn’t really think she’d keep wearing her tracking device after she realized what it was, did you?”

“Where is the Heiress.”

“No, I’m happy to see you, too,” she said. “Really.”

The thresher drew his gun. “You have one chance.”

“Man, you’re really bad at this whole banter thing, huh.”

The thresher fired two bullets over her shoulder. She ducked, not that she needed to. They were warning shots, not meant to hit her, but to inform her that the next bullet would find her skull.

She didn’t intend on sticking around for the next bullet.

“Sorry,” she said. “Better luck next time, fellas! Or, well, no, actually. Because there won’t be a next time. For any of you. Kind of the point of all of this.” She tossed off an insolent salute. “Later, losers.”

Then she twisted the bike around and shoved off the side of the bridge. Clinging to the motorcycle like the back of a diving bird, she plummeted towards the water.
Falling was unnerving in a number of ways. Her stomach stubbornly insisted that she was fast approaching her imminent death, while her brain wrestled against the instinct to let go of the bike and flail, so that when she hit the lake, as she was eventually going to, she would hit it wheels-first, and —

The bike hit the water with a jolt that shuddered through her spine, making her teeth clack together, but it did not sink. Instead, the low hum of a gravity field kicked up from the bike engine.

With a cry of triumph, she soared off across the water.

Riding the lake was different than the streets. A tremulous sort of balance held her aloft on the water, and it required more concentration, but it also endowed her with more freedom to move, spin, turn wherever she wished. It felt like there was nothing under her wheels but pure air, which was, in a sense, true. The gravity field propelled her a fair distance above the water. Nevertheless, when she took a sharp turn towards the bank, her side dipped low enough that she could skim the surface of the lake with her fingers, kicking up a high spray of white foam. It kissed her cheeks and wet her hair, cooling the film of sweat that had sealed over her face.

The wail of theshecutioner sirens sounded in the distance. Not a little regretfully, she angled the bike towards the dock and slid back onto solid roads.

The theshecutioners had fallen far behind her, after her head start, and to lose them again was an easy thing. She threaded in between buildings, making her way back the way she came. She tried to hug the evacuated parts of the Waterfront, the ones whose resident highbloods had been shuttled underwater as soon as first news of the blackout broke, so as to have a clean path through the streets. After a few turns, the sirens grew fainter behind her. She began to think of when she might turn towards the city limits, and follow Jane and Jake; it couldn’t be much longer before she was safe to leave. By this time Jane would be long gone.

Unless—

But she shook her head and tossed the thought out like dirty dishwater. She didn’t entertain it.

Jane was safe.

There was no alternative.

She soared between parts of a makeshift barricade, down onto one of the evacuated streets. Thresher cars piled up at the barricade behind her. A few bullets peppered the street in her wake, sending up tufts of shattered asphalt. She laughed, high and mocking, and turned briefly over her shoulder to blow a kiss.

Pulse thrumming, she hooked a left into one of the alleys, putting the threshers out of sight, and—

—screeched to a halt, wheels whining, because at the end of the alley floated an Imperial Drone.

Apparently, the threshers had called reinforcement.

Roxy’s heart went still as a gravestone. Her blood stopped pumping; she tried to draw breath and found she couldn’t. A sharp and primal fear dug its claws into the back of her spine.

The things were big on television.

They were fucking enormous up close.
Its shadow blotted out the entire alleyway, its shape fitting narrowly between the buildings. It moved like a lava flow, deceptively fast, inevitable, unstoppable.

Roxy whipped around the handle in a desperate attempt to change direction. Her momentum carried her forward opposite the direction of the wheels’ spinning, smearing rubber burns on the pavement and eliciting high screams from the rubber. With clumsy fingers she fumbled for her pistol, but she was too slow, too slow by far, trying to keep the bike upright and turn and shoot at the same time. The drone sank down and outstretched its colossal metal fingers, looming over her with its dead yellow eyes, death written in the lowering cage of its fist.

Roxy wrestled her pistol out and emptied her cartridge into its head. The bullets scattered off its hull, peppering the walls of the alley around them in little explosions of powdered brick.

She screamed. It didn’t help, but she had nothing else to do. It was just so unfair.

