The Vienna Game

by paraTactician

Summary

'There's a whole other story, about that, a girl with mirrors over her eyes and a man who was scared to care about anything.'

Notes

cybernetics n.: ‘the branch of science concerned with control systems in electronic and mechanical devices and the extent to which useful comparisons can be made between man-made and biological systems.’ (Collins Dictionary of the English Language)

κυβερνήτης (kybernetes): ‘a steersman, helmsman, pilot’ (Liddell & Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon, sixth edition)

[NOTE: This fic does not currently carry shipping tags, in an attempt to minimise spoilers. If you are concerned about the possibility of encountering a ship you find upsetting, you can go here for a full list of ships that will be involved in the story to a greater or lesser extent. However, I strongly advise against doing this unless you know there is a particular ship which you need to avoid; checking the link out of curiosity will not tell you anything useful, and will seriously spoil some plot developments later in the work!]
Sollux Captor was a low-atmosphere cargo hauler full of stolen mining equipment the first time he died.

The missiles were stone age – frag payloads riding a combustion trail, thick and greasy in the sunlight, smart as a brick – so he hadn’t felt them coming in: hadn’t felt the screech on his mental chalkboard. It turned out the guy who’d stolen the mining equipment had pissed off another guy, who’d been planning to steal the same mining equipment, and that the other guy had decided the most appropriate way to register his displeasure was to rig up a SAM site and blow the whole cargo to fuck half a mile above the Sulphur Sea. Not that Sollux knew this at the time. At the time, he hadn’t known much of anything: just knives in his temples and the shrill red scream of alarms. Warning. Hull breach. Warning. Structural integrity compromised. Warning. Warning. War-

He hadn’t even had time to buzz out.

He’d woken to wide eyes and scared faces and a certain amount of hushed muttering. Words like vegetable and miracle had stood out of the hum. His EEG trace had been flat as mercury for twenty-two point two seconds. The clinic’s doctor would later explain to him carefully that he’d caught enough feedback to kill a mothership; that his skull should be so much pot-pourri, and his brain a cloud of superheated steam. Sollux had to reach up with a shaking hand to reassure himself that this wasn’t exactly the case. When he touched his head it felt like it should cave straight in. The doctor, visibly uncomfortable, had suggested that perhaps he should look in the mirror.

Sick with terror, he’d done so. It mostly looked okay. High, domed forehead, still convex rather than concave: check. Long face, sharp nose, unshaven jaw. Skin still grey, if maybe a few notches paler than usual. Horns: four, two big two small, candy-corn orange, check. Eyes: two, blank and without pupils, one a brilliant scarlet, the other a vivid electric blue. Check.

He’d turned slowly to look at the doctor.

“I wish I had an explanation,” the doctor had said, “but this wasn’t in any of my textbooks.” And a little shrug, like welp. What are you gonna do?

Before they kicked him out onto the street they’d given him a pair of dark glasses and a packet of pills and told him that oh, there was one more thing. His neural architecture, they’d said – speaking slowly, like he wouldn’t fucking know what it meant – had been irreversibly damaged. He could still walk and eat food and take a piss and all that root-level stuff, but the higher functions were a little fried. His psionics were gone; burnt out like so much filament. It was impressed upon him in strong terms that if he ever, on any account, under any circumstance, even thought about connecting to a cyberspace rig, the few remaining dregs of cerebral matter would squirt out of his ears and nose like grubsauce. It was further intimated that, since he’d pulled off some kind of one-in-ten-billion coup by living through a systems crash in the first place, it would be pretty Goddamn churlish to make a fuss about this minor glitch. Never mind, the doctor had joked, you’ll just have to get used to living like the rest of us!, and he’d laughed too loud and Sollux had for a few hazy seconds known exactly what the guy’s throat was going to feel like under his hands.

Instead he’d gone back to his apartment and lain down on the floor and cried.

* * *

He woke just past midnight from a dream of falling into the ocean. Took a shower for the sweating
and a cigarette for the shakes and knew from experience there was nothing he could do about the headache. The shower hissed and sputtered and spilled pale brown water over cracked off-white ceramic tiles while the ceiling-fan stirred the lazy air with dull swimmer’s strokes. Past midnight and it was still too hot for comfort. He pulled on tatty black jeans and a crumpled white cotton shirt in between taking sips from a fat enamel mug of coffee. The coffee tasted of soap.

The street outside the hivestem was rain-swept and nearly empty. Three rustblood kids with hollow eyes watched him from on top of a wall, heads turning slowly as he passed, like cameras. The drizzle beaded on his cheap plastic coat and mottled his shades. He smelt gasoline, fried food, and petrichor. Argon floods on the tenement walls glistened off the puddles and the air. Even the trashcans seemed to sweat. He paused to light another cigarette, cupping his hand round the lighter-flame – two parts reflex to one part wishful thinking – and a clown cultist drifted up, bare arms like knotted rope and gaze beatifically vacant. He wore baggy pants and a string of charms across his chest: ringpulls and twists of coloured wool.

“Hear the good word, brother?” the cultist asked amiably, and spread his arms wide. His left hand was empty; his right was clutched round a three-litre bottle of Lemon & Lime Low Orbit Bombardment Faygo, claws making tiny dents in the plastic where they bit.

“Heard it,” said Sollux, “thanks,” and kept walking.

The argon for Tinkerbull’s jerked blue-white and hapless in the rain, fairy wings flicking on-off, up-down. He shouldered open the door and stepped quickly inside before it could snap back and hit him the way it did first time to everybody.

Tinkerbull’s was not a *good* bar, exactly. But it was better than the other bars. Tav Nitram was a friendly guy with a good memory for faces and no fewer than four firearms concealed beneath the counter at strategic intervals. One of them was a military-issue assault shotgun, which Tav was clearly never going to fire because it would have taken out most of the front wall of the building, but the slide racked with a dramatic *ka-chunk*, and it had a way of making hopped-up gangers turn suddenly docile when it materialised from its little cave. Tinkerbull’s had a floor in scuffed black-and-white chessboard tiles and an out-of-date jukebox, and its unstated policy was that you could kill yourself there any way you wanted, so long as you didn’t kill anyone else doing it. Sollux, who regarded himself as both subject and assessor in a dispassionate long-term experiment with suicide, liked this just fine.

He bought a tall green glass bottle of beer and a fresh pack of Diamonds and went and sat in the corner, facing the door. He dragged an arm carefully over the brushed chrome table-top to dislodge any grit or crumbs. He placed the beer in the far right corner of the table, within arm’s reach, and wiped his hand dry on his jeans. The Diamonds went in the far left corner, open, one cigarette protruding slightly. The square ceramic ashtray was already half-full of crumpled butts and ash: he pushed it to the far edge, and twitched it until it was precisely equidistant from both bottle and packet. In the very middle of the table he placed a wide strip of clear bubbled plastic with a tinfoil back. The strip was thirteen bubbles long and four bubbles wide and each bubble contained a small flat circular pill. Two rows of pills were scarlet; two were blue. They winked up at him in the electric light.

He straightened in his seat, breathing.

He took twelve breaths, deep, and as slow as he could make them. Then he picked up the strip of tinfoil and plastic and used his left thumb to push a red pill free from its bubble and onto the pad of his right index finger, from where he transferred it to the centre of his tongue. He held it there, in his mouth, for as long as it took him to peel every remaining shred of tinfoil from around the empty
bubble with his right foreclaw. Then he reached out and took a long pull from the beer, careful to set the bottle back down exactly over the wet ring it left on the metal.

He extracted the jutting Diamond carefully from its packet, put it to his lips, and lit it. He kept the first lungful of smoke for a few seconds before letting it leak slowly from his nose and half-open mouth, curling like ectoplasm. Then he sat back against the flaking leather of the wall-bench and stared into space.

