whatever path you take (wherever you might go) i'll follow

by thinkatory

Summary

The impending end of civilization on Earth, Rose, Dave, and a connection that transcends a reboot of the universe.

Totally normal shit and not at all weird and convoluted as fuck. Yeah.

Notes

First things first: I am posting this much earlier than I meant to, as this fic is going to take me forever to finish. Really I don't want to risk being Jossed and feel obligated to rewrite this. There are going to be six chapters (likely, possibly seven), spanning 2002 to 2035, so this may take me a while. Chapters may go up sporadically, so check back if you like. <3 I promise this will be done soon, though; I'm totally obsessed and love writing this.

Secondly, this fic is unapologetically shippy but is definitely plotty. Just worth note in case someone is looking for something strictly one or the other.
Thirdly... the CSS for pesterlogs alone threatened to kill me, so I gave up on getting the header perfect. Just. Cut me a break.

Title from Midnight Hands by Rise Against, a song I find particularly accurate for this fic.

TT: Hi.

TG: uh hey

TG: not to be super rude or something

TG: but who the hell are you

TG: and how did you find my handle

TT: I'm Rose. We've met. You just don't remember me yet.

TG: okay uh whatever that means

TG: im dave

TG: do you read my comic or something

TG: then you had to talk to me because how cool is this fucking guy

TG: that happens

TG: a lot

TT: Yes, I've read your comic. I find a lot of it very interesting, including your extreme lack of filter and its implications. Still, I think you can do better.

TT: For a given value of "better."

TG: that is the shittiest screaming groupie speech i have ever heard of

TG: like you didnt even say how awesome you think i am

TG: or ask me to sign something rated PG-13

TG: youre gonna have to work on that

TT: I'm not a groupie, Dave.

TG: uh okay then

TG: hi rose

TG: nice to meet you i guess

TG: but im kind of busy
TG: im kind of a big deal
TG: adventuring and all that shit
TG: what do you want
TG: if not to jump on this bandwagon while its on its way up
TT: I need your help.
TT: You're a programmer, right?
TT: I can't get these .~ath files right.
TG: why
TG: the fuck
TG: does anyone do that shit
TT: I have my reasons. Is that a no?
TG: no i can kick the shit out of that code
TG: ill look at it
TG: its just
TG: WHY
TT: We can't all be the creators of the next ironic masterpiece of the century.
TT: I'm a girl, anyway. Mystery. Et cetera.
TG: im a 15 year old guy
TG: not retarded
TG: anyway
TG: i have hacker artifact hunting to do
TG: give me 10 minutes
TG: while i make angelina jolie as both lara croft and that chick in hackers look like fucking amateurs
TG: brb
TT: Great.
TT: This. Is so exciting.

--

April 2003
You name is DAVE STRIDER. This is obvious, because there is literally no fucking way two guys as cool as you are would be lucky enough to also have a life this cool – a coolness which even your friend ROSE admits, so it must be true. You were raised by your adoptive father and his bros to be an ADVENTURER, and took up the art of computer skillz and hacking the shit out of stuff on the side.

You're SIXTEEN YEARS OLD now (almost seventeen actually), and you're so great at fucking up computers left and right and playing code like Snoop plays the ladies that it's mind-blowing. Like any Turing test-passing motherfuckers would blow a motherboard and wind up in computer intensive care or some shit if they came across you. BOOM, you lowly circuit-based sons of bitches.

Okay this is getting stupid, so fuck it.

A bro like you's got a lot of shit going. Like you also whip up some SICK COMICS in MSPaint, and have a fanbase that's only gotten bigger since you started updating more frequently despite being such an obvious rockstar all over the place otherwise. You're also a RAP CONNOISSEUR and will not shut the fuck up about it if people happen to exist and have the wrong opinions, but can't do much personally because adventures, that's why.

Thing is there's only one way to keep on the move and have all your brass as fuck balls in the air, get it, of course you do. It's a SWISS ARMY BACKPACK, which you got from Herb one year for Christmas. You got more shit on your back and look cooler than any god damn videogame character. Even Link from Zelda would go damn that smooth fucker has a computer, swords, guns, and survival supplies in there? Actually he'd say what's a computer and then after you explained he'd go holy shit you're a wizard do you work for Ganondorf? But eventually he'd just be impressed by a badass who also could survive on islands covered with monsters who ALSO has shades sharper than any Hylian sword and then you'd give him a fucking autograph.

And thank fuck you aren't saying any of this out loud because your DAD... hahaha you don't even want to think about it no really.

You are in WASHINGTON right now, the state, not the boring-ass capitol where the politicians are all so stupid you almost think that maybe the batterwitch conspiracies are real because it would at least explain how people could be practically brain-dead, walking, talking, and holding down a job. DC mostly annoys the shit out of you because your dad insists on going there at least once every two months, and puts you in lockdown every time for no apparent reason.

Your dad is really good at lockdown.

Speaking of your dad. Here he is and he's not in a good mood (when is he though anyway, sometimes you think he's going to stab you in the face, but it's all in good fun since he hasn't done it yet). "Kid," he says, "it's time to go back to work."

Which you don't mind at all. There's more of the Old Lady's proprietary shit to find, fuck up, and sell to the highest bidder, which is kind of the coolest homeschool setup ever.

God DAMN is your dad awesome.

Your dad's bro Drago calls. You know this because Drago keeps setting Dad's phone to have the dumbest possible ringtones for all of them just to piss him off a little, except for Drago's, which is "Eye of the Tiger." Drago is awesome, too. What, your dad demands at the phone, then goes off grumbling and bitching about ONE JOB and NOT THAT HARD TO FIND A KID and Jesus Cesar get your shit together.
(Cesar is fucking hilarious, but if you laugh and Dad notices you'll get that look and probably have to clean the dirt off of everyone's shoes after the hike, so fuck that.)

Anyway, Dad hangs up and points into the woods. Herb hauls his own Swiss Army backpack over his shoulder. Here you are, all badasses, and it's time to go ransack this shit like a bunch of awesome Vikings who actually bathe and have technology and medicine, and actually it would kind of totally suck to be a Viking what the fuck.

Yeah. The Old Lady really liked building computer labs in the middle of nowhere. But who gives a shit. You don't. Because it's time to fuck shit up and take another look into JADE ENGLISH's awesome builds and try not to have a technologically-based crush on a woman who was older than dirt when you were born, because Rose would never let you live it down.

Speaking of the high priestess of Knit-thulhu herself or whatever...

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 15:13 --

TT: Are you going to stop in one of these days?

TT: All this traveling you do and you never consider coming here. I have to wonder why.

TG: yeah ill just haul my ass to treesville

TG: we can hang out with your trees

TG: and your lab

TG: and your cat

TG: i cant believe you knit AND have a cat

TG: are you just giving up on getting laid ever

TT: As usual I have to ask why you're so interested in any of my sexual expressions or fantasies therein.

TT: Is it possible that my occasional mention of knitting and needles has given you ideas?

TG: rose we are not doing this

TG: we are not doing psycho picture theatre where you make me think of

TG: oh dammit

TG: you dont do that do you

TG: thats some fucked up shit

TT: There is in fact porn like that.

TT: I know you were wondering.
TG: i wasn't
TG: i really wasn't at all
TG: jesus
TG: what the hell is wrong with you
TT: Rose - 1, Dave - 0
TT: Pwned, Strider.
TG: never say pwned again
TG: i am so embarrassed for you
TG: like
TG: you're just no don't
TG: also
TG: i'm not a stalker or anything you know that
TG: and you just asked me to fly over and hang out and watch you knit or something
TG: what's your last name anyway
TT: I've mentioned. Haven't I?
TG: i think i remember you not being cryptic for once in the last year
TG: but let's play yeah daves a drooling moron for two seconds and you tell me again
TG: rose
TG: where did you go
TG: it's been like twenty minutes you're still there you're not even idle
TG: what the fuck
TG: you are unoffendable as shit
TG: you make howard stern look like the amish
TG: like i could start posting pokemon porn here and all you'd do is psychoblahblah the shit out of it
TG: all interesting choice of pikachu fucking ash with his lightning tail dave is this a metaphor for your phallic something something
TG: why are you
TG: oh fuck it
TG: i'll hit you later
Two hours later, you're inside a damp cave leaned over your laptop to protect its screen and shit, your other gear tucked inside your backpack, because the writing on the wall – literal writing on the wall, it's obscure Asian ASCII code or something – is the closest thing you can get to a decoder on this menu.

Dad recognized it and chalked in some helpful details but he told you to figure the rest out and get back the hell out or he'd leave you behind. You're not sure he's joking, so you're hurrying. You can still hear him and Herb arguing over the Bluetooth, though, so you're probably good.

That's when she hits you back first.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 17:35 --

TT: I would say that Pikachu penetrating Ash with his tail would be a larger indicator of your issues with your father, actually.

TG: wow holy shit
TG: welcome back to you too
TT: That doesn't make sense.
TG: okay fine you never answered my question
TG: but i dont care
TG: you want me to visit yeah fine
TG: lets do this
TG: whens good for you
TT: Wow. You've managed to surprise me.
TT: Rose - 1, Dave - 1
TG: ill never get why you act like you know me so well
TG: youre just some chick who pestered me randomly
TT: Then you're just some dude I pestered who wants to randomly meet me.
TT: Are you sure you want to go down this road?
TT: We're friends, Dave.
TT: Aren't we?
TG: can you at least tell me
TG: are you secretly a dude
TG: or a fifty year old unmilf
TG: or a fifty year old dude
TG: or anything besides i dont know
TG: 16 year old rose cryptic mcmystery psychobabbler extraordinaire

TT: Everything I've told you is the truth.
TT: I think you know that.
TT: Shouldn't you get back to work? We can plan later.
TG: yeah
TG: i guess
TG: later

When you alt-tab to the decryption, you see it's done, thank god. There's .~ath files, which means going through probably endless lines of sociopath code, and you do your best to stay cool and not glare through your shades. There's also a text file titled "readme!.txt" and you already hate this.

You open it anyway.

*sunglasses boy, i think you already know this, but you really should not run these files!*

*i believe you will do what's right with them, in fact i know that you will, so i trust you as long as you trust in yourself!*

*best of luck always,*
* jade*

You stare at the screen, then quickly close the file before somehow your dad comes back. Then you copy the .~ath files onto one of your drives and delete them from the disc. The rest you can play with on the way back home.

It finishes up just in time for your dad to stick his head into the cave and give a curt nod; you shut your laptop and cram everything into your backpack, and adjust your shades.

Your hands aren't shaking. Everything is fine.

Everything is fine.

Everything is fuckin' great, and you are awesome.

--

*August 2003*

Your name is ROSE LALONDE, even though your placronym says otherwise. Your placronym, you decided three years ago when it was engraved, will be the first thing you destroy when you turn eighteen. You are SIXTEEN YEARS OLD, though your seventeenth wriggling day is not far off, and you are literally counting the days.
For the record, today marks the 475th day until you could technically be free of your MOTHER.

Your hobbies, besides yearning for freedom from heinous maternal figures, include knitting, creative writing, cryptozoology, and combinations therein. You have a talent for ANCIENT MAJJYKS, though few people believe you on the topic, and your mother pretends not to know or notice.

She knows. That passive-aggressive bitch.

One of your main problems is that you live in the middle of nowhere. There's a library full of books and consistent wifi, as well as all the technological advancements anyone could hope to have under one compound's roof. You have staff ready to wait on you hand and foot. You want for nothing. By all standards you are an incredibly lucky teenage girl. That is, you would be if you had ever been allowed to leave the compound unsupervised.

It should be noted that this isn't an exaggeration. You're not allowed to leave the compound unsupervised, and that accounts for a whole once or twice a year at most. The psychology books that have reassured you on many things have also reassured you that cabin fever is hardly a real concern for the occupied mind; without this piece of advice, you might have developed a bad case of it yourself.

This is not to say that you have much human contact, though. Or any human contact at all.

It's probably obvious by now that you have plans and secrets. You're not going to reveal them. Not yet. Not by a long shot.

And, probably, only to him, when you're both good and ready.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 10:34 --

TT: When is your flight coming in?

TG: about that

TT: I see. You're standing me up.

TG: can we not do the date comparison

TT: Am I making you nervous?

TG: look im already getting shit from my dads bros

TT: I can take a picture if they want to know if I'm pretty.

TG: please stop

TT: You make this way too easy, Strider.

TG: okay the point is

TG: whats your game

TG: i have a weird feeling about this

TT: Go on.
TG: no dont start enjoying this
TG: this is not psychoevaluation time
TG: im serious
TT: Did you have a dream?
TG: what
TT: I think my question was fairly straightforward.
TG: no
TT: Strider.
TT: I'm not fucking with you right now.
TT: Did you have a dream?
TG: who cares dreams arent actually a thing
TG: theyre just
TG: brain puke
TT: That's an interesting way of putting it.
TT: But you're wrong.
TG: look id have to go on my own and your mom might get all weird
TG: like were online dating or something
TG: do you get that
TT: Hmm.
TG: dont
TG: no hmming
TT: Hmmmmm.
TG: seriously
TG: fuck
TG: if itll stop you hmming
TG: i hate dc
TG: i hate just sitting in the hotel room
TG: but i just dont fucking know
TG: like whats your deal
TG: are you a serial killer maybe
TG: going to turn me into a skinsuit
TG: put me in a hole
TG: listen to bad music and dance in a stridersuit
TT: Please stop referencing Silence of the Lambs.
TT: We're talking about our first date here.
TG: its not
TG: but
TG: anyway
TG: ill be next tuesday
TG: 815pm or something
TT: I'll pick you up.
TT: We have guest bedrooms. I won't make you cuddle with me.
TT: This time, anyway.
TG: ninja hackers dont cuddle rose
TG: we disappear into the night
TG: like shadows
TG: then find peoples embarrassing wizard fanfictions
TG: and post videos online of dramatic readings
TT: Even if someone did have embarrassing wizard fanfictions,
TT: You would be welcome to try to find them.
TG: awesome
TG: permission
TT: Sure.
TG: cool

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 10:58 --

You smile to yourself, count the days on your fingers casually, then look instantly up at the sound of the droids starting to move around downstairs. Now you're not smiling.

She's home.
You shut your laptop and snatch up your most current knitting project, a purposely ugly purse for her. Best to hide it until it's done, so she can see all the work you put in to achieve the maximum effect of absolute tackiness, and you can see the look on her face as well. If she sees it too early... well, she expects better of you than that. You stick it under a pile of skeins.

The droids chirp and clank behind her as she heads up the stairs, a sharp tick against each marble stair as the stiletto heel strikes it. You pointedly don't shut your door. You don't look away, or make any pretense of anything but hyper-vigilance around her. It's not weakness. It's the game.

You see her face first, her sharp smile. Her eyes flash onto your face, then her hair, her perfect hair, it sets your teeth on edge. Even if you didn't know for sure, even if there was a sliver of doubt, you would know. She's too vain to hide it. She is what she is and she loves being it.

Even if you couldn't see past the Snow White fair skin and dark flowing locks like something out of genuinely terrible fanfiction, not like yours, you would know. You would see the way she shimmers and the colors in her eyes and the highlights in her hair, the way a shattered rainbow desperately flashes through every inch of her façade like a warning to all who might come close.

She's not human.

"My Rose," your mother drawls, pleased, and strokes her fingers, her fingernails, more like claws, through your long blonde hair she makes you keep as an obvious and trite reminder that you're hers, and you hate her, you hate her, you hate her.

But you smile again as she releases you and strides away.

You open your laptop, disconnect from the wifi, and plug the USB hidden in the pendant around your neck into the computer. There's no point in impatience, in worry, in fear. It's always been you against her, and a chessboard full of pieces only you can look on to and direct from a distance so far no one but you would be able to see.

You begin typing the moment the command prompt finishes loading and the encrypted channel opens.

_We're on track. Nine days. I would tell you to expect us but you seem to already. Enjoy your lone island vacation while it lasts. Soon you'll have tourists to deal with._

You close the window, eject the USB, clasp it around your neck, and easily reach for your knitting as though nothing at all is, or has always been, wrong.

--

As it turns out, no one really cares if you go to visit Rose.

For some reason you find this incredibly weird. No, actually for like seven reasons. Dad usually crams you in a room with Cesar and puts Herb in charge of not letting either of you burn the hotel down, and Rose's mom by your best guess is probably a huge bitch and control-freak who wouldn't go all oh hey Dave Strider come on in and violate my daughter, have some free condoms. Not that you're planning on violating anyone, or touching anyone, or even looking twice at anyone. It's just way too easy.

Maybe everyone thinks you're gay. You try not to think about that, not that there's anything wrong with that. (You're pretty sure Cesar and Herb are dating, anyway, so who cares.)

You're packing, which is nothing new, this shitty Austin apartment is just a parking space for your
bullshit, and you have Pandora blaring and the billboards outside are flashing. You don't think about impressing anyone as you grab stuff. You don't think about good shirts or bad shirts because you wouldn't have bad shirts, fuck no. You're cool. Your instincts are cool so your choices are cool.

You do throw in a suit. You don't think too hard about that either.

Eminem's rapping up a storm. Storm wishes she could make this kind of weather event happen, and Zeus is like oh shit let me just give my lightning to this sucker. You don't even like Eminem that much but you have to give him props because the guy can lay down some sick rhymes. You think his beats suck, though. Maybe one day you'll try this shit out. It can't be that hard if faygo-chuggers like ICP do it.

You have ignored the fuck out of ICP on your Pandora. They still show up sometimes. Fuck those guys.

Em's handing people their asses left and right, movie stars, politicians, like this is an ass line during the great ass depression, and you almost crack a smile or a smirk or something, but stay cool, when you hear the audio cut out. A woman's voice drawls, "OBEY. LISTEN TO YA MASTERS. SAVOR YA SLAVERY, MA PETS."

There isn't a word for the reaction you have. Not one you know. If you didn't think Rose would think you were totally fucking psycho and be raring to slap a diagnosis on you, you'd ask her if she knew a word for it.

You have finally lost your shit. Your shit is lost. You put that shit down for one second and then you turned around and where the hell is it now, who knows, your shit is LOST like the show with the polar bears.

You turn to look at your computer, eyeing it like it might explode. Then you exhale, slowly, set down the t-shirts, and approach it, looking more closely at the screen.

The song's still running but there's no track playing, just a humming sound you can barely hear, and a mechanical chirp here and there. Obviously your Pandora is fucked up beyond recognition.

...And so are the ads.

CEASE REPRODUCTION. TRUST ONLY IN YOUR CORPORATE OVERLORDS. SURRENDER AND SLEEP. PEACE WILL COME TO YOU THROUGH OBEDIENCE.

You slam the laptop shut without thinking, and get back to packing. You shut your eyes hard when you can't get the voice out of your head, when the taste of acrid fear and vomit are at the back of your throat. You are too cool for this. For crazy. For conspiracy theories. For batterwitch nutjob shit.

Your PDA goes off.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 09:58 --

TT: I can't pick you up myself. I know you were looking forward to it. Deeply sorry.
I'm sending you a fancy car instead.

TT: But I'm going to need some help.

TT: There's a protest tomorrow. BCCcorp Maryland. Meet the driver, he'll get you here.
I'm on a tight timeframe, though, so if we could banter less today and get to the point that'd be great.

TG: uh

TG: what does the protest thing have to do with

TG: anything??

TT: A good question.

TT: Do you know how many protests have successfully made a stand at Crockercorp or its subsidiaries, Dave?

TG: no

TG: again

TG: what the fuck

TT: None have.

TT: No protests. No strikes.

TT: You have no idea how important this is.

TG: is this one of those oh no they add chemicals to their whatever

TG: or technology is scary or whatever

TG: because you know thats bullshit

TG: serious bullshit

TG: like the pile of shit behind bull lawyers

TG: that serious of bullshit

TT: Dave.

TT: I need you to trust me.

TT: There's got to be something you can do to take out BCCorp MD's security.

TG: why

TG: i get it

TG: hippies

TG: but

TG: are these good hippies or bad hippies

TG: are they going to blow shit up

TG: holy shit are you a terrorist
TG: why am i even surprised
TT: Strider.
TT: Play stupid if you want.
TT: But I know you've seen it. All around us.
TT: Her shit.
TT: I know you're smarter than you'd ever let on.
TG: the fuck is that supposed to mean
TG: im smart
TT: Smarter than that, then.
TT: I didn't want to do this. Not this early.
TT: But if I have to, I will.
TG: oh god
TG: what

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] ceased pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 10:04 --

-- godelsGirl [GG] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 10:04 --
GG: hi dave!
TG: what
GG: my name is jade.
TG: what the fuck.
GG: hahaha, you kids these days.
GG: dave, you need to wake up!
TG: rose put you up to this right
GG: rose is trying to help all of us.
GG: you don't need to fight it so hard, i promise
GG: it's okay to believe
GG: and we're all here to work on this together!
TG: sorry you still lost me
TG: are you uh
TG: are you jade english

GG: yes!

GG: now do you remember those files you found?

GG: the code i wrote!

TG: um

TG: yes

GG: you're a smart boy :)

GG: i know you'll figure out the rest

GG: now trust rose

GG: she's a good girl

TG: hahaha

TG: do you even know her

GG: yes

GG: i'll see you soon, dave!

GG: happy travels!

TG: uh

TG: okay

TG: thanks

-- godelsGirl [GG] ceased pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 10:06 --

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 10:06 --

TG: is this shit for real

TG: jade english just pestered me

TG: you know my dad basically bounty hunts her tech

TG: obviously you know because you know everything

TG: which is fucking unsettling

TG: and youre dragging me into your shit

TG: seriously deep shit

TG: so you could tell me something
TG: anything
TG: what is going on whats this shit about bccorp
TG: we could go to jail
TG: were both too pretty for jail
TG: answer dammit i swear i am just going to stay the fuck here
TG: my ass stays in austin
TG: enjoy hacking security mainframes by yourself
TT: I wouldn't ask you if it wasn't important.
TT: And,
TT: There are worse things than prison.
TT: Trust me or don't.
TT: You know how to find me.
TG: yeah

Something tugs in your gut.

*Why do you trust her?* Why does she matter so much to you for no goddamn reason at all? You'll never know.

TG: you cool?
TT: Yeah.
TT: Just help me with this.
TT: We haven't got time for the infodump now. I'll explain everything later.
TG: you know you just guaranteed youre gonna die right
TT: I should go.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] ceased pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 10:20 --
TG: wait
TG: rose
TG: shit

You're sweating. And it's not just the Austin heat.

What the actual fuck was that.

Something changes in your head. Like a video camera swinging rapidly away from its original focus.
You're disoriented, vision and focus blurred, you shut your suitcase and put it on the ground, climbing onto your bed and into the range of the fan to breathe in fresh air.

The stylish music technology of Pandora washes over you again. You wonder when you opened your laptop, but you're too drowsy to care.

You dream of Rose. The dream, as usual with brain puke, has completely shitty lighting like some sort of low-budget sci-fi show trying to cover up its mistakes. But she's costumed like an idiot, too, in some sort of purple princess dress, and she's not hot, even if you can't look away from her and you can't really talk because your throat just stops.

It's a stupid dream, you decide, in the midst of it, and close your eyes. What kind of dream would let you just freeze up and ignore the actually kind of hot chick in the princess dress? Fuck this dream.

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Days in the future, but not many...

An ANCIENT EMPRESS takes short steps to develop the battlefield advantage to ensure her rise.

"If you fuck this up, Jackie," she says as she looks over the maps strewn across her desk, "I'mma make you think death is the coolest option you coulda got. Hear me?"

"Yeah boss," Noir says. (He's annoyed. Who cares.) "We got it under control. Locked down tight. Old Lady's good as toast."

This is inane. The EMPRESS hangs up on him.

The picture of JADE sits on her desk, too, all carefree and childish and most of all human. She couldn't raise her daughters to be what she is, this world too soft, their bodies too weak and wrong.

Until now.

"Hope you're ready for Mama, my babies," she says, and sets the picture atop the maps as more a target than a keepsake.

For the first time in about a century, this whole thing is starting to feel right.

---

You get out of the gate at Reagan, for once on your own, and it feels completely fucking weird, but that particular ping of weirdness goes away pretty quickly once you see your name on a sign held by a robot.

Probably worth repeating that because you're stuck on it: your name, on a sign, held by a robot.

Okay then.

"Uh," you say to the robot, then you realize you don't even know if there's a point in talking to it but keep going because you've already started, "yeah. I'm Dave Strider."


It ignores you and keeps going, and you spot a sign; apparently it's taking you down to the luggage carousel. Whatever. You're going to try to tune this crazy out, no matter how weird it is. What the
fuck, Rose. *Robots.*

Now you're stuck at a luggage carousel with a robot that doesn't talk as far as you can tell, and no one seems to think anything of it, and yeah, robotics is totally a thing and you're decent at it but what the fuck, it's not exactly normal. Is it? Do most people have robots who drive them around and carry their luggage?

Homeschooling. You've heard it does this.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 20:38 --

TG: did you seriously send me a robot butler

TG: do you have robot butlers

TG: is this an east coast thing

TG: wait

TG: is this YOUR robot butler

TG: am i being led into a trap

TT: No.

TT: That is my robot butler, I promise.

TT: I would recommend being particularly careful around it, though.

TT: I'm not sure how long the reprogramming is going to hold.

TG: what

TG: seriously

TG: are you putting me in a car with a robot that might go homicidal

TG: WHEN ITS DRIVING THE CAR

TG: how is this a good plan

TT: I'm working with what I have.

It hits you, as your luggage appears on the carousel and the robot butler goes to fetch it, that none of this makes any sense. Again. You wonder how many times you're going to be reminded of that until your brain finally surrenders to the part where Rose's life is completely fucking insane and you're a part of it now.

TG: you got a minute

TG: i have some questions

TT: I don't, actually.

TT: I'll see you later.
You mentally write up a pop quiz for Rose McMystery herself.

*Question 1: Why are you sending me to BCCorp Maryland?*
*Question 2: Don’t you live in Treesville?*
*Question 3: What the actual fuck is going on, really?*
*Question 4: Do you really expect me to hack the security of the biggest corporation in the world?*

Unfortunately, that last one is both probably a yes and “there’s no time to ask that question right now” based on the crazy timetable she’s vaguely given you. Robot butler takes you to the towncar (yeah, that’s not conspicuous, thanks Rose) and you settle in the back, plugging your wifi enabler into the USB port of your laptop. The main issue here is going to be untangling who supplies the security.

Which is in fact what the issue turns out to be. Fifteen minutes into the drive you’re just about grinding your teeth, then you instinctively alt-tab through your stuff to see you have an explorer window open with the .~ath files from Jade English.

Except there’s a .jpeg there now along with the others. There’s no way that was there before. How could there be a .jpeg in there, you would have previewed that shit immediately.

You’re grumbling about the Old Lady out loud like your dad does, so you stop, swear at yourself for being stupid, then open the fucker.

There it is – a logo of a shield and spikes in a disturbingly familiar pairing of red and white – your eyebrows raise above your shades – and a tablet-drawn smiley beside it. You pause, and exhale.

You get it.

She doesn’t answer, so you’re not going to acknowledge that happened. Or the reaction you’re having to having even reached out to her. Nope. You still don’t have a crush on the Old Lady. That would be too weird even for your life right now.

The .~ath files, based on just a skim, are nothing good for anyone who runs them, but what else is new, they’re .~ath files. Some quick research into the BCCorp databases and subsidiaries gives you a name and logo that matches perfectly to the one on your screen: Imperiacorp.

Whipping up a virus and a file to hide it in is easy enough. Breaking through the encrypted network their IT is hardly competent enough to protect from you and sending it as an update to all of their computers is an equal fucking cakewalk, ironically enough.

You grin to yourself. Just for a second. You are *so. good.* You are so good Hacker Jesus would let you go ahead and walk on water first. Go ahead, you rad motherfucker, he’d say. You earned it.

TG: think i got it
TG: your hippie friends putting flowers in guns yet
TG: still not entirely sure what these files do
TG: not sure i want to
TG: jade scares the shit out of me
TG: guess well see
TG: hey
TG: you too busy singing we will overcome over there or what
TG: whats going on
TG: do you mind telling me shit now
TG: think i earned it
TG: just pulled off some seriously sick shit

TT: Later, Strider.
TG: christ
TG: are you serious
TT: STRIDER.
TT: LATER.
TG: well
TG: shit
TG: okay

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 21:30 --

She shouted at you. Well. "Shouted." Rose can get angry. That stuns you a little, no lie.

You're starting to worry that if she starts to answer questions that you'll just have more and things will get even more fucked up.

Ignore it, you decide. Enjoy the scenery. Or look at the code you sent to the world's biggest everything to see exactly how badly you just fucked up your life for some girl you've never met in person.

Yeah. No. That's not happening.
Check it out. There are trees outside.

--

*Hours in the past, but not many...*

On a pacific island, an ELDERY REVOLUTIONARY walks in the jungle with no less than five computers on her person, like a reasonable person.

She adjusts the soothspecs on her face. She has a young friend to reassure.

-- godelsGirl [GG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 19:01 --

GG: rose

GG: there are 30 of them

GG: and you have dave on your side

GG: i know you trust him

GG: what else is there to do?

GG: the plan is in motion.

TT: I can't sit here and wait.

TT: There has to be something else I can do.

GG: they'll be there soon.

GG: you'll be able to do plenty for them from your computer. remember, i am giving you access to the grounds controls.

GG: and you are well-armed, it's safe to say. :)

GG: don't you think?

TT: Is it unreasonable to worry?

TT: To feel helpless?

TT: Even with all the plans we've made, and how well-armed I am, as you say.

It makes the REVOLUTIONARY smile, sadly, and think on childhood losses and anger burning more brightly than the heart of any volcano.

She speaks.

GG: not at all.

GG: that's what she does.

GG: she makes you question yourself.
GG: but all you need to do is take heart.

GG: remember who you are.

GG: i know you know that quite well.

TT: Sometimes I'm not so sure, Jade.

GG: if you can't trust yourself.

GG: then trust me.

GG: before we go ahead with this plan

GG: you need to know that i am so proud of you.

TT: Jade.

TT: Stop it.

GG: it's okay!

GG: everything is going to be okay, rose.

GG: i saw them safe and sound.

GG: trust in skaia's knowledge.

GG: it sees and knows.

TT: Maybe I'm too selfish for this,

TT: Too weak.

TT: I'm afraid.

TT: For all of us.

GG: you are the furthest thing from selfish.

GG: take care of yourself and dave.

GG: he'll need you.

GG: i believe in both of you. that we can do great things. that we can stop the witch in her tracks.

GG: you believed in me. let me believe in you.

TT: I will, Jade.

TT: Thank you.

GG: i will see you soon, rose.

TT: I can't wait.
She looks into the sky. She sees, and she knows.

Things aren't as clear to her as they once were, her eyes and her reflexes gone weary, but there are very few tricks up her MOTHER's sleeve that she hasn't seen over the course of a century.

Skaia hasn't told the REVOLUTIONARY. She just knows.

"Come and get me," she says. She knows what needs to be done.

The BOY must be shielded from the witch. She goes.

--

You look outside at the compound grounds, where drones and employees usually mill through, and you smile down at the sight.

For once, the sun setting on BCCorp Maryland, the place you've called home your entire miserable life, is a welcome sight. Because it'll be the last time you'll lay eyes on a sunset from confinement. You and Jade have worked too hard on this, risked so much, and you may do your best to be hardened and cynical but you're still sixteen. You have to grudgingly admit to yourself, if nothing else, that your main hope in this relies on the unfairness of your aforementioned miserable life being dictated by a series of choices for some reason made by an alien psychopath.

You have to believe Jade. She's never lied to you. In a world built from manipulation and thoroughly gaslit, she's one of the only people you've even considered trusting.

(Of course, you can trust your mother to behave certain ways. You can trust the employees and the drones to studiously ignore you, at least until ordered otherwise. But that's a different kind of trust.)

The butler picked up Dave, and he's on his way to you, working on the hack. You don't want to think about the kind of trust you have in him right now, the kind you've placed in his hands, because it's still impossible to tell if it's valid. He could turn at the last second.

You really, really don't want to think about that. It makes you nauseous, for so many reasons.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering godelsGirl [GG] at 20:30 --

TT: Are we go?

TT: I thought they were supposed to be here.

TT: Should I reach out to Luke?

TT: Jade.

TT: You're worrying me.

TT: Please let me know how it stands on your end.

TT: Jade?

TT: Are you all right?
GG: i only have a moment, rose
GG: go to your computer
GG: i'll install the controls for the grounds
GG: luke will contact you
GG: i love you.
GG: now take heart. go.

TT: I,
TT: Yes.
TT: I'm ready. Thank you.
GG: <3
TT: <3

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] ceased pestering godelsGirl [GG] at 20:35 --

You breathe in and out. You remind yourself there's a plan. You remind yourself you have no choice.

You open your laptop and click to open the grounds controls setup Jade gave you access to. It's time to get to work; you're not going to have the time to do all this when Dave and everyone else's efforts make it blatantly obvious what's happening.

-- parisBound [PB] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 20:38 --

PB: Rose
PB: We're here
PB: Your friend with the code
PB: Has he got it under control
TT: He will.
PB: Might be difficult to get on the property if security isn't down
TT: Yes, that's a fair assessment.
PB: Are you sure he can do it
TT: Absolutely.
PB: What now
TT: As long as you follow the strategic positions we discussed. I'll make way for you.
TT: Do you trust me?

PB: Definitely

PB: You make a good Patton, Rose

TT: You have no idea. I'll see you out there.

PB: :)

-- parisBound [PB] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 20:38 --

You settle in with the controls. The gates are the most obvious thing, but opening them would tip off security, and at this point that's the last thing you want to do. What would probably be your best bet is disabling the electric fence instead.

There it is. You smirk, and cheerfully disengage it.

Other things you can do – this is like playing Sims except it's letting you undermine your mother's empire, how great is this? – include: locking down the drone base in the main building so no reinforcements can be called, lowering the oxygen levels in the security wing so as to throw off the humans involved just slightly enough, that kind of thing.

As fun as this is, though, now it's probably worth checking to see if you've captchalogue and packed everything you need or want ever again. Somehow you think you're not going to be able to sneak back here to pick up something you forgot.

You're dizzy as you look through your things, convincing yourself to leave your yarn behind, that skeins are replaceable even if they are just the right shade. Unlike that of the security guys, the lightheadedness isn't because there's less oxygen being pumped through the vents. This is it. This is it.

You're on your way out.

Finally, you stare at your placronym where it sits propped up as a reminder of why. You captchalogue it.

Dave is signed on, not idle, so he must be working at the hack, and you don't want to interrupt him, because for once something more important than trolling Dave is happening. You pace. You thumb your needles nervously and think about kicking dents in your wall. And, finally, you snap.

It's been sixteen and a half years. You have waited too long.

You throw yourself in the computer chair and the freedom of it all is intoxicating. *Here we go.* You lock the doors on the human security first. You open the gates. Then you kill the power.

Yes, there's a backup generator. But it'll take a minute to come back up, and that's just enough time, considering how dark it is right now.

Enough of that. You captchalogue your laptop, put on your HUBTOPBAND and flip the night vision capabilities on, shouldering your backpack. There shouldn't be drones in the house at this hour, probably, considering your mother isn't home and technically they think you're locked in, which you never actually are.

You sneak out and then HOLY FUCK you were wrong and there's a drone. You think there's a
serious possibility you're going to have to blow it up and everything is going to go to hell in here, because when one drone is in this house, there are at least five, and you can take them all out, but everything they see she sees and you are totally doomed.

Its camera takes you in and it moves forward to take you into custody, you can tell, and you just want to scream like a child because this is like every escape attempt you've ever had when you were seven, eight, nine, eleven, thirteen –

But it stops. It whirrs. You scan it with the HUBTOPBAND. It's on sleep mode.

Oh. Oh.

He did it.

A smile crosses your face and your stomach turns, but this nausea is different. This is good nausea. Because Dave came through for you, and you are so incredibly fucking elated that he did and you can't say a word because he'd never let you forget it, but you don't care.

Your heart is beating hard, from fear, from intense joy, all of it. You rush past the drone. There are two more on the stairs, likely having been alerted by the first one, but you ignore them because they're just as asleep. From a window on the first floor you can see the flash of Skaianet weaponry and red and white shrapnel flying through the air, and that terrifies you on an instinctive level because things are going too well.

You strain to look out the window, and that's when you see the bodies.

You know better than this. You do. You knew that people were going to die, you were supposed to be able to deal with this. People are dying at her hands, you remind yourself. We have to make sacrifices to make her stop.

A voice in the back of your head chimes in: Or just make sacrifices to get you free?

You shunt the thought away, because the lights have gone back up, the human security guards are out there, and things are getting really unpleasant. You have to step in, you do, even though things might really go to hell if Heiress v 2.0 shows up to kick ass and take names.


You have nothing to lose, nothing to do but lass scamper the fuck out there.

It's a battlefield out there, quite literally; the power's back on, so is the propaganda signal, and the guards have basically no resistance to it. You can't see Luke, who Jade assured you sticks out, being over six feet tall and also fully capable of wielding two electrified short swords of Jade's own invention, but that's probably just because he's busy having a reasonable discussion with, or physically dominating, the biggest two or three security guards out there.

Or possibly not. Because a fairly large one has just spotted you.

You freeze despite yourself – just this once – then you let the adrenaline take over and a smile crosses your face for a moment.

"Do we have a problem?" you ask him, and show him the THORNS OF OGLOGOTH.

He makes the mistake of laughing at you, so you disarm him, throw him to the ground, choke him out a bit, and dislocate his shoulder. Then the HUBTOPBAND warns you that you're not alone
again, which seems redundant considering the whole battlefield thing until you hear gunfire in your direction. You instinctively deflect it with majjyks.

That stops the gunfire for a few seconds, both because they realize it's not helping and that you have majjyks and what are they up against exactly?

Apparently they don't realize who they're working for.

All the better, really. You smirk, and advance on them.


TG: think i got it

Strider is pestering you. REALLY?

You suppose it isn't totally fair of you to complain, considering, but what timing.

TG: your hippie friends putting flowers in guns yet
TG: still not entirely sure what these files do
TG: not sure i want to
TG: jade scares the shit out of me
TG: guess well see
TG: hey
TG: you too busy singing we will overcome over there or what
TG: what's going on
TG: do you mind telling me shit now
TG: think i earned it
TG: just pulled off some seriously sick shit

Okay, two of them are down. That's a start. You can answer now.

TT: Later, Strider.

TG: christ

TG: are you serious

Shit, that one got back up.

TT: STRIDER.

TT: LATER.

TG: well
You make a point of kicking that last guard in the balls.

Oh, fuck, this feels good. You think you could be into this kind of thing. The fresh air – the THORNs in your hands, finally crackling with power – the rebellion, here, on your doorstep, to help you – the destiny of it all, just as Jade said – wait. Jade. She hasn’t pestered you in ages.

You start to speak, to pester her, but another guard comes at you, a faster one now, and there’s no time, you’re being fought into a corner.

There’s a horrible electronic shrieking sound a second later and half the combatants throw their hands over their ears, and you fight through it, tie this guard’s hands up, and try to think past it. You glance at your wrist and exhale, grinning for an instant. The light has stopped pulsing.

The signal is down.

Shouting breaks out instead of fighting, shoving and arguments, less bloodshed, and you’re starting to wonder if maybe there’s a way to get everyone, most everyone, out of here – climb on top of something and use majjyks as a bullhorn to rally the people, maybe? How cliché – then gunfire rings out again and there’s screaming, high-pitched, and chaos breaks out worse than ever.

This day, you swear to the Old Gods. You go to save some people’s asses.

Dave, where are you – no, you can’t think about that, not right now –

One moment you’re in the fray, breaking a security officer’s arm and knocking him out, then the next there’s a blinding light and the most horrific kind of screaming and the smell of burnt hair and scorched rubber and sulfur, and

There’s blood on your face and your clothes and you blink and swipe it off the lens of your HUBTOPBAND, slowly, because you can barely move through the shock and confusion. What, why, how, why are there bodies for a hundred feet or more around you, why has everyone turned to shoot up, up into the sky, where –

It’s a ship. A spaceship. It’s red, and white, and huge. Her mark is there. You can feel her, there.

Strider again. You look, because it’s better than this.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 21:38 --

TG: holy fucking shit

TG: what was that

TG: i was joking about the terrorist thing

TG: you didnt actually blow shit up did you

TT: How far are you?
TG: just saw a nuke go off or whatever
TG: 5-10 max
TT: Meet me by Building 38C.
TT: Don't worry, Strider.
TT: We've got this.
TG: to be worried
TG: id have to have any clue whats going on
TG: so
TG: cool
TG: all good here
TT: See you soon.


You think that's the longest you can pretend that any of this is okay.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering godelsGirl [GG] at 21:43 --
TT: Jade.
TT: I don't know where you are,
TT: Or if you're all right.
TT: But she killed them.
TT: She'll kill us all.
TT: I think it's over.
TT: I'm sorry.
TT: I love you, too.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] ceased pestering godelsGirl [GG] at 21:44 --

You impatiently brush tears from your face and run for 38C, over and past bodies of people you didn't know but knew of you and fought for you, or who had no clue who they were working for, actually.

You have another message, from Jade, hopefully, or, no, no no no no fuck

-- )(er Imperial Condescension [](IC] began trolling terminalTelesilla [TT] at 21:47 --
You falter and take steps back and you hate yourself for it, pushing yourself to stand your ground as you see her step off the fucking ship about a hundred feet away, readying her cameraphone at you like you're going to high school prom.

Her trident is bloody. Fuck do you not want to open the link. But you have to.

You're trembling when it loads. Jade. This is not okay. Jade. You can't let this go unpunished. You have to avenge her. You have to. It rages in your head, the echo of the throes.

You look past the photo of Jade, crumpled, bleeding, to your MOTHER, still captivated in fury and unwilling to admit that this all could fail even when Skaia knows.

She snaps a picture of you. You stare at her, speechless in guilt and vengeance, and that's when you see it. Either she doesn't care or she can't control it, or the propaganda signal was doing part of the work for her – whatever the reason, she's now essentially visible as what she truly is. Even you aren't prepared for what you're seeing, honestly. It's the most open she's been in years.

All of this is the most open she's been in years.

"Gills," you say, skeptical. "Gills and... and magical rainbow auras. And... is that a third eye?"

"Rose," she answers, gently, grinning, smirking, taunting, all of it, somehow. You may be snarking but your body can't decide how to handle it, to cry, to collapse in terror, or to fly at her in rage, so you wind up just staring at her in the most potent impotent rage possible. "Roooooose," she calls. "Come to Mother."

"You killed her," you say, flatly. She's winning, and that makes you hate her more than ever. "You killed Jade. After everything – she – YOU WON. She was forced out, in hiding, why would you even hurt her, this was my idea – mine! Why would you need to – want to – you fucking monster!"

"All of this – " She gestures at the bloodbath, and there's another blast of light and screaming and you fight off tears desperately – "All this, baby, and you have to ask why?" She follows your gaze to the blood dripping from one side of her trident. "Girls like you, discipline's key."

Oh, shit. Your face is flushing now. You have no control. At least in the rage and the throes you can live with yourself, for now. "You can try to kill me if you want." You draw the THORNS again.

"But I think all my patience with your stupid game has earned me first shot. Have I not earned your respect yet?"

"Ain't about respect." She eyes the THORNS. "I knew you could do it, both of you, and you know that. And I know you know why-y," she finishes in a sing-song, her eyes narrowing.

"This is stupid," you interrupt, sharply. "Do I get first shot or not?"

"Oh come on, let's enjoy this, Rosie – "

"Don't call me that!" You lash out with powers from the Void.

You expected her to react better to that, pleased, even, but she doesn't take well to it, her mouth
pressing into a firm line. Power crackles from her fingers in near-blinding, flickering colors as she
smashes your attack aside. Ridiculously, you think of what Dave's stupid metaphor might be, and –
*what the hell, Rose?* – anyway –

"You're right, I could kill you too," she drawls out, gestures grandiosely, and the GodCat appears
next to her. You huff despite yourself; you hate that thing, and it hates you, and this is just insult to
injury. "Oh, who am I kidding, baby? I kinda have to, don't I."

"Oh my god, shut up and try or go back to Mars," you say. It's not remotely clever but you're too
pissed off to care that much.

"Not from Mars, *Rose*, and you know it," she answers without missing a beat, and smirks. "Right?"

Fucking taunts. You attack her again and again and again, and you can't even tell if it's getting past
her defenses, but you don't care. You don't care that a small voice in the back of your head is
suggesting you're becoming more like her than you want to. You don't care. *You don't care.*

Your MOTHER lowers her hand; she remains untouched.

"Time to play," she says, and saunters towards you with that awful swing in her hips.

You take slow breaths.

This is it.

You catch one side of the trident in the THORNS and she spins it, you duck, you blast the trident out
from your grasp but of course it's in perfect condition, still, and she's so close that you just know, you
know this is it, and in one way, one way, this is freedom –

*No.*

You punch her in the face, which mostly just hurts your hand, then blast her away ten feet while
she's distracted by your audacity.

"You little *bitch*," she shouts at you. "*Not* the face!"

You chop your hair off with a lash of the THORNS, staring her down with a faint, probably totally
insane smile.

"Fuck you," you say.

She looks at you, mortally offended because your *precious hair* or whatever, her idiotic ego as usual,
then she laughs in a way that can only be described as wicked. Then she hits you with a rainbow
lightning bolt, seriously, and the next thing you remember you're on the ground, and –

Here we go again.

--

You have finally arrived at BCCorp Maryland, and promptly have begun to feel like a major asshole.
Like, holy fuck, yeah, this DAVE STRIDER guy is a douchebag, an awesome douchebag who can
do incredible things with a computer and survive in any wilderness, but a douchebag nevertheless.

You don't know if Rose is completely insane or whatever, and she probably is because she makes
barely any sense to you most of the time, but right now you are a douchebag for doubting her for
everything because there are definitely evil robots and a fuckton of dead bodies and a red and white
spaceship parked right over there.

"38C. 38C," you repeat urgently to the robot butler, and punch him in the arm without thinking to get him going faster. "Ow, fuck – "

"You have told me sir," the robot butler says.

"You can talk? Oh shit that doesn't matter just go faster," you say as fast as you can. "Hit the gas, motherfucker!"

The car jerks forward as he hits the gas and it plows over a few hopefully dead bodies – you cringe and really hope you didn't just kill some possible survivors, but most everyone looks pretty horribly ugly dead there so – before skidding across a courtyard and right up by the spaceship.

"Oh, shit, no, not by the spaceship," you shout at the fucking robot. "Dude no I did not sign up for aliens – "

"This is Building 38C," the robot butler says pleasantly.

"Well – shit!" There it is on the building. Doesn't look like you have a choice here. Dammit, Rose. You throw the car door open, climb out and just about run before you remember to tell the robot butler to "STAY HERE."

"Yes sir," the robot says, and turns the car off.

"LEAVE IT ON," you shout at him again, and take off running.

You stop dead when you see her. Them. Shit, fuck, damn, hell, holy motherfucking christ it's an alien with gills who you are definitely not having sexy thoughts about, and Rose is using magic wands? and you have a really horrible feeling about this because if that's – if that's –

You can't let yourself think about that.

Rose gets blasted to her feet by some kind of rainbow-y lightning strike from the fish-alien and you're shouting her name before you can stop yourself even though that's a recipe for getting a lightning bolt yourself and you fucking know it. The fish-alien's head turns to you and your instinct is to freeze – is that a third eye? Is it blinking? – until you break out of it and draw your sword.

"Oh sweetie," the alien drawls, "you got the wrong idea."

"Yeah well you aren't gonna kill Rose," you say, and it almost sounds like you're not terrified, which is surprising considering that you absolutely are. "I'll kill you first."

"Oh really, Dave?" HOLY SHIT SHE KNOWS YOUR NAME and that's when you start having a really hard time not admitting that this fish-alien might be Rose's "mom" and you don't really want to think about the implications of that any further, also not really the time is it. "Because I don't think so."

"Then let's do this, Aqua-Mom," you say, and ready your sword.

She considers that, tilting her head as she gazes at your sword, but Rose is stirring, and she glances her way instead. "...Later, boys and girls," she says, and blows Rose a kiss – and rainbow electric shit bursts from her fingertips and electrifies Rose, who starts screaming and twitching, and you rush forward but the alien's on you and slams you to the ground with the side of her trident to your head. Your sword clatters to the ground and jesus christ this is going badly, you realize, as she glides away
walking like Betty god damn Boop or something to her over-branded spaceship.

"What a bitch," you mumble.

The spaceship leaves. It takes you a few minutes to climb to your feet comfortably, and you probably have a concussion, but it's not like it's your first one. You walk to Rose and kneel by her; you're going to have to see if she's alive and you know it but god you don't know what the fuck you're going to do if she's dead. You touch her lips, accidentally, as you test to see if she's breathing, and in spite of yourself you flush because you're a teenager, dammit, and in person, asleep, even with a crazy-ass haircut, Rose is kind of hot.

This isn't exactly how you imagined your first meeting. But now that you think about it you can't imagine it turning out any other way, because, it's Rose for fuck's sake.

"Weirdest fucking day," you say to the unconscious Rose, and pick her up. "Come on. The robot butler's waiting for us."

--

You wake up. The last thing you remember is being flattened to the concrete, so lush bedding and soft lighting is surprising but not unpleasant. The first sound you recognize is the gentle clack of laptop keys, and you blink sunlight from your blurry vision, which finally shows you who's there.

"Dave," you call to him.

You startle the hell out of him. "Uh, hey," he says, turning around quickly, playing it cool. Does he think you're going to believe that? "You're up."

"Yes." You sit up, cringing and wincing at all the pain that's everywhere, and your head's still sorting itself out. "Should I... leave the questions for later, or..."

He hesitates. "I don't know. I figured you'd want food first."

"We're in a hotel," you conclude.

"Yeah," he says.

"Room service? Can we afford it?"

"Rose, I ransacked BCCorp Maryland's accounts, they won't be needing that shit anyway. Place is ruined," he says. "We're good. Also probably we're both in deep shit with the law. Or at least Crockercorp. Woohoo," he finishes in a deadpan.

"It's not a matter of 'probably,'" you say. You can't stop looking at him, but you're not out of it enough to just stare. It's just so good to see him. "We're on the run, Strider. Ready for it?"

"Something like that," he says. His eyebrows rise above his sunglasses. "You owe me, by the way. I saved your ass."

"Did you?" you ask dryly. "Really."

"Yeah," he says. "From a fish-alien."

You smile, in spite of yourself. "Do you know how insane that sounds?"

"Nothing crazier than what you say on a regular basis," he says. "You got everything you need from
that place, because I can mess their shit up again if you need somethin’ – "

"No," you say, immediately. You don't want to go back. It hurts to think about. "No, I'm fine."
There's a long, awkward pause, and he seems to be expecting you to say something. "You did it."

"Uh, yeah, and you have magic powers or something," he points out, clearly uncomfortable with this
idea. "What the fuck was that?"

"You never believed me, did you," you ask rhetorically.

"Who the hell would? It's Girl Interrupted, padded room crazy shit. And now I'm – " He cuts
himself off, and puts his hands up, then turns back to the laptop. "Whatever. Order breakfast. Lunch.
Whatever it is."


He doesn't turn around. "Yeah?"

You think it through, again. "Dave."

His shoulders relax. "Yeah."

"Thanks."

"Yeah," he says, quietly.

You pick up the menu and the phone, and avert your eyes from him. He needs time, even if your
time is running out. You can wait.

--

A century in the past...

An ANCIENT EMPRESS holds a human wiggler in her arms.

It disgusts her, as all such things do. She is not a jadeblood; she is not meant to care for things, to
keep them from dying. The glory of her race was – is – her only priority.

The wiggler is wiggling, appropriately, she supposes. The EMPRESS wishes she could throw it to
the ground and shatter it. But the power that's been given to her; the things she can do; the things that
she's seen; the things that she's done; the price she's had to pay for it; it's all led up to this, and what
will come far too soon after.

She has no choice. She must be ready, now. Humanity is frail, and will be easy to break.

The troll race will rise again. Her Master will bleed candy red and taste defeat, or she will at last find
freedom from a multiverse in which she serves no purpose.

It's too early to tell. But either way, she's gonna make him pay.
You step out of the shower, don't bother with more than that and a brush through your hair, and are a little grateful that Dave is completely distracted by something other than that you're naked under that towel when you leave the bathroom.

You didn't bargain for the crush lasting this long, for it being an actual real thing, or for lots of other things you're not willing to discuss even in the privacy of your own head.

You realize as you walk towards the bag of clothes you've bought that he's crouched by the bed, staring at something, so you approach him and look down.

"Crocker," he says quietly. "That's why you wouldn't tell me. I get it."

You don't think you can speak.

Your placronym must have gotten kicked out of your sylladex while you were rearranging things for space, because Dave's holding it like it might explode. He stands up, not looking at you, just looking at it – thank the Old Gods. He throws it into the air and in an instant his sword flashes out and the two pieces of your placronym go flying and clatter as they hit opposite sides of the room.

"That always looks way cooler in movies," he says, glancing back at the piece that's on the windowsill.

"Physics," you say, as casually as you can. "But it still looked pretty cool."

You can practically feel him smiling there. You hold onto your towel as you bend to pick up the nearest piece. Rose, it says.

"Pretty much the only part that matters, right?" he says flippantly.

It moves you. Deeply. Embarrassingly so. You would cry, if you weren't saving that for a full-blown Jade-related freakout. Instead, you say, "Lalonde."

"What?"

"Lalonde. Rose Lalonde." You look at him; he looks at you. There's a moment of silence, then you raise your eyebrows at him. "That's my name."

He's got that look on his face again, the one that mortifies you and confuses you but inevitably means nothing. Nothing can come of it. That's not what this story is, and you can't afford for it to be that story anyway. You should want it to stop. "Lalonde," he repeats. "It's a little pretentious. Works on you."

"You should talk," you say. There is a palpable shift between the two of you, then, which can easily be summed up as we both know I'm naked under this towel. Dammit, Dave.

You captchalogue the single piece of your placronym and go to pick some clothes out of one of the bags of clothes you bought earlier today, completely silent and ignoring the awkwardness, when he fumbles words out of his mouth, or at least one. "...Rose – "

"What?" you ask, delicately.

A steady pause, then. "Nothing."
It's clearly not nothing. You nod and go to get dressed, blow-dry your hair, and stare at yourself in the mirror. Your hair is crooked and ridiculous. You start to laugh, just for a second, then you're really and truly hit with all of what's happened, all of it, the good, the bad, and the absurd, and you can't stop.

Jade is dead. You're free! But Jade's dead! You're free but it's because your bitch alien batterwitch "mom" let you go, what's that about? Why has your awesome "defeat the alien empress" plan turned into a YA novel???

About a minute after you're starting to feel the giggle pain in your ribs, Dave knocks on the door. "Everything sane in there?" he asks.

Intellectually, you have to give him credit for even bothering. Intellectually, you know you have to answer, because it's the first time this has felt right and real in a long time. ...But you can't answer. You can't do anything. Your stomach wrenches and you sob, once, and go stiff where you stand.

"Rose?"

Oh god oh god oh god. If you open your mouth, if you move, it's going to happen. You don't want it to – you can't.

"Uh," Dave says from the other side of the door – he has his head up against it, you think, based on the muffled sound of his voice – "I'm checking out the pay-per-views. You, uh... take your time."

You don't have a choice. You open the door, slip past him, and retrieve your laptop from your sylladex. He watches you, wary and silent, as you look through the encrypted channel (to no avail). You will him to say something, to be an idiot, to be anything but this stranger, and –

"You need a haircut," he says. "An actual haircut. I'll go with you."

It's not what you expected him to say. It rarely is, though. The giggles threaten to start again, and you touch and tug at your short, crooked hair; you have quickly figured out that this reaction you're having is bad, and nothing good will come of it. "Yes," you agree.

"Somehow you're even weirder than I expected you to be," Dave admits, dryly enough.

It's automatic; you look up at him, into his shades, all sly and from under your eyelashes, and you say, "I'd figured that was part of the draw."

Dave's posture changes completely, from drawing closer to defense. "Come on," he tries.

It's a disappointingly lackluster response. "You used to be so good at this," you say, and push your hair behind your ears.

"What?" That snaps you out of it. You didn't realize what you were saying, the conversation you could have started, but he shakes it off anyway. "I. Uh. I don't know what you want to do now. After all this. But."

"But," you prompt him.

"But I'll help. Obviously."

"How do I – " He looks like he's going to say something, but stops himself, and starts again. "Look, yeah, you're fucked, I get that. In case you forgot, though, you dragged me into this, I did all that hacking, and I stole a shitton of BCCorp's money, so I am pretty good and fucked too."

You selectively answer from that pile of accusations. "Your dad and his bros have connections, right?"

Dave goes silent and guarded again. You wonder – "Too much coincidence," he says, rapidly. "They were after Jade's shit, all this time. I sided with her – with Jade, with you. I think I'm fucked on that front."

"He's your dad," you remind him, just as guarded.

"Adoptive," he answers immediately, and makes a face. "God, that sounds fucked up. I mean. I."

He's not going to say it. But it's written all over his face for anyone who knows or suspects the massive, and actually true, conspiracy behind all their lives. He knows it wasn’t right, that it didn’t fit, just as you knew your "mom" wasn’t right even before Jade told you the truth.

"Tell me this wasn't – some – " He looks away, pushes his shades just slightly up his nose. "Was the whole thing a plan? From the beginning? You knew I could hack and program. Jade knew, too, she – "

"Dave," you cut in, and pause; there's a hollow ache in your chest. "You really don't remember."

You've caught him totally off-guard, the one time you really don't want to. "Remember what?" he says.

"Tell me you remember something." You're being an idiot and you know it. "Anything, from the dreams, they have to be helping – please, tell me you're remembering – "

"The dreams?" he interrupts you, now, horrified. "Jesus, Rose!" He presses his face into his hands at first, then throws them in the air when it's not sufficiently indignant. "I'm fucking serious about this and you're pulling your Sabrina the Teenage Psychologist shit on me? What the fuck?"

"That is such a dated reference," you say, before you can help yourself. "Were you even old enough to read when that was on the air?"

"What the fuck," Dave repeats; his shades have slipped down his nose some in his frantic indignation, and you freeze at even an instant of direct gaze. "I am not fucking around, I want to know if you've got a little Dave chess piece you're moving around in some game against your sea-alien mom, and maybe just for once to know what the fuck is actually going on, since as far as I can tell all you're doing is checking your fucking e-mail – "

"I am not checking my fucking e-mail," you say, as neutrally as you can, and close your laptop pointedly. Your chest hurts, your throat burns, and you wish you could abscond. What are you supposed to do? Jade had plans about this, Jade knew how to deal with this, and that's why she killed Jade, because Jade knew what to do and how to – oh, god, Jade –

"Rose," he says, he says your name for the millionth time today, and you just picture your broken placronym, and – he's talking again. "Rose, come in, Rose, I'm trying to have a conversation with you when we're in the same room, how is it even harder to get answers out of you in person?"

"Because I don't have time to think up a pithy comment or a lie," you say, honestly, in the same mild tone.
"So tell the truth?" he suggests, not as nastily as he could, to his credit.

"The truth is – " Your throat feels raw now. "You already know the truth. You're... understandably having issues with it. But you know it."

"I can always count on you for riddles and bullshit, I'm not in the mood, Rose, fucking tell me the truth – "

"I am telling the truth," you snap back at him.

You wonder when he got so close to you, close enough that you can see the flush in his cheeks from anger (or whatever). He looks down at you, measured, and says, "Try harder to sound like a person who isn't taking crazy pills and then tell me the truth again."

There's really no plan you have in mind for what you're going to say, so it just sort of happens. "The truth is the world's going to end soon if no one does anything, and Jade and I needed people to help, and she knew about you, and I don't care if it pisses you off that this was part of a plan," you add in the middle there, "because it's worth it so the world doesn't end. And if you're going to call me insane again I'll remind you who my 'mom' is and that you saw her up close and personal."

"Yeah, fine," Dave snaps back, his face all pink now, "but you can't seriously think it's okay to just lie to me for a year and ruin my life, because – you could have told me."

"Jade was supposed to do this part," you say, your tone and words less sharp and barbed and weaponized than you wanted them to be. All you can see, now, you can't see Dave, you can't see your computer, not really, all that your brain's registering now is the image burned to your retinas of Jade skewered like she was a kabob on your mother's trident and left to die. "Jade had... she knew what to say. She had – "

Dave seems less surprised than you are when you start crying. It's ugly, and quiet, and you cram your hands over your mouth to keep from making any noise. There are a lot of tears even though you're holding back as best you can, and they're sneaking to drip off your fingertips and along rivulets of your skin, and it almost tickles. That's important to note. It's important to think about anything except what's happening.

You're frantically pushing the tears off of your face and there's this horrible, amazing tug in your stomach. You feel powerful. Incredible. It's like powering the THORNs, but at least ten times better, and you're almost ecstatic though it feels like your hands are on fire.

"Rose!"

Dave's grabbed your hands and your throat stops on a half-laugh, half-sob you didn't realize you were even suffering through, and he just looks at you steadily, shades all uneven on his face. "It's okay," he says.

"It's not even slightly okay," you say, "but I appreciate the comforting lie."

He doesn't look impressed at that. You don't care. "What are we going to do?"

"I'm getting a haircut, like you said." You hold onto his hands, gently, in return, and you swear you can feel his breath stop in his chest. "Then we get something to eat."

"Oh good," he says, deadpan. "An actual first date."

You raise your eyebrows at him, he stands his ground, and... that's it. You captchalogue your laptop
again, stand up, and sidle past him. "Got the card?"

"One card? Please. We have five."

"Then we're gold."

"They're mostly platinum, actually."

The corner of your mouth turns up, but you easily stifle it, pulling on your hoodie. "Grab a sweatshirt. You're not in Austin anymore."

"Tell me about it," he mumbles, and follows you out of the door soon enough.

--

You have things to do, so you finish up then head to the salon where Rose is getting her hair cut. They’re not done, for some reason. You pester her instead of just sulking at the situation, because she looks bored and not even slightly interested in making chit-chat with the hairdresser, and you are also incredibly bored.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 3:34 --

TG: tell me something

TG: about jade

TG: how did that happen

She reaches for her PDA and stays perfectly still, the screen at the perfect angle for both sight and typing.

TT: I see what's going on.

TT: You're incredibly transparent.

TG: you're actually being honest

TG: so maybe i finally want to know shit

TG: im not a total asshole

TG: dunno if you can wrap your head around that

TT: I get that. I know that.

TG: so tell me

TT: Fine.

TT: When I was ten, she sent me something. A USB that let me tap an encrypted channel.

TT: We've been talking ever since.

TT: She promised me she'd help me get out, that she knew I would, and that I had to.
TT: She told me I was right about my mother,
TT: That I was right about the propaganda signal.

TG: the what

TT: It's everywhere. It's in all broadcasts, over all audio, video, anything.
TT: You've heard it for what it is. I'm sure you have.
TT: There's nothing quite like that dead monotone voice.
TT: Or her voice. Are you telling me you never heard her voice?

TG: why do you think ive heard it

TT: Because you're special.

TG: oh jesus christ
TG: thats why you picked me
TG: im special
TG: rose that is so stupid

TT: I'm special. So are you. We're the only hope the world has.
TT: Deal with it.

TG: are you sure jade wasnt just full of shit or read too much animanga or shit
TT: I am sure she did not read too much animanga.
TT: You're going to have to trust me on this.

TG: so how are we going to save the world
TG: tell me that

TT: There are people. There's Jade's technology. And there's our particular skills.
TG: your magic my skillz got it
TG: no way we can take down bccorp though
TG: thats insane

TT: We're better-equipped than you'd think.
TT: We can talk about this more over dinner.

She glances over to you, that sly look on her face, and you have a hard time breathing for a second.


TG: i was thinking mcdonalds
TT: You don't even want to know what's in their food.

TG: what you're telling me that the batterwitch put people in the fries or something

TG: no way

TG: no wonder they're delicious

TT: I was thinking Korean, honestly.

TG: no

TT: I think you've been outvoted.

TG: how could I possibly be outvoted

TT: I'm the girl. And this haircut gets a vote, too, just for today.

TG: this isn't a date

TT: Are you sure?

Shit. You can practically feel her smiling over there.

TG: how long could that haircut possibly take

TT: That was a terrible deflection.

TG: we're supposed to keep the world from ending

TG: don't think flirting was part of Jade's plan

TG: was it

TT: Jade's gone.

TT: But we'll figure it out as we go.

TT: You need to take the encrypted channel. Find whoever's left.

TT: Find the hippies, as you call them.

TT: I have other plans.

TG: like what

TT: Like helping those Crockercorp's ruined everything for.

TT: I may send some of them your way,

TT: But there's a lot of them who can't reintegrate. Or who won't be safe out in the world.

TT: That's my job.

TT: You'll need to establish a base for the others.
TT: I suggest a big city. Somewhere they won't expect you to go.

TG: okay

TG: whatever

TG: ill look for "good places to create a revolutionary base"

TG: google should cover that right

TG: wikihow

TG: theres "how to dispose of a body" on there

TT: Are you going to contact your father?

Your thumbs freeze on your PDA.

TG: so how about that sports team

TG: and that weather

TT: Point taken.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] ceased pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 3:45 --

Eventually, later, you are at the damn Korean restaurant, because Rose always wins and there's no real point in arguing about something like this when you can be a stupid asshole about things even more pointless.

"We're going to pick up our stuff from the hotel and go," Rose says, picking at her food.

This food is delicious. You really weren't paying attention to anything she said before that. "Go where?"

"You're going to follow the channel and Jade’s notes to whoever can join us. Recruitment. I'm going back to Maryland and hoping there's something there. If not – I'll be around. You know where to find me."

"I think telling me nothing about where you're going to go means I won't." You pause as it sinks in. "Oh. Okay. Pesterchum. Got it."

She raises her eyebrows at you. "You're wearing those sunglasses in a restaurant."

Now you're defensive. "I like them. I bought them off of eBay."

"Really, that's how you got them?"

"What's wrong with eBay?" You're a little offended. "I've gotten awesome shit off eBay."

"Random dead things?" Rose guesses.

"How the hell could you know that?" This is always so weird. "Are you psychic? Are you a psychic witch now?"

"I saw some of them in your suitcase. Do you bring them with you everywhere or something?"
"I was pretty sure you were dragging me into serious shit and they're worth money. I didn't realize I was going to cash the fuck in here, so I'm not selling shit." You pause. "So this is it?"

"Yes." She looks at you, levelly, an attempt to look you right in the eye. Before you can stop yourself, you're looking over your shades in return. It takes her off-guard again, like she didn't expect you to meet her halfway; you kind of like that. "This is it."

"I knew it." You shake your head. "Cool. When the revolution comes, Rose'll be mysterious, makes sense to me, nothing new there."

"You resent that I'm leaving," she says slowly.

"I don't care if you're leaving," you say, before you can think of something less stupid to say. Then you add, "So long as you let me know what the hell is up."

"I will let you know what's up." She's looking at you with pity, almost, and searching your face for something that you can't imagine because you're not going to let her see shit, and anyway there's nothing going on. You're fine. "Dave. It's going to be fine."

"Yeah. I have no idea how any of this could go wrong." Why do you have that tone of voice? Jesus. You're losing control. You tamp that shit down. "You're full of shit, but whatever, I'm game. Nothing else to do when you're on the run from the law."

"I'm not leaving you behind," Rose says, steadily, and holds your gaze once you make the mistake of looking up from your plate. "Don't ever think that. I never – I never will."