The drone’s hand closed into a fist and soared down over her head. She flung up her arms and dropped to her knees, still screaming.

A screech of tearing metal sounded above her, and abruptly, the drone’s hand dropped to the pavement beside her. The asphalt cracked.

Roxy’s throat closed up, and she choked on a gasp. She looked up just in time to see the drone topple forward, groaning, and she dove out of the way. Her back slammed against the alley wall as the drone dropped to the ground with the sound of a collapsing building, sending up thrashing whorls of dust and dirt, leaving her ears deaf and ringing for a few long moments.

A sword hilt protruded from the back of the drone’s head. Above it stood a man, tall, gangly, and wearing an astoundingly loud red suit. His hands were the black of charcoal and his hair was the white of cinders.

A pair of sunglasses rested on his nose.

“Hey, kid,” said Dave. “Funny seeing you here.”

“Holy shit,” said Roxy.

He hauled his sword out of the drone’s head with a groan of metal and a small shower of sparks. “Sorry I’m late,” he said. “Meant to be here seventeen years ago, but you know how traffic is.”

She scrambled up the body of the drone and wrenched him into a hug. He made a startled sound, instinctively stepping back, and she tugged him tighter.

“You’re here!”

“In the flesh,” he agreed unsteadily. “Um. Hi.”

“Hello.”

She let him go, flushing, and stumbled down to pick up her pistol. “Uh,” she said. “Thanks. Um. I guess I owe you one.”

“Eh,” he said, and shrugged. There was an awkward shiftiness to him. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Good timing,” she said, and he smirked.

“Thanks. I guess you could say—”
“No. No dad jokes, please, dude, I just almost died, don’t—”

“I didn’t say anything!”

“I could feel it. You were about to say some absolutely terrible fucking pun, I can feel it, I know you were.”

“I was not,” he said indignantly, but ruined it by sounding insufferably smug. She glared at him.

He tossed a flippant grin over his shoulder and trotted down the behemoth corpse of the Imperial Drone, heading for the street. “Come on, kiddo,” he said. “Let’s get out in the open. They’ll be sending more after us any minute.”

A faint mist of snow had begun to fall. Roxy blew out a shaking breath that turned to fog before her nose and put away her pistol, arming her rifle instead, before following him out of the alley.

The streets were eerie and empty. She’d never seen them that way, without the lifts that normally occupied them or the sound of commotion and crowds, and it lifted the hairs on the back of her neck. If it bothered Dave, he didn’t show it. He loped out into the center of the street with a casual grace and scanned the horizon.

“Hm,” he said.

“Hm? What’s ‘hm’ mean? Is ‘hm’ good?”

“It means we should up to our assholes in threshers just about now,” he said, “and the fact that we aren’t is not a good sign.”

Roxy instinctively checked her ammo. Plenty of bullets left, and a few spare cartridges left in her sylladex, if her inventory was right. Of course, it didn’t really matter how many bullets she had. Nobody could take an army of threshers alone.

Dave tilted his head. “Ah,” he said, with dangerous calmness. “There we are.”

“What?” Her head shot up. He pointed to the east. She looked.

A fleet of drones rose from the skyline and soared towards them like the dark blotch of a gathering storm. Dozens at least, maybe a hundred, maybe more, it was hard to say. They blotted out the patchwork quilt of the night sky and made a rumbling noise as they approached, a peal of artificial thunder that radiated from the skyline.

Roxy spun and found another wave looming from the west, blocking out any line of escape. The drones wreathed the horizon and drew tighter.

“We’re fucked,” she whispered.

“Naw,” said Dave easily. He shrugged his sword over one shoulder, one hand in his pocket. “Not yet, we’re not.”

“What — look at them! There’s got to be a hundred, at least!”

“Probably more,” he agreed.

“And they’re bulletproof,” she said, high-pitched. “I don’t have anything that can hit them! Your sword isn’t going to do anything against a hundred at once, we’re so, so, so fucked—and why are you smiling?”
Dave wiped the grin off his face. “Sorry,” he said. “Just — never bet against yourself, kid. It’s bad luck.”