Ray was a little early today. He’d only been sitting for perhaps ten minutes when the door huffed open and she slipped inside. She wore a shirt for a band he’d never heard of and a long dark skirt with a ragged hem and slim silver chains looped from the waistband, and her hair was a mist of fine droplets; she’d taken the subway, stayed under cover.

She sat down opposite him.

“Hey, Sollux. How are you doing?”

“I’m okay,” he said, and she smiled. It was an old joke, and it hadn’t been funny the first time.

She craned forward a little to peer at his face. “You’re flying again.”

“I’m not *flying*,” he said irritably. “I’m not some fucking greenie hipster kid wants to dance the day away. It’s just _ryth_.”

“I wish you wouldn’t.” Her eyes were smudged with dark rings of galena, and her lips were just starting to crack.

“Ray, you know what the number one negative side-effect associated with _ryth_ is? The one gets seventy to eighty percent of users? *Bad dreams.*” He flapped a hand. “You know? May as well tell me I run the risk of abnormal eye pigmentation. That ship has fucking sailed.”

He’d met Aradia Megido before the crash, in a coffee shack on the other side of Low City. She’d bought him a double espresso and told him she liked his jacket. He’d been wired and jittery from two days straight in the medium finishing up a job, hadn’t known what to do but say thanks and drink the espresso. When he’d met her again a week later she’d laughed and told him that had sealed the deal.

- *I thought you’d try and press your luck.*

- *I didn’t have much luck to press.*

And she’d smiled at him and said *so how’s your luck looking now, Sollux?* and he’d bought her a beer and they’d broken into a derelict stem and sat on the roof pointing out stars. In the day she’d lain half on top of him, the chipped crimson lacquer on her claws gleaming wetly in the arc-light as she drummed her fingers on his bare chest and he breathed in the faint spiced smell of her hair.

He ached for the medium. In the medium, you were nothing but numbers, and numbers have no memory. Only the flesh remembers.

She pushed the ashtray around on the table with two spread fingers, opened her mouth to speak, closed it again. Then she said, hesitantly, “You were being followed, you know. Earlier.”

He stared at her. “What?”

“On your way here. A woman.”
“I didn’t see anyone.”

“You weren’t watching. She followed you right from your front door.”

He blinked, took a last drag on the cigarette and crushed it out in the ashtray. “What kind of woman?”

“Tall. Very pretty. Long coat and shades. The way she moved, Sollux, she wasn’t some cutter. She scared me.”

He pushed through the slow rolling cloud of the ryth, thinking. He wasn’t square – owed ten cee here, five there maybe – but nothing big enough for wolves. A Lacerator? Tough to see what they’d want with him these days. Maybe some old case file had blown open and they’d started digging up bones. Maybe Ray was seeing shit that wasn’t there again.

“Where did she go after?”

“She didn’t.” Aradia looked up and met his eyes. A single thin wisp of smoke drifted from the Diamond he’d abandoned as a last coal flared and died. “She’s right outside.”

His mouth went dry. The ryth was falling away now, driven back by white lines of panic. He stretched elaborately, slung an arm along the back of the bench, and used the motion to let his head turn to the right like he was checking out the bar. The rain had grown more determined, and the shop-glass windows of Tinkerbull’s were a torrent of glinting code down a murky screen, but on the far side of the street he could just make out what might have been a tall blurred figure in a long coat.

He swore, and turned back to Aradia. He scooped up the bubble-strip and the cigarettes; left the beer where it was. “You finish that for me, ‘kay?” he said. “I better move. How are you for cash?” He groped in a jeans pocket and dug out a caegar bit.

“I don’t need money, Sollux. You should keep it.”

He slithered along the bench and stood up, sparing another quick look toward the street. The figure apparently hadn’t moved when he did. There must have been something in his stance, though, because Nitram put down the glass he was wiping and called, “Everything, uh, okay, man?”

“Fine, Tav,” he said loudly, “everything’s fine. You get my friend whatever she wants, I’ll settle up later.”

The barman nodded vague understanding. Then Aradia said, “Sollux, wait.”

He turned back. “What?”

She looked up at him, and the eyes behind the kohl were pale and sad. “I’m not sure you’re going to be seeing me much any more,” she said, “after this.”

“Don’t be fucking stupid. I’m going to see you every night, same as usual.”

“No.” She shook her head and chewed her bottom lip for a moment. “No, I don’t think you will.”

“Ray, just – “ He glanced at the windows again. “Just sit tight, okay? Drink a beer and don’t go anywhere. I have to go sort this shit out. I’ll be back in twenty minutes and you can tell me what’s up.”

She smiled, at that. “You’re sweet. You were always sweet. Go on. You need to move.”
Outside on the street, pulling his collar up against the gusts of spray, he turned and looked back through the window. She was sitting there alone at the table, cocooned in the warm glow of Tinkerbull’s; battered sneakers on the chair’s edge, knees hunched up to her chest and arms wrapped round them, watching him go. Water dribbled down the glass, tiny streams forking and merging like decisions, blurring her, smearing her outline into crystal pixels, and in the surface of each drop the pinpoint dance of argon wings: up-down, on-off.

Light and rain.

* * *

As he’d reached out to tug the door open he’d seen the figure again, still waiting. By the time the door shut, it had vanished. He looked left and right along the street, saw nothing but a couple of umbrellas hurrying past, a kid dashing from one dark doorway to another. The clown cultist from earlier was still meandering happily along, nursing his Faygo. His ponytail of hair, held back off his face by a fat pink elastic band, was now a sort of wet rope hanging down his back, and his skin was slick and shimmered in the lights. Jagged orange stripes rippled across the concrete.

“You up and changed your mind, son?” said the cultist hopefully as Sollux approached. “You ready to get your motherfucking miracles on?”

“Nah. My last miracle fucking sucked. Listen, you see a woman out here just now? Tall chick in a duster, maybe shades?”

“Shit yes, I saw her.” The cultist frowned. “All business, that lady. Shark in a small pond, you know? Bad vibes, son, bad motherfucking vibes.”

“Right. Where’d she go?”

The cultist assumed the kindly expression of one forced to explain something straightforward to a moron. “Man, she ain’t gone any place. She’s flat behind you. Down the street a way, call it thirty feet. You want I should give her a wave?”

Sollux froze; forced himself not to look round, not to stiffen. That made it pretty much official, then.

“No. No, we’re good, thanks.”

“That’s cool. Hey – ” As Sollux tried to step past, the cultist put a meaty hand on his arm and fixed him with a serious gaze. “I’m just sorry as shit to hear ‘bout your last miracle, brother.”

He searched the guy’s white-smeared face for any sign of humour, and found none. In this line of work, a bad miracle was like bones in your lunch; unavoidable, regrettable. “Yeah. You know if I can get a refund?”

The cultist shook his head sadly. “Don’t work like that. But hey – ” he brightened – “maybe the next one’ll turn out better, huh?”

“Sure hope so,” said Sollux, and walked on up the street, shoulders hunched. His brain had fought more or less clear of the ryth’s distortion, but the crash was still fogging his thoughts, and coupled with the heat and the beer and the broken sleep he was running distinctly sluggish. Without breaking step, he fished in his coat pocket for the strip; punched out a blue pill by feel, palmed it into his mouth and dry-swallowed. Then he upped the pace a little. It was natural he’d want to get out of the rain, right?

He walked another two blocks until the sparkle at the edges of his vision told him the cyanephedrine
was kicking in. Consciousness unfolded around him like a sheet of paper. Focus dialled back up suddenly. He was no longer a drifter through a blurred world of rain and shadowed arches; he was a piece, and the city was a board. Doors and stairways and fire escapes glowed with significance. He realised the hand in his pocket had balled tight into a fist around the bubble-strip, and the edge was cutting into his palm. Cool, stealthy fingers of light reached down through his sleepy brain and plugged in at the base of his neck, neurons snapping awake like guilty sentries. A muscle jumped behind one eye.