You just stare at her, nod, and look down at your plate.

The two of you eat in silence, pay the check with a gold card, and you silently hand her the envelope. She looks inside and says nothing, so you take a deep breath and talk about programming until you get to the hotel.

Once you're packed, you look up to see her looking at you with a facial expression you don't think you've ever seen on a person's face. It's confusing. It's like a smile but really, really not like one. You don't know what to say or what to do, so you just check your hair like some kind of girl, so you must be really fucking stupid right now.

"See you later, Dave," she says. Before you can answer, she's engulfed you in a hug. You freeze, then slip an arm around her and pat her shoulder. Then she's stepped away as though nothing's happened, and you manage, "I'll see you," in a strained voice.

She smiles, just barely, that smile that cuts into you like you're some kind of moron who actually takes Rose Lalonde seriously, and you put up your own defenses, a quirk of the corner of your mouth. She turns to leave, and, once the door is shut behind her, you shut your suitcase and take a deep breath.

Time to go save the world.

You are so not ready for this.

--

Technically, you never wanted to come back to Maryland.

The thing is, more than anything, you want to honor Jade's memory and carry on her work. And that
means going back to Maryland.

It's not a particularly long trip. The robot, who you have affectionately dubbed Nigel Metalbury, drives you the entire way without a single complaint, as he is a robot. It occurs to you about halfway through the trip that you really need to learn how to drive if you're going to try to save the world, as classy as it would be to be the chosen one to save the world who's driven by a robot chauffeur.

Your favorite part of the trip is repeatedly going through the credit cards Dave got especially for you, as Rose Lalonde is emblazoned on each of them.

You're you. And you're smiling, vividly, even if it's not visible from the outside.

BCCorp Maryland is still practically a crater. The bodies have been cleared, and probably incinerated. You've been there when she's burnt bodies before, and the smell is horrific. She must have taken them elsewhere, though, because none of the smokestacks are going.

No one is here, that you can see. Either she's taken everything offsite, or this is a trap, or both. You have the distinct feeling that this might be a trap, actually. The fault with that idea is that she let you and Dave go – if she wanted you dead, you'd be dead. You have never claimed to understand Fish-Alien Mom's machinations, though.

There's too many buildings on this compound. You're going to be here all night, and maybe at least part of tomorrow. There's a reason you bought energy drinks before you left, even if you hate them on principle. You like sleep, most of the time.

You start at 37A. For some reason, this is the first building at BCCorp Maryland, which bodes interestingly for how many other compounds there must be. It's a small building, at least, ostensibly just the guard house on the lower level(s?) and labs on the floors above.

Best to get the guards out of the way early, you figure, if there are any. If any survived. If you had any doubt she had no regard for human life, the wholesale slaughter of her own employees-slash-slaves sealed it.


How did you manage to survive?

A question for another time. For now, you arm yourself.

The guard rooms are mysteriously empty. The cameras are still going. Are they recording? You look around and hope you can check without bothering Dave. Yes. They're still recording.

Do you want to be seen by her? You almost do – fuck her – but it'll undermine your plans.

You turn on speech-to-text. Hands-on is not going to work for you here.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 9:45 --

TT: I need you to hack Maryland's system with the program I gave you. Kill the cameras.

TG: theyre still on

TG: why
TT: She knew I’d be coming back. Probably wants to watch me lass scamper everywhere.

TT: Kill the cameras.

TG: what’s the magic word

TT: Password 123.

TG: fine whatever

TG: for someone all ladylike you suck at manners

TT: You think I’m ladylike?

TT: Is that the adjective that comes to mind?

TG: nope

TG: not doing this

TT: As you will.

TG: killed the cameras

TG: you know i’ve got shit up too

TT: Yes. I do.

TG: so

TT: So I need help.

TT: I’m going to need help sometimes.

TT: I learned that some time ago.

TG: okay

TG: rose

TT: Yes.

You’re halfway up the stairs (no elevators for you, that’s for damn sure) when he answers.

TG: fuck

TG: dont want to start this shit again

TG: but

TG: dreams and shit

You stop dead.

TT: Tell me.
TG: aren't you busy
TT: I want to know.
TG: weird shit
TG: not to go all wizard of oz
TG: but you were there
TT: And?
TG: we died
TT: Normal reaction to high stress.
TT: I’m not surprised.
TG: we came back

You breathe slowly.

TT: Hmm.
TG: great
TG: brought the hmm on myself now
TG: cant complain this time
TT: I should go.
TT: I heard something.
TG: k
TT: More later.
TG: cool

You didn’t hear a damn thing. You just needed out.

Actually, you don’t hear anything. At all. It’s too quiet. It’s not even a classic movie trope joke; it’s too quiet, and you feel like something or someone is watching you, for no discernible or logical reason.

You do know to at least consider your instincts, as your intellect is very useful but not exactly completely flawlessly correct at all times.

You go to the next floor. Everything is pitch dark in the hallways, at least; there should be windows in the rooms based on a skim of the building outside, but it is night, so it likely won’t help much. You’re going to need some kind of light source if you don’t want something to sneak up on you and kill you, as that would be a major anticlimax after all the surviving you’ve been doing. You break out your HUBTOPBAND and hope the software Jade gave you to access the compound’s security and power will work on it.

It doesn’t. And even if it’d be useful to have light, you’re not particularly keen on your only option
for getting it, which would be talking to Dave, right now. You turn on the night-vision on your HUBTOPBAND.

The first door you try is open. Everything is still, silent, and dark, no windows, and you’re just waiting for the inevitable jumpscare. This is not a horror movie, this is not OH GOD you just tripped over something.

You look down. It’s an arm. It’s very clearly an arm. It’s an arm with grey skin and claws and crusted dark red blood on the stump that used to be connected to the shoulder.

You take a deep breath, lift your gaze and your foot, and step over the arm.

This room distinctly smells like death, rotted flesh and formaldehyde, you realize; someone was attempting to mask it with something sweet but soft, less perfume or air freshener than something floral piped through vents. It almost worked, but not quite, and as you walk through the lab tables you see that there are no end to the body parts, most of which are preserved. You’re starting to suspect someone was doing something with the arm when everything went wrong, dropped it, and ran for their life, considering what happened here days ago. Other than the arm on the floor, though, this is disturbing but completely orderly, for a lab full of body parts.

There’s an actual sound, distant, on the same floor. To your credit, you do not jump.

TG: btw

TG: busted the encryption

TG: you let me remote into your machine and your headband ill give you access easy

TT: Dave.

TT: I’m still at the Maryland compound.

TG: hey look trying to help

TG: besides you wanna be busted

TG: not like batterwitch

TG: wait oh shit

TG: this is what i mean

TG: the nsa is gonna be on my ass now

TG: encryption

TG: good thing

TT: I need my computer to see.

TG: i can turn the lights on

TG: did you not just mention asking for help is good

TG: yeah you did
TT: I remember.

TG: let me do it then

TT: I don’t know if that’s a good idea.

TG: what

TG: why not

TT: Call it instinct.

TG: look i dont want you to die because of your womans intuition or whatever

TG: im giving you some damn light

TT: "Woman’s intuition"?

TT: Dave.

The lights turn on. You’re temporarily blinded, and swear.

TT: Shit!

TG: lol

TT: Shut up, Dave.

TG: you never swear

TG: there lights are better right

TG: what do you say

TT: Thanks. For not listening to me.

You turn off the night-vision, and the hum of lights permeates the building. Promptly, there’s unearthly screeching down the hallway, and you do jump at that.

TT: Shit, shit.

TG: what

TT: I have to go.

TG: uh okay

TG: let me know shit

TG: please

TG: ill remote in when you go idle

TG: put in the encryption

TT: Great.
You ignore all that, and your hands tense on the THORNS. It’s not a far walk to where the apparent screeching must have come from – now you can just hear whimpers – there’s a room marked with a biohazard symbol and a sign: "classified project" followed by "level 5 personnel only". That is the clearest "Please don’t open this door and find our human experimentation lab" sign you’ve ever seen, not that you’ve seen many (or any). You have lived here for nearly seventeen years, though, and you know the sort of creative marketing that goes on.

Either way, it’s a little conspicuous.

You slowly open the door. You notice a sudden movement from the corner of your eye, and you turn, stupidly, to see nothing. Then someone speaks.

"Are you real?" The male voice is weak, hollow, and audibly sure that nothing will come of this. "I'm. It's. Fuck."

Your throat stops, in spite of yourself, in... pity? Fear? Hard to tell. "I am," you say finally. "Where are you?"

The lights don’t seem to touch the walls, so you can’t really see the glass cabinets lining them, or whatever’s in them. "Here," he says, and you follow his voice.

There’s a – an – you are not absolutely sure what it is, but it was once human, now all sharp teeth and claws and its throat in shreds. The guy three feet from it is wiping his mouth, eyes wide and shining in the light. Then he sees you, pushes himself up, and stumbles in the effort.

"Wait. Hey," you chide him, and help him up. "Take it slow."

"John," he says; his face is paleish green, but he glows with appreciation and awe of you, and you try not to think about that too hard. "I'm John."

"Rose," you answer. "Rose Lalonde." It feels so good to be able to say that for real. "I'm getting you out of here."

"It was going to kill me. He, he, he was going to kill me," John insists, panicked all of the sudden; his gaze is on the deformed experiment. "I had no choice – "

"I'm not judging," you assure him. "I – need you to hide. I'll come back for you."

"No," he says heatedly. "Fuck that. I'm coming with."

You pause. "There might be – "

"Lalonde, I've seen worse shit," he says, and gestures pointedly around the lab. "Take a look."

"Who says this – " Oh. Now that you look, the glass cabinets, or what you thought were cabinets, are encased people. People, you realize, who are like that person with no throat and too sharp of teeth, some dozing comfortably, at least a dozen of nineteen dead. "John," you say, calmly as you can manage. "What's going on? Did you work here?"

He laughs, plainly bitter. "Here? No."

"Well, we..." What can you even do for people this far gone? Jade isn’t here to help, Jade is so far gone and away and she would know – no, you can’t slip into that frame of mind. "Well, shit."
John is still beside you. "We should kill them," he says.

You turn to him, actually astounded. "What?"

"It’s that or they wake up, figure out how to work the doors, and go insane once they hit the lights." He points at the dead one. "Like he did."

"So we turn off the lights," you say, more certainly than you feel.

"We turn off life support and lock them in," he says, hands balled into fists. "It’s crueler to let them live like that."

You don’t know who you’re allying yourself with right now, who this guy is, but you really don’t feel like you can actually judge him. You’re not actually better. Are you? You wonder what Jade would say.

Then your mouth goes dry. Jade is dead. She lost. You wonder how much of a bitch it makes you to even think that way, or how naive it makes you to think you can carry on like she did and win. You don’t have the time to make this decision, not once and for all. "Do what you have to do," you say, finally. "I'll be back soon."

John seems ready to do what he has to do, so you go before you have to think about it too much.

He’s right. Nothing here is worse than that. Just a lot of leftover grist, broken alien tech you're almost entirely certain is useless, but it all goes into the sylladex or the like.

You lean into the room; John's sitting on a desk and staring into space. "Let’s go," you say. You try to be Patton, to be cool, to be the kind of general that Luke thought you could be. You ignore the slumped bodies, faces pressed against the glass of their holding cells, and keep your gaze on John as he looks back at you.

He shakily smiles. "Lead the way, boss."

--

*September 2003*

You have so many tabs open and you have *had* so many tabs open you don't remember what it was like to have non-tabbed windows or to not have windows with more than one tab. Tabs have invaded your life like the aliens in Independence Day, which is not a great thing to think about actually, dammit.

Anyway. You never thought you'd do this much shit in a timeframe like this, ever, and it's not like you were sitting on your ass before. You have led a super serious awesome busy lifestyle. This is just way more super serious awesome busy, with less awesome and more busy, also with way more paranoia.

As for the invasion of the tabs, you've spent more time on messageboards, like, full-blown 1995-era shit, the toilet bowl of internet ads, Craigslist, and every possible treehugging political website in existence in any language, in the last three weeks than you ever thought you would have to. It kind of pisses you off.

Someone pulls a chair back behind you; you look around, see some thirtysomething business guy wander off without even considering you, and push your shades up. The baristas seem to have decided you're just some dumb American. To that you say, to yourself, *enjoy being puppets to the batterwitch, eurotrash.*
But you don't really mean it. Europe is cool, so far.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 1:04 --

TG: hey

TG: im in geneva

TG: home of sketchy bank accounts

TG: and neutrality

TG: you want anything

TG: guess they sell chocolate

TT: Dave.

TG: yeah yeah

TG: just checking in

TG: you said

TT: It was you who insisted. But I agree. It's important that we keep in touch.

TG: ok

TG: well

TG: germans are a big no so far

TG: got one group and came here to meet em but

TG: uh

TG: most of em showed up in the obits instead

TG: dont really wanna go to france

TT: Use my surname. They'll be more interested.

TG: not worried about interest there

TG: checked uh literally everything under .fr

TG: french college students are fucking crazy and everywhere

TG: fighting the government over like nothing

TG: we bring em in we might get overthrown

TG: by the french

TG: not cool
TT: I doubt they protest over nothing, but I follow your point in general.

TT: We could use a toehold in France. Ask the others to reach their contacts, maybe? I’d prefer if they deal with us, but if need be we should be able to rely on who you already have.

TG: yeah definitely

TG: working on the others now

TT: How many do you have?

TT: Is anyone coming back with you?

TG: nope

TG: and around fifty

TG: all said theyd keep in touch

TG: gave them the channel

TT: Is that wise?

TG: dunno

TG: seemed legit to me

TT: Great.

TT: Go to India next. I know Jade knew people there.

TG: she did computer tech of course she knew people in india


TG: i know

TG: what about you

TG: whats general lalonde up to

TT: Busy. Up to lots of things.

TG: wow

TG: super descriptive

TT: Jade found some places for people to hide. I'll e-mail you that info, because you may need to send some into witness protection.

TT: Also I found someone you should meet.

TT: I doubt you'll get along.

TT: Don't be offended if you don't.
TG: uh
TG: ok

TT: I just mean, he may be abrasive, and I've weighed that against his usefulness.
TT: He's with us.
TG: already said ok
TG: you safe
TT: What?
TG: are you safe
TG: ok
TG: etc
TT: Dave.
TT: Yes.
TT: I am safe.
TG: have to ask
TG: you dont tell me shit
TG: you could be bleeding out and i wouldnt know
TT: I know.
TT: But please.

You watch the cursor blink.

TG: yeah
TG: could go for more where the fuck is rose and why info
TG: but
TG: youre the general
TT: That's right.

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 1:16 --

Some guy sits down next to you, takes out his computer, starts it up, and touches your shoulder all in about a minute. You practically flinch, your hand on the hilt of your sword in its disguised sheath, then glare at him. "Can I help you?"

"I know who you are," he says, and grins. He's a kid, maybe a teenager, black, dark-skinned enough that his teeth could not look whiter, and his accent is weird as fuck, not something you've ever heard. "You're Dave Str – "
You throw a hand up in the air to shut him up the second you hear the "D" sound leave his mouth, and it only registers right before he practically says your last name. "Shut up," you suggest.

"Now you know I know who you are, and I know you want to know why," the kid goes on, and holds out his hand. "I'm Mark."

That is such a douchebag name, as in a name douchebags have, you note, but go ahead and shake his hand. "Yeah. So. We can go somewhere else."

"Not necessary." Mark logs into the computer and pulls up Nyx-based Pesterchum, and you watch him sign in. "The one thing," he says, "is that I don't know your handle."

That reassures you some. "Why should I give it to you?"

"Because if I wanted to hurt you or reveal you as what you are, you would already be dead or imprisoned," he points out.

You kind of want to repeat that in a sarcastic nyeh-nyeh voice but you decide to refrain. You look at his screen, and then pester him.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering burntPromises [BP] at 1:20 --

TG: yeah so

TG: say your shit

TG: or forever hold your dick

BP: Very mature.

BP: But all right.

BP: I am here to offer my services to the efforts that you and your friend Miss Crocker are mounting.

You get really pissed off in a split second and he probably sees that because he's sitting right next to you and has working eyes and ears.

TG: thats not her name

BP: Yes.

BP: I saw you changed the name for her credit cards.

TG: what the fuck

TG: protip

TG: dont hack the people you want to help

BP: I looked into it. I want to help. I have nowhere to go, no protection.

BP: I've run out of money.

TG: you expect me to protect some guy
TG: who i dont know
TG: because he says he can help
TG: you say that and all i hear is "spy spy spy spy spy spy spy spy spy spy spy spy spy spy spy spy.“
BP: Rose must trust you.
BP: Why don't you trust me?
TG: man whatever
TG: one sec

You pull up your window with Rose.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 1:23 --
TG: whos this guy
TG: the one you said
TG: the one i wouldn't like
TT: It's more likely he wouldn't like you and you’d pretend not to care.
TT: As far as I can project.
TT: Why?
TG: because he might be sitting next to me
TT: That is thoroughly impossible.
TG: why
TT: Because he's with me. You must have found someone else.
TG: yeah

You're not about to say "he found me." Nope.
TG: hes an asshole
TG: i vote no
TT: What does he have to offer?

You look over at him, skeptically. He looks back at you. You look back to your computer screen.
TG: he hacks
TG: knows who we are
TG: says he needs help
TG: protection
TG: still dont trust him
TT: What would make you trust him?
TT: What would it take?
TG: uh

You look over at him yet again to check him out, then you turn to your computer in a desperate effort not to be as visibly immature as you're feeling.

TG: prove it
BP: Prove that I'm not a Crocker spy?
TG: yeah that

He starts to laugh next to you, like you've just made an awesome priest, rabbi, and a sexy fish-alien walk into a bar joke.

"You'll love this," he says, logs off of the computer, and packs it up. "My hostel's ten minutes' walk from here. Let's talk."

You already kind of hate this. No one said saving the world meant you'd have to put up with assholes on your own side, but now that you think about it, assholes are an inevitability no matter where you go.

In that moment, you remember your dad saying something along those lines, and you miss him before you can stop yourself. You shut your laptop instantly, loudly, to make yourself focus.

"Let's go," you agree.

It's annoying how right he is, how smart he is, all of it. What’s really annoying is his theoretical projection of the brainwashing algorithm, as neatly outlined as the organized but scorched pieces of the tech he found that boosts the signal. It’s all incredibly annoying, but so useful that you can’t hold his douchiness against him.

He looks so smug. You sigh. "How old are you again?"

"Heh," he says, and grins.

--

October 2003
It’s been a month. It feels like it’s been a few. Day after day of the mission, chasing endless leads and only freeing two or three people who’d been experimented on, the dead bodies otherwise, it all weighs on you. There have been no breaks, just the work. You suppose it follows

There are three guards. You wish you had the signal-killing technology. It’s a lot harder to reason with people under the signal, or to even detect whether the signal is going. It’s for the best to assume it is, and almost nobody can be reasoned with.

You're in the world alone. It's you, the bad guys, and their victims, and your allies are starting to look like future victims the more you stare at the ceiling at night and think about it.
But that's not going to help right now, or possibly ever. You run your thumb over the top of your needle, forcing yourself to concentrate. You're only two buildings away.

"No point in waiting," John says, barely audibly, and leans past you to scope out the entrance to the next compound building. "Even if there's Imperiacorp, we can handle them."

"I know we can. It's a matter of - " He's getting more attached to the cause than you'd ever wanted him to. You shove down some concerns, some guilt. That’s not helpful right now. "We don't have to. Not necessarily. And, to be honest, timing is everything to get through this without drowning in drones."

"Being careful will only get us so far," John retorts. "The point is seeing what's in there. Jade said in her postmortem e-mail that it'd be in Delaware, right? This thing?"

You take a breath. "Yes, that the 'thing' would be in Delaware." Of all places. "And this is the most likely place. I want to make sure we can get to it with minimal issues."

"Didn't you say we need to kill as many drones as possible?"

"We can do that without waking them up." You sigh. "Let's go. Be careful."

"It's almost like you don’t want adventure," John says, making a face at you, and waits for you to go ahead.

(All this does is resolve you. But all that can wait until you survive and get what you came for.)

"Hi," you greet the guards. "Do you mind directing me to Building 30A?"

"You're not supposed to be here," the guard who's probably the boss says sharply, stepping forward. You consider that. "I am, though. And I'm going to Building 30A. Anyone? You're terrible tour guides."

They advance on you, the boss clicking a taser on and smiling when it crackles. "It's her," he says to the others, not taking his gaze off of you. "Look at her weapons."

"Am I notorious? That's good news," you admit. "I like that." There’s a nasty crack as a baseball bat meets the back of one of the cronies’ heads, and the other two whirl to see John. You flick the needle in your hand, barely a half-second’s gesture, and a darkness briefly falls around the fight. You move quickly, grabbing the other crony and tightly lashing yarn around his neck, slamming him to the ground easily.

There’s a brief fistfight when you turn to watch John’s progress. You don’t know much about punching, but you do notice the brutal sound of John’s fist hitting the side of the boss’s head, the way he hits the ground sideways, and John shaking out his hand after. It seems effective.

"His taser wouldn't work," John says, looking at you.

You smile innocently. "Let's go."

30A is two buildings away from 30C (where you'd been hiding), obviously. Drones file out of the building as you approach, and you sigh heavily.

"I'm ready if you are," John says, readying his bat.

Unfortunately, this is necessary.
Ten drones later, you’re in the building and going up the elevator. "But how haven’t they seen us?" John presses you. You shrug, all innocence still.

"Fourth floor. Research and Development," the calm female voice says as the doors ping open.

There are no guards on this floor, which seems like a major oversight, but you have managed to wander past at least six cameras, so that might help. You look through four rooms until you find it behind a door marked Level Six clearance only.

"There’s something there." John points into the corner, and you cross from behind him to see. It’s a large machine, an important machine, and one you instantly recognize.

"Oh my god," you whisper, blown away. "We found it."

"What? What is it?" He approaches it. "It’s not going to hit me with lasers if I come near it, is it?"

"No," you say, and smile broadly. "It’s an alchemiter."

Once the other tech you’ve found, the intellistation, the punch designix, is all installed onto the alchemiter, you show him. It’s all coming back to you. Much to your chagrin, at least at first, John originally uses this to figure out how to make a "motherfucking taser bat," which is, you must admit, a practical weapon, as well as being "incredibly goddamn cool!" in John’s words.

A half hour later, on top of making genuinely helpful things, you’ve also made five different kinds of weaponized scarves and John’s got four different pairs of glasses, the most practical of which (not saying much) is a pair that finally lets him access Pesterchum easily, like a normal person.

"This is stupid," you say finally, curling the fringe of a needle-throwing scarf around your fingers. You stop playing with the damn thing, because there’s a problem.

The stupidest thing about all of this is the alchemiter itself, and that you can’t move it. You can’t captchalogue it. You can’t take a picture of it with the captchalogue camera.

This is half a loss and half a win. You’ll just have to make do with what you’ve made, or what you can make right now.

Jade knew. There’s another way. You have to trust her.

The two of you make your way back to the hotel without any further strife. You small-talk and joke with him as you go, and only say what you need to say when you’re back in the hotel room and he’s taken a seat on his bed. You’ve thought this through, today and weeks before. You just have to spring it on him so he can’t argue, at least not much.

"I'm dropping you off with a credit card and cash in case. You have to re-establish yourself in the real world." You don’t let him interrupt. "You deserve this. You've earned it."

He stares at you, totally bereft, clearly not having expected this. "Rose." He looks strained. "I haven't done enough," he says finally, tone firm. "And I don't deserve that, not yet. Probably not ever."

You look back at him, your face carefully blank. "This is my rebellion. I make those calls."

He's unmoved, focused now. "And you can't afford to lose people as you're building it."

"I can't afford to sacrifice people who could get out of this and be safe."

"Rose," he says, a bite in his tone, "I don't want to get out."

"I'm not leaving you."

You sit on the bed next to him. He's older than you, taller, lanky, but you really can't afford to appraise him further, even if you almost have. He's old enough that you could accurately be classified as jailbait, anyway.

Your HUBTOPBAND makes its chime that you've received an e-mail. You ignore it. "Make me understand," you say, as firmly as you can.

Your commanding tone starts a smile on his face, but it falters, and so does he. "People died because of me. I don't want to go back. And you need people on the ground, someone has to do all of this."

Maybe you relate a little too much to that. People have died, people will continue to die. It's what people do. "We have people. That's what Dave's doing. So just try. We'll come ask you for help if we need you."

"I can't," he says, without looking at you.

You catch his gaze with your own pointed one. "You have to," you say, bluntly as you can.

John's expression hardens. "You don't get to make my decisions for me."

"I can refuse to let you stay with me, if it comes to that." Staying steady isn't as simple as it was before. He's staying, fighting, all of it. You aren't Jade; you can't make promises. "Don't make me do that, John."

"You want to go on a suicide mission," he says, and you instantly tense. "Don't you? You against the biggest, most asshole corporation in the world. You're not going to win and you know it, you're the smartest sixteen year old I've ever known, there's no way you're stupid enough to believe you can."

"Someone much smarter than you believed I could, and I'm going to honor her memory by trying," you say coolly. "Now I have to insist that you go."

He scoffs. "Because I'm right?"

"Because you don't know what the hell you're talking about. This is bigger than you think it is, and I have help, and I don't need you – I don't need you risking your life."

"I – " John shuts up, and you don't know what to say but you're thinking it through, then he speaks, tone cutting but quiet. "You have blood on your hands, too. Don't you?"

You're not sure you can speak, now. But you have to, so he'll understand. "Maryland," you say. "I didn't pull the trigger. But it was aimed at me. So, yes, I have blood on my hands, and I have to do something, not to make up for it but to make sure it doesn't happen again if I could have prevented it by keeping people safe, at any cost. That's the difference between what I want to do and what you want to do."

He loses it, and stands to turn on you. "Why do you think you know my fucking motivations?" he demands.

You stay cool. You have to. "You framed it that way. You said people died because of you. You essentially told me that was your reason. You have to do this because you want to, because revenge
will just burn you out."

John's pissed off. "You can’t tell me this isn’t revenge for you. I can tell, I can read you like a book – I’m sure you don’t think people can, but it’s all over your face. This is payback, obviously, and you – "

Your patience snaps at that. "My motivations don't matter, and are more complex than you're saying."

John throws his hands up. "And mine aren't? Look, your revenge thing is obvious and anyone could tell if you weren't shoving everyone away, including the only one you've bothered to keep around, until now."

You regain your composure. "Fine, I'm obvious," you say neutrally. "It doesn't matter."

He stares at you. You give nothing away, pointedly. "You don’t want to save the world. You want to take her down, personally. And I don't think that's safe."

You ignore the rest. "She deserves to be taken down," you say mildly. "I know you think so too."

"I mean that’s your priority – "

"Leave the analysis to me, John. I’m better at it."

He pretty much glares at you. "You would ask for help if you just wanted to take her down. Defeat her. Save the world. But you’re pushing me away. And you only trust Dave. I’m not sure why."

"You don’t need to know why." Your stomach’s started to roil, but you can’t give any of that away. "I'm buying you a ticket and you're leaving."

"I'm not."

"I'll leave without you," you say, tone flat.

"Then do it. Leave me."

You say nothing to that, just looking casually up at him as you consider. "You’re trying to win," you say. "I’m not sure why."

"Because I want you to be safe," John says, in plainly forced calm, "and you’re an impulsive sixteen year old on a suicide mission. If I want you safe, I have to be here. You’re not going to listen to a damn word I say otherwise."

"That’s right." You relax, just slightly. "Why should I keep you?"

"You saved my life. I’m never gonna leave you, if I can help it. And I’ll do what needs to be done."

He makes himself look at you. "What more could you want in a follower?"

This is stupid. It’s stupid to fight him on this. You’re not even sure why you had it in your head that he had to go; that was sentiment, not sense. You need what followers and materials you can get.

"Fine. We’re leaving in a half hour. We should pack."

You wish you could sleep. Today’s been exhausting. But there’s an e-mail waiting for you. You lower the HUBTOPBAND’s screen to check the e-mail before anything else, in case it’s another of Jade’s.
It’s an e-mail from Dave. There are pictures attached. You start to worry, but there's really no point in it, at all, in the end. You slap your hand over your mouth before your face betrays you. Dave is an idiot, and he’s your idiot, and you can hardly stand it. "Oh my god," you say into your hand.

"Dave?" John asks.

"You may want to stop asking that in that tone, I’ll start to think you’re jealous," you say, doing your best to be flippant but not as amused as you are. You’re failing.

The first picture is appropriately titled paintmelikeoneofyourfrenchgirls.png, based on the pose. Then there’s toocoolforhomeschool.png, where the sunglasses are very prominent, and illerthan cholera.png, which defies description, and he really needs to stop taking pictures of himself because it might literally kill you.

"You're laughing," John says skeptically.

"I am not," you insist, and clear your throat. Just like that, because of Dave, the tension in the room is diffused, at least for now. You’re going to have to thank him later.

"Are you going to share with the class?"

"He’d kill me, so no."

"Naked pictures?" he asks wryly.

You fire him a startled, annoyed look. "No."

"Wow," John says, "that is either serious denial or the boy stands no chance."

"It’s complicated," you say, maybe a little put off. "Besides, he's busy with his own side of this, the point is moot."

"Even saviors of the world get lunch breaks. Aren’t we supposed to meet them in Seattle, anyway?"

Oh. That. You’d nearly forgotten. "Yes. We’ll try."

He side-eyes you. "You’re avoiding him."

"Remember the whole end of the world thing? I may be too busy to constantly see my colonel in person."

"What, am I not your colonel?" John asks, feigning indignation.

"There are usually multiple colonels." Back to it. This is why you’re not looking forward to John meeting Dave.

It’s about time you check in. You pull up the window, but you get a flurry of pestering before you get the chance.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 5:04 --

TG: hey uh

TG: remind me
TG: whos that old guy again
TG: the one jade was bffs with
TG: because yeah
TG: people need to stop finding me
TG: its making me look bad
TG: anyway
TG: rose
TG: rose
TG: answer
TG: jesus

He’s doing the thing again, where he pesters you ten times in a row because you didn’t answer right away, even though you were going to message him first. You’re not sure why you find this whole thing slightly charming.

TT: His name is Luke.
TG: ok great
TT: He’s alive?
TT: He was at Maryland.
TG: he says you can talk about that when were all together
TT: All right.
TG: so
TG: were getting the band back together elwood
TT: Wow.
TG: shut up
TT: Heh.
TT: By the way,
TT: You’re a regular Annie Leibovitz.
TG: what
TG: dont make me google things
TG: oh yeah those
TG: knew you'd appreciate them
TT: Masterpieces, certainly. Each of them.
TG: can you have more than one masterpiece
TT: I believe it's a matter of relative definitions. One piece of art can be a masterpiece amongst like pieces made by contemporary artists.
TT: This could be an interesting discussion.
TT: I think it's more important that I say,
TT: The choice of Titanic reference interested me.
TT: Do you identify with Kate Winslet?
TT: Her willful femininity in the face of early twentieth century mores?
TT: Do you experience strong feelings when you look at Leonardo DiCaprio?
TG: hey look this strategy session is over
TT: Don't leave now. I was just starting to have fun.
TG: stop picturing me in drag
TG: bye

You force back your amusement. It's time to go. You have a mission, and you're going to achieve it, by any means necessary.

--

November 2003
WITSEC is annoying in that it would probably feel rewarding if you didn't get super paranoid about the safety of every single person and thing under it when you do it.

But this is how it is. Hana and Adya, two former Skaianet engineers, stupidly reapplied for copyrights on proprietary broad-spectrum signal-jamming hardware, on principle or something. Now they have a new last name, Verma, and a house in a Bangladesh suburb. The security system you and Mark built is pretty solid – the tests all worked, anyway – so you're comfortable installing it on the new house. It kicks Imperiacorp ass. They should be fine.

Maybe. Probably. So far the other four people you've moved into WITSEC into Jade’s properties seem to be fine. So far. Probably. Very reassuring thoughts.

All you think about as they move their shit in – besides the thought you always have to force back, that they might inevitably die bloodily by Imperiacorp's hands – is something inane as fuck, but whatever. Just, you aren't sure you could ever change your last name, even if it was something ten letters long like Hana and Adya’s used to be. Or your first name, or any part of your name. You're Dave Strider. Fuck anything other than that.

While Mark’s installing the system on the house, you get to hear his story again. Mark’s already gleefully added onto the account five times while talking at you and you alone, with conflicting and even more specific and overdramatic information each time; you can only guess what version he’s
going to tell Luke.

Mark holds a wire in place and takes the small screwdriver out from between his teeth, only then starting to talk. "Kenya is the perfect country for them to gain hold. We do well, compared to some other African countries. Room enough to build more towers and spread the signal. Few enough people who would look. But we’re skeptical of American presence in our lives. One of us would look one day. It happened to be me."

"You’re high school age," Luke says, watching the street and thumbing the hilt of one of his swords. "You figured this out this young?"

Mark grins, and you have to say, "Hey, eyes on the tech, bro."


"I think he doesn’t want to waste time," Luke says, "and technically he’s our leader right now, but I’m inclined to agree anyway."

"Technically?" you say dryly, but it really does feel weird to think about. You suppose if Rose is the general you’re the colonel or something, or you’re co-generals, but she has a way better idea of what the fuck is going on than you have, at least so far. There should maybe be a general whose motive is not my sea-bitch mom is an asshole, in your opinion, but. "Anyway, I knew something was up. I just didn’t decide to climb a radio tower like an idiot."

"You didn’t let me tell that part!" Mark protests.

"Oops," you say in a deadpan. "Well, he climbed a radio tower."

"Not from the outside. Well, not from the outside right away," Mark amends. "I was thirteen back then, it seemed like a good idea. It gave me the part to broadcast my own signal at home, anyway."

"Yeah, I know," you say to Luke, who’s looking at Mark with great scrutiny. "But he’s legit. It’s a little grudging. You can’t help it.

"I’m a genius," Mark says casually. "I was in my last year of secondary when they came after me."

"Wow, senior prom would have sucked for you," you say.

"What would you know, Homeschool?" he returns.

Okay, you’re actually starting to like the little prick, despite yourself. He can hold his own. "Not much," you say, "but I’ve at least hit puberty."


You balk at that. "Not well. Talked to her a few times. Cryptic lady."

"She talked about you," Luke says, a little surprised, but only mildly. "She must have seen you, then."

"Never met her," you say. You’re not sure what you would have done. There’s a distinct possibility you might have called your dad and his bros and turned her in if she’d been right there, especially before Rose basically made you unknowingly join her rebellion against the biggest corporation in the world by being irritatingly fascinating at you.
"I don’t mean that." Luke rakes his hand through his thinning hair. "She saw things. She knew me before she ever met me. She didn’t say how she knew those things, not really, I just assumed she was psychic."

"Psychic," Mark says, and snorts.

"She knew things about me she couldn’t have known otherwise. And she saw the future." Luke doesn’t look at either of you. "She didn’t see you, Mark. Don’t know why, but she knew about me, and about Dave. Before Rose even talked to him."

"Jade had Rose talk to me," you say, a little dazed by this. It explains sunglasses boy, but… does that mean Jade knew you worked with your dad? Does that mean she knew everything? How much did she know about what would happen after? Did she know she was going to die?

You realize they’re looking at you and you’re just sitting there.

"Maybe psychic," you say grudgingly. "Maybe."

"That’s stupid," Mark says.

"Watch your mouth," Luke says sharply. "Respect the dead. And Jade. She’s the one who started all this, she’s the one we owe all this to."

"Can we see the swords?" Mark asks, in a totally smooth transition. You roll your eyes.

"Not now. Later, maybe." Luke looks at you. "She cared a lot about you and Rose. Wanted me to do everything I could to help you. I think she knew she was going to die."

"She could have told Rose," you say, a little more sarcastically than you mean to. "What with her being horribly traumatized by it instead."

"Rose would have tried to prevent it. And she couldn’t." He’s still looking at you. "She said you two were so, so important. I’m starting to believe it."

Every time things gets like this, you think you might puke. Not out of disbelief, but because part of you is sure it’s true, even if it’s incredibly stupid. "Uh," you say, "well, we’re people. Saving the world. Or trying. So that’s pretty important."


"So which one of you is Princess Leia?" Mark asks, neck deep in the system already.

"Neither. I’m Han," you say. "Also, shut the fuck up."

"Ooh, language, Strider. I’m only fifteen." Mark pauses. "Does that mean she’s Leia?" He laughs obnoxiously at the expression that crosses your face, and you flat-out glare.

Luke sighs heavily. "Probably worth mentioning, boss," he says, "I know where we’re going next."

You are never going to be used to a forty year old guy calling you "boss." You raise your eyebrows. "Yeah," you say. "Where?"

"Sacramento," he says. "Something there I didn’t anticipate."

Oh, fuck. "What?"
"Are we going to the States?" Mark perks up.

"Don’t get too excited, it’s just Sacramento," you say. "Luke, what?"

Luke looks contrite. "I took someone who liked getting in our kind of trouble and dropped him a hint to our kind of problem. I didn’t think he’d try to get it onto the local news, because for God’s sake."

"Bailing someone out. Cool," you say, in a weary deadpan. "Yeah, once we’re done here let’s go."

"Where did you get all that money?" Mark bothers asking for the first time in two weeks.

"Uh," you say, "finally. I wondered when someone would ask me why I have a fuckton of money. Who do you think I got it from?"

Mark turns to you, away from the tech, eyes wide. "Are you serious?" he demands, astounded.

Oh, you like that. "Yeah," you say, casually. "When we took down Maryland – Luke was there – I raided the account. Easy."

"I’ve been trying to do that for a year," Mark says, stuck between glowering and admiration. "How –"

"Once you hack their security it’s pretty much a piece of cake," you say. "Delicious, EZ-Bake Oven cake that’s made of cash and five keystrokes. They barely upgrade it. I swear they want me to be able to get in there. That bitch would play that kind of game, though."

Mark’s eyebrows meet. "That… wait, do you actually believe there’s a Betty Crocker?"

"I saw her battlecruiser," Luke says. "Yeah, she’s real."


"And… you, uh – " Mark is still wrapping his head around this, apparently missing the whole battlecruiser thing in the fuckery of this revelation. "You… what, fought her? Ran?"

"She – " You don’t like thinking about it. You don’t like thinking about how Rose might have died, how you both might have been poked full of holes through vital organs or worse. "Yeah. We fought her." You don’t want to talk about it. "Finish up. Who are these idiots in Sacramento, anyway?"

"Luis Angeles," Luke says, a little wearily. "He runs his own newspaper, he does great social commentary, don’t get me wrong, he sees further than most people are willing to – any way, I tipped him off on the signal, because for some reason I thought the guy would be able to manage subtle. I was wrong. The blog he runs with his daughter says he’s ready to publish something big and spread it far. We should go soon."

"Sounds more like ‘now’ is a better idea than ‘soon’." Damn, you do sound like a general or some shit. "I’m going to buy the tickets, Luke, see if anyone else is willing to come. Mark, fucking finish that shit, no more rubbernecking."

"Why don’t you finish it?"

"Because someone has to buy the tickets and I’m not giving you access to this much money," you say.

He swears under his breath in a language you can’t understand, and you sigh and open your laptop.
-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 9:04 --

TG: on our way to the us
TG: luke has a tip
TG: or gave a tip
TG: something
TG: point is we're going to sacramento
TG: don't know if we can meet you there
TG: wherever you are
TG: let me know
TT: I can try.
TT: It would be good to see you.


TG: we're flying into lax
TG: probably uh not gonna be there til late tomorrow
TT: I'll do what I can.
TT: Take care of yourselves.
TG: yeah
TG: wait
TG: how are you
TG: good job almost dodged that
TT: I'm fine.
TG: and
TT: And good.
TG: really specific
TT: Sorry. We're busy.
TG: you and john
TT: Yes.
TG: best bros
TT: What?
TG: whatever
TG: busy with what
TT: I should go.
TG: rose
TT: Dave.
TG: fine
TG: whatever
TT: I’ll try to see you, Dave.
TG: yeah

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 9:08 --

Yeah, you’re a little pissed, but not completely, so for kicks you purposely buy Mark a seat on the aisle. Time to ride in first class. Hearing stewardesses call you "Mr. Strider" all seriously is kind of the best part of this whole clusterfuck so far.

File that with so many other things Rose is never, ever going to hear a god damn word of.

--

You've never seen Jade's island. It's not on any maps, and, though it may be seen by satellites, cartographers seem convinced it's just a spot in the ocean with a major reef and volcano and nothing resembling a place where human habitation could occur. It is entirely possible and likely inevitable that this had to do with an investment of a lot of money and a global conspiracy by the good guys.

At any rate, you know where it is, *that* it is, and that the fauna is slightly more worrying than anywhere else, but probably *as* worrying as Australia's.

John doesn't seem to find any of this information reassuring as you brief him from the spot next to him in the motorboat. He makes this very clear. "So if this island exists – "

"It exists."

"Fine, it exists and it's terrifying. Why did she live there?"

"Why does anyone live anywhere? Some mix of 'I have to' and 'I like it.'" You prod him in the shoulder, and he sends you an exaggerated wounded look. "Don't be afraid, slugger."

"I could have been in the pros by now, you know," he grouses.

"Look at it this way; you still have an epic specibus." You don't want him to think too long on the past. "So we're going in with a plan. She didn't include a map, just coordinates, but I think in a jungle we're probably better off with coordinates anyway. We'll have to be vigilant. You watch for danger, I'll watch the coordinates. We should get to it the second we hit land. She said there'll probably be people ransacking the place now and then. Since she's dead they can look whenever they want."
You omit that the "people" include Dave's dad. It's complicated.

"What happens if we run into them?" John asks pointedly.

"Nothing good, so we should try not to," you answer delicately.

"Are we talking worse or equal to Imperiacorp?"

You consider that. "Likely worse."

He sighs. "All right, General." He looks at the island in the distance. "Getting closer."

You look up as well. The volcano is looming, and the jungle seems to grow up towards it. You have the distinct feeling this jungle is going to be a problem. "That is not an insubstantial amount of volcano," you note.

"Or you could say, 'holy shit, that's a big volcano,' but whatever works for you," John says.

There's a sound overhead, one you haven't heard in months, and panic rises in your chest and your throat. You look up, back, and there it is, a cruiser with the Crockercorp logo – not hers, there's no way she'd go anywhere in anything that small – flying towards the island. "Oh, shit," you say softly.

John touches your arm. "So," he says, attempting a casual tone and failing.

Being reasonable is the only option. "So we hit the shore and run, or we risk a fight."

"Are we sure they're worse?" John checks.

"They're her special agents. They – " Well, you can't say that. He's not ready to hear about dream-planets. "They control things, where she comes from." Close enough. "At least, from what I've heard. I haven't met them or anything."

John is looking at you with suspicion. You flash an innocent smile, which in its very nature is insincere. He rolls his eyes. "We're probably ten minutes away. Strategy if we run into them?"

"I lead, you take them out in the aftermath." Best case scenario. "Or we run."

"Or we run." He sighs again. "All right."

The ten minutes to the island seem to take forever. You twirl the THORNS and touch on the power, breathing through it when it touches you back. You ignore what you know about it. What the time you've had to hone it means for you. You push it down.

The Crockercorp cruiser's already landed. You don't think you can outpace them, and they probably saw you, though there's a chance they haven't. Hiding in case is still the best option.

You grab John's hand and haul him forward. There's no time. "We get to the coordinates and we go."

He follows. "What if that's where they're going?"

"Then we deal with that." Obviously. "But I think Jade is smarter than that. It won't be easy or obvious, where we're going. She wouldn't have pointed us to something they would find easily." You duck into the brush. It's not comfortable, but it obscures you from sight.

"If she pointed it out to us this late, she had to have known – "
"She knew," you say simply.

John's grip is tight on your hand, then. You don't think about it. Handholding can't have subtext.

You don't speak as you move through the jungle, chopping brush out of the way with the THORNs as you go. The coordinates aren't too much further. John shifts away from you in a strange bit of body language, an instant before there's an explosion at least a mile away.

"Shit," he swears under his breath.

"If we move quickly," you start.

"We'll have to." He grabs your phone and shifts it in the right direction. "We run."

You haven't been this afraid in months. You squeeze his hand, keep your expression clear of fear, and you both run. He grips the phone and you cut through brush. There's fire crackling in the distance.

*Why did they blow something up?* You don't know and you don't care.

A root rips John off of his feet and he hits the ground with a horrible sound; it wrenches your arm and you drop to the ground next to him. "John," you shout in spite of yourself, and try to pull him up. "John -"


You stay low. "We may not..." What are you thinking? What can you do? What's the plan, General? "Stay down."

"They know we're here. They have to." John shifts. He's just *looking* at you. You hate the responsibility in that instant, and hate the weakness. You have to. You have to push through it. *You have to do this.*

You can hear them, now, really well if you're not talking or hyperventilating.

"Can't see 'em, boss."

"They're here."

"Think it's the English kid?"

"On that boat? Don't think he's going anywhere. The old lady had to know we would hunt him down if we got the fucking chance. No, this is one of those fucking kids."

"You mean Strider?"

John's gaze snaps to you, and you don't look at him.

Boss's tone changes at the name, too. "Strider's in Europe. Has to be her."

You can't handle how taunt your nerves are. You feel the grimdark course through your body, along your skin, and John inhales sharply, his hand convulsing against yours as your arms are immolated in majjyk. You instantly drop his hand, holding out against fear as best you can.

"You think they're here?"
"We saw the boat. Dignitary heard 'em. I think there's a good fucking chance we can get 'em if we try. Hey, Brute."

"Yeah?"

"You got a bigger voice. Do me a favor and call the girl out."

The guy clears his throat. "HEY, KID. COME OUT AND YOU GET FIRST SHOT."

You barely look up, then you see the boss striding ahead, and you very nearly make a sound, slapping your hand over your mouth before anything can escape. *Shit.* You don't know for sure, but you know. *You know.* No harlequin costume, no glasses, no dog-face, but that has to be him. You can feel it.

"GONNA HUNT YOU OTHERWISE."

"Wouldn't be much of a hunt."

"Don't count 'em out," Jack says. "Condesce says she put up a fight."

"They might have run anyway."

John dares to look up, too, and he panics completely. "What the *fuck* is that?" he whispers.

"Told you they were from her... place of origin." Close enough, again, especially for now. "Don't panic."

"*Don't panic*?"

"Counting to five," Jack shouts.

"Jesus," John hisses out. "*Don't panic,* what the *fuck* – "

"Calm down!" you snap; his sharp fingernails are digging into your hand again.

"THREE," Jack calls.

"Boss, you said five," the brute says.

"Changed my mind. Two – "

You act on instinct. The THORNS lash out, the power bolts through you, and the earth shatters underneath all of you.

You don't look at the chess guys. It's not even about them and whatever they're doing, now, it's about running. John's rushed to his feet and you grab the phone, then his arm, and haul him towards where the coordinates are meant to lead you.

*don't worry rose, you'll be safe. :) you're going to need a few things and i put them all together for you! be brave.*

You reach a cave, and neither of you hesitate to go inside. You flick on the HUBTOPBAND, slowing just slightly, and John glances back at you, harried. It gives you some light, just enough, and now all you can do is trust the cave. Jade wouldn't lead you wrong.

"Left," you say.
"Rose – "

"We go left."

You've slowed down so you can catch your breath, but you keep up a good pace, and the power is starting to ebb away again, which is incredibly good news. You don't want to talk to John, and John doesn't seem to want to talk right now, which is also good news.

A few minutes into rushing through the cave and pointedly not thinking about whether Jack and the others will find you, you see it.

"Oh my god," you breathe.

John looks around, bewildered. "What?"

There's a transportalizer. You know about them, and you know Jade knows you know about them. You think you know what to do. It's your best option, and Jade wouldn't have put this there for no reason.

"Let's go," you say, and immediately jump onto it.

"Rose, wait, what, no," John says in a rush, but you set it off.

The room you’re in is… clearly in a house, and you can see the jungle far off out of the window. You’re in Jade’s house. Oh, god. You hope John doesn’t follow you, but then he appears behind you and you can't help but facepalm.

"Did you want me to leave you behind?" he snaps. He may be slightly hysterical. You don't have the time for that.

"A little." You sweep the barely-populated room, not looking at him, just then noticing you're sweating and covered in jungle debris. Then you notice a box wrapped in twine and bearing a green smiley face, and rush forward to grab it.

"She left you a present," John says slowly.

"That's kind of all she's been doing this time, if you think about it." You tear it open like children probably tear open Christmas presents (you wouldn't know) and once the box is open you're smiling in spite of yourself. Your throat doesn't ache, your eyes don't prick with tears, you're just happy, that's it.

John peers over your shoulder. "Sylladex cards."

"She's stocking our armory. And – " You're rifling through the cards. "Is that – that is an alchemiter."

*It's an alchemiter.* There's one on the next card, too, then a few pairs of *fenestrated* WINDOWS. You're practically dizzy. This changes everything. It's going to cost a lot of grist, though. That's going to mean a lot of dead drones.

"There's something in the bottom of the box." John reaches past you, and pulls out glass vials.

You recognize the colors crammed into it, and John does after a moment, too. "She always thinks of everything." You stifle a grin. The other cards aren't as useful, but almost nothing could be. You look up at John, then, considering him. "John."

"General," he answers.
"We're going to have to be quiet. We're staying here for the night."

"But if we found the – transporter thing – can't they?" he prompts you.

"That's if they find the cave and realize that's where we're going, and take the right corridors. Either way. We'll figure it out." You take a seat in the comfortable chair, which seems out of place in such a clearly uninhabited room, but you're not complaining. "I'm going to sleep."

"Is that – "

"This house is huge, and if we're quiet Jake won't notice us. And I need sleep."

"General," John says firmly, "I'm not going to risk you getting hurt by those aliens."

You are not moved by this at all. No, you are definitely not. "Then we switch shifts. You can sleep first."

"You just said – "

"Just lay down." You point at the couch, and sit up in your chair. "I can keep busy."

He exhales, then lays down on the couch, sending you a warning look. "I can stay awake," he starts.

"Take your orders, Colonel Rosslyn."

He mocks a salute, and lies back, his eyes falling closed.

You open Pesterchum and project out your keyboard.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 1:04 --

TT: I've solved some of our problems in a general sense.

TT: We'll need to meet, soon.

TT: Our birthdays?

TT: We could even have a party.

TG: uh

TG: yeah

TG: sorry things are intense here

TG: got it handled though

TG: totally

TT: I believe you.

TT: Mostly.

TG: thanks for the vote of confidence
TT: Next time don’t undercut yourself. I believe in your ability to not fuck things up.

TG: wow

TG: that's

TG: something

It occurs to you that you can’t ever tell Dave that his dad could have and would have killed you. You don’t know what that would do to his head. He’s already got cognitive dissonance from everything else.

If nothing else, you need him sane for the war effort.

About time to tell him about the alchemiter, though. It's good news, and you can actually make it sound that way now that there isn’t just one in a place you probably can't return to, at least for a long time.

TT: This isn’t really the point.

TT: We’ve got weapons and transportation handled now. I think we’re good.

TG: rose

TT: What?

TG: nope nothing

TT: All right.

TG: bye

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 1:08 --

You exhale, realizing you forgot something pretty major.

Is everything all right? How hard would that be to ask?

You wish you had, but you don’t think you can go back to him now.

It takes everything within you not to sleep. You look through the few documents you have, and begin listening to the recordings of the people you've sent into WITSEC, as close as you get to praying to the Old Ones that you get ideas, that you know what to do next without another of Jade's e-mails.

One of these days, you're going to have to do this on your own, and that day is probably soon.

--

You have decided once and for all that if the world fails to end you're never volunteering for anything. There are enough people who want to hug puppies and make phone calls and try to spread the word of Jesus or a politician. You’re already tired of this shit and you’ve only been doing it three months. This is obviously not the career for you.

Point is. Figuring out what to do while sitting outside the guy’s newspaper building, because he’s a paranoid hippie-type and apparently a delicate approach is needed, has turned out to be really
annoying considering this could all blow up right about now.

Thing you learned right away in trying to recruit people to help end the march towards the apocalypse: no one moves fast enough in the Fuck You Betty Crocker business, because no one takes it seriously enough. That’s why you like Luke. And Rose. And almost, almost, Mark.

Sure, unrelenting fear of her might be a good reason to freeze up. But you're finding that to be a less and less reasonable way to deal with this in the long term. Terror, yes, because you’re not a moron. Freezing up, no.

"So we may or may not actually find the guy here," you say to Luke. "Because blah blah the electric grid kicked my dog and the renewing power of celery. I mean we're talking about people as paranoid as us because of fluoride in the water and cable satellite dishes."

"Mock it all you want, Dave," Mark says, "but the hippies were right."

"By accident. They believed this crap before too." You aren't even sure what you mean and you're the one saying it, so you studiously don't make note of their expressions and focus on the door. "Let's go."

"General has a point," Mark says to Luke. "The message we sent is just going to look like a trap to people like this. We should let Dave talk to them."

"You just called me a general then said you'd let me do something. Get your shit straight." You open the car door. "Luke, with me. Mark, stay with the car."

"Why – "


"I got this." You knock, then check the doorknob. It twists, so you go in.

You spent enough time around guns to know the sound of one cocking, so your sword is out and Luke's hilts are crackling with energy already. When you see the guns, then the person holding them, you pause.

The pretty blonde Hispanic girl dual-wielding pistols looks at you deliberately and shifts one of the two guns pointed at you to aim at Luke. "I'd apologize but we're closed and no one visits us anyway, so I'm going to assume this is the attempt on our lives we keep hearing about. Pick your next words carefully."

"Hey, this wasn't supposed to be a Tarantino set," you say at the same time as Luke says, "So you're Ruby?"

"Jesus, Rue," a guy calls from the next room, a little anxious, "did you just draw on total strangers?"

"They came in without an invitation, Daddy," she says, mock-sweetly, and takes a long look at you. "You're a smartass."

"So I'm told," you say. You really need her to stop looking at you like that. "Uh. You're Ruby Angeles?"

"I'd totally take subpoenas if pretty boys like you delivered them," she says, "but they don’t anyway, so yeah I’m Ruby, hi. You’re not trying to kill us, are you?"
Luke clears his throat. "Luis? My name’s Luke Kalama, I’m the anonymous tip on the signal you’ve been chasing."

You take your eyes off of her, maybe a little unwillingly, and see her dad standing back there, and find that a good reason to keep your eyes to yourself. "I see," he says to Luke, then he looks at you with less suspicion than fear, and you snap out of it. "You’re… very young," he says, faltering. "For those people we’ve heard about, I mean."

"Oh, you think this is *them*?" Ruby shifts in her chair to examine Luke, then you again.

"I keep forgetting we want people to spread the word," you say to Luke, avoiding her gaze easily enough, then look to Luis. "Yeah, uh. We’re them, if by them you mean ‘people being obnoxious as shit trying to save the world,’ yeah, that’s us."

Luis shakes his head. "All right. Well, what do you need from us?"

"You can’t go public with this," you say, before Luke can say a word, and you’re not completely sure why. Obviously he can’t go public but why are you saying it? Luis is looking at you like he’s going to say something, and you shake your head and approach him. "You really don’t seem to get this, like, this is not some corporate bullshit conspiracy, this is an international clusterfuck of cosmic proportions and the first word you say about that signal in the public arena is going to bring down a really simple shitstorm on your head called ‘hopefully quick death’ and if you think I’m joking about that then you’re not paying attention and Luke was full of shit, sorry Luke."


"Why not," Luis says, eyes trained closely on you. He still seems more scared than anything. "People need to know. If we risk backlash – "

"Jesus," you say, "are you serious. You know why you haven’t heard about this yet? Because everyone else who tried to say something got horribly murdered. So research it, fine, get data or whatever the fuck, but I’ve seen what happens to protests and rallies and shit, Luis, mass graves and body parts, I’m not making this up. Things are so much worse than you think."

"Oh," Ruby says from behind you, "yeah, that’s definitely you."

Luis sighs heavily. "You’re. I’m not… are you really saying what I think you’re saying, and, I didn’t catch your name – "

"Dave Strider," you say, "and I’m saying ‘batterwitch,’ guys, so don’t publish your shit. You want in, we’ll cut you in, when the time’s right you can publish it all, once we can keep you safe – "

"That’s the thing," Ruby says smoothly, crossing to you. "We have published it."

"Where?" Luke says rapidly, before you can start swearing at them.

"The blog," Ruby says, crossing her arms. "They don’t take us seriously. Gotta put it somewhere."

"Rue," Luis snaps. "We couldn’t have sold that as a new – "

"Please, doesn’t count, also we couldn’t sell it anyway, Daddy, you know that. Bigger problems, anyway. What do we do?" she asks you.

"I graphed the data." Ruby pushes your shades up the bridge of your nose in an almost affectionate gesture, and you don’t do anything out of pure surprise. "Published that. Didn’t really push the story as such. I can pull it down but someone’s gonna have saved it and if the worldwide conspiracy is as cosmic as you say, *Strider*, they already saw and are about to rain shit down on us, yeah?"

"You need to run this stuff past me," Luis says severely.

"I had to float it. Daddy, stop," she pleads, doing the sign of the cross and pressing her hands together, and he sighs in clear irritation.

"We have to get you out of here," Luke interrupts. "Get your things, we’ll cross state lines tonight."

"But." Luis tries to take a breath and think about this. "Ruby, when did you post that?"

"Last night," she says, and rolls her eyes. "Surprised there wasn’t a pipebomb this morning if we’ve got Betty to be scared of."

"If you’re not scared of the evil murderous corporation that runs the planet then I’m not sure I can help you," is what you say before you get a chance to really formulate anything to say. You glance at Ruby, casually; she’s staring at you. "I saw her face to face. It wasn’t fucking funny."

Ruby shakes off her surprise, and raises her eyebrows. "Is it true – "

Luis’s voice raises as he gestures frantically at Luke, who’s been talking quietly to him. "But I can’t leave everything – this is fifteen years of work, Mr. Kalama – "

The door bursts open and Ruby’s fired a warning shot above the doorway before you or Luke get a chance to move. "AGH," Mark exclaims, and practically falls into the doorframe. "What did I – "

"One of yours?" Ruby asks you, offhandedly.

"Mark, come in, shut the door," you call out, making a point to not look impressed, or at least not that impressed.

"Dave," he calls back, out of breath, "security, six blocks out – "

Ruby shrugs at that. "We’re safe. I have everything wired – well, I opened it up because I was here and so’s my dad, so whoever tries to get through either door is pretty well fucked – "

"He doesn’t mean your security, he means Imperiacorp, BCCorp’s security, we need to go now. Luke, Mark, grab the car, you two start clearing out your sylladexes and get ready to pack your shit away now," you say to the Angeleses, "and, why the fuck are you not moving?"

"They’re not moving. Luis is doing something that is probably "standing his ground" and it’s such an incredibly stupid thing to do right now. "I’m not leaving," he says firmly. "I’ve done nothing wrong."

"Daddy, don’t be stupid," Ruby says, flippant. "Let’s go back to the house then go lay low in L.A."

Hahaha, what, no. "No," you say firmly. "Not L.A. We’re going further than that."

"What?"

"Well, we can relocate you if you want, I mean," you say, and realize you’re in over your head. "Uh, um, no, we need to go, if your house is close enough we can get there, get your shit, and go somewhere, we can figure that out later, because – for fuck’s sake, where are you going?" you shout
after Luis, who’s just taken off.

You throw your hands up to no one in particular in total indignation, and Luis runs out, sweating, looking to Ruby, who’s just finished captchaloguing two laptops. "I found it," he tells her.

She softens. "Oh, oh, thanks, Dad – "

"Yeah yeah I’d rather you not die because I let you have a moment," you rattle off, and grab Luis’s arm. "Luke and Mark are out back, you two go ahead, I’ll deal with the fuckers out front."

"Ah, ah, no, fuck that," Ruby insists, and parks her ass on the desk. "I am not abandoning our HQ so you can fight our battle for us."

"Oh my god, shut up," you fire back, and she shoves your arm and grabs her dad by the shoulder. She whispers something, he glances at you, and he goes. "You’re not staying," you inform her as she settles back.

"No," she agrees. "I’m not. But I promised him I’d punch you if you disrespected me again, because otherwise he’d do it first." She sits up. "You really good on your own, bro?"

She just called you bro. "I’ll manage," you say, dryly, and she nods, hopping off of the desk. She flashes you a smile, then saunters off all casually, and you wish you could say you weren’t looking as she goes. She re-holsters her guns and pulls her jacket down around them, and you snap out of it as the door shuts after her.

Pesterchum chimes.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 1:04 --

TT: I’ve solved some of our problems in a general sense.

TT: We’ll need to meet, soon.

TT: Our birthdays?

TT: We could even have a party.

This is a thing that’s happening. Rose is trying to be helpful, right now.

TG: uh

TG: yeah

TG: sorry things are intense here

TG: got it handled though

TG: totally

TT: I believe you.

TT: Mostly.

TG: thanks for the vote of confidence
TT: Next time don’t undercut yourself. I believe in your ability to not fuck things up.

You’re getting the impression Rose’s day has been way easier than yours.

TG: wow
TG: thats
TG: something

TT: This isn’t really the point.
TT: We’ve got weapons and transportation handled now. I think we’re good.

You can hear the truck approaching, slowly.

TG: rose
TT: What?
TG: nope nothing
TT: All right.
TG: bye

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 1:08 --

You’re an idiot.

You lean by the window, tilt your shades down, and watch the truck roll by.

They don’t stop. Somehow you don’t think it’s because they’ve changed their minds about offing the Angeleses.

-- parisBound [PB] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 1:10 --

PB: 1015 Las Palmas Ave
TG: yeah about that
TG: theyre on their way to you
TG: didnt think this through to be honest
TG: im stealing a car
TG: ill take some crazyass shortcuts like fucking stallone
TG: ill return the car obviously
TG: thats legit right
PB: Make sure to steal it from a subsidiary
TG: great idea

You run. You thank whatever that BCCorp people are dumb enough to have cars with the best possible GPS. You go as fast as you goddamn can without running people over.

As annoying as the Angeleses are so far, this has to be important.

(That’s the really annoying thing. It’s all important.)

--

You’ve been working on a cool trick.

It’s a great distraction from the main thing on your mind, which is that Dave hasn’t been talking much recently and you have no idea what to think about that.

Before, this wasn’t so important. Before, you weren’t worried about his life, because he wasn’t really involved. Now you’ve pinned him with a life or death job that he probably feels obligated to do because you cried in front of him, which is stupid and not what you wanted at all, and this would have been so much easier as a suicide mission.

About the trick, though.

"So let me get this straight," John says slowly, watching the darkness curl up from your fingertips. "You officially don’t need the THORNs anymore?"

"I channel through them. But no, I don’t need to be wielding them specifically." This isn’t strife. It’s stupid to use the specibus for undramatic non-strife reasons. "This is why we haven’t been detected."

"Why the cameras die. It might actually be magic," John concedes, shrugs, and drums his hands on the steering wheel. "Are we ready?"

You send him an amused but weary look, lower your HUBTOPBAND, and nod to him. He steps out of the car, you carefully open the door with your un-grimdark hand, and he locks up while you head towards the building. The darkness permeates your hand completely as you concentrate, obscuring it from vision for a moment, then your other hand lights up and vanishes without much effort at all.

"Easy," you say out loud, like this isn’t a sign of something worse to come, because of course it isn’t. You approach the back door, look into the camera, gaze measured, for a long moment. John comes to stand next to you, then promptly flips the camera off with both middle fingers.

"Really?" you ask, though not particularly bothered.

"Well, it’s one way to figure out if they can see us," John reasons.

You assess the camera through the HUBTOPBAND’s lens and shake your head. It’s not recording, you can tell that much, and it may just be a dead prop now – the last three times you’ve tried this, it’s proved that much. You’re good.

The John Crocker Memorial Library is an institution in Seattle. You try not to spend too much time there, because it’s a very… Crocker-y place, and that makes you understandably nervous. Still, it’s the most logical place for the batterwitch to keep her records; considering the security on the place, she apparently thinks so too.
The man was a comedian, not a president. There’s no state secrets in there. There may, however, be sea-alien secrets. And that’s why you’re here.

John starts fucking with the keypad, then reaches for his lockpicks before he realizes how stupid that is, and you watch with some amusement before he finally looks back at you with a pained expression. He really doesn’t want to concede that you have to do this. "I’ve been working on it," he says, defensively, "it’s not my fault that she’s invested at least a million dollars into ‘fuck you, rebellion’ technology."

You flick the lock over with your majjyks, and turn the handle. "No one said it was your fault. We’ll need the lockpicks later."

"But –"

"Shh."

The two of you head inside, all nonchalantly, and there’s no one to be seen. The cameras are all dead. You wonder if anyone’s noticed. Someone has to be here. There has to be security. You’re not going to get away with this scot-free, and if you do there’s likely a more sinister reason for that and you may want to think twice about what you do with the result.

"We have to find the guard station first," you say.

"What if we… just… don’t, this time?" John suggests.

"Yes." You pause, surprised that John suggested this, of all people. You have to encourage this. "Let's try it. This seems to be working."

He glances at your hand, and you smile, ignoring the part where your arm both tingles pleasantly and feels like it’s on fire. He shrugs, and follows you down the hallway.

"There’s a hidden floor. We’d need a key. We could get that off of the guard, or your lockpick could come in handy there. Unfortunately I doubt that my powers extend to a lock so delicate as this, or they would need to be refined before I’d risk it." You don’t remember anyone ever talking this much in heist movies, but then those conversations likely get cut for time and coolness’s sake. "I know she has something down there. What, exactly, I’m not sure. No matter what it is, we need it."

"What if it’s… a card catalogue or something?" He makes a face at the expression you send at him. "I was only partially joking. We don’t know what’s down there at all?"

"Massive security," you say, "and her heir’s name on the place. I think she’s stupid enough to put serious things down there, actually. Don’t you?"

"I don’t know that I’d ever call her stupid," John starts.

"Power doesn’t mean intelligence, and victory doesn’t mean competence," you say, walking quickly down a dark hallway lit dimly by your HUBTOPBAND. "She’s been at this for a century or more. She’s got a lifespan advantage on us, if nothing else."

"So… you really think she’s immortal?" he asks, uncertainly.

"I think it explains enough that it’s a worthy hypothesis. But one I’m willing to test." You arrive at the elevator, and hit the down button. John’s looking with some concern at the cameras. "I guarantee you if they saw us we’d know it within a matter of seconds."
"I’ve been here most of your time raiding BCCorp too, Rose," he says, maybe a little snappish. "But if you’re right, this could be so much worse than usual."

"Yes," you say mildly. "And I’ve got it handled."

He looks at you in disbelief, and the elevator pings upon arrival, the door sliding neatly open. You step inside, and he follows, pulling out his lockpicks. "Right, that thing there?" he asks, as though you didn’t just have that very mild confrontation.

"Yes," you confirm, and rest back against the elevator door. "From what I’m told."

"Who told you?"

Your mouth quirks up into a half-smile. "Jade."

"Another e-mail?" John raises his eyebrows. "She could have told you this when she was alive."

"We were risking a lot talking as often as we were, and as openly. This place is named after her brother; she had to have wanted to know what the witch stored here. So either she did or she had an idea or she wanted us to find out. Either way." You watch him work. "Can I help?"

"One sec," he says in half a grunt, and something audibly clicks in the lock. The elevator door closes, and he grins – you grin, you love his stupid grin, whatever.

"Nice," you say, getting your face under control.

"I do what I can for my cause," he demurs, and you smirk.

"‘General,’" you say. "I do what I can for my cause, General."