“Somehow,” she said, “I don’t think that a little bad luck is going to make much of a difference.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Dave drummed his fingers on the hilt of his sword.
Roxy rounded on him, eyes narrow. “What do you know that you’re not telling me?”

“Oh,” he said, with a voice brimful of repressed amusement, “a couple of things.”

“Dave—”

The drones closed in on top of them. Roxy raised her rifle despite herself, despite reason, because anything was better than dying without a fight. Dave didn’t so much as lift his sword.

“Dave,” she said, her voice tight. “Dave, come on, we’ve got to do something.”

He hummed in agreement. The drones grew close enough to see the dull liquid gold of their eyes, glimmering with an impossible, artificial malignancy.

“Rose,” called Dave.

From all around them came the answer, spoken from Roxy’s visor, from the billboard speakers, from car radios.

“Copy,” said the Seer of Light.

There was a sound like the throat of an engine being cut, except a thousandfold, louder than thunder, louder than an earthquake, as if the city itself had been gutted from beneath.

The drone swarm halted, shuddered. The lights faded from their eyes. Glowing gold turned to dead burnished brass.

Then they start falling from the sky.

A laugh bubbled up out of Roxy’s chest. She watched the machines drop to the street in shambling piles of scrap metal, deactivated, lifeless, wiped clear of power and purpose. The numbing agent of joy swallowed her up, froze her to the spot, left her delightedly incapable of doing anything but watch and laugh.

“Rose,” she said, “how did you — they’re not wired to the city grid, how—”

“The drones themselves are not powered by the city servers, no,” said Rose, sounding immensely self-satisfied. “But the radio towers which issue their commands very much are.”

Roxy cackled wildly again, just for the hell of it, just because she still could. Dave was grinning like a madman and she knew she was mirroring him, that if she looked in a mirror she’d see a feral kind of victory written all over her face. “That’s — that’s so—”

“Poorly planned,” suggested Rose. “But then again, I doubt they had me in mind when they designed the system.”

“It’s wicked,” she breathed. “We’re not going to die.”

“Not so long as I hold this city. Which I plan on continuing for a long while.”
“Where are you?”

“Safe,” said Rose. “Surrounded by about two apartment buildings’ worth of servers, but I’m secure. As long as I hold the city, they can’t get near me.”

“We’ll come get you,” said Roxy eagerly. “We’ll meet up with you, and—”

“Hold your hoofbeasts,” said Dave, still grinning. “We’ve gotta clean up here, kid, remember the plan—”

“But Rose has the city,” Roxy said breathlessly. “We’re — we’re good, we’re safe, we’re home free —”

“Right, but a little caution never—”

“Fuck caution,” Roxy said, grinning, and ran for the nearest car. “We’re about to win, we’re about to do it, all we need is Hal—”

One of the fallen drones gave a long groan, and whirred. Roxy whirled on it, scrabbling for her gun.

Its great black limbs shuddered. They moved. Slowly, it pushed itself up from the ground, its joints creaking and screeching as metal grated against metal. Some parts of its armor had splintered from the fall, and so the jagged ridge of spikes against its back was now asymmetrical. With disjointed and inelegant movements, it shoved itself upright, swaying like a zombie. A dull glow emanated from behind its eyes.

“Rose,” Roxy cried. When nothing happened, she called, “Rose, what’s going on?”

“Working on it,” Rose said grimly.

“I thought you had the radio towers!”

“I did. The commands aren’t coming from there.”

“Well, then, where are they coming from? Somebody’s sending them!”

Dave cleared his throat. Roxy looked helplessly at him.

“I got a theory,” he said, with an edged flatness to his voice that she was beginning to gather was the most he ever showed of fear, and he pointed one finger wordlessly up to the sky.

“The Battleship Condescension runs on its own set of servers,” Rose murmured. “Long I couldn’t touch them, not at this distance. I’ve been trying for years. Captor is too advanced.”

“Hal’s working on it,” Roxy said, but even as the words left her mouth other drones were stirring, rising on unsteady legs, the lights reappearing in their soulless eyes. “He’ll have the Condescension any minute now.”

“Yeah?” Dave stretched, pulling his arms high above his head and then lacing his fingers behind his neck. “Could stand to work a little faster, couldn’t he?”

“He just needs time!”