He didn’t bother to check the woman in the coat was still behind him: he could feel her even stride a street’s length off, calm and focused. He fought down a smile. Shark in a small pond, huh? Sorry, sister. This isn’t some liquored-up desk jockey whose scent you’re on now, some tubby sack of beer and five-gee cards who jumps when a door slams. This is Sollux Captor. You’re in Low City. Look him up.

He turned a corner, ducked left into an alley, and ran.

Sollux had long, rangy legs and not much body fat. He wasn’t built for stamina, but over short distances he could clock a respectable speed for his caste. Five seconds to the end of the alley. Two to haul himself up onto a dented trashcan that teetered alarmingly but stayed upright; two more to grab the rungs of the rusted ladder and clamber up until his sneakers found a purchase. The blue star pulsing in his brain wiped out all irrelevances: the ladder’s edges were sharp and bright against a haze of grey. Six seconds to reach the top, crawl onto the roof on his belly and roll over to face the stars. Time elapsed: fifteen seconds.

He rolled onto his front again and inched carefully up to the roof’s edge, peered over into the dark alley below. A pale blotch of a face with black holes for eyes stared straight back up at him, impassive.

He shoved himself away, sneaker toes scrabbling at the poured concrete, and pushed himself upright so fast he skinned his palms. How the fuck? He didn’t wait to hear the inevitable creak of metal under new weight; just bolted straight across the roof, heart pounding. There was a gap between this building and the next, but the cyanephedrine’s roar told him he could make it and he hurled himself across without considering the alternative, hit the other side and stumbled but stayed on his feet, kept running. This roof had a fire escape door in a squat brick housing. Sollux shrugged the coat off his shoulders as he ran, let it slip till it flapped from just his right arm. As he reached the door he glanced back. No sign of a stalking silhouette. Was she still on the ladder? Maybe the trashcan had picked a really convenient moment to fall over and she was rolling in spilt garbage clutching a sprained ankle? He balled the coat round his fist and hit the glass pane in the top half of the door as hard as he could; there was a crunch as it burst. He reached through with his left arm and groped around until he found the bar. The ice-blue cubes crackled underfoot as he started down the stairs two at a time.

The staircase was mostly dark. He ignored the doors leading off onto landings and kept straight down towards street level, swerving headlong round each bend, some cocktail of ancient instinct and modern stimulant warning him not to get cut off from an exit. His ears strained for sounds above him. As he leapt down the last couple of steps, his foot caught on some protruding piece of junk and he sprawled painfully on damp linoleum, banging his elbows hard and knocking the breath from his lungs. Wheezing, he clawed himself half-upright and something hit him in the ribs. He yelped and fell over onto his back, hands flung up to ward off another blow.

“Attempting to escape was, on balance, unwise,” said a cool voice from the shadows of the hallway.

He looked. She really was tall: six feet easy. The leather coat was tastefully cut and hung down to the middle of her calves, which were sheathed in gleaming black boots. She had pale grey skin and
short hair and one horn hooked into a sort of barb, and she wore black mirrored shades and a very slight smile. Her right hand gripped a telescopic three-section riot baton. Everything about her stance – loose, easy, professional – telegraphed *stay the fuck down, smartass* loud and clear.

The cyanophedrine nagged him for a fight. Sollux stamped on it. There wasn’t a boss in all Low City could afford muscle like this. He’d met leg-breakers and door-kickers and every sort of wolf in the sewer, and this was something else again. The real deal: street samurai. The cold slow awareness dawned that Ray had called it. He was going to die here, in a locked-up stem, and she’d probably take his cigarettes.

She raised the baton, pressed her free palm against the tip, and pushed the thing shut with two soft clicks.

“Mr Captor,” she said. “My name is Kanaya Maryam, and I have been instructed to approach you with an offer of employment.”
She didn’t take his cigarettes.

In fact, once they were inside the groundcar, slicing through the rainbow ribbons of an uptown shopping district he’d never seen before – the car’s sleek black body shedding tears along the slipstream as puddled colours split and sprayed around its tyres – she offered him one of hers, silently. She smoked Black Queens, which were a little fancy for his tastes, but you didn’t turn down a cigarette. He sank further into the plush crimson ultrasuede of the car’s interior and smoked and stared out of the window at the shop-fronts flashing past. He didn’t ask where they were going; there was no point.

Feeling the ephedrine clarity start to tremble, he fished the bubble-strip out of his pocket again and placed it on his thigh, in full view. She just kept looking straight ahead. When he popped out a blue pill and put it on his tongue she didn’t even blink. It was only when he held the strip out towards her and said “Want one?” that she said “No, thank you”, very politely, and even then she didn’t look round. He couldn’t see the riot stick, which made him nervous.

The Spider’s Web was a midblood nightclub with a garish, paint-splattered frontage. Its main sign was a simple holographic: a stylised octagonal web of blue light with a fat spider squatting at its centre. The strands of the web flashed on and off in different sequences. The effect was weirdly crude. Unlike holographics he’d seen which flaunted their complexity, sending shapes spinning and tumbling through each other, morphing hands into eyes or roses into skulls, this one was not much above what you could have done with argon, as if you’d bought top-range speakers just to listen to some guy banging a stick on a rock. It was a brash big sister to poor little Tinkerbull, stuck flapping his wings against the Low City rain.

The street samurai ushered Sollux through a side entrance and up some stairs. This early in the night the club was dark and still; the staff hadn’t even come in to set up for sunrise. They climbed three flights, and she pushed open a frosted glass door and stood aside so he could go through. The cyanephedrine murmured treacherously in his ear that something in her stance had changed, gone slack: she’d stopped expecting a fight. Either she didn’t think he would try to get away, or she didn’t think he could. He didn’t think he could either. The second pill had been a mistake. He felt sick and jangled, and his nerves were screaming under gauze.

The office on the other side of the door was cavernous, and heaped high with clutter. He glimpsed fat green polyethylene sacks, a sagging wooden bureau with its drawers missing, a flesh-grey shop mannequin with no head and a smooth lump for a bulge, cardboard boxes with damp corners, wooden crates sprayed with bright tags in scarlet and orange, scrolls of yellowed computer printout, what looked like most of a brass chandelier jutting like ribs from a landslide of white foam packing chips. The room smelt of cigar smoke and furniture polish and old sweat.

“Captor!” a voice crowed. “Man, you took your sweet time. Get your skinny butt over here, sit down.”

The woman behind the huge mahogany desk had a sharp face and a pirate’s smile. Her hair was long and stuck out in unruly folds and spikes. Her left eye was a complex chunk of bionics: six small red lenses ringing a larger central one, all set in a shiny chrome housing that jutted over her cheekbone, defiantly artificial. It didn’t look like civilian work at all. Military issue, maybe, or Feltware, something out of the green clinics. She used her cigar to gesture to a dilapidated office chair on three wheels that stood in a clear patch of floor, facing her. Sollux sat down cautiously. The chair creaked, but held. The samurai – Maryam – closed the door and took up station a little way into the room,
arms folded.

The woman with the bionic eye stared at him critically. The lenses swivelled and whirred, focusing somehow.

“Wow,” she said finally, “you look like shit. You need a coffee. Maryam, get this poor fuck a coffee already before he drops dead or something.”

Maryam crossed to an old-fashioned coffeemaker on a side table, under a bad oil painting of a naval battle, ships burning yellow and white beneath the violet moon. The squat glass tankard on the hotplate was half full. She poured, stirred, and brought him the mug. He cupped both hands round it gratefully.

The other woman was still gazing at him. “You’re on something, right? What is it? Meth-tel, blue stars?”

“Can we please cut the shit?” he said wearily, and took a sip from the coffee. She’d sweetened it, but it was hot and strong and it felt good going down. He shifted a little in the chair and the castors lurched.