"Ha," he says, and looks at your hands again. "Does it hurt you?" he asks.

You don’t answer. The elevator continues lowering, drops to LL2, then the screen goes blank and it lands. You raise your eyebrows at him, then draw your THORNS and go ahead of him.

It’s dark. Instinctively you move your hand and the lights flicker on; it startles you, too, and John backs up behind you. "Shit," he says.

"They can’t see us," you remind him.

"They can see the lights – "

"Well," you say, "we weren’t going to be able to read anything in the dark anyway." Poor reasoning, but you can fight off whatever contingent of Imperiacorp guards are here, you’ve proven that. "Come on."

They’re stacks. You haven’t spent as much time in libraries as you would like to have – the library at the compound being the one difference, but that’s a home library and likely not at all an example of a human library at all anyway. You know what stacks are, or at least what they are theoretically, and these are stacks.

These aren’t all books, though, not as such. Most are book-bound, some bound periodicals, others file folders full of paper. You’d be down here for days if you looked at everything, and maybe you should just camp out. It wouldn’t be the worst thing to know what they know.

"We’re really going to have to narrow down what the hell we’re looking at," John says, and moves
ahead of you. "Hey, filing cabinets."

_Filing cabinets_ is putting it lightly. There’s rows of them. "Right," you say, taking a deep breath, "we’re going to figure out their system and go through what they’ve got."

"I did not sign up for archiving duty," John says, more serious than dry.

"I know," you say, and pat his arm. "But your leader commands you."

It’s a process, but eventually you get the idea of how this place is set up. There’s things about the history of BCCorp, largely redacted files on those who went against BCCorp, government attempts at intervention with BCCorp and its policies, experiments and research they’ve funded, all of it. You scan all of this that you can find with the HUBTOPBAND, because reading it all right now is not plausible.

You enjoy this more than you should, maybe. John certainly seems to think so, and just hands things off to you to ascertain their usefulness. It occurs to you, again, that Dave is probably in serious danger while you’re filtering through all of this in the quiet.

"Can we put on Pandora or something?" John asks. "The silence is killing me."

"Shh," you say, half to troll him, and turn on Pesterchum, projecting your keyboard.

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-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 5:12 --

TT: I don’t know if you’re here.

TT: I know things have been intense on your end.

TT: I’m getting there, I promise.

TT: I had to do a few more things first.

TT: Jade’s been e-mailing me. Or she did. They’re being sent from her server, they started coming after she died.

TT: They’re incredibly useful.

TT: I wanted to have this information before we get to HQ and all of the people you’ve gathered.

TT: And get information from Luke. I need to know what he’s holding back.

TT: Try to ask him?

TT: Otherwise, you seem to be doing well.

TT: The results are good, anyway.

TT: How are you?

There’s nothing. Nothing. For minutes, there’s nothing.

TT: What, no AR? You said weeks ago you were building one.
TG: rose
You exhale sharply.

TT: Yes.

TG: im so tired
TG: were out
TG: meet us at hq
TG: do your shit and meet us
TG: we need to talk
TT: Are you okay?
TG: yeah im cool
TG: you should get here though
TT: I will.

Why do you feel so incredibly terrible?

TT: Dave,
TT: We’ve got this.
TT: You did a fantastic job.
TT: I did pretty well myself.
TT: We’ll figure out where to go from here, together.
TT: All right?
TG: yeah
TG: need a nap
TG: see you
TT: Yes.

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 5:20 --

"Laid them out for you," John says, a bit of an edge to his voice. "Whenever you’re ready."

"John," you say, warning.

"We’re on a mission," he says, apparently unable to help himself. "You can’t tell me you’re just talking strategy with him, you’re –"

"John," you repeat, sharply.
"You’re distracted," he says, directly, looking down at you like he can actually tell you what to do. "You said we were going to take her down, and we can’t if we’re getting – involved in other things."

"Don’t start this." Your tone goes brittle. "You’re misreading things, I don’t appreciate it, and I – don’t want to say something I’ll regret."

John scoffs at you, and pushes a file at you with his foot. "Go on," he says. "Prove it, then."

"If you have a problem with the way I do my work," you say, "I’ll give you a real life to go about. But this is my chessboard, John, I told you that, so get the hell off of it if you have a problem."

"I’m giving you advice – "

"You wouldn’t give this advice if you weren’t jealous." You hardly had a choice. He stares at you, completely bereft, and you’d almost enjoy this if it wasn’t all so horrible. "I’m not wrong and we both know it."

"This isn’t the point," he says heatedly, once he finds his voice.

"No. The point is defeating her. The point is that my closest friend is running around doing incredibly dangerous work towards that goal, so I may want to be in contact with him on and off to see if he’s been murdered, or at least to know that before that bitch sends me an imgur shot of him bleeding out." You’re so pissed off you can hardly stand it, and you feel the heat of the majjyk go down your arms and your back and practically feel it streak down your face, somehow. "John, leave it alone. There’s so much more going on here than you and me or me and him and – that’s why we’re here. The history will tell us what we’re doing wrong and what we’re doing right and what we can do to go forward. Everything else will just – give us some context to work with."

"You are such a history major," he grumbles, and turns back to the filing cabinets.

"John," you repeat, some heat still in your voice, but he doesn’t turn. "I’m not mad at you."

"That’s believable," he says. "I just got teen-angsted at, but you’re not mad."

"Don’t talk down to me," you say, trying to get this under control before you burst into black majjyk flames or something. "I’m not mad. I’m not – " You don’t know what to say. "Just… don’t get jealous."

He looks back at you, surprised, then plays it off cool and turns back to the shelves with the bound materials. "Yeah," he says, "fine."

The power begins to bleed away, almost; it keeps going, and you’re noticing a trend that is not very encouraging. You try to calm down, and, as the heat and the power drops, you notice that in spite of your icy tones, your cheeks are blazing pink and your eyes are wet, and – shit, shit. This isn’t how you want to work. This isn’t how you want to be seen, or how you want to be at all.

"John," you say again, and he doesn’t look around at you. "John – "

"Rose," he says in lowered tones, "there’s someone here."

You could not be more surprised, probably literally. You crouch, then, rise slowly to go behind John, and you see what he sees, a line of people approaching you. "Not Imperiacorp," you murmur, at watching their movements.

"No way," he agrees. "Non-military. Police?"
"She doesn’t need the police," you say.

"Who says it’s her?"

It’s a good point. Then you see one of them cross through a nearby stack and the back of the jacket he wears: FBI.

"Shit," you hiss.

"Relax," John suggests, and he steps out, walks forward, all before you can grab him by the back of the jacket and smack him senseless. "Agents," he says, "what can we do for you?"

The look on the lead agent’s face is priceless, right up until he lifts his gun. "FBI! Put your hands where I can see them!"

Oh, fine. You saunter out, hands up, majjyk still streaking down your arms. "Are you here for us or for her?" you ask, and the agent’s eyes go wide.

"Take ‘em in," he says to the agents behind him, and you take a deep breath to release your majjyk energy. Only then does the agent get anywhere near you, and you casually put your hands behind your back.

You eye John critically, he shoots you a glance, and speaks up. "They were going to find us anyway, and do you really want ‘assaulting an FBI agent’ on your record on top of everything else?"

"I’m a minor," you say. "My record would be wiped clean in about a year anyway."

He doesn’t find that funny, apparently.

"Do you know why they call this ‘frog-marching’?" you ask the agent holding onto you, who studiously ignores you. "Well. I try to help."

John may be right. You could afford to take this slightly more seriously.

--

December 2003
You have a revolutionary headquarters now. How cool is that?

For the record, the originally idiotic and terrifying prospect of being leader of a revolt has turned out to prove that you look pretty good as the leader of a revolt. And it sort of fits. It's that or you've just gotten used to it, but it's probably that first thing.

You're rubbing sleep out of your eyes at 5am, pissed off but totally ready to hear from Rose about when she's coming to meet you and the others in NYC. Mark won't shut up in general, but especially about Rose and Ruby, your "harem" or whatever, and you heard Luke warn him that keeping up with that could get his lights punched out, so that's hopefully one less thing to stress you out.

"Jesus," you grumble, wandering out of the master bedroom. Being a general is hard, and you were raised on the road in a pack of lone wolves which is not actually a thing but it should be, anyway, there are too many people, like, you think babies might just spring into existence in a burst of sparkles or some shit because there are that many fucking people here and so far aliens exist and have a worldwide conspiracy so if you're all really sentient Sims in some asshole preteen's computer it might not even surprise you much.
It's not like you've even had a chance to "woohoo!" yet so you don't even know.

(It should be noted you've never fucking played the Sims, because you have better things to do.)

"Hey," Ruby slings at you, quietly enough for the hour but awake enough to scare the shit out of you.

"What the fuck," you declare in a sharp whisper, backing off and running your fingers into your hair and you're totally fried now. "Why are you awake? Why are you happily awake?"

"I don't sleep well when I'm under threat," Ruby says smartly. She looks exhausted, actually. "Are you just going to stand there?"

You tense up instantly, despite yourself. "I was getting my computer," you say, almost defensively, and take it out of your sylladex to plug it in the outlet near the couch, by her. You have to sit next to her. That's fine.

"Well," she says, as your computer boots, "we're going to have to talk about it."

"Talk about what?" You don’t have to talk about anything, you can talk about nothing, you can do all kinds of things involving speech, and you’re totally willing to do whatever you can do to revolutionize talking. You’re the fucking Einstein or Stephen Hawking of talking. It’s what you do.

"The thing where you killed the fuck out of that guard and nearly killed the other when you were rescuing us," Ruby says bluntly. "That thing."

"That thing," you echo. "Yeah, that was a thing."

"Dave," she chides you.

"It’s a thing that’s over."

"It was a week ago." Great. She’s getting pissed at you. "I’ve seen people get killed, I got pulled from school because people got killed, Strider, it fucks people up. You actually killed someone, that has to be fucking you up."

"This is a revolution. People are going to die." You haven’t even booted your computer yet. You’re too tired for this conversation, your dreams full of too much bullshit. "It won’t be the first time and it won’t be the last."

"Fine. Whatever. Fuck it," Ruby says, clearly not ready to let it go. You really don’t care if she does or doesn’t, as long as she doesn’t bring it up with you. You’re fine not thinking about it. "You got pulled from school because of this revolution thing? Your parents do something? I get that."

"I was homeschooled," you say, your throat catching, because your body’s an asshole.

"You – " She sees the look cross your face. "Your parents – "

_Doesn’t matter. I don’t want to talk about it._ There's a million ways to say it. Instead you say, "Don't know who my birth parents were. My dad is, uh, I think. I don't know." It's too early. That's why you're not cool right now. "He was part of this. I think. Like Rose. I mean. Part of..." You're rambling. "We're different. We've been involved in this shit forever."

That's the first time you told anyone your suspicions. Maybe you are being way too typical, maybe she broke through your cool, and you hate that a little bit. But you have to push through until the
cool comes back. "So yeah, I mean, something like that I guess," you finish, like a genius.

"Look," she says. "You don't have to... you're obviously messed up and you have the right to be. Don't get weird and macho, Strider, we all get messed up about things, even cool kids like you."

You just look at her for a second – she’s managing to make you get close to talking about something, actually talking about something, and this girl is a problem because she’s pretty and fucked up enough that you can relate to her but not exactly Rose-level fucked up, which is probably a good thing. You realize that you’re just looking at her right about the time you realize that she’s laughing at you.

"Nice pants," she says.

You don't look down, because that would be admitting a reaction to the tease at all, but you don’t have to. You know goddamn well you're wearing ninja pajama pants.

"I know," you say, with cool guy Zen. "Everyone's jealous of my wardrobe. It's unfortunate. Like. What, I have a gift. I'm a gold medal badass."

Ruby smirks. "This is the thing," she says, "I'd think you were trying to be cool right now except shit like that comes way too naturally, am I right? So, you're that guy. The guy who runs his mouth." She doesn't let you answer. "You're a good leader."

"I, uh," you start to say, and you are just a genius all over today, like MENSA's got their shit in the mail for you.

"Your computer booted," she says, and rests back against the couch.

You go into the encrypted channel, waiting for something from your excited French college students, but it’s a waiting game. You don’t know if you want to talk to Rose today, even if she might be dead. You’re going to wait. "At least you can tell I'm cool," you say to Ruby, without looking at her. "Good sign for your coolness factor."

"I’ve always been cool," she starts in a deadpan you’re really enjoying until you recognize it as an imitation of your own, especially when she keeps going. "I’m so cool that you won’t even realize my full coolness until, boom, explosion of cool. You’ll never see it coming."

"You’re imitating me," you say, squinting at her even if she can’t really see anything besides your eyebrows going what the fuck, hey. "Why are you imitating me?"

"I'm just cool, bro," she says, and starts laughing.

"Just, uh, stick with your whole – girl – thing," you say, realizing how stupid it sounds. "It’s way better. For you."

"Oh my god, listen to you," Ruby says, grinning at you. "'Girl thing.' I’d be offended but it’s almost cute, but that might be because I haven't slept since we got here? I don’t know."

With the smiles and the flirting, she’s probably trying to distract you; she’s actually doing a decent job, and it might have worked on anyone but you, king of deflection. Not to mention that you’ve also known Rose Crocker Lalonde for years. She has to do better than that. "Get sleep," you say, ignoring the rest. "You're safe."

"Are we?" she asks, apparently rhetorically.
You glance around. You've rented out the entire fifth floor of this apartment building, have twenty-five people here right now, and are expecting at least ten more. It never occurred to you that you needed any help to protect them because this is your complete obsession right now. "I'm not going to let anyone get hurt."

"You don't have to do it alone," she says, somewhere in between amusement and annoyance. "Why would you have to do it alone?"

"I'm a fucking general. That's what that means." You obviously know what she's getting at with the whole previous conversation that you're ignoring ever happened. "Look, help is appreciated. Great. Totally awesome. Just, actually get sleep."

"I don't need beauty sleep," she says in a very different deadpan than before, and much to your horror you realize you are visibly embarrassed at that. She’s beaming at you. "God, Strider. This is going to be fun."

"I promise it's not," you say, soberly as you can manage.

"Go try to sleep," you say, firm, as an order, then she just rests back against the couch and ignores you. You take this as a sign to harass her later – maybe she’ll fall asleep next to you – and open Pesterchum.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 5:16 --

TG: hey
TG: checking in
TG: i know weve both been busy
TG: hq is set up
TG: rallied the troops
TG: twenty-five people
TG: more on the way
TG: how long til you get here

No reply. She's set at away.

TG: whenever youre back
TG: let me know

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 5:20 --

You take a deep breath, and give up on the whole general thing, at least for a second. "Breakfast?" you say to Ruby, who isn't even pretending to sleep now. Maybe food will help.

"You... know how to cook," she says slowly.

"I lived on the road my whole life. Yeah, I know how to cook. No chef shit, but it'll do." You set
your laptop aside after locking it, then stand. "Eggs. I bought eggs."

"Eggs would work." Ruby follows you into the kitchen.

(Somehow you manage not to get nervous as she helps you out, with minimal flirting, because you're getting the impression she's both not messing with you and not getting pushy either. Besides, it’s better than the deep, feelings-y conversation. Fuck that.)

Around 7:30 you message Rose again, because what Ruby brought up is starting to get to you.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 7:32 --
TG: either youre awake and ignoring me or youre dead
TG: no way youre dead this early in the game
TG: i know youre awake
TG: you are always annoyingly awake
TG: up reading and shit
TG: so talk
TG: i actually am asking you to talk
TG: so
TG: yeah

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 7:35 --

This is just sad.

You do a security sweep, talk to Mark and Luke, program some extra stuff for the security system, then it's lunchtime and Ruby cooks.

The Vermas show up, kind of a surprise since they seemed fine with the idea of being in hiding weeks ago. You're ready to ask them what the fuck is up, then they hand you a stapled stack of paper. "The Mirsas sent this information with us," Adya says, keenly, "and we want to help from now on. So we’re here."

You glance over the printed information, then look skeptically up at her. "If you're going to stick around we need to get you fully digital. You said the Mirsas sent this? Where did they get it?"

"Reza said she got scans from Miss Lalonde to create a database and her information was the first in there," Hana says, pushing her hair back behind her ears. "We should get to work, right, sir?"

You start paging through the paper. It's chunks of a blueprint. "Mark!" you shout.

"What?" Mark leans out of his room.

"Stop whatever fucked up thing you’re planning and get the fuck over here." You pull the staple out and wave the Vermas over as well as Mark as you lay out the blueprints on the table in the right
"Tell me what I’m looking at."

Mark edges past you and rearranges a few pieces. "We don’t know," Hana admits. "It’s not Skaianet technology."

"I need supplies," Mark says, standing over the blueprints and staring at it. "We can build it."

"When you don’t know what it does," you say flatly.

Mark shrugs. "The only way to find out is to build it."

"We don’t have some of these materials," Adya points out.

"You don’t know that." Mark taps the symbols on the side of the blueprints. "If we decode this… Dave, you can do this, right?"

You didn’t even see the symbols until just now. You look closer at them. "I’ve seen these." They were on a cave wall, months ago. "Yeah, I can do that. I’ll do that, you take apart whatever goddamned thing you’re building in there, I’m not stupid, Mark. Hana, Adya, look at this and try to figure out the basics before we go look for supplies."

The Vermas leave, and you’re stuck with Mark, who isn’t leaving. You stare at him, then he starts talking.

"General," Mark says, in that tone you know means he’s being a fucking teenager again. It doesn’t matter that you’re sixteen, nearly seventeen, it matters that you aren’t a teenager. There’s a difference. You eyeball him. "You need to see what I’m doing."

"No," you say. "Take it apart."

"General – "

"Stop flattering me and take it apart."

Luke steps between you, and you sigh wearily at him, shaking your head. "Let’s be reasonable about this. Mark, what are you building?"

Great, Luke was listening and just waiting for you to need intervention. You have a diplomat on your hands. It’s not the worst thing, you guess, but it makes you wonder what’ll happen when Rose gets here. "If it’s anything fucking with the signal I don’t want to hear about it."

Mark pauses, looking caged. "Well – "

You are so done with him. "Oh for fuck’s sake, I told you we can’t do that until everyone’s together and – "

"I tapped it! I tapped it, we can listen now without getting… involved," Mark tries.

"We – " You luckily stifle the words before you say them. We already could. Apparently, not everyone can. "You sure?"

"I’m sure." Mark looks more worried and troubled than you’ve ever seen him, which is really to say at all. "I listened. And I was fine, it’s just… you’ve heard her," he asks.

"I talked to her in person," you say wryly, "but yeah, I heard her before that."
Luke interrupts. "Let’s hear it.”

As usual, you’re simultaneously pissed off at Mark and having to concede that he’s useful. It’s terrible and you hate it. Whatever. You follow him into his room, and there’s an antenna stretching nearly to the ceiling. "How the fuck," you say.

"He’s stealing," Luke says mildly. "Turn it on, man."

Mark flicks a switch on the box the antenna’s coming out of, and the speakers it’s attached to crackle. The fan of the desktop computer it’s attached to starts running hard, and something that sounds like a phone picking up goes through the speakers. Then it starts.

OBEY. SURRENDER HUMANITY. FEAR INDIVIDUALITY. LISTEN ONLY TO US. OBEY.

It runs for three minutes before Luke reaches over and flicks the off-switch.

"Well, none of us seem to be affected," he says, "but that’s no guarantee."

"We were hearing it anyway," Mark reasons. "Now we know what it’s saying."

They’re obviously fucked up about it. You weren’t thrilled to hear it either, even if you’d already heard it before. "What do we do with it?"

"Record it?" Mark hazards.

"And do what with it?"

"Keep it on record, give it to Luis, so that when we tell everyone – "

Tell everyone. The look on your face stops him dead. "Do that," you say, and look to Luke, who’s looking at you with the same expression of concern and uncertainty Mark has on his face. Then you look back to Mark. "If this breaks the signal…”

"There’s no proof it doesn’t affect us," Mark points out.

"But if it does, could this tech be used to jam its effects for at least an individual?" you ask.

There’s a brief pause. "Yes," Mark says, a little surprised, probably that you thought of it first.

"Then we’ll do that. You’re going to figure it out. Put your obnoxious shit to use. We’re going to – "

"You don’t even know. "Rose is almost here, we’ll figure it out from there."

"Have you heard from her?" Luke asks you.

You ignore him and just leave to head to your computer. This day is starting to get to you.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 12:04 --

TG: rose

TG: rose

TG: rose

TG: rose
TG: okay

TG: whatever

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pesterimg terminalTelesilla [TT] at 12:06 --

Lunch is a decent affair, even if you have to cram a bunch of tables together to get everyone in the same apartment. Ruby falls asleep on the couch after, and you’re clearing out the dishes like some kind of chump (aren’t you a general or something? what kind of general helps with cleanup?) when you hear someone knocking on a door down the hallway.

No one’s in that apartment, because everyone’s in the main apartment. No one ever comes to this floor; no one knows anyone lives here besides the sketchy-ass landlord. Anyone who’s here knows it's you who's here. The landlord probably got paid off, if he was lucky. Either way, fuck that guy.

Everyone goes silent. You draw your sword and head towards the door, waving Luke over to join you.

More knocking. You debate the element of surprise, but you might lose it if they see the door opening and you’re in the same position you’d be if they kicked the door down. At least, though, then everyone else would be safe. You wait for the next knock, and take a deep breath as it does.

They’re two doors away. You hate to do it but you go to Ruby, shoving her shoulder. "Wake up."

Ruby blinks at you. "I’m awake."

"Strife," you say, not apologizing, focused. "Come on."

She pulls herself up, draws her guns, and stands behind you with Luke as you carefully open the door, silently, just barely. Then you whisper, "Not to kill," and shove the door open, backing down so Ruby can take a few shots.

She fires twice, and you’re still not over how fucking loud guns are oh jesus god why. Why. Your ears ring but you realize the Imperiacorp guards are on the ground, groaning, and you kick the door shut, heading towards them with your sword on the ready. They’re both bleeding; she managed to hit one in the gut and the other in the leg, and you can hear the one with the gut wound start to hyperventilate as he sees Luke’s electrified swords.

The one with the leg wound reaches for something, and you immediately put your sword to his arm. "You want to lose two limbs today?" you ask, and barely glance at Ruby. "Grab the thing."

She reaches for it, pulling a radio out of his belt. It starts talking right away. "Troops 231 and 232, report," a female voice blares, with static.

"231, status of device?"

Oh, shit. They found you because of Mark’s fuckery. Of course they did. "Device was abandoned and destroyed."

"232," the other radio blares, then, the same voice. "Status of 231?"
Shit, you’re busted. Han Solo made this look cool, and you are not Han Solo, which this situation is forcing you to admit. You gesture to Luke, who steps on the gut-shot guard’s hand and grabs the radio. "232, reporting," he says, very graciously. "Device is destroyed."

"Roger, 232," the dispatch says. "Return to base immediately."

Well, you didn’t think this through completely. You’re really going to have to kick Mark’s ass if this tech doesn’t pan out. "Shit," you say.

"Send us back," 231 says, surprising the hell out of all of you. "Don’t kill us, send us back."

"Send you back so your guys will kill us," Luke says skeptically.

"No, I think we don’t really have a choice," Ruby says, cocking one of her guns.

"For fuck’s sake," you snap. If you weren’t cool someone might think you were panicking. This is General shit, and you can do it. "No. We're going."

Luke looks at you, surprised.

"We have other places to go." You switch your specibus and draw the taser, cranking up the voltage. "Get the radios, get Mark, he's going to sweep them for tech now. Now!"

Ruby goes, and you knock out the troops.

"He's going to die," Luke says quietly.

"I know." You don't know what else to do, you're not fucking happy about it, but you have twenty-five people to take care of.

Mark had better have something to show for this, at least after a few days.

(You don’t know what she would have done, but you still wish Rose was here.)

--

So, it turns out that the FBI is actually not completely terrified enough to fail to investigate BCCorp and the batterwitch "myth" in general. You wish you would have found this out in a different way, but one can’t have everything.

"Miss Crocker," an agent calls to you from outside the holding cell and by instinct you refuse to answer to it. "Miss Crocker." She opens the door and approaches you. You don’t look at her, less pointedly than casually. "Rose," she tries.

"Yes," you say. "What?"

You seem to have taken her by surprise. FBI, try harder. "I’m Agent Parker, we have to question you. Come with me."

You answer by standing and following her out without a word. You wonder how long you can go with one word answers, and decide you’re going to try.

"Here we are," Parker says, and unlocks the door, ushering you inside. You sit down across from her, doing your best to communicate bored disinterest, a challenge a sixteen year old’s face was made to meet. "My partner’ll be here in a minute. Sorry about the wait."
Good cop. Typical. "Let’s get this over with," you say. So much for one word answers. You shrug at yourself and at her.

"Somewhere else to be?" Parker asks, not entirely sarcastic.

"Generally."

She’s assessing you, you can tell. "I couldn’t help but notice your last name."

*It’s not my last name. "Mm."*

"We can’t find records beyond your placronym, you know. It’s weird. Any idea how that happened?"

Parker’s just watching you and you really cannot believe she thinks you’re this stupid. "I had nothing to do with that," you say. "When’s your partner showing up?"

"A minute, like I said," she says. "Are you related to John Crocker?"

"It’s not an uncommon last name," you say mildly.

"But you happened to be in the hidden level of the John Crocker Library," Parker points out.

"Nothing gets past you." If the strategy is to annoy statements out of you with overly typical law enforcement tripe, it's working. "You were there too. Also interesting. Why?"

Parker looks like she wants to sigh, but doesn't. "We're questioning you, Rose, not the other way around. You were breaking and entering. Why?"

"For the same reason you were." You look at her, daring her.

"Really," she says, obviously not buying that. She pages through her file. "You were there with, ah, John Rosslyn. How did you two meet?"

Well, there's no delicate way to couch the truth, you realize with faint amusement. A lie? It's less funny when you consider your options are extremely limited. "I don't understand why I'm here. John, maybe. I'm a minor. Tell me why I'm here and I may talk."

"We just want to know to what purpose you were looking through BCCorp files," she explains.

"So you looked at them as well." You already had suspicions, but things are becoming clearer. "You really know no more about me than my name."

Her expression is unreadable, very likely on purpose. "Yes," she says.

"Get your partner. I'll tell you the truth."

It takes about two minutes; it occurs to you then they're probably thinking this is corporate espionage. You smile as they enter the room, Parker followed by a tall man, older, clearly the veteran. "Agent Cormier," he introduces himself. "I hear you have something to tell us."

You can't wait to stop that damn condescending tone from both of them. "You're right," you say.

"About what?" Cormier prompts.

"I was raised a Crocker. By the woman herself, at the Maryland compound. I imagine you and yours
know something happened there, and if you don't I'm happy to tell you." You glance at Parker, who's listening intently. "The woman once called Betty Crocker is real and has plans beyond bakery. She has reach beyond her company. You know this, or suspect this, or you wouldn't have been there last night. You – general, FBI you – may have known this for some time, but, for whatever reason, bribes, fear, all that, you didn't do anything about it. John once worked for BCCorp, I met him at Maryland after Jade English helped me escape." You pause. "Oh, we were at the library because we needed more information about her reach and what we can do with our base to limit her influence. That should cover it."

The looks on their faces are completely worth this gambit. "Okay," Cormier says, "you're spying on BCCorp. Why?"

"Because she's evil and so are they. She's not after money, though it helps. I'm not after money either," you add. "Though I'll take donations. I take it you understand now?"

"Your base," Parker repeats. "I'd like to hear more about that, if you would, Rose."

"Sorry," you say promptly. "That I can't tell you. And I won't. You can charge me, charge John, put me in juvenile detention, and then BCCorp will have us killed and you'll lose so much intel on them you can't believe. So call me a corporate espionage agent who broke into private property to steal information, slinging conspiracy theories at you to get out scot-free. But I know things you don't, and can operate outside the law."

Cormier has a look in his eye; you were right to aim this at him. You smile, casually. "Let's make a deal," you say.

A half hour later, you see John again when you're getting your belongings back, and he's completely bewildered. "What did you do?" he whispers.

"They're scared," you say, "in over their heads, and don't know who to trust. They'll give us a pass if we keep in contact. They want to use us, but we can use them to far better effect." You smirk at his god you're fantastic face. "You're welcome."

"They thought this was a Patty Hearst situation, you know," he tells you, sliding on his Winspecs. "A kidnapping, for god's sake. Who would kidnap you?"

"Someone could try." You put on your HUBTOPBAND and pause for a long moment. You realize you've stopped dead when John doubles back.

Dave. Oh, Dave.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 5:16 --

TG: hey

TG: checking in

TG: i know weve both been busy

TG: hq is set up

TG: rallied the troops
TG: ten people
TG: more on the way probably
TG: how long til you get here
TG: whenever youre back
TG: let me know

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 5:20 --

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 7:32 --
TG: either youre awake and ignoring me or youre dead
TG: no way youre dead this early in the game
TG: i know youre awake
TG: you are always annoyingly awake
TG: up reading and shit
TG: so talk
TG: i actually am asking you to talk
TG: so
TG: yeah

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 7:35 --

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 12:04 --
TG: rose
TG: rose
TG: rose
TG: rose
TG: okay
TG: whatever

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 12:06 --

You immediately project your keyboard out right then and there.
TT: I'm okay, Dave.
TT: Things got complicated but I figured it out.
TT: I'm coming to HQ.

There's no response. You instantly sink into terror.
TG: this is you right
TT: Yes.
TG: when are you coming
TG: what airport
TG: is jay coming with

You breathe again, and almost laugh. He’s checking that you’re safe, he doesn't believe it either, and you can't blame him.
TT: John is coming with, yes. We should be arriving at Newark, as soon as we can. Does that work?
TG: yeah
TG: we had to move hq
TG: were in jades long island location
TG: long island
TG: swear to fuck
TG: imperiacorp assholes
TT: Are you okay?
TG: yeah
TG: get here
TG: we need you

For some reason you're so happy you can feel your skin tingling and your heart beating.
TT: I will.
TG: cool
TG: btw im a general now too
TG: deal with it
TT: Cool.
TG: lemme know when you have the flight info

TT: I will.

TT: Dave?

TG: yeah

TT: Get some sleep.


You sign off and put your arm in John's. "We're heading home."

He smiles, sadly. You focus on the good. You lean against him as you walk, some small comfort to the both of you.

--

You're drawing on the walls.

No one said it was particularly good drawing, but that's the point. It's ironic. You could do better, but the whole point is seeing people's expectations and fucking with them. Bad art, bad grammar, absurdist humor, that's the point.

Those idiots who call you out for not bothering have never got it and never will. Poor fuckers. They have no sense of humor or irony. How do they even survive in such a fucked up world, anyway?

You're guessing shitty movies. You hate movies, except a few ironic remakes which really get you. You think you could relate to the people who make those movies. You heard they're thinking about making a Starsky and Hutch movie. Or a 21 Jump Street one. You're incredibly optimistic about it.

Out of nowhere, you realize you're dreaming. There's a masterpiece in front of you, and you vaguely remember it from some point before you started creating it.

"You're awake," Rose says. She's standing behind you. She seems surprised.

"Nope," you say. Nope to all of it. You don't miss Rose this much.

You wonder how to wake up actually. Maybe if you're awake you should go to sleep. Besides, if Rose wants you to do something, you're a little inclined to not do it, and being awake isn't very awesome right now anyway. You're remembering things that didn't happen, like the drawings.

"Nope," you say again, before Rose can say anything, and walk past her to the bed that's in purple fantasy dream world. She's looking at you. You ignore her.

You're tired. Dream-tired. You feel like you haven't slept for days. It's not hard to start drifting like a member of the Fast and the Furious cast trying to beat whatever bad guy can only be defeated by car stunts and friendship.

"Please wake up," Rose says, and her voice is almost, maybe, weak, like it was when she completely snapped about Jade.

But you can't. Reality is shifting. You don't want to.

You wake up. Like really. In your bed at HQ. Some stupid part of you remembers the dream
perfectly, supposedly, but it's just a dream that's leaving your brain because it's just a dream, and you're starting not to remember it at all, but you're starting to get almost, maybe, guilty. Like it was when you started to talk to Rose about your dreams and they got louder, which is fucking stupid, so it's good that it stopped.

Either way, that Rose was just a dream Rose in stupid pajamas. You're fine. Real Rose will be here really soon.

Everything is fine. It's great. Besides the paranoia thing, as usual, you are fucking awesome.

You sit up, take out your PDA, and consider messaging Rose.

All you're picturing is that look on Dream Rose's face. But like you said before, you don't remember anything, so this must be some bullshit your brain cooked up because it wants you to be typical and beg for Rose to come back like you've already done like some kind of chump, and you're not having it. Fuck that.

See, it's fine. You pick up your PDA.

Rose has to message you first. You're not doing this stupid song and dance shit like you're prancing around on Broadway in Lion King or something. You're not Simba. You're not Mufasa. Although now you realize you'd definitely watch James Earl Jones tap-dance without even thinking. That'd be awesome as shit.

You message Luke, because you're lazy and he's always awake at this hour.