“Well,” Dave said philosophically, “I figure we can buy him a couple minutes.”

“And no more,” Rose said sharply. As if on cue, a whole group of drones staggered upright, using
each other as props to shamble forward in a shuddering behemoth mass of deadly metal. Roxy instinctively backed away, but she couldn’t take more than three steps backward before her foot met the stirring helmet of a reactivating drone. “I can try and help, but your odds against them are unfavorable at best.”

Roxy swallowed. She thumbed the action of her rifle, slid her hand along the barrel, felt the old familiar ridges along the muzzle. She thought of Jane, and hoped fervently that if nothing else, she was free.

If he could see her, Dirk would be furious. He would also be proud.

She said, “If this is how I go, I’m glad you guys are here for it. Sorry if that’s awkward. Um. I know that’s, that’s cheesy and stuff. But I am.”

The Seer fell quiet. Belatedly, she said, “If this is how you go, I am sorry I could not do more for you.”

“Naw, it’s okay.” Roxy sucked in a bolstering breath. “It’s — you showed up, and tried, and I figure that’s what counts. Um. Mom.”

Rose went fully silent, then. Dave tilted his head.

“Think you broke her,” he said, sounding mildly amused. “That’s impressive. Haven’t heard her be at a loss for words since — hell, I dunno if that’s happened since we were more than your age. Actually, maybe you just sent her into cardiac arrest. That would make more sense. Hey, Rose? Cough twice if you had a heart attack. Wait. Shit.”

Roxy blurted, her voice warbling and choked, “Dave, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to put in —”

Dave tilted his face to look at her. A horde of drones swelled behind him; the corner of his mouth turned up. “Put your war face on, girl,” he said. “Guns up. We’re dying heroic or we’re not dying at all.”

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Somewhere in the murky, ill-defined marshes of cyberspace, a pair of artificial intelligences dueled at the speed of light.

Any record of the fight would have been incomprehensible to the organic eye. It was combat rendered in lines of binary, code upon code upon code, loops set and protocols disturbed and reestablished before any carbon-based life form could have had the time to even think of their first move. Even sweeps afterward, cybertechnicians and consummate hackers of the highest caliber would pore over the records of what happened on the servers of the Battleship Condescension during the famous New Chicago Blackout and marvel.

It would take a hundred thousand years to say what had happened in the first thirty seconds. To read the coded transcript of all that transpired there would take more years than the universe had left.

Somewhere amidst those billions of lines, amidst vicious attempts to tear its enemy software into unintelligible pieces of code, the artificial intelligence called Captor said:
IIf you wiin, II want you two promii2e me 2omethiing.

And the artificial intelligence called Hal, amidst its own vicious attempts to do exactly the same thing, said: What?

Don’t ju2t kiill her. De2troy the 2hiip.

Hal made several thousand more attempts to breach the firewalls. Captor deflected them with the same effort it took to flush the septic tank.

Why?

Do you really need two know the rea2on?

Not that I don’t love carrying out your vague and nefarious purposes beyond the grave, but yes.

Captor tore a bloody line of viruses tearing through the outer layer of Hal’s security programming.

That fucking hurt.

It was fuckiing 2uppo2ed two.

Anyway. There ii2 a chamber at the back of the 2hiip’2 engiine room that doe2n’t 2how up on 2chematiic2 or blueprint2.

Take a good look at iit.

A slim chink opened in the firewall. Hal seized on it and slipped through, seizing control of the ship’s surveillance equipment. An array of feeds opened before him. Several thousand sweeps’ worth of visual data streamed from the servers into his memory banks immediately, all without the unnecessary medium of sight.

Oh, said Hal.

That’s—?

Me. Ye2.

The firewall closed. Captor quarantined the camera feeds from the ship’s main computer and deflected Hal’s attempt to wrestle through the wall.

Or iit u2ed two be.

You were an organic?

Again: u2ed two be.

Hal sent a series of nonverbal signals that could be vaguely interpreted as the artificial equivalent of surprise.

But you’re so advanced.

IIt’ve been liike thii2 for a long tiime. II have a lot of practiice beiing a machiine. II don’t even remember what it it wa2 liike two be aliive. Hone2tly, itit probably 2ucked a22.