“Yeah! Straight down to business. I like that. Time is money, right? Except I got a lot of money, and not too much time.” She frowned. “Name’s Serket, Vriska Serket. I run this club. You ever come here? You should, it’s awesome. Best club in town, no kidding. I run a bunch of other stuff too. Secret stuff. Punk like you, you’d probably love to hear about it, but I ain’t saying a word.”

“Aw, gee,” he said, and turned to look at Maryam. “You got anything for crippling disappointment?”

Serket laughed. “A wise guy! I love wise guys, that’s great. Hey, wise guy, you want a job?”

“What kind of job?”

She rolled her one visible eye. “Heavy lifting. Jeez! What kind of job do you think? I need a helmsman. I need the best helmsman. Street says that’s you, kiddo.”

He snorted, and took another swig of coffee to cover the sudden swoop of misery in his guts. “Street needs to check its fucking facts. I don’t do that shit any more.”

“Yeah yeah, bullshit.” She waved a hand airily. “It’s like riding a two-wheel device, huh? You never forget.”

“No, you don’t understand. I had an accident, couple of months back. Fried my brain. It’s all just junk up there now, I couldn’t buzz in if I wanted to.” The sickness was back; he wondered if the cyanephedrine was crashing early. He felt a bead of sweat break free of his hairline and crawl downwards. His stomach churned, and he gripped his free hand on the arm of the chair, fighting it.

Serket folded her hands and propped her chin on them, watching him. “Yeah, we know about that.”

Then the remaining flickers of blue light bunched up and hit him in the side of the skull. The tape replayed with silky, mocking clarity. The samurai had stirred the coffee, but she hadn’t put anything in it. The sweeteners had already been in the mug.

“What the fuck,” he said, and licked his lips, “have you done to me.”

She smiled, slowly, and reached into the top pocket of the iridescent blue jacket she wore. She waved something at him between thumb and forefinger: a short glass tube. As she tilted it, he saw
amber fluid flow thickly down towards the cork. “Ever heard of mind honey, Captor?”

He convulsed, up, out of the chair, and it clattered away behind him on the boards, but she was faster, much faster. She had the gun out of the drawer and levelled before he’d got one foot in front of the other. It was an antique eight-shot naval revolver, fat and deadly, and it was pointed straight at his right knee.

“Easy, tiger,” she said softly, and thumbed back the hammer with a snap. “I need your head, and your hands. Got no use for anything from the waist down. How ’bout you?”

He swayed. The light from the ceiling bulb had slowed like treacle; it gleamed stickily off the gun and trickled down the blue-black insect scales of her jacket. The coffee mug burst somewhere miles below him. He heard a creak of leather, and then a cool, strong arm was locked round his throat from behind and something hit him very precisely in the back of the knee. He watched his leg cave with a mild sense of objective concern, and then he was kneeling in spilt coffee, warmth soaking into his jeans like he’d pissed himself. A hand blurred somewhere from the right gripping a syrette. He felt, but didn’t see, the needle pierce the flesh on his arm; felt the molten gold rush into his bones and catch alight, the fire spreading up past his shoulder, spilling through his chest, leaving nothing but black ash behind.

Far away, somebody said “Holy shit – ”

His eyes exploded, and he fell.

* * *

Sollux woke to a sloping ceiling with a grimy trapezoid skylight lit up green by moonlight. His head hurt. He rolled to the side and sopor slopped and rippled: cheap stuff, watery with an alkaline tang, the same as you got in any number of roadside skeps and motels. Gripping the sides of the cocoon, he blinked a few times and took in the room: a big white space, high walls smooth with latex paint, a single metal door. The skylight was the only window. Here and there jagged holes had been punched in the walls to admit bunches of cable, which dangled loose or ran on along the floorboards under layers of black tape.

The floor was gritty with sawdust and splotches of dried paint. Sollux stood and dripped for a couple of seconds before he noticed the samurai. She was sitting on a metal frame chair against the wall opposite the door, legs crossed, nursing a steaming white mug of something. She’d foregone the coat: black leather jeans and a kind of tight mesh sleeveless top. She turned her head aside modestly, and he realised he was naked.

“Uh,” he said, and looked down at himself foolishly. “Sorry.”

“There’s a towel just behind you,” she said.

There was: a white one, scratchy from repeated washing, neatly folded on top of his jeans. He mopped himself mostly dry and clambered into the jeans, then looked down again. The thighs and knees were smudged with reddish smears of rust and powdered brick, and there was a strong smell of coffee.

“Shit.”

“Don’t worry,” said Maryam, sounding amused. “There will be time for shopping later. How are you feeling?”

It came back to him in brilliant shards: the too-sweet coffee, the little glass phial, the syrette.

“You. Fuck. You dosed me up on mind honey. Shit. How long have I, did I – ”

“Please try and stay calm,” she said soothingly.

“Calm?! I’m going to fucking die – ”

“You’re not going to die. Vriska calculated the dose very carefully. The minuscule amount in your coffee primed your system for the main shot. I will admit she’s a little annoyed about the roof, but no-one was hurt.”

He clutched the side of the cocoon. His palms were sweaty on the cold metal, and his mouth felt like crumpled paper. “You’re both insane.”

“On the contrary. This decision was not undertaken on a whim. We consulted neuroengineers from three separate clinics. Mind honey amplifies psychic potential.” She reached down beside her chair into a black nylon sports bag and removed a plastic bottle of water. “In the case of a fully-functioning psionic, this amplification invariably results in massive brain haemorrhage and death.” She tore a foil seal off the bottle’s cap and held it out. She said the words massive brain haemorrhage as coolly as she said everything else. “You were not a fully-functioning psionic.”

He crossed and took the bottle, but didn’t drink. “And what the fuck am I now?”

“That’s rather what we’d like to discover.” She gestured. For the first time he noticed the sleek black cyberspace rig squatting on the bare boards, against the wall. It was a new model, a Kraghe Seven, same as all the scene kiddies in the Spires were meant to be using. He ran his tongue round dry lips. “Take your time.”

“You reckon I’ll be able to buzz in.”

“We think so, yes.”

The fingers of his left hand flexed slowly at his hip. “What if I can’t?”

“Then you probably will die.”

“And if I flip you the bird and walk straight out the door?” he asked, more out of a concern for form than anything. He knew this script.

She gave him a regretful little smile and something clicked. He glanced down to note the hand propped on her knee now held the matte grey curve of a slicer. He hadn’t even seen her draw it.

“’Kay,” he said, and took a deep breath. “I’d sit a way off unless you want cerebrospinal fluid all over your jeans. They look kind of expensive.”

He drank from the bottle in one convulsive gulping motion, head tilted back, until it was half empty. Then he dropped it and sat down cross-legged at the rig. He thumbed the power stud, and reached up to unhook the jack from its plastic clip. It was still wrapped in a wafer of pink foam. Never used.

The earliest cyberspace rigs had been incredibly clunky. They were the size of a wardrobe, and the helmsman had to wear a headset covered in wires and lights and aerials and all kinds of extraneous shit. You’d closed the connection by pushing a conductive strip down against a copper plate, which had made a characteristic buzzing noise. The idiom survived, even though the whole process was now completely silent. Slang was funny like that sometimes.
Sollux held the little silvery jack between thumb and foreclaw. He blew on the spindle: an old good luck charm. Then he reached behind his right ear, a motion still written into the muscles of his arm at what felt like a genetic level, said a silent farewell to Ray, and pushed the thing home.

Pain, pain like hot oil dripped through a crack in his skull, green and blue lights popping in darkness and –

– contact –

The medium opened like a flower.