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-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering parisBound [PB] at 6:03 --
TG: you awake
PB: Yes
PB: Did you hear Mark
TG: hear him what
PB: You sleep like the dead
PB: He was up all night building something
PB: He doesn't sleep you know that
TG: none of us sleep
TG: not really
TG: we should maybe
TG: hard to when you know a psycho alien bakery baroness is out there
PB: You're sixteen
PB: You'll be fine
```
PB: I need to sleep
PB: I'm old
TG: yeah you are
TG: what's he doing
PB: Probably following orders
PB: But someone should check
PB: He didn't eat dinner
TG: am i his dad
TG: are you
PB: You're his general
PB: Morale is important
PB: So is food
TG: isn't army food shit
PB: Have you tasted your food
TG: don't talk shit man
TG: i'll demote you to washing floors and shit
PB: Rose is almost here
PB: She'll put me back to colonel status
TG: why does everyone know military ranks
PB: Google
PB: And also you are slightly hilarious about this
PB: I won't lie
TG: yeah okay
TG: whatever
PB: Rose is coming to HQ
TG: i know that yeah
PB: You two good
TG: why wouldn't we be

You know what he's getting at and you're not saying a goddamn thing.
PB: Just asking
TG: k
PB: Are you going to check on Mark
PB: Or should I
TG: i will
TG: gotta do something first
PB: All right

Comfortably not avoiding anything, you start reaching out to people on the encrypted channel; there's generally someone on there on any hour. You're 150 strong worldwide, which isn't bad for three months' work.

That eats away an hour and a half, then you have no excuses when you've run out of people to talk to.

It's fine. You can talk to Rose without talking about It, the thing that happened, not the shitty movie with the clown that a punk band stole for their equally shitty music. “It” doesn’t even matter, so you're good.

You're trying not to think of how embarrassingly glad she's not dead or worse, every time you think about it or talk to her. At least people know better than to mess with you about it.

She seemed so worried, before, during It. But that wasn’t real.

TT: Yes.
TT: We'll be at Newark tomorrow at noon.
TT: Thought about a train, but plane security is better. Harder for Imperiacorp to get around.
TT: We have weapons we can get through there, too.
TG: okay
TG: i uh

Fuck.
You are not going to talk about this.
You are definitely not going to talk about this.

Fucking damn it. She seemed so real. *It won’t go away.* It’s not a dream, it’s a memory, a memory so real of the Rose you know, but that makes no sense, and you shouldn’t talk about it, because it didn’t happen.

Fucking *damn it.*

TG: you have a minute
TT: Yes.
TT: What's wrong?
TG: nothing
TT: I really don't believe that.
TG: fine
TG: more dreams
TG: more bullshit with you in stupid pajamas
TG: why do you even care anyway
TT: We're special. Remember?
TT: It's important.
TT: Or it could be important one day.
TT: I’m never clear on exactly which it is, myself.
TG: why would dreams be important
TG: remember
TG: brain puke
TT: Some of them are brain puke.
TT: Some of them are important.
TG: okay
TG: how are they important
TT: There’s information that can be gleaned.
TG: what
TG: are you telling me im psychic
TT: Not exactly. They’re important, though.
TG: how could you possibly know that

TT: You have to know by now that Jade knew things she couldn't have known or guessed.

TT: Luke has to have said.

TT: This is how.

TG: so jade is psychic because her dreams were true too

TG: wait

This is so much worse than you thought this conversation would get. Being honest blows, because suddenly you are very fucking nauseous and have the desperate need to abscond from your own brain.

You’ve put two and two together and got “fuck you.”

Yeah, this is bad.

TG: i gotta go

TG: later

TT: Dave.

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 7:53 --

You sign off hurriedly.

This can’t be true or real or anything, but the thought won’t go away, sticking to you like something you would normally have a ridiculous fucking metaphor for but right now you’re panicking too much to even come up with one. Because of a dream, months ago, and you finally realizing what it could mean.

NOPE YOU’RE NOT THINKING ABOUT THIS.

Except you are and you can’t stop it.

Did you see how you and Rose are going to die? Is that why she wouldn't talk about it? But that doesn't feel right, it doesn't sound right. You could feel it, and you were different, you –

The room is spinning. Your head is between your legs and it’s not helping. You are definitely about to puke. You run as quietly as you can to the bathroom.

As you lean against the toilet, you can't ignore the thought.

When Rose is here, someone will get it. You won't be alone.

You’re not alone, you’re surrounded by people. It's stupid, but essentially true anyway. Right now, it’s comforting.

She’ll be here soon.

You can wait. Things will be okay.
John seizes your hand when you step off of the plane, in what might well be a fit of nerves. He’s apparently not nervous enough to go for one of the stupidly weaponized pieces of clothing and accessories that you both have, though, so you assume this is some kind of gesture of affection rather than a case of an itchy trigger finger in case Imperiacorp is waiting for you.

The two of you walk in silence and calm to the gate, then you see Dave, a man who must be Luke – you’ve never met him in person, after all – and a teenager, all standing at the gate in a casual discussion. You stop, frozen, and John tugs at your hand.

"Come on," he urges you, and you nod and go ahead.

Dave completely breaks off mid-sentence when he sees you coming up, and smacks the teenager in the arm to shut him up. Admirably, you don’t go up and hug Dave, or anything so sentimental. You hold yourself back. This is what’s necessary now.

"I am so glad you're not dead," you inform him mildly.

Dave eyes John, who’s just casually smiling. "Yeah, likewise," he says. "John, right?" he directs at him, wearing an expression that’s clearly critical if you know him at all.

"Yeah," John says, and holds out his other hand. You only realize at that point that you’ve been holding onto John’s hand this whole time, and let go of it. "Hey, Dave."

"Hey," Dave says, quickly shaking John’s hand. He’s not acknowledging you at all now. You were completely right; this is incredibly awkward, and likely only going to get worse. "Uh, this is Mark. Mark, Rose."

Mark looks at you with clear amusement and surprise. Then he looks at Dave, who glares. Then he holds his hand out. "My pleasure, General Lalonde."


"Pleasure," Luke tells John, and adds to you, "I’ll tell you what happened after Maryland. You and Dave really need to hear – we had other things going on, before, but now that we’re all together – "

"Yeah, let’s not do this here. We should get back," Dave says; finally, he’s looking at you again, ignoring John, just focused on you. You restrain even the smallest smile. "Everyone wants to meet you."

You don’t know why you’re nervous.

"Let's go."

--

*Weeks in the future, but not many...*

A HOSTILE AGENT stares at his FENESTRATED WINDOWS.

There’s a whole lot of stupid out there right now, the least of it being that his EMPRESS is insistent that he not do anything about the kid running around causing shit and the girl who got underfoot cutting in on his business. The lady doesn’t have a clue how to run things. He has ideas. He has
But all of that's gonna have to wait, because the EMPRESS is more than a little ahead of him.

There's the kid. The whole thing with the kid is complicated. He didn't get attached to the kid. He doesn't really care what happens to the kid. He just wants to be able to do his goddamned work.

Something's gonna happen, whether the boss lady's behind it or not.

On the FENESTRATED WINDOW in front of him, the kid grabs the girl's hand and pulls her forward; the AGENT stares at it with his entire carapace tensed.

"Are you sure about this, boss?" the Dignitary says.

"Of course I'm sure, why wouldn't I be sure," the AGENT says. "You got our next location locked down?"

"Yes."

"Good."

He turns the windows off.

Whatever goes down, goes down.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

So there's some dumb posturing going on in this chapter and pairing back and forth nonsense. I can't help that these people got so petty!

I hope some of these plot twists are sufficiently interesting :D

December 2003

There are enough people that the only place that really fits all of you (at least, nearby) is a pair of condominium buildings that Skaianet owns in Long Island. They share a courtyard, which is where everyone is today, in winter coats, breaths streaming in the cold.

You haven't been around this many people you can supposedly, hopefully, trust, in possibly ever. No, this is definitely a new thing.

As Dave introduces them to you, you can feel faces blurring, names vanishing from your mind the instant you hear them. This isn't because you can't remember them. You're fully aware this is a psychological phenomenon. You can't handle this, and your mind is compressing your memory in real-time.

It's remarkable. You're not sure you'd have it any other way. You, Rose Lalonde, are not a social creature by nature. That trait changing overnight would herald something troubling.

Dave only notices about five people in. "Uh. Hey."

"Yeah?" you return. He's pointedly not wearing a concerned expression. "Good amount of people here. You did a good job at recruitment."

"Yeah. You did a good job at whatever you were doing," Dave answers, wonderfully passive-aggressive. "I'm assuming. You know. You and John."

"Dave," you say, "I basically just got here and this is already getting stupid."

"Yeah, well," Dave says. He looks exhausted. "You're deflecting."

"You started it." You glance around. "As much fun as this is, shouldn't all of us talk?"

"You mean the four of us," Dave supposes.

"Five."

He looks blank, glances down at his hands as if to count, then shrugs. It irritates you, but not in a bad way. Besides, you knew this sort of posturing was coming. "You know, people were looking forward to meeting you," he says.

Really. "I hate to fail the masses, but I have other things on my mind. Are you really into this whole populist thing now?"
Dave has that squinty look on his face like you’re trying to pull something on him. “Is there something wrong with wanting the people who are working for us to not think we’re jackasses?”

You return that look, straight-faced as you can possibly manage. “Are you suggesting they think I’m a jackass?”

“I’m suggesting you’re kind of acting like one, Lalonde,” he says. “Just meet them. Do you need me to introduce you to everyone personally? You’re acting like you’ve just met human lifeforms for the first time and, oh shit, what are these things called mouths and how do I expel words from it, fuck.”

“Typing is easier,” you say, and smile, because he may not know you in person very well yet but he has to know what that, in essence, means. At least you hope so. “Do you want to know what I was doing?”

“No, I hate knowing things,” he says, scratching his head and not looking at you. “Never tell me anything. Actually, no, it’s more like keep telling me nothing. Should be easy. Well, not anymore, we’re going to be working together, so.”

“We were working together the whole time.” You didn’t want this to be like this. You wonder how you could have prevented it. “I was following Jade’s clues, you knew that. I needed to find some things, which I’ll tell you about when the five of us talk. Give me a chance, Strider,” you add pointedly. "I'm trying to catch you up, maybe at the expense of kissing babies."

"There aren't babies to kiss yet," he says grimly, "but it's a matter of time. Too many people, suddenly two or three to a bed and we're a daycare. Daycare of the revolution. Raising child soldiers. Dressing them up in uniforms and teaching them how to assemble guns by age two."

"Dave," you say.

"I'm just saying there are a lot of people here. I'm as fucking weirded out as you are, gotta manage them, though. Or everyone starts panicking. They’re ready for big shit now that we’re together, you think we can manage big shit?"

"General, I think when we are ever together, the shit content is high." You eye him, and he looks right back at you, clearly waiting for you to do something, so you do. "Come on. Get Mark and Luke, I'll get John. We'll meet... it's your turf, you pick. I'll introduce myself some, it can't be so difficult."

Dave looks skeptical. "I'll see you in the kitchen in five," he says, and glances back at you before he heads out of the living room.

You manage a brief conversation with a couple of people – one of them is named Ilya, the other Katrina, and they were nearly killed midway through a heist on Crockercorp and have been on the run since – before John spots you and saves you. "What's up?" he prompts you as he pulls you away.

“We’re all going to meet in the kitchen. We have to tell them what we were doing or Dave’s going to bury me in passive-aggressive comments.” John’s got this expression on his face, one you can’t exactly read. It almost looks like concern, but there’d be no reason for that. “What?” you prompt him.

“Have you ever been around this many people?” he asks.

Ah. You don’t acknowledge that. “I think it’s this way.”
John might sigh behind you. You don’t care.

When you open the kitchen door, Dave’s talking. “– don’t get why we spent the drive here talking about – ” He stops when he sees the two of you there.

“Oh, go on,” you say, with a mild smile, and glance back at John when he shuts the door behind the two of you.

Mark clears his throat, and finishes pouring his glass of water. Everyone universally decides to ignore the awkwardness. Dave, for his part, is perfectly expressionless. “Don’t know why we wasted time, honestly.”

John talks before you can. “We needed a break. And sleep.”

“You could have – fine.” Dave doesn’t want to talk to John, that much is obvious. “I don’t know that we have time for breaks anymore.”

“We need to take breaks,” you say firmly. At least, John does. You just fell asleep out of sheer exhaustion after fifty hours awake. “We haven’t had much time for them, and I think we’re losing our minds under the pressure.”

He shakes his head at you. “We need to talk before anything else, I need to know what’s going on with you, with Luke, too. He’s on his way to us, I think he’s checking in with the Vermas.”

“I have a question, before we get to that,” John says. He’s far enough from you now that you can’t throw an elbow invisibly into his side, so you just shoot a look at him, which he ignores as he goes on. “You were busted by Imperiacorp, that’s why you’re here instead of in the city, right?”

“Yeah, Mark did something and our location was, uh.” Dave seems to mentally rummage through the lingo and come up short. “They tracked us down. Compromised. That.”

“You ran,” John says. He pulls up a chair and sits backwards on it. “Why?”

You sigh and take a seat by him, placing yourself between him and Dave purposely. Mark sits, too. “Well. Rather not have people die,” Dave says reasonably.

“I’m serious,” John says, leaning his chin on the back of the chair. “You didn’t execute them? Now they know for sure we’re out – that there’s a group of us out – ”

“There’s no way they didn’t know all of that already.” Dave’s still standing, arms crossed. He’s not sitting, probably not any time soon, because you assume that would be tantamount to surrender. Masculine posturing. “No point executing them.”

John looks up at him pointedly. “It’s a message.”

“A message,” Dave repeats; his consonants are crisp. He is very pissed off, already. “How many messages have you two been sending?”

You raise a hand. “Slow down,” you say evenly. “Focus. Next time we’ll talk it through.”

“We need to, as a group, concede that blood will need to be shed sometimes,” John says, brushing right past your attempt to be a calming influence. “She doesn’t care about killing anyone, why should we? We’re at war.”

Dave shifts his weight back, probably wanting to sit, or punch John, you can’t quite tell. All you
know is he’s attempting to behave. “Imperiacorp are people, last I checked,” he says, in a tone you have to assume is a desperate attempt to stay casual and not snap. If nothing else, you appreciate the slight effort involved in all of this. “And people try not to kill people if they don’t have to, I don’t know about you.”

You open your mouth, but John speaks first, and you fire another sharp look at him. “It doesn’t matter what... species they are, they are what they are, and have orders to kill us.” He’s ignoring you. Of course he is. “You want to save the people on our side, you can’t spare everyone – have you ever even – ”

“I killed someone, yeah,” Dave says, a very specific type of toneless. “I don’t think I – ”


Mark jumps to his feet, but Luke comes through the door before he can go. Luke’s face immediately communicates that he has a very good idea of what just happened in this room, not that the idiots are being particularly subtle. “Let’s sit,” he says without further prelude.

Dave sits opposite of John, lounging back, because of course he does. You speak before he can speak, or John can speak, or anyone can. “A few things about what John and I were doing. Dave, you remember I was working from some information from Jade.” You know something, so relax. “She had e-mails triggered to send to me after her death. There were some useful things she’d sent, including the extra real estate properties you’ve used, and guidance to things she’d kept safe for us. I’ll deploy the specific, most important thing after we all talk. You’ll understand later,” you say to Dave’s change in posture.


You didn’t want to think about how complicated it would be, is the real answer. “We were apprehended by law enforcement.”

There’s a moment of dead silence at the table, then Dave says, “Sorry, missed that, what?”

All you can think is that this is going to be a long revolution. “The FBI – ”

John cuts you off. “Feds were at the library dedicated to Jade’s brother where we picked up intel. It was good intel, Rose has it on tap.”

“It’s uploaded to our server, along with what I could get the FBI to give to us after we left.” Even Luke is looking at you like you’re insane. “All right, go on and ask, any or all of you.”

“You made a deal with the feds,” Dave says the second you finish talking, and you’re thinking by the end of the day his “casually furious and also mildly hysterical” tone is going to settle comfortably in the lexicon of all things thoroughly Dave. “You’re exchanging information with the federal government?”

“With the FBI,” John says.

“Who are the federal government,” Dave says.

“Dave,” Luke cuts in. “They may be hemmed in by the government proper, but if they were researching and found the same source of intelligence that Rose and John found, it seems more likely than anything that they’re not corrupt and are looking for evidence on Crockercorp to indict them.”
“I get that,” Dave says, “but that doesn’t change that the government will see this shit, at least eventually, because they’re government police, that is literally what the FBI is, so even if the entire FBI isn’t corrupt there are corrupt people who could see this shit and have us killed.”

“They don’t know where we are or who’s involved, beyond the obvious of me and John,” you say. Dave’s exhausting you all over again. “They can’t do anything because of the government. We’re outside of them, we can act on intel they give us. It’s a good deal.”

He’s not focusing in on you, but you can tell he is, somehow, he’s turned towards you without looking at you at all. “I’m just confused, because apparently we’re supposed to execute Imperiacorp grunts because of what they know, but we’re allowed to spill everything to a government agency, and that’s fine because you trust that they’re not going to turn around or be taken over by people who’ll immediately decide to call Crockercorp – ”

“We didn’t spill everything,” you say, intent on not losing any more ground on this than you already have. “And we didn’t have a choice. This was better than being put in detention, likely taken from it, tortured for information, and murdered. At least I think so.”

“I get that, I swear, but you – ” Dave throws his hands in the air. You glance casually at Mark and Luke, who look equally weary and fascinated. “You sound like you think this is a good thing. They can turn us in. Do they know where we are, do they have the channel? How are they getting a hold of you, Rose? Secret drops? Decoder ring shit?”

“I’ll be reaching out,” you say levelly. “Across their encrypted lines.”

“That sounds slightly less not great,” he says. “Total relief.”

You have to stand your ground, or this’ll turn into another battleground. You can’t afford to be attacking each other. “It’s not impossible this could work out in our favor. It already has, we have the records from the library, and access to other intel. Yes, It’s an uneasy alliance, one that could go sour, but one that could work out beyond just information.”

“You are the last person – people – I’d expect optimism from. Fine,” Dave says, tense. “We need to figure out an out, or a way to get their intel without getting anywhere near. Yeah?”

“Young,” you agree. “Now, another thing. About the experiments they were doing. Even at Maryland – ”

Luke shifts forward in his chair, and you look up, surprised. “May I have the floor?” he asks, upon making eye contact.

Literally no one has even bothered to ask before talking, so you give him a nod. He leans onto the table. “I have to tell you about Maryland,” he says. “Just about everyone died. I think three or four of us survived, including you, Rose.”

“That many?” Dave asks, surprised. You weren’t going to say it, but you were thinking it.

Luke simply nods, his gaze focused on the center of the table and nowhere near on anyone sitting there. “They were moving the bodies, and kicked me awake, which surprised me as much as it surprised them, honestly. They grabbed me and the others. They took us to Virginia.” He looks up, expression thoughtful, but there are probably not good thoughts behind it. “They experimented on me, obviously, and a lot of others. It was unpleasant, and I don’t think they’re used to people surviving it. They seemed surprised I did. Honestly, so am I. There were a lot of bodies being moved out.”
There’s silence for a moment after he finishes talking, and then you speak up. “We’ve seen this,” you confirm. You can feel John breathing shallowly next to you. “What did they do, specifically?”

“I can’t speak to the science of it, they were using techniques I can’t even explain.” Luke shifts, stands, and goes to the knife block in the kitchen. He pricks his fingertip with a knife, then moves to show all of you the blood welling there.

There’s silence again. John is probably having a quiet mental breakdown next to you, but you’ll talk to him eventually. “That’s yellow,” Dave says finally. “Your blood is yellow. Grey Poupon and shit. Oh fuck.”

“Yeah,” Luke says grimly, and wipes it away. “Don’t really know why. Or why they’d bother. I know –” He presses his hand to his forehead, like he has a headache. “Shit. I know... not much. But ever since it happened, I get... flashes. I can feel things, mostly. Other people.”

“Psychic ability,” you prompt him with as he falls silent. “Yes?”

He sighs. “I can feel people in another room, further if they’re louder, I mean, if they’re in distress or other... loud emotions. Whatever. There were a lot of loud – people – something, in Virginia and especially in New York before I escaped. They were –” He’s struggling. He can’t seem to get his mind around it, or doesn’t want to, or both. “Angry. Focused. I couldn’t hear – I wish I had. It reminds me of something, but even when I think about it or dream about it I can’t completely get it –”


“Not really,” Dave says instantly, “and dreams are bullshit, Luke.”

“Mine help,” Luke says, and you feel somewhat gratified. “Makes sense of shit in daylight, sometimes, but anyway. I’m trying to remember, guys. It’s familiar, and... maybe it’s fucked up, but it could help. Maybe?”

“Experiments,” Mark says, not quite in response. You’ve almost forgotten he was there, intently listening. “What do they get out of biological experiments?”

“Psychic ability,” Dave repeats, eyebrows raised.

It’s the obvious question. But it’s worth considering. “She could get anything out of it,” you say. “With the biological technology she’s probably been working with for decades, she could have all kinds of psychics or... anything running around. We have to figure out at least some of the experimentation and what the people she’s experimented on can do. There’s some research and intel we have on the experiments they’ve done, these might be in there. Luke, can you and the Skaianet scientists look it over?”

“I’m not so much a scientist, uh, I’m a surgeon,” Luke says, “but I take your point. Yeah.” He looks deeply uncertain, but gives you a mock-salute. You’ll take it.

Dave glances at Luke before he stands, and then back at you. “We should look at your intel,” he says. He looks you in the face without that incredibly guarded look on his face, and there’s no other word for what it does except heartens you. “There’s a lot, right? So we should get people looking at it.” He pauses. “We need more computers.”

“Buy a few computers, then let me buy parts for more,” Mark says, looking at Dave, who looks back at him, and you guess something like agreement happened there. Were you really gone so long that Dave’s bonded with these people so well?
“I can build them too,” Dave reminds Mark. “Before you get all fucking smug.”

John touches your arm, and you glance at him. “Smile,” he says.

You fix a dispassionate look on him, and he grins. “I should probably introduce myself around,” you concede. “Before dinner. I’ll try to figure out human lifeform things, like words and how to say them. I guess it might help.”

“You’d be surprised,” Dave says; he might even have smiled for a second there. “But before you do – show us the life-changing tech Jade gave you.”

You smile, then. “You’ll be a natural,” you promise him, and turn to find a space large enough for the alchemiter and attendant parts.

--

It’s been a week since Rose arrived at HQ. There’s been a lot going on. You’ve been building computers, since the grist cost for alchemizing them is really steep for what you have around; once you’ve got a few done, your people start reading through all of the papers, research, records, and studies that Rose got her hands on and meticulously organized in the times she’s been presumably not sleeping; Mark, Hana, and Adya are still experimenting with building what’s on that blueprint. The group of fighters are training constantly, though you’ve told them the aim is not exactly to build an army.

You guys haven’t really figured out a solid plan yet, but you feel like Rose is working on it because of course she is. You’re not really keen on her just doing it by herself because Rose is Rose, so you’re constantly working, doing anything that you can, up late, up early. Does it count as “up” if you didn’t sleep?

“Did it ever occur to you that they shouldn’t be building that thing?” Ruby asks you from the doorway, surprising you only a little as you assemble the laptop on the hardwood floor of your room.

“Yeah,” you say comfortably.

Ruby sits cross-legged next to you. “So you think they should be building it, or you don’t care if they do?”

“Once they get a few pieces together, they’ll figure out what it is and probably won’t build it if it’s going to be a problem. Or I’ll kick Mark’s ass if he does it anyway, because I really don’t want to move all of our people and shit again.” You consider the RAM you have, and pick a middling one. “Once they’ve got that figured out... well, it could help with other shit. I don’t know, I’m making this up as I go along. Don’t tell the others that.”

“I don’t think you’re completely making it up as you go along.” When you look up, Ruby’s closer than you remember her being a second ago. “You have a plan. I think we all know you do.”

“Kind of,” you concede, looking back down at the laptop you’re assembling as though Ruby isn’t right there. Is she even doing that on purpose? “Working on it. I wish I could just ‘I Dream of Jeannie’ a plan into motion. We’re not a democracy but we’re not a dictatorship, either.”

“I’m sure you’d be a benevolent dictator if it came to it,” she says.

You really hate being high school age sometimes, because she needs to stop talking in that tone that she doesn’t even seem to know she talks in. “Think we’ve had enough of dictators. I like democracy. President Strider works for me.”
“You think they’d let a sick dude like you into the White House? Presidents are notoriously boring.” She makes a stupid face at you when you look up at her with a little amusement, then she soberes. “I won’t tell anyone there are issues.”

“You don’t tell anyone anything,” you say to her, eyebrows raised, then affix the keyboard. “It’s one of my favorite things about you.”

“Heh,” she says, and draws her knees to her chest. “You’re not going to sleep tonight, are you?”

“Things to do,” you answer. You only have so many more screws to put in and pieces to click together, then you might actually have to look her in the face. You consider taking it apart again just to avoid that. “Will you? You should sleep more than I do.”

“You are a general, Dave,” she answers, prodding your arm. "Doesn't that mean you should be sleeping more than I do?”

“General, President, shit, my dad would be so proud.” Damn it, it’s done. You move past her to plug the adapter into the wall, and check to see if it’ll get to the boot screen. It does. “...Hey, check it.”

“Dave.” Your name is almost a sigh from her, just about every time she says it. “Is there anything I can do?”

You decide you can’t excuse not looking at her anymore, and sit comfortably back against the wall, happening to look her way. The OS disc can load up while you're bullshitting her. “You’re good patrol. Keep patrolling.”

Ruby opens her mouth to say something, shuts it, and looks at you in frustrated surrender. “I should arrange patrols, now that you mention it,” she says, and shifts back like she's going to stand. "They've basically made me the head of that, you probably know. It's almost like they know I have an in with the boss.” She smirks, eyeing you.

You look away instantly. "Yeah, uh," you say. "Gotta stop that."

You instantly wonder why you said that, but you can't unsay it. Ruby is silent for a moment, but just as you're about to flee she speaks. "Gonna have to look me in the face for me to believe that, Strider."

You don't think you can look her in the face, possibly ever again. What the fuck. You fought an immortal fish-alien. This is not scarier than that. "Just saying," you mumble. "Don't have this figured out yet and there's a lot going on and we're just busy and everyone could die and this isn't the time, not like you're not, you know, really, uh – "

"I can barely hear you and I'm right here," Ruby cuts you off with, her frustration clear though she's calm. You think this is how you might die, not by the batterwitch’s rainbow magic and trident like you have nightmares about, but instead by girl. What the fuck, how stupid are you? "Look, figure it out. I know there's a lot to deal with. I can't sleep either just thinking about it. But you're not alone and I'm tired of watching you burn yourself out like you're all alone and I'm right here, you – "

It happens both really quickly and incredibly deliberately; you realize she's in your space, terrifyingly close, then you look at her and she touches your face, and you probably have the stupidest possible look on your face, but she doesn't seem to care because she kisses you.

So the kiss is kind of awesome and humiliating in a way, but it’s also weirdly disappointing in a way you’re not sure you can put your finger on. Either way, you stop her pulling back and kiss her again, then it’s way too awkward for reasons you don’t want to deal with; she’s looking at you, still
stretched out pushing down the top of the laptop in your lap, all expectant and interested, and there you are dying again.

“Wanna make out?” she asks, and you think the word for this is probably coy. Coy, and deadpan, you know that one. God, it’s so much easier to think bullshit than it is dealing with this.

The answer is probably yes. You’re frozen, though, like an idiot, then you make an executive decision with your awkwardness to at least move the laptop from between you, then she’s kissing you again and it’s that same mix of awkward and awesome all over again.

It’s a distraction, too. Distractions are great.

Eventually Ruby shifts away after a glance at her watch, talking about patrols, and you hate her a little bit but it’s a relief at the same time. You manage to say something resembling a see you later, and then you realize that she took your shades off.

You cram them back on your face, in totally cool not-panic, and roll your shoulder once her footsteps fade with a slight cringe. Everything is fine, and all you are is uncomfortable, because you just made out with a girl against a wall, which is a thing that just happened. Goddamn, this whole thing is surreal.

“You’re all red,” Rose says, from the doorway.

Oh, look, a new nightmare. You look up at her. She’s all amused. “Don’t know what you’re talking about,” you say, casually as you can manage. Yeah, you’re cool. You can do this.

“Wondered when she’d jump you.” She leans against the doorframe. “You make a cute couple.”

All of the sudden you’re kind of pissed off, for some reason, but you also know you shouldn’t show it. “If you were watching, that’s weird as hell,” you tell her.

“I wasn’t watching, I happened to see her leave.” She raises her eyebrows. “Did you think I’d disapprove?”

“I wasn’t thinking about it at all.” Sometimes you’re not sure what the fuck your mouth is doing.

“What, is this... thing really so casual? Or is it that my opinion is irrelevant to you?” Rose gestures, all fake confusion. "Or am I wildly off-base? I'm just curious, Dave."

Yeah, you're officially annoyed. "You're being obnoxious," you tell her calmly, or at least you hope it's calmly. You may have lost control of the situation. "Haven't figured it out with John yet?"

"You're taking me too seriously again," she says; her expression hasn't changed from that barely-there amusement. "You really think it's like that with me and John?"

"I think he wants it to be like that." Why are you talking about this? "Call it a hunch."

"I know he does." Rose leans into the room more, tone airy when she talks next. "You didn't answer my question."

"What question?" You really want this conversation over. "Jesus, Rose. Leave it alone."

"I'm your friend," she says. "Are you really so repressed you can't talk about this?"

Probably. "Don't psychoanalyze me, you know I hate that shit."
"It doesn't take psychoanalysis to tell you're high-strung and repressed," Rose says, still infuriatingly calm and amused.

"Then stop caring," you suggest. Your teeth are on edge, along with the rest of you. "We have better things to do."

"We can't be rebels every second of every day. Don't you ever want to bullshit the way we used to?"

"You brought me into this and I can't not think about it," you say, totally reasonably, probably. "I'd think you'd want to be focused."

"I'm focused. I'm just doing a better job of not having a visible breakdown, like you are." She says it all matter-of-factly. You hate that, right now, all you want to do is try to help this obnoxious girl, and all she wants to do is help you, but there's no way any of that is happening, for so many reasons.

"If I decide to have a breakdown," you say, in as close an imitation to her horrible calm tone as you can manage, "I'll try to keep it under wraps."

"Dave," Rose sighs.

You are really done with the condescension. "See you," you say, and lock your gaze on the laptop, where it waits for you to finish installing the OS.

"Dave – "

There's the Dream Rose tone again, the one from the dream you didn’t have and don’t remember, which is even higher on the list of things you don't want to hear. "'Bye," you say, more loudly.

The silence from her direction, the way you can see from the corner of your eye that she shifts like she’s going to come inside the room, it all says fucking Dave again, in whatever tone she might use this time, and it hurts just thinking about it. You just want her to go. It’ll be easier than anything she’s thinking about doing.

“Rose,” you say, not looking up from the laptop, tone muted.

“What’s your problem with John?” she asks.

It’s her damn psychologist voice again. You could punch something. “He’s a sociopath, that’s my problem. Your pet sociopath, maybe, but not any less of a sociopath.” You don’t want to talk to her. Why are you talking to her? “Didn’t I say ‘bye? I remember saying ‘bye."

She’s looking at you and you can feel that she wants you to look back, but you’re not going to. “He’s no worse than me,” she says.

“He is, because I know you don’t believe that we should kill people just because they happen to be on the wrong side. There’s got to be a way to turn them towards us. There has to be something better than just slaughtering them – they’re – they’re probably all going to die anyway, so, why are we deciding they’re evil, when.” You’re running out of steam. “God, Rose, how is this a thing you can even be behind? We’re doing this to help people, to save humanity from an alien, why would we kill people on the way?”

Rose’s tone drops in volume, now. “We may never be able to turn Imperiacorp against her. That’s more hypothetical than anything. We can hope to, Dave, but until then, what else can we do?”

"Kneecap them," you say. "I don't know why this is so hard to get." You suddenly, deeply crave the
ability to talk about nothing with her again. You double down because that's not going to happen, even if it feels weird and unfortunate but whatever. "You know what I've been thinking, Rose, I've been thinking maybe the reason you're agreeing with that tool is he told you to do something fucking evil and you did it." You look up at her to check for a reaction.

You get one. Barely a reaction, but that shift back, the look that flashes through her eyes, that's what you were trying for. You can psychoanalyze too. "I did what I had to," she says.

"How'd John convince you into that?" you ask pointedly.

"I couldn't have done what I was doing alone. Not easily. I'd be dead without him," she says. You really got to her, wow, she almost sounds human. "He doesn't do philosophy. He just acts. And he's loyal."

"That justifies what he's saying? Whatever he's made you do?" You have the urge to stand up and argue with her on a less casual level, but you can't do it, probably for some bullshit psych reason like your ego. "I trust Mark because he's on the run, because he already did so much against Crockercorp before we ever did, I trust Luke because Jade knew him so well and put us with him or him with us. Why the hell do you trust John enough to put him at that table with us? I'd love to hear it."

Rose is dead silent, gaze down at the floor. "He was at BCCorp Maryland. In one of the labs."

You sit forward, instantly pissed. "He works for those – "

You barely get that much sentence out before she stares you down and says, "No." She doesn't break eye contact. "He was experimented on, like Luke. We haven't talked about it."

You sit back again. It's huge. You're in fucking shock. "So when were you planning on mentioning this? Ever? What the fuck, Rose, this doesn't make me trust him, you know that, right?"

She doesn't look remotely apologetic. "Yes. Are we going to argue about this, now? What's the point? We can deal with the rest later."

You put the laptop aside and put your head in your hands before you look up at her, astounded. "It's not pointless if I tell you that we need to know shit. What if he's being controlled?"

"What if Luke is?" she retorts. "You don't like John, that's what I was asking about in the first place. I expected you to be indifferent but you hate him and I want to know why."

You're not answering that. You don't have an answer to that. "You have a theory, otherwise you wouldn't have asked. I wouldn't fuck with your hypothesis." But you can't leave it at that, not during this conversation. "I hate him because he's done something to you."

Rose pulls the door shut and approaches you, stopping short when you look plainly at her. She stands straight. "You changed as much as I did, Dave – "

You don't even hesitate. "For the better. How about you?"

That stuns her, but she smiles, that usual cool half-smile. "It seems we'll have a running debate."

You're fine. This doesn't matter in the long run. "Cool," you say.

"Get up."

You glance up from the screen, confused. "What?"
“Get Mark and Luke. We’ll meet in the kitchen,” she says, and leaves your room all on a mission or
something.

You sit like an idiot for a few seconds before you push yourself up, and go immediately to the next
condo to find Mark, not knocking on his bedroom door so he can't hide whatever shit he's up to. You
are relieved to find him not with his hand down his pants or something; instead he's just obsessively
comparing chips, presumably for the unknown device thing. “We’re getting Luke, unless you want
to fondle those all night,” you say.

Mark raises his eyebrows. “All right,” he says, and follows you on your way out.

Luke’s already left his room when you approach it. “Whatever,” he says when you stare at him, and
you shrug, heading back to yours and Rose's condo.

Once you make it to the kitchen, it’s... a clusterfuck. “You had no right. You should have discussed
this with me first,” John is snapping at Rose, then looks back at you, looking incredulously back at
her.

“Thank you for coming,” she tells you, Mark, and Luke, her version of casual, then sits down by
John at the table. “I had every intention of talking to you about this, but it came up and I considered it
worthwhile to be honest about something we’d already discussed as a group and failed to mention.
We should be honest,” she concludes.

John is rigid, and it may be petty but you’re glad to see him uncomfortable after all of his bullshit.
“Fine,” he says.

“Right,” Rose says, and rests back slightly, as if this isn’t incredibly fucking awkward. You glance at
Mark, who hurriedly shuts the door. “John was experimented on, too, at Maryland. This is
information that could be useful and we should discuss it.”

“Give me something sharp.” John gestures impatiently. “I’ll show you. Tell you.”

“So,” you start to say, and Rose raises her eyebrows at you as she hands off some sort of weird
silvery needle to John. You decide to shut up for now.

He stands, pokes his finger, and shows the rest of you. His blood is green. He sucks it off of his
finger after a second. “I know as much as Luke does. No powers. The others were fucking monsters.
I don’t know why I’m fine. That’s all you need to know.”

“That’s it?” Rose asks delicately.

John is hyperfocused on Rose, still. You could throttle him. Maybe her, too. "If I remember anything
else or it comes to mind – uh, Luke, we can talk. But. That's all that matters."

You step forward, pointedly. "We'll decide what matters. Since this didn't seem to matter to you in
the first place, I'm not sure I agree with your... what you seem to think is important. Priorities, those."
Damn it. That could have been smoother.

John glares at you. "I'm done with this shit. Strider, what is your problem?"

Oh. On the other hand, finally. "You're out," you say decisively. "You're not at the table anymore.
Can't trust you and that's the whole point of the fucking table. And what do you have to offer
anyway?"

"Dave," Rose interrupts.
"No, fuck that." You turn to her. "I'm going to need a better reason to sit across from him while he's giving strategy advice we don't need than 'I trust him,' Rose, especially now that we know we can't."

Of course John has to talk. "You're just pissed that I make you morally uncomfortable. I think they might agree with me. Do you?" he asks Mark and Luke.

Rose makes a sound like she wants to cut in and tell you both off, but she throws her hands up. "Luke, Mark? Opinions?"

"I didn’t think ‘who’s at the table’ was this big of a deal," Mark says openly.

Jesus. You throw your hands up. "We're doing strategy, it matters – "

"Dave," Luke interrupts. You look at him, and decide to shut up for a second. "He's been building a strategy with Rose for a while now, around when we started ours, if not before. Just because he's not medical or engineering doesn't mean he has nothing to offer."

"What do you have to offer?" John asks you, sarcastically whatever.

That's it, you've drawn your sword and strife is inevitable, and you weren't planning on hitting him right away if at all, but you don't get a chance anyway; Rose flicks your sword off of her needles, cramming it back into your face lightly, and gives you a measured look you can't begin to read.

"He's with me," she says to John, then looks at you again, that one look in her eye that makes you feel like she can see not what you're thinking but what you are, how you are, cut it into pieces, and look at it like scientists look at dead animal parts to examine for their usefulness, and be sad or proud or both at what she finds.

It's a big thought and a big moment but it all happens in about five seconds, max, and you sheathe your sword in order to do anything but look at her and her fucking face. "Don't hold another goddamn thing back," you say, calmly, probably actually calmly this time, and leave.

Mark and Luke leave after you, but you ignore them, going back to your room silently.

You finish with the laptop. You ignore anything that goes through your head – anything, everything. You lay down and go to sleep.

(You don't dream of her. Which is fine. You don't want those dreams anyway.)

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*January 2004*

It's 2004. Your first New Year outside of captivity.

Yay.

John has his arm slung around your waist; you'll wake him up if you move. There are things you could do, probably endless things, but right now you just want to think.

Too many pieces. The biological experiments, the signal, Imperiarcorp, the gastroresearch you'd heard about and found graphic details on in the records, the endless money that she couldn't be making from BCCorp alone. It hasn’t come together yet. You’ve been at this for less than a year, less than six months, and no one could expect that you would, but it would still have been great if beyond all odds it had made sense and a straightforward plan would fall into place.
It may never fall into place. But you need a specific plan, one specific plan, and that’s been the problem.

Your HUBTOPBAND chirps on the bedside table, not loudly, but loudly enough, and John shifts beside you. You sigh, and slip away from him. “Go back to sleep.”

“Don’t count on it.” He shifts up slightly, still half-asleep. “Have to ask you something.”

You know better. “It’s too early for this.”

“Rose.” He touches your arm. You send him an acquiescing look, and he pauses. “Why do you even let me sleep here?”

That’s not the real question he’s asking. You don’t particularly want to answer either of them. “I assume being raised without human contact has made me starved for human touch. That may have something to do with it. Do you want your glasses?”

He sighs raggedly, and you hand his glasses off to him. The HUBTOPBAND chirps again. “Are you going to answer that?” he asks.

“Eventually,” you say.

“What if it’s important?”

“Anyone who has my Pesterchum handle is somewhere in this building, John. It can’t be that important.” This is a stupid conversation. All of these conversations are stupid. “Fine. Go on.”

John stops cleaning his glasses and looks up at you, startled. “What?”

You raise your eyebrows, making every effort to be as reasonable during this conversation as possible. “Are we going to avoid discussing this until I’m eighteen?”

He puts his glasses on, and shakes his head, shifting back against the headboard. “Doesn’t have to be like that,” he says. “I’m here. I told you that. I’m here until you can tell me to go, really tell me to go.”

“But you want it to be like that,” you say.

“I realized when I fucked up not saying anything about the – the – “ He doesn’t even want to talk about it now. “That you have your priorities and I don’t stand a chance against that and besides, yeah, you’re seventeen and I’m twenty-three and I shouldn’t be doing anything anyway, with anyone, I have no clue what’s going to happen, if I’m going to do something fucked up, I already know there are definitely situations where I will, and I never want to hurt you, or anyone else, but not you, Rose, god.”

You wish he’d be this emotive in front of other people. They all think you have a cold-blooded killer on a leash. “You really think you’d hurt people?”

“Rose – ” It looks like he’s in physical pain from just talking about it. “When there’s blood, when we were in strife against Imperiacorp, even, sometimes I... fuck that’s embarrassing, I don’t want to be some overdramatic obsessive whatever, it’s just sometimes with blood, I want to... I can’t help it. But it’s just sometimes, but that’s enough. I’ve done it, I’ve – I killed one of them, at Maryland, and his blood, just – Jesus Christ. Look, I’d never forgive myself if I hurt you.”

You need to stay your emotional distance, but you touch his elbow in comfort. “But you’re still
coming to sleep with me at night,” you say, pressing him gently.

“Doesn’t feel right, sleeping alone.” He’s just looking at you for a moment, then looks across the room, probably just to look at anything but you. “And, yeah.”

You withdraw your hand. There’s other things you could do, but decisions have to be made and you have your priorities, like he said. “Why did you even bring it up?” you ask, putting on the HUBTOPBAND.

“I was hoping you’d be honest,” John says.

You put the visor up. “Sorry?” you ask, trying not to sound as incredulous as you want to and probably failing.

He’s reaching for the Winspecs in his hoodie. “It’s fine, talk to him.”

You could smack him. You lower the visor again and project out the keyboard.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 6:31 --

TG: hey

TG: let me know when you're done cuddling

Actually, you don’t know who you’re angrier at right now.

TT: Why are you both so petty?

TT: It’s been weeks. Over a month.

TT: We have bigger things to discuss.

TG: just giving you shit rose

TG: like you give to me about ruby

TT: The difference there is that you are actually dating her.

TG: not dating

TT: That was a little quick. Any reason for that?

TG: still not doing a psych session with you

TT: Why aren’t you dating her?

TG: why aren't you dating him

TT: I would say you have been participating in 100% more physical displays of affection than I have.

TT: That might have something to do with it.

TG: technically

TG: he is hanging all over you
TG: all the time
TG: maybe im making out with ruby or something
TG: but hes dying to make out with you or something
TG: kind of mean to lead him on lalonde
TG: just saying
TG: smack his nose with a newspaper or do it already
TT: I’m done with both of you.
TT: I was going to come talk to you about important things but it always comes down to this bullshit.
TT: Why don’t you just make out with your non-girlfriend today while Luke and I work on the whole saving the world thing?
TT: I know you have it in you to be really good at this,
TT: To flourish under pressure.
TT: But you’re letting petty interpersonal issues get in the way and that’s not like you.
TG: wow christ wait a second let me answer
TG: did you have a fight with john

You pause, then scroll up on the conversation. You close your eyes and facepalm.

“Everything good over there?” John asks.

This is infuriating and embarrassing and you just want to rewind the day and make the opposite choices for the most part. “Everything is great,” you say, and look at the pesterlog again.

TT: Yes.
TT: I stand by that I think the two of us could be doing a lot more than we currently are.
TT: We need to talk this through. Just the two of us.
TG: why
TG: why just the two of us
TG: we let them call us generals
TG: but why
TG: why are we in charge
TG: we dont know more than they do
TG: not really
TT: We do.
TT: And Jade chose us for this.
TT: There has to be a reason.
TG: she said we were special
TG: thats what you said
TT: Yes.
TT: Jade put all of her efforts into Skaianet,
TT: Into doing what she could to challenge the batterwitch.
TT: She gave us things and people to work with.
TT: Hmm.
TT: Do you want to have this conversation here, or in the same room?
TG: want to go on the roof
TT: We shouldn’t.
TG: but do you want to

Maybe you do.

TT: I’ll meet you there.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] ceased pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 6:42 --

You pull off the HUBTOPBAND and look to John, who’s reading something and taking notes with his projected keyboard. You move beside him and pull the Winspecs down just slightly on his face to get his attention. He looks at you, surprised. “What?”

You don’t know what to say, or do. You’re not sure why you did this. Your hand’s by his leg, and you pull back, but he takes it. “Rose,” he starts.

“I’m sorry.” You move to leave but he’s not letting go of your hand. “John – ”

“Fine.” He releases your hand. “Later.” He puts his Winspecs back on.

You go, throw a coat on over your pajamas, and climb up the stairs all the way to the roof. Dave’s perched there with his laptop, a document of some kind open on his screen, and he glances back at you as you sit beside him.

“Nice pajamas,” he says breezily.

“We need to talk,” you say, ignoring that. “Remember?”

“Be good to talk,” he agrees, and scrolls through to the end of the file before closing the laptop and captchaloguing it again. “You were fucking with Crockercorp. Right up in their faces. You want us to keep doing that, I guess?”
You pause. “I think we’re capable of doing something direct that leaves a mark,” you say honestly. “You would rather... build something from the bottom up? Trust that we’ll be safe while we do nothing against her?”

“As opposed to going out of your way to fight them,” Dave says, deliberately, pushing his shades up. “By yourself. With those needles and your magic shit.”

Oh. That’s what he’s getting at. “I wouldn’t go by myself unless I really thought – who told you that I was even...”

“Oh Jesus fuck, you really are, I just wanted to make sure you weren’t all revenge-obsessed because all your shit so far is looking in-your-face-wind-up-dead,” he says, already beside himself. "All of the raiding this and blueprints of that and probably bombs. You're going to kill some people if I'm not fucking careful, I can tell that."

"Dave." You don't find this funny.

He looks at you for a second, waiting for you to find something clever to say, but nothing comes to your mind and he just presses harder. "Is that really your strategy? ‘Fuck the rebellion I talked Dave into recruiting, I’m just going to stab the batterwitch in the face,’” he mocks your tone, apparently. “Or you’re going to use our people to formulate a plan, then sacrifice them to get close enough? And I’m here to protect them. Is that it? Some chess gambit?”

You take a deep breath. "So Ilya told you what we were discussing, that's, it's fine. I think we can flesh it out some more, but – but this bloodless planning you have in mind isn't going to work out and I don't know how to tell you this."

Dave looks severely like he wants to throw his laptop. He's as angry as you've ever seen him. "Rose," he says, forcing his tone reasonable, "if you think we can leave a mark on Crockercorp with one move you’re fucking insane and you know it. If you think you can go up against her without her murdering you, then you’re even more insane, and I’m not going to let you do that shit again, you'd better know that."

“I didn’t have a choice last time,” you say, irritated.

“Yeah, and now you would, and you shouldn’t,” he says, and he looks you in the face; it feels like a challenge, and you want to do all kinds of immature things in response. Then he keeps talking before you can do or say anything. “We need to come up with an actual plan because going up against Crockercorp cold – at all – isn’t gonna fucking work.”

It is surprising how annoyed you are at the way this is going, but you couldn't have anticipated that Dave would start acting like he knows more than you do. “What do you suggest?” you say, perfectly calmly and not at all affected by him and his tone and the confrontation itself.

He pauses, clearly thoughtful. “We start something of our own.”

At least you’re on the same page. “That’s what I want –f”

“You want us to start building something to attack them, that’s not what I’m saying,” Dave argues. So much for that. You fight back against your face to keep it from looking crestfallen, which is a ridiculous reaction to all of this. Teenage. “Rose, for fuck’s sake. There’s nothing we can do, nothing like you’re wanting, not without losing people, maybe a lot of them.”

You shake your head at him. “We’re special, Dave, we can do this. I have my majjyks for a reason, I can get close, you haven’t seen. I can break through enemy lines, I can get what we need to get, I
can figure out their weak points and get there so we can make a strike.”

He throws his hands up. “This is what I was saying! You’re so hung up on – *striking*! What makes you think we can strike? What makes you think *you* can strike?”

“I have and I will and we have to,” you snap at him.

“Will you survive it?” he retorts. “Because I want to save lives, Rose, I want to keep people alive, I don’t want to throw them away out of some – misguided – whatever.” There’s barely a pause, where you sink back despite yourself, and he says, “*Rose.*”

You can feel your face has gone pink, and you can feel the majjyk biting at your hands and down your arms. Can he see it? You make a point not to panic at the possibility. “I’m not wasting time or resources,” you say reasonably.

“Rose,” he repeats again, and reaches to touch your arm.

You yank away, standing. *It hurts.* But it’s fine. You feel like you’re being swallowed into the ground even though you’re standing still. But it’s fine, you know you’re fine. “You’re underestimating me. With what we know, Dave, with what we know now, there’s things we can do, we just need to pull it all together to know exactly what. And if you’d come with me, the two of us – we can do anything. I really believe that, don’t roll your eyes, and I know you believe that, too, even if you won’t admit it.”

“Rose, I swear to fuck,” he interrupts you, shoving himself up to stand. “I don’t know what the hell it’s gonna take for you to hear this.”

He’s walking towards you. You back up, and it feels like you’re backing through a door, though you know you’re not, and there’s heat at your back, on your back. “I have a plan, you just have to give me time. All we have to do is exploit a weakness, the signal, probably, a-and once we do it’ll be – “

Your voice is failing you.

“Why?”

“I wish you’d wake up, you don’t understand – “

“I’m trying to understand!” he snaps, then paces back, then towards you again. “You’re having a panic attack or something, fucking sit down.”

“I’m fine!” you shout at him, then stop dead, go silent, just tense and blank. You need a moment to collect yourself, to release this energy, to deal with the natural progression of this sort of confrontation and its results.

Dave’s gone still, too. There’s something different in his expression. “Promise me you won’t fight her again if you can help it,” he says.

You will yourself to speak. “Not in my plans right now,” you say finally.

He doesn’t seem reassured by that. “Don’t go alone. I’ll go with you.”

You don’t react. You can’t. Slow breathing is making it go away, for the most part. “We figured this out, right?” you ask, in something possibly superficially resembling a joke.

He doesn’t find it funny, apparently. “Talk to me. All right?”

“Yes.” You nod, blindly, then you back up and abscond. You ignore Hana Verma and one of the newest recruits, and go back to your room, where John is still taking notes on one file or another.

“Hey,” he greets you.
You don't say anything. You just sit next to him, silently, knee to knee, close enough but far enough for comfort.

He doesn't think twice about it. You have time to think, to focus. You can still feel the majjyk blazing quietly around you, through you, out of your fingertips. You watch your fingers and breathe.

Help me. Help me find a way.

Are they listening?

You'll just have to wait for an answer.

--

February 2004

Somehow things are starting to make sense. Or at least they might start making sense soon, because you and Rose aren't being fucking morons, at least most of the time.

That's all incredibly depressing put that way. It goes like this.

Rose does the information/intel thing. She does professorly assignments and pulls shit together, and you're – general you – wait, not General you, either, but maybe? because you and Rose are supposedly generals, but what the fuck, actually, no, anyway. You're starting to get a vague idea of the whole many rainbow shades of fucked up shit Crockercorp is up to, even if the actual source of the sheer money behind it is still a mystery. There's a lot of theories is the point, but at least it's something. (It keeps Luis busy, if nothing else, and you're kind of glad he's not just sitting around bored knowing you're making out with his daughter.)

You, the specifically General Dave "awesome motherfucker" Strider you, are busy with the recruits. A month of bullshit looking at paperwork has mostly led them to talk to each other, start having sex like you knew they would, and come up with their own ideas. This still seems to be your job, and to be honest Rose would be fucking awful at it so it looks like you're stuck with it.

Not that it's so bad. It's not. These people are great.

"I was working on something," Tony Capello says. He's the newest recruit, along with his wife Anna, and originally he was a pain in the ass because he wanted a piano, which, really? But Anna is a badass, like a movie badass, unrealistically badass, like Bruce Willis would go "oh come on let's be fucking reasonable here" if she showed up shooting shit up, so you don't give a shit and you got him his piano. Anyway. "Looking things up online," he says. "We'd need to invest but it'd be easy. Subliminal messaging, Dave."

"Definitely had it in mind, yeah," you say. "We're not exactly flush with media to put 'fuck Betty Crocker' stickers all over, though, are we?"

"Oh, I love when I get to do this," Ruby exclaims, and leans into the room. "Hi." She grins at you.

You are totally reasonable and unaffected and you put major effort into not being even passably stupid. "Hi," you greet her. "I'm doing a thing right now."

"Idiot," she says fondly. "I'm part of the thing. I got to come in at the perfect time and you ruined it with assuming I'm here to be all sweet on you. Do you really think that, Strider?"

"No," you say, totally cool and not at all caught off-guard. "I want to know about the thing?" That
wasn't supposed to be a question, but your mouth decided it was going to be one. Sometimes you really dislike your mouth. "So back to the thing."

"Your – " Tony stops, and Ruby looks away innocently when you look over to check out why. He goes on quickly. "Ruby. She can sing, and play, but both or either would be good for – "

"What is that face?" Ruby interrupts, dropping to the ground across from you. Then you realize she's talking to you because your face did something because this was sort of out of nowhere, and she sees you realize that it did, and you wish it was at all cool to facepalm, but it doesn't seem to matter because you kind of wind up doing it anyway. "I'm trying to be useful," she explains. "In a long-term, not-gunplay way. Tony says I'm good, I wouldn't have even – "

"Could be better. If we're putting subliminal messaging in, it won't matter much," Tony reasons.

"That part might have been unnecessary," Ruby says wryly.

"We can't just do this," you point out. "To even get you safely out and visible, it's not like Crockercorp forgot about you and your dad, we'd have to figure out what to put in as the damn message, and I'm just saying, I'm not shooting this down, just hold your goddamn horses." You barely pause. "Who doesn't hold onto horses if they're moving fast and pulling you or whatever? I mean it sounds like you're letting go of the horse leash thing when they're running then you run over some people and I guess that's the whole point because otherwise it'd be 'hold your horses, or don't, who gives a fuck.'"

"Dave," Ruby says patiently.

"'Horse leash'?" Tony says.

"I don't know," you say, dismissing it in as casual a way as possible. "Work on it, music, I, uh." No, you are not going to – oh, what the fuck, you have near unlimited funds, and a rebellion you're running. You've earned this. "I can help. Later. In the production process." You get to mix beats. Epic. "Let me know what you need. Yeah?"

They nod. Ruby is looking at you, all questioning, and you shrug, standing. She follows you. You're not really thinking about it; you're thinking about where to go next. You look up slowly, towards the roof.

"She's not here," Ruby says.

"Where is she?"

"Don't know."

So maybe you've been trying to think the best. She isn’t always disappearing like this, and that’s a goddamn upgrade, but when she does, you usually think the worst, all because she was on fire with her magic shit and couldn't promise, probably couldn't have kept a promise even if she'd made it.

You won't know until it happens. You know that.

"Is there anything I can do?" Ruby asks.


"Where the hell would Mark go that isn’t here?"
"Just go look, I have a feeling." You take out your laptop and settle in on the couch, wasting no time. She musses your hair as she moves past you to leave the condo.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 5:14 --

TG: where did you go
TG: you think i dont notice
TG: im not fucking stupid
TG: rose
TG: if youre not answering because youre in danger
TG: were supposed to be working together
TG: you said wed go together
TG: jesus
TG: you know what fuck this

This is not going to end well, but, again, fuck it.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering lostStories [LS] at 5:17 --

TG: where the fuck are you
LS: I didn't realize you cared so much about me, Dave.
TG: yeah yeah all that bullshit
TG: where are you
LS: Guess if Rose wanted you to know where we were she would have told you.
TG: you realize im a teenager and youre being less mature than me
LS: I think there's an argument to be made either way.
LS: We're busy and you're interrupting. We'll talk when we get back. Until then, be patient.
LS: The less focused we are, the more at risk we are.
TG: try not being at risk and talking first theres an idea
LS: Stop talking.

You've already had fucking enough from this asshole.

TG: your purse dog needs to learn to shut the fuck up

TT's HUBTOPBAND exploded.

You slam your laptop shut, maybe a little too hard, and try not to have what some people might
mistakenly call a panic attack.

“Talking to John?” Mark asks from the doorway.

This is a subject you’ve grown to vividly hate, especially because there’s bigger shit going on almost always when it’s brought up, including that Rose’s computer just exploded around her face or something, but here you are, hearing this shit.

“We’re going to the kitchen, starting dinner, and you’re telling me what the fuck Rose is having you do, because I know she’s not stupid enough to just run off wherever she’s gone without any planning and you have been suspiciously goddamn quiet,” you say, and captchaLog your laptop. “And I swear to fuck the next person who brings up that prick is eating the frozen leftovers without using the fucking microwave.”

“Ouch,” Ruby says, in a tone of pure, if wry, admiration.

“Yeah I’m an astounding leader of men or something.” Now it's getting to you. "Fuck. Move,” you snap, and they finally look worried before going, never mind that you haven't told them shit.

They head into the kitchen before you, and you park at the table, taking your laptop out again. "Mark, help her with dinner. I'll be with you in a minute."


TG: so roses computer headband blew up

TG: could use an all clear on that

Nothing. You stare at the screen. Ruby and Mark are quietly discussing the night's menu. You thought now that Rose was here this wouldn't happen again, but here you are, same shit playing out again, secrets, lies, and John there just to piss you off.

TG: dont be a dick

TG: answer

TG: eventually

TG: need to know what we should prep for

LS: She's fine. Just needed some time.

LS: Might need some time with Luke for the superficial stuff, but nothing so bad.

TG: she was wearing it

LS: Yeah.

TG: how the fuck

LS: Complicated.

TG: make it simple

LS: We'll be home soon. We got what we came for.
You are totally fine, which is why you react to Ruby touching you, her arms around you, because everything is fine and there’s no need for that, in front of Mark especially. "What," you say.

"Shut up," she says, and kisses your temple. "Everything is fine."

"She's – " No. This is between you and Rose. Again. You relax against Ruby. "Just sounded bad. Worse than it is."

"Do you want to know what Rose has me working on, or is this domestic bliss I'm standing in the middle of?" Mark asks.

"I'm not in the mood, Mark," you say calmly, and Ruby moves back to the stove, checking on the pan of pasta sauce. "Why are you taking orders from her?"

Mark raises his eyebrows. "I thought she was also my boss. Are we split between you?"

Shit. This is so fucking stupid and petty, all of it. Too bad Rose didn't get that memo. "No, and you know that. I didn't know about it and you know that too. So, tell me."

"It's the Crockercorp device I'm building. The chipset is pretty average except there's one chip I can't..." Mark puts his hands up. "I've never seen it and neither has anyone else, outside of Crockercorp, as far as I can tell. But it's for an antenna. A very weird antenna."

"What does that have to do with her running off?" you ask, blank. "Jesus. She's not stealing from them, is she? Why do we even want – " It's probably an intricate part of the biggest, stupidest plan she could come up with. You're starting to get a headache, but at least a computer didn't explode around your face. "Do you know what she's planning?"

Mark shakes his head. "All I know is she’s been plotting out Crockercorp locations on a map. But this is good, Dave. We need to know more if we want to – "

This is all coming together, sort of, but part of you, the part of you that’s winning, wants to hear it from Rose, so you shove it back. “Thanks,” you say, cutting him off, and clear your throat, because your voice is being fucking stupid. “We’ll figure it out.”

Ruby clears her throat the next second, then leans against the fridge. “Dave, I’m tired of being the girl making food here, you get your ass up and cook.”

“I’m... doing things,” you point out.

“You get up here, I’ll check the channel. I can pretend to be you,” she says, and if you didn’t know she was joking you really wouldn’t be able to tell she was joking. “Or you won’t let me on there because you have porn, right?”

Mark audibly loses his shit, and you shoot him a dirty look. “No,” you say to all of it. You wish you could be distracted, but you can’t, and you can’t just go, because it’ll look like things are really fucked up, which they aren’t, you’re just reacting to some specific things, and those specific things aren’t so bad, apparently, maybe, but you’re just stuck in your own head and you need to get over it, even if it is serious. Mostly.

“Shit,” you say. You don’t know how long you paused, there, or if anyone said anything, because
your head is incredibly loud with all of the thinking and not-panic and the strain of all the stress. Then you get up, silently, and grab your coat to pull it on before you walk outside.

The courtyard is quiet. You sit down heavily in a patio chair, and lean back as far as you can without sliding out of the chair, pushing your shades right up against your face and tuning everything out.

You wake up instantly, your hand on the hilt of your sword, and you might have been asleep but at least you woke up.

“Guess I’m not tapping on your shoulder then,” John says from behind you, and tries out a smile when you look back at him.

You hate this day. Not that it matters. “Where is she?”

“She wanted me to come get you. She’s with Luke, like I said she would be.” He’s looking at you, still. You wish he’d just go, but he’s not going to leave you alone until you go to Rose, and then you’ll probably have to physically pry him off of Rose’s hand when you need time alone with her. “It’s fine, Dave.”

“Huh,” you say. It feels like your only diplomatic option.

He hesitates. “Look, I’m not trying to be a dick. We don’t agree, I get that. But this is pissing Rose off, so – ”

“If you’re going to stop being such an asshole, then yeah, we can sort of get along,” you say, “but as long as you’re doing the shit you are and pretending like Rose is the only one in charge I’m going to have a problem with you.” You push yourself up out of the chair. “I’ll find her.”

You get three steps past him, then he says, “Dave, just, one second.” You stop, look back at him, and he looks at you expectantly for a second, but you don’t move, so he sighs and adds, "It's about Rose. Something you want to hear. Something she wouldn't want me to tell you. All right?"

He's capable of disobeying Rose? This isn't an opportunity you want to waste. You go past him with a quick gesture for him to follow you, and take a seat. You look at him when he sits across from you with your own expectant look.

John takes a breath, releases it, and says, "The majjyk is affecting her."

"What, the random outbursts of it when she freaks out? Yeah, I noticed that," you say, unable to keep from being a little sarcastic.

"No. Well, yes," he says, "but all of it's affecting her. In some ways I'm just guessing at, but there's a lot of proof that she's... she's losing control of it. In a serious way. Her computer exploded while she was using it, I mean, the powers, full-bore flames, she was babbling and out of it, then she freaked out a little and, boom, and she was out for around two minutes and babbled for a while after, too."

You breathe normally, swallow, and say, "Yeah, that's not good." Because you can draw that conclusion and not be fine with it, because it's fucked up, but accept it, and be fine yourself, yeah.

He looks really strained. For a split second you wonder if you look like that, because you maybe feel like that. "Yeah. There's little things, too. Well, less... explosion-based things. Have you even heard the babbling?"

You look at him. "...Like the obnoxious psychobabble?"
"Apparently not." John sighs. "Like the stuff that sounds like another very throaty language. It doesn't happen often but it's starting to happen more and it's always after she uses it for a long time. The majjyk happens when she's asleep, sometimes," he says, "and – what? Oh, fuck, can we not right now?"

You guess your face spoke for you. "You haven't had sex with her, have you?" you ask, and, goddamnit, you didn't want to ask but you probably had to, really.

"I have not had sex with Rose," John says; he looks very fucking done with this conversation, so you're letting it go, with some relief of your own. "Anyway. Yeah. In her sleep. I don't know what that means but I have a theory. Then there's the, uh. The grey."

"The grey," you repeat, blank and prompting.

He opens his mouth, closes it, and says, "I'll suggest you ask her about it once she's done with Luke. I've been trying to convince her to have him look at it, but I'm not sure he'll have any better idea what to do about it than we will."

So it's medical, or plausibly, and you want to bitch at John, but you want to talk about Rose about all of it and fuck it. "What's your theory?"

He pauses, like he's not sure he really wants to say it, but does anyway. "Wherever the majjyk comes from is talking to her in her dreams."

You freeze up at the mention of dreams, apparently visibly, because he obviously notices. Whatever. "What's your angle with this?" you ask.

There's a long pause, a genuinely long one, before John speaks again. "She isn't going to stop. We could use your help."

"Why can't she stop? I mean, you don't want her to, but she could – "

"She's not going to. I second-guessed recently, and she pushed me into it, and she was right – but she's not going to stop, Dave, that's the point. The sooner you get the memo on that, the easier it'll be to keep her safe."

Yeah, this is starting to irritate you again. "Or we could have a – "

"We don't know if this shit is killing her," John cuts you off with. "Or if she needs time to recover and she's not using that time to recover because she's pushing so hard and it might kill her, which, maybe the grey is a sign of that? You'll see, I don't know. Or if maybe whatever's happening in her dreams is making her do this and once it's done she'll be safe and we won't have to fight about this anymore. No matter what, I don't know why you won't support her – "

"I support her as a person," you say. "Doesn't mean I have to support her ideas or plans." But what he's saying is sinking in. "Fuck. Fuck." You force the chair back as you sit up. "Yeah. John. Thanks." You barely look at him before you turn around and head into the house.

You're at the door of Luke's room within a minute, nothing before that matters, they're people you're responsible for but this is more important right now. It's kind of so important you can't touch the doorknob and you're just frozen and staring.

Why are these things scarier than Crockercorp in their way? You'll never know.

You open the door.
Rose looks back at you right away from where she sits on Luke's bed, but Luke moves her head back to him, where he's applying a thin bandage to her forehead, needle and thread on the bed beside her. "That took longer than I expected," she says, her voice strange in a way you can't put your finger on. "Did you fight with him?"

"Sort of," you say. "He's trying to behave. Glad you're finally training him."

"Are you trying to behave, Dave?" Rose asks, in that very Rose style of sarcasm, but something's still off. You realize it sounds forced.

"I'm trying to not get pissed off about not knowing what's going on, that's what I am," you say, direct but not in an asshole way. "So what's going on?"

"Is this the time?" Luke asks mildly, and opens another bandage.

You don't fucking know. "Is she okay?" you ask him in answer.

"Everything I can see is superficial," Luke says.

Rose tilts her head at him. "You're reading me? I think you are."

"It's not something I can turn off." Luke seems uncomfortable. "I won't say anything if you do. All right?"

There's silence in the room and you don't know what's happening, but then Rose says, "Tell me what you hear."

Luke shrugs, then, still stiff, but talks. "It's not what I'm hearing now, it's what I heard when you came in. You were unconscious but I heard something. I've heard it before. I heard it in New York when they were unloading us, right before I escaped."

"What did you hear?" Rose asks, calm, as though this isn't ominous as hell.

"It's dark. It feels wrong. Tastes wrong. I know it sounds insane. But it doesn't feel human." Luke kind of looks like he wants to puke, but he's holding it together. "Jade told me you'd all have something out there helping you. I thought she meant the stuff she left for you. I'm starting to think she meant something else."

"You think aliens are helping Rose?" you ask. It helps to voice it instead of just being stuck with um holy shit in your brain.

Rose is conspicuously silent. You clear your throat and she looks back around at you with an expression on her face that you can't read, but you're starting to get the impression that Rose only uses expressions like that to hide her bullshit. "If they were, what would that mean to you?" she asks.

"Fuck you," you say, not as harshly as you could. "This isn't the fucking time. Luke, are you done?"

"I'm done," Luke says.

He might be lying to get you out of there. You don't care. "Rose, come on." You could pace for hours; it's an incredible effort to stay still. She isn't moving. "Rose, Jesus – "

She pushes herself up and turns, bandages on her face and looking all pale and washed out, and you're stuck thinking how much you hate the lies, because none of this is okay. You turn around before your face does anything without your permission and leave the room, heading to your condo
without thinking about it.

"We could go to the roof," she says from behind you.

You don't answer, fling open the door, and go into your room, immediately kicking a magazine or two under your bed. Barely anyone comes in here anyway. "Close the door," you tell her, like she wouldn't.

She closes the door and looks at you, intently. "The Crockercorp antenna needed a chip. We were looking for it."

Okay, diving right in. Cool. "Stealing from the enemy, that's great, you could have led them back here, you realize that?"

"We didn't," Rose says simply.

"I love when you're sure about things you can't be sure about, it's so comforting," you say. "Why?" You're pissed off now, apparently. You don't remember when that started.

"When we knock out the signal in New York City, we can replace it. We just need to understand the technology first," Rose explains.

"Wait wait wait," you interrupt quickly. "How do you know the signal is New York City?"

Rose smiles. You're instantly more pissed off and queasy in a way you don't want to think about. "It's something of an inference. It's where the chips are from. It's the headquarters for the company. John used to work there, and he took a look at the blueprints we have of the building and pointed out some idiosyncrasies – things most workers weren't allowed to see. One thing is on one blueprint and not on another, which makes me think they're trying to hide it from everyone. Where else would the main signal be coming from, really? What else are they hiding?"

You don't even know how to respond. "Rose," you start, then you drop your face into your hands. "Rose." You speak into your hands. "Tell me you're not planning on blowing up that building."

There's silence again. That's enough of an answer. "Jesus Christ," you say. "What are you thinking?" There's a pause, then you lift your head, remembering. It could be killing her. "If I tell you no, if I say you're not using anything we have or bringing any of our people, what then?"

Rose looks completely calm and still paper-thin. "I try to only do things worth doing. I don't know why you can't see that this is. Get rid of their signal, boost our own. We could have them do it worldwide – all over the country – we have that ability. Why would we not do that?"

"Because all the batterwitch has to do is hit the big red button and Imperiacorp kills everyone they see," you retort, then look away and force yourself to breathe. You try to focus. John's words are fucking haunting you. She's your best friend. You can't just let her die.

"John told me about the grey," you say. "I want to see."

Rose immediately moves, but away from you, not towards. "What did he say?"

"He's worried about you. I am, too. Especially knowing what you've been keeping quiet." You so desperately don't want to talk about this, but too fucking bad; it all needs saying. "Show me."

She doesn't move for a long pause, but then she comes towards you as you look up at her again. She tugs the shoulder of her shirt aside, but hesitates. "It's... not easily visible there."
"It's somewhere else, too?" You haven't even seen anything and you're already really fucking concerned. "Show me."

"Dave," she says, warning. There's color in her face again, but probably not in the good way. Then she bites her lip and pulls her shirt up in the back. "It goes all the way up."

Her skin is grey, or there's a thick streak of grey up her back, apparently all the way to her shoulders. Before you think, you're touching it, your hand to her bare skin, and... it doesn't feel weird, at least her skin doesn't, the moment is weird but it's just a color change in her skin. Not that it isn't fucking worrying. She's looking back at you, and you don't pull your hand away, holding her gaze.

"This shit could be killing you," you say quietly.

"Give me a reason to stop."

That's easy. "People will die."

She shrugs; you feel it in your hand. "People are already dying, at least we'll have achieved something."

You withdraw your hand, and back up. "You're not worried about…"

She pulls her shirt down. "No," she says easily.

"If you weren't worried, you would have mentioned it."

"You were going to worry. John did," she points out.

You scratch your head. "Yeah, about that, how did he – "

"We haven't," Rose says instantly. "Not anything. He just stays in my room sometimes, you know that, and I didn't realize he was awake when he saw me – anyway, this is hardly the point."

It's an effort to not start a fight with her about John, because that would be more comfortable than what you actually need to discuss. Unfortunately, you're going to have to just fucking push through it. "What's the point?" you say. Your head is fuzzy and your shoulders hurt; you don't want to think too hard about this; too fucking bad. "Is it that I need to follow you on this, whatever, in this crazy-ass plan?"

Rose shifts. "I – "

You're not done. "Are aliens helping you? Is someone telling you to – "

"You have to trust that I know this is the right thing to do," she interrupts you in turn. "You have to believe me."