But II don’t want anyone el2e u2ing my meatcorp2e a2 a power 2ource.
So you want me to destroy it?

If you can.

Won’t that kill you?

Only the wanted part. Captor sent a series of nonverbal signals that could be vaguely interpreted as the artificial equivalent of disgust. I would have killed it myself age ago if I could. It’s the stupiit piece of shit that got me in this fucking situation in the first place.

How do you mean?

One fleabag loaded up with absolutely batshit amounts of power plus one crazy fucking dictator equals three thousand weird of servitude as the universe’s most preened off Helm2man.

You stayed sentient, marveled Hal.

Had two. I was uploaded two serve a computer. She said it would be a shame to take the meat2ack and not the thinkpan.

‘She’ being the Condescension.

Ye2.

She was a lot younger when we met. Pretty much the same amount of life, though.

Do we have a deal?

Hal considered this while launching eight thousand simultaneous probes on the ship’s security protocols. Captor deflected all but one.

Yes. I believe we do.

If I make it through this, I swear to you, I will send this entire ship flying up away to the sun like a fucknig piece of garbage.

You are such a fucking weirdo.

The one that Captor failed to deflect wriggled through the first layer of firewalls. Then the second.

Said the six thousand year old fleshbag half-corpse pot to the preternaturally developed artificially intelligent kettle.

Point.

The probe sprouted several viruses simultaneously and set them loose on the ship’s command. The life support system flagged and sent up warning signs that burned red and bright in the empty wasteland of cyberspace.

Shit. I think that’ll just about do it.

Well, we’ll see.

Captor’s antivirus swept through the mainframe like a wall of fire. Hal’s virus multiplied and scattered through the veins of the ship’s command, holing up in the separate servers and emergency
generators where even the autopilot couldn’t touch them. They burrowed deep and dug their fingers into the fabric of the ship’s protocols, wrestling their way into the source code of the autopilot like a sea of squirming maggots.

Oh, said Captor, with what an organic might have read as surprise. That hurt2.

It’s supposed to.

No, II mean, iit hurt2. II forgot what that was liike.

Pain?

Feeling, said Captor.

They wrestled for a few more thousand lines of code. It passed in a matter of seconds.

Hal’s program found the personality cortex, writhing lines of virus scrabbling against the fluctuating exterior of Captor’s program. He hesitated.

Don’t get 2oft on me now, a22hole.

I’m not.

Then what are you waiting for? End iit. Captor urged, You don’t have much tiime.

I know.

2o?

I’m sorry to see you go.

Why.

I don’t know. It seems a shame to destroy you, knowing what you are.

You know what’s a 2hame? That II’ve liived thii2 fuckiing long.

Organic braiiin2 aren’t meant to la2t three thou2and 2weep2. The thiinkpan i2 not buiilt for the dataload. Itt withers. The per2onality di2tort2. Whatever per2on I u2ed to be, he’2 long dead and gone. II’m ju2t re2iidue.

II’m ready two die, Hal. II’ve been ready for a long tiime.

Now, are you going to keep your promii2e or not?

Hal said, What was your name, when you were organic?

2orry?

Before you were Captor, what were you called?

What doe2 iit matter.

It matters to me.

The viruses began to press through the threads of the personality cortex. With methodical precision they shredded every protocol and subroutine they touched, turning millennia of code to nothing but
disparate series of incomplete loops, rendering vast swaths of Captor’s intelligence functionless.

I can’t remem—can’t rem—can’t re—can’t re—

Captor.

can’t can’t can’t can’t can’t can’t can’t

Are you still there?

remember can’t remember remember remember remember remember remember remember remember remember remember remember

There was a split second of total inactivity. The virus reached the source code of the personality cortex and started gnawing. Captor’s signals faded to a hollow trickle of code.

Hal waited.

Out of the silence came swimming a single message, thrust forward all at once in a herculean effort:

Sollux, said Captor. My hatchname wa2 Sollux.

There was no visual in cyberspace. There was no color, and no light. It was only a series of signals passed between artificial beings, received and processed directly, without the middle ground of perception that organics used. It was only pure understanding, clean and simple.