He was moving. He was flying. The meat was nothing now, a coat thrown off, a distraction heavy with scents and sensations he was no longer obliged to care for. He was light, only light, soaring and angling down the data canals of non-space, the wind from infinity roaring music in his ears. He yelled – a hoarse, wild yell of triumph – and banked, cut back on himself, threw a quick loop just for the Hell of it. His fingers pattering on the keyboard seemed like ghost transmissions from a far-off galaxy. Structures rose all round him, great translucent palaces of code in rose-pink and apple-green and cobalt blue, linked by a lattice of streams and thrumming lines. The scene kids with their new rigs they didn’t know how to use would be trickling along those lines, arguing about tedious real-world bullshit and posting endless purrbeast .gifs, clogging the arteries. Fuck ‘em. They’d see him pass and wonder what the Hell just happened; wonder if they’d seen an Inexplicable Cyberspace Phenomenon, or an angel.

He paused to take bearings. He’d dropped in somewhere around the middle of the spindle, the social terraces. Prospit of him were libraries, academies, and the shining towers of government. Derse lay the military, a snarl of technical databanks permanently lit up by the electric hum of angry nerds, and the endless, murky caverns of pornography into which you didn’t go without a map.

He felt the need to do something stupid: push the rig, show the net its lusus was back now. Too far prospit and he’d start hitting glass ceilings and setting off alarms, and he figured Serket and her samurai wouldn’t be too keen on that. Derse, though. No-one gave two shits what happened way down there.

He hung flaming for another second, then fell like a thunderbolt.

Heading derse was always an experience. The light changed. He punched down through obsolete sectors which glowed a dull, defeated purple, down past the looming crystal glaciers of military intelligence, where ice rippled hungrily and sent stealthy tendrils to coil in wait for prey. Geometric solids, data nodes, rolled and tumbled slowly in invisible tides – red cubes, green spheres, a shimmering orange dodecahedron that any phyte would have picked as a juicy target. Sollux could tell without looking it would be nothing but fire and poison. Big things stirred, down here: ancient autonomics left ticking over for hundreds of sweeps, mutated AIs grown black and malevolent. He scattered chaff as he fell, tinsel fragments spooling out in his wake to puzzle and misdirect anything nasty that happened to be paying attention.

Something caught his eye. He slowed, and stopped.

Hanging a little below him, still and untroubled, was a small and perfect pyramid of light. It was a peaceful sort of pink-purple colour. Further prospit it would have been one in a thousand, but down here you didn’t find isolated nodes like this; they’d long ago have been chewed up and cannibalised by the autonomics. Either it was very new and very doomed, or it had tricks up its sleeve.

He made a couple of leisurely orbits. The code signature suggested moderate security, enough to keep out an ambitious phyte, but nowhere near the heavy armour you needed to survive so deep.
He’d seen social nodes with better ice. He drew cautiously closer, watching the pyramid’s surface for any telltale shift or change. Nothing. It took no notice of him. That was kind of insulting.

He racked his shields up high, ready to jump a mile if anything twitched. Then he reached out and touched it.

Cool sensations along his arm. A medley of images, flickering and alien: the top of a tower, beneath a stormy sky. A white hive and a waterfall. A pale figure in a crimson cloak. A great bearded statue. Trees on fire, and a pink scarf flapping in a wind he couldn’t feel.

The scent of lavender. A hand on the back of his neck.

The connection broke, and he found himself gazing up at Kanaya Maryam. Her eyes were wide and concerned.

“What happened?” he said stupidly.

“I’m not sure,” she replied. She stepped away, and he realised she must have slapped the emergency brake: the red button on the side of any rig that meant drop everything. “You started talking.”

“What did I say?”

“I’ve no idea. I think it was another language. It was extremely strange. Are you feeling alright?”

He shrugged. “Yeah. I feel fine. Sorry. I was messing around, think I went a bit too deep. Weird shit down there.”

She stared at him for a couple more seconds, then nodded. “Very well. I take it the connection was a success, at any rate?”

He just grinned.

* * *

His reward for passing the test was new clothes. Maryam had the driver drop them outside one of the bigger Spires and they took a glass and chrome elevator to the fifteenth level. The target was a bleeding-edge boutique called Naive Wanderer; he’d occasionally seen holographics for it, limes and ceruleans with perfect bone structure posing in asymmetric gowns and immaculately-tailored suits with skinny ties. He was appalled to find himself standing inside the fucking place. Maryam made intrigued little cooing noises over the perigee’s menswear collection, but he mobilised every ounce of disdain his skinny frame could convey and emerged victorious in black jeans (low-slung and boot-cut with stupid straps; there weren’t any other kinds), a grey marl T-shirt in some comfortable brushed cotton analogue, and a good hard-wearing black denim jacket with a high collar and deep pockets you could cram your fists right down into.

“Weapons next,” she said, and took him up another six levels.

He’d been in armouries before, but they’d always been back-alley joints: a tattooed rustblood with a beard would lead you into a garage that smelt overpoweringly of engine oil, offer you a beer, and show you a couple of crates, stocky firearms with taped-up grips and dubious muzzle attachments nestling in packing chips like newborn cholerbear cubs. This was not that kind of a place. The carpet was deep-pile blue, patterned with burgundy swirls. The counters looked like real timber. Guns sat on show-mounts in glass cases, carefully lit with tiny individual spotlights. Some of them revolved. Tasteful boneflute music was piped through unseen speakers, and the whole shop breathed a discreet, tough-yet-classy aroma of oiled leather, hot metal, and pinewood. Sollux blinked helplessly.
The samurai nodded at the attendant who’d materialised next to them. “Good evening. My associate requires pistol abstratus and a suitable beginner’s weapon, please.”

“Of course, madam. Will you be wanting anything yourself tonight?”

“I’ll just browse for now, thank you.”

She glided away to look at a display of throwing stars mounted on green velvet. The attendant, who had slender horns and hair thinning on top, looked solicitous. “Is this sir’s first experience with pistolkind?”

“Uh. Sure, I guess.” He was beginning to really need a cigarette.

“This way, please. Is sir anticipating extended hotzone engagement, or primarily defensive work?”

“I’m hoping not to have to use the fucking thing at all,” said Sollux.

The attendant’s brow furrowed and he turned to look up at a wall of pistols on little wooden shelves. “Hmmm,” he said thoughtfully. “Best steer clear of the Chekov, then. Would sir say speed or damage is more of a priority?”

“Speed,” said Sollux, “definitely speed.”

The attendant hummed a few notes, then made an exaggerated eureka! face. “Ah! I have just the thing.” He reached up and took down a short, snub-nosed handgun with a curved grip and a red LED partway along the barrel. “Vulturer spine pistol,” he said, and handed it to Sollux, who took it as if it might be going to bite him. “Light frame, so it’s good for concealed carry. Magnetic propulsion means no recoil, and it’s almost silent. Excellent accuracy at anything up to a hundred metres.” He picked up a wedge of translucent green plastic and held it out on the palm of his hand so Sollux could see the thin needle-like spines trapped inside in rows, like flies in amber. “One magazine holds thirty rounds. You can fire single shots, or semi-automatic will dispense five rounds in just under a second.” He stepped aside to reveal more of the plastic wedges under a glass tabletop: nine or ten different colours. “Now, ammunition is strategically crucial. May I suggest – ”

“Two red and two blue,” said Sollux automatically. The attendant beamed.

“A splendid choice, sir! I see you’re not quite the beginner you implied. I’ll wrap it all up for you now. The abstratus will be included in the package.”

Maryam added several other flat boxes and cylinders to the order, and paid with a slim black credit key. The attendant followed them to the door, full of platitudes. Back outside in the lobby, Sollux muttered, “What ammo did I actually buy?”

“Blue is synaptic scrambler rounds,” she replied. “Non-lethal, but they’ll drop anything with a nervous system inside a second. Red is explosive. Be careful with those: they’ll blow a hole as big as your fist. Aim for the centre of mass.”

“Fuck,” he said. “Look, can we get a coffee or something? I’m twitchy as Hell tonight.”

“That sounds good,” she said, somewhat to his surprise.