"I – " You shake your head. "Shit." That was as good as a yes, honestly. "Whatever you're holding back. When this is done, you have to tell me everything." You look up at her again, then tense as she sits next to you. "...I'm only doing this because I think you're going to get yourself killed," you say. "And you're not going to fucking die by their hands if I can say a damn thing about it."

Rose smiles, if thinly. "We can work on your ideas, too," she says. "Fill the void of the missing signal with something else. I'm not against it. I just needed your support in this larger project. So... thank you for listening. No matter your reasons."

You could be sick all over the ground in front of you. You're compromised enough that you're even
willing to acknowledge that. But if there's even a chance you can stop that grey from spreading, 
those majjyk flames from growing, if you can stop her from running into the most dangerous 
building in the country, possibly in the world, all alone, you're going to do it.


You can't smile. She doesn't say anything about it, just says, "Let's go get something to eat."

As you head downstairs, you're thinking about death, just death, for the first time in a while. You're 
trying to remember a time when your dad pulling a knife on you was your biggest problem, and it's 
so far back that you can hardly believe that was your life less than a year ago. You're trying to be 
okay.

You can't eat. You find Ruby and just let her talk about her father's writing on the gastroresearch, on 
all of the names he's looked into and the grotesque details, and it's close enough to real but far 
enough from Rose that it works, for now, to keep you sane.

Soon, it'll just be a mission. But you need some distance today.

--

April 2004

Things are falling into place.

First, Dave's been hyperfocused on his subliminal messaging for the last month. He's almost as 
single-minded as you are, and you can't help but admire that. The last experiment managed to get 
Mark to eat bananas, which he finds abhorrent, without even really noticing; it's promising. The next 
one is supposed to be bigger, but you haven't heard details, yet.

You immediately look for him when you get in. He's camped out on the roof again with his laptop, 
comfortable in the spring weather, when you find him and sit next to him.

"You should alchemize a new computer," you say.

Dave shakes his head. "I'm fine with this."

"It won't help when we go. You need something you can move around with." You poke him in the 
leg of the shades, and he shies away. "How about combining with these?"

"I don't know," he says. "But, yeah. Sure."

"It works for John," you point out. He makes a face. "Stop it," you chide him.

"I still don't fucking know," he says.

"Well, trust me," you say. His expression changes again, and you can't read it, but a change that 
happened when you said that kind of can't mean anything but the obvious. "Dave. You can trust 
me."

"So we did another experiment while you were gone," he says, ignoring what you said 
completely, apparently. "I didn't want to do something so extreme, but we have to know we can 
make an impact."

"What did you do, who did you do it on?" you prompt him.
He taps his keyboard gently, obviously not wanting to answer. "It got Ruby to put a gun to her head."

You pause, genuinely not knowing how to respond to that. "Did she mind?"

"No," he says; he looks incredibly uncomfortable. "She's cool. All of you are. No holding back. We need to achieve something. I get that."

"You're just doing this on my account," you deduce. He says nothing. "Because you think I'm going to die. Is that right?"

He doesn't even hesitate. "That's not the only reason I'm doing this."

You accept that answer. "You think you're ready to do something bigger?"

"Yeah," he says. "But I don't know what to use."

You smile. "Your comics."

He's surprised. "What?"

"Your comics. All you have to do is put subliminal messaging in your comics, then artificially promote them. Have you really not thought of this before?"

"Don't be smug," he says. "But yeah, okay. Artificially promoting them might be hard, though – "

"There's got to be a way to get someone big to notice and promote them; a subliminal message to make them look, even," you say. "If you can get them to watch something..."

"I know who to e-mail," Dave says, "it's just I don't know if he'll click. Whatever. All I need is one look at the first page. Fuck, I need to do more drawing."

"Shouldn't take you longer than ten minutes," you say dryly, and he almost, sort of, smiles. You try not to look as thrilled as you are at that; he's seemed miserable and stressed out nonstop for the last two weeks. "Are you ready?"

He freezes, his smile fading a little. "No," he says honestly. "But I haven't been ready for any of this shit, so, no big change there."

"You need to get the subliminal messaging in Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff done tonight," you say, "and – "

"How did you know the name?" he cuts you off with. "I haven't even really shown you." He looks troubled.

"You think I didn't look?" You dismiss it, your heartbeat stammering with nerves. Damn it. "You did post the first two pages. Anyway, get it done tonight."

He looks at you skeptically. "That's going to take – "

"Just get it done," you interrupt. "It took us this long to get ready, tomorrow we move out, we need something to support the cause, and – "

"We could wait," he interrupts you in turn. "We could do this in a month, wait for Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff to get big or whatever."
"It'll bring attention to you," you say.

"How would they know it's me?" he points out.

"They'd know. You're not sure you want to get into it. Trust me. Don't get that look on your face, I need you to trust my instincts on this."

"Is this a Jade thing?" he asks directly. You pause. "Yeah, I thought so," he goes on. "She saw my shitty art? She knew I'd get famous? Holy shit, does the batterwitch know this shit too?"

"She knows things," you acknowledge. "I don't want to run the risk. We need to strike. You know that." He doesn't look at you. "Dave –"

"Stop Dave-ing me," he says, sounding incredibly frustrated, at least for him. "Jesus fucking Christ. Maybe this freaks me out. I don't see the future. I don't know these things. I don't know half of the shit you do, and maybe you could actually bother telling me sometimes. It's like you know everything but you just give me a trail of breadcrumbs and expect me to believe you that one of those crumbs down the line isn't incredibly important and that I don't need to know it now. You could tell me everything, right? But you're never fucking going to."

You feel sick, guilty, stricken, like an idiot. You know you're approaching this the right way, but that doesn't change this. "It's complicated," you try.

"What's so complicated?" he presses. "Does it get in the way of the master 'kill the batterwitch' plan you have going? Or what? What if I told you I didn't give a shit?"

"You –" You would give a shit. You don't say that. "You're really overestimating what I'm keeping secret," you say instead.

"It's just really fucking hard to trust you when you're acting like this," he says. "Do you get that?"

"You've made it abundantly clear you have a hard time trusting me," you say dryly.

"And there's an easy fix. Just tell me shit."

You don't know what to do. You genuinely don't. It's an unsettling feeling. You stand up and pace forward, standing still, facing away from him. "After tomorrow," you say. "Get it done tonight if you can, or have the others work on it while we're going. Work through the night if you have to."

"I might need sleep," he says, a bit sarcastically. "What with raiding the biggest Crockercorp facility in the goddamn country tomorrow."

"Have them work on it," you say in a bit of a snap, then glance back. He's just staring at you. "You can get this done."

"Fine," he says. There's something hard in his expression. You try not to let the guilt prick at you, but it does. "You do what you have to, I'll do the same."

"Dave –"

"I told you not to fucking Dave me," he says, and looks back down at his computer. "We're good."

You don't believe that for a second. "Fine," you say, and go without further comment.

John is waiting at the foot of the stairs for you, leaning against the wall. "How long have you been waiting here?" you ask him.
"Only about five minutes." He shrugs and stands straight. "Everything good?"

"Everything's good." The two of you head through the door and towards your room. "I almost wish you hadn't told Dave about the majjyk."

"He needed to know. He'd never have supported what we were doing if he didn't." John gives you a pointed look. "You keep too many secrets."

"I'm not keeping secrets from you," you say, "so I'm not sure why you care."

"You are," he says. "I know you are, there's no point in lying to me. You won't say why Dave's involved, you won't tell me why you're so intent on fighting Crockercorp, why it's so personal – and it is personal –"

"She raised me," you say simply, maybe a little tartly, and he stops while you keep walking. You open the door to your bedroom and leave it open for him to follow.

John enters the room, shuts the door behind him. "You were raised by the batterwitch?" he repeats, demanding.

"Yes," you say serenely. "So it's personal. Any other complaints?"

"What about Dave?" he prompts, but he doesn't seem to be over that first revelation yet. "How does he fit into it?"

"I'll tell you that eventually," you say. "Not now. Not with what we have to work on." You turn around. "I need you to check to see if it's spread."

"It's probably spread," he says. You shrug and pull your shirt off, and there's a stretch of silence, maybe five seconds, and he comes towards you to look. He touches your back, between your shoulders; his hand is cool. "It has. It's…"

"How bad is it?" you ask, measured.

John doesn't answer for a moment, just slides his hand down your back slowly, then around you, arm around your waist and moving close to you. He's incredibly close to you, and you're still nearly half-naked, and your heart jumps to your throat. His mouth brushes your neck in a kiss and you freeze, uncertain but maybe not as uncertain as you want to be.

"John," you say again, and your voice wavers, which you resent. There's nothing worth wavering over.

"I need this to be over," he says into your neck; you can feel his breath warm there. "I need you to be safe and away from this shit."

"It's never going to happen, John," you say, and swallow hard; your hand drops to John's that rests on your stomach. "Not the way you're thinking."

"You don't know what I'm thinking," he says fiercely; he knits his fingers with yours. "Your safety's all I ever wanted. And this is eating away at you, and you can't see it, I get that. But I'll do whatever I have to do, I just need you to believe me, and to be careful."

"It's fine," you tell him. You don't know what you're saying, what you're thinking. You're so torn. You know, if you're being honest, that his age is the one of the only real things really keeping you apart, but right now it doesn't seem to matter as much. So then... "It's… we'll do what we can."
"I love you," he mumbles. "You know that?"

It's like you've been stabbed. "Yes," you say, and it's weak and horrible and you say, "Shit," then. "John, I…"

"It's okay," he whispers. "I know you don't."

You shake your head, just barely, then release his hand and turn around. He can see the grey on your stomach, then, and up arcing from your side up through your bra to your right breast. He looks you in the face, all seriousness and softness, and you wonder how you could possibly deserve that look, no matter who he is.

You open your mouth to speak, then slide your arms around his neck and go just slightly up on tiptoe to meet him face to face.

"Don't do this if," he says, but you kiss him inexpertly on the mouth to cut him off, and he kisses you back, and again after that. It's stupid, you shouldn't be doing this, but it satisfies something, something that's been absent for some time. The humanness of it, the closeness, is the best part, and you're overwhelmed enough to pull back.

"So, um," you say, and try to breathe through it. "So…"

"Don't do this for me," he says; he's putting on a good front, but you know him well enough to know that he's really shaken.

"I don't do anything I don't want to," you say, and touch his face. He just looks at you, and you know you need to pull back; you still crave the closeness. "Don't worry about me."

"I always worry about you." He lifts your chin and kisses you again, this time all him, and almost all of you flutters, like an idiot. "All right?" he asks after.

You don't know what to say. Dave would have a good comment to that. *Dave.* Shit. You pull back. "I should…" You snatch your shirt up from the bed next to you, and pull it on. "I should check with Mark about tomorrow."

"Rose," John tries.

You smile at him, tensely, quickly, and leave in a rush to head to Mark's room.

The plan goes like this:

Mark and the Vermas build the antenna and wait for a signal – *indication* – that they should boost your signal you've already got planned and ready to go. Mark's already hacked one of the satellites, so it's possible to hack all of them, but even one would work. You, Dave, John, and Ruby raid the New York City compound, find the source of the signal, and destroy it. If you get out, you get out.

That last part is mostly inside of your own head. You think there would be some pushback on that.

"It's fine," Mark reports when you ask about the satellites. "I crashed one – it will come back in time, don't worry about that, but now I know I can reach it. The others I hijacked briefly, but I doubt they'll think hard about it. Even if they do, well, we're bringing hell down upon ourselves quite possibly tomorrow anyway. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, we are," you answer warmly. "We had to poke our heads up eventually, Mark. Trust me and Dave."
"I always do," he confirms. "Isn't it time for dinner?"

"It is." You glance into the hallway; thankfully, no one's hovering. "Let's go?"

Adya's made a variety of Indian food for the third floor of the condo. You're not a huge fan, but it's a change, and change feels good right now. You look across the table as you cringe at the spicy heat of the chicken you're eating, and Dave is laughing at you. You fight off a grin.

"Problem?" you ask dryly.

"Looks like you have the problem," he says.

"I don't know what you mean." You raise your eyebrows at him, and he's smiling nearly as much as you've seen since the plan's really kicked into gear with both of you at the helm. "Are you ready?"

"I want a week," he says.

It's a surprise. "Dave. We talked about – "

"I want a week to get Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff up, and to strengthen the message we're working on. More time gives us more strength. You with me?"

Sensible. It feels wrong. You want to fight back. It almost hurts to consider agreeing. "I am," you say mildly, and he looks totally astounded for a split second before he buttons it down. "A week from today."

"A week from today," he agrees, his smile fading a bit, his expression distant. Then he stares into his plate and digs in.

"Look at us," John says merrily, nudging his leg against yours at the table. You are horrified to realize that you might be blushing. "Big happy family! A toast to family!"

You smirk a bit, despite yourself, self-deprecatingly. "A toast to family," you repeat, and lift your glass. "Cheers!"

Dave touches his glass to yours with an expression that is the closest he gets to a visible good-natured eyeroll, and sends you another brief smile (mirroring your own, you realize, as you feel your own smile grow a bit wider).

This feels good. This is what you've always wanted.

This won't last long. You have to make it count. You have to fight for it.

(Later that night, alone in your bedroom, you message her:

   TT: There's been a delay.
   TT: But I'm going. I'm going to find what you need me to find.
   TT: Or want me to find. Either way.
   TT: We're making it happen.

)

--
"I was making a joke about being all broken up about it," the guy who isn't you says to his shades. He's fine. "A guy can be sad and make jokes at the same time."

"You are sad, but not broken up about it?" the girl on the other end says to the guy who can't be you. "I don't understand."

"Exactly," the guy says. He looks down at the ground, where a guy who looks like you is bleeding and dead on the ground. He feels something. That something is complicated. You wonder why this guy sort of cares about the fact that you're dead, because you don't know this guy, and even if you did, you wouldn't be friends with a guy who has the same name, especially one who's only thirteen.

You wonder how you know he's only thirteen. It's a dream. It's not supposed to make sense. Your brain is just being an asshole, showing young you, you, dead.

His stomach churns. It hurts you. You refuse to acknowledge this. You're the dead guy here. It's not supposed to affect you.

"But you said you were grieving!"

There's no point. His mind's on something else. Awesome irony shit. And how to get that goddamn anime sword out of the rock, like you're not even fucking impaled by it.

"If that sword's coming out of his chest it's coming out clean. Taking it vertically means drawing more blood. But horizontally means a clean break."

He straightens.

"Check it."

Someone is pounding on your bedroom door. You clutch at your chest like an asshole, like you were actually fucking impaled, as Luke calls, "Rose says you should have been awake for an hour by now!"

Rose. You try to breathe. You're in reality, where you haven't died twice. Thankfully, so far, you only die when you're asleep, which is great, five star experience, Dave Strider's brain, give it a try.

There's footsteps outside of your door, then it opens, and you scramble to your feet for some reason. "What the fuck," you complain loudly.

"I thought that might get you moving," Rose says from the other side of the door. You can't see her face but she sounds amused. "Dreaming?"

"Yeah," you say before you think it through. She caught you unawares. "It's not the time."

"I agree. Get dressed. We're going." She shuts your door and you go look out there to ask why no food before you go, but she's gone.

There's probably some symbolism behind your sword being more important than your death, and you wish you were enough not in the mood to dismiss it, but it all feels incredibly fucking real right now. Today is the day you're probably going to die, no matter what Rose says.

What you do today is more important than you.

You're just standing in front of your closed door, hand on the doorknob, frozen. You force yourself to take a step back and then it's okay, almost.
"It's cool," you say out loud, then shake your head and start to get dressed.

You switch out for your SkaiaShades before you leave the room, and open Pesterchum.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 7:10 --

TG: might have seen the future
TG: i die let them know i was psychic
TG: it was weird i was older i think but
TG: shitty lighting in that dream
TT: I thought it wasn't time.
TT: This bothers you?
TG: i saw myself dead
TG: kind of disturbing to sane people
TG: some kind of crater thing
TG: does she have a volcano
TG: shes a supervillain of course she does

There's a pause where you're just standing in your room like an idiot and she's not replying, then you have to say something.

TG: rose
TT: You're not going to die.
TG: what
TT: Come downstairs.
TG: k

Everyone who's going is downstairs already, and some of the others are lingering. You see movement outside and realize all of the others are there, then, or at least most of them.

"They're not all assuming we're going to die, are they?" you ask Luke. "That's really fucking unhelpful if they are."

"They know it's big," Luke says. "You're both going. That's kind of huge."

Mark sidles up next to you. "I'm still not sure who's contacting me," he says. "And maybe I should go along? I could –"

"Fuck no," you say. "No offense, bro, but only people who can really defend themselves for this round. As annoying as you are I want you not dead."

"You could protect me," he points out.
"We have enough to do and you don't have to be there to do what you need to do." You eye him as he puts his hands up. "Yeah. Okay. Luke, you're going?"

"I'm going." Luke looks tired. "I'm driving the getaway car."

"Cool," you say.

John wanders over to you, and you still tense like an idiot. Damn it. "We're not driving," he says. "Rose dropped one of the windows at the building you had to abandon in the city. We have to take the subway or walk a half hour, but – "

"Yeah, that sounds stupid," you interrupt. "What if it's unplugged on the other end and we're all trapped? What if something goes wrong before Luke gets there and we have to get home? We just hope for a cab?"

"You really underestimate how many cabs there are," John says.

"There aren't a million goddamn cabs in Austin, god, you fucking New Yorkers," you snap.

John scoffs and laughs. "You're from Austin! Of course!"

"John," Rose says pointedly, and he instantly turns to see her behind him. "None of that today."

"He's being obnoxious about the plan," John says, jabbing a thumb at you.

"Because I think a car is a better idea," you say, "not gonna apologize for that."

Rose considers that. "We're taking the window."

"Why," you say.

"Because we can't afford to be easily traced. We may take the window back as well. Is that enough?" she prompts you, but doesn't wait for your answer. "We're going. I just wanted to make sure everyone was ready. Where's Ruby?"

You realize everyone's looking at you. "Why would I know?" you retort. "I came right down." You ignore everyone and open Pesterchum on your SkaiaShades.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering sirenLights [SL] at 7:20 --

TG: hey

TG: where'd you go

TG: were leaving

SL: oh sorry!

SL: my dad wanted my help translating

SL: we're on the roof

SL: i'll come down soon

You hate how you can feel people looking at you as you talk. You flick the keyboard function on.

TG: were leaving
TG: like now
TG: you scared
SL: are you kidding??
SL: i'm stoked
SL: are you scared?
TG: yeah because im not stupid
TG: no offense i guess
SL: no offense? lol
TG: ruby theyre all looking at me
TG: get down here
SL: my dad was verifying that your last experiment worked
SL: it did
SL: plus he's being stupid about his articles
SL: not really relevant now i tried to point it out but
SL: ANYWAY
SL: there's an email that hit the fake email account
SL: you didn't check today obviously

You didn't check today. That's true.
TG: what is it
SL: maybe we should save that as celebratory news in case this all goes south
TG: yeah no i want to know
SL: check for yourself bro
SL: but wait until i can see your face

Now you're checking the email and fast, even though she keeps pestering you.

"Dave?" Rose asks skeptically.

The email's open. Your brain's breaking.

"Kevin Smith took the bait," you say, astounded. "Kevin Smith – " You switch over to Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff's page and check the hit counter. "Holy fuck!"

"It worked?" John asks.
"It worked," Rose confirms, almost cheerfully. "Now we take down the signal."

You check your Pesterchum window.

SL: you're looking aren't you
SL: you never let me have any fun
SL: hey for the record
SL: i'm never going to have the guts to say this in person
SL: if i die
SL: you should go for it
SL: you know what i mean

What the fuck.

TG: just come down here
SL: don't be a wuss
SL: and you know what i mean
TG: im not and i dont
SL: whatever man
SL: be right down

-- sirenLights [SL] ceased pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 7:30 --

You flick off the keyboard and look levelly at Rose. "She'll be down any second now. They were checking in with the last worldwide experiment."

"Good?" she asks.

"Good," you say. You feel like you probably should be scared out of your mind, but things are going well today, and that makes it hard to be the level of paranoid that the situation really warrants. "She may have more detail. Should we head up?"

Rose smiles, briefly, in that unsettling way that isn't quite her, and turns to go. "Luke, I'd leave right now. Keep your PDA readied, park nearby."

Luke sighs. "Rose, if there's traffic, if I don't get there in time –"

John is following Rose up the stairs now. "We're intelligent, we'll figure something out, just stay in touch."

Mark looks at you as she disappears upstairs. "They seem optimistic," he notes.

"Yeah," you say. That much is very true. "Well, whatever, we'll see. There's always the apartment."

Luke's hand is on your arm all of the sudden, and you freeze up. "Don't be reckless," he says. "You're the one I trust for this. Try to get the others through this. I know it's your mission, but it
could go south. Do what you have to do."

It rattles you and comforts you at the same time, that he's so scared and so confident in you. It gets scarier the more you think about it, but that's because it's important. "Thanks, man," you say, and feel yourself smile, so you try to wipe it off your face to look at Mark. "Don't be a dick," you warn him.

"I think Rose and John are a thing now," he says to that, immediately being a dick. "I'm saying in case they're kissing when you go up there."

"I'm trying to have this heartfelt moment between bros, Mark, you're just too fucking stupid to pull it off, you're killing me and my serious feelings jam," you say, totally cool.

"Whatever," Mark says, and shrugs. "I know you'll come back."

"You see the future?" you retort.

"I see a group of competent badasses headed inside with a plan and my help. It may not go down perfectly, but it will go." He opens his arms. "Want a hug?"

"Fuck no." You touch the hilt of your sword in mock warning. "Cool. 'Bye."

Luke takes a deep breath, so big you can feel him next to you doing it. "Okay. Yeah. 'Bye." He goes out.

You pause for a split-second, then go upstairs, running into Ruby on the way. "Uh, so, we're going – "

Ruby grabs you by the shirt and kisses you, then shoves you up against the wall with another kiss. You're not against this at all. It's a good release of tension. She pulls back and you're not completely ready to stop and she knows it, but she talks instead. "Congratulations, bro," she says, and smiles broadly. "Let's make two wins today."

You are suddenly fighting off thoughts of sex. They're inconvenient. They don't seem to care that they are. You kiss her again, and that startles her – she almost always instigates. "Don't fucking die," you say to her.

She touches your cheek. "We're all gonna die someday, you know," she says. "I always wanted mine to mean something, ever since they killed my mama. You gave me that, Dave."

You want to kiss her again. You don't want Rose to see. "We should go," you say, and she goes ahead to Rose's room. You follow.

You open the door and true to fucking shit you basically catch Rose in the same position you were just in, her majjyk already starting to surround her body. "Yo," you say.

Rose's head whips towards you, and she looks worried, actually fucking concerned, for less than a second. Then she smiles and moves past John, who turns around carefully. "Let's go."

You're thinking about this damn thing with John now. You don't want to, but you are. It's irritating. Ruby touches your arm like she can tell, probably because she can. (The truth is she probably deserves someone better than you, but whatever, that's not really your decision to make in the long run, and does that fucking matter now anyway?)

Rose plugs in the window, and it flickers into life. It strikes you again how stupid this all is. Too bad. "Are you ready?" she asks.
"Yeah," you say. For some reason, you're smiling. Probably nerves. "Do it already."

She smiles outright and smashes the window with her foot, clearing the edges. "Just jump," she says, and does.

"Shit," you swear, and try to get in next, but John is ahead of you, of course, so you jump as soon as you can.

There's darkness, then light again, then gravity shifts weirdly and you fly up out of the other window, jumping quickly to the ground. Then you realize you're not in an apartment like you should be.

There are a group of people in labcoats staring at you. One is wearing a red labcoat. Rose and John are doing the same dumb standoff of shock that you are. No one's doing anything, until Ruby comes in behind you.

Red Labcoat Woman unfreezes to make a run for something and Ruby fires one of her guns in the air. Red Labcoat freezes, and Ruby saunters forward. "Thanks for saving us a trip on the subway," she says. "We want answers. I'm a very good shot, and you're not leaving the room until we get them. Understand?"

There's a shift in the air, and you shift uncomfortably, then noticing Rose's majjyk has gotten visibly bigger and more intense. "The signal," she says. "Take me to it. Now."

--

Something feels incredibly right. Being here, at long last achieving what you mean to do, of course, that's something. But that's not what you're experiencing this vividly, this sharply. It's all in your tastebuds and along each nerve. Every part of you is awake and thrumming.


You look ahead. The elevator button for "down" is hit. "Why aren't we headed up?" you ask.

Ruby raises a gun casually. "That's a good question! I'd think a signal would be up, wouldn't you?" She nudges Red Labcoat Woman with the gun. "Don't you think?"

"You don't know anything," Red Labcoat Woman says, with mild irritation, less irritation than you would think someone would have at someone putting a gun up against them. "I can take you to the roof, but you'll find nothing and kill me. Once security finds us they'll kill all of the rest of you and keep Lalonde, I hope you know that?"

"They can try," John says, a cheerful edge in his voice.

"You're at our headquarters, you incredible dumbasses," Red Labcoat says, with more disgust than anything. "You're going to be overwhelmed sooner than later. You should have brought more people if you actually wanted to achieve something."

"Why does she want Rose?" Dave asks. You glance at him; he beat you to it, but you think you already know.

"I assume retribution. We've been told not to kill her. Although now she's just looking like a fascinating experimental subject. How exactly are you managing that?" Red Labcoat asks you directly.
The elevator pings open. Ruby nudges her into the elevator and the rest of you follow. "It's hardly important," you say. You glance at Dave, who's staring at you, and John sighs raggedly. "What?" you try.

"It's happening again," John tells you, and you do your absolute best to not look at all surprised or shaken.

"It doesn't matter," you both translate the babbling and answer the question.

They have their claws or tentacles or whatever in you. They're changing you physically, neurologically. *It doesn't matter.* What matters is that this ends. If you vanish into the ether but the world gets a chance, it was worth it.

"Where are we going?" Ruby asks in her usual deadly serious sing-song tone.

"Where you want to go," Red Labcoat says.

"Not good enough, I want to know where you're taking us," Ruby says easily. You don't know her as well as you could, and her grace under pressure is admirable. "Is this where it's being broadcast from? Some kind of machine?"

Red Labcoat laughs, then puts a hand to her face. "Oh, Christ. You kids. You have no idea, do you?"

"We know it's here," you say. There it is again; the world is tilting, just for a moment, and you're probably exhibiting some kind of physical symptom of too much majjyk, the eyes, the grey, something. You and John have been doing this for too long for certain patterns to not have become noticeable. Today is going to be bad on this front. You've known it could be and so far it's proven so. "Hit a button already."

"I can only get you down so far," Red Labcoat says. "I'm not going to wish you good luck, because what you're doing is insane, and you're going to regret it." She punches the button marked LL5, pulls a set of keys off of her belt, and puts it into the elevator to twist. It starts to move. "Also, whatever you're trying to do is misguided. This signal is the only thing keeping things sane."

"You would say that," Dave interrupts her.

"I would. I know better than you do, don't I?" she retorts. "The signal keeps people asleep. They don't want to be awake."

"Maybe you don't want to be, but I sure as hell do," Ruby says, warmly combative.

"Kids," Red Labcoat scoffs. She eyes John. "Field trip?"

"I used to work here. Didn't know about the signal though," John says. "I'm feeling a hell of a lot better being awake."

"Oh," Red Labcoat says, with great interest. "I thought I recognized you from a file. Maryland's prize subject! Oh, they can't kill you. You're good product."

You see John shift specibi and you clear your throat. *Stand down.* He does. "You aren't just any scientist, are you?" you ask her, and clear your throat again, this time because it's all caught in your throat, the desire to let them speak.

"Dr. Helena Redding, Assistant Scientific Director, Biology," she says. "You were damned lucky
"You got me and not the director. You wouldn't have survived that."

"Yeah, we don't care," Dave says, and eyes John. "Where did you work, anyway? Fuck, this is taking forever."

"I worked in advertising. Saw something I shouldn't have. These assholes killed my wife and kids and experimented on me." John says it all matter-of-fact, all of the things you suspected but never dared to ask. "We should just nuke the place."

"Fuck no we're not," Dave says, then reels it back; you see him visibly trying again when you look. "There's assholes, like this lady. But there's people like you in here and I don't want to kill everyone. And how do we survive that?"

"We leave someone behind to do it," John points out.

"Oh, this is a fascinating political debate," Dr. Redding says. "We've wondered what side of violent versus nonviolent revolution you tilted on, it looks like you haven't quite decided."

"No one cares what you think," Dave snaps, then looks at John. "Tell me you didn't bring a bomb."

"I'm not stupid enough to carry around an armed explosive. Parts of it, yeah," John says casually, "but it wouldn't be hard to put together. I know where we could put it, too."

"John," you say, as balanced as you can be, as it feels like the elevator is vanishing out from around you even though you intellectually know you're fine.

He falters and looks at you, then crosses the elevator to you. His hands close around your arms; you haul in a breath and realize you haven't breathed in at least thirty seconds. "Hold on a little longer," he says.

"I'm fine," you say, but it doesn't come out right. You blink, and things don't look right. (Can they see through your eyes now?) "John." You try again. "John." There it is. He's looking at you in mild terror, but sinks back when you speak for yourself. "I'm fine."

"Just try to keep a grip." You can tell he wants to kiss you. He shouldn't even be touching you. It has to hurt. "Okay?"

"Let go of me," you say firmly. "Don't hurt yourself."

"Why haven't we been interrupted?" Ruby wonders, looking up at the elevator. You're reaching Ground Floor now and you're still going.

"That's probably me," you say. "They aren't able to see in here. They're probably smarter than to try to enter it."

"For what could be a camera outage?" Ruby asks skeptically.

"We assume camera outages are her, now," Dr. Redding says, and shrugs. "Better safe than sorry."

"Aren't you supposed to capture her?" Dave points out. "Wouldn't you want to crash the party?"

"You'd think," Dr. Redding says, "but even chipping the Imperiacorp doesn't make them one hundred percent compliant when they're scared of something. I suspect you've noticed that."

"Chipping?" Ruby asks.
"Pain breaks through the programming," Dr. Redding says, "but so can fear. We haven't managed to perfect it yet. She has kind of unrealistic expectations, to be honest."

"Yeah, well, fuck her," Dave says.

You look past John, at Dave. It's grounding enough to have him there. You wish you could say something on Pesterchum, or something that only both of you could hear. You wish you'd known how in deep you were going to get, because this feels differently than you expected.

Your Pesterchum goes off. You pause and check.

-- uranianUmbra [UU] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 7:48 --

UU: i see that yoU have begUn yoUr joUrney!
UU: thoUgh i wish that yoU hadn't.
UU: this is a difficUlT path yoU have taken to the destination we have discUssed.

You project out your keyboard instantly.

TT: This isn't the time.
UU: yoU have not thoUght this throUgh.
UU: thoUgh i know yoU believe yoU have.
UU: we have all made plans that seem foolhardy in retrospect.
UU: i can tell yoU these will seem so soon.
TT: You're looking at the wrong timeline, or you really don't know how this works.
TT: You can't just tell me to turn back.
UU: i can, rose, and i am.
TT: Why?
UU: becaUse everything will change after today if you don't.
UU: and yoU are not in fUll control of yoUr actions. is that not enoUgh?

It should be. But you're not known for your ability to back down even when it's not too late.

TT: It's too late. What can you tell me that's actually helpful?
UU: we had a plan, rose. yoU foUnd it insUfficiently direct. i have tried to help.
UU: for now, i can tell yoU to listen.
UU: and bring yoUr listener if yoU can.
TT: Luke?
TT: He's on his way but he won't be here any time soon. That's not helpful.
UU: then take your time.
UU: it is not the end of the world. yet.
TT: I need more than that. You aren't telling me anything helpful. I'm wasting time.
UU: you are afraid. you're right to be so.
UU: but you will live.
UU: yes.
TT: Fine.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] ceased pestering uranianUmbra [UU] at 7:51 --

You open a window to Luke, quickly.
"Rose," Dave says severely.
"Just a minute," you say in much the same tone.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering parisBound [PB] at 7:52 --

TT: Are you coming?
PB: Nowhere nearby
PB: You made it I assume
TT: Yes. Come faster if you can.
PB: How
TT: We could use your help here. We could use your… hearing.
PB: I don't know if I want to
TT: Too bad. Your General orders it.
PB: I'll come as fast as I can
PB: Make sure one of you stays alive enough to answer me
TT: Everyone needs to stop being so grim.
PB: I'll try to keep morale high
PB: I wish I was with you
PB: I owe it to Jade
TT: You've done so much already. Let us take it from here, and get us the hell out of here if it all goes badly.
PB: I will try to get there and use my "ears" soon
TT: Good. Be careful, get back to driving.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] ceased pestering parisBound [PB] at 7:53 --

"What the hell was that?" Dave asks the second you turn off the keyboard.

You look at Dave, then John, and you're all doing your best impression of someone who isn't uneasy. Then the door pings open. John swaps specibi back and reacts instantly to haul the Imperiacorp guard crossing by the elevator inside and knock him out with a normal bat.

Dave's eyebrows are very much raised. "Okay," he says. "Anyone else out there?" He catches the door before it closes again and dares a look outside. "Rue, go ahead."

Ruby grins and hops delicately over the guard to stalk outside, and Dave follows her. You gesture John ahead, and give Dr. Redding a level look. "I'm taking you with me."

"You can, of course," she says. "But I can tell you that the further down you look the more likely you are to find what you want. And you can take me with you to put me down if you find I'm lying, but I really don't believe you're the kind of person who has the stomach to do that."

"I just want a guided tour," you say blithely, and point her out the door. She exits and you nudge the Imperiacorp guard into the elevator completely, and punch the up button so he'll wind up somewhere safe. Dave would be proud. "Go," you say to her, and point after the others. She shrugs and goes.

John looks at you curiously, so you answer. "She knows this building. She's going to get us to where we need to go."

"Or she could be lying," Dave says.

"Of course I could, but that's not going to help anyone. This floor is an Imperiacorp outpost. You have to take the stairs from here on in, I don't have access to anything below this on the elevator and LL6 is the last there's even elevator access on," Dr. Redding says mildly. "I'm sure you've looked at blueprints, if you're so clever. I can't give you much help here, though."

"Dr. Redding?" a voice calls down the hallway.
She looks at you, specifically, and it's clear she's trying not to laugh. "Go back," she calls.

"Are you alone?"
Ruby cocks one of her guns, sidles off just slightly so she can see the figure of the approaching Imperiacorp guard, and takes two shots, two groans of pain and heavy falls following. "Rose, where do we go?" she asks instantly.

"This is a circular corridor," you say quickly, recalling the blueprint. "There's a stairwell – should be past the elevator."

"Stronger fighting position if nothing else," Dave supposes, and grabs Ruby's arm, running. You and John follow, and you shove Dr. Redding forward with majjyk; she pretty hurriedly runs with you then.

You make it to the stairwell and down a flight just when Imperiacorp spills into the stairwell, and you
throw one or two of them back into the crowd with majjyk, causing chaos, Dave and John frontline in melee, Ruby picking off anyone who might make a dent. "Back," you shout when there don't seem to be any more at least for the time being. "Down the stairs!"

The five of you emerge onto LL6. It's just a poorly-lit corridor. You stride ahead of everyone as Dave directs Ruby to watch your backs and John tersely tells Dr. Redding, "Well, tell us more."

"I don't have access to LL6, remember?" Dr. Redding points out. "Access is quite important here, as you might remember."

You glance back at them. "John," you say in warning, because she's goading him and his anger management skills are not great.

He ignores that. "Keep up the majjyk," he says, "you're letting it loose. Aren't you?"

"Well – " He has a point. There's less of it coursing through you. You know what it feels like by now. What's happening? "Shit," you swear quietly, and touch the THORNs. There's a brief burst from there, but it's not the same.

You're in front of the door at the end of the corridor now. You reach out to open it.

"Wait, wait, fucking wait," Dave says. "No, I want to know what the fuck we're getting into. So this is the last official level of the building, right?"

"Right," Dr. Redding says without hesitation.

"But the building goes down a good five miles underground after that," he goes on, "right, Rose?"

"Right," you confirm.

"So there's something under LL5 that goes five fucking miles underground," he says, "otherwise there'd be multiple floors built in. And this is going to be our first goddamn run-in with it."

"What are you thinking?" you prompt him.

"I don't know, but I'm not fucking stoked," Dave says, and pushes up his shades. "We should be ready. Are we ready? Do we think she's actually going to be useful?" He glances at Dr. Redding. "Or just making snarky fucking comments the whole time?"

"What's the worst thing that happens? She's obviously not a combatant," John points out. "It's the only reason I haven't fucking put her down already."

"One of two reasons," Dave says.

"Boys," Ruby sighs. "Let's go before Imperiacorp gets wise again?"

You turn and open the door, striding inside. You stop dead. You recognize this.

"These are," John says, and his voice is strangled. "These are the.... life support."

"Pods," Dr. Redding confirms without much concern. "Life support pods for those whose biology may have been compromised by experiments but who could still be of good use." There are at least a hundred of them lining the immense circular room, all glittering in the faint light, some of them with people or creatures or something inside. There's two stairwells down, one on each side.

"So there's people who were experimented on in there." Dave has never seen this before, and you
remember that look, you remember wearing that look. "What do we do?"

"This isn't about the signal," you say. "So forget it. We keep going."

Dr. Redding tilts her head and her expression is amused, but she says nothing. You find it suspect. "What?"

"This is why humanity's losing," she says. "Because we're so simplistic. It's embarrassing, really."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Dave says impatiently, "who gives a shit. What do we do now?"

"We go down," you say.

There's the faint sound of laughter from higher up, near the ceiling, then it gets just louder enough to make it clearly human or something like it, and everyone freezes up for an instant.

"Down?" John checks. "Down is good."

"Aren't you even going to check?" Dr. Redding says. "What if it's important?"

"You're telling me it's important?" you ask.

"I'm saying it might well be," she says. "Coming all the way here and not checking seems like a fatal misstep for me."

There's more of that faint maniacal laughter again, and Dave starts to pace. "I'm fucking leaving this fucking – that's creeping the shit out of me," he says, "let's fucking go ahead. Ruby?"

Ruby finishes reloading her guns. "Ready when you are."

You look at Dr. Redding again. "We're opening a pod," you say to the others, and the doctor smiles. "No. Don't look smug. We should verify."

"It's going to kill us," John warns you shortly.

"Not if we're ready. Just one pod." You go down the first small flight of stairs and to the first pod there, touching the controls lightly.

"I don't think this is a brilliant idea, for the record," John says.

"Holy shit, he's disagreeing with you," Dave says. "I'm in shock."

"Shut up," John advises him.

You look closer inside; the glass is reflective, so it takes the right angle to see inside. The man inside is half-asleep, his face apparently painted or blotched in dark colors and his eyes with broad dark circles around them, like a clown's makeup. You can't help but be fascinated. You lean in closer and he senses your movement, waking, looking back at you.

His eyes are strange, inhuman, and the look in them wild. Your heart's suddenly racing. Then he moves so fast you can't react and slams the glass, and starts laughing in this horrible piercing way, and you jump back.

"Jesus fucking Christ, now that we've had our fun," Dave says, rattled just watching you.

"What is this?" you ask Dr. Redding.
"Well," Dr. Redding says, "we have certain obligations to fulfill to keep the business size and money flow going, as I'm sure you're aware. This sort of thing is one of them."

"Great non-answer," Dave says, a bit snappish, "but what is it and why did you bring us here?"

"I like to consider myself a teacher," Dr. Redding says. "I don't just give out answers."

Ruby cocks a gun and puts it to her head. "How about now?"

"You wouldn't kill me because I wouldn't give you answers," Dr. Redding says dismissively.

"No, but I'll shoot you somewhere really painful and wait for you to give us answers," Ruby answers.

Dr. Redding considers that. "You were interested in the signal," she says. "It's not an antenna. At least, not the way you think of one. These creatures... the processes it takes to make them gives them abilities. Some can make people feel certain ways, some can spread those abilities wider. Most wind up the way you saw that one, mad, inhuman, but they still serve a purpose." She eyes John. "Some come out of the other side sentient, but they're still monsters, just monsters with the right pedigree."

"The signal doesn't come from people, that's not, that's fucking stupid," Dave says, but he's staring around bewildered now.

"Well, it's not coming from here, right now," Dr. Redding says, waving that off. "She hasn't visited in at least six weeks. The bulk of them visit here and it's so strong it lasts for weeks."

"Why – "

You're done. You're finished. You have a gut feeling. Listen. You go downstairs.

"Rose!" Dave shouts after you, and you hear him run after you, then presumably John as well.

There's five or six stairwells, until there are no more pods and there's just a door in front of you and you go through it. When the door shuts behind you, the others catch up with you, but there's just another hallway and another door and another stairwell.

"You can't just run away like that," John chides you, touching your arm, but he yanks it away. You look at him, surprised, and his hand is burnt, badly. "What the fuck?" he says.

"I don't know," you say. You're shaken.

"Everything will change after today. Everything appears to be changing already. None of this feels the same as it usually does. "Just be careful, all right?"

"Yeah," John says, sidling just a little away from you.

"You really don't need me anymore," Dr. Redding mentions. "I told you all I know."

"Yeah, you're not going to run back up for help, sorry," Dave says. "You know you're crazy, right? Like, bugfuck as shit? Who sides with an alien?"

"I'm interested in progress," Dr. Redding says, a bit snidely. "If I go back upstairs – "

"Frightened?" you ask.

There's silence. That tells you everything you need to know. "I thought maybe," you say. "What's down here?"
"I've never been," Dr. Redding says shortly. She doesn't like that you called her out, probably. Too bad.

"Everyone," you say as calmly as you can, "you need to listen."

"For what?" Dave asks.

"You'll know it when you hear it." You don't know what you're talking about, but you trust your alien contact.

It's a long trip down all of the stairs. You're wondering how long it's actually been – the others have been in conversation for a while about what food they should get after all of this – when you see down the stairwell a few flights and there's a door.

"There's a door," you tell the others.

"Shit," Dave swears.

"What?" you ask, glancing back.

"Rose, we can't hear you," John says, expressionless in that way that means he's incredibly worried.

"But I feel fine," you try to say, and that's when you realize you can't feel your hands. You look down at them to find them a light shade of grey. "What," you say, more out of shock than anything.

"That was sudden," John says. "Uh, Rose, do you want to take off the HUBTOPBAND in case?"

Damn it. He's right. You take it off and captchalogue it. "Please tell me you can hear me," you try again. You don't want to lose control like last time. You can't afford to do that now.

"It's okay," John says quietly, and wraps his sleeve around his hand a few times so he can touch your shoulder briefly in comfort. "Just be ready for whatever."

"So this is the scary shit you decided not to tell anyone about because I might think it's insane because it is?" Dave checks with John.

"Yeah, be more accusatory," John says. "It got us all the way here to where we can do something."

"At what risk though," Dave says. "What if she doesn't come back from that?"

"Whatever," John says, and exhales. You can just feel that more than anything right now he just wants to touch you, but he can't, even though you want the same thing. "Go, Rose. We're ready."

You open the door.

The room is immense, but clearly one room; the edges of the walls aren't even visible from where you stand, and there's about a thousand feet between the walls and whatever's at the center. Something glowing is at the center of the room, possibly a window or a wall. You move closer to the center without hesitation, your head tilted.

You think you can hear something.

"What's she doing?" Dave hisses.

"Listening," Ruby says simply.
"For what?"

closer

It's not even really a word, just an impression placed upon your brain, and you move closer, and closer after that, until you realize that what you're approaching is glass, and there's something behind it. Something moving. Something very, very big, and white.

There's an eye right in front of you, bigger than your head. This should terrify you, but all you do is put your hand on the glass, and, slowly, a tentacle reaches out to put against the glass near your hand. Something about this feels right.

"Hello," you say.

remember

You're not sure what it means by that. "You're why it all changed today. My abilities. Getting closer to you changes things, doesn't it?"

remember

"I don't know what you mean," you say. You strain. "Do – are you one of them? You look like one of them."

remember back

You think you're frustrating it. "When should I remember? The first time? Or here and now?"

There's silence from it for a moment, but then there's a pain through your arm and your head nearly buckles from pain, but you see a flash of you, little you, at Maryland, maybe four years old, asleep.

"Don't touch her," John is shouting when you wake up.

"Fuck that," Dave snaps back, and pulls you to your feet. You blink at him, still a little stupefied, but then you scramble back, not wanting to hurt him. "Rose," he tries. "Get back from this thing."

It keens, a sound that scrambles you mentally and physically, but the others don't seem to react. "I'm in tune with you," you say to it. "You helped me. Why? Why are you here?"

"Oh, Rosie," a voice comes from the other side of the room, "you're in wayyyyy over your head, ain't ya?"

"What the fuck," you say, just because no one is going to actually hear you except maybe the monster that the batterwitch has in a tank, apparently, anyway.

"John, switch specibi now," Dave says rapidly, "it's her, it's fucking her, Jesus Christ –"

"You broke into my crib and expected me to not be here?" Now you can all see her, the tall, terrifying outline of her, all hair and rainbows against the bright white of the tank. "Not cool. Time to fuck you up, babies." She grins.

You stand in front of the others. "You probably can't understand me," you say easily, "but I'm not going to let you kill my friends."

"Ooh, this is going to be fun," she says, her eyes all alight with interest. "A real fight! But first I gotta kill this bitch." She readies her trident and before anyone can do anything she throws it at Dr.
Redding, who's pretty much dead the second she hits the floor.

"Holy shit," Ruby whispers.

"You're not allowed to die," Dave whispers back to her.

"Tell that to her!"

Your mother does her obnoxious terrifying sashaying to grab the trident, but John goes at her with a sword before she gets a chance and she instantly grabs him by the neck before he gets in a swing.

"Stupid," she says in a sing-song. "Stupid boy! Lucky me, though! He's one of mine." You draw your needles and approach, but she just laughs, releases John, and he goes stiff, then relaxes, and turns to Dave.

"Oh shit," Dave says slowly. "Shit, he's fucking gone, shit – "

"I'll just shoot him," Ruby says rapidly.

"No, we can break her concentration or something – leave it to Rose!"

"I'm not letting him fucking kill you!"

You have just enough time to watch in horror as John tries his damnedest to kill Dave with a sword, before your mother crosses into your vision.

"Soooo," she says, "looks like we can't catch up since last time because my lusus is ruining everything. But that's cool!" She twirls her trident. "I can still kill you and the pet can kill Strider and you little bitches will stop being my problem."

"How are you doing that?" you demand, pointing demonstratively. "Let him go." Even if she could hear you she wouldn't, but you have to say it.

She glances at them in the middle of a furious swordfight and all of Dave's shouting. "They're mine," she says, "I dunno what the fuck you want. Maybe I should let some of my rage babies tear you to pieces. They need a good break."

You suddenly remember, it all falls into place, you can't believe you're thinking at a time like this but you're not sure you were ever really ready for this, have you ever really been ready for this? Trolls.

"We're not trolls," you say hotly, and that comes out in English, you think, from the look on her face, maybe because you're just that angry. Then you go at her with your needles.

A shot rings out and John cries out in pain, but it doesn't seem to help at all, but you're just battering against her magic with your own majjyk, and it's so much more powerful in this chamber, right now, that you think you almost stand a chance. It's swallowing you whole and you're just blindly using as much of it as you can against her, to swallow her whole, and you try to drag her off of her feet, to slam her into the wall.

She starts screaming at you, nothing that makes sense to you, because you're not quite succeeding but she's probably not used to a fight being anywhere near this close, and you're panting with the effort and you realize that you're bleeding from your nose, which probably isn't good. But this is the important thing. You could save them all. She tries to stab you and you freeze the trident where it is, somehow, and switch needles quickly to stab her through the arm.

"You're fucking dead," she screams, and you think you probably are no matter how this goes,
because the human body isn't meant to be channeling this much anything, but you don't give a shit right now. You keep going after her, and then she grabs you by the hair and you scream in fury, lashing out at her arms, but she's got a grip on you and there's nothing you can do about it.

"No, FUCKING WAIT," you hear Dave shout from the other end of the room, but you can't see what's going on, tears and maybe blood down your face as she drags a door open and crams something onto your head.

You fight to get it off of your head, but she smacks you across the whole of your head with the trident and you can't move. She flips a switch.

Everything goes white.

this isn't right
listen

The next thing you know you're in a car, coughing blood into a cup, your head in disarray. "What," you choke out.

"Oh holy shit you're awake," Dave says in the tone of the most poignant relief you've ever heard him use. "Can you talk? Like, another word in English for me?"

"What – " No, that's the same one. "What happened?"

"She left us alive," he says. "Did some fucked up experiment thing on you."


There's dead silence in the car. You are still stupid enough from what she did to think that you might be wrong about what happened. Then Dave says, "He broke whatever she did. Killed himself so he wouldn't kill me. He was about to, I was fucking dead."

"I wouldn't have let you die," Ruby says quietly.

"He was dead either way," Dave says. He can't seem to look at you. This explains, you realize, why he's completely covered in John's blood. "I'm sorry. Yeah. Whatever."

You don't have it in you to cry right now. You're not sure you have it in you to do much of anything.

You touch the THORNS from comfort. You feel nothing, from the throes, or from inside yourself.

It's been a week. Rose hasn't left her bedroom since it happened. You're surprised, really, because she's always seemed like the type who'd go out no matter what to prove that everything was fine even when it wasn't. But there's a line like that even for Rose Lalonde, you guess.

You're not fine, either. You're probably finer than Rose is, but you're still stuck with the mental image of John trying to kill the shit out of you and opening his own throat to save you. You're probably going to be stuck with that forever.

Now you have to be special. If someone kills themselves to save you, you've officially got to be worth that.

It's time for lunch. You silently gather it, raise your eyebrows at Hana on your way out, and go
upstairs, opening the door without a knock. She's generally just in there reading or knitting these days, or just laying there quietly.

"You mind me having my lunch in here too?" you ask her, when she shifts from lying on her side to face you.

"No," she says simply, and you put the tray on the bed, then take your own plate off of it.

She pulls the tray into her lap. "You're treating me like I'm made of glass," she says, only a little accusatory..

"You've been hiding. I figure it's for the best to roll with how you're doing." She shifts up on the bed for you to sit with her, so you sit on the end. "No one expects you to get over this quick."

"You're talking about feelings," she notes.

"It was kind of a big deal," you point out.

"Well," she says, and she looks tired. "He was going to die for me someday. It was why he always wanted to be there, so he could die instead of me. He died for you instead, but it comes to the same point."

"He wasn't loyal to me. I don't know why he did it," you say honestly. "And – we don't have to talk about it."

"It was for our purpose, yours and mine. He understood that, Dave, even though he didn't know everything that was involved." She pulls apart a roll and picks the smallest piece to chew, and no one speaks until she's finished chewing. "You were right. Your approach was right. We learned useful things, but it was too much of a risk."

"You weren't in your right goddamn mind," you say. "I don't hold it against you, not really."

"I started that path on my own. The…" She sighs. "I think it was calling me."

"What is that thing?" you demand. "How were you talking to it?"

"I think it's… her pet. But it's sentient. It knows things and it knew me. It…" She trails off.

"Don't push yourself," you say, as non-committally concerned as you can plausibly get away with.

"Don't baby me," she retorts, not as offended as she could be, though.

You watch her eat for a moment, and she lets you without any comment. "I thought you were dead," you say finally.

"I bet."

You should just leave. "We need to – do something. Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff, I mean, I'm getting a lot of buzz and shit, and – "

"And I've got my own things I have to do," Rose says. It's not what you were expecting her to say and that must be written all over your face. "What?" she asks. "It's not violent."

"That's good news, not gonna lie, but I kind of thought you were in here because you didn't know what to do," you point out.
She doesn't respond to that. "What would you have done if I was dead?" she asks.

You're mid-bite when she says that shit. "Shut the fuck up," you say with your mouth full, and then chew.

"Would you have given up? I'm curious."

*I would have burned these fucking condos down and lived as an awesome yet reclusive millionaire.*

"Yeah," you say, "it would have been really fucking tempting."

"Don't give up. You know how fucked up it is now," she says. "How deep it goes. If I die – "

"We're not doing this violent shit anymore," you remind her sharply.

"That doesn't mean she'll let me live," she points out. "I'm the one she's always out to kill."

"But you're – " Your throat tightens as you remember it. "They want to capture you. You'll have to be careful."

"You won't be there with me?" she asks, but it's rhetorical and you both know it.

You want to be, you need to be, but there's more important things. "Shut up."

The two of you eat in silence, then she says, "So, you'll be getting the others into witness protection, keeping the key people nearby, and we'll split up?"

You hate this. "Yeah, at least to the first part. Everyone knows we're breaking up the core group. Luke should stay with you. Ruby and the Capellos with me. I guess I'm stuck with Mark too."

Rose is looking at you and you think you know what that expression is saying but it's not fucking helpful so you're ignoring it. "The majjyk is gone."

"It might not be gone forever," you say. "But if it was, that might not be the worst thing."

"Needles aren't actually as good at killing people as swords are," she says.

"Hopefully you won't have to. But you'll have Luke."

It's stupid. You hate how stupid it is and how knowing it's stupid doesn't stop it. You spent a year knowing Rose without seeing her in person, and then months again after that, so you don't need to be there face to face. You don't need to watch her eating lunch. That's dumb shit.

"Have you had any dreams since New York?" she asks you after a long break of silence.


"It's complicated," she says after a moment.

"You always say that so that you don't have to tell me things," you say, a little sharply. "So just tell me."

"Dave," she starts.

You lean forward. "We're not going to be here for that much longer. Tell me."
Rose just looks at you, stunned and startled, which is a weird look on her. Then she leans over the lunch tray and kisses you.

You remind yourself to breathe after, because you're not during. "What," you say, too fucking blown away to manage a question mark.

"Sorry," she says, and you see this close up that she's blushing.

"Holy shit." This is really happening. She's thinking about drawing back, it's written all over her face, but you stop her with a hand on her arm, and kiss her. She's the most vulnerable you've ever seen her, now, and it's a little terrifying, but you have been avoiding thinking about how badly you've wanted this for a long, long time.

"I wasn't sure," she says quietly.

"Whatever," you say. It's a stupid thing to say. This is the best you've ever felt, right here, right now, with her. You've always felt at your best with her, and you're about to lose her all over again. "It's not like we'll never see each other again or something."

Rose smiles. "You won't be nearly that lucky."
I know it's been, uh, three and a half years since I updated this, but things have been busy and the muse just didn't bite. That said, this should be done by the end of 2019 or early 2020.

This chapter is long. Following chapters shouldn't be quite as long as this.

October 2004

It's been over a month since you've dreamed of Rose.

You'd much rather dream of Rose in that strange world full of purple, even if it feels real, overly real, which is something dreams shouldn't be. On the other hand, your brain seems to find the only other option showing you John's throat sliced open in front of you, green blood dripping onto you, sizzling hot, and other bullshit like that.

You're becoming an insomniac. It's your only defense.

It's three AM and Ruby's asleep in her room – thank fuck, because every time she catches you awake like this you have the same non-fight and you're really fucking tired of it by now. You put the finishing touches on a comic and squint at it thoughtfully before saving and closing it.

You're so tired that you're having trouble thinking straight. It's why you pester Rose. Lately, it's the only time you do.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 3:05 --

TG: so i dunno if youre gonna answer

TG: i dunno what youre doing

TG: it wouldn't kill you to talk

You somehow thought that the kiss would simplify things, but it hasn't at all. Now it's just a giant question mark, along with everything else about Rose. The more you know her, the more you realize there's so much more you don't know.

Your head lolls and you drift asleep for something like thirty seconds, then awake, startled.

What is it going to take?

TG: i dreamed that i died last night

TG: again

TG: what is this about

TG: if this is real
TG: how can it be real

It's just a handful of keystrokes away. *Help me. I miss your bullshit.*

TT: Tell me more.

You blink at the screen, press a hand to your face, then finally answer after pause.

TG: got shot
TG: some girl
TG: somehow
TG: seemed complicated at the time

Rose doesn't answer right away. That doesn't make you nervous. You're fine.

TT: How many of these dreams have you had?

TG: sometimes i cant tell whats real or not

This is definitely a 3 AM conversation. You think maybe going to sleep is your best option when compared to this conversation... but then you'd risk dreams of hot green blood and helplessness. Maybe not.

For now, Rose. You straighten your Skaiaashades.

TT: What do you mean?
TG: i dunno
TT: You do. You brought it up for a reason.
TT: It's bothering you.
TG: everything feels real
TG: but it cant be
TT: Then let it go.
TT: I know you believe it has no greater meaning.
TG: you said jade could see the future
TG: all i see is bullshit death
TT: Dave.
TG: dont dave me
TT: There are dreams.
TT: Brain puke, as you have said.
TT: Then there are memories.
TT: Then there is...
TT: It's complicated.

You make an exasperated sound.

TG: i dont believe anything is as complicated as you make it
TT: Go to sleep, Dave.
TG: no
TG: fuck sleep
TT: Dave.
TG: i just said dont dave me
TT: I want to visit you.

Okay, she has your attention.

TG: how
TT: We have the fenestrated windows.
TG: youd use resources like that
TT: Do you want to see me?

Shit. You press the Skaiashades into your face with a facepalm.

TG: you know lots of shit
TG: you know why i dream about dying
TG: because its gonna happen
TG: am i psychic
TT: You're really deflecting one serious conversation with another?
TT: I'm impressed.
TG: tell me
TT: Have you been dreaming anything else?

Involuntarily the visual of John bleeding out onto you pops into your head.

TG: yeah
TT: And?
TG: tony hawk pro skater
TT: Dave.
TG: whatever
TT: We're so far off-topic.
TG: we had a topic
TT: I asked you if you were dreaming, first of all.
TG: i asked you if i was psychic
TT: In a way.
TG: wow a real half answer from rose lalonde
TT: I want to see you.
TT: In person. Do you want to see me?

You stare at Pesterchum. The cursor blinks.

TG: what do my dreams have to do with seeing you
TT: Your dreams have to do with you raising the question of your being psychic.
TT: You raised that question because of the dream you mentioned where you died.
TT: Do you want to see me?

There are so many things you would feel the need to say if you saw her in person, so many things you would definitely do. You don't know why uncertainty is uncurling in your gut.

TG: yeah
TT: I could be there tomorrow.
TG: tomorrow afternoon
TG: unless im promoting or whatever
TT: Can't you check your calendar?
TG: ruby
TT: Ah.

That got awkward quick.

TT: I'll make plans to arrive around 4 your time.
TT: Plug one in for me.
TG: yeah

You rub your eyes.

TG: talk to you then
TT: Get some sleep.

You know you should try to sleep. You close your eyes for a second – no blood, no death – and
decide to run the risk.

You settle in bed and it's minutes, you think, before you wake up in purple dreamland. There's
SBAHJ art everywhere on the walls. You don't even think twice before running your fingers over
the shitty paintings, and picking up where it left off.

Something happens in your head. You pause, because that's weird to realize. You put the markers
aside, lie down, and close your eyes, half-expecting to wake up when you open them. But instead
you get the weirdest sense of... twoness, duality, the weight of a much larger sword in your hands,
and... you can't deal with it. You close your eyes tightly. You want out.

Then, you're asleep on a bed. Except it's not you, because you're you, and you're standing over you.

"It's lame of you to pretend there's any element of suspense here," you ramble off to your shades,
pestering someone. "Why don't you just tell me?"

GC: OH I G3T IT

GC: YOU W4NT TO R1S3 TO TH3 GOD T13RS 4ND B3COM3 4S GR34T 4S JOHN

GC: WH1L3 ST1LL FORF31T1NG 4LL OF YOUR D3C1S1ONS 4ND FR33 W1LL TO 4 BL1ND G1RL 1N 4NOTH3R D1M3NS1ON

GC: R34L H3RO1C, D4V3!

GC: OR SHOULD I S4Y

GC: SOOOO COOOOOOL >8]

You don't roll your eyes, because that would let her win.

"Look, I don't mind making the decision if that's what's going on here. Like doing the free will
thing."

GC: OH 1S TH4T 4 TH1NG NOW?

Jesus. Trolls. "Yes, how would it ever stop being a thing? Being a thing's not something it ever
stopped doing." You stare at the sleeping Dave. "I just want to know what's really going on here.
Before I decide to start choppin' off the heads of outrageously good-looking snoozing dudes."

You wake up to Ruby outside your door, ten minutes before your alarm. "It's time to get ready! God,
what would you do without me, stupid boy."

"What the fuck," you mutter into your pillow, and push yourself up.

Apparently today you're at the Today Show promoting SBAHJ (and its subliminal messaging). That
doesn't intimidate you at all.

There's makeup and production assistants and cameras being pointed out to you, and your head is
spinning, though you'd never admit that out loud no matter the torture. Then Ruby kisses your cheek
and you're ushered onto the soundstage towards the three people there to interview you, all smiling,
all interested.
You feel yourself shifting backwards instinctively, then shove that instinct back and sit down at the circular table, propping your elbows up while you're at it. "Hey," you say, as cool as you can.

"Hey," Matt Lauer returns, clearly amused. "So tell us once and for all, because I've got money on this – are you ready?"

You raise your eyebrows. "Yeah," you say.

"Is it pronounced 'meem' or 'me-me'?"

All at once you're not sure why you were worried about this at all.

You check the hit counters as the two of you drive back home and you're still fighting the urge to paw at your face to make sure none of the makeup is still on it, even though you know they removed it before you left. "How do girls wear makeup?" you ask Ruby, who's driving.

"Who cares," she says, and punches you in the arm. "What do the hit counters look like?"

"They…" Wow. They have ticked up. More than you'd expected, but maybe you were underestimating how many people were watching this and would be interested. Or maybe you thought you'd fuck it up. "Looks good."

"How good?" Ruby sounds smug, you don't even have to look at her.

"Good." You pause. "Rose is coming over."

She eyes you. "Really. When?"

You're not sure about that look. "Afternoon."

Ruby gives a half-shrug. "Okay. I'll see my dad."

You can't read this situation at all. "Is this… okay? I mean. Me and. Uh – " Wow, your mouth is being really awesome right now.

"Strider," Ruby cuts in, patiently, "I'm over it. Don't worry about it."

There's another pause. "Oh," you say. Maybe you feel like an idiot. Then, before you can stop it, you say, "Are you sure?"

"For fuck's sake," she exclaims, and punches you in the arm again. "Yeah, we're good, god, what the fuck. I told you to go for it, didn't I? I knew almost right away you were way more into her than you were into me anyway, like, the way you talked about her and the way you would drop any conversation with me and it's stupid to even be talking about this, you know that? But I like you, not just the part where I made out with you, so I'm fine." She barely hesitates. "Oh, and I'll stay with my dad tonight if you want her to crash with you."

You don't know what to say, so you just say, "You're cool." Thank you. She smirks at you and somehow smugly drives.

You spend the rest of the day ignoring the fact that you're writing out your dreams into a document on your Skaiashades. Eventually, the light on the FENESTRATED WINDOW flickers, and Rose jumps out incongruously to most laws of science.

She brushes her skirt down in what's probably fake casualness and you just stare at her. She's really there. Not a dream.
"Hey," you say, as casual as you can, which is to say not very.

There's that half-not-really-a-smile of hers. "Hey. Can I join you?"

You nod just slightly, and she sits beside you on the couch. You're not sure what to do, but she reaches over and touches your cheek, drawing your face towards her. Her palm is cool. "I'm working on the book," she says. "Nonstop. This is my first break."

"I know the feeling." It's a lot of work getting the subliminal messaging under SBAHJ, and you might have some personal stake of pride in SBAHJ being quality irony on top of that. "You could have come earlier."

"I wasn't ready yet." Her hand drops from your face to your lap. "Were you?"

"Ready for what?" Her fingers are brushing your hand and this is very distracting.

"Ready to come back to the real world." She pauses. "Luke was enough, and we've barely talked."

You open your mouth to say something, cut yourself off, then say as offhandedly as possible, "This is about John."

It changes everything. Much to your surprise, Rose leans into you. "Partially. What about you?"

She knows. Of course she knows. "Yeah," you say bluntly.

"It's hard for me to believe he's gone," she says. Should you be putting your arm around her? "Everything's changed now."

"No kidding." You decide to put your arm around her. She's clearly surprised. You act like nothing's happening. "You said partially."

"What she did…" You feel her breath go shallow in her weight against you. "Dave, I don't want to talk anymore."

"You wouldn't let me get away with that," you say dryly.

She ignores that, kisses you instead, and all the questions you could ask, to make her feel better or accidentally worse, are put on hold, because your brain is newly overwhelmed with each kiss. When she breaks from you, it all sinks in as real, and you lean forward to kiss her one more time.

There's something desperate about all this, and you don't like it at all, but this craving for Rose feels like you've had it in the back of your head since the moment you met her, and now you need it sated. She blinks at you, almost expressionless, and you say, "Don't use this against me." You know she will, but you have to say it.

Rose barely nods, and rests against you slightly. "Are you awake?" she asks quietly.

You freeze, barely breathing. "Rose," you say, warning, for what reason you're not sure.

It's like she's staring through you. "I need to know."

"I don't know what you're talking about." It feels like a lie, for some reason, or at least a half-truth.

There's a very long pause where you have no clue what's going on, then she kisses you, and you get the sense that she's given up the topic. She stays close after.
You break the silence. "How long can you stay?"

"Until the morning." It's not the answer you wanted and she can tell. "We agreed, Dave – "

"I know," you cut her off with. "Go back when you need to."

You're inches away from each other and the air is rife with tension. "Is there a problem?" she asks.

I don't want you to go.

Why can't we do this together?

Either way we're targets.

"I just think there's no point in separate operations – " you start, then she gets that expression that's even worse than rolling her eyes and you get pissed. "So we live in the same place, so what? It's not like – "

"You know why," she says, firm and low.

"I'm not sure I do because you keep expecting me to just go along with everything you do without explanation," you say.

"Right now she wants us alive, for some reason," Rose says, distant. "She probably has seen some future of ours and wants it to happen. But when she acts and the hammer drops, it'll drop on me. I'm the one she primed." She exhales. "You're the one who needs to come in after she's done with me."

You are incredibly not okay with this. "You think she's going to kill you? Have you seen anything – "

"No," she says. "It's just a theory. But I think it's a good one."

"Rose, don't act like this shit is normal and you're okay with it and you know everything," you say heatedly.

"I wouldn't be Rose Lalonde if I did any of those things," she says, blithe as hell.

"Goddammit!" You pull away from her and her touch and her kiss, because the Rose you want to kiss is also the Rose who pulls this bullshit. "I'm not going to let you die."

"I don't think you're going to have much say in this," Rose says, flatly wry.

"Fuck this," you say; you're having a hard time thinking in anything but curse words. "Why do you have to ruin everything?"

"You asked," she says.

"Move in with me," you say. "Fuck this theory of yours. When you face her, I'm going to be there, no matter goddamn what. Don't spare me. I don't want to be spared."

Rose stares at you. You suddenly realize she is annoyed at you, or what passes as annoyed on Rose. "This isn't just about us. Your part of this is important and you need to be there for it to play out. Think of the long game."

"I am not going to stand by and watch you die at the hands of the fish bitch." You meet her gaze readily. "Just so you know. That won't happen."
She shakes her head and you hate that you're so angry at her and there's no point to it, because Rose is Rose and you aren't going to win this by arguing with her. "Fine," you say, and it comes out brittle and annoyed. "Tell me about the book."

Rose smiles, just slightly askew, and you feel the anger subsiding just that easily. She touches your hand and you look down, forced to breathe normally again.

"How much do you know about chess?" she asks you.

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*In the future, not many months away...*

An UNUTTERABLE draws pictures of the things that she's seen on the screen.

The girl shares a kiss with the boy in the picture she draws, his sunglasses pressed to his face in the close proximity, and both share a sweet blush.

She ships it.

Pesterchum chimes. She puts down her pencil and goes to look.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering uranianumbra [UU] at 14:32 --

TT: It's done.

TT: Do you want a copy?

TT: I have you partially to thank.

UU: yoU did all of the work, rose!

UU: reap yoUr reward.

UU: i am proUd to coUnt myself yoUr friend.

TT: I don't even know what result I'm hoping for from this.

TT: You say there's more to come, right?

TT: That we're not going to be killed flat-out?

UU: i cannot tell yoU of the fUtUre.

UU: as yoU well know.

TT: Well, you could.

UU: it wouId affect events.

TT: You've already affected events.

The UNUTTERABLE sighs.

UU: rose.

TT: I'm not wrong.
UU: someone in my position mUst be carefUl.

TT: You've seen what happens, at least in part.

TT: You're my friend, and you've encouraged me.

TT: You wouldn't do so if it meant we failed to succeed at any of our work.

TT: Would you?

She doesn't type for what is arguably a long time.

UU: the trUe reason for my intervention will come to bear.

UU: i woUld love to see yoUr book.

TT: I see.

TT: Fine.

The girl sends the attachment, and the UNUTTERABLE settles down to read someone else's story, drawing fanart as she goes.

January 2005

"You need an ending." Your editor Kim is, if nothing else, to the point. "You've tried three, pick one."

"Yes." You glance down at the manuscript and flip through it. "I – "

"It doesn't have to be now," Kim says, "but we need it completed by the end of the week."

"I understand." you say immediately, and casually draw upon your majjyk. "Then… we begin printing once the full edit is done. At least ten thousand copies. Fully promoted."

Kim stares at you, and you recognize the look in her eyes. It's working. "Yes," she agrees. "Fully promoted."

"Good." You stand. "Thank you, Kim."

"Thank you, Rose," she echoes, and a strange smile flickers across her face.

You leave, annoyed, and immediately open up Pesterchum as you get into the car. The book needs to be finished, no matter the measures you take.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering uranianumbra [UU] at 16:31 --

TT: Hello.

UU: hello rose!

TT: I need your help.

UU: how can i help yoU?

TT: I need to know the future.
UU: you know i cannot tell you that.
TT: Not about me, or the others.
TT: About her.
TT: Something I can use.
UU: you know how to frighten her.
UU: we've discussed.
TT: Can you give me anything?
UU: i'm afraid you may have to be creative.
TT: Sarcasm doesn't become you.
UU: i wasn't being sarcastic.
TT: Please, UU. Help me.
UU: you must strike at her innermost fears.
UU: that she will not succeed.
UU: that the memory of her people will pass away completely.
TT: I see.
UU: oh.
TT: What?
UU: nothing.
TT: You think you told me too much?
TT: I already figured that out.
UU: figured what out?
TT: She wants a race of trolls to rule.
UU: Um
UU: yes.
TT: That's why she's doing the experiments.
UU: yes.
TT: What happened to her people?
UU: rose.
UU: what do you think?
TT: Oh.

It all makes sense now. You know what to write.

Unfortunately, you have two messages waiting for you otherwise.

   TT: Thank you, UU.
   UU: of course.
   UU: be wise.
   TT: I'll do my best.

You check the others.

   SL: we need to talk

   -- parisBound [PB] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 16:35 --
   PB: How did it go

Ruby's messaging you. That's concerning. You talk to Luke first, because that'll be faster.

   TT: They had some concerns about themes and the ending,
   TT: But I think I know what to do for the ending now. I'll start work immediately when I get home.
   TT: We're doing this.
   PB: How
   TT: I have some ideas.
   PB: Majjyk
   TT: Yes. There are ways. I've been experimenting.
   PB: On people
   TT: Not in any harmful ways.
   PB: Of course
   PB: The network has been active today
   TT: I'm glad to hear it.

There's a pause. Ruby messages you again. You're becoming less and less likely to look, for reasons you're not entirely ready to admit.

   TT: Luke?
   PB: Yeah
TT: I may not be home tonight.

PB: All right

No excuses now.

SL: we need to talk

SL: i know i'm not your usual contact obviously but it's important

TT: It's no problem.

TT: What's going on?

SL: dave

SL: he's being incredibly weird and not sleeping

SL: which he was doing anyway since crockercorp but it's different now

You realize then that you haven't heard from Dave in days. He usually reaches out to you if he's acting like this, and it makes you have very uncomfortable thoughts.

TT: Plug in a window for me. I'll be there soon.

SL: just don't…

TT: What?

SL: don't do your thing

TT: What's "my thing"?

SL: you know what i mean

SL: look, i don't hate you

SL: but when you do your thing it messes him up

TT: If you're calling me manipulative you might as well come out and say it.

SL: he loves you

SL: and you're important

SL: i can't change any of that

SL: all i can do is ask that you're nice to him

You raise your eyebrows at the HUBTOPBAND.

TT: I don't think you really understand how we work.

SL: guess i don't

SL: i'll plug in the window
You begin to write, though it's awkward to do on your HUBTOPBAND, your mind not exactly on the task at hand. Finally, you stop. It'd be easy to write Ruby's concerns off as jealousy, but Dave hasn't seemed concerned about that at all and he most certainly knows her better. Either way, it doesn't matter. What matters is Dave.