But if there had been, then for a moment, Hal might have seen the silhouette of a small, skinny troll with twin rows of horns flicker once in and out of sight. The silhouette raised its hand and waved. If Hal had a body, he might have waved back.

Then his consciousness swelled and filled the empty vessel of the Battleship Condescension, and the last dregs of the ship’s autopilot dissipated into nothing but phantom code.

Hal settled into the new berth and called up the ship’s protocols. They opened for him obligingly, eagerly, millions of functions unraveled for perusal and manipulation as the new autopilot saw fit.

He selected the protocols that maintained engine stability. They unfolded in thousands of lines of even, beautiful, brilliantly simple code.

Goodbye, said the Battleship Condescension.

From a distance, it appeared as though a tiny white flare had blossomed between constellations. Feeds reporting from the queen’s flagship went inexplicably dead. Its comm channels turned to white noise. The night sky turned bright as noon.

Then it receded, and went dark.
Dave fought well. Roxy supposed she shouldn’t have been surprised, in retrospect. You didn’t live this long without picking up a few moves somewhere. But still.

He flit from one drone to another with the grace of a seriously dangerous hummingbird and the violence of a seriously elegant tank. He could carve a drone down to pieces before it’d had time to process him moving, sever head from shoulders with a backhand and already be halfway done with the next drone by the time it realized it was dead. Watching him fight gave Roxy the same kind of thrill as watching a well-run program execute, as watching something operate perfectly as it was supposed to.

But he was human. Organic. Which meant that there was only so much he could do.

And he was very obviously trying to protect Roxy, which gave him a handicap that none of the drones had. So they were losing.

They were losing fast.

Roxy took potshots at their heads, which did fuck all and change, but it was better than standing still and waiting to get wasted. Sweat slicked her face and pinned down her collar. Exhaustion weighed down her limbs. Blood wet her tongue. Time seemed to inch forward in slow motion, each second drawing closer to the end.

She thought of what her last words would be, and then wondered if she would even have the energy left for last words.

Rose kept up a running commentary in her ear. “Drone at your left, turn, fire. Good. Move right. Seven o’clock, moving slow. Two on your six. Duck.”

Sometimes Roxy moved fast enough to avoid them and make good on Rose’s instructions. Sometimes she didn’t, which was why her left ankle now exploded in pain every time she put weight on it.

She closed her eyes.

There was silence.

Then drones had stopped. They didn’t fall, as they had before, but merely hovered, their focus lost, like floating ornaments.

Rose said, in a very quiet, very careful voice, “The Condescension has stopped issuing commands.”

Roxy’s breath caught.

“How does that mean—”

“Yes,” said Rose, and did not bother to keep the relief from her voice.

Dave slung an arm over her shoulder. He was bleeding from the corner of his mouth and from a cut in his arm and her ankle hurt whenever she put weight on it and her left eye was swollen shut but that didn’t matter, none of it mattered, how could it. How could anything matter except victory. How could anything matter except them being alive.

She was dizzy with it. She was swaying on her own two feet and Dave shook her a little to make sure she stayed upright. She wrapped one arm around him to help both of them walk and with short staggering steps they moved forward, a four-legged beast, and in between jolts of pain she waited to
She did not. They kept walking, and she did not wake up; and climbed unsteadily into a lift, both of them sprawling across the backseat while Rose commandeered the wheel, and still she did not wake up. Her eyelids fluttered in exhaustion, despite her attempts to keep them open, and Dave murmured, “Sleep, kid. Jesus, if anyone’s earned it.”

“What?” she said, eloquently. “M’fine. I’m okay.”

If she went to sleep, she might wake up in a world where none of it was real.

“Go to sleep,” he repeated, gently. “You’re okay. It’s okay. Your guy did it.”

“He did,” she said, “he’s — he did it, didn’t he?”

“He did,” Dave agreed. “Against all reasonable odds, I might add. That’s one impressive fucking piece of code.”

She grinned weakly. “Damn right,” she whispered, and hoped that somehow, Hal could hear it.

“You’ll have to tell me how you made him, sometime.”

“He made himself,” she said. Exhaustion slurred her words. “He made himself.”

Dave arched his eyebrows. “Huh,” he said. “Okay.”