* * *

Seated on stools either side of a high aluminium table with their coffees, he asked her, “Maryam, who’s funding all this? I mean, who paid for all that shit we just bought? Serket?”
She chuckled. “No. Vriska’s capital is substantial, but I’m afraid it doesn’t run to this level of expenditure. We’re being bankrolled for this operation by... well, by a very wealthy individual. I can’t really give you any more detail than that yet.”

“And where the Hell did you guys get the mind honey? That stuff’s not exactly available at the grocery store.”

“No,” she agreed, and blew carefully on her latte. “In fact, acquiring even a relatively small quantity of mind honey has been our biggest expense so far.” She frowned. “While we’re here, Sollux, there’s something I’d like to tell you, although please don’t mention it to Vriska. She wanted to keep you in the dark, but I feel that’s unfair. You see, mind honey’s effect on troll neurochemistry is spectacular, but not permanent.”

“You mean I need to keep taking it?”

She sighed. “Yes. Worse, I’m afraid your body is now essentially addicted to the substance. So long as you continue to ingest small amounts every day or so – nothing as serious as the original dose – you’ll retain your enhanced abilities. If you stop, you’ll begin to suffer – well, withdrawal symptoms.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Let me guess: by ‘withdrawal symptoms’, you don’t mean headaches and nausea.”

“No.”

“My brain’s going to dribble out of my ears, isn’t it.”

“Um. More or less, yes.”

“So I’m hooked on the galaxy’s most expensive drug, and if I can’t get my fix I’ll die.”

“That is an accurate summary of the situation, yes.”

“Fucksake.” He held up a hand. “Hey, can I get another espresso over here?”

As the waitress brought the coffee over, he dug in the pocket of his new jeans and came up with a cigarette. The samurai leant across the table and lit it with a slim black lacquered tube. “Once the job is complete, Vriska will equip you with the chemicals necessary to rid yourself of the dependency without suffering further ill effects.”

He nodded, blew smoke. “Keeping me on the leash. Neat. That her idea, or yours?”

Maryam looked uncomfortable. “Hers. I’m sorry. I bought you something.”

She reached into one of the bags and pulled out a small plastic canister, which she placed in the centre of the table. He picked it up. It contained a single silver abstratus plug with a green rubber tag.

“Riflekind,” she said. “In my experience, it is almost never wise to enter a combat situation with only one available abstratus. It limits your tactical options appallingly. A spare riflekind plug has saved my life on a number of occasions.”

He looked at the plug, then up at the samurai. “You really think it’s going to get that hot?”

Her expression flickered very slightly. “Drink your coffee,” was all she said. “We have a plane to catch.”
On the flight he washed down a sleeping pill with a double whisky and folded himself into his jacket. He dreamed he was floating in a vast and featureless sea. The water was blood-warm and grey as iron, and stretched all round him to a dead horizon.

He swam towards a figure perched a little way away on a bright pink inflatable airbed, which bobbed on the ocean’s surface. The figure proved to be a slim young woman about his own age, with milk-white skin and no horns. She wore a purple swimsuit and a matching ribbon in her pale hair. Her bare legs trailed in the water.

When she saw him she smiled with small dark lips and kicked out a foot, splashing him. Then she trailed her toes gently down the left side of his face, from his temple down his cheek and the line of his jaw, until they tapped him under the chin. Her skin was very cold.

“I’m drowning,” he said.

“Yes,” she said kindly, “you are.”

There was a sudden roll of thunder, and the sky darkened. A great black wave rose to swallow him, and he woke shivering and sweating in the dim cabin of the plane. Kanaya was in the seat next to him, wide awake, and she didn’t look round.
Viral Strike

Chapter Notes

[After consultation with Tumblr, a separate 'spoiler page' listing ships which will be encountered during the fic has been created. This is intended for readers who are particularly upset by a ship and are worried about stumbling across it. See the notes at the beginning of the first chapter for a link. This page is NOT recommended unless you know you have a strong adverse reaction to one or other ship, since it will spoil several plot developments later in the story!]

Terezi Pyrope wasn’t exactly surprised when she went insane.

It was a ground-level tenet of troll biology that the higher your bloodcaste, the greater your risk of serious mental instability. The upper castes were riddled with psychosis, paranoid schizophrenia, delusion, erotomania, lack of impulse control, and in some cases abject lunacy - a fact which was key to any understanding of troll culture as a whole. Terezi, as a tealblood – too low to be high, too high to be normal – had always hoped she would sneak in under this particular radar, but she was sensible enough to greet the first symptoms of incipient mental collapse with regret and resignation, rather than horror or denial.

She’d been far away from Alternia when it happened. As the Mekbuda campaign dragged to its bloody close, her squad had been deployed into the ash hills north of the planetary capital to hunt down the last few loose bands of Rhothi insurgents. They’d dropped a little after noon, nine killers in chameleon suits and dayvision optics, with long-barrelled jezails and blades for close work. They’d been briefed to expect anything from peasants with hatchets to full-scale artillery bombardment: no-one in Command knew precisely how much stuff the northern tribes had squirreled away.

Unfortunately, the Rhothi had outsourced. Realising Alternia’s iron hand brushed off cluster bombs and mortar shells like gnats, they’d started buying in tech from the neighbouring system, and the neighbouring system didn’t fuck around.

They’d split the virus into beads to reduce its profile and hung it all along the data artery Terezi’s squad used for uplink to battalion core. A sophisticated scan would have lit them up like Bright Season’s Eve, but Terezi’s helmsman was working with a greasy battlefield rig ten sweeps out of date while lying on his face in a ditch. The second he’d buzzed in, he’d joined the dots, and a particularly nasty species of scrambler worm had slithered straight down the pipe and through his occipital jack. He’d made a noise at Terezi’s elbow, and she’d turned just in time to see a pressurised jet of mustard blood squirt through each lens of his optics with a tinny little crunch. Then his skull had burst. By the time the screaming started from the rest of the squad, her hand was already moving to tear off the headset.

Good old Pyrope, they’d teased her in Basic; she always gets there first! Viral strike drill was to trip your baffles and go dark, ride it out, but that was when you had a warning. She’d felt the first shriek of an impossible, diamond pain in her ears, two cold thorns of toxic black glass burrowing blindly inwards, before she’d ripped the whole assembly clear and flung it away. Then her 2ic had made a wet howling noise, like an animal cut open, and on panicked instinct she’d rolled over towards the sound and opened her eyes.

The last thing she ever saw was the summer sky.
Some time later, she woke to darkness. Her eyes hurt, a lot. She reached up to touch them and her fingers came away wet and sticky. She was lying on her back; there was a dead weight across her legs, which she managed to push clear. It was still very slightly warm. Not really thinking about very much, she staggered to her feet and pawed at the air in front of her.

A little voice in her head said, Get down, dumbass.

“What?” she said, out loud.

Get DOWN!

Training reasserted itself. She dropped, reflexively, and heard a flat crack and a whine. She pressed her face into the gritty ash.

Jesus, said the voice. That what they teach you at Commando School? How to catch sniper rounds in your mouth?

Leave me alone, she thought grumpily. I'm not having a good day. My squad’s all dead and I think I may be blind.

No shit you’re blind, said the voice. Terezi knew that your ‘head voice’ was often very different to the way you actually sounded, which was why hearing yourself on tape was always so weird. But, even allowing for that disconnect, she was pretty sure her head voice wasn’t normally male.

You’re gonna need to do something about those assholes, it said.

What do you suggest?, she thought, trying to convey the sarcasm without actually vocalising, because her mouth was still full of ash.

Apparently this didn’t work, because the voice said, Grab a rifle. There’s one just to your right.

Cautiously, she spider-walked her fingers outwards to the right until they bumped into cool metal. She scrabbled around until she had a solid grip on the barrel, then dragged it towards her.

Nice. Now crawl forward some.

She hesitated.