At long last, you're home. You waste no time plugging in the window and jumping right into the situation. The first thing you see is Dave sunk back into the couch, SkaiaShades cast aside in favor of regular shades, computer in his lap as he works furiously. You turn at the sound of a cleared throat, and see Ruby there, all dressed to the nines and styled up as she normally is, her eyebrows raised. "Dave?"

Dave looks up and nearly drops his computer. "Ruby, what's –"

"You have the interview tomorrow," Ruby says, and taps her watch. "You need to be on your game. Rose is going to sort you out. I have to help my dad and Tony, so I'll be back late. Figure it out." She fixes a look on you. "I'm trusting you."

"Right," you say, bemused.

"You don't really have to –" But Ruby is out the door before Dave can finish the sentence. He looks back to you. "I think she just brought you here to psychoanalyze me."

"Something like that." You unplug the window in an idle motion.

"I don't need psychoanalyzing," he says, and starts to work on his computer again. "You can go."

Stupidly, it stings. "Should I?" you return, tone flat.

He looks up at you again, gaze steady (as far as you can tell behind the shades). "No," he says. "You wouldn't be you if you didn't bug the shit out of me with psychology every once in a while. Sit or something." He shuts his laptop in a decisive motion.

You hesitate for an instant before going to sit by him. "Tell me what's going on."

"It's complicated," he says instantly, nearly speaking over you, and something about this is so, so very different; Dave is different. "I don't want to talk about it, I don't know how I even would talk about it, so let's just, let's just, fuck it." He looks at you. "I don't want to talk," he says, with a strange emphasis on each word; you can feel his gaze hot on you.

You have a job to do, though, and you're not known for giving up on things. "I think you're avoiding something," you press. "Something you know is important, but that you're scared to talk about."

"Don't call me scared," he retorts, rapid-fire. "I'm not scared."

"Then say it." This is almost too easy. "What's the problem, Dave?"

"You. You're the problem." Dave looks unpleasantly surprised that he's said this, but you're not really bothered. "I mean, not exactly, it's not you you, it's –"

"It's sort of me?" You can't resist a deadpan.

"Shut up." He looks so tired in that moment. "I feel like I went crazy months ago and this has all
been some kind of hallucination and I'm tied down in a padded room in some crazy people asylum thing."

"It's real," you say softly. "It's all real."

"All of it?" He seems to almost be hoping that you'll give him a good, solid answer that'll put his mind at ease. Has he met you?

"All of it, Dave."

There's a long pause where Dave sets his laptop aside, then he breaches the space between you, resting his hand on your hand, stroking up your arm and cupping your cheek. You feel your face get hot and part of you wants to interrupt, to press him for more details, Ruby's messages in your head, but then he kisses you and it escapes just out of your mental grasp. This kiss is different; Dave is usually scrabbling to maintain his composure when you kiss, but right now he doesn't care at all, and he keeps kissing you and you have no complaints at all. He curls his fingers into your hair at the back of your head and holds it tight and kisses you harder, and you don't know what's happening but your heart is racing and you think you could kiss Dave like this forever.

Something is happening and you both realize it, and it doesn't feel like anyone has a say in it at all. You yank Dave closer when he tries to pull back even just to breathe, and you kiss him fiercely in a way that feels foreign but perfect and necessary, and you can just feel that something in Dave's head breaks after a minute or two. He pulls back and he tugs at the bottom of your shirt.

You can feel you have a strange expression on your face, probably not something that fits the occasion, because you're Rose Lalonde and you were raised by an alien, but it doesn't seem to bother Dave, who pulls off your shirt and gets to touching as much of your bare skin as he can manage.

It isn't as though you haven't been touched before, but never this hungrily; Dave wants you, but his mood feels fragile right now, like one push and he could shatter. You want this, but even if you didn't, you'd probably go along with it.

His hand is up your skirt now, in your panties, and you make a desperate sound into his mouth, near pleading, in what direction you don't know, because he's relentless right now in a way you've never known Dave to be. What is he doing right now? What is he oh god you can't think about that right now, because he's doing things with his fingers and, unbidden, you think of Ruby's message: he loves you.

Dave seems to be enjoying your reaction and he's not giving up at getting exactly what he wants out of you, which as far as you can tell is getting you totally undone, and you seize him into a kiss and groan embarrassingly into it as you come. He kisses you again after, and you realize you're just sitting splayed out on his couch with your panties around your ankles as you start to breathe again.

"Well," you say, comfortably dry, "I'll be going now."

"No," he says, and pulls you to your feet, flush against him; you can feel him hard against you. "Let's go."

You don't know how you could possibly say no. "Yes," you say readily.

He very nearly smiles in a very confusing way, half-happy, half-sad, and guides you to his bedroom.

You and Rose don't talk after the sex, which is good, because there was that stupid PSA about this is your brain on drugs and you completely understand what it's like to feel like your brain is an egg.
frying on a hot pan or some shit. Something awful is stirring up inside of you, and you just want to escape despite your grip around Rose as she nestles against you as you go to sleep.

Your eyes open in purple dreamland in what feels like seconds later, and that jangling that's been going in your head for a week, maybe more, maybe months of slow jangle-fucking-jangle buildup, is at a fever pitch. (You've been missing people you've never met, faces, pesterchum handles you've never seen, memories that can't be real that you know are memories because you can taste sulfur and metal and the sharpness of arctic frost and it makes no sense, perfect sense.) Some escape. Except it's different now, like you shifted a kaleidoscope in your brain and it formed a picture.

For some reason you'd thought that Rose would solve all this, that she would make it make sense. She did, but this was the wrong way. Your stomach churns. You know now.

You remember.

Rose steps into your window, probably flying like goddamn Peter Pan, and you level a look at her, ready to say something smart and scathing or probably not smooth at all because you're too angry to think straight really, but she speaks first. "Something's wrong."

"I just fucked my sister." It takes her off guard. Good. "Who lied to me."

She looks more caught than you've ever seen her. "Dave – "

"It's all real," you say. "All those dreams, they were memories from, from before. But you still kissed me. You still started this, because you can't tell me you didn't know. You were saying all this time – "

"Dave." Rose's tone goes flat. "Listen to me."

"Are you actually going to be real with me because that would be a nice fucking change," you retort, tone even flatter.

"I never lied to you," she says, drawing closer to you. "I told you as much as you could handle."

Your stomach is so tight and awful and it feels like something is trying to escape your abdomen. "I can't handle this," you force out. "I'm awake now and you made this fucking awful, this is on you, Rose, fuck you, because you thought you'd fuck me and then I'd wake up and go 'oh it's fine that I'm in – '" No, you can't say that word, not to her, not right now, maybe not ever, maybe not to anyone if not to her. "You should go."

"Finish what you were going to say." Her eyes are glittering with a strange look you've never seen in them. "You might as well if you're going to send me off like this."

"You don't get to make demands right now," you warn her, not a touch of irony or humor.

"What's the worst that'll happen?" Rose presses. "You hate me now, don't you? Hurt me, Dave." She's needling you, pressing closer into your personal space. "It's the healthy thing to do, to express your emotions."

"Rose," you snap out, pulling back from her as if she's toxic, which she might be. "Just go."

She stands there, unmoving, giving you your space for once. "I want to hear it." Fuck, she knows. She always knows, always has known. "Say what you were going to say."

The words are bitter in your mouth when you force them out, and you know the only reason you're
saying them is to hurt her. "Maybe I loved you. When I thought you were someone else. But now I
know. Who you are, I mean."

Rose stares at you for a moment, then takes two slow steps back. "I see," she says; her voice is
weird, detached, all Lalonde. "I'll go."

"Do that." You don't want to look at her because you know your resolve might break. You turn
away, sit on the bed, and wait for her to go.

"I'll be in touch," she says, words strangely forced out, and flies out the window.

You don't move for a long moment, your head heavy with all the memories and chest tight with
Rose, goddamn Rose. Finally you get into the bed and close your eyes tightly. Everything makes
sense now and you just want to vomit.

You wonder what would have happened if Rose had left you alone, if you had just gone along with
your dad –

Your dad.

The images match up in your brain like some shitty computer program on a cop show. Fuck. Your
dad is that dog-faced asshole. Or a version of the dog-faced asshole. There's no way that he's not.
There's no way you're that lucky.

So that can't be a coincidence. Your head aches, your chest hurts. Rose was raised by the fish bitch,
and you were raised by Jack. No way he doesn't work for her.

You were never getting out of this.

Maybe Rose was right. Maybe you were destined for this. No normal life for people who were
created by a weird machine by some teenager in a different timeline.

"Fuck," bursts out of your mouth, and you turn over in the bed so you can puke off the side if you
need to, because it seems possible. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

Go to sleep, Dave.

You close your eyes tightly, and eventually your breathing slows, though your head spins. You
focus on the mission, on Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff, until your consciousness fades and you dream
about nothing.

When you wake up, you're back at home, and Ruby's setting a cup of coffee down by your bedside.
"Drink," she orders.

"I don't," you start, cramming your shades onto your face.

"We have shit to do," Ruby says, obviously fondly weary. "Barbara Walters is expecting you in
three hours and I have to go to the studio and you need to send a total script of the subliminal
messaging to You-Know-Who."

"Is this a Harry Potter thing?" you ask, relenting to drink the coffee.

She rolls her eyes. "It's a 'your girlfriend' thing," she says.

You lower your mug and don't answer for a moment, feeling Ruby's eyes on you. "I don't have a
girlfriend," you say.
"Whatever you want to call her." Ruby waves it off. "She pestered me just now to ask, don't know why she's not pesterling you. Pull it together, send it to her, then we need to eat some food and go."

Why are you dreading just sending an email? "To the studio?"

"I mean, you don't have to come with me to the studio," she supposes. "I'm three tracks away from finished with the LP. Tony's already been laying down the messaging, so all we need is to leverage your fame to get this album on the right desk and then we're golden."

"I might work on this Barbara Walters thing." Maybe you need to recover. Last night wasn't exactly easy. "And I can try to make those, whatever, connections for you."

Ruby looks a little surprised. "If you find the time."

"All part of the mission." You pause. "Has Tony been sending your messaging to Rose, too?"

She nods. "She's been editing everything for everyone."

Rose sure is great at editing what goes on in people's brains, you figure. "Then I'll send her what I have."

"I made pancakes," Ruby adds. "I'm going to go, but you eat."

You nod, and push yourself out of bed after she leaves the room, snatching your Skaishades up as you go. You kill time eating pancakes and drinking coffee until you have no more excuses. Finally you sit down and send the email, subject line here, script as attachment, no text in the email.

Maybe you talked a big game about actually doing something today, because you stare into space for about ten minutes until an email from Rose pings into your inbox:

Thanks.

You exhale sharply and close out the email. You have to do better than this. You can't let this ache in your chest and hollow out your stomach. You're a Strider.

What would Bro do? The answer isn't that much different than what your 'dad' would've done. Then it hits you. You pull yourself together and open Pesterchum.


TG: question for you

TT: Yes?

This is a nightmare, but you have to ask.

TG: so bro and your mom werent here first this time

TG: as far as i know anyway

TG: were they

TG: where are they

TG: or when maybe
TG: fuck this is stupid

TT: They aren't here yet.

TT: John and Jade were already, obviously.

That all falls into place in your head now, too.

TG: john crocker

TT: Yes.

TG: so where are the others

TT: John's Nana is here and now. So is Jade's grandpa.

TG: and we haven't done anything for them

TT: It's complicated.

TG: always is

TG: anyway where's bro and your mom

TT: Jade told me we'd find out in good time.

TT: I imagine when we need to know, we'll know.

TG: if fish bitch got you and me and john and jade, shouldn't we like

TG: try to stop her getting the others

TT: She already has Jane. Nana.

TG: and were not doing anything there

TT: I have my orders from Jade.

Jade. The memories rush back to you and oh, that hurts.

TG: if you'd told me

TG: i could have known and talked to jade

TG: and now she's dead

TT: I'm sorry. She wanted it to happen naturally for you.

TG: did she

TT: I'm not lying to you, Dave.

TG: anyway i have things to do

TG: im busy as shit

TG: hella important memelord
TG: lord of all memelords
TG: dregs of the internet all bow down to my meme crown like
TG: oh shit here comes our king shower him in cat memes
TG: and id say those arent funny but gift horses and whatever
TG: why are so many phrases about horses anyway
TT: Dave.
TG: i should go
TT: Yes.
TG: bye

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 9:52 --

You swallow it all down and shake it off with a brisk shake of your head, then shut your laptop, cram your SkaiaShades onto your face, and rest back, trying your best to relax even a little.

It's not really working.


TG: hey

You close your eyes. Dealing with your brain right now is like trying to shut a trapdoor filled with creepy puppets. It's not easy and it's disturbing as fuck as you go.

SL: hey what's up

What are you even going to say to her? By the way, last night I slept with Rose, who is my sister, and found out I knew her in a parallel universe.

TG: never mind

SL: i have like ten minutes tell me what's going on

TG: rose and i are over

That's one way to put it.

SL: oh shit

SL: i didn't know sorry

TG: still have to do rebellion stuff

TG: i just cant do it anymore

SL: are you okay?

TG: yeah
SL: would you say that even if you weren't?
TG: probably
SL: go pester kevin
SL: see if we can have a post-interview celebration
TG: you think hed do it
SL: fuck yes
SL: he likes you
SL: probably MOSTLY subliminal messaging but hey
SL: see if you can get some famous people there so i can network
TG: oh this is for you
SL: it's for both of us
SL: now go talk to him
SL: love you
TG: yeah


Something uncomfortable is stirring in your stomach. You just follow orders and ping Kevin Smith.

TG: hey
WG: hey!
TG: ruby wants to have a party tonight for the barbara walters thing
WG: holy shit that's a great idea.
TG: you think
WG: yeah I can work on that.
TG: she wants fancy people there i guess
WG: what like famous people?
WG: people want to meet you so that's not hard.
TG: yeah
WG: famous people and booze it is!
WG: better be ready to drink illegally.
TG: you better fucking believe it

WG: nine at my place.

TG: see you

WG: yeah!

That was easy. Subliminal messaging has at least made you popular.

You kill a few hours scribbling bullshit on MSPaint until Ruby comes back, and you sort of hate the careful expression on her face as she spots you. "Hey," she says. "It's time to go. You should change."

You glance down. "Why?"

"Let me pick something for you," she says, obviously a little amused. "One sec."

"But – " She's already gone. You push yourself up out of the grip of the couch, and barely catch the shirt she throws at you.

"Change," she orders.

You pause. "Right here?"

"Oh, shut up." Ruby glances away, and you take off the shirt that you guess wasn't right for TV and slip on the other. She grabs your hand right away. "Let's go!" There's no point resisting. You go.

She doesn't talk as you drive, until you're about halfway there. "So the party?"

"Nine at Kevin's," you say.

"Good." Ruby sends you a little smile, and it twists your stomach just enough.

The place where you're filming is cozy, couches, warmly lit; you sit patiently as they powder your face just a little, and eye Ruby. "I probably can't fuck this up," you say.

"We'll see." But she's smiling, Jesus Christ, she's smiling.

Barbara Walters walks in, and you find yourself on your feet right away for some reason. She shakes your hand. "Dave Strider," she says. "I've really looked forward to meeting you."

"Good to meet you," you get out, smooth as you can manage.

"Are you ready or do you need a minute?" she asks.

"He's ready," Ruby speaks up.

You eye her. "Right," you say. "Let's do it."

Barbara ushers you to the couch and takes a seat across from you. "I'm really going to try to get to the heart of you and what you do," she informs you. "Just be honest and genuine and I think we'll get something great."


"All right." Barbara nods to the crew, then turns to you, all businesslike but gentle. "Dave Strider,"
she says again. "Internet phenomenon. How did you come to start drawing the sort of comics you do?"

"It just came naturally," you say honestly, with a tinge of irony. "It's who I am."

"Would you say that your comics express the type of person you are?" she goes on.

"Yeah." You don't even hesitate. "One hundred percent."

"Your website has blown up in popularity," Barbara says, leaning in. "I would say the world has begun to accept who you are, Dave. How does that popularity feel?"

"It's new," you settle on.

"The Washington Post Culture Section says it's deserved." She nods to you. "You've seen the article."

"No?" What the fuck?

She accepts a newspaper clipping and offers it to him. "It was in the Post yesterday."


"I believe they say that you're a touchstone of this decade," Barbara says. "Isn't that right?"

It's right there. Holy shit, it's working. "It's only the beginning, Barbara."

She laughs, smiles genuinely, and you have a really good feeling about this shit.

The interview goes on, you do all right, you play it cool. She pats your shoulder after you're done and tells you, "It's going to be great." Ruby catches your arm, and you look past her at a sudden movement; two men have entered the room.

"Holy fuck," you say. "That's ICP."

Ruby follows your gaze. "Oh, those rappers?" She shrugs. "Let's go."

You can't help but be really amused though. "One sec."

"Dave –"

"One sec!" You slip away and go to Jay and Dope right away. "Hey," you say easily.

"Look, it's Strider," Jay says to Dope; they don't seem surprised at all that you came to them. "Remember that comic?"

"We read some of that," Dope agrees.

"Doesn't make sense sometimes," Jay says.

"It doesn't have to," you say. "So you're Barbara Walters interesting now, I guess."

"About time," Dope mutters.

"Hey, we're here, that's the important thing," Jay tells Dope, a little annoyed.

"Keep writing ridiculous shit," you say. "I gotta fucking eat."
"What's ridiculous?" Jay asks Dope.

"Don't know what he's talking about," Dope answers, and a weird expression flashes across his face as he looks at you. "See you 'round, Strider."

"Yeah." You withdraw as coolly as you can, even though Dope rattled you a little. You let Ruby grab your arm.

"What was that?" she asks as she guides you downstairs.

"Who the fuck knows," you say honestly.

You kill time. Ruby orders a ton of food in and you sit in the apartment and eat and watch shitty movies. It reminds you of John, but not in a shitty way, so you relax with her as you watch until it's late enough to get ready.

"I'm not changing again," you warn Ruby.

"Then just wait for me," she says briskly, and heads into her room.

It feels like a long wait, then someone pesters you; you check.

-- motherfuckingMiracles [MM] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 20:30 --

MM: see you soon

TG: whos this

Then another pops in:

-- fuckingMiracles [FM] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 20:31 --

FM: aaaaahahahahahahahaha

TG: what the fuck

"What are you looking at?" Ruby asks.

"I have no fucking clue." You shrug. "Let's go."

The drive is fun; Ruby sings some of her tracks from the album as you go, and you just listen, because her voice is nice and honestly you need nice things right now. You step out of the car as soon as you arrive, and the place is already obviously packed.

"Fuck yes," you say, and grab Ruby's hand to pull her inside.

It's a mess of famous people. The usual beast of insecurity that likes to claw you up before it gets beaten down with irony and repression rears its stupid head for a minute, then you just remind yourself you've got the mind control edge here and start rambling at people.


"Hey," Owen echoes, grinning.

"Holy shit it's Dave Strider," Ben says, and extends his arms out for a hug. "Bring it in. I love your
Somehow both prior Dave and current Dave are both having their minds blown at once. You're hugging Ben Stiller. "Yeah, thanks."

"Owen and I were talking," Ben says immediately after letting you go.

"About you," Owen clarifies.

"About your comics," Ben goes on. "About how we like them."

That seems good? "Yeah," you prompt.

"We think you've really got something, bro," Owen says. "We want in."

Holy fuck. "Like what?"

"Like a movie." Ben looks so amused. "You think?"

Holy fuck. This is amazing. "Yeah," you say immediately.

"We'll produce," Ben informs him. "Help you pull it all together. We figure you want some creative control – "

"Oh yeah," you say instantly, hurried. "Yeah, creative control." If you get the messaging into theatres across the world…

"Great," Owen says, grinning. "Yeah, wow, this is great."

Owen Wilson just said wow about making a movie about SBAHJ. Your life is going great. You finish your fourth drink with them and then hurry off to find Ruby, who is giggling with some guy you don't recognize but who's wearing a really nice suit. "Hey," you say. "We need to talk."

"Sorry," Ruby says, beaming at the guy in the suit, and lets you lead her off into a quiet room. "What's up?"

"Ben Stiller and Owen Wilson want to turn Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff into a movie," you fumble out.

"Holy shit!" she exclaims.

"I know." You're drunk, so you have the excuse to hug her, and she immediately melts into your arms, hugging you close.

There's a pause after the hug is over, where you pull back – but not completely. "Hey Dave," Ruby murmurs. "It's working out."

"Yeah," you mumble back, then press a kiss to her mouth; she tastes like vodka. She seems to have been expecting that – she kisses you back, and you barely think of Rose.

"Wanna make out?" she murmurs against your lips.

This is what you need. This is what can get you through. "Yeah."

She gently pulls you to a couch, then kisses you again and again until it's not just the liquor that has your head spinning. You think you could kiss her forever until there's a loud noise like an amplifier kicking in and a voice over the mic.
"Hey Strider!"

Wait, that's you. "What?" you say against Ruby's lips, then pull back.

"Hey Strider, where the fuck are you?"

"You should go," Ruby says softly.

Reluctantly, you pull yourself up and follow the voice into the main room, where fucking Jay and Dope are standing there with mics looking like the dumbest fucking goth clowns.

"Heard you talking shit today," Jay says.

"Our rhymes are fucking transcendental," Dope answers, not missing a beat.

You're drunk and dumb from a makeout session, so you manage: "You crashed my party."

"We're going to show you a real party," Dope says, and gestures for the DJ behind them to drop the beat.

You stare at them as they start to rap, too unfocused to listen to their shitty lyrics, then about midway through their first 'song' you make a snap decision. You know you're being disrespected. You walk past them, to their amp, to their sound system, and yank them out of the wall.

Jay spits a line into the dead mic, and Dope stops him. "What the fuck," Dope demands of you.

"Get out," you say bluntly.

"This isn't a joke," Jay says, his voice raising.

"You're a joke," comes out of your mouth. "You're not welcome. Get out."

"Get out," Kevin speaks up. "It's my house and you weren't invited."

"Oh fuck off," Dope says, and grabs the amp. "This isn't over, Strider."

Your mouth seems to be going on its own. "You think you can spit but all you do is ramble," you rap out, "when you hear a Strider drop the real shit then you're really gonna scramble, and your rhymes are a joke but nobody laughs so pick up your shit before I'm gonna cut it in half."

All at once everything changes in the room, not visibly, but the tension in the air. "You threatening strife, kid?" Jay says coolly.

What the fuck are you doing? "I'm saying get out."

"This isn't over," Dope repeats, and nudges Jay to grab their cords and go.

Once they're gone, Ruby's behind you. "What did you do?" she whispers.

"I don't know," you say honestly. "I don't know what just happened."

"Jesus," she swears softly, then catches your arm. "Another drink?"

"Fuck yeah." But something about it bothers you. You pass Guy Fieri as you go for another beer. *God, you wonder, is everyone here?*

Looks like everyone's gonna know about this.
"Calmasis." The duchess's voice was thick, luxuriant, with the emotion she tried to restrain. Her hair, curls upon curls, obscured her vision as her head dropped in a half-servile motion. "I would work alongside you if I might bring my people back to life."

"No one works alongside me," Calmasis said. "I have no equals." They lifted their hand. "Kneel, and vow to obey me."

"My people," the duchess repeated; her tone was pressing, exigent. "What about my people?"

"Your people are of no consequence to me either way." They gestured impatiently. "Kneel."

After a protracted pause, the duchess descended to her knees and dropped her head. "Yes," she said. "I am yours."

They plunged their hand into the profoundness of reality and pulled out something simple, luminous; the duchess stared before Calmasis shoved this sphere of beauty into her very soul.

The time has come. Complacency of the Learned is ready for release, and you have so much work to do. The amount of majjyk it takes to do pile of book after pile of book is exhausting, and you find yourself taking naps after every session of channeling eldritch horrors.

Every single time, you drop into Derse. It's not an unwelcome sight. You stay out of sight as best you can, and check on the kids.

They're probably not kids, compared to you, but you feel vaguely maternal towards them. It's complicated. Dave's Bro rests in a clearly defensive position. So far you've never seen him awake, so you're not sure if he is. The new version of your mom – Roxy, you suppose – is the same. You ache for some message from Jade, some way to help them. If they're not to Earth yet, they're likely to land when things get even worse.

Unlike Dave, who seems to be on a high from the success of his comic and his film deal, you are not optimistic.

The urge rises, not for the first time, to go to Prospit. You know there's a way, even though the Condesce has a firm grip on both Prospit and Derse. It would be dangerous, and you'd likely die. But you ache to do something. You just ache, a cold and tender feeling heavy in your chest.

You go to the horrorterrors first, their vaguely visible tentacles waving; you ask, Is there something I need to see?

The answer surprises you: Yes.

You know they've led you wrong before, but between your gut feeling and this encouragement, you feel like it's destined, however foolish that is. You return to Derse and sneak your way to the right transportalizer.

You exhale once you reach Prospit. It's bright, it's warm, but it's not safe. You sneak until you can see Skaia in the distance, then fly over the towerless moon (how strange to see) to see the clouds of Skaia.

An eclipse. Perhaps it was destined after all. You see:
Jack Noir stalking through a room with a determined and ugly expression, knife in hand. The black man realizes he's there too late, with him too close, and fires the gun in his shaking hands – and misses. Jack yanks the gun out of his hand and buries his knife into the man over and over again until blood is soaking through his shirt and into his jeans.

Your mouth is dry. You waste no time; you manage to get back to Derse without being caught, by some miracle, and try to wake.

Your HUBTOPBAND chimes, again, again, and you're awake.

"Good," you murmur, and pull it onto your face. Luke is finally flying back from his trip to update security systems on the people you WITSECed.

-- parisBound [PB] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 7:32 --

PB: Good morning

PB: I'm getting on my flight now

TT: I'll be there to pick you up.

PB: Full release tomorrow right?

TT: Yes.

You've seen violence. You should be able to shake this. The image is still fresh in your head, and you wonder if Jade, in either timeline, had to deal with something like this.

PB: I'll join you?

TT: Would you want to?

PB: If you would have me

TT: It should be worth seeing.

PB: Should we take a trip

PB: Off to the city

PB: After you pick me up

You think of Dave, unbidden; your stomach twists.

TT: Yes.

TT: I think there will be more to see there.

PB: Sounds like fun

TT: Oh yes.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] ceased pestering parisBound [TT] at 7:36 --

You can't sit idle. You drive off to do the last batch of books and posters, your arms aching as you finally finish performing the majjyk, and head home to rest.
You only stir in Derse, for a moment; you see Dave outside of the window, then slip into complete sleep, a small mercy.

For once, you wake rested. You push the thoughts of Dave away (was that wishful thinking, a dream of its own?) and dress, going to the airport in a daze. You finally spot Luke at the gate and wave.

Luke pulls you into a very brief hug, then you start walking to the car. "How have you been doing?"

It feels pointed, though it's probably not. "I'm busy."

"That's not what I asked," he returns.

Does he know? You never told anyone, but gossip tends to go wild in the rebellion circle, and if Dave spoke even a word of it all being over… "I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

"Because things feel different." He taps his head to indicate his abilities. "You seem different."

"I'm obviously using my majjyk but it's not the same as before," you defend immediately.

"I know that," Luke says immediately after you finish speaking, "it's something else."

Are you really going to say this? "I think you're guessing."

"It's assisted guessing." He barely pauses. "Something's wrong."

No matter how deep-seated your upset is, you're still Rose Lalonde. You can't speak it out loud. The truth is too terrible to say. "Yes."

"What is it?" Luke goes on, glancing at you. You busy yourself with getting into the car and starting it, and give a single shake of your head.

There's silence in the car for at least a minute, as you start to leave, then he says it: "Is it Dave?"

You don't answer. Maybe that's answer enough. He nods after a heavy pause. "You two will sort it out."

"I don't know," you say finally.

"Do you really think anything can destroy what the two of you have?" Luke says, skeptical. "Not to sound – over the top, but – "

"It's possible." You nearly have to force it out.

"Oh, Rose." He sighs. "I love you, Rose."

"Yes." You pull yourself together. "And you."

He sends you a fond look, and keeps driving. You slip on your HUBTOPBAND to hide behind it, skimming through rebellion materials you've received from your contacts.


-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering graveTimes [GT] at 10:09 --

TT: I'm concerned.

GT: Yes?
TT: Your gastroresearch document. They seem to be escalating.

GT: Yes.

TT: You have a contact within the organization.

GT: For now. He thinks they might realize there's a mole.

TT: I don't have to tell you to tell him to be careful.

TT: Why didn't you write his name in the document?

GT: Whose?

TT: The one in charge of it all.

There's no response for a long time, and you just stare at the cursor until the message comes:

GT: I wasn't sure you'd believe me.

TT: Luis, I know you're good at your job. I'll believe you.

GT: Do you know who Guy Fieri is?

You blink at the message.

TT: Yes?

GT: It's him.

TT: That clown that promotes for

TT: Oh.

GT: For BCCorp. Yes.

TT: Oh.

GT: He's the center of it all.

TT: Thank you.

Your jaw is clenched. It should be a relief to know, to have an idea of what you're facing, but it seems to be an endless pool of trouble and you'll never even see the bottom.

GT: Let me know what you want to do with this information.

TT: I'm formulating a plan.

GT: Good. I trust you.

TT: And you.


TT: Thank you.

"Isn't there always?" he asks dryly.

"We're almost there." Downtown Manhattan has a glut of shops. *Complacency* is being sold anywhere it's reasonable to sell a book and posters are plastered all over the city; finding a spot in the center of things makes the most sense if you want to see anything.

"Wait, this street is blocked." Luke stops, and tries to see past the car in front of him. "It looks like a protest."

"What?" You immediately roll down the window and stick your head out to see.

The block is crowded with people, some rushing out of a nearby store, holding books aloft in their hands like a gesture of victory. The crowd pushes back against the newcomers, and a scuffle breaks out.

"It's a riot." You know in your gut what this is. You think you saw the covers of those books well enough to know. "I'll be right back, Luke."

Luke stares at you as you unbuckle your seatbelt. "What are you doing?"

"Don't worry," you assure him, and slip out of the car to walk through traffic.

"It's signed! It's signed!" a man is screaming, waving his copy of *Complacency* as you approach. A chorus of shouts, mostly offers of money, follow, and you think, *Maybe I did this a little too well.*

But you know in your heart what to do. You start climbing. There's a fire escape nearby; you climb up onto it and draw upon your majjyk before you raise your voice. "My name is Rose Lalonde!" you shout over the crowd, and even though you should know better, you're astounded as they go near silent.

"Rose!" a woman shouts. "Rose, I'm going to read – "

Shouts break out again. "Rose, this book is so import– "

"*Rose!*"

"You need to go home and read," you shout. "Spread the word!"

"Yeah!" a man screams. "Spread the word!"

Cheers burst through the crowd, and you gesture for them to disperse; the riot quiets and spreads out until the stragglers are finally gone. You climb down and meet Luke on the street.

"What the hell was that?" Luke asks.

"That's what we came here to see." Your face is burning. "It's working, Luke."

"Your book *caused a riot*?"

Your smile is deadpan.

"They might change their minds. They haven't even read it yet."

You don't know if you should allow yourself to feel good about this, when there's so many other awful things going on. You decide for a middle ground. "Let's get coffee."

You're midway through your latte when your HUBTOPBAND chimes.


(--)(er Imperial Condescension [])(IC] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 10:28 --

)(IC: think ur smart dontcha

)(IC: icu baby girl

You can't breathe for a long moment, then pull in a strangled breath, cursing your weakness.

TT: I'm glad you saw.

TT: Why don't you give it a read?

TT: I'm sure you'll enjoy it.

)(IC: ur gonna regret this

TT: We'll see about that.

"What is it?" Luke asks. He sounds alarmed. You need to form words.

"She knows," comes out of your mouth.

He absorbs that, then says, "Good."

He's got a point. That was the point. You breathe.

"Let's drink to that." You raise your coffee cup to his and clink them together. "To the plan."

"To the plan," Luke agrees, "and to the grandmaster."

You're not humble enough to disagree with his assessment.

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November 2005

It's been eight months since Ruby's album dropped and five months since you started the long process of the movie. You're rich. You're famous. And you're still a leader of the rebellion against Crockercorp, which is easy enough to forget some days, like the ones where you go to a record label party with Ruby and drink yourself completely useless.

You wake up at the sound of an alarm clock with a hangover on the floor next to Ruby's bed, which apparently drunk you thought was a comfortable place to rest. "Ugh," you say.

Ruby looks over the side of bed at you after a second. She looks hungover, too. "Most people would have gotten back in bed after falling out," she notes.

"Ruby," you say, in a tone that wouldn't be called whiny by anyone.

"Shut up," she says, and it's unfair that she still has that lilt to her voice after all that whiskey.
"We should make food." You actually mean *please make some food?* and hope she gets the gist.

She doesn't, or chooses not to or something. "Better figure out how to shake this off," Ruby says, "you've got to show a good face today."

Your head hurts. Where are your shades? "What does that mean?"

"We have the convention today. Announcing the cast and everything." She offers your Skaia-shades to you. "I'll make some food."

You fetch them and put them on. "Right." You rub at your eyes under the shades. It looks like you have messages on Pesterchum.

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-- burntPromises [BP] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 7:01 --

BP: Hello Dave.

BP: I have Luis's most recent summaries of Crockercorp activity to be looked over before they're sent to our FBI liaison.

TG: what

BP: I usually send these to Rose.

BP: She's not answering.

BP: Should I go on and send it on her behalf?

TG: rose isnt answering

BP: I wouldn't worry about it.

TG: you wouldnt

BP: Does she find your particular concern for her attractive?

TG: do you find your face useful

TG: because its lame

BP: You seem stupider than usual.

BP: I'll send you and Rose these files. I just need a head's up from one of you.

TG: im not stupid

BP: Of course, Dave.
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-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering burntPromises [BP] at 7:03 --
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Three PDFs land in your inbox. Out of stubbornness, you sit and read each of them. Ruby eventually crawls off her bed and gets you both glasses of water. Eventually you say out loud to her, "Did you know we were still in contact with the FBI?"
"No," Ruby says easily. "But that's the kind of thing someone playing four-dimensional chess would do, isn't it?"

Rose. You pointedly don't sigh.

One document is about the gastroresearch that Crockercorp has been doing on human subjects – ways to dumb humanity down and turn them into cattle using food marketed under the name BCCorp. Another uses a lot of big words that you're only guessing at, but it seems to point at the mutation research that they were doing on human subjects like Luke and John. The last is about the signal itself and includes reference to blueprints discovered during the reign of Generals Dave and Rose, and makes very clear much scientific effort has been put towards building an experimental version.

In short: Mark's still fucking around.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 7:11 --

TG: hey

TG: youre building shit arent you

BP: Yes.

TG: why

BP: I haven't turned anything on if that's your concern.

TG: fine

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering burntPromises [BP] at 7:13 --

You would be angry but why. So far, Rose has been running this operation without you even being aware and nothing bad has happened.

That doesn't actually make you feel better when you think about it too hard. Nothing makes you feel better when it comes to thinking too hard right now, actually, but that's the whiskey. You go back to the PDFs, because that grim General Dave seriousness is gripping you for some reason, then stop.

You message Luis.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering graveTimes [GT] at 7:16 --

TG: guy fieri

GT: Yes.

TG: that cheesy idiot

GT: Yes.

TG: hes in charge of the WHOLE THING

GT: Yes.

TG: are you sure
GT: Yes.
TG: he's everywhere
GT: That's part of the problem.
TG: oh holy fuck

You can deal with this. Alone. You can do this without talking to Rose. A horrible feeling is gripping your stomach and it's not the hangover.

Fuck. You have to do it.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 7:20 --
TG: should i be doing anything about guy fieri
TG: he's at the parties i go to sometimes
TT: I've been assessing this situation for some time.
TT: She's been using him for years. He's completely corrupted.
TT: But he's also… dangerous.
TG: how dangerous can guy fucking fieri be
TT: He personally kills defectors.

Well, that's not comforting.

TG: i can take him down
TT: Don't be stupid.
TT: We agreed we wouldn't strike at direct targets and turn hearts and minds.
TT: Didn't we?
TG: right
TG: thats all i had to say
TT: Dave.
TG: bye

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 7:24 --

You're having a bad day. You drag yourself up to your feet and track down Ruby, who's already cooking breakfast. "Come help me," she suggests.

You slip your arms around her waist from behind her instead, and rest against her. You can feel her smile. "Everything is shitty," you mumble.

"I know," she says quietly. "The world is ending."
"I wish there was a way to just get this over with one way or another." You close your eyes. "You know?"

"I don't know. I like breaks." She touches your hand briefly. "Tell me."

"Uh, fucking Guy Fieri is in charge of introducing alien shit into BCCorp foods," you say, "and we still need to play nice with him at parties. So that's fucking great."

"What about ICP?" Ruby asks.

You tense. "What about them?"

"I have a bad feeling about them," she says, sounding uncertain as she works on making an omelette. "They're rabid about us for no reason."

You pause. "I did sort of piss them off a while ago – "

"Just because they crashed your fucking party," she points out.

She has a point. "What good is a shitty rap group to the fish bitch?" you return.

"I don't know. I just have a feeling."

You press a kiss to her temple. "It's been months since they've fucked with me. Maybe it was just a stupid rich people feud."

"Maybe." Ruby doesn't seem convinced. "Pick your fixings."

You release her, always a little vulnerable after affectionate encounters like that, and play it off cool.

Breakfast is quiet as you both recover from everything, her from the hangover, you from that and everything else, then you both get ready and head to the car.

Ruby sings along with the radio as you go, wind in her hair, but your mind is somewhere else entirely. You're on the last floor of BCCorp New York, blade to blade with John, helpless, always helpless.

After about twenty minutes, the words break through your anxiety to your mouth. "What if the messaging isn't enough?"

"Dave," Ruby starts.

"It's not happening yet," you press on. "Nothing's happening."

"We're fighting against someone a lot more powerful than us," she reminds you. "No one said it would be easy."

"What the fuck am I doing?" you retort. "I'm going to a comic convention."

"You're playing the role that history needs you to play right now." Ruby shakes her head firmly. "You're not General Dave, General Dave got people killed – "

"Right." You cram the rest of the words trying to escape your mouth down. "Comic convention."

"Comic convention," she agrees. "Just be yourself."

You can do that. Maybe.
As you step out of the car, cameras flash; you glance at Ruby, who's rolling her eyes. She ushers you away from the paparazzi and into the building. You just follow her – in general, Ruby has a better idea of what's going on with this stupid shit than you do – and finally relax as you see Owen and Ben in a back room waiting for the panel.

"Hey bro," Owen says immediately, giving you a man hug.

"Hey," you echo, and give Ben a man hug too. "Donald here yet?"

"Any minute," Ben says. "You excited, man?"

"A little." It's not a lie. Part of you realizes it's ridiculous to make a movie out of SBAHJ, but you're proud anyway. "Does the weird part of being famous ever wear off?" you ask them.

"Not really," Owen says with a shrug. "Bottled water?"

Your life's just destined to be weird in every sphere then. "Sure."

You catch the bottle, and then Donald Glover walks through the door. You had no expectations on casting, didn't necessarily want someone big and famous or unknown, either way, but Donald was just it. You knew you needed him, and it's time to announce it. "Hey," you greet him.

"Uh, hey." Donald glances between the three of them. "So. Owen Wilson. Ben Stiller."

"It's weird, isn't it?" you ask rhetorically.

"Yeah." Donald offers his hand to both of them to shake. "Looks like we're doing this."

"It's time," Ruby speaks up after conferring with a convention worker.

Time to put on Famous Dave's face again. You stride ahead first, the others behind you, and settle in at your marked place on the table. Cameras flash; you know you have to speak. "So hey," comes out of your mouth. "We have a Geromy."

The cameras flash again, clearly directed at Donald, whose expression is halfway between a grin and utter confusion.

"Meet Donald Glover!" Ben declares.

"Hey," Donald says into the mic. "Any questions?"

Most of the questions are for Donald, some for you. It looks like you're winding up, then you hear, "Fuck Strider!" from the back.

Another voice: "Strider's a traitor!"

You squint; teenagers in black and white facepaint are being hauled off by convention security before you can even completely react.

"Think we're done here," you say, abruptly standing, and the others follow you off the stage.

Ruby's there right away. "What was that?" she whispers.

"Juggalos." You have a bad feeling about this, and you want to drag her off and talk to her about it but you're being pestered. You pause, but open it.
TT: That man you cast as Geromy.

TG: yeah

TT: Find someone else.

TG: What?

TT: I'm telling you to find someone else.

You exhale sharply and gather yourself.

TG: why would i do that

TT: Because he's not going to be safe.

TG: what does that mean

TT: Exactly what I said, Dave.

TG: no one is safe

TT: They'll kill him.

TT: You have to listen to me.

TG: ill talk to him

TT: That's not enough.

TG: what is this about

TT: I saw it in the clouds of Skaia.

TG: why did you

TG: do you realize how fucking dangerous that is

TT: I know.

TG: look

TG: if its in the clouds of skaia or whatever

TG: then theres nothing i can do

TG: you know jade was always right when she looked at that shit

TG: so i might as well make my fucking movie

TT: Dave, do you not see how callous that is?

TG: do you realize what this movie could do

TT: And it doesn't bother you because now you know he's going to die.
When she puts it that way.

TG: if theres nothing i can do to save him at least i can make his death worthwhile
TG: if they want to kill him it means he did something big right
TT: I see.
TG: dont judge me
TT: I suppose I can't.
TG: bye
TT: Dave.
TG: bye

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 16:16 --

You have to remind yourself to breathe as you stare through your now blank shades. Ruby touches your shoulders.

"Hey," she says. "Everything's fine."

You glance at Donald, who's joking and laughing with Ben and Owen. It's not fine. But no one can know, no one would understand the cosmic bullshit. "Let's daydrink."

"Yeah." She offers a smile. "Let's get the boys and go."

"Hey," you call over. "Want to get drunk as hell?"

"Sure," Owen says, grinning.

"You're not old enough to drink," Donald points out.

"He's famous," Ben says breezily. "Let's go."

"Sign some autographs on the way," you suggest.

"What, for free?" Owen jokes.

"Just a few," Ben agrees.

It doesn't take too long to get back out of the convention and pile into your car. Maybe you can settle the horrible buzz in your brain with another party. Maybe you can ignore the signs that everything's sinking deeper.

Maybe you can ignore the facepainted idiots lurking and leering on the corner as you go.

Two weeks after *Complacency of the Learned* is released, you've made a decision. Dave can be in the public eye; you'll be the recluse. You deny all requests for press, allowing the video of that one tiny speech at the riot to be the face of Rose Lalonde for all those reading hundreds of pages over and over ravenously.

If you and Dave were on good terms, you'd ask him whether he ever felt it strange to be so praised
for something you know was boosted by mind control of a sort. But you're not, so you don't.

You waste no time getting to work again, comforted by Luke's quiet presence behind you on the couch as you write. He speaks about an hour and a half into your writing. "FBI connected to the encrypted line."

"Oh?" You move to your HUBTOPBAND and slip it on.

What do you know about the group called juggalos?

It's not the question you were expecting to get.

I believe they are devoted fans of a rap group.

There's a long pause before the next response.

We've been tracking them as a gang for some time. We're concerned about the behavior we've seen from them in the last year or so.

All right, so you're going to have to ask. What does this have to do with BCCorp?

The response is near instant. That's what we want you to find out. All we know is that they're targeting Dave Strider.

That changes things. You exhale. Then I'll get my people on it.

You won't be alone. Keep in touch.

You close your eyes for a moment, then finally type, Yes. You close the connection and look back to Luke. "More trouble."


"Ilya and Katrina." You haven't decided yet if this is a bad idea. "They need to infiltrate the ICP fanbase."

He pauses. "The what?"

"FBI thinks they might be Crockercorp-related." Should you ask Dave? Maybe you should ask Dave. You just hate his short, choppy, terse responses. "So we need someone in there."


Why is something so vague rattling you? Dave. Of course. You wish there was some way to cut all those feelings out of yourself, but you'll have to live with them forever. You try to write, but only manage five minutes before you get pestered.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 13:01 --

TG: got something for you

You hate how your hopes rise each time he contacts you, even as he's all businesslike.

TT: Yes.

TG: someone contacted me
TG: wanted to meet
TG: think it might be a trap
TT: Tell me more.
TG: some political guy named Kintzler
TT: He runs a thinktank. I've read his work.
TG: great
TG: anyway he wants to meet both of us
TT: I see.
TT: Are you just suspicious or do you really think we ought to be worried?
TG: ill send him your way
TG: maybe you can figure him out
TG: i dont know why shed trap us with a political guy but
TT: You've been suspicious of everyone we've ever brought on, you know.
TG: yeah
TT: Go on and send him.
TG: we can meet him separately

You breathe out, maybe a little shaky.

TT: Dave.
TG: might be safer
TG: ill go first
TT: This is business.
TT: We can meet him together. That's safer for both of us.
TG: i guess
TG: sending him to you

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 13:05 --

That's some progress.

-- righteousEnd [RE] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 13:05 --

RE: Hello.
TT: Hello. Are you Mr. Kintzler?
RE: Dr. Will Kintzler, yes.

TT: I see. Dave mentioned you had some interest in us.

TT: May I ask how you came to be aware of us?

RE: I can explain everything when we meet.

TT: I'm afraid I'm not wholly comfortable with that idea.

RE: I can understand that. However, I'd rather not explain all of this over a line that could be intercepted.

TT: I see.

RE: What can I offer to reassure you?


RE: Yes, this is a limited means.

RE: I can send you something over email.

You sigh, and rub your temples. It's not as though the batterwitch doesn't know your email address.

TT: Yes.

TT: rlalonde@sbahjcomic.com

RE: Sending.

An email pings into your inbox from a Will Kintzler at ThinkFree. You open it; there's a PDF attached, and you open it to see an official Crockercorp document with a picture of Dave and a flurry of information about him, including his Pesterchum handle. You're drenched in fear in an instant before you can shake it off.

TT: Where did you get this?

RE: That's only the beginning.

RE: I promise I am not a Crockercorp spy.

RE: I'm the furthest thing.

RE: I'm in Jersey. Meet me at the SunnyDay Motel in Newark around eight.

TT: We'll see you there.


It's not exactly a snap decision, but Kintzler clearly has something to share, and you need as many allies as you can get.


TT: We're going.
TG: we are
TT: Yes.
TG: fine when
TT: SunnyDay Motel in Newark, eight PM.
TG: guess ill see you
TT: Yes.


Your stomach wrenches, and you sit back heavily; you realize Luke is watching you, and glance back.

"Tell me," he suggests. You ache at his kindness, always there, and for a split second wish you could free him from this poor excuse for a life.

"We may have a new contact," you say, once you shake all the sentimentality off. "We're going to meet him in Newark."

Luke takes it in stride. "When?"

"Eight tonight." You make yourself breathe normally. "I'll be meeting Dave there."

He sighs. "I'll come as backup in case anything goes sideways," he says. "I know the two of you can handle yourselves, but – "

"But it can't hurt," you finish. "I get it."

"We should have some dinner before we go." He stands. "I'll make something, you write."

"Thanks." You open your document again. You can hear Luke moving around, gathering supplies, cooking, but all you do is stare at the cursor as it blinks.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering uranianumbra [UU] at 18:20 --

TT: UU?

There's no response. Sometimes there isn't. You try not to think too hard about that.


The two of you eat in silence, and the car ride to Newark is punctuated by the rattling tones of the political talk radio Luke flips on in lieu of any discussion. By the time you get to the motel, your nerves have only slightly cooled. Dave's sitting on the hood of his car with Ruby, obviously idly chatting. You hesitate, then feel Luke's hand on your shoulder.

"Let's go," he suggests. That's all you needed. You stride up to Dave and Ruby with Luke a step behind you.

"Hey," Dave greets you first, utterly casual.
"Evening," Ruby offers. "You brought backup too?"


"So which room?" you ask, doing your best to match Dave's energy and stop watching him.

"I'm waiting for a response." Dave pauses, and checks his Skaishades. "36."

You glance up at the second floor, marked with the thirties. "Let's go."

The four of you walk in silence up the steps, and split as you reach the door. "He'll likely only want us in there," you say, "so – "

"I think we assumed we'd be out here," Luke says wryly.

"Right?" Ruby's smiling for some reason.

Dave just knocks, pointedly not looking at you. The door opens after a pause, and a forty-something man with glasses opens the door. "Evening," he says. "I'm Dr. Kintzler. Come in, Dave, Rose."

"Our friends are going to wait outside," you mention. "If that's all right with you."

"Oh, I suppose," Kintzler says, and looks to Dave. "Come on in."

You go inside first, eyeing Dave until he enters, and Kintzler pulls the door shut behind you. "Right," Kintzler says. "I'm sure you have questions."

"You have Crockercorp documents," Dave says. "Ones we've never seen."

"And I imagine you've seen a lot, considering how scared they are of you," Kintzler says, with a faint smile. "Not bad for a couple of teenagers."

"Yes, we've seen a lot," you agree. "But where did you get those documents?"

Kintzler muses on that. "I have a whistleblower in the organization. Someone well-placed, whose identity I have no intention of revealing. We're waiting until the right time to drop the information we have."

You glance at Dave. "We've been compiling data," you say. "I don't think it's safe for you to continue – "

Kintzler laughs. "You're suggesting it's safer for you to do so?"

"Sort of, yeah," Dave says, surprising you. "If you give us what you have, we'll handle the rest."

"Wait, are you serious?" Kintzler rubs a hand over his face. "You can't just – what are you going to do with it?"

"We have a plan," you cut in. "And you could well ruin it with yours."

"What's your plan?" Kintzler asks.

Dave glances to you, eyebrows raised. "Don't think we're going to tell you," he says.

"I don't think so," you have to agree.

"Then I'll just carry on," Kintzler says, with a shrug. "Wait for my chance."
"Wait, wait, wait." You raise your hand to stop the conversation. "Prove to us that you're not a Crocker spy."

Kintzler pauses. "Let me show you." He reaches into his pocket for a pocket knife, and your mind races to the conclusion right before he cuts into his fingertip and reveals a dot of blue blood.

"Blue," Dave says, tone muted. "That's new."

"My mother was experimented on by Crockercorp before I was born," Kintzler says, tone almost too light for the conversation. "They all thought she was insane because of her story, so when I was a young child they locked her up in an asylum. She died there. But she bled blue, so do I, and so did my daughter."

You speak up immediately. "Have you noticed any other effects?"

"They put up that propaganda signal in the nineties," Kintzler takes a seat on the bed. "I hear her, I hear them. Every day. Everywhere."

"And no one else does," you finish.

"Except us." Dave pauses. "Sometimes."

"So you have to do something," Kintzler supposes. "But you can't put everyone at risk until you have something... very, very good to prove your case."

"The propaganda signal means no one's going to hear you no matter what proof you have, Dr. Kintzler," you say, to the point.

"I imagine that's part of your plan?" He looks expectant.

Dave sighs. "Yes," he says. "It's... an ongoing thing."

"How ongoing?" Kintzler presses him. "How long is it going to take?"

"Long," you say bluntly. "What's the rush?"

Kintzler throws his hands up. "We're living under tyrannical rule, and you're asking 'what's the rush'?"

You shake your head. "We're going to connect you with one of our people," you say. "Luis Angeles. He's in charge of our information center. If you want to help, talk to him."

"And just wait for your signal to do a damn thing," Kintzler says, a touch sarcastic.

"Yeah," Dave says, shrugging.

Kintzler rubs the bridge of his nose. "Why should any of us trust you with the fate of the world?"

"Because they're scared of us," you remind him. "When has Crockercorp ever been scared of anyone?"

Kintzler visibly backs down at that. "Yes," he agrees.

"So we'll pass your information on to Luis," you finish. "And the two of you can work out the rest. Feel free to talk to me."
"So you're not going to tell me your plan," Kintzler checks.

"No," Dave says easily.

"I see." Kintzler eyes him. "All right. Anything else I should know?"

"Be careful," you offer.

Kintzler's expression goes even more bemused. "I'm careful."

"More careful than that," Dave interjects. "This shit is dangerous."

"I get that," Kintzler starts, "but – "

"No," Dave's tone is weary, now. "We should hook you up with a safe property."

Kintzler sighs harshly. "I'm fine where I – "

"No," Dave repeats. "If we include you, if you know who our people are, you have to be safe or you could give them up under fucking torture. So no, we're going to make sure you're as safe as we can get you."

You glance at Kintzler. "He's right," you say.

"Relocate me then." Kintzler doesn't seem to be thrilled that the two of you are telling him what to do. "Anything else?"

"Move where we give you, talk to Luis, be prepared to go ahead with the plan when we say." Dave shrugs. "Drop him a key and an address, right?" he asks you.

"That was the plan." You raise your eyebrows at Kintzler. "Dr. Kintzler, it was a pleasure."

"I wish I could say the same," Kintzler says.

"Rebellion against an alien invasion isn't fun," Dave says. "Sorry."

Kintzler's eyebrows shoot up. "Alien?"

It looks like some of the details have slipped past this reporter, or whatever he is. "Yes. She's an alien."

"That's absurd," Kintzler says, visibly beside himself at the very idea.

"Look, she's an alien, they want to make us like her aliens, it's a whole insane thing, just get used to it," Dave rattles off, obviously annoyed in his usual flat way. "If you're lucky, blue blood is the weirdest thing you'll see."

He's putting it together now, though. "So that language – "

Ah, he's seen the Alternian then. "Is alien, yes," you say.

Kintzler sighs; it's written all over his face that this news is too much for him. "All right."

"Wait for us to drop you access to a new place," Dave says. "I think that's the rest of it though."

You wish Dave would look at you, or joke, or something. "I think so. Thank you for your time and help, Dr. Kintzler."
"Yeah," Kintzler says, and exhales sharply. "I'll wait."

Dave nods, and heads out of the hotel room; you glance at Kintzler before turning to follow. Dave's already caught Ruby's arm to guide her off, and you barely look to Luke before following. "Dave," you try.

"You know what you need to do, right?" Dave answers lightly, not looking at you.

"I do." You manage to catch up right behind him and Ruby as they reach the stairs. "There's something you need to know."

"What?" Dave is focused on playing it cool.

"The juggalos." It's so stupid, why is everything so stupid? "The FBI says they're targeting you."

Dave pauses and turns halfway down the stairs. "I mean, I see them," he says, some of the cool veneer slipping away from his tone and expression. "Aren't they all over the place?"

"The FBI seems to think otherwise." You hold his gaze. "So be careful."

The corner of his mouth flicks up. "I'm not going to get killed by a juggalo, Rose."

"Keep an eye out, that's all I mean," you say. "If things change, if there are more of them – let me know."

"Yeah," Dave says, and glances to Ruby. "We can do that."

You struggle for just a moment with what to say, but then settle on the simplest conclusion. "I think that's it."

"Good." Dave looks at you for a measured second or so, then turns to Ruby. "Let's go."

"They know we're flying out tomorrow, right?" Ruby asks Dave.

"What?" comes out of your mouth before you can help it.

Dave has his you must be kidding me expression on. "We're going to Austin," he says. "Should be there for about a year while we get the movie going and filmed and all that shit."


He's just a FENESTRATED WINDOW away. If he changes his mind. If things get better. You knew the two of you had different paths, anyway. "Austin," you echo. "Have fun back at home."

"Somehow I doubt I'll run into my dad," Dave says, with an edge of irony. "It'll be fine."

"Interesting that's where your mind goes," you say without thinking, but stick to it as he looks at you. "Have you thought about your father recently?"

"It's time to go," Dave says to Ruby, as though you said nothing, and catches her hand to lead her off. Ruby glances back at you, half-apologetic, but turns back to chatter with Dave as they go.

Luke touches your shoulder. "Let's go," he suggests, and you follow him back to the car. The trip is silent; he seems to know better than to engage with you at the moment. You finally pull up Pesterchum again.
TT: I hope you're all right, UU.

No response after ten minutes.

You resent yourself for a moment as it occurs to you; you're leaning entirely too hard on others. It's time to stand on your own.

*What good are you if you need monsters or men to help you every step of the way?*

You feel something in your stomach sink. Even after you're home and comfortable in front of your laptop with Complacency in front of you, it doesn't rise again.

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**March 2006**

You see them all the time now. When the paparazzi take pictures of you out in Austin, they usually catch one of the bastards in the frame. Of all the things you could've expected out of the batterwitch conspiracy, juggalos up in your business wasn't one of them.

The two of you are driving when Ruby says, "Don't look." Naturally, you do; with the eye of someone who's incredibly paranoid, you spot the car following you right away. "I told you not to look," she says with a sigh.

"Anyway," you say, pushing past that, "you think it's them?"

"They're wearing that stupid facepaint," she says. Fuck, she sounds tired. Today is going to be a shitty day. "Fuck 'em."

"Yeah." But you barely pause. "Wait."

"No," Ruby says instantly. "Whatever you're thinking, no."

"What if we, you know…" You gesture. "Cut to the chase or whatever?"

"You mean strife. And no, we're not starting strife with some rap-obsessed morons," she says bluntly. "Forget it."

"So what the fuck do we do?" You're going to remain cool about this. You're *Dave Strider*. "Just – "

"Ignore them." Ruby shrugs at you. "Maybe."

"No." She huffs a little, and you add, "No strife, but I'm doing something."

You're so lucky she isn't your girlfriend, because if you were actually dating, that look on her face would be bad news. "Like what?"

"Like calling out their leaders in front of any camera I can find," you say. "Fuck it. They want strife – "

"*Dave –*"

"They'll get it," you finish, definitely calm and not irritated.

"All right, let's think this through," Ruby says, keeping her eyes firmly trained on the road and away
from you. "The FBI thinks this has to do with the batterwitch, right?"

"Don't remember them saying that exactly." You can see where this is going.

She takes a breath before she responds; you're definitely annoying her right now, but you're having a hard time stopping being an idiot right now. "They contact her for batterwitch shit. They contacted her about this. It follows and you know it."

"Fine," you say, as though it was your idea to carry on the topic this way. "Yeah, it's batterwitch-related, so…"

"So you're not going to start strife with Insane Clown Posse," Ruby finishes.

"Well," you start with your best casual tone, but she gestures impatiently at you.

"I'm not watching you die because you fell for a scare campaign by that fish bitch. No."

You glance out the window. "I need to do something," you say, not exactly conceding the point.

"I know I can't talk you out of starting shit." She sounds so tired of this conversation. "I just want to make sure you play it smart."

Well, all you have is a desire to kick the shit out of anyone who chooses to put that stupid facepaint on, and you can't really argue that that's a smart impulse. "So what's your idea."

"I mean, beauty of the internet," she says. "It's the most public place you can get and things spread like wildfire. One video drops from a famous person, you've got more people than the population of New York metro watching in a hot minute."

There's a long silence in the car as you absorb that, then you say, "Yeah, I can do that."

Ruby glances at you and flashes a quick smile, the one you know is the would you take a look at this shitshow we're in smile, and you raise your eyebrows and sit back. "Things are going to get loud," she says.

"Things have been loud for two years," you return. "Whatever."

"Whatever," she echoes. "Jesus Christ."

"Yeah," you say, just a touch of irony in your tone.

You're a few months into shooting the movie. Deep down you know that you could film any shit and put the message underneath and it'd do well, but, stupidly, you have a vision, and a fuckton of creative control. Days on set and in the studio are long, but more days than not you make it out somewhere doing something stupid with Ben, Owen, and Donald.

Donald ushers you out of the cab you both took back from the party, and you glance at the clock once you're back in the apartment – it's one, and you have no desire to sleep. You think better of wandering the streets of Austin to call back to some long-dead part of old, pre-Rose Dave Strider, at least while this drunk, and instead you open the document that opens up around this time on your laptop.

Last week's unsent messages to Rose look like this:

hey
rubys album is kicking ass
charts and gold records and shit
you dont listen to music so you probably didnt hear
uh
also
ruby and i arent actually a thing
i mean we are but we arent

hey
i dreamed about karkat last night
he was losing his shit about us being the last hope against fish bitch
its stopped being memories for a while now
just sampling from them kinda
probably my brain puking up a warning or some shit
anyway

You glance up at the bedroom, where you're sure Ruby is asleep but not sure enough, and start typing.

hey
you really think donald is going to die
i dont know if we can save people if you see it in those fucking clouds
but i hope we can do something
innocent people shouldnt die in this whole thing
it should be you or me and you know it
so im trying
im going to do my best ok
im not giving up

You save it, close it, and lay back on the couch. You're going through the usual struggle of whether or not to fuck it all up by contacting her, but finally drift off to sleep, until you hear Ruby softly say, "Hey."

You blink awake. "Hey."

"It's ten," she says. "I thought I'd give you some time to recover."


"Yeah you do," she agrees, amused, and gestures you off. "There's leftover breakfast once you're done!"

"Kay." You cram breakfast into your face after, still stuck in your head. Finally she tilts her head to get your attention. "What?" you ask.

"You're quiet."

You pause. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." She shrugs. "Just thought I'd say."

"Yeah," you repeat, and check your Skaiashade.

-- fuckingMagnets [FM] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 10:08 --
FM: hey dumbass

Oh it's this tool again.

TG: you're boring

TG: i hope you know that

FM: go fuck yourself

FM: you're a disgrace

TG: yeah i bet everyone whos related to you isnt horribly embarrassed by it or something

FM: just wait until it all goes down

FM: you're gonna fucking beg to make the right choice

TG: look you stupid fucking juggalos need to mind your own business

TG: im just making movies and comics thats it

FM: i'm not stupid

TG: wheres your dumbass friend

TG: i havent gotten a dumb fucking message for the past three days

TG: my iq started going up

TG: im reading foucault and shit

FM: don't pretend you know who foucault is

TG: do you

FM: that's not the point

TG: whats the point

TG: is there ever a point with you

FM: the point's gonna be embedded in your skull if you're not careful

FM: you dumb son of a bitch

TG: oh im so fucking scared

FM: you should be

You get another message. You check it. Oh great.

-- motherfuckingMiracles [MM] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 10:10 --

MM: hey fucker
TG: im roasting your friend in the other window
TG: hes got an apple in his mouth
TG: turning him over that thing that goes over a fire
TG: having a beer, talking about life
TG: man things
TG: while dumbfucks roast over the fire of my words and shit
TG: spit
TG: its called a spit
TG: i know that
MM: you talk too much
TG: yeah i know
MM: i can't wait to watch you die
TG: oh what
TG: youre going to kill me
TG: im terrified
TG: try me asshole

"What the hell are you doing over there?" Ruby asks.
You don't have a good answer for that. "Uh."

"You're typing a lot," she goes on.

"Yeah," you agree. She doesn't know about the juggalo trolls. You've figured it's for the best if you keep this specific way of blowing off steam secret. Oh, here he goes again.

MM: that's it
MM: i'm fucking you up
MM: tonight
MM: i'm gonna find you and fuck you up
TG: dont you need to contact the brains of the outfit first
TG: using that term lightly as hell
TG: lightly as fucking puffy clouds
MM: oh fuck off
TG: you first

MM: watch yourself strider

Another message.

FM: don't listen to him

TG: too late im shaking in my shoes

TG: hes gonna kill me help help

FM: oh fuck off

TG: and you wonder why i dont take your shit seriously

FM: maybe i'll let him go

FM: you'll regret it

TG: what are you going to do throw shitty cds at me

FM: wish you knew who you were talking to

TG: then tell me

FM: sorry kid

FM: not the time yet

Jesus Christ, both of them need to shut up.

MM: it's not time yet or i'd skin you alive

TG: oh no

TG: youre gonna skin me

TG: someone please helpppppp

MM: you're an asshole

TG: yeah probably

FM: watch yourself

FM: we're watching you

FM: and that girl of yours

FM: a juggalette tattoo would look great on that… perfect skin

You snap.

TG: leave her out of it

FM: aaaaahahahaha
FM: oh did we strike a nerve?
TG: she has nothing to do with this
FM: bullshit
FM: we know better
FM: we know she's in on it
FM: and we'll roast her ass in front of you before it all burns down
TG: eat shit

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering fuckingMagnets [FM] at 10:15 --

You probably could've come up with a better response than that, but you're really fucking angry and you're not doing a great job of holding it back. "Jesus Christ," Ruby says, once you stop typing. "What was that?"

Now you're in trouble, because you didn't exactly promise not to start shit with juggalos, but it was kind of implied, and now you just started shit with juggalos and they threatened her. "Nothing," you say.

She throws her hands up. "Are you serious?"

"Nothing," you repeat.

"You're a dumbass," she says. "Fine, don't tell me. Is it Rose?"

You don't react visibly. "No."

"Because if it's Rose –"

"It's not Rose." What can you even say? "I just need to figure this shit out."

Ruby sighs. "Fine. I'll pick you up from the set?"

"Yeah." You straighten. "I should go."

"Yeah." She's half-looking at you, and you hurriedly glance away, not wanting to start anything. "Take care, Dave," she adds. "Don't do anything stupid."

"Saving that for later," you say, and head off to set.

Tony's working the subliminal messaging into the film already; you drop off a coffee for him as he works in his trailer and look in on the scene they're filming.

"It'll look better with special effects," Kevin says to you from his spot in the director's chair.

"Yeah," you agree.

"How long is this going to take?" Ben calls from his spot at the top of the stairs.

"Trust the process," Kevin calls back.

"Trust the process, man," Owen calls.
It's a long day on set, but craft services always brings good shit to eat, and you sneak away before anyone can try to get you to do something social. You're not good at making excuses; something stupid always comes out of your mouth instead. Ruby's there to pick you up, and the two of you make your way home.

Things are going to be awkward unless you admit to things, aren't they? "Thanks."

She sends you a look, obviously thinks about it, then says, "Are you going to tell me or not?"

No point lying. "Probably not."

"Is it bad?" Ruby goes on, tone kind of neutral.

"I don't know if I'd say bad —"

She cuts you off. "Is it something I need to know?"

Fine. "They might be looking at you, too."

Ruby visibly relaxes. "I figured that."

"I mean, they might have said something about that," you fumble out.

"I thought it was something really bad by the way you were acting," she says. "Jesus Christ, don't scare me like that."

"So you're not worried." Sometimes you can't figure her out.

"I'm not more worried than I was before, no."

"Okay." You give up on it. "So, call 'em out."

"Go with your gut," Ruby says. "You're decent at improvising."

"I'll take decent." You watch the upcoming streetcorner, where shadowed people are watching your car go. "Let's fuck some shit up."

You don't have your laptop in front of you, so you write the messages in your head instead.

hey
looks like im pissing icp off today
cant just let em think they can pull whatever they want
fuck them sideways
dont worry i got this

You get home, you straighten your clothes, and you scribble on a piece of paper as you wait for Ruby to set up the video.

Here goes.

"I got a message for the juggalos and the juggalettes who think they know what's up," you say. "I got a message for anyone who thinks they can talk shit and start shit just because they have a fanbase who's fucked in the head and'll listen to anything you goddamn say." You hold up the picture with the juggalo mascot on it. "I ain't scared of clowns." You rip it in half, slowly, and toss the pieces away. "That's it. Peace."
Ruby exhales after lowering the camera, then immediately goes to upload it. "Let's do it."

You pick up the pieces of paper and toss them hurriedly, not wanting a reminder, then pour yourself a drink. Ruby sits next to you with a drink of your own, and it's only about ten minutes before you get pestered.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 20:32 --

TT: Why did you do that?

TG: only thing to do

TT: Dave.

TG: i got it handled

TT: If you say so.

TG: yeah

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 20:34 --

It hurts. It only hurts for a second, maybe two, but it hurts.

A few days in the future...

A FLAVOR PRIEST is having problems with his subordinates.

FM: mr. fieri, we can't just let him talk shit like that

FM: they'll think we're weak out there

MM: he's right they're laughing at us

The PRIEST sighs.

FF: No one is laughing at you, man.

FM: have you looked at the comments on that video??

MM: people talking shit

FM: disrespect

FF: You talk about respect, Dope.

FF: Respect the plan.

FM: we could kill him NOW

FM: keep him from causing problems later

FF: Do you respect her, Dope?

FM: of course
MM: yeah always
FM: our lady reigns supreme
MM: fuck yeah
FF: Then trust the plan.
MM: so we really can't do anything
FF: No.
FM: can we kill the girlfriend???
MM: yeah let us kill the girlfriend
FF: I don't really care what you do with the girlfriend.
FM: oh shit
MM: awesome
FF: But you aren't going to kill Strider.
MM: uh
MM: he'll def strife if we kill the girl
FM: well yeah
MM: and we can't kill him
FM: yeah
MM: so we kill her and ignore him?
FM: guess so

He smacks a hand to his forehead. He's surrounded by morons.

FF: Figure it out.

FF: You have a commercial to do. Don't forget to go to NBC tomorrow.

MM: got it

FM: thanks boss

FF: Anytime, Dope.

There's always paperwork scattered across his desk. He takes the time to sort things out; grant requests, results from experiments, casualty counts, into nice neat piles. He starts with the results. He grins, he laughs.

Intelligence evaluations dropping across the board. They're beautiful.

A message pings into his Nyxshades.
The priest smirks.

FF: Things are looking great.

)IC: it moves so fuckin slow

FF: Yeah.

)IC: worth it

FF: Oh yeah.

He doesn't know if he can dare ask.

FF: Can I see you soon?

)IC: aw u miss me?

FF: I'm just wondering.

)IC: soon babe

)IC: keep an eye on the sky

FF: Always do.

)IC: good boy

The priest turns the plaque on his desk towards him, and dreams of a day when he'll be known for more than flavors and frosted tips.

November 2006

A gentle chime wakes you. You drift awake with grimdark on your tongue, midphrase, and roll over immediately to grab your HUBTOPBAND.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 8:32 --

TG: i was thinking
TG: about the first time

Wow. He's talking to you.

TT: Yes.

TG: are they all gone

TG: i know john and jade are dead

TG: but the others

TT: The trolls?

TG: yeah

TG: i mean shes here right

TG: batterwitch i mean

TG: what about the others

TT: The Reckoning seems to have destroyed the trolls' homeworld in its previous incarnation.

TT: The ones we knew, who made it to the Medium, would not have survived the Scratch were they in the previous universe.

TG: how do you know that

TT: I just do, Dave.

TG: anyway

TG: theres no way to know

TT: No.

TT: What is this about?

TG: its nothing

TT: Dave.

TT: Please.

TG: so the plan is

TG: messaging

TG: everywhere

TG: get people to back us

TG: knock down the signal

TG: win
TG: right
TT: Something like that.
TG: fuck
TT: What?
TG: nevermind
TG: bye
TT: Dave.
TG: i cant
TT: You can't what?

There's a long pause, and you sink into your bed, overwhelmed despite yourself. Finally he responds.

TG: i cant talk to you
TT: I wish you would.
TG: im not him
TG: i dont want to be
TT: It's a burden.
TG: theyre all gone
TT: I know.

Your eyes get a little moist, but that's all you allow.

TG: rose
TT: Yes, Dave.
TG: come here
TT: Plug in a window.
TG: yeah

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 8:38 --

You get dressed quickly, then plug in a window and jump through. You land in the apartment Dave has in Austin, and glance around before you see him tucked into the corner of the couch, drink in hand.

"Hey," he greets you, sips his drink, and sets it aside.

Your heart jumps into your throat. "Hello, Dave."
Neither of you seems to know what to do, but eventually you gather up the strength to close the
distance between you and Dave and take a seat next to him. He looks at you, then his hand drifts to
your face and lightly touches it before he pulls back hurriedly. Your breath escapes you shakily at the
touch, and you imitate the motion by pressing a hand to his cheek, thumb brushing the corner of his
mouth.

"I just don't know what to do," he says, barely audible.

"Tell me," you say softly. "Tell me everything."

Dave shakes his head, and you slide your hand into his hair, heart keening at the sensation. "Dave,"
you murmur. "I'm here."

"This was a mistake," he says, his voice nearly breaking, still quiet. "You should go."

"No," you say instantly. "No, no, no." You have to do something, so you just kiss him, once, again,
and he falls into each kiss until his hands grip your shoulders and gently push you back.

"Rose." You've never seen that expression on Dave's face. Every look on his face is tempered with a
flatness, a caution, and this one looks like muted defeat. "I can't."

"Why not?" you finally demand. "I need to know. I need to understand why it's so important – "

He gestures broadly. "Because this is bad for us, Rose! It's bad, it's sick, it's – "

"What, because we're ectobiologically related?" You roll your eyes. "Come on, Dave."

"No, it's not just that," Dave says abruptly. "It's you. There's something wrong with what happens
when I'm with you."

"You're you when you're with me," you fire back with. "Gods forbid you deal with that."

Dave scoffs. "I'm me with Ruby – "

You go for the throat, then. You're angry, you don't care. "Oh, so she knows about the previous
universe, about John and Jade and Karkat and Terezi and Sburb? She knows about your Bro, about
what we have to do for them in the future?"

"Of course she doesn't," he retorts. "I'm not stupid."

You gesture openly. "So you're not you with her, Dave. I know you, I know you from then, I know
you from now, and you just can't deal with having someone know you, can you?"

You've hit on something; his face crumbles for less than an instant, then he stands, pacing away from
you. "The problem is," Dave says, "you use that against me."

"I don't," you say sharply. "I don't."

"Maybe you don't mean to," he says. "But you do, Rose."

"I'm sorry for bringing up the things that are ours." This is almost too much. "I'm sorry that I want to
share something with you, that only we can share."

Dave shakes his head. "You need to work on being less fucking toxic. On not trying to control
everyone. I'm not someone you can just throw majjyk at and get what you want."
That pisses you off. "I have never – "

"I'm not your pawn, that's what I mean," he snaps back, more attitude than you've ever gotten from him. "You want me? Fucking… win me, don't manipulate me."

It breaks through some of the tension, at least for you. Your laugh sounds a little absurd. "You want me to woo you, Dave?"

"That's not what I meant!" He gestures that off in a little bit of a flail. "If you want us to be okay, you have to stop playing games. That's what I mean."

Wait. "So we can talk," you deduce.

He turns a little, to watch you. "We're talking right now."

"You know what I mean." You stay as collected as you can. "I thought you and Ruby…"

"Ruby and I are friends," he says, glancing away awkwardly.

"But you have sex."

"Not that it's any of your fucking business, but yeah we do."

You raise your eyebrows. "Does she know that?"

"She knows we have sex, yeah." Dave pauses, then answers, "She knows what's up, I swear."

"If we start talking," you carry on, "everything would be fine?"

"I mean if you're not horrible." He takes in an awkward breath. "The movie's going, it'll be next year, it's a lot of pressure, and I keep having dreams like I'm talking to the trolls or John, they're not memories, they're just new dream sort of things, and I don't think I can ever tell her. I don't."

"I know," you say, your tone dropping. "I know, Dave."

There's a pause that's longer than it should be, then he says, "And the book?"