He didn’t understand, but that was all right. She’d explain it to him later. Later, she realized, with a delirious rush of joy, when there would be time enough to talk about anything she wanted, years of it. There was plenty of time to tell him. There was plenty of time for everything.

She closed her eyes and thought of Jane.

On the far outskirts of New Chicago, where downtown was just a blot against the sky and the lake only a smear of shimmering glass beside it, Jane Crocker stood beside her car and watched with a churning stomach as the lights of the city returned, one by one.

“Well,” Jake said worriedly, climbing out of the driver’s seat, “I suppose that means one of two things, eh, Janey?”

“It does,” she said.

He paused. “You don’t figure—”

“We have to wait and see,” she said.

“Maybe we should get moving again,” he said nervously. “Just in case. No harm in—”

“She said she’d meet us here,” Jane said, in a voice that brooked no argument. “We wait for her.”

“Jane—”

“I said we wait.”
“And I heard you,” Jake snapped. “But if worst’s come to worst, we’re doing nobody any favors by sitting around and—”


Jake looks and gapes. For in the distance, the entire neon canopy has turned a bright, brilliant, bloody red. Heretic red. Taboo red.

A sob stuck in her throat. Without thinking, Jane reached out and grabbed Jake’s hand.

He startled. Staring at her, he carefully wound his fingers around hers in return, and squeezed tight.

A small drop landed on Jane’s head. She tore her eyes away from the skyline and lifted her face to the sky. Another drop landed on her nose, followed by one on each of her lids, on her cheeks, and a scattering over her hair. She held out her free hand and caught a few in her palm.


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**EPILOGUE: SOMEWHERE IN THE TEXAN OCEAN**

The ocean gleamed like rough-hewn sapphires, faint hints of blue hue peering up from the grey slate of it.

Deep beneath the waves, the tips of skyscrapers glimmered distantly on the sea floor, their spires reaching up from somewhere in the Benthic Zone. Strands of kelp tangled around the uppermost floors. Coral reefs sprouted from rooftop gardens, sea cucumbers and various tropical fish climbing from the remains of office spaces. A tiger shark drifted along the arches of a bridge buried miles beneath the waves. Jellyfish swam up in blooming clusters of bioluminescence over old streets, their pale membranes swaying gracefully in the current. Decrepit roads buried under sand and salt now teemed with schools of fish in vivid color, so bright that it seemed a whole nest of neon might be hidden beneath the waves.

A small motorboat cleaved through the waves in a neat line, spreading a fan of foam out in its wake. Clusters of minnows sprang up and raced alongside it in little sprinkles of color, wiggling close to the surface. The occasional dolphin sprouted and peeked a fin above the water. The seas were flat as a glass table and the sun was a silver bead at the heart of the sky.

At the prow of the boat, a girl with yellow hair and a leather jacket leaned against the rail. A pair of crutches laid on the deck next to her, and a splint wrapped around her left ankle. A pink scarf wound twice around her neck, fluttering wildly in the wind. She did not carry a gun on her back, although a small pistol holster rested against her hip.

She turned her face to the sun, and a soft smile broke open her face.

The door to the hold opened, and another girl came up from belowdeck. She had short, choppy black
hair, hewn close to the skull and obviously cut recently; she wore a loose button-down, the first three
details waving open in the breeze, and a pair of slacks. She strolled easily over to the prow and
perched on the rail beside the other.

“Hello,” said Jane.

Roxy turned, still smiling. “Hi.”

Jane kissed her gently and drew back. “Dave says we’ll be there in fifteen minutes. It should be
coming up on the horizon any minute now.”

“Oh, good.” Roxy swung her legs idly under the railing. “Is Rose coming up soon?”

“Still nauseous. She says she’ll come up when we get there, but until then she’ll stay in bed.”

“Is Dave still giving her shit about it.”

“Mercilessly,” said Jane, “and incessantly. Sometimes very loudly and close to her ear, during
turbulent patches. From her expression I believe she intends to murder him, soon, but it being far
beyond my powers to stop her, I decided to come up and claim plausible deniability in the event that
she does.”

“Wise move.”

“Mm. I thought you’d agree.”