It’s cool, the voice reassured her. You’re in a ditch. They can’t hit you unless you do something really fucking dumb, like standing up and waving your arms around.

Shut up! she thought furiously, and crawled forwards. Within a couple of feet the ground under her hands started to slope upwards.

Keep going. Little more. Okay, stop, said the voice. The edge of the ditch is about eye level. She shrank down a little. Relax, these dudes suck. You spent ten seconds doing improv mime theatre just now and they missed by like six feet. Get the rifle in position.

It’s not a rifle, she thought muzzily, it’s a jezail.

Oh shit, said the voice. You’re right, that IS the most important thing right now. Get that fucking thing on your shoulder or we’re going to lose them. Also who names a gun after jizz, that is incredibly unthreatening. Don’t worry sergeant, I’ll get ’em with my spunk blaster. Hold on, this turned into gay porn again, didn’t it?
Little of this made sense, but the word we was strangely comforting. She snuggled the jezail stock against her shoulder and went to sight down the barrel on automatic, then sighed.

*Mystery voice*, she thought, *I don’t know what you’re talking about, but this is silly. I can’t snipe blind.*

YOU’RE blind, the mystery voice shot back. I’m having a fucking see party up here, let me tell you. Just peepin’ shit up like crazy. To your left. Ten degrees. Okay, five more. Now drop the barrel half an inch. Yeah. Do it.

It was at this point that Terezi realised what had happened. She had gone insane. The stress of the mission, the trauma of seeing her squad’s brains burnt out by viral fire, and the loss of her own sight had all dogpiled her fragile tealblood sanity and snapped it clean in half. It wasn’t even PTSD, she’d just gone nuts. She’d made up an imaginary friend with a nice warm drawly voice to keep her company, and she was lying blind in a ditch full of corpses pointing her gun at a cactus. Any minute now some kindly Rhothi would come along with a meat cleaver, find the crazy blind girl mumbling to herself, and put her out of her misery. In fact, she should really take the initiative; they tortured captives. But she might as well take the cactus with her.

She pulled the trigger. The jezail coughed.


She breathed in, breathed out, pulled the trigger.

*Fuck yes,* said the voice. *Job done. Okay, you can do tai chi now or whatever you like, you’re clear. Looks like they only sent two guys to mop up.*

*I think I might just sort of stay here, actually!* she thought, and passed out.

* * *

She came half-awake in a med-cocoon, smelling clean metal and chemicals, and floated drowsily for a few seconds. There was no voice in her head; no voice at all but a couple of people nearby deep in some quiet discussion.

“– both straight between the eyes, perfect,” one of them was saying.

“But she must have already been –”

She drifted off to sleep again.

* * *

When she woke properly there were a lot of tests, all of which proved that no, she really couldn’t see anything at all – she could have told them as much, but the military liked to do things properly – and a debriefing at which she received the gratifying news that she was not going to be court-martialled and shot for dereliction of duty (the general sounded a little disappointed). Then she was allowed back to the ward to get some more sleep. She missed the ladder twice and banged her shin painfully on the rim of the cocoon, but eventually she managed to snuggle down wearily into the warm sopor. It was strange not to close her eyes.

*Jesus,* said the voice in her head. *You sleep in jizz, too. That’s commitment.*
Voice! she thought, outraged. I’m not dressed! Then she realised how stupid this sounded, and blushed.

It’s cool, it’s cool, the voice said hastily. I can’t see anything.

You said you were having a see party, earlier, she thought suspiciously. She actually heard it sigh. Having someone sigh inside your head was really weird.

It’s kind of complicated, it said. It’s like – I can see WHERE things are, but not WHAT they are. Or, no, that’s not right either. I’ve got some limitations, okay? I’m not gonna check out your tits while you’re asleep, I swear. Then it added awkwardly, I mean, I’m sure they’re great and everything, but.

Not really, she thought sadly. They’re sort of underwhelming.

No, come on, girl, give yourself some credit, okay? I bet they’re – yeah, this went weird. I’m just going to shut up now:

Terezi snorted, and accidentally inhaled a mouthful of sopor. When she’d finished spitting it out, she thought, Voice? Do you have a name?

There was a long silence.

Nah, the voice said. Not any more. I lost it.

That is very sad! How did you lose your name?

Bet it on a pool game, the voice said.

Will you still be here in the evening?

No promises. I’m a busy guy, y’know. Got places to go, blind girls to confuse.

She tutted. Such a coolkid.

You know it, baby. I’m so cool you’re gonna have an ice-cream headache pretty much 24/7, I’m warning you now.

There was another silence. Terezi rolled over a little.

Voice? she thought. You’re in my head, right?

Yep.

So, when I feel things, do you feel them too?

Uh. Was it her imagination, or did the voice sound suddenly uncomfortable? Kind of, yeah. I mean, there’s a neural gradient, so I’m not getting the full home cinema experience with Dolby 2.0. I just get like – echoes. But if you stick your arm in a fire, yeah, I’m gonna get burnt.

She reached a hand down under the sopor. Can you feel that?

Holy SHIT!, the voice squawked.

Terezi grinned broadly, and went to sleep.
The military didn’t want her any more. They tried to be nice about it, but there was no place on the front lines for a blind soldier, and her training made her wholly unsuited for anywhere but. They gave her an extremely small pension, and an even smaller medal, both of which she kept for sentimental reasons.

The first thing she did when she got off the shuttle, edgy and awkward in fatigues, was withdraw all her savings. Then she caught a cab to a bodymod clinic, one of the lower-profile cabins huddling in the shadow of Felt Mansion. She’d done her research, talked to friends in medical: the place was clean, cheap, and did good work, which was all she wanted. She didn’t need to be photographed coming down the steps afterward ostentatiously failing to hide her new horns.

The clinic tried to sell her a wide range of modifications. She turned them all down. In the end they threw up their white-gloved hands and gave her what she wanted: thin lenses of pyrolitic carbon, polished to a mirror finish, sealing away her ruined eyes from the world for good. Shades could fall off or be ripped away, and Terezi was determined that since she could never see how bad her eyes looked, no-one else would either.

They said she could have the lenses any colour she wanted. Terezi asked for a minute to think about it.

What’s your favourite colour?, she thought.

Red, the answer came back instantly.

She had to turn her face to the wall so the nurse wouldn’t see her smile. Mine too!, she thought gleefully. What are the odds?

Well, I’m a voice in your head, so pretty fuckin’ high, the voice in her head reminded her.

That took the wind out of her sails somewhat, she had to admit. But she asked the nurse for the reddest red they had. The nurse said this was an unusual choice. “Most of our clients prefer something that will blend a little more... harmoniously with the natural tones of the face,” she objected feebly.

“Not me!” declared Terezi, bouncing slightly in her seat. “I am not a very harmonious person.”

Ask ‘em for a lollipop for being a good girl, the voice advised.

Sssshhhh!

After the operation she hired a skep cocoon and lay in it for two days straight while the bruises faded. Then she bought a new set of clothes and went looking for work.

Terezi felt she had a good CV. She was, first and foremost, a highly-trained killer, a skill set which on Alternia was never out of fashion and always in demand. Yet she had something to offer the discerning employer which was rather more tantalising than mere aptitude with a garrotte or a jezail. The Legislacerature was not like any other army division: it prioritised individual opportunities for growth over team-based assessment objectives. All Legislacerators received extensive, holistic, and notoriously brutal conditioning in espionage, infiltration, psy-ops, black propaganda, martial arts, wilderness survival, interrogation, torture, psychodynamics, and simple murder. The jingle ran that one Legislacerator could kill a city, and three could kill a planet. Terezi had killed a city once and it hadn’t really been much fun. She tried not to think about it too much these days. Cities died loudly, and it took a long time.
Offset against this juicy recruiting morsel was the new fact of her blindness. This, she discovered, made people less inclined to take her seriously. But she killed the first few of them, and after that people gradually began to take her seriously again.