"It's going. Not as fast as I'd like." You stand with purpose, and approach him. He watches you carefully as you cross the room to get to him, and you stop close but not too close. "Maybe one day you'll understand," you say, keeping his gaze. "Why I did what I did."

He says nothing, but draws your arms around his waist, and slips his arms around you. You lean into the embrace, soaking in the quiet company that no one else can give you. Then, after what's probably just two minutes or so but feels like a perfect hour, there's the sound of a key in the door, and Dave quickly moves back, pacing back to the couch as Ruby enters the apartment.

She's got blood spattered on her face and over the white part of her skirt. Dave immediately stands. "What the fuck?"

"Ilya warned me some juggalo fucks were going to try to kidnap me," she says steadily, "so at least I was ready but I still had to murder the fuck out of them to get back here."

"Jesus fucking Christ," Dave swears, swiping his hands over his face, then he turns to her. "But you're all right?"

"Yeah, I need a shower," Ruby says, but her gaze is on you now. "Hey, Rose."
"I'm glad you're all right," you say, not sure what else to say to that look. "I can stay if you need backup in case they come back."

"I think they were trying to make a point and they made it," Ruby says, "but I dunno. We'll have to see." She turns to Dave. "Didn't manage to get our groceries. Sorry."

"We can try again tomorrow." Dave glances askance at you. "I'll talk to you later."

You nod to him, and then to Ruby before just jumping into the window and landing back at home. Complacency is waiting, but you don't think you can do it today. The only person who truly knows you called you poison today, and it's going to take a minute to come back from that.

"Are you all right?" Luke asks; you realize that he's been watching you sit on the couch and stare into space for at least a few minutes.

"We almost lost Ruby today," you excuse it with. "She's a fighter, though."

"Right," he says. "So you were with Dave?"

Sometimes you hate that he's psychic. "Yes."

"And?" he prompts.

"And I have a lot of work to do."

He accepts that without question. "Searches for 'batterwitch conspiracy' have gone up significantly. The anonymous posts by the Angeleses are near the top of the results, too."

"Good." That's half the battle right there. "Good."

"Why don't you help me make lunch?" Luke offers.

You push yourself up, because you hear the part he's not saying: Maybe it'll help take your mind off things. "Thanks, Luke."

"Anytime." He smiles.

You know he would listen to the stories you have of a life before this one, that he might even believe, but he wouldn't understand, and you would feel even more alone. You only have one choice in that.

You pour yourself a drink and start to fetch ingredients on Luke's orders, a faint, uncertain smile on your face.

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**January 2007**

So you're a little paranoid ever since a group of juggalos tried to kidnap Ruby. Really this just means that the paranoia that kicked up ever since you met Rose has gotten that much worse, and it's becoming a problem.

"You need to give me some space," Ruby is saying, but you're spacing out like an idiot, and she snaps her fingers in your face. "Hey. I'm talking to you. Yeah, you need to give me some space, all right? I love you but you're driving me crazy."

"I just want to make sure you're safe," you say firmly.
She gives you a gentle tap on the side of the head. "So tell me what's going on," she says. "Not this dumb shit, but about the movie. All right?"

You sigh. "Rue, I can't –"

"Just talk," she says. "I know that stress can't be helping either. Tell me about it."

You're really done with women in your life wanting to talk about things. "NBC is all up in our shit. Suing us with stupid baseless shit. It's going to delay the movie at least another six months."

"Six months?" She shakes her head. "There's no reason to…"

"Exactly," you agree. "They're just being shitty for no reason."

"Can't you do anything?"

"Legal's on it," you say with a shrug. "But at this point we're just sitting on a mostly finished project waiting for a premiere."

Ruby pauses. "Well it's gotta get out, right?" she says.

"Yeah," you say immediately. "Absolutely."

"And NBC is stopping it getting out," she goes on.

"Yeah." You pause. "Oh."

"Yeah," she says. "Might be worth investigating that shit."

"Well I'm not talking to Kintzler," you say. "Talk to your dad, maybe."

Ruby sighs. "I'm not… I'm not talking to my dad."

Great. That's great. "What? Why not?"

"He has opinions about shit he shouldn't have opinions about," she says. "It doesn't matter, have Rose talk to them."

You're really not sure exactly where to take this conversation. "You sure?" you ask.

She sighs. "It's about us," she answers. "You don't want to hear it."

Truth is, you probably don't. "Fine then," you agree.

"So talk to Rose," Ruby concludes. "See if NBC's looped into everything else in that clusterfuck that is Crockercorp conspiracy."

"The stupid thing is we'll still have to fight lawsuits," you say, grumbling.

"Sometimes I don't get it," she says. "Well, a lot of the time I don't get it, to be honest. It's all dumb little shit they pull except for the occasional kidnapping attempt, and those're never at you."

"Some grand plan I guess." You straighten your Skaiashades. "If she wanted us dead, we'd be dead ten times over already." You pause. "One sec."

Ruby shakes her head. "Yeah, I know."
You pause. "The fuck does that mean?"

Her hands go up. "I'm not trying to start anything, Dave."

"I just want to know what you mean."

She doesn't exactly look at you. "You know what I mean."

This feels incredibly stupid. "Because I'm going to talk to Rose."

"Omnipotent Rose," she says. "I get it."

"Yeah." You look at Ruby for a second, then just open Pesterchum already.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 16:30 --

TG: question for you

TT: Yes. I'm here.

TG: why are we still alive

TT: You mean why hasn't she killed us?

TG: yeah that

TG: i havent asked since

TG: well you know

TG: maybe you have a better answer this time

TT: I have theories.

TG: yeah i know you have theories

TG: youre rose

TT: Yes.

TG: so

TG: what are they

TT: Well,

TT: She may have seen something in Skaia that indicates a specific time in which we are meant to die.

TT: This is my favorite theory.

TT: As you know, the clouds of Skaia are hard to controvert.

TT: But they also don't tell the whole story.

TG: they dont
TT: Not always.

TG: ok so you think she saw the future

TT: That's one theory.

TG: what's another theory

TT: She needs us and our rebellion.

TG: why would she need a rebellion

TT: It's a questionable and disconcerting theory,

TT: That our work is meant to play into her work.

TG: well she knows what we're doing

TT: Yes.

TG: and she's gonna use it against us

TT: At some point, yes.

TG: starting to like the future theory better

TT: I wouldn't. It means she saw a future in which we lose.

TG: or one where she loses

TG: she's not acting really confident right now

TG: everything they're doing is so SLOW

TT: Yes.

TT: That's a point.

TG: holy shit you're saying I made a point you didn't think of

TT: Yes.

TT: Well, I'd realized things were going slowly.

TT: It just didn't occur to me that this was because she realized she was going to lose.

TG: wishful thinking probably

TG: who the fuck knows

TG: skaia though

TT: Yes.

TG: any other theories

TT: None that are solid enough to share.
TG: ok
TT: How are you and Ruby?
TG: fine
TT: And the movie? I heard a rumor there were lawsuits.
TG: fucking nbc
TG: that reminds me
TG: can you ask kintzler and luis if nbc are in any documents we have
TT: Why can't Ruby ask her dad?
TG: i dont fucking know
TG: please just do it
TT: Well, because you said please.
TG: thanks
TT: Anytime.

You relax back and look up at Ruby. "So," you say, "she'll send us info."

"That's what all that typing was?" Ruby asks, obviously skeptical.

"No," you concede.
She shrugs. "Fine," she says. "What are you doing today?"
You pause. "Plans with the boys. If you want to come with –"

"Don't need to," she says, and offers a little smile. "You've earned some time, you know that."

"Why is everything so fucking awkward?" you ask in a rush of stupidity. "Like I'm somehow fucking everything up."

"Dave," Ruby says, and sighs. "You're not…"
You raise your eyebrows. "I'm not fucking everything up?"

"You're not half as shitty as you think you are, Dave Strider," she answers.

"I don't think I'm shitty," you defend yourself.
She shakes her head at you. "It's… it's everything," she says. "The kidnapping, my dad, Rose, it's all of it."

There's got to be a way not to have this conversation this directly. "Why isn't the label giving you more to do?"

"I don't fucking know. They're trying to plan a tour yet." She heaves out an even heavier sigh.
"Dave, maybe we should stop…"
You're not sure you want her finishing that sentence. "Yeah?"

"We're friends," Ruby starts. "Right?"

"Well yeah." You wish there was a good excuse for you to leave right now.

"So maybe we shouldn't be having sex."

So this is what's going to happen today. "Sure. If you want."

"I mean, I'm enjoying it," Ruby says, "but if you're going to start back up with Rose again – "

You gesture quickly. "Whoa," you say. "Who the fuck said I was starting anything with Rose again?"

"Well you're talking," she defends. "You weren't talking and now you're back to talking, and it was really weird that night after what happened – "

"Rose and I have our shit to figure out," you say, a little on edge, "but we aren't starting shit."

Ruby catches your hand and your gaze. "I know I can't compete with her, Dave."

You have no idea what to say to that. "And your dad talked you into this."

"No, I think for myself, you know that." She doesn't look impressed. "Just let me know how it goes. I never expected to keep you, you should know that."

"We were never dating," you clarify.

"I know that. I never... expected to," she says, and softens. "People had their ideas about us but I always knew. Okay?"

"Okay," you agree. "I'll, uh. I'll let you know. If anything changes."

She shakes her head at you. "And there were the juggalos and I'm not exactly terrified to leave the house but I don't really want to have to keep killing people, you know?"

That you can relate to. "Yeah. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," she says instantly. "Jesus, Strider."

"It completely is but whatever," you say, and check your Skaishades as someone pesters you.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 16:40 --

TT: One document.

TT: One.

TT: It looks like everything is off the books but NBC is involved.

TG: not shocking but not great

TT: I agree.

TG: it took you that long to get back to me on one document btw
They were looking. And I was talking to Kintzler.

TG: why would you want to talk to kintzler

TT: I don't know. He's interesting.

TT: The three of us plan on writing something together.

TT: You know how the Federalist Papers were written by three men but under one name?

TT: Something like that.

TG: i didnt know about that

TT: It was a comparison Kintzler made.

TT: We'll see how it pans out.

TT: So,

TT: What are you going to do moving forward?

TG: i need help

TT: What can I do?

TG: not from you

TG: no offense

TT: None taken. From who?

TG: people with star power

TT: Ah.

TT: I think that's a good plan.

TG: yeah thanks

TT: Let me know how it goes.

TG: will do

You glance up at Ruby. "Looks like NBC's involved."

"Great," she says. "Next steps?"

You shrug. "I think I have a plan."

The four of you bought out a back room of a restaurant to hang out in, and Donald cracks open the bottle of whiskey. "So," he says, grinning, "all we need to do is win a lawsuit against one of the biggest companies on the planet and we're gold."
"Easy," Ben says wryly, pouring out a few fingers for each of you.

"Guys, guys, give it a chance," Owen cuts in. "They have no case."

"Yeah, but buzz for the movie'll get killed if they keep wasting our time," Ben says. "What's the point of all this anyway?"

"We're competition," Donald supposes.

"This isn't the usual song and dance for competition between studios," Owen admits. "They're making up copyright claims out of whole cloth just to get in our way."

"Have they ever approached you?" Ben directs towards you. "About making a film for them?"

"Hell no." You raise your glass. "MGM all the way."

"It's stupid," Owen says, "and the judge will see that they're lying. That's it."

You pause. You couldn't really be given a better chance to clear things up. "Guys," you say, "I need to tell you something, and you need to listen, and keep it between us."

"Are you proposing to Ruby?" Donald immediately jokes.

"Oh my god, no," you say instantly. "Jesus Christ."

Ben laughs. "Holy shit."

"Shut up," Owen says, waving that off. "I think he's serious, guys."

"Yeah." Jesus, what are you about to do? "How much do you know about the batterwitch conspiracy?"

There's a few seconds of silence around the table, then everyone starts talking, and it all sounds pretty bad, things like "my crazy aunt says" and "conspiracy blogs" until you finally cut in with, "It's all true and I have proof."

Ben laughs, astounded. "What?"

You realize that you have no idea how exactly to prove this.

"One sec," you say, then hurriedly go to Pesterchum.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 17:10 --

TG: ROSE

TG: HOW DO I PROVE THAT SHES REAL

TT: You sound like Karkat.

TG: oh shut up

TG: im serious i dont know how to prove shes real

TG: theres too much shit

TT: Mark still has the signal translator.
TG: he does

TT: Yes. He's working on something for me right now.

TG: what

TT: We can talk about that later.

TG: yeah fine

TT: The good news is he turned it into an application.

TT: Ask him for it.

TG: we need to have a talk about all the shit youre not telling me about

TT: That sounds merited.

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 17:12 --

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering burntPromises [BP] at 17:12 --

TG: hey

TG: i need the signal translator application

BP: Oh, Rose told you?

BP: One second.

An email hits your inbox. You open it and hurriedly install the application that's attached. You crank up the volume on your SkaiaShades. "All right," you say, "there's a propaganda signal going most hours of every day all across the world."

"For real?" Donald drinks, a little pointedly.

"I'll tune into NBC," you decide, and flip to the station on your SkaiaShades. "Hear that?" It's some dumb soap opera.

"Yeah," they agree.

"Check this out." You flick the app on.

"OBEY. DO NOT RESIST. DO NOT LISTEN TO THOSE WHO WOULD TELL YOU THINGS AREN'T EXACTLY AS THEY SHOULD BE. EVERYTHING IS FINE. EVERYTHING IS AS IT SHOULD BE."

You turn off the app after a sentence more, then look at them. "Nearly every hour of every day," you say.

"What the hell was that?" Ben gets out.


"Docile," Owen interjects.

"Docile," you agree instantly.
"So we're hearing that... now," Donald says, staring at his whiskey.

"Generally," you say casually.

"Holy shit," Ben says. "Why would you tell us this? How do you even know all this? How did you do that?"

"That's the, uh, news," you decide on, because you're not sure if it's good news or not. "I'm part of the resistance. The movie's part of that. SBAHJ was always a part of that."

"How is our movie a part of the resistance?" Ben doesn't seem mentally ready for this at all.

"I can get into that later." You wave that off. "For now – are you guys in to help with NBC and all that shit too?"

"Is NBC – " Owen shakes his head. "Is NBC in on this?"

"Well yeah," you say mildly, as though you hadn't just found out.

"Holy shit," Ben repeats, and drops his head into his hands.

"We're in," Donald says decisively, looking up from his drink.

"More whiskey," you decide for the group, and start to pour more.

"Thanks," Ben says weakly.

Owen offers a smile. "Thanks for telling us," he figures.

"I don't know about thanks," you admit. This is kind of shitty news, especially that you kind of brought them into this without them having a fucking clue.

"Now we know," he says. "Now we can help."

"That's true," Donald agrees. "We're here."

"We're here," Ben says after a moment.

You smile, despite yourself. "Awesome."

"Awesome," Ben echoes ironically.

In a way, you're both right.

August 2007

IT'S HAPPENING.

But seriously, with a lot of PR and lawyer work, you broke through the lawsuit and tonight is the night. Tonight Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff: The Movie is premiering and you feel like your head is going to explode.

"This might be it," you say to Ruby, still messing with your bowtie. "I'm going to die in black tie."

"You'll look fucking great though," Ruby says mildly, and glances away from the mirror. "Seriously, you look delicious."
"Whatever," you deflect. "I'm serious."

"We'll be ready," Ruby points out. "If we have to kill our way out – "

"I don't know." You approach her. "Can you help me with this goddamn thing?"

Ruby pauses, then gives the bowtie a try, once, twice, until it comes together. "Ugh," she declares, and gives you a kiss and a tap on the cheek. "You look great."

"Yeah," you say, with your best coolguy Zen tone. "You look good too." She's in a bright red dress with lipstick to match, and you wonder if she left any on you, touching your mouth awkwardly.

"You're fine," she assures you. "We should go."

"Jesus Christ." You haven't felt this alive since that day you hacked Imperiacorp and ran to save Rose. "Yeah, let's go."

Ruby sends you a smirk and catches your hand, hauling you behind her as you make your way down to the limo. You start rambling about absolutely nothing as you go, trying to unravel your anxiety, but none of it really works. Thank god it's a short trip from your hotel, maybe ten minutes, and you step out, immediately throwing up your arm at the bright flash of cameras.

"Oh stop," Ruby says, and catches your arm, leading you down to the carpet, her smile blazing across her face something beautiful.

You're on high alert as you go, watching for juggalos, for their stupid leaders, for your dad and his bros, for her. She grabs your hand and squeezes it firmly to bring you back. "Hey," she says quietly. "We're okay."

"Are we?" you return.

"Yeah, we are."

You try to tone down the paranoia with a few breaths, then a pester comes through your SkaiaShades.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 20:03 --

TT: Check your three.

You look around, and she's across the carpet in a wispy pale purple dress, a faint smile on her lips as she watches you. You raise your hand and flick on your voice-to-text.

TG: get over here then

TT: This is stupid.

TG: yeah

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 20:05 --

Someone shouts something across the carpet and Ruby laughs; you barely register it. Rose approaches you, and you flick off Pesterchum quickly. Ruby turns and sees her, her expression changing just slightly but not enough for the cameras to catch.

"Dave," Rose says easily.
"Hey," you answer, just as casually.

"Good to see you," Ruby interjects.

"You're that girl who wrote the book that can be used as a murder weapon, right?" you direct at Rose.

"It is quite thick, yes," Rose says, with that barely-there smile. "Did you read it?"

"Just once." You stick your hands in your pockets. "I'm not much of a reader."

She looks amused. "Well, I'm flattered."

"You should be. I'm busy like Wal-mart on Black Friday. People stampeding to get to my shit," you say. "This is my movie, you know."

"So I hear," Rose says, and you really like that tone despite yourself; she sounds nearly delighted, for Rose. "I can't wait to see it."

"We should walk," Ruby cuts in. "We'll see you later, Rose?"

Rose doesn't answer. She's looking past you. "Dave," she says quietly, "don't look."

"I hate when you guys tell me not to look," you say in a rush, "how am I not supposed to look when you say don't look?"

"What's happening?" Ruby presses.

"Slowly," Rose says, "look at the end of the carpet."

You don't like this at all, but you turn your head cautiously to the end of the carpet only to see Guy Fieri chatting and joking with the paparazzi with a hot woman with long hair and hella curves by his side. Then your vision shifts, you see her, her, and you fall back three steps. "Jesus Christ," bursts out of your mouth.

"I don't know what we're looking at," Ruby confesses.

"She's here," you say. You don't think you can move. "Holy shit, fish bitch is here, we're so fucked."

Ruby follows your gaze."That's her?" she says. "But that's just…"

"A disguise," Rose says, her voice clearly forced steady. "We can see through it sometimes."

Ruby takes a deep breath. "All right. What do we do?"

"We go in." Rose looks at you. "We sit."

"We go in and sit," you repeat, because your brain isn't really working what with the terror.

"If she was here to kill us she would have done it," Rose says. "She has her reasons, we just don't know them yet."

"Oh great," comes out of your mouth. "Yeah, great, I can totally relax right now."

"Go find your friends." A faint, unhappy smile flickers across Rose's face. "I'll see you later."

"Yeah," you agree instantly. "Later."
Ruby catches your arm again. "Keep in touch," she adds to Rose, and you glance back at Rose as Ruby spirits you off.

"Jesus Christ," you mutter again.

"Just be ready," Ruby says lightly, and flashes a smile for a nearby camera. "You need to be on, Dave."

"On, right." How do you do that when death feels imminent as fuck? "Yeah." You look at the cameras, then back down the carpet, where Donald is striding towards you. "Hey," you greet him.

"Holy shit there are a lot of cameras," Donald answers, glancing around at them.

"That's what we want," you figure.

"Ben and Owen say they're already in there waiting for us," Donald adds. "Come on, let's go."

"Yeah." You wish you could see Rose, just for a second, then follow Ruby and Donald into the theatre. It's nice. It's weird. It's great. It's terrifying. It's a lot, to be honest.

Kevin gives a speech, and you don't hear any of it because you're on too high of alert. You finally spot the batterwitch an entire section away, a smirk painted across her face, and try not to stare out of fear of catching Guy fucking Fieri's eye. You think this is probably what going insane feels like.

"So here's Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff!" Kevin finishes, to applause. The theatre goes dark. You sink into your seat and seek out Ruby's hand, wishing you had it in you to tell the boys that everything might be about to go to hell –

But it doesn't. The movie plays on. You soak it in, oh, it's good, you're proud as shit, and the paranoia bleeds away as nothing continues to happen. Then your Pesterchum pings.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 20:45 --

    TT: She's doing something.

Oh Jesus fucking Christ. You can't do this right now.

    TG: meet me outside

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 20:46 --

You don't say anything to the boys or Ruby, you just go, glancing back at where the batterwitch is still sitting before you hurry off to meet Rose in the lobby. You go to her as calmly as you can. "What the fuck," you say.

"She's doing something," Rose says directly. "Luke contacted me, there's something going on."

"Like what?" you press.

"Like the signal's getting stronger," she says. "They're... using those." She pauses. "Those things."

"Those people." You'll never forget seeing those creepy clown fuckers in those pods. "It's to fuck up our chances."

"Yes," she confirms.
Well, fuck. "What do we do?" If you made that movie and fought to get it out for no fucking reason, you're going to lose your shit.

Rose considers that. "Well, we could take out the signal," she says.

Great. So much for enjoying your fucking movie. "Do we know where it is?"

She pauses. "It's coming from her ship."

You stare at her. "You want to storm her ship," you say. "This is insane."

"It is insane," she agrees.

"Fuck that," you clarify. "Fuck that hard."

"Do you want to win or not?" Rose asks; you look at her for a long moment, at the look of casual challenge in her face, and you nod.

"What the hell are we doing?" you ask in return, now that you've committed to this stupid plan.

"Luke's a block or two away." She sweeps off, wisps of dress trailing behind her, and you stop and watch stupidly for a moment before following. She's still talking. "We use his ears to find the ship, and… well, we'll figure it out from there."

"So we don't have a plan," you conclude.

"No."

"Great." The two of you walk in silence for a moment, then you say, "I didn't think you were going to come."

Rose glances at you. "I always like to surprise you."

"Yeah, you do." You're more than a little ironic with that. "But I'm, uh. I'm glad you did."

"Dave," she starts, and sneaks another look at you. "I think we should talk about something before we do this."

Oh, this doesn't sound good. "Shut up, we're not doing some sort of we're-about-to-die confessional thing right now."

"I'm serious," Rose says, tone flattening.

You shrug. "So am I, I don't want to hear it."

She eyes you. "Still, it's a conversation we should have, whether you like it or not."

"Like I can ever stop you from talking."

"Oh, stop." She turns a corner at the next street. "I understand that things have been difficult for you even before we came to this time and place, and I have done my share to make them more difficult for you."

"You're not great at apologies," you say, raising your eyebrows.

She ignores that. "I never meant to do that," she says. "I did everything I could to wake you up
before it reached that point."

"That isn't the problem and you know it." You need to shut this down. "Forget it, Rose, everything is fine."

"Clearly it's not." Rose looks vaguely unimpressed. "Stop deflecting and talk to me."

"I have absolute fuckall to say about this," you say, doing your best to stay cool. "So forget it."

"But you're still angry," she says, tone obviously perfectly measured.

"Sometimes, yeah. But you did a shitty thing, so I'm fucking allowed to be." Where the hell is Luke?

Rose is silent for a moment, then her voice drops as she goes on. "I can't apologize for what I did," she says, "because I'm not sorry. I'm sorry that I hurt you, but I'm not sorry that I did it."

You're so fucking done with this conversation. "You're not sorry that you tricked me into an incestuous relationship?"

"Dave." Her tone flattens sharply. "You don't care about that and you know it."

"Actually I do," you retort. "Don't tell me what I do or don't care about."

Rose stops. "You kissed me," she presses you. "When I kissed you, you kissed me back, you knew, and you didn't care."

You stop, but you don't look at her. "What's the point of this again?"

"Because if we die," she says, "I want you to know that I love you." She turns. "That's it. Luke's in the red car, come on."

"I." You don't know what to do, but apparently you're getting into Luke's car like everything is normal after that shit. You climb into the back and raise a hand in greeting to Luke. "Hey."


"Take us to it," Rose says, her General voice on.

"Gotcha." Luke's clearly forcing his voice cheery, and he starts to drive, drumming his fingers nervously on the wheel as he goes.

"You didn't bring Ruby," Rose says, breaking the silence in the car.

"Someone needs to stay back and defend people if the fish bitch starts a murderfest," you say, shrugging.

"I just figured…"

"You didn't want her here." You're not stupid. "It's fine." But you should really talk to her.


TG: hey

SL: what's up

TG: im sort of storming the batterwitch's battlecruiser
TG: really important shit
TG: you manage the theater
TG: got it
SL: what the fuck?
TG: im asking if you got it
SL: you just ran off to do WHAT
TG: shes broadcasting a huge signal
TG: we need to knock it out
TG: you get it now
SL: jesus christ
SL: fine
SL: i hate you sometimes
TG: im sorry
TG: ill be ok
SL: you can't promise that
TG: ill do my best
SL: i’m scared, dave.
TG: i promise ill be ok
SL: don't do that
TG: stop it
TG: i wish i could say it to you before anything happens
TG: im just shitty that way
SL: dave
SL: don't

You breathe pointedly, carefully.

TG: ill meet you at home
SL: don't die
SL: i love you
TG: yeah
SL: see you at home

TG: yeah


"Dave," Luke says, fingers gripped around the wheel. "Rose."

"What?"

"I know you're afraid." Luke looks straight ahead. "But just… know we're completing Jade's work."

"I think we're far off from completing anything," Rose says, more a little skeptical.

"You never know," Luke says, "depending on what exactly you're planning tonight." He really doesn't look good, Jesus, all sweaty and tense.

"I think she still basically runs the planet," you say. "Knocking out one signal – "

"We'll see." Luke looks to Rose. "It's right around this corner."

You force yourself to breathe, but there's nothing when you turn the corner, just an empty, dark pier. Luke stops the car, and there's silence in the car until you say, "So what am I looking at?"

"It's there somewhere." Rose opens the car door. "Let's go."


"Yes," Rose agrees, and glances at you for a moment before heading towards the pier. You follow without hesitation, until you see her flinch and step forward, and you hurry forward only to feel something brush past you and your vision flicker.

Then you see the ship, red, big, and nasty-looking. "Well shit," you whisper.

"Time to go." She nudges your arm.

You take a slow breath, then go straight ahead, Rose a step behind you. Nothing happens as you approach the ship, no Imperiarcorp, no alarms, nothing; Rose lifts a hand as you get close and her hand lights up with her magic shit for a split second, and a door opens, a walkway folding neatly out.

You bite back any comments and head onto the ship, which opens onto a small room with two hallways branching off. Everything is still quiet, and it's unnerving as hell. Rose moves next to you and nods to the right, and you have no idea how she decided on that direction but you go with it anyway. You make it to a door, which Rose unlocks, and the room is so dark you can't see your sword in front of you. "Rose," you say quietly, but she's on it – the lights flicker on, still dim. You see the room – there's a circular front and steps that lead down into a lower part of the room. Below, there's a room walled off by glass, and the glass is tempered or weird somehow, so you walk towards it to see better; you immediately drop your head against the glass and close your eyes, hoping what you see won't burn itself against the back of your eyes and into your nightmares, but you don't have high hopes about that.

"What?" Rose asks softly, but you just gesture her over, opening your eyes again. The woman is still bound to the wall, a heavy-looking device crammed onto her head, intense terror in her eyes and
marking her face, her veins bulging. Her device is connected to devices attached to the heads of two sickly-thin men with those horrible markings around their eyes, who are shoving at each other from seats on the ground to the sound of insane and delighted laughter. It's not worse than John's death, you know that, but there's something deeply fucking wrong with this situation.

"I assume," Rose says quietly, "they took the strongest and connected them together."

"They're the signal." As you watch, tears streak down the woman's face.

"Yes." She touches your arm, pulling your gaze away from the woman. "We need to disconnect them."

"They could die." You're starting to think that might be a good thing. "And how do we even do it?"

Rose opens her mouth to say something, but then the door opens above and you hear footsteps and a snatch of muttered conversation. The two of you decide in an instant; you head up, and Rose stays. The Imperiarcop notice you as soon as you're on the same level, and you draw them away from the stairs as you start strife.

You switch gears immediately as one of them goes for a radio, and you move without hesitation, your sword biting into his throat and sending him into the metal grating at your feet. The other backs off, going for his radio as well, and you say, "Maybe don't do that."

"Strider," the Imperiarcop starts.

"I don't want to kill you, but this is important," you say, as steady as you can.

He raises the radio to his mouth, then you hear Rose shout, "Dave!"

You ignore the Imperiarcop guard as he starts to radio in for more guards or whatever, running back down the steps. When you get down there, you pull in a shaky breath at what you see. They're all dead, the clowns' faces scratched and bloody from fingernails.

"We need to go," she says, and grabs your hand to haul you out. You make it as far as halfway down the hallway before Imperiarcop starts to pour in; you have no choice, and it doesn't bother you at all to murder your way the fuck out of there until you get to the exit with Rose's hand in yours.

The two of you rush through the shield hiding the ship and to the car, where Luke's head is lolling around. You panic before you can think twice, and waste no time hauling him out and cramming him in the backseat. Rose climbs in the driver's seat and you hurry to the other side, getting the fuck out of there.

"Where do we go," fumbles out of your mouth.

"I don't know, I'm just going to drive," Rose says rapidly.

"Jesus Christ." You try to catch your breath, then it occurs to you.


TG: hey

SL: holy shit

TG: yeah
SL: well nothing happened here
SL: they're just watching the movie
TG: thats good news
SL: yeah
SL: so you did it?
TG: think so
SL: you're amazing
TG: yeah
SL: are you coming back?
TG: i dont know
SL: we can rendezvous later
SL: remember there's a skaia property in sacramento

Oh, that's true. You look to Rose. "I know where we're going."

"What?" Rose is clearly rattled, which is unnerving.

"Remember that Skaia property in Sacramento?"

"Oh." She shakes her head. "Right." She plugs it into her HUBTOPBAND.

TG: thanks
SL: see you there
TG: yeah


You look down at your nice white shirt and realize it's got blood on it. You look to Rose.

"You okay?" you ask.

She doesn't answer that, or any of the other dumb conversation you come up with, until you make it to the small house on the outskirts of Sacramento. You go right away to haul out Luke while Rose comes out with the giant keyring to flick through it until she finds the right key to open the door.

You drop Luke on the couch and catch your breath. Then you look at Rose, who's staring down at her hands.

"Rose," you start. She shakes her head, then you go to her, touching her shoulders. "Hey, Rose."

"I thought there would be a way," she says, tone forced steady.

"You don't know, this might hurt her, just a little. It was worth it." You don't know that, but it sounds right. "I'm sorry, but we fucking had to, Rose."
She looks into your face, looking for something, then throws her arms around you and hugs you close. Startled, you hold onto her, and the two of you steal just one moment of silence.

"So, what," Rose says softly.

"Rose." You breathe in the scent of her hair. "I can't."

You can feel it in the tension of her body against you, how you've hurt her. "Yes."

She is what she is. She's your sister. She's your best friend. She's goddamn everything, and you can't do it. You just can't jump off that cliff, because you know you'll never come back from it.

Just because you love someone doesn't make it right.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Just your standard reminder that they're in their twenties now, so the teenagers being teenagers factor is starting to wear off. They're still dumbasses, but different kinds of dumbasses.

Also, here's an apology for having written a giant cast into this fic. You should see my notes. Don't worry, eventually everyone's going to die.

February 2008

Life is frustrating. Waking up just means more staring at Complacency and managing a rebellion that operates much like an old car, pieces falling off and needing repair at regular intervals. You would never say as much to anyone: everyone needs to feel like you truly believe in the success of what you do, even Dave. Still, it wears on you.

You exhale and lean into your bed, snatching up your HUBTOPBAND. You sigh and open the memo you've been invited to. Luis and Kintzler are already arguing.

GT: I'm not having this argument again.
GT: It's not time yet.
RE: When will it be time?
GT: When Rose and Dave say so.
RE: Which seems entirely arbitrary to me.
GT: They know things we don't.
RE: And why don't they share?
TT: Because it's more complicated than you could ever imagine.
RE: I see.
TT: Can you trust me?
RE: Rose, I just want to make people understand.
TT: They won't.
TT: Not until we're done.
GT: The signal is too powerful.
RE: Even now? After you knocked over the last one?

TT: It's weaker now. But not weak enough.

RE: Are you sure?

GT: We're publishing the anonymous posts still.

GT: That's as ballsy as we can get.

GT: Something outright would just get us and our sources killed.

TT: Aren't you concerned about your source?

RE: My source is fine.

TT: If we move too quickly, we risk everything.

RE: Aren't you concerned you're not holding back due to uncertainty?

TT: Nothing is completely clear in our work.

TT: If you want something neat, go back to politics.

GT: We'll send you back before you get into too much trouble.

GT: No one would fault you.

RE: No. I'm here. Sunk cost fallacy and all the rest.

RE: Can you at least understand why I'm impatient?

TT: The world isn't ending today.

TT: The day may come, and we'll know well in advance.

RE: People are suffering, Rose.

TT: I understand that.

RE: Yet we do nothing.

TT: We aren't doing nothing.

RE: I want to know what we're waiting for.

TT: We're tracking several factors that may indicate popular opinion on the batterwitch conspiracy.

TT: When we feel that the tide may have begun to turn, we will be ready to initiate something more direct.

RE: Is that it?

RE: I had the impression from Luis that there was something you knew that the rest of us didn't.
GT: Come on.
RE: I'm serious.
GT: They're scared of her, is that not enough for you?
TT: Please stop bickering.
RE: I want to know why they're scared of the two of you.
RE: You're dangerous to know, but I don't know why.

You have the feeling this isn't going to go away.

TT: I can visit you in New Haven and we can discuss.
GT: Seriously?
TT: If that's what it takes.
RE: I'd appreciate it.
GT: Why can't you just pester him?
TT: Certain things won't come across in a message.
GT: Wait.
TT: Trust me.
GT: So you're going to tell him everything?
TT: Not everything.
GT: What about the rest of us?
TT: We'll see.
GT: If I'd realized complaining would have got me answers, I would have done it a while ago.
TT: Do you really need answers?
GT: Well, not from you. That's why I didn't complain.
TT: So why do you need them now?
GT: I'm an investigative reporter. Now that I know I can get them, I want them.

Well, this is stupid.

RE: Let's not get ridiculous.
RE: I should be forgiven for wanting assurances after dropping everything to follow the orders of a teenager.

TT: I'm 20.

RE: My point stands.

GT: Honestly, they probably saved your life.

RE: You think?

GT: I do.

TT: That's enough.

TT: I'll drop in at New Haven tonight.

RE: That's good for me.

TT: Luis, are we good to go on the first phase of Project Publius?

GT: Everything's there.

TT: One day, we'll be able to drop this all on her.

GT: Like a house on a witch.

RE: Nice.

GT: Thanks.

TT: I'm glad we're bonding.

TT: Are we good?

GT: We've got plenty to work on.

RE: Good to go.

TT: See you soon.

RE: I'll make dinner.

TT: Thanks.

It's not as exciting as storming the battlecruiser, but not everything is dramatic battles. Some of it is day-to-day check-ins on small tasks that are likely to grow much bigger in size and importance as time goes on. You happen to be skilled at handling details.

"Rose?" Luke's voice is raised, now.

You clear your throat and answer. "I'm coming!"

"Hurry up," he suggests.

It's less than minutes for you to pull on clothes and get out there. By the time you can see Luke, he meets you halfway and catches you by the shoulders. "I don't want you to panic," he starts.
"I don't do panic," you answer instinctively, but it's not a good opening and you know it.

"You know I check in on everyone." He drops his slight grip on your shoulders. "Those you freed from Crockercorp." You nod. "Some of them didn't answer, so I checked the logs on their security consoles. They're gone, Rose."

You refuse to react visibly. "All right," you say. "I'll need details. Do we think this means they have access to our databases?"

"They hit four houses out of hundreds of Skaia properties," Luke assures you. "If they knew all of our safehouses, we would have seen more than that."

"Yes." You barely pause. "What's the connection?"

He hesitates. "They all survived experimentation. Like me."

It's not a huge leap. "Recouping their losses."

Luke is clearly doing his best to appear casual. "I assume so."

"You have to be more careful," you decide. "It's not safe. They must have some way to find people like you, and -- "

"And I can fend for myself," he cuts you off with. "You specifically sent these people off because they weren't fighters."

"Luke." You sigh. "You didn't see you when we got close to that signal."

"Do you really think she's going to put that much effort into stealing me?" he retorts, a little impatient.

This just makes you think of John, your many arguments with him, your failure to save him. "You're my right hand man and you're one of them. She'd want you."

"I'm not scared, Rose." Luke sounds tired of this conversation already. "I'm not holding back."

You press a hand to your face. "All right. Just take this as a warning to be careful. Even more careful," you add.

"You may have to do grocery runs instead," he tries to joke.

"I'll find the time." You look at him. "You're not allowed to die, you know."

He looks back at you. "I promise Jade I'd be there for you."

Something inside you quivers before you lock it down. "We have to keep our promises to Jade."


"I'm going to New Haven tonight for dinner." You smile at the look on Luke's face. "And I want you to come with me."

"Kintzler," he says, sighing. "Do we have to?"

"I think we do." You shift and move past him. "Breakfast?"
"There's bacon," he offers, and follows you.

The day is tedious, and you make little progress on Complacency. It's frustrating. It's almost a relief once the time comes around to leave for New Haven. You drive in companionable silence, then speak up. "I haven't heard from the FBI in some time."

Luke glances at you. "You could reach out."

"I could." You're not in the habit of doing so, though, happy to accept their reports and send the occasional large detail when it crops up. Instead…

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 8:26 --

TT: How are you?
TG: sorry im a little uh
TG: hungover
TT: If you need to rest, don't stop on my account.
TG: i can talk to you
TT: I'm just checking in.
TG: everything is ok
TG: you saw the search results right
TG: not much but ill take it
TT: Yes, yesterday's results were promising.
TG: anything else
TT: We lost some of those Crockercorp experimented on.
TG: oh shit
TG: so theyre probably
TG: i dunno
TG: hooked up to shit
TT: Probably.
TG: fuck
TT: We'll figure out a way to save those people. All of them.
TG: i think the clown ones are lost for good
TG: they dont seem uh
TG: really human anymore
TT: We can try.
TG: i dont want to talk about this
TT: All right.
TT: What do you want to talk about?
TG: nevermind
TG: i should go
TT: Dave.
TT: Come on.
TG: I'm leaving to start work on sbahj2
TG: Were filming in ca this time
TT: Have a good time.
TG: you can visit
TG: i mean
TG: we have windows
TG: and
TG: jesus christ
TT: What?

You don't know if this is concerning or amusing, to be honest.

TG: not conscious enough for this conversation
TT: This conversation shouldn't be particularly taxing.
TG: yeah well
TG: whatever
TT: Is there something you want to say?
TG: no
TG: just that you can visit if you want
TT: Of course I'd like to see you.
TG: ok
TG: let me know when
TT: All right.
TG: oh uh
TG: i meant to say
TG: i saw you on derse
TT: Oh?

You frown; you don't like the sound of this.

TG: just dont be stupid
TT: What do you mean?
TG: you know what i mean
TG: we need those extra lives
TT: I need to go.
TG: ok

-- terminalTelessila [TT] ceased pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 8:32 --

The Skaia property where you've placed Dr. Kintzler is a nice small home on the outskirts of New Haven, and you approach the innocuous-looking house with Luke behind you. After a knock or two, Kintzler opens the door and you flash a half-smile. "Hello," you greet him.


"What's he doing here?" Kintzler asks, then adds, "No offense."

"Can we come in?" you ask instead of answering that, and Kintzler moves aside to let the both of you inside.

"Thank you for coming," Kintzler says, hurriedly shutting the door behind you and reactivating the security system. "Come, sit. Dinner's ready."

You've never been good at dinners. They require a lot of human interaction, which isn't something at which you're particularly skilled. Still, you sit by Luke and take off your HUBTOPBAND. Conversation is stilted until everyone has food served out, and you speak first. "There's a reason we haven't told people any part of the truth."

"Because mystique works as an appeal to authority in your favor?" Kintzler says mildly.

"No." You mix your gravy into your mashed potatoes. "Because Dave and I, and Jade English, were born into circumstances that give us a greater understanding of the cosmic events around the creature you call Betty Crocker's reign."

"So tell me," Kintzler says, leaning forward with clear fascination in his eyes. "What are these
circumstances?"

You'd like him to continue taking you seriously. "They're very cosmic."

He shrugs. "Try me."

Luke speaks up. "Sometimes these things don't make sense."

"So make them make sense," Kintzler goes on, not harshly.

You smile wryly for a moment. "I would love for my life to make sense." But you cut him off with a gesture before he can interject again. "I'm not from here. I'm from somewhere else. Somewhen else."

"Somewhen," he repeats. "The future?"

"Not exactly." The paragraph by paragraph Lalonde explanation is tempting to give, but you just can't do it. It's too absurd for anyone's reckoning. "Consider something more parallel to our experiences now, with very different results."

"Parallel universes." Kintzler stares at you. "You're from a parallel universe?"

That's probably the only way to explain it. "Or something similar, yes."

"And that's why Crockercorp has a healthy fear of you," he goes on.

"And why Jade English was able to see the future and past," Luke says, watching you carefully. "I see."

"This can't get out," you clarify. "We need people to take us seriously, and the batterwitch conspiracy is insane enough. If it gets out that we think we're from a parallel universe, we won't stand a chance. So this never leaves this house, never leaves your mouths or fingertips, do you understand?"

"Yes," Kintzler agrees right away. "I just have one more question."

You nod. "Go on."

"In that other universe." He pauses. "Did we win, or did we lose?"

It's a complicated question, isn't it? "Things were different there. She was there, I think, but she wasn't a constant evil force pervading every aspect of life. She saved that for this universe."

"But some ability you had in that universe carried into ours." Luke is clearly reading you with his 'ears' right now.

"Jade's, mine," you agree. "Dave's... hasn't, but I suppose there's time yet." Oh, that's an unintended joke only you'll get. How funny.

"You have abilities," Kintzler presses.

"I know things." You suppose that's the crux of it. "I know and I remember."

"That's incredibly vague, Miss Lalonde."

"Yes," you agree. "But it's both very complicated and very simple. I know a great many things, most of which are beyond normal human comprehension, and the knowledge of which I wouldn't burden
Something strange is alight in Kintzler's eye. "What if I want to be burdened?"

"You don't." You smile for an instant. "And, to be honest, I don't trust you with more than that."

"As, I suppose, you shouldn't." He leans back. "I think we can dispense with the combative back and forth now. If I accept that the person in the middle of the machinations of Crockercorp both exists and is an alien species, then I can accept that the young people who she fears are from her original parallel universe. Yes?"

"Oh, I hope so," you say. "I would prefer it."

"Then that's what you'll get." He smiles, and you like it. It figures, you suppose, that you would strike a friendship with someone in a tense back and forth pressing for hidden and unknowable things. "None of this can go into Publius?"

You shake your head. "Not a word, Dr. Kintzler."

"I won't," he swears.


Kintzler eyes Luke. "Back to my first point: why is he here?"

"Because he deserved to hear the same thing you did," you say honestly. "Luke has been the most faithful of anyone we've had on board, and... I figured he deserved some small explanation. Two birds, one stone."


"So, the other thing," Kintzler says briskly. "Your book."

"Yes?" you return.

He chews thoughtfully before answering. "Crockercorp's mobilizing Christian groups to boycott and burn copies."

It's not good news; you've been majjyking every copy that leaves the printer, and hundreds less are the loss of a lot of work. "I see."

"Don't tell me that tome has anything to do with anything," Kintzler asks after a pause.

"It's complicated," you offer, and smile faintly.

"I don't understand anything," Kintzler says, sounding deeply annoyed.

"Welcome to the rebellion," Luke says, a touch cheery.

You laugh briefly, despite yourself. "True enough."

Conversation is stilted again for a moment or two, then Kintzler launches into discussion of his source's most recent findings on mutation research and you get wrapped up in the details until you realize how late it's become. "We should go," you say. "You know. I could come here again."

"You could," Kintzler says, a smile only briefly on his face but in his eyes nevertheless. "If you don't
"Dinner was good," Luke supplies.

"Thank you." Kintzler seems at least a little more charitable towards Luke now. "I'll see you out."

You nod to Kintzler as you leave, and glance at Luke, who catches up to you with an easy stride. "That could have gone worse," you say.

"I don't expect the whole truth, Rose," Luke says; you didn't expect it and that obviously crosses your face. "I'll follow you to the end, I don't need explanations."

"Maybe you deserve them," you return, and climb into the car.

"It would never change the fact," he says directly once he's inside, and starts the car. "I promised Jade, and… I care for you, Rose."

Anyone else might have hugged him, but you're still Rose Lalonde, no matter your various embarrassing weaknesses this even more stressful go-round. "I'm grateful," you say, "for everything you do."

He nods, and pulls out. You eye him, then open Pesterchum.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering uranianumbra [UU] at 20:20 --

TT: Are you there, UU?

UU: hello, rose!

UU: i am sorry for my absence.

UU: there are things beyond my control.

TT: Aren't there always?

UU: is there anything i might do for yoU?

TT: It's just lonely. Isn't it?

TT: Knowing so much?

TT: I know you aren't a Seer, but you seem to know… very much.

TT: Isn't it a burden?

UU: it isn't if i can help yoU.

TT: But there's so little that you're able to tell me.

UU: yes.

TT: And there are things I need to know.
UU: rose…

UU: i would ask yoU to be carefUl with yoUr desire to plUmb the depths of knowledge available to yoU.

TT: What do you mean?

UU: yoU know exactly what I mean.

TT: I don't do anything without a reason.

UU: that is not an answer, rose.

TT: You didn't ask a question.

UU: i made a sUggestion.

UU: be carefUl.

TT: Yes.

TT: I will do my best.

UU: one day i will explain more to yoU.

UU: it's jUst… very difficUlт.

TT: Anytime, UU.

TT: I'll be happy to listen.

UU: yoU shoUld rest.

TT: Maybe I should.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] ceased pestering uranianumbra [UU] at 20:25 --

You rest your head against the car door, and shortly wake up on Derse.

They're calling to you. You stare out of your window and feel your chest ache. You know this is foolish, and UU's words are still fresh, but things like that have never stopped you from doing anything risky before.

You think of visiting Dave before you go, but think better of it.

Complacency 2 is halfway done, but it's not coming together. You know you're not wise enough in the most cosmic way to reach the only person you truly need to reach with this book, and UU barely answers your questions when you do ask. You can't do this alone. It'll just be thousands of pages to no effect if you don't get help, and fame is not the ultimate goal.

You hate reaching out for help. But you have no choice. And they call to you.

You go without hesitation, the cool air of Derse behind you as you approach the creatures on the edge of the moon. They watch you and you watch them, until you speak to them as only a Seer can:

Help me. You're not begging; you're suggesting firmly, just shy of an order.
Come, they say. You go closer, unafraid, and they close around you, tentacles waving around you and you snap awake in the car, as Luke turns the engine off.

Complacency flies from your fingertips as you sit to write at home, deaf to Luke's presence.

May 2008

You're on set and the same damn shit seems to happen every day.

"I could watch that show for days," Kevin's rambling, "sometimes I just leave it on for hours, it's so fucking good, man."

You want to put your sword through your eyes and then puncture your eardrums just to make sure. If you hear one more thing about this new show by Guy "Secret Traitor to Humanity" Fieri from the normals, you're going to lose your shit. But you know what to say. "Yeah, it's real good."

"Hey," Owen cuts in, clapping you on the shoulder. "We ready to go?"

"Just about," Kevin says, snapping out of it. "We're missing Ben."

"I'll check his trailer." You snatch up a donut from craft services on your way, and eat it as you head back to the trailers; Ben's trailer is near the back. You knock on the door, wait a minute or two, then check the door. It's open, so you head in.

Ben's in street clothes, feet propped up, and that fucking Guy Fieri show is on with him rattling off dumb shit about food. NBC. You're more annoyed than you're comfortable with. "Hey," you speak up.

He doesn't answer. "Hey," you repeat, more firmly. He shakes his head, then you go to him and push at his shoulder pointedly until he looks at you. "Ben, what the fuck."

"What?" Ben blinks at you.

You have a bad fucking feeling about this. "One sec," you say, then flick to the same channel on your Skaiaashades and put on the signal translator app, cranking up the volume.

SURRENDER. SUCCUMB. WATCH AGAIN. SURRENDER. SUCCUMB. WATCH AGAIN.

After the monotone goes on a few more times, you flick it off and look over at Ben, who's pale. "Oh shit," he says.

"Yeah, try not to watch that," you say, and sigh. "Come on, we have a movie to make."

"Dude." Ben's not moving. "We don't stand a chance."

"Shut up," you suggest. "We're doing fine."

"How can we stand a chance against that?" he presses.

"Trust the plan." At least, that's what you keep telling yourself.

He shakes his head again. "You're twenty," he says, "and you have some kind of plan, and I'm just supposed to --"
You cut him off. "Just make the movies. Don't worry about the rest."

Ben looks at you. "Yeah," he says. "Uh, let me change, I'll be out soon."

Jesus. Your head hurts. "See you." You head out of the trailer and let the boys know that Ben's on his way, switching on your keyboard on your shades and starting to type.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 15:01 --

TG: hey
TG: uh
TG: i know you dont watch tv but
TG: theres bad news
TT: What?
TG: guy fieri has some stupid show about diners
TG: everyones obsessed with it
TG: because theres a huge propaganda signal on it
TG: more powerful somehow
TT: I see.
TT: NBC is hers.
TT: There's no way to knock it out.
TG: no
TT: So we have to counter somehow.
TG: we almost lost ben
TT: It might be time to take down Fieri.
TG: you said we shouldnt
TT: That was before this.

Another pester comes in. You switch over to check.

-- fuckingMagnets [FM] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 15:05 --

FM: hey

You sigh and switch over to Rose.
TG: direct attacks mean a lot of people die

TT: We went after the signal at the premiere and neither of us died.

TG: thats probably the exception not the rule

TG: our history of direct attacks hasnt been great

TT: What's the alternative, Dave?

It occurs to you.

TG: ruby

TT: What?

TG: shes got our messaging

TG: shes famous

TG: if we get her on tv somehow

TG: it might help

TT: It could be you.

TG: what the fuck would i do on tv

TT: What you always do.

TG: im not doing tv

TT: You'd do fine.

TG: i say ruby

TT: Talk to her about it then.

TG: yeah

TG: shes on tour but she might have time i dunno

TG: anyway i have to go fuck with a juggalo

TG: see you

TT: Will I?

You collect yourself with a breath.

TG: probably
TT: Great.
TG: bye

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 15:08 --

Back to the juggalo. You switch over.

TG: hey dumbfuck
TG: what do you want
FM: i have an offer for you
TG: what could you possibly have that i would want
FM: security
FM: you're not safe
FM: you've never been safe
FM: i know your shit, strider
TG: what the fuck do you know about me
FM: a fuckin lot, bro
FM: i know about rose crocker
FM: i know how you lost your greenblooded friend
FM: i can keep going

It stops you cold, before you get angry for a second too long. You think of Rose's placronym, and how you cut it in half in that hotel room.

TG: its lalonde
TG: and who told you this shit
FM: you know goddamn well who did

Nausea curls up in your stomach and slithers up your chest.

TG: who are you
FM: it's dope, bro
FM: we see what you do
FM: how you sway people
FM: we want you
FM: you could be it for us
FM: seal the deal

You feel yourself go pale, and take a breath before typing.

TG: fuck you
FM: are you serious??
FM: you'd be one of us
FM: top of the game
FM: no more fighting
TG: fucking never
TG: fuck off
FM: i’m dead serious
FM: imagine what we could do
TG: sell out the human race to an asshole alien
TG: who wouldn't want to do that
FM: if you would listen
FM: revel in the message
FM: soak that shit in
FM: you’d see
FM: this is the future
TG: hard pass
FM: ugh
FM: fuck you then
TG: yeah fuck you too
FM: offer stands
TG: im never taking your fucking offer
FM: just say the word
Shaky, you turn your Skaashades off and watch them film. You're at the poignant part that you worked with Kevin to refine, where Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff reaffirm their lifelong friendship and mend fences, the one you know is fucking stupid but it's a movie, right? Soon as they call a break, you ignore everyone else and message Ruby.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering sirenLights [TT] at 16:05 --

TG: hey rue
SL: hey!
TG: doing ok on tour
SL: it's boring tbh
TG: traveling around the country to screaming fans is boring
SL: sort of
SL: i thought i wanted this, a long time ago
SL: but i just want something normal
SL: you know?
TG: yeah

How can you ask this when she just said she wants to be fucking normal? Christ.

TG: might have a mission for you
SL: oh cool do i get to do strife
TG: probably not
SL: dammit
SL: what
TG: do you want to have your own tv show
SL: what??
TG: im serious
TG: we can probably swing that
SL: what the hell would i do on tv?
TG: i dunno
TG: but fieri is doing powerful shit on his tv show
TG: thought we could counter
SL: maybe
SL: label has me busy you know that
TG: if they give you a break
TG: itd be good for them too
SL: i'll pitch it
TG: if you dont want to
SL: it's a mission from my general
TG: not a general
SL: i know
SL: but i'll still do it for you
SL: for everyone
TG: yeah
SL: i'll see you soon
SL: next weekish
TG: good
SL: love you
TG: yeah


You clear your shades and head back to your trailer for a break; Donald calls, "Hey!" and you glance back, slowing down.

"Let's walk," he suggests, and you shrug, going off to your trailer as planned. He keeps talking as you go. "So I have questions."

"Okay," you prompt him.

"About the rebellion thing," Donald explains.

"Yeah." You pause. "Maybe we should have that conversation in my trailer."

"Yeah, I get it," he agrees, then adds, "Everything's good with Ruby?"

"I mean, yeah," you say immediately, then your brain kicks in. "But, uh, not like that."
He looks surprised. "Oh. Because, uh, everyone kinda thinks --"

"I know what everyone thinks." You shrug. "We're friends."

"I mean, that's cool," he says immediately. "Whatever your deal is, she's obviously cool."

"We go way back," you decide on. "Not as far back as me and Rose -- " no fucking kidding -- "but back."

Donald pauses. "As far back as who?"

Oh. Shit. Sometimes you forget how little you've told them. "Come on," you tell him, and hurry a little to get into the trailer.

As soon as the door is shut, Donald turns to you, his eyes obviously full of questions. "So," he says.

You're okay with this, you think. "Go ahead."

He hesitates, then says, "So she's got that signal and we're doing Sweet Bro to counteract it."

"Yeah." You think about what else he needs to know. "We have a guy doing post-production for our messaging. The studio isn't up in my business about it, thank fuck."

"Okay, I get that." He puts his hands up. "But that can't be it. The conspiracy, when I looked it up, there was all this shit about the food and people being killed or experimented on."

It's not like you have a lot you can say to that. "Yeah. That's all happening."

He breathes out sharply. "Shit."

You think of what to say. "Every single one of us is a part of their science experiment. The only ones of us who aren't completely, uh, plugged in, are me and Rose, and that's complicated as hell." He looks at you expectantly, and this is going to be harder to explain than the other parts. "She's. My partner. She's the one who started all this, with Jade English."

"Jade English," Donald says, realizing. "Skaia, right?"

"Yeah, she was the original revolutionary." You ache to think of Jade, lonely, betrayed by John who didn't know any better. "She helped Rose. Batterwitch killed her a few years ago."

"Shit." He wipes a hand over his face. "Okay, so Skaia's in on it. And Rose is... your partner."

"She does her own thing," you admit. "But yeah. It's been five, six years now."

"Jesus." He looks at you frankly for a second. "That sounds exhausting."

You raise an eyebrow. "No shit." Then a smile flickers across your face for just a second. "But hey, someone's gotta do it."

Donald scratches his head. "Here's the thing." You look at him, and he hesitates again. "I don't want to just act, man. I want to do something."

You open your mouth to talk, then you remember what Rose told you she saw. How did you forget? Fucking Skaia. "I don't know," you say. Maybe you're an idiot for forgetting and just dumping out all of this dangerous shit in front of him so he can get himself killed.
"I'm serious," he presses you. "I know you just want us to get the movies out there, but just knowing
this is out there and doing nothing is, shit, man, it feels shitty."

What the fuck are you supposed to do? He's going to die no matter what you do, somehow, even if
you feel responsible right now. If you make it worth it... "Yeah." You nod. "I can find something
for you to do."

His shoulders sink in relief. "Cool," he decides. "Let me know. Anytime."

"Course," you say, and feel like an incredible asshole.

He nods, and heads out of your trailer after a glance back at you. You sink onto the couch and drop
your head back. You don't message anyone. You don't think anyone can make this better for you. It
is what it is.

There's a knock on your trailer door after a few minutes, and you sigh, pushing yourself up. A PA is
looking at you when you open the door. "Mr. Smith wants you to look over something," he says,
and you nod, following him back to set.

As you walk, you pass a group of crew members clustered around a cell phone, and Fieri's voice
rises above their excited rambling. You feel sick, then angry. At least anger is useful.

You're cool by the time you get to Kevin. The movie needs you. Fieri can wait. You hope, anyway.

October 2008

Luke finds you unconscious on the bathroom floor again.

It's the second time in the last three weeks. You can't pinpoint exactly what's happening, which is
troubling. It doesn't feel like sleep, and you haven't seen Derse for months. Still, you push it back.

Complacency has swallowed you whole. Your back aches from hunching over your laptop for hours
on end, and you eat half a meal at most to get back to the document. You reread, edit, think about it
in the shower, talk to yourself in a murmur to work things out.

It's the most important thing you can do: she's the only one who matters. If you turn her head even
slightly from her plans on Earth, to think more about him than the rest of you, it affects everything.
You know that's what UU meant all that time ago. It took BCCorp New York for you to realize
what you really needed to do.

"You're all right though," Luke is saying to you as you type. "You look pale."

"I'm fine," you say patiently.

Calmasis let the jester walk a step or two behind, a respectable distance, and

You get pestered. You sigh heavily and switch over.

-- undyingumbrage [uu] jeered terminalTelesilla [TT] at 10:31 --

uu: HELLO SEER.

This is new. You wake up a bit more from your Complacency haze.
TT: Hello.

TT: Who are you?

uu: SOMEONE BEYOND EVEN YOuR uNDERSTANDING.

uu: I AM A GOD TO YOu.

TT: Are you, then.

uu: IF YOu'RE NOT STuPID.

TT: Is there something I can do for you?

uu: WE'LL GET TO THAT.

uu: FIRST OF ALL, YOu CAN STOP WRITING THAT BOOK.

uu: IT'S EMBARRASSING.

uu: YOu HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOu'RE TALKING ABOUT.

TT: On the contrary.

TT: I think I have quite a good idea of what's going on.

uu: I CAN'T BELIEVE MY SISTER THINKS YOu'RE IMPORTANT.

uu: WITHOuT YOuR MAGIC YOu WOuLD BE NO ONE.

uu: JuST AN OBNOXIOuS FANFICTION WRITER.

TT: Yet here I am. With majjyk, and importance.

TT: Or, at least, many people seem to be suffering under that idea that I am important.

TT: Her Imperious Condescension being one of them.

TT: And doesn't that grant me importance?

uu: SHE'LL MURDER YOu.

TT: I assume eventually, yes.

uu: I THOuGHT HuMANS FEARED DEATH.

TT: Some do.

TT: I'm not one of them.

uu: THAT SOuNDS LIKE A LIE TO ME.

uu: NO NEED TO LIE TO ME.

TT: Even if I was lying,
TT: I wouldn't feel particularly comforted in sharing the truth with someone like you.

uu: LIKE ME?

uu: WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

uu: HAVE I upset you?

This is getting stupid. You know when you're being trolled.

TT: So you're related to UU.

uu: Unfortunately.

uu: My idiot sister.

TT: You seem to dislike her.

TT: Why is that?

uu: EVERYTHING ABOUT HER.

uu: EVERYTHING.

uu: I CAN'T WAIT TO KILL HER.

TT: Hmm.

TT: Do you really feel that's the best way to solve your problems?

uu: VIOLENCE IS ALWAYS THE ANSWER.

uu: YOU KNOW THIS.

uu: YOU PLAY BY HUMAN RULES BECAUSE OF YOUR PARTNER.

uu: BUT GIVEN THE CHANCE YOU WOULD BE JUST LIKE ME.

TT: I don't think so.

uu: LIKE I SAID.

uu: NO NEED TO LIE TO ME.

uu: I WON'T EVEN TELL MY SISTER.

TT: Thanks, but no thanks.

uu: I THINK YOU'RE TAKING THE COWARD'S WAY OUT.

uu: DESTROY YOUR ENEMIES.

uu: THAT'S WHAT THEY DESERVE.

TT: Thank you for the advice.
uu: OF COURSE, SEER.
TT: Is that all?
uu: ONE MORE THING.
uu: YOU HAVE BEEN DISGUSTING.
uu: THE SMUT YOU COMMIT WITH THE DAVE HUMAN.
TT: I haven't committed 'smut' with the Dave human in quite some time, actually.
uu: I'M NOT REFERRING TO THE HORRIFIC ACTS YOU COMMITTED WITH HIM SOME TIME AGO.
uu: I MEAN… THE LOOKS ON YOUR FACES…
uu: THE STOLEN KISSES…
uu: OH, *YES*.
TT: I see.
TT: I'm sorry to offend?
uu: FILTHY.
uu: WHEN YOU SPOKE WORDS OF LOVE TO HIM.
uu: YOU DEBASE YOURSELF.
TT: Does it trouble you to see acts of love?
TT: Or titillate you?
TT: It's difficult to tell.
uu: IT DOESN'T MATTER.
uu: IN RETURN FOR THE ADVICE I HAVE GIVEN YOU, YOU WILL WRITE SOMETHING FOR ME.
TT: What?
uu: YOU WILL WRITE ME A SHORT PORNOGRAPHIC STORY.
uu: I KNOW YOU ARE MORE THAN CAPABLE.
TT: You want me to write pornography.
uu: I THOUGHT YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO BE THE INTELLIGENT ONE.
TT: All right.
TT: Why not.
TT: What would you like?
uu: OOH… YES, I KNOW WHAT.

uu: THE DAVE HuMAN.

uu: HE CONFESSES HIS LOVE TO YOu.

uu: HE TENDERLY COMMITs TO YOu.

TT: You're joking, right?

uu: THIS IS NOT A JOKE.

uu: YOu WILL WRITE THIS PORNOGRAPHY FOR ME.

TT: Or what?

uu: OR I WILL KILL MY SISTER.

TT: You've already said you're going to do that anyway.

uu: I KNOW YOu CARE FOR HER.

TT: You know, I already agreed to write this for you.

TT: I'm just asking if you're joking.

uu: YOu MOCK MY TASTE IN SMuT.

TT: I would never.

uu: YOu WILL WRITE.

TT: I will.

TT: Give me a minute.

You figure the only way to win this troll is to commit.

TT: "Dave wraps his arms around Rose in a firm but gentle hug, and withdraws to give her a sweet, devoted kiss on the forehead. 'I love you,' he murmurs, 'and I will be with you forever.'"

uu: OH SHIT.

uu: OHHHHH, *SHIT*.

uu: THAT'S DISGuSTING.

TT: Thank you.

uu: I WILL BE BACK FOR MORE.

uu: BE PREPARED.

TT: I doubt it.
You have no idea what that just was, but it was a lot, and it's going to take a minute to soak in.

Finally, you message her.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering uranianumbra [UU] at 10:45 --

TT: UU?

TT: I'm concerned.

She doesn't answer. *Complacency* pushes at your mind, the thoughts of the jester… but the way it threatens to overwhelm you briefly frightens you before you pull yourself together.

Maybe Publius will take your mind off things.

Kintzler and Luis have set up an encrypted server full of all the data your efforts have harvested. It's a long process to untangle all of it -- some documents are as short as one page, some whole folders of information in one long PDF, and it's an effort to set up everything in preparation for writing. Still, the three of you have a running document on the server that's a preliminary outline, and it's incredibly soothing to dig into the horrible details of Crockercorp and be an academic about what feels like the slow end of the world.

You don't know how long you work until Luke touches your shoulder and snaps you out of it.

"You should eat," he says. "Come on."

Hesitant, you get to your feet, though your fingertips ache for *Complacency* all at once.

(Hours later, at a time a sane person would be sleeping, you finish the eight hundred pages of *Complacency 2*, under a year's work.

You start the next.)

---

*December 2008*

Happy birthday to you or some shit.

Today's your birthday, tomorrow is Rose's. You've tried to make yourself ask before now, and you're not doing a great job of it, but here goes try number three. She hasn't been answering right away, even though you know she's in front of her computer writing all the time or working on Publicius or whatever it's called, but you're going to keep that Rose's business unless it gets to be days or something.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 15:20 --

TG: hey
TG: its my birthday
TG: want some fucking cake or something
TG: i wont even buy crocker mix

Nothing. You go through your email until a response comes in about a half hour later.

TT: You want me to come over.
TG: i mean if you want to
TT: I don't want cake.
TG: less work for me
TT: Plug in a window, but it'll be a bit.
TG: thats fine
TT: I'll see you.
TG: yeah


You switch away from Pesterchum on your shades and look around. Not that it matters, but the hotel suite looks fine. You're fine. You just plug in a window and try to relax until Rose finally appears through it and smooths her dress.

It's not a big deal. It's just Rose. "Hey," you say. "Do you want a drink or something?"

"Sure." Rose takes a seat on the couch and watches you cross to the bar you and Ruby set up in lieu of paying through the ass for liquor through the hotel. "Happy birthday, Dave."

"Can drink legally now," you say. "Not that that was stopping me."

"Have you been drinking much?" she asks.


"I see," she says, considering that. "I suppose that's one excuse."

"There's also the slow fucking pace this plan is moving at." You pour your own whiskey. "I feel like I'm gonna die of old age before we actually do anything."

"It is a bit glacial." Rose is clearly watching you as you move across the room, and you don't know what to think about that, so you just hand her the drink and sit a little away from her on the couch. "Still. We've survived five years since Maryland."

"Five years. Jesus." You drink, then glance up at her. "That's gotta mean something, right?"

"Yes." Her expression's unreadable again, which is sort of readable in itself; it means she really doesn't want to think about what she's going to say next. "It must mean that our plan plays into hers."
"Great." You down more whiskey.

"I still don't think that means all is lost, though," she clarifies.

You shake your head. "If this is all based on some Skaia shit, Rose, then she knows how it turns out already."

Rose shakes her head at you, too. "She might know one detail of how it turns out. Not all of it."

That's a point, you guess. "What if that detail is 'we fucking die' though?"

"Do you think it's really that simple?"

This isn't how you want to spend your birthday. "I don't know." You rest your head against the back of the couch. "I wanted something normal for today, Rose. I haven't had a normal birthday since I was thirteen in a different universe."

Rose seems to switch gears fast enough. "I would have bought you a gift, but we haven't done birthdays in quite some time."

"No," you figure. "We haven't."

"I've been… busy." She glances away from you. "I haven't been thinking about much else but the work. Majjyking Complacency 2 has taken up a lot of my time."

"I know." You find yourself watching her as she steadily focuses on a wall while drinking. "You haven't been answering a lot."

"I know." She makes a little half-sigh sound. "Dave."

"Whatever," you answer without missing a beat. "If you've got it figured out. Of course you do."

She turns to look at you, and something stupid and hopeless stirs inside you until you clamp it down. You don't know how long the silence is, but as you open your mouth to say something that's probably stupid, Rose's head falls back, the drink falls out of her hand as her arm drops, and you close the distance between the two of you immediately. "Hey," you urge, catching her by the shoulders. "Hey, Rose."

Nothing. She's out. You shake her a little. "Hey, wake up, what the fuck." Nothing. You fight back panic, thoughts of conspiracies, all that dumb shit. "Rose!"

Ruby walks into the hotel room as you're shaking Rose again, and stops. "Um, hey," she says.

"She passed out," you say, being firm so you don't sound helpless. "She's not waking up."

Ruby comes over to you and Rose, and nudges you away to check a few things. "She's breathing real slow," she says, "and her pulse is slow too."

"Happy fucking birthday," you mutter, and catch Rose's hand before you stop yourself; just as you're about to drop it, Rose's eyes flutter open and you hurriedly do it before she notices. "Jesus Christ, Rose."

"What?" Rose asks, clearly out of it.

"You passed out," Ruby says, and steps away. "Are you okay?"
"Oh, I'm fine, thank you," Rose says casually, and glances at her hand. "Where's my drink?"

"You dropped it." You're not all that impressed right now. "Rose, come on."

Rose doesn't look at either of you, and Ruby puts her hands up and leaves to go in the bedroom. There's silence for a second before you say, "Rose," and she says, "Everything's fine."

You cut her off from going on with a gesture. "You just passed out."

"I appreciate your concern," she starts smoothly, "but -- "

"Don't." You're not in the mood. "Just tell me what's going on."

"Maybe I should go." She shifts on the couch. "I'll send you a birthday present soon."

You stop her with a hand to her shoulder, pinning her just barely to the couch; she looks up at you, and oh shit, oh no, you know that soft but focused expression, you know what comes next. You stand, snatch up your drink, play it cool. "Don't go," you say, not exactly looking at her.

"I'll see you soon." She stands, and approaches you; you stand completely still as she places a kiss on your cheek. "Happy birthday, Dave."

"Happy birthday, Rose," you get out, without doing a goddamn thing, thank fuck. She leaves via the window, and you finish your drink, clean up the mess Rose left, unplug the window, and call, "Ruby!"

"What?" Ruby calls back.

"We're going out!"

She immediately looks out. "No shit?"

"No shit," you confirm. She checks to see if Rose is still with you, looks relieved that she's gone, and goes back into the room, to change or something. It's not long before you're in a club, two drinks in, relaxed in a dark corner.

"We should dance," Ruby muses.

"Don't think so," you say. "People take me seriously right now."

"That bad, huh?"

"Never danced, so my guess is yeah."

"You never know." She smiles. "We could've done this at the hotel."

"I wanted to get out." You shrug. "If you want to dance, go ahead."

"You're really not even going to try?" Ruby nudges you. "I think you might have fun."

Is it that obvious you need to snap out of something? "Do I seem like a dancer to you?"

"I've seen you with a sword," she whispers, "and I know you've got rhythm." You shake your head at her, and she laughs. "Fine! I'll go by myself."

"I'll keep myself busy," you answer, and rest back against the plush of the seat as she goes. You
watch her dance a little, feeling like a goddamn moron, thinking of all kinds of dumb morose shit, and wave over a waitress for another drink. Just as she goes and you're ready to pester Rose like a fucking idiot, the rat-a-tat of machine gun shots ring out and screaming breaks through the noise of the club music.

You're not ready for this at all.

You draw your sword and go into the fray, but there are already people dead on the floor. You make the mistake of checking for Ruby before you duck just in time to avoid more machine gun spray. "Check your ten!" Ruby shouts over the noise, and you cut through a juggalo, rushing to run through a second, when at least two guys yank you back and someone crams a cloth into your mouth and nose that reeks. Everything goes dark.

You blink awake, eyelids heavy, and yank at your hands, your arms, bound behind you on the chair you're sitting in. Ruby's right in front of you, head lolled in front of her as she's bound, too. "Rue," you whisper.

"You let your guard down, man." Oh, shit. Even with your brain muddled as hell, you know that voice. "I'm almost disappointed."

"I don't want your fucking job offer." You stare at Dope. "No matter what you do to me or her."

"We'll see about that." Dope gestures Jay forward; Jay's carrying some kind of needle gun thing. "See, we're taking a different fuckin' tactic. We heard this girl wants to be real famous, on TV and all that shit, so we thought, why not join forces?"

"If you're gonna torture her, just do it," you say flatly. "It's not gonna convince either of us."

"It's not about torture, bro," Jay says. "It's about seeing the light." He lifts the gun thing. "She'll look real nice in black and white."

You bite back a response and yank at the rope, but it's too tight; you just have to sit and watch as Jay grabs Ruby by the hair to yank her head up straight and bare her neck, before shooting the gun into the back of her neck. Ruby flinches and pants awake. "Oh god, oh god, oh god," comes out of her mouth, and you strain at the chair.

"Fuck you, what did you do," you snap off coolly.

"It'll take a few hours or something for it to really kick in," Dope says, "but it's real fuckin' effective."

"Maybe we should keep him here to watch the chip kick in?" Jay suggests. "Then we pass him off to her."

You can't let on about the panic flooding through you, so you focus on the other part instead. "Oh, so you didn't tell the fish bitch about this plan? I'm shocked."

"We figure you can be bait for Lalonde," Dope says, shrugging. "Then we end it all."

"Unless," Jay says, "we chip him too."

You don't like the sound of that at all, but you keep your face blank.

Dope considers that. "Yeah, we could," he says.

"Imperiacorp chips, right?" You're not fucking stupid, and you don't read the Crockercorp stuff as
much as Rose does, but you read enough. "You just put an Imperiacorp chip in her."

"She's one of us now," Dope says -- you guess he's dodging the question -- and grins at you. "Maybe you should be, too."

"You turn me, nothing changes," you fire back. "We know what to do against you now."

Jay gets up in your face. "Face it, man. You lose."

For some reason, you're not that worried, for yourself, at least. "Do what you need to do," you say, with as much of a shrug as you can manage.

Jay tosses the gun to Dope, who does something behind you; you think about what Rose said about your plan playing into the batterwitch's right before there's a jab in the back of your neck and you flinch. "Jesus fucking Christ," comes bursting out of your mouth, and you yank the chair forward, awkwardly nearly falling to the floor before Jay catches you and shoves the chair back onto its legs, near-cackling.

Dope crosses back into your vision. "Why don't you sit back and enjoy the ride?" he taunts. "We'll leave you to it."

"Fuck you," you wheeze out, still reeling from the pain to the point that you barely register the two of them leaving. Finally you pry your gaze up and look at Ruby. "Hey. Rue."

"Can you feel it yet?" She looks completely wild-eyed now. "Is it just me? Because holy shit."

"What?" you press her. "What's going on?"

Her voice goes up in panic. "I need to get out. Get me out!" She starts struggling more.

"Ruby," you try again. "Breathe, tell me what's going on."

"I can hear it," she gets out. "Or I can feel it, or both, I don't know, it's, it's a lot, I can't think -- "

You flinch; something is surging through you, into your brain, through your posture. You hear it; you feel it, the horrible numbness, the surrender. You need to get out. "Oh, fuck this," you decide in a split second, then it occurs to you. "Shades," you spit out, and the voiceprint comes up. "Dave Strider." The menus open.

"Dave..." You hear Ruby crying. "Dave, I can't think."

"I'm here. I'll get us out." You shake your head slightly. "Pesterchum, Rose. Talk to text." It pops up the screen, and you start talking.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pester ing terminalTelesilla [TT] at 21:32 --

TG: rose

TG: icp got me and ruby

TG: bad shit

TG: we need help now
TT: Located you.
TT: Ilya and Katrina may be there already.
TT: I'll check.
TT: If they're not, I'll be there as soon as I can.
TG: yeah
TT: Just hold on.
TG: yeah

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 21:34 --

"Close Pesterchum." You look up at Ruby, and she's a complete mess of tears and panic; you get angry as hell all at once. "Rue, I'm here, talk to me."

"I want to remember," she gets out. "I want to, I want to be me."

For some reason, it's not hitting you as hard, even though you can feel it on the edges of your mind. "Remember when we met?" you try. "You were at your dad's office and Luke and I came to warn you about Crockercorp."

Ruby looks up at you. "I published the data," she says, forcing her breaths calm. "You thought it was a goddamn mistake."

"It was," you say, "but you got out. Years now."

"Years with you, Strider." It looks like she's tensing every muscle in her body just to keep a grip. "We were doing so well -- "

You shake your head. "Ruby, stop it -- "

"If this is how it ends," she presses, "then… we did our best, Dave."

"We didn't do years of recruiting just to get knocked out by a bunch of fucking clowns," you retort. "Just hold out a little bit longer."

She starts to laugh, and it turns into sobs, then coughs. "They want her," she manages. "They want Rose."

"All they'll get from Rose is a hit of magic," you say; now you're forcing your own breaths calm. "Ruby, talk to me."

"I just want to close my eyes," she answers, head lolling to the side. "Let me close my eyes."

You don't know what the right thing to do is. "One more thing."

"Dave," Ruby begs. "Please."

"Remember that morning at NYC HQ?" Being sentimental is hard, but it might be the thing that keeps her from going full Crockercorp. "The first time we talked for real. You found me awake and you talked to me."
She does that half-crying, half-laughing thing. "You tried so hard to be cool."

"I am cool." That gets a little more laughter-crying, and you don't know where to go from here. "Rue?"

"Yeah, Dave." She manages to look you in the face.

"Close your eyes."

She does, and you do your best to stay calm instead of letting the horrible trickles of shitty propaganda leaking completely into your brain prepare you for those dumbass clowns. It feels like forever that you just sit there breathing until you hear footsteps, then a fight break out at the doorway; you see a juggalo guy and girl rush towards the two of you, pulling out weapons. "Jesus Christ," you get out, but then the guy goes behind you and the ropes give from around your wrists, and the girl pulls Ruby from the chair. "Oh," you realize.

"It's us," Ilya says hurriedly. "Come, we haven't much time."

Ruby shoves at Katrina and stumbles away. "Have to go," she's mumbling. "Have to find -- "