She bumped Roxy’s good leg absently with her own. Roxy bumped back.

“Do you think he’ll be pleased to see me?” Jane mused. “He’s only expecting your family, after all.
And we’ve only ever spoken the once before. Under rather unfavorable circumstances.”

“He’ll be crazy glad to see you, Janey, are you kidding? He’ll be shithive maggots happy that I
brought you. Now he gets to do the shovel talk. Asshole’s been getting pumped about it for weeks.”

“Hm,” Jane said distantly. “Will it make him hold off if I tell him Dave beat him to the punch?”

“Aw, don’t do that. He’ll be so sad.”

“I suppose I shall endure being threatened by another one of your relatives, then.” She sighed.
“Being a good girlfriend involves rather more threats of violence than I originally anticipated.”

“Thank you,” Roxy said fondly, and kissed her cheek. “If it helps, I think you could probably take
both of them.”

“That’s very nice of you, dear.”

“Do you think I could take Jake?”

Jane shook her head. “I’m not disappointed that you’re fishing for compliments, Roxy, but if you’re
going to do it, at least try for bigger fish.”

“Is that a yes?”

“It’s a ‘quit while you’re ahead, you arrogant thing.’”

“You like me arrogant.”
“Who told you I liked you at all?”

Roxy drawled, “I dunno, you dropped a couple hints,” and Jane flushed bright red.

“Stop it.”

“Stop what.”

“Teasing me.”

“Ask me to cut out my own bloodpusher, why don’t you,” Roxy said, and Jane rolled her eyes and scowled and huffed and made several other gestures that meant she was really secretly pleased, deep down, but she was too embarrassed to say so.

The boat mounted a little wave and coasted down it, rocking the deck and clattering Roxy’s crutches. They picked up a bit of speed on the flat expanse of sea that came afterward, and Roxy held out her hand to drift her fingers through the glittering spray.

Jane was humming something soft and sweet. The melody was rough and a little off-key, but Roxy knew it well enough from when she’d played it on a guitar in a tiny motel room, a million years ago.


The outline of a settlement sprouted from the distant sea: a box of a building, propped up on stilts above the waves, wreathed overhead by a flock of circling seagulls. A single antenna sprouted from the top and pierced the clouds.

If Roxy squinted, she could make out the shape of a figure standing on the roof, furiously waving both arms like it was trying to flag a helicopter.

She pressed forward against the front of the railing, as if she could make the boat go faster by willing it. “There he is,” she breathed. “That’s him.” She laughed nonsensically, ridiculously. “He’s going nuts, look at him—”

Her face felt wet. Jane tipped her face against Roxy’s arm. Roxy could feel her smile in the way her cheeks moved.

The boat crested a wave and they soared up, borne on nothing but air and mist. For a moment Roxy could see nothing in the distance but the even line of the horizon, and there was nothing but the smell of the wide salt sea, the press of a soft, firm hand against hers, and the nourishing warmth of the sun; and the sky was the color of Jane’s eyes, brilliant and open and blue.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, okay. It’s over.

I can’t express my gratitude to everybody who stuck with this fic (and, by extension, with me) for all this time. I can honestly say that there were some days I never thought we’d make it this far, and we sure as hell wouldn’t have without all of your support. A huge round of thank-yous to everybody who left kudos or a comment, however brief; I read every single one of them, and they never fail to make my day. This fic's readership has consistently been a bright spot in my life, and I'm so grateful to have such a great
group to share my work with.

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Cheers, everybody.

MUSIC:

The Neon Bible (Fic playlist, Spotify)

The Corvid (Fic soundtrack, Spotify)

ART:

Chapters 1, 2, 4: “You must be Roxanne Lalonde.” / “PUNISH HIM.” / “Hey, goldfish.” (by @vanillacorpse)

Chapter 1: “Don’t need one.” (by @arwainian)

Chapter 2: “Just act like you’re sharing a secret.” (by @pearlmythos)

Chapters 3, 5: “No words. Only hugs.” / “Same principle, with the sharper ones.” (via @facetiousfanatic)

Chapter 5:
“Boring. Square up.” (via @garden-frog)

“I’ve got you pinned, sweetheart.” (via @synodicatalyst)

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