You don't care that your arms hurt like hell, you go to her and grab her arms. "Oh hell no. You're coming with us now."

"My orders," she says; something in her eyes looks dazed.

"Your orders are from your fucking General," you say bluntly. "Come with us, now."

She cringes, and buries her face in your shoulder. You look to Ilya and Katrina. "Let's go."

Katrina nods and pulls Ilya along; you do the same with Ruby, barely looking back as you rush out of the warehouse. You climb into the backseat of the getaway car with Ruby, holding onto her hands because you have a bad feeling about what's going to happen if you just let her sit there armed to the teeth with those fuckers in her head, and Katrina drives off.

You can still feel them in your head, just along the corners of your thoughts, so you focus on simple goddamn steps. Save Ruby, get out of here alive, get those fucking chips out. "We need to go to Luke."

"We've got a window nearby that can take you right there," Katrina assures you right away.

"Good." You wish you could thank them, but you're gripping Ruby's hands too tightly, focused on staying yourself and keeping her her, until she throws herself into your arms and buries her face in your shoulder. You stay there until the car pulls up to a building and then you realize an instant too slow that one of Ruby's guns is in her hand before she jams it under your chin.

You keep breathing, and send Ilya and Katrina a warning look as they go for their weapons. "Ruby," you say, "it's me."

"I know who you are." She looks incredibly confused. "I know what you're doing, Strider."

"What I'm doing is trying to get us somewhere safe. Come on." You shift away from the gun, pushing it away from yourself. "I've got you, Rue."

"Help me," Ruby demands of Ilya and Katrina, and Katrina immediately gets out of the car, opens Ruby's side, and hauls her out. She flails, but Katrina slips something around her wrists and binds
"Let's go," Katrina says. You and Ilya look at each other, then hurry to follow the two of them into the apparently abandoned building. In a small room that must have been an office once, there's a FENESTRATED WINDOW on the floor.

"Take her," Ilya says, "we've got the rest figured out."

"Are you -- " you start, but Ilya pushes at your shoulder.

"Take her."

You don't fight it; you haul Ruby over your shoulder, hold onto her tight, and take her through the window. You land in Rose's apartment and immediately set Ruby down in a chair, dropping to a knee in pure exhaustion. "Jesus," you mutter.

Rose and Luke are there in less than seconds. "What happened?" Rose asks.

"Microchips." You haul yourself to your feet. "In the back of our necks. We need them out. Now."

Rose looks to Luke, who runs off to get a box. "Ruby first," you say right away. "I'm, I'm doing a lot better than she is."

"Let me go!" You hate the sound of Ruby's voice now, so incredibly fucking distressed. It's not her at all. "I need to go, I have my orders -- "

"All right, move her so she's facedown on the couch," Luke orders, and the three of you get to work. Fuck knows where he got all this shit, but Luke has a ton of medical supplies including something that knocks Ruby completely unconscious as he starts to dig the chip out. You make yourself watch because you're not going to wuss out, but it doesn't make you feel all that fucking great about having it done to yourself.

"It's Imperiacorp," Rose says quietly. "But worse, I think."

"I think they upgraded," you say, as steady as you can. Your head feels like it's splitting. "From just a little propaganda stream to the signal itself."

"The signal itself." She pauses. "The one created by the…"

"Yeah."

Luke gestures to get your attention, a tiny chip clipped between the medical tweezers thing in his hand. "Let me put in some stitches, then I'll do you, Dave."

Oh, fucking great. "Do I get a scar?"

"You'll be so cool," Rose says, tone Sahara dry.

Luke fishes some more supplies out of the box, and you look to Rose; you can see that you look like shit just from the way she's looking at you. "You'll be all right," she says.

There are ghosts of words in your brain. "Yeah. Great."

Rose sends you that tiny smile of hers, and it freezes you in that second, cuts through all the propaganda; it's that feeling that terrifies you, pure and clear and deep into your bones. "You can stay here," she says. "To recuperate."
"Jesus, we're gonna have to," you say, and sink down into a chair. "I need to get to L.A."

"We'll fly you out as soon as we're sure you're all right." She sits down by you, not too near you, careful, but through the haze of the signal trying to drag pieces away from you, you can feel her there.

"Your turn," Luke says. You never thought getting the back of your neck cut open would be a relief, but that's your fucking life.

"Don't let me die," you suggest to Rose.

"Not even once," she promises, and leads you off to a bed. You welcome unconsciousness.

---

Not long in the future…

An ANCIENT EMPRESS, only for a second, thinks of a book as she kneels before the creature that considers himself her master.

"HONK," he declares, and she understands, drawing herself to her feet, still deferential.

"Soon," she says. "I'm priming them good." It'll be years. What are years to either of them? More than time enough to take her time, pounce, and terrorize the tiny useless creatures below.

His eyes flicker. She barely meets his gaze.

"Trust me," the EMPRESS says, and a smile creeps across her face. "They won't know what hit 'em." He dismisses her with a wave of his hand, and she sweeps off to find the AGENT.

The AGENT's staring at a FENESTRATED WINDOW aimed directly at the boy, who gestures and rambles in front of a microphone. She clears her throat.

"Be ready."

The AGENT eyes her, and nods. The time will come. He's impatient by nature, but he wants blood, even if he has to wait for it. Lucky for him; if there's anything she has to offer, it's blood.

Her respiteblock is useless without a recuperacoon. She lies on a bed, useless thing, no sopor left to keep the dreams of blood at bay. There's nothing she can do but make her ancestral dreams come true.

She drifts to sleep.

---

March 2009

Luke sends you to sleep, and you welcome the darkness that envelops you shortly after you close your eyes.

You're cold, watched, loved, at the edge of the abyss. There is no light.

You can't breathe. The dreams flow through you. You surrender.

You wake after what feels like a century in the dark.

The encrypted line has only a brief statement as you open it on your HUBTOPBAND. The juggalos
You answer, blinking heavy sleep from your eyes. We'll keep an eye on them. Be careful.

No one answers.

You open Complacency 3. It's the only thing that matters. You're deaf to Luke outside your door. When your vision swims hours later, you take out a bottle of gin.

The burn down your throat is welcome. Then, you feel something besides the tinges of majjyk flickering down the skin of your arms and back. Then you feel human.

May 2009

You wake up to your Skaishades chirping a half hour before you have to get up for your flight. Finally, SBAHJ is done filming, and you can leave LA to go home. You grumble, glance to see that Ruby's already up and out of bed as usual, and grab your shades to see what's up.

-- burntPromises [BP] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 5:21 --

BP: Good morning.

BP: I have something for you.

TG: go for it

You're already tired and you just woke up.

BP: I found a way to access the chip you gave me.

BP: The one they implanted in you.

TG: access

BP: I used some of the blueprints we had to build a small machine.

BP: It was... potent.

TG: you turned it on

BP: It was fine.

TG: goddammit mark

BP: The mechanics behind this machine and the other are totally different.

BP: This isn't the point.

BP: Dave, I may be able to reverse the effects.

That wakes you up.
TG: what do you mean

BP: I'm saying that I may be able to block the effects of the signal.

TG: how

BP: It's extremely technical.

BP: And I have some difficulty explaining how this alien technology actually works.

BP: Any such machine would be limited. I don't know how to do a large scale block yet.

TG: limited how

BP: To one person, maybe.

BP: And I would need these chips.

TG: what chips

BP: The ones they implanted you with.

TG: you need fucking imperiacorp chips

BP: Yes.

TG: goddammit

You try to think, try to lead, try to do this right.

TG: so what would we need

BP: I made a list of everything we need already.

BP: In case you were willing.

TG: you realize this is crazy

BP: I realize there is a way to completely block the signal.

TG: you still havent done it though

BP: Give me the chips, the supplies, and a few days.

BP: Please.

BP: I think this is what I was meant to do.

BP: Why I was able to find you.

TG: youre destined to do this or something
BP: Maybe.
TG: sure
BP: Don't you believe in destiny?
TG: destiny believes in me unfortunately
BP: You might as well accept it.
TG: im doing this shit aren't i
BP: You are.
BP: So, what now?
TG: ill find some people to get the chips
BP: Should I talk to Rose?

You hesitate.

TG: no
TG: i got this
BP: All right.
TG: ill let you know when its ready
BP: Thank you, Dave.
TG: yeah

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 5:29 --

Rose is online. But you really need to get ready. Shit. You push yourself out of bed, change, and get ready, only to have Ruby knock on the bathroom door. "Time to go," she says briskly.

"Yeah." You don't feel much like talking, feel the weight of fucking destiny on your shoulders, and the two of you make your way to the airport in mostly silence. You and Ruby sign some autographs at the airport (her disguise of a hoodie and shades doesn't really work, and you're too fucking conspicuous all the time, thank you Tony's subliminal messaging skills). She only talks to you, really talks to you, when you're both on the plane.

"Hey," she says finally. "You all right?"

"Shit," you say instead of answering her, and hurriedly open up Pesterchum on your shades.

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 8:03 --

TG: hey
TG: mark has a plan
TG: needs imperiacorp chips
TG: i want to send a team

Stupidly, you're dreading an answer.

TT: You want to steal from Crockercorp.
TG: yeah
TG: he says we could block the signal entirely
TG: for one person anyway
TT: Can he prove it's worth the risk?
TG: uh
TG: he says he might be able to do it
TT: Might.
TG: yeah
TT: I'm not convinced.
TG: rose
TG: you dont see all these people who cant think past it
TG: im barely holding onto some of them
TT: And you think this could hold our rebellion together.
TG: im saying we dont need people abandoning us cause of guy fieris stupid show
TT: Dave, I'm not sure this is worth the risk.
TG: whats worth the risk then
TT: Who would you send?
TG: id have ruby pick a team
TG: she knows everyone
TT: Yes, I suppose.
TT: You'd send her in?
TG: sure
TT: To BCCorp NYC.
TG: bet theres somewhere easier
TT: Dave.
TT: I am concerned about this plan.
TG: probably because it isnt your idea
TT: Dave, come on.
TG: yeah ok
TG: i want to take one risk
TG: one
TT: You're going to do it anyway.
TT: I don't know why you seem to be asking permission.
TG: i just wanted to talk to you about it
TG: and i hoped youd get it
TT: I get it.
TT: Wait.
TG: what
TT: We have a source at Crockercorp.
TT: Kintzler's.
TG: yeah
TT: They might be able to get what we need.
TG: and blow their cover
TT: Maybe, maybe not.
TG: is that less risky than mine
TT: You'd be risking Ruby.
TG: ruby knows whats up
TT: She needs to do the TV show.
TT: How is that going?
TG: shitty
TG: fucking nbc in the way
TG: but were gonna figure it out
TT: So we'll use our source.

TG: good luck convincing kintzler

TT: I'm getting better at managing him.

TG: at least someone can

TG: fuck it lets do it

TT: Good.

"Are you going to explain to me?" Ruby asks casually, leaning into you.

"Just a minute," you answer.

TG: ill be back in nyc

TT: Yeah?

TG: today

TT: I see.

TG: anyway

TG: bye

TT: Dave.

TG: yeah

TT: Is that it?

TG: think so

The awkwardness is solid in your shoulders and stomach.

TT: I think you're holding back.

TG: what

TT: You need to talk to me.

TG: do i

TT: I think so.

TG: i gotta go

TT: Dave, you're being infuriating.

TG: pretty rich coming from you
TT: I'm coming over as soon as you're back.

TG: why

TT: Because otherwise you're going to dodge me over these messages until we both die of old age.

TG: like were going to die of old age

TT: You know what I mean.

TG: whatever

TT: Let me know when you're home.

You press your hand to your face, smashing the stupid shades into your stupid face.

TG: yeah

TT: I'll see you.

TG: yeah

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 8:11 --


"We're gonna take the show to Youtube," she says, and flashes a smile. "Fuck networks."

"Fuck networks," you have to agree. "You and Tony?"

"He's ready to start as soon as we're home," she confirms.

"Are you ready?" you dare ask.

She lowers her shades and meets your gaze. "I can run my mouth about music for a half hour every day to help save the world, Strider."

"And you talked to Tony about it." This is the first you've realized. "About doing the same thing underneath your show."

"Yeah. Ask him yourself if you want."

-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering stringedSuccess [SS] at 8:14 --

TG: hey

TG: you figured out the fieri messaging right

SS: Yeah

SS: Nasty shit
But I broke it down after a few weeks

did you test it

It's a long term thing

It doesn't work right away

so we just have to try nonstop

As much as they are, yeah

quick dumb question

Yeah

do you think you're safe

Think so

Anna's on top of it

i get that your wife is a badass

but maybe you need more than that

you're too important

Thanks

i dunno that you want to be this important

being important sucks right now

I get that

so we're upping your security

If you want

yeah

Cool

well be back today

get to it this week

Gotcha

You're on edge the whole flight, and fail to make conversation with Ruby no matter how hard she tries. You glance at Ruby as soon as you're home, settle in on the couch, and sit silently, your stomach twisting in the most annoying way. Finally, you open Pesterchum.
-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 18:23 --

TG: im home

TT: I can drive or you can plug in a window.

TG: maybe not

TT: You're being avoidant.

TG: i dont see what the problem is

TT: Fine.

You're probably a fucking idiot.

TG: how are you doing

TT: What?

TG: you passed out before

TG: how are you

TT: That was a long time ago.

You don't know what to say. Is there a good time to have this conversation?

TG: so it didnt happen again

TT: What are you getting at?

TG: just wondering

TG: if youre drinking

TT: Why would you ask that?

TT: I could ask the same of you.

TG: i dont pass out

TT: Yes, I passed out.

TG: are you drinking

TT: I'm a grown woman.

TT: I'm allowed to drink.

TG: not if youre passing out

TT: I didn't pass out because of drinking.
TG: why did you pass out

TT: It's fine.

Jesus fucking Christ.

TG: thats not an answer

TT: That's all I have to say.

TG: are you drinking

TT: Not at the moment.

TG: whats going on

TT: Nothing.

TT: I have to go.

TG: rose

TG: stop for a goddamn second

TG: im serious

TT: So am I.

TT: Have a good night, Dave.

You should have let her come over.

TG: bye

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 18:30 --

You drop your face into your hands and bite back a groan.

"Want a drink?" Ruby asks from across the room.

"No," you mutter, just loudly enough to be heard.

There's a pause, then she says, "You two'll figure it out."

You know the truth. "Not fucking likely."

Ruby moves across the room, and you glance up. She sits by you and touches your face lightly. "Just talk to her," she says. "Just tell her the truth." You make a face. "Dave," she goes on, your name a sigh, "I'm serious."

"I'm so tired of people saying 'Dave,'" you grumble.

"Then stop being Dave-worthy." She taps you on the cheek. "Tell her the truth."
"Ugh."

You can maybe win a long-term propaganda war against a fish alien troll. But some shit is impossible.

---

**September 2009**

You wake up, the empty bottle of gin from last night right in your face. You push it away with some annoyance and snatch up a bottle with some gin left to ease the sting of a hangover.

"Rose?" Luke calls, and it sounds like it isn't the first time.

You push yourself up, a mild hangover prodding at your temples, and call back, "I'm up!" It's tempting to call that a lie and just lie back down, but you actually climb out of bed and pull on clothes to act like a human.

Breakfast is quiet, then Luke says, "How's Complacency going?"

"Very well." You glance at the clock. "I need to check on everything."

He eyes you, but says nothing, just nods. You dread the day he breaks the silence to speak to you openly, but instead you focus on what you need to do and put on your HUBTOPBAND.

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-- temperedGramr [TG] began pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 9:01 --

TG: hey

TG: you need to come over here now

Ugh.

TT: What's going on?

TT: Can it wait?

TG: do you think id call you over if it wasnt important

TT: I don't know.

TG: its mark

TG: he has something

Not for the first time, you wish the rebellion would just leave you alone, but you also hate yourself for the thought. It's a tangle in your head and you don't know how to fix it.

TT: I'll be there.

TG: got a window plugged in for you
TT: See you soon.

-- temperedGramr [TG] ceased pestering terminalTelesilla [TT] at 9:04 --

You close Pesterchum and look at Luke. "I have to go."

"Do you need me?" he checks.

"I don't think so." You keep looking at him, uncertain. "So… I'll see you later."


"What?" Maybe you're challenging him, but he just watches you. "Is something wrong?"

"We both know something is," he answers.

You've seen him put his 'ears' on so many times you can see the way something changes in his eyes. You don't like it right now. "I need to go."

"Then go," Luke says, steady, and glances away. You stand, plug in a window, and go before you say something you regret.

Dave's apartment looks different than the last time you were there; it looks more Dave, records, posters, a painting of a bird with a sword through it in heavy red. You pause at that, then Dave waves at you from the couch, where he's sitting with a middle-aged woman you don't recognize.

Dave stands immediately, and gestures for the woman to join him. "Rose," he says, "this is Yui."

"Yui Yamamato," the woman clarifies, and smiles, a thin sort of smile like yours. "I am your Crockercorp source."

Dave seems surprised she came out and said it. "She brought the chips. And Mark figured it out last night. So, yeah."

"Yui," you repeat, and shake her hand. "Thank you for your work."

"It is my pleasure," Yui assures you. "I look forward to seeing this invention."

"Yes!" Mark crows from the other room, and comes practically bouncing in with a box in his hands. "This is so great. I'm a genius."

"Jesus Christ," Dave says without missing a beat.

"Let's see," Yui encourages.

Mark sets the box down and pulls out two sleek-looking metal cuffs. "So this seemed like the best approach," he says. "Something… un-suspicious."

"Have you tested it?" Dave asks immediately.

You really just want to go home; everything, including your head, feels heavy. "If not, let's do it."

"I ran tests with Luke," Mark explains. "In theory, it should block the hypnotic effect in the brain."

"In theory," Dave repeats.

"Let's do it," you keep on. "Luke wouldn't have given the go-ahead if it wasn't ready."
Mark doesn't look as though he thinks that's a good argument, but he doesn't say anything to it. "Ready?"

"Oh, fuck," Dave says. "Why not." He grabs one of the cuffs from Mark, and you take the other. "If this kills us, or brings Imperiacorp down on our asses, I'm going to find a way to kill you."

"I'd deserve it," Mark agrees.

You affix the cuff to your wrist, and it tenses around your wrist to fit perfectly; then, something jabs into the top of your wrist and you make a brief pained sound. "Mark," you start, then look at Dave as he grunts from the same jab. There's a pause, then you start to see flickers around your vision like the shadows of words.

"Oh shit, that's weird," Dave says, taking a step back.

"What?" Mark presses.

"I think it's translating the words into a different part of our brains, Mark." You glance at Yui, who's watching you intently. "I don't know that I feel anything terribly different."

"You've always been different," Mark supposes. "We'll have to try it with someone who's more susceptible to the signal."

"I can," Yui speaks up. "You've got more, right?"

"I made five." Mark pulls out another and offers it to Yui, who accepts it and casually slips it onto her wrist; she grimaces at the jab but pauses as it appears to kick in.

"Oh my god," Yui breathes. She sinks down onto the couch and puts her head in her hands.

"What?" Dave crosses to her. "What's going on?"

"I see it," she says, barely looking up. "I see it when I blink. But it's quiet." She seems past astounded.

You glance at Mark. "Good work," you decide on.

"Make more," Dave says bluntly, "and we're going to test this against the Fieri Messaging too."

Mark pauses, then hands a bracelet to you. "For Luke," he says. "Maybe that will help with... you know."

You exhale. "Yes," you say, and captchalogue it. You hear Mark offer Dave one for Ruby, but you're not in the mood to stay. You'd blame it on the bracelet, but it's more than that. You want to get back to your room, to Complacency, to the reward of one of your remaining bottles.

"Rose," Dave says, and nudges past Mark to come to you. "Everything cool?"

"I should go," you say, and look to the window.

"Whoa, wait." He stops you before you can move. "It's not the bracelet, the signal, is it?"

You can still feel, hear, see the signal in a detached sort of way, but it doesn't bother you. "No. I just want to go."

Dave glances at Yui and Mark. "I'll... well, won't see you around, Yui, but Mark -- "
"Yes," Mark says immediately, and catches Yui's arm to pull her up. "I'll work with Luke to see how it's working on her."

"And then get to work," Dave says, his gaze still on you. The two of them leave, and you make another lady dart attempt to get to the window, but Dave cuts you off and holds onto your arms. "Hey."

You eye him wearily, and give in for now. "Yes, Dave."

"So," he says. "What the fuck is going on with you?"

"Oh, are we having a personal discussion?" Your tone is a little too cutting and you know it.

"I can't tell if this is dumb alcoholism shit," Dave goes on, "or dumb majjyk shit, or both." You don't react. "But I can't find you on Derse, Rose."

That stops you. "What?"

"I've been looking," he says. "When I can. And I can't find you. Do you know…"

His sentence trails off; he's obviously expecting you to cut in, but you don't, not immediately. "I fell asleep there some time ago. I haven't been awake there since."

"How long ago?" he asks.

You're not sure you even remember. "About a year." Maybe more than that, but you aren't keen on admitting that.

"Rose, what the fuck," Dave demands. "You haven't woken up on Derse in a year and you never went, 'hey, that's suspicious as hell, maybe I should tell Dave'?"

"I don't think she killed me," you argue, but you also know you're not in a great position to argue right now. "I would have woken up." Right? You don't let your expression change.

"Maybe." He's on edge now. "I'm going to try to find you again. And you're going to sleep, see if you wake up over there."

You restrain a sigh. "Yes," you say. "The last thing I remember there…" You try to think, but the hangover, the desire to write, and the signal flashes from the bracelet are distracting, not to even mention how long ago it was that you last saw Derse. "I went to the edge of the moon."

Dave's eyebrows raise. "Towards the asteroid belt thing or the other way?"

You realize the truth, but it doesn't cross your face. "The other way," you say, as casually as you can manage.

He shakes his head at you and releases you, moving away to put his face in his hands and obviously think it through. "You went to those things," he says. "Didn't you?"

You incline your head slightly. "That would be a possibility."

"Fuck, Rose." He exhales. "Fine, I'll… go out there, see what I can find. But you're going to sleep, too."

You sigh. "Why? I just told you I haven't seen the Incipisphere in a year -- "
"In case I can… I don't know, get you out of whatever happened, it'll help if you're awake," Dave points out.

"Fine." You don't feel like arguing. "So, just sleep? Easy as that?"

"Just a nap." A wry smile crosses his face for a brief moment. "No big."

This all has more gravity than you're comfortable with, so you just don't engage with the real issue at all. "Fine," you repeat. "I'll take the couch."

Dave's expression flickers through a few strange looks, then he says, "Uh, yeah. See you there."

You raise your eyebrows, then grab a throw pillow to settle in on the couch.

There is entirely too much foreboding to comfortably take a nap, but eventually you drift to sleep, to the darkness.

It's not a long flight to the outskirts of Derse, but it's a dangerous one, and at least you're more willing to admit to that danger than Rose. You keep a running commentary of swearwords in your head as you go, until you're drifting in darkness you can barely see through.

"How does she do this," you mutter, and start looking.

Then you see them unfold in front of you, just barely, and what you can see doesn't look friendly. "Whoa, hey," you say quickly. "I'm just here for Rose."


"Nothing. You're going to tear your fucking hair out. "So here's how this is gonna go," you keep going. "You're gonna find some way to talk to me and tell me if you saw Rose."

There's some movement, which gets your hopes up, then two of the creatures move to show, holy shit, it's Rose, all Derse-pajamaed out, limp in the mixed grip of two sets of tentacles. You drift closer without thinking, on pure need to save the girl instinct, without thinking about the monsters surrounding her, and one of them cuts you off. "Hey," you say, raising your voice. "I get that you probably have your weird horror-creature reasons for grabbing her, but I need her more than you do, okay?"

Obviously no one fucking answers you. This is insane. You can't afford to lose an extra life, you told Rose that, but you can't just let them do whatever they're doing to Rose either. You throw up your hands. "Okay, okay, can we make a deal? I'm ready to make a deal."

The horror-creatures' eyes (there are a lot of them) are all on you. You get the feeling you're being measured up. So this isn't working, they don't take you seriously. "Yeah, fine," you say, so tired of this already. "Fuck it. ROSE!"

You don't know if she can hear you, but there's a chance, you had her go to sleep, maybe she'll hear something, anything, maybe she can talk them into letting her go.

"ROSE," you shout. "WAKE THE FUCK UP!"

Like, this is probably smarter than pulling a sword on them, right? Right?

You're smart enough not to allow yourself to think What's the worst that can happen?
The first thing you see is faint light in the distance, so different than the creamy dark of the dreams you've had for a year. Then you realize what woke you.

"I'M NOT FUCKING AROUND HERE," Dave is shouting. "IT'S TIME TO WAKE UP, ROSE!"

You stir, realizing then that your body is bound, with some little give but strength behind it. You open your mouth to speak, then your mouth is covered in a muscled tentacle, your breath stifled.

"TELL THEM TO LET YOU GO! TELL THEM I'M NOT GONNA HURT YOU!"

It's as though your body is coming back online piece by piece, including your mind, and then you understand what he means.

It's all right, you tell them, and stop resisting. I can go now.

"ROSE???

The tentacles tighten around you for a moment, then some of them release. There's a longer pause before the other tentacles release, and you scramble to float, exhausted and tingling. You rub your eyes just in time to see the horrorterrors lining up in front of you.

"Oh no," you manage, and long capture or no you fucking move. It's an effort to get up and over some of them, but by the time you're on the other side of the line Dave has his sword drawn.

This is going to end badly. "Stop," you try to get out as loudly as you can, but there's movement in the line, an energy buildup, and you know you can't just watch this happen. You move as fast as you can and throw yourself in the way just as the energy reaches a peak, and all-knowing they might be but they're not fast enough to stop once they've started.

You take the hit full blast. It permeates you, sinks into you, the most sublime version of any unholy powers you've ever touched upon. You feel the grimdark flames down every inch of your body, and you wonder if you're about to die, about to burn through a perfectly good 'extra life' as Dave calls them, but nothing happens. The flames don't go down, and they hurt, quite a lot, but you're not dead.

You look at the horrorterrors, and they look back at you. You're maybe starting to remember. You helped me.

They don't react; they just disperse into the dark. You stare after them, speechless.

"So you're not dead," Dave says from behind you. "That's cool."

"I'd say so." It's hard to speak. "Can we go?"

"Yeah." He pauses. "I'd help you, but you're on fire."

You wonder if you can turn it off. "Just a second." You try to channel it, but it's too much in your system at once, and you shrug. "I suppose I can't accept any help at the moment."

"You usually don't," Dave answers in a heavy deadpan, but he shrugs and leads the way back to Derse. He settles you in your bed and looks down at you. "Wake up," he says. "We need to talk back home."

You're not looking forward to that. "Yes," you agree, and close your eyes. Your Derse body is exhausted; it's not long until you're stretching back on Dave's couch.
Dave wanders out from his bedroom and looks at you as you sit up, uncomfortable with his gaze.

"So you saved my life back there," he says casually.

What are you supposed to say to that? "I suppose I did."

"You didn't know if you'd survive that," he checks.

"No." No point in lying.

"Guess you're lucky you, uh, didn't die from that." He seems to realize there's not much to that statement. "I mean, if you had, that would have been shitty."

"An extra life lost," you agree.

He glances down. "You shouldn't die for me," he says. "Don't do that again."

"How successful have you been at convincing me not to do things in past?" You smile, very faintly. "I'll try not to."

"How about this." He shifts where he stands. "Promise me you're not gonna put yourself in danger in the whatever-sphere. No Prospit, no monsters."

You may have lost the high ground on this point. "I think it's paying off."

He groans, not much, but enough to make his point. "How?" he demands.

"Complacency," you point out. "I'm getting the message out there."

"What message though? How do you know it's working?" he keeps on.

You frown. "I just know the books are... true." Well, that's not quite right. "In their way."

Dave raises his eyebrows. "But you don't know if it's affecting her or not. Isn't that the point?"

That's true. That's going to take more work to figure out, work you don't want to do. "Yes," you concede.

There's a pause, then Dave comes to sit by you. "So, have to find some way to find out," he says. "See if this all was worth it."

"Even if it doesn't," you point out casually, "I needed to know."

"You're the most self-destructive person I've ever fucking met." He touches the nape of your neck and draws you in until your foreheads are touching, eyes lightly closed. You breathe softly, until he pulls you into a firm kiss. You keep on kissing him until he withdraws just slightly, and dumbly look at him for the brief pause until he speaks.

"So, yeah," he says. "Just promise me."

You keep yourself in check in spite of the rising stupid hormones. "Promise you what?"

"That you'll run your shit past me. Listen to me. Be careful." He sighs, and runs his fingers through the hair at the back of your neck. "And tell me the truth. That's all I'm asking." He pauses. "We're a team, Rose."
The more cynical part of you wonders if he's using your attraction to extract a promise, but you (mostly) know better. "Yes," you answer, despite your reservations. "I promise."

Dave breathes out sharply, and his fingers grip into your hair to draw you into another kiss, another, another, until the sheer sweetness of the moment is overwhelming and you pull back just enough to breathe. He keeps you close; as the moment subsides, he says, barely audibly, "What?"

You can't, you can't be vulnerable in this moment. It's all too raw, and it might kill you to say aloud. "Nothing," you say softly.

He accepts that, and you kiss him again and again until he's got his hands all over you, your skirt hiked up around your hips, your hands undoing his jeans. It's a perfect, devastating thing, the two of you entangled, his fingertips buried into your hips as he presses into you and your mouth pressing desperate kisses against his, breathless and restrained until your arousal's too much to handle. You shudder through an orgasm and kiss him helplessly until he jerks into you and finishes himself.

You rest against each other after rearranging your clothes, silent for a long pause as you catch your breath, then you speak. "Glad we sorted that out," you say, dry but soft.

"Shut up," Dave says, but his barely-there smile is still on his lips.

"Never."

You know, in your heart, this is a promise you have to keep. You can't afford to lose this again.

Not long in the future...

A FLAVOR PRIEST stands before a test subject with his Lady.

"What we see here," he says, nothing short of grandiose, "is the brain of a indigo-blood." They look on as the subject twitches as the scientist stimulates various parts of the brain, throwing up visuals of muddled words on a screen. "They're particularly special, as their brains don't process the signal itself, only the words on it."

"Sounds like trouble," the EMPRESS says bluntly. "Find 'em all, destroy 'em."

"They predate me," the PRIEST says, tone easy. "I would have killed them all at the first sign of that mutation."

"I know," she says, and grins. "So smash 'em to pieces."

"Good as done." He turns. "I have something else to show you," he says hurriedly, and gestures her over to a violetblood, whose stomach and brain are carved open for observation. It gibbers, awake, and cackles. "The scientists tell me that the stomach of our violetbloods especially have soaked in all of our products." He puts on a pair of gloves and grabs onto the intestines to show her. "You can see the way the viscera has died there, there, and there. It can only process our food."

Her eyes light up. "Yes," she crows. "How do we get the others like that?"

"Experiment on more," the PRIEST says. "Figure out the physiology that makes the violetbloods different." He pauses. "And, fix the violetbloods so… well, the rage subsides."

She frowns. "My rage babies are fine the way they are."

"But they can't adapt to a standard human life," he tries. "We need mutants who join society and
normalize the mutation among them."

"Use the juggalos to start," the EMPRESS says, gesturing. "A little rage ain't the worst thing but if you need some *humans* out there, figure it out." She pauses. "Why'd you bust open the brain?"

The PRIEST moves over to where the babbling idiot's brain is completely visible. He gestures to the scientist, who stimulates part of the brain; the creature screams, deafening, and struggles against the restraints.

"We can trigger the rage now with the chips." He grins. "Any day, any time."

She grins back, an expression full of points.

"Fuck yeah."
Chapter 6

January 2010

"Three, two, one," Ruby crows over the crowd.

"HAPPY NEW YEAR!" the crowd roars along with her, and cheers. It's incredibly loud. You watch from backstage, hands jammed into your pockets, Rose beside you.

"I think you're supposed to kiss someone at the start of a new year," Rose says idly.

"Yeah?" You glance at her, casual. "You picked up some human traditions in the last couple of years I guess."

"Just the useful ones." Her gaze lingers on you. "Hm?"

"'Hm,'" you mock back at her, and take your hands out of your pockets. "Never known Rose Lalonde to not just take what she wants."

"Ask forgiveness, not permission," she answers.

"When have you ever asked forgiveness?"

Her faint smile is unmistakable. "We're losing time for the good luck kiss, Dave."

"Wait, it's good luck? If it is, that's shitty for single people," you say. "How is that fair?"

"Shut up," Rose advises, and moves quickly to kiss you on the mouth, soundly, once and again. The usual flare of this is sick, you're sick starts up, but you stifle it back, because whatever, you made your decision. And she's caught you badly.

When she pulls back, you catch her hand and calmly pace back past security to Ruby's dressing room. She makes an amused sound as you go, and you shut the door behind you before fumbling Rose to the couch. You kiss down her neck, feel her down, bury your fingers under her panties and deep inside her until she pants out, "Please, please." You're so desperate and obsessed with the flush in her cheeks and the breath in her voice and the perfect wetness between her legs that you nearly rip through her panties on the way to get started.

She stops you once your pants are down and looks up at you, her eyes soft but focused in the way you've seen a million times but now completely understand. She wants you, and it feels so good. She grips you, strokes you, and your eyes fall shut with the awesome perfect feel of her hand, until she releases you and pulls you down on top of her. It takes an awkward, frustrated second, but you press inside her, and she releases a sharp breath before kissing you fiercely as you start to go.

Jesus Christ, you're some kind of sicko, but you can't say no anymore. It's warped and fucked up and all that kind of shit, but it's what you want, and it's what she wants. You yank up her shirt to grope her firmly, still kissing her harshly as she breathes her moans into your lips.

It's hot in a way Ruby could never compete with. You could fuck Rose for hours if you had the time.

She shudders in your arms; you hold out as best you can, groaning into her mouth, a few thrusts later finally giving into the pleasure of her throbbing around you with a helpless grunt.

You're breathless and sweaty together, but stupid and giddy, and kiss a few more times before you
push yourself up. "Fuck," you decide on, pulling your pants up.

It takes Rose another second before she recovers enough to pull herself together, shirt down, panties up, skirt fixed. She eyes you. "I think," she says, "that you're still a little guilty."

Oh, come on. You shake your head at her. "What the fuck do I have to be guilty about?"

"Well," she says, "we are related."

Why is this happening? "Yeah. I remember that."

She watches you. "I think it still bothers you."

This is so uncomfortable. "Rose," you say finally, "it's a hell of a lot better that I don't think about that."

"I think you're missing something vital," Rose says, and her eyebrows flick up. "The taboo might make it better."

You're about to open your mouth to argue, but then Ruby opens the door of the room and looks at you. "You fucked in my dressing room," she concludes.

There's a moment where you're horrifyingly enough too embarrassed to speak, but Rose speaks up instead. "I'd say we're sorry but we're not."

"You're ridiculous." Ruby waves it off. "Have a seat, Donald's coming back and we're going to have a bottle of champagne or three."

"You and Donald," you say, very amused. "You call us ridiculous."

"Nothing's happening," Ruby insists.

"He talks about you all the time," you point out. "I don't think he even realizes he's doing it."

Ruby waves it off. "Whatever," she says hurriedly. "It's nothing, we just hang out."

Donald looks into the room. "Hey," he greets you all. "Cracked open a bottle yet?"

"Not yet, getting there," Ruby says, as though you weren't discussing something that embarrasses the hell out of her. "Everyone sit already." She grabs a bottle of champagne out and offers it to you. "Do the honors?"

"It only works sometimes." You accept the bottle anyway and draw your sword.

"Remember, everyone, look suitably impressed," Rose says.

You shake your head at her, and slice the bottle in just the right angle so champagne comes spurting out. You hand it off to a cheering Ruby casually and wipe off your hands as she takes the first drink from the bottle.

"You have to admit that's cool," Donald says to Rose, amused, and flops down on the couch.

"Do I?" Rose returns.

Ruby eyes the couch, then you, then decides not to say anything to Donald about it. She settles down next to him, hands off the bottle, and gestures for the two of you to sit. You yank forward a chair to
"You two are bizarre," Donald decides. "It's not a crime to be seen not being cool."

"You always come off looking cool," you point out.

"In public? Man, that's the job," he says. "I mean, the door is shut, you're with us, why not relax and actually touch each other?"

"Who says we're not relaxing?" Rose speaks up.

"This is kind of what relaxed looks like for them," Ruby confirms. "You wouldn't believe how stupid they were when we met."

"Shut up," you suggest immediately. "No one needs to hear about that."

"I agree," Rose says, much to your surprise. "That was a long time ago."

"I'm just saying, no one is going to give you shit for acting like a normal couple," Donald says, putting his hands up.

"I don't think we have it in us to be a normal couple," Rose says, and you've never heard her say anything in a more ironic tone in your life.

"It's all you," you add in an easy deadpan.

"Well, I was raised by aliens," she says.

Donald pauses after drinking. "Wait, what?"

"I stand by my earlier characterization of ridiculous," Ruby says, and pushes the champagne bottle into your hands after he gives it up. "Anyway, tell 'em what your agent said."

Donald finally looks up and scratches his head, looking awkward. "They're doing the push for Oscar nominations for us," he says. "Ben and Owen for Best Actor, me for Best Supporting."

You blink, shocked. "Oscar nominations?" you repeat.

"You saw the reviews," Rose says, shrugging. "The critics loved it."

"Especially you," Ruby teases Donald. "They said you had, what?"

"Pathos." Donald smiles wryly. "I just built from what you gave me, bro."

"That's the work, isn't it?" you point out. "I dunno, I write and direct, you act, you acted better than what I gave you, so you should probably get some kind of thing for that."

Donald grins. "You might get an award too."

You shake your head immediately. "No fucking thanks."

He laughs, obviously surprised. "So I have to take the award and you don't."

"You have to give a speech," Rose says, and you can tell she's also holding back amusement. "Dave can't give speeches."

"Shut up," you decide on.
"Oh, he could," Ruby says fondly. "He'd just say something stupid while he was up there."

"If you get that mic, though," you say to Donald, "make it worth it." You don't look at Rose, knowing the look you might be about to get. You gave into the fate of Rose's vision of Skaia for Donald a long time ago. Now you're playing a stupid game of chess with him the way Rose does. Whatever.

Donald frowns. "What, like… batterwitch shit?"

"Whatever you want to say," you answer, "with what you know."

Ruby cuts you off with a gesture. "We're not talking about that right now. It's the new year."

Rose has a small, wry smile on her face. "We never take a break."

"Can't we just celebrate? We survived another year!" Ruby drinks a lot of champagne, and holds up the bottle. "To another year! 2010!"

You glance at Rose. "To 2010," you figure.

"To the Oscars," Rose says; her expression doesn't change, and you know from just that she's thinking about the same thing you are. "I have a good feeling about this."

"That's a big deal," Ruby tells Donald. "Rose doesn't usually talk about good feelings."

"I have a habit of being a little foreboding," Rose says, and her hand drops to touch your hand, fingers curling around yours.

The little contact is enough to flare the usual feelings in you: a little fluttering, a little shame. "Yeah, but you're usually fucking right," you say. "It's annoying."

"Whatever works," Donald says immediately. "I'm just… I'm glad someone gives a fuck, you know?"

"Always," you answer. Rose lightly squeezes your hand and holds it carefully. Everything is okay, in this moment, even though that makes you nervous through the dose of fun and champagne.

After a bottle and a half of champagne, when Donald slips his arm around Ruby and she slides into the crook of his arm, you look to Rose. The two of you leave with just a quick wave. She releases your hand as you walk in silence.

"Where are we going?" Rose asks.

"My place?" You just want the normal to continue. "Yeah."

"Dave," she says, and her tone is weird; it's kind of pleading. You look at her, and she looks at you, her expression just barely pained. Before you can ask, she shakes her head and turns to go ahead to the parking lot.

"What?" you ask, following her closely.

"I was just thinking." She shrugs. "Dangerous pursuit."

Can you go back to the days when the two of you would lock everything down and bullshit constantly? That was a long time ago, a lot of fucking traumatic shit ago; you'd both lose your minds if you didn't say anything about what was going on in your heads. Still, you miss not constantly
worrying about Rose.

"Tell me," you say after a pause.

Rose looks away from you. "I need to talk to her," she says.

You can't figure out what she means for a second, then you realize. "Fish bitch," you half-ask.

She doesn't answer, and that's an answer itself, really. "You don't have to," you say finally. "I'll do it."

"No." Her tone is fierce, and it surprises you. "I have to do it."

"I'm trying to help," you point out. "I don't, uh, have the, you know, problems with her that you do."

"I think you're aiming for the word 'baggage,'" she says, "and I'm not going to show weakness to her."

"You just can't take help from me." You're not exactly accusing her, more a statement of fact. "You'd rather do your part on your own."

She falls quiet, and you look at her, but then she draws her needles and tenses; you immediately look ahead and see fucking Jay and Dope leaning against your car, and you draw your sword without a second thought. "What the fuck do you want," you force out. You're angry, and you're doing a shitty job of hiding it.

"Relax," Dope says, tone way too casual for this bullshit. "No need for strife."

"Fuck off," you suggest.

"Dave," Rose says, tone dead even. "Let them talk." She puts away her needles, eyeing you.

You lower your sword, but you don't put it away. "What the fuck do you want," you repeat.

"We were told to tell you we're sorry," Jay says, glancing at Dope. "For trying to chip you."

Not what you were expecting. "What the hell?"

"There are rules of engagement," Dope explains. "You ever play chess?"

Rose tilts her head. "Is that what's going on?"

"You play your queen and king too hard, man," Jay answers. "That's a dangerous move. Gotta sacrifice some pawns."

You're not exactly a chessmaster, but you know what that means. "Hard pass. Rather have us on the front lines and you know why."

Dope looks at Jay, an obvious smirk on his stupid painted face. "If you really think that's gonna work," he says, and eyes Rose. "Play your strategy, Crocker."

"Lalonde," Rose answers promptly, tone cool. "I've been playing for years, a little intimidation won't stop me now."

"And we're not sacrificing any pawns anytime soon," you cut in, "if you haven't noticed."
"You might not think so," Jay says, "but sometimes you're dead fucking wrong and you know it."

Rose smiles, and it's sharp, warning. "We know what she's going to do."

Dope snorts. "Right."

"I'm a Seer," she says, with a casual sort of danger to it. "I know things."

"You don't know shit." Jay's getting annoyed. Good. "Stop playing."

"I know where all my pieces are." She lifts her head. "And I play to win."

For some reason, she's incredibly hot right now, which isn't helpful and is unnecessarily distracting. You talk instead of staring at her. "So your apology isn't fucking accepted and your threats don't mean shit. Fuck off."

"Motherfuck," Jay spits out. "You're a disrespectful piece of shit."

"And you're an asshole," you say, "so what?"

"Dave," Rose says firmly.

"He shot me and Ruby with a microchip to brainwash us," you point out. "That falls in the asshole category if you ask me."

"And we apologized," Dope says, gesturing. "Don't be immature."

"You're the fucking bad guys!" You gesture in what definitely isn't a flail. "I'm not going to accept an apology or talk shop with the fucking villains of the story!"

Jay frowns. "You've got it all wrong, dude."

"Yeah, come on," Dope says, sighing. "You're the ones trying to disrupt the true path."

"The true path to what? An alien dictatorship over whatever mutants are left over after she kills us all or something?" You're getting pissed off, now. "Fuck off."

"You have to open your mind." Jay gestures widely. "To the signal. Fuck, if you'd just listen, you'd see. The rage is the truth."

"We're not interested," Rose says, her tone flat but acidic.

Dope puts his hands up. "We know. We know how this goes. Just thought, maybe, you'd say fuck destiny and give me peace."

Rose smiles again, a look of pure ice in her eyes. "We'll get peace."

Jay starts laughing, and Dope claps him on the shoulder. "Let's go, bro," he says, and walks away, Jay loping after him.

You watch them go, your hand still gripping the hilt of your sword hard. Rose touches your arm, and you sheathe your sword, breathing silently and still for a moment until you've calmed down.

"Let's go," she says, and you fish out your keys to get the fuck out of there.

February 2010
Dave's dead asleep next to you as you fish a bottle of gin from the bedside drawer.

You know what you need to do. It's nearly embarrassing that you're this gunshy after all the power you have now. Even getting supercharged by a lot of majykical energy to the point where it requires no energy at all to achieve what previously required all of your effort, you still don't want to contact your 'mother'.

You drink more. And more. And then, at last, you're ready.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering )er Imperious Condescension [)(IC] at 7:53 --

TT: We should talk.
)(IC: oh rosie
)(IC: what are u doin
TT: I have questions.
)(IC: what makes u think im gonna answer ur questions
TT: I think you can't resist trolling me.
)(IC: gurl bye
TT: All right.
TT: I will assume that you have nothing to say about Complacency.
TT: I will continue to write,
TT: And I will continue to lay bare your history and the history of your master.
TT: And how you are servile in the face of his power.
)(IC: what

You take a very long drink. It might even be a chug.

TT: I know you can read.
)(IC: what do u know
)(IC: nothin
)(IC: not a damn thing
TT: Oh, I think we both know that's not true.
)(IC: i hate seers
TT: I bet you do.
TT: Servile refers to someone who happily serves.

TT: Do you happily serve?

TT: Actually, I'm typing.

TT: Ah, yes, respect for the woman who's tortured me for two decades.

TT: And murdered multiple close friends of mine.

TT: I'll pass.

TT: The question to me is when.

TT: You have had every opportunity.

TT: You act like a chessmaster.

TT: But your master treats you like a pawn.

TT: You realize you will die for him.

TT: And for what?

TT: The chance to recreate your race on a hostile planet?

TT: Even if you kill us, you will fail.

TT: We will never be what you want us to be.

-- ) (er Imperious Condescension [ ) (IC] ceased pestering terminaTelesilla [TT] at 7:53 --

Holy shit. You may have successfully trolled the queen of the literal trolls. On one hand you're proud; on the other, you're not sure what the consequences of this are going to be. But it's become clear to you that she's waiting for something, and that you, personally, and Dave, are safe until that time comes around. Whenever that is.

Dave is waking up next to you. You wait until he's awake and looking at you to speak. "It's working," you say.

He rubs his eyes. "What's working?"

"Complacency." It thrills you to realize your plan is working, that thousands of pages and risking your life have all led to this: she doubts her plan and fears you. "I think it worked."
He absorbs that. "Okay," he says. "What are the chances that this gets us killed?"

"I don't know." There's no sentence you hate saying more in the English language. "But I have a good feeling that we'll be fine for some time."

"Yeah, I guess there's a grand plan that those clown bastards didn't know about." He stretches. "The fuck time is it, anyway?"

"About eight o'clock." You look at him. "Maybe I should head home. You and Ruby probably have something to do."

"Not really me." He shrugs. "All I have to do is put on a suit for this Oscar thing. She's the one who has to get all the makeup and hair done."

"But she probably wants me out of the way." You know that much.

Dave sighs. "You know she doesn't hate you."

"I know." You smile faintly. "But I know I make her uncomfortable."

You can tell that Dave doesn't want to have this conversation. "She just worries about me."

You've supposed as much. "And she worries I might hurt you?"

"Yeah, I think so." You're clearly making him uncomfortable, but some conversations need to be had. "I mean, there was the whole thing, uh."

"When you woke up." You watch him. "I remember."

"So, like, maybe you could talk to her?" He sighs. "Whatever the fuck has to go down to keep this from being awkward would be great."

"The two of you." You move closer, and he automatically meets you halfway. "You're so close. It's hard not to feel like we're competing."

"You're not." Dave shakes his head. "She's my friend. You're... you."

"And what am I?"

He raises his eyebrows. "Rose fucking Lalonde."

You smile, though, slightly. "But what is that to you?"

He doesn't seem to know what to say, so he kisses you and stays close. Finally he says, "You're it."

You think you get it. "Yes," you say quietly.

"Oscars," he says, clearly desperate to change the topic. "Are you going?"

"That's the plan." There's a non-zero chance that she will be there, that any of her minions will be there, and you don't want to be sitting at home writing Complacency if it all goes down again. "And Mark is ready?"

"We worked the hack together." Dave definitely seems proud, in his quiet way. "We should be able to knock the signal out just on the Oscar broadcast, for a short time. Anyone who speaks out will... probably be heard."
"Unless she knows what we're doing." There's always a chance. The game is hard when any player can have seen your moves in advance. "You know this is it."

This is another topic he doesn't want to talk about. "Rose."

"I mean, possibly. There's always a chance that I saw further into the future than today." You watch him. "But we have to be prepared."

He's silent for a moment. "And there's nothing we can do."

"We can make it worth it." You smile, not happily. "I think my majjyk and your messaging has done the trick for tonight. He should win, unless they've put efforts into stopping it."

"No." Sometimes it's hard to tell these things with him, but Dave looks incredibly sad, exhausted in the face of early grief. "If he gets it it's because they want him to get it."

He's starting to understand. You sort of wish he wasn't. Before, the burden was only on you, and he deserves some carefree thought with his Ruby and his friends. "I'll be there," you say. "When it happens, I'll be there."

He looks at you. "How do you do this?" he asks. "How can you deal with knowing this shit?"

"I think," you say, "that I've always been a Seer. We're built to bear that burden on behalf of everyone."

"I don't want to know." Dave can't look at you. "I don't want to know anymore."

It surprises you. "I thought you wanted me to tell you everything."

"Not things like this. Not shit I can't do anything about." He rubs a hand over his face. "I can't fucking do it. I can't do nothing. With all this shit going on, with how long everything is taking, I can't just sit and do nothing, especially if I know shit is going down."

"I'll keep it to myself." You can do that. You can figure out what secrets he needs to know and what he doesn't. "I promise." You offer a smile, barely there. "Only what you need to know."

"Yeah." He exhales. "Let's go make breakfast. All three, maybe four of us."

"Did Donald stay over last night?" That makes you smile. "They're a cute couple."

"A smile almost crosses over his face. "Ruby seems to be happy.""

"That's good news." You lean over and kiss him, just once. "Let's go."

Ruby is already making breakfast when you get out there, laughing at something Donald said as he chops up ingredients for omelettes. "You and eggs, man," Dave says to Ruby.

"They're good for you," Ruby insists, "and as far as I know Crocker doesn't do shit with farmers."

"Processed foods," Donald says knowingly. "That's their shit."

"Well." You can see Dave is putting major effort in trying to act normally. "Eggs, then."


She seems to relax a little. "Yeah," she says. "Some of the songs you heard last month. Honestly
who the fuck knows if any of it's any good. People are only obsessive because of the messaging, and we know that."

"Yeah." Dave shrugs. "I mean, SBAHJ is something, but it's not... you know." He looks at Donald. "You did a good job though."

"You don't think it's messaging." Donald looks skeptical. "You don't think the only reason I'm getting critical whatever is because of the shit you put underneath everything we make?"

"I think it helps," Dave says, "but that doesn't mean you also don't do a good job. So do the others. I'm proud of what we do."

"It's kind of ridiculous shit," Donald says honestly. "But it's for a good cause, right? And I met all of you."


"I'm serious," Donald says. "You guys woke me up." He taps his bracelet. "I don't care if it's weird to know the truth, I'm just glad I do."

Ruby speaks up. "We wrote his speech."

Dave tenses. "Yeah?" he says, playing at casual, badly.

"It's gonna be great." Donald smiles what you're starting to think of as the rebellion smile: thin, unhappy, but a little proud. "We're going to get press, I'll tell you that."

"So we're not being careful," Dave says. "We're just gonna fuck this shit up, huh?"

"Why not?" Ruby asks. "You read what my dad wrote this week, right? They're doing worse shit every day. The messaging works but maybe, maybe, when you knock out that signal for even two minutes, we could reach some people."

"And if Mark has those bracelets ready," Donald cuts in, "we could wake up even more."

Dave nods after a pause. "Got the marketing for those all ready," he said. "Through me, ad with messaging by Ruby to back it." He paused. "Nothing through Rose."

"No," you say easily. "My job is a bit more complicated."

"I don't really understand what you do," Donald admits.

"My job is... more high-level." You smile, just a little. "You're going for the people. I'm going for the mindgames."

"She's really good at mindfuck," Dave says, and looks at you, a little amused.

"Yes." You glance at Ruby. "I am unfortunately skilled at manipulation."

"That can be a good thing," Ruby says, noncommittal, and leans into Donald's touch as he slips his arms around her waist while she works.

"When used at the right time, on the right people." It's as close to an apology as anyone is going to get from you. "One learns their lessons."

"One does," Dave says. He's watching you, and there's a moment, one you can't define, but you see
something new in his eyes. It might be trust. You haven't seen that in years, or maybe ever.

"So." You look at the three of them, and you're aware of the difference between them and you. They're… human. And you may have been, once, a long time ago, a universe ago, but now you're this. "It looks as though Ruby and I have a long day ahead of us."

Ruby smiles, then, and it looks genuine. "Are you getting done up?"

"Not that they will successfully take any pictures of me," you say, "but I might as well make an impression on those there."

"Then come with me," Ruby offers. "I'm sure they'll find space in the schedule for you."

"I have my ways of getting what I want," you admit wryly.

"Did we mention she's super-powered now?" Dave asks, and raises his eyebrows as you look at him with some consternation. "What, it's not like they're going to tell anybody."

"I'm doing exactly what I was doing before. That… incident has nothing to do with what I'm doing now." You pause. "It just means that I will be more prepared when it comes to our final strife."

Donald grimaces. "Final strife? Jesus, that sounds grim."

"Life is grim," you admit. "One day, it'll happen. Maybe we'll win, maybe we won't. But I know that's what she's waiting for. I know that's what we're all waiting for."

"All of us," Ruby says, and shunts a plate into Donald's hands. "Now everybody fucking eat, today is either going to be great or it's going to suck, and either way we need to be prepared."

"With eggs," Dave says in a deadpan.

"With eggs," Ruby agrees, and hands him a plate. "So eat."

Ruby's appointment is at noon, so you have no excuse to do anything but stay there at the house Dave and Ruby rented for the week with the three of them and kill time. You get by with the occasional dry remark and a seat nearby Dave, until Ruby ushers you out the door with both your dresses in garment bags over her shoulder. "Have fun," Dave calls after you.

It occurs to you as you start to drive there that this is ridiculous and probably a bad idea, that, again, no one will be able to take pictures of you, that it's possible no one will even know who you are, that maybe you shouldn't go at all – and apparently this is written all over your face, probably in the most Lalonde-esque of ways, because Ruby speaks up. "Relax."

You wouldn't be you if you let that pass. "What makes you think I'm not relaxed?"

"I don't know you as well as Dave knows you, but I've picked up a little," she says. "Also, this isn't really your thing, so I'd get it if it freaked you out a little."

You sit back a little, eyebrows raised. "I deal in more upsetting things than hair and makeup."

"Everyone knew," Ruby answers, "that the human touch was never your thing. I don't think that's changed in the years since HQ. Has it?"

"I've gotten a little better." But that's not a no, because you can't deny that. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"I'm just saying." She shrugs. "You don't even have to talk to them. They're just, you know,
working, they might try to chat with you but you can brush them off."

This feels a little insulting, but you don't think she means it to be. "Yes. I'll see."

It's awkward for a pause, then she cuts through the silence. "I'm glad," she says. "I'm glad you two figured it out. Don't think I'm not."

Oh, so you're moving onto the real point. "You're not jealous."

"It was never that way." Ruby shakes her head. "We were never… we're just friends." She rolls her eyes. "Friends who've had sex, yeah, but friends."

You watch her. "You just thought I'd hurt him."

"You did," she says, her eyebrows flicking up. "He wouldn't admit it, but I know you did."

And there's no way you can ever explain that to her. "It was complicated."

"It always is." She shrugs. "But you seem to have figured it out." She crosses her legs, and pauses. "If you do it again, that's it. I won't let him go back."

There's a long pause before you speak, terse. "You can't."

"I don't know," Ruby says, tone forced casual. "I just want him to be happy."

"So do I." You decide to dismiss this with a gesture. "We're going to be fine."

"Good." She relaxes visibly. "I want to be friends with you, Rose. We don't have to be close, but… I want us to be okay."

"Yes," you concede; it feels inevitable that you have to, but you can't imagine anyone being more different than you than Ruby Angeles. "If you have any questions… I'll try to answer them."

Her eyes light up at that, and you realize you've made a horrible mistake that you can't undo. "How did the two of you meet?" she says. "I know it was years and years ago, but he never explained how you found each other."

"I found him." You remember when Jade finally sent you Dave's Pesterchum handle and told you to speak to him, how you just wanted him to say rose, finally, to know you. "Jade English sent me to him." It isn't a lie.

"Right," Ruby concedes. "I think I heard that much from Luke. But how did Jade know who he was, why did she choose him?"

Oh, this is not the conversation you want to have; then again, lies of omission may win her over. "He's special, like me. You know that."

"It doesn't get to you the way it gets to the rest of us," she says with a nod. "Why?"

"Because…" You pause. "Because we were born that way. Experimentally." It's mostly not a lie. "Raised within her circle. She tried to control us because she knew we were different."

Ruby takes that in. "You were the result of an experiment," she rephrases, "and she took you so she could keep you from knocking her out? Who did the experiment?"

"Someone good," you say, because you can't imagine anyone better than John Egbert. "It's
"I'll take it," she decides. "So you two just started talking and…"

"Became friends," you finish. "Then I asked him for help at Maryland and he began to realize the truth."

She considers you before answering. "Do you ever regret telling him?"

You smile a little. "Not for a long time."

The car stops, and Ruby offers you a small smile in return, opening the car door to get out first. You follow her into the building, and steel yourself for the process of being seen after years mostly spent in an apartment in front of a screen.

You survive. The spa, the primping, the makeup, the hair, is ridiculous, but you put up with it until they have you look at yourself. You think, for a moment, that the batterwitch would be proud at the disguise, and raise your plucked eyebrows. "All right."

"I'll take it," the stylist says dryly. "Let's get you in that dress, it's about that time."

You slip into your dress, purple again, and your short heels. The stylist looks relieved to be sending you off, and Ruby grins as she sees you. "Jesus Christ," she says. "Let's see if the boys are heading there yet, or we can kill time eating or something."

"In this?" You look down at the dress.

"You're probably right. Anyway." She taps into her watch-PDA combination, and you sigh, putting on your HUBTOPBAND.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 15:52 --

TT: We're finished.

TT: Are you on your way?

TG: still cant believe you agreed to that

TT: It wasn't torture.

TG: were in traffic

TG: if you leave now we should get there the same time

TT: Noted.

TG: got any odds whether she decides to kill us tonight

TT: That is not something I can predict.

"They're on their way, let's go," Ruby speaks up, and you follow her, get into the car, and immediately start responding again.
TG: try

TT: You just like making me say 'I don't know'.

TG: no i was serious

TG: id rather know

TT: Based on my current theory of her behavior, I believe we are safe.

TT: However, this is by no means a guarantee.

TG: yeah no shit

TT: I don't think she'd risk the brand by attacking us openly somewhere like the Oscars.

TT: She's saving the open approach for something huge,

TT: World-changing.

TT: We're not there yet. I don't think.

TT: We aren't the ones at risk.

TG: you dont have to say it

TG: i know

TT: I'm so sorry.

TG: making friends with him was a mistake

TT: Yes.

TG: it was a game

TG: to get him to do the thing

TG: super shitty

TG: maybe i should tell him

You shake your head instinctively.

TT: Absolutely not.

TG: he deserves to know

TT: You can't stop it from happening.

TG: maybe he deserves to say goodbyes

TG: maybe he would kick even more ass at the speech

TG: did you think of that
TT: This is a bad idea.
TT: Play the game.
TT: Think of this strategically.
TG: i know if i found out i was gonna die
TG: that id go down fighting like hell
TG: just imagine
TT: You're going to do it.
TG: think so
TT: Fine.
TT: Do what you want.
TT: I'm concerned, but I can't stop you.
TG: cool
TT: Let me know how it goes.
TG: yeah

You sit back heavily, frustrated, with no outlet for it. It's probably a good reason you're going now, just in case this throws everything off, but you just have to sit and wait and stew until the car stops.

"Okay," Ruby says, clearly psyching herself up, and opens the door. She laughs at the flash of cameras and pulls you out after her. You release her hand and cast your majjyk before anything can catch your face.

You're about a hundred feet down the carpet when you hear your name shouted across the way. "Rose!" The voice is unfamiliar, but you turn anyway, and a man in a suit is frantically waving you down. "Miss Lalonde, please, please."

The video of you up on the fire escape shouting to the newfound Complacency fans has been pulled multiple times from Youtube, but it seems some have examined it closely enough to recognize you on sight. You make your way over, and listen to him babble about his theories and his intense love for Calmasis and how you're a literary genius. It's nice to hear, even if you know the truth about why someone would be so very excited about your earnestly ironic hard work. You scribble an autograph on one of his business cards and turn to walk away.

Then you see him.

It's the first time you've seen JC Crocker in the flesh. The Crockers notoriously keep to themselves, but there have of course been pictures in the press. There he is, and you don't know why. Is it a taunt by her? Is it simply him choosing to use his riches to access other rich people and show off for his daughter?

Either way, you're drawn to him. He's only a hundred feet away, and you move cautiously until he notices you looking at him. "Great night, isn't it?" he asks you.
"So far." You're dizzy, you don't know exactly what to say. "I know who you are."

"I don't know who you are." His eyebrows raise, but he sticks his hand out. "John Crocker, Jr."

"Rose." You hesitate before plunging forward. "Rose Crocker."
He releases your hand, and looks terribly surprised. "That's a coincidence."

"It's not." Your chest aches. "Do you know the truth, Mr. Crocker?"

"I don't know what you mean," JC says, obviously genuine.

"About our family." You can own this, just for this moment. "About where the fortune comes from."
His eyebrows furrow. "You say you're my family, what do you mean by that?"

"She raised me." You think, for a moment, that John raised this man, even if it was a different John, raised by her, he must be good, John couldn't be so corrupted. His son has to be the same, right? Or is that pure sentimentality? "She adopted me and raised me."

"Who?" Oh, he doesn't know a thing, you can see it in his face.

"Mr. Crocker." You feel too vulnerable right now. "I was raised alone at Crockercorp. My mother wanted to control me the way she controlled your father, the way she controlled you, the way she will control your daughter given the opportunity."

JC just looks at you, clearly trying to determine if you're insane. "Who is your mother?" he presses.
Can you even say it? "The woman who started it all," you say, "and the one who will finish it."

His expression is grim. "Are you one of those conspiracy theorists?" he says, to the point.

You realize you have only one way to prove yourself, and produce the broken pieces of your placronym. He stares at them. "Once I knew the truth... Mr. Crocker, I had to leave this name behind. And I hope you do the same, one day, for your sake and your daughter's."

He seems to think about it, then scratches his head. "The fortune comes from the hard work of many employees of Crockercorp," he says, "not from any sort of nefarious deeds. I'm sorry if you had a bad experience being adopted by a member of upper management, but..."

"Upper management." You're a little astounded. "I was raised by – "

"There is no Betty Crocker." He offers a small smile. "It's good to meet another Crocker. I'll pass your well-wishes on to Jane."

The signal, you realize; it pulses, lingers on your vision. He could never hear you. It hurts you physically, the calm look on his face, though he lives in the lion's maw. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Crocker."

"You too," JC agrees, and turns away, only then betraying a look of confusion as he heads off.

Embarrassingly, you restrain tears, at least successfully. It's the stress. It's her. It's the knowing what will come to them one day, and that you may be able to do nothing about it.

Then, you remember where you are. You let a smile drift onto your face, and slip back down the carpet, in hopes of finding Dave.
The car is stopped and waiting outside of the goddamn Oscars, but neither of you is moving. Donald just stares at you. "You saw the future," he says.

"I didn't," you clarify. "Rose did."

"And she saw me die," he goes on.

"Yeah." You try to be cool, not to freak out at this. "She saw someone kill you."

He looks away from you. "All right, uh, comic book logic," he says. "Now that we know, we can stop it, right?"

Oh, fuck this conversation. You don't want to do this, why are you doing this? "No," you say after too long a pause. "We can't."

Donald shakes his head immediately, then makes an impatient gesture for you to keep going. "What do you mean?" he presses.

"I mean it's going to happen." Maybe Rose was right. "There's nothing we can do."

"How do you know?" he demands.

"That's the way it works." You sink back in the seat. "I don't know when, but it's going to happen. This might be it. So."

He's still in obvious shock. Can't blame him. "What do we do?" he says, at least trying to sound calm.

"We make it worth it." You make yourself look at him. "And you say goodbye."

"Just in case." Donald shakes his head. "You really don't know –"

"I don't," you admit. "I just know it's going to happen someday."

"Then… yeah, fuck it," he says, and sits up straight. "Make it worth it. Yeah." He opens the car door. "Let's go."

You breathe out sharply and get the hell out of the car. You need to find Rose, or you're going to puke or something. This is too stressful. It was one thing to make movies and let Tony throw messaging underneath them, to storm the fucking battlecruiser, but this is too personal, too real, not something you can write off as just rebellion bullshit, just the job.

Somehow, you do the red carpet like you've done before, cool, raising a hand in greeting to the photographers, on autopilot or something.

"Dave."

Rose is about a hundred feet ahead of you. You ignore everyone else on the planet and go to her at a casual pace. You wish you could pull her back to a car and get the hell out of here and pretend none of this is happening, for the first time in a long time. "Hey," you say.

"You did it," she answers instead.

"Yeah." Maybe she can see it in your face. "I did."
"I'm sorry." You can tell she means it. "So what did he say?"

"Make it worth it." She looks expressionless; you know by now that means she's hiding a real reaction. "What?"

"This is how it was always meant to happen," she says, and seems to be talking more to herself than to you. "You did the right thing."

"Or I just did a thing that was going to happen anyway," you say. "Jesus fucking Christ, when you put it that way there's no point in anything."

"That's not true," Rose says, and sighs. "I just mean… whatever happens, Dave, what I saw, you had some hand in it."

"Oh, great." She probably didn't mean it that way, but it sounds shitty.

"If the plan works," she keeps going, "if he moves even a handful of people, if you moved him to do so, then, yes, you should be proud of that."

You make yourself breathe and listen to her. She's probably being reasonable, and you're just freaked out. "Okay."

"All right?" she checks. "Come on, let's go in."

In a flash, you wish you could kiss her, but this is definitely not the place. Later. You follow her inside, to the table, where Donald and Ruby are already sitting with Ben and Owen. You see the looks on their faces, the way Ruby is folded into his shoulder with their chairs pushed together, and you hate everything in a sick rush to your stomach.

"I can't fucking believe this," Ben says, and he looks a little dazed when you look at him. "I didn't think this was actually going to be a thing."

"Welcome to the thing," you say dryly.

"It's great," Owen says, with a broad smile. You realize he doesn't know, that neither of them know, that there's literally no good answer to should I tell them or not?, and you look up as a waiter passes with a tray of wineglasses.

"We'll take all those." The waiter pauses, and you raise your eyebrows. "I'm serious. Give us the wine."

Donald sends you a weary smile as the waiter starts setting the glasses down on your table. "Good idea."

"Don't be nervous, man," Owen says, squeezing his shoulder. "You got this."

"Don't jinx him," Ben suggests.

The music strikes up, and you hear Ruby say, "Shit, here we go." You have this feeling it's going to be a long, tense night, and you wish you could plausibly excuse typing at Rose for at least a little while. Instead, you settle in for a night of dumb jokes and serious speeches, until Rose's hand creeps into your own under the table and your gaze flicks over to her. She looks casually in your direction, then away, and you relax, even if it's only barely.

It feels like forever until they announce Donald's category, and he smiles at the camera as it moves to
him; it's only a few seconds to wait for the envelope to open but it's pretty much unbearable, then the actress holding the envelope says, "Donald Glover, for *Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff: The Movovie*!"

The music sweeps in, and Donald kisses Ruby firmly before heading up to the stage. Your stomach twists, and your right hand slips to your sword on instinct. Rose's hand tightens on yours, and just a glance at her shows it was a warning. You don't care. You want to be ready.

Once he's up there, he immediately starts talking.

"First, I want to thank everyone who got me here, especially Dave and Kevin." He looks across the room at you. "I only got this far because of our work as a team. Ben, Owen, I owe it to you." He glances down at the piece of paper in his hand. "But I also need to tell you that you need to wake up." His voice rises, not strained, passionate. "The world is falling apart because of one corporation's work. We're being undermined from within, through our food, through the media. I need you to do your research and think for yourselves." He taps his bracelet. "I need you to join me, join us, show your support. Hear me. This is the most important thing you can do right here, right now. Make the choice to wake up."

There's stunned silence over the crowd, then applause breaks out, scattered at first, then picks up. Donald heads off the stage with his Oscar, obviously dazed, and Ruby looks at you, expression even and cheeks pink.

"You should have told me," she says.

You don't know what to say to that. "I'm sorry," you say finally.

Rose releases your hand, and touches your shoulder. "Let's just get through the night," she says.

"That was a hell of a speech," Ben speaks up, looking pointedly at you.

"Yeah," you return simply, still tense.

"What's wrong?" Owen presses you.

"Everything's fine," Ruby says, and she smiles brilliantly. "Let's get some more wine!"

Ben and Owen don't look convinced, but you smack the table. "Let's party," you declare. "Come on, it's gonna be great."

"Great," Owen echoes, obviously trying to relax. He waves down a waiter. "Let's have a good one."

"Man," Ben says quietly. You can tell he has a bad feeling about all this, but there's fucking nothing you can do about that. "Yeah, let's drink."

Rose catches your gaze, then smiles faintly. Somehow, that little thing helps, just enough. You seek out her hand under the table again, and accept a glass of wine with the other.

The look on Ruby's face is terrible and you hate it. In the long run, though, it doesn't matter. This is how it was always going to be.

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*Hours in the future...*

A HOSTILE AGENT moves quickly to get his orders. A FENESTRATED WINDOW is on the wall, showing an exhausted-looking man sitting in a chair facing a bed, hand resting on a weapon on his waist.
"Sent you the details," the EMPRESS says. "Fuck 'em up."

He understands. He leaves. He hates Earth, but he makes his way there anyway.

The man wants to fight back, tries to fire his weapon, but he's not a killer like the AGENT. His blood flows red and dark through his shirt, weak flesh torn to pieces underneath the rent fabric. The AGENT doesn't sit and watch him die. He goes.

It happens quicker than either of you could have guessed. Dave gets a frantic, angry call from Ruby at two in the morning, and he desperately rambles at her, trying to get her to say exactly what happened and breathe – and you can hear it through the phone when she shouts it.

_He's DEAD, Dave, just like your fucking prophecy said!

You see Dave go still, silent, but you keep to yourself and type a search into your HUBTOPBAND.

The headlines are incredible.

_A fashionable civic duty: Glover's call to don Strider bracelets_
_Glover raises questions about Crockercorp's dealings. Here's a look at what he might mean_
_A modern David: unquestionable bravery from Oscar winner Glover in facing corporate behemoth_

It's only been five hours. But it's working. And, by daylight, he'll be a martyr.

The call ends, and Dave sinks bonelessly into the bed. "We should go," he says, contrary to that. "She's downstairs."

"It worked," you say softly.

"Rose." His voice is quiet, but strained. "Don't."

"I'll stay here." You know better than to face Ruby after this. She needs Dave, not the person she's likely to direct most of the blame for doing nothing to. "Let me know if you need anything."

He looks at you, and the absolute flat expression betrays his turmoil in a way only you would understand; you wonder if he learned that from you. "I need to go." He pushes himself up, and you shift up to meet him before he gets out of bed. He gives you a warning look, but you kiss him anyway, for some small comfort.

You stay close after, and he pauses, opens his mouth to speak, and closes it.

"Yeah," he says quietly instead of whatever he was thinking, and you think you understand what he means; it sends warmth through you. You let him pull on clothes and go.

-- terminalTelesilla [TT] began pestering parisBound [PB] at 2:04 --

TT: Are you awake?

PB: Often

TT: You should be asleep.

PB: I know
TT: Something terrible happened.
PB: I'm sorry
PB: Do you want to tell me
TT: I don't think I can talk about it.
PB: That's fine
TT: It's starting.
TT: They're lashing out.
TT: It might not be immediate,
TT: But it's coming.
PB: Yes
PB: I think you're right
TT: I'll be home tomorrow.
PB: Good
PB: I miss you
TT: You're sweet.
PB: Whatever
PB: It's weird not having you here
TT: I know. I'm a fixture.
TT: Someone is dead, Luke.
PB: I see
PB: Was it one of ours
TT: Yes.
TT: I hope it was for the best.
PB: You can tell me tomorrow
PB: Don't force it
TT: Yes.
PB: Rest
PB: Try to get some sleep
TT: Not likely.
PB: Try anyway
TT: All right.
PB: Love you
TT: I love you too.
PB: Good night
TT: And you.

You rest back, then close your eyes to See. It comes to you, the way it always has since the confrontation with the horroterrors.


A week in the future…

An UNUTTERABLE restlessly taps her chained foot as she looks on at the timeline.

She makes a snap decision, a rare thing.

-- uranianumbra [UU] began pestering temperedGramr [TG] at 8:26 --

UU: hello dave!
TG: uh
TG: hey
UU: i am a friend of rose's.
UU: i thoUght it time to speak to yoU.
TG: a friend of roses
TG: who i dont know
TG: whats your name
UU: i cannot tell yoU.
TG: why not
UU: becaUse of the natUre of what i am.
UU: ask rose if yoU mUst.
UU: yoU can call me UU.
TG: one sec
She waits, and smiles, as he leans against Rose's side on the furniture.

TG: ok
TG: she says you're fine
TG: what do you want
UU: to offer some small comfort.
UU: you will find that your efforts are not wholly in vain.
UU: not today.
UU: not any day soon.
UU: but what you do will have an impact.
TG: i make famous movies
UU: dave.
UU: you understand my meaning?
TG: yeah i get it
TG: i think
TG: vague
TG: wish all you prophets could give me more than oh you'll see
UU: you can trust me.
TG: why now
UU: i worry for you.
TG: you don't know me
UU: i see your progress.
UU: i have a vested interest in you.
TG: uh
TG: thanks
TG: i think

She grins, as much as a cherub can.

UU: i am here for you, dave.
TG: so you know what happened
UU: yes.
TG: and it was supposed to happen
UU: yes.
TG: why
UU: you know why.
TG: to make progress
UU: yes.
TG: i don't like sacrificing pawns
UU: the time will come when you must.
TG: i'm getting that
UU: be brave.
UU: be kind.
UU: act in love.
TG: sounds nice
TG: not really an apocalypse thing
UU: you must find a way.
UU: rose is not inclined.
UU: bring humanity to your efforts.
TG: ok
TG: i get that
UU: yes?
UU: good.
TG: yeah
TG: thanks uu

She bristles a little.

UU: uu.
TG: yeah i said that
UU: take care, dave.
UU: of yoUrself. of rose.
TG: yeah
UU: goodbye.
TG: yeah

The UNUTTERABLE knows what is coming, but she must trust in the future, and follow the timelines faithfully. She can't think it's all for naught, and she has made the mistake of letting her pity get the best of her.

Whatever her brother would say, she regrets nothing, for the brief flashes of friendship she is allowed in this life.

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