It was during this first, admittedly rocky phase of her job search that she made a useful discovery. Her favourite weapon, since Basic and before, had always been the sword. She was proficient with guns and knives and staves and bombs, but she was an artist with her sword. Being blind undeniably put a dent in this; the dent, however, was almost entirely covered up when she learnt that the voice in her head was a swordsman himself. He was ever so helpful. He gave her almost everything her eyes couldn’t: positions, vectors, heights, angles. They developed a good working shorthand, so that he could sketch a picture of a room in only a couple of sentences and she could proceed accordingly. There was no lag, either. He thought, and she acted. It made the life of a blind swordfighter, if not exactly easy, then infinitely less painful and embarrassing than it could have been. Longer, too.

Somewhere in the first exhilarating week of negotiations, a week of smashed glass and choking noises and arcs of bright blood on grimy back-room walls, he began to call her TZ – a name she’d never had before in all her life – and she began to call him Coolkid. They weren’t sure how it happened. They just sort of fell into it.

* * *

By her twelfth wriggling day, Terezi enjoyed a unique reputation among the more discerning sectors of the Alternian underworld. If you wanted something stolen, or someone killed, or somewhere blown up, you had all sorts of options available. But if you wanted something planned, there was really only one place to go.

Terezi Pyrope was a strategist. She took the impossible, and broke it down methodically into several difficult things, and then broke those down into a large number of things that were actually starting to look quite straightforward from a certain angle. What you did was, you went to her and said, in an appropriately respectful tone of voice, Ms Pyrope, I want a certain event to transpire. It has to take place within the next two weeks, and no-one can know it was my idea. Then you gave her a great deal of money. Then Ms Pyrope would stroke her pointy chin and pace around the room for a while, and sometimes, if your proposition was an especially difficult one, her lips would move silently, as though she were carrying out a conversation no-one else could hear. Eventually she would turn to you and say: okay! We are making this happen.

Then she would give you a series of detailed instructions, and if you followed them to the letter, you would get what you wanted. It was uncanny. Somehow she saw things no-one else could.

So great was her reputation that she began to attract business from some surprisingly high tiers of Alternian society. Terezi didn’t mind: shifty-looking Imperial officials were as welcome in her garishly-coloured twentieth-floor hivesuite as Low City crimelords, and indeed there were awkward moments in which a member of the former group on her way out would encounter a member of the latter group on his way in, and a great deal of coughing and turning up of collars would ensue. Terezi always seemed to find these moments particularly amusing. But even she was a little taken aback at the letter she received three weeks after her twelfth wriggling day. It was hand-delivered early one morning, instead of coming with the rest of the mail, and she had to break a wax seal to open the envelope. The letter itself was written on thick, stiff notepaper with a slightly coarse feel, and folded over twice. She sniffed it tentatively. A faint chemical tang, and something that might have been perfume.

_Are you there, Coolkid_, she thought.

_I’m at the White Castle_, said the voice in her head, which did this sometimes. _I don’t see you here,_
Shut up, she thought fondly, and look at this for me.

Okay, what we got here, the voice said. Expensive paper. Purple ink, fancy handwriting, like real calligraphy stuff. Did you just open it?

Yes, just now.

Good, ‘cause it’s gonna turn into dust in like three minutes. Enzymes or some shit, apparently. Science. Dear Ms Pyrope, I am writing to you regarding a matter of considerable delicacy, blah blah blah...

The voice tailed off.

Well?, she demanded.

Fuck, it said.

The next day she packed a couple of bags and caught a plane.

* * *

She told the cab driver at the airport to take her to a well-known local beauty spot, then got out and hiked the rest of the way. It took two hours. She spent most of the walk enjoying the smell of the pinewoods and the warm breeze that filtered in off the sea, and running possible scenarios in her head. Several of them ended with a body count that she judged unacceptable, either because the number was very large, or because one of the bodies was hers.

Eventually she reached her destination. A pair of electronic gates whined open to admit her. Then another. Then she crunched up a long gravel drive and hopped up a short flight of steps, and anunctuous valet with cut-glass consonants welcomed her to Villa Ampora and offered to take her bag. She shot a friendly grin in his general direction and said she was fine. He ushered her across what was presumably a hall – her boots clattered on tiles and echoed off a high ceiling – and into a room.

Coolkid? she thought.

Five, the voice said. No prox, no guns. Big dude with a fucking awful mullet, standing. Tall chick in a badass coat, standing. Skinny kind of pirate-looking chick with some tech on her face, sitting. Tall scrawny dude looks like a skeleton drank too much coffee, sitting. Snooty douche in a scarf, standing. All posed round the walls like they’re some kind of experimental art-rock outfit from Seattle getting their first big interview. Cut the tension with a fucking broadsword. Maybe tell a joke?

“Good evening!” chirped Terezi, and dropped her bag on the carpet with a thump.

“Good evening,” replied a cool female voice, and one of the guys managed an awkward “Hey”. No-one else spoke. A door clicked, and there was some general stirring and rustling.

Whoa, shit, said the voice. Hot chick, twelve o’clock. Like goddamn.

Coolkid! she scolded. Keep it in my pants.

“Hello, everyone!” sang a new voice: female, melodious, alarmingly cheerful. Seadweller vowels.

“Thank you all so much for coming! My name’s Feferi Peixes, and I want to be the next Empress of
 Alternia.”
The mechanics of Imperial succession had always been reassuringly straightforward. Every so often, a female troll would hatch with blood that was a vivid Tyrian purple. From the moment she wriggled out into the birthing caverns and blinked her adorable eyes, this troll would be treated as hot shit. She’d be coddled and guarded and given the best education and the best food and the prettiest dresses. She might well be invited to the Imperial Court and given some sort of honorary position that didn’t actually require her to do any work other than turning up to parties. Eventually, when she made it to a suitable age, usually somewhere around the nine-sweep mark, she would challenge the current Empress to single combat. If she won this duel – which was, beneath the preposterous brocaded layers of pomp and ritual and formality, a bar fight with pretensions – she became the new Empress. If she lost, she died, and everything went back to normal until the next one came along. This system satisfied some deep and primal need in the troll collective psyche. It had only ever been seriously called into question once.

The succession was by no means automatic. It was quite common for a Tyrian princess to die during childhood – the deep oceans were dangerous – or to lose the crucial duel. But the turnaround was fairly reliable all the same: the longest reign on record had lasted for ninety-four sweeps, and fifty or sixty was considered average. This was healthy because it gave the Empire enough stability to expand, in that long-term military campaigns could be undertaken without too much risk that a new Empress would change direction halfway through, while also avoiding stagnation and decay. Such, at least, was the principle of the thing.

This had served the Empire very well until the accession of the current Empress.

Her Imperious Condescension was, without a doubt, the most calculating, brutal, and merciless ruler the Empire had ever seen. Such qualities in a leader were warmly regarded by trolls under normal circumstances. But the Condesce, as she was generally known, had actually proven a little too ruthless even for the system which had spawned her. Tyrian blood confers a natural lifespan of extraordinary length, and the Condesce had every intention of enjoying this lifespan to its very last second. She implemented an unofficial new policy: new Tyrian hatchlings, rather than being given the prettiest dresses, were to be culled immediately on emergence from the caverns, before they were in any condition to put up a fight.

This was very simple, and tremendously effective. The Condesce had been on her throne for four hundred and thirteen solar sweeps.

The change of policy was not made known to the Empire at large. In fact, steps were taken to ensure that nobody really noticed the difference. Every so often, a particularly healthy and attractive young girl from the next caste down would be taken into the Empress’ care. Much would be made of her smiling and waving from Palace balconies. Eventually she would challenge the Empress, as was the way of things, and inevitably she would lose. Only Tyrian blood could stand up to an Empress at the height of her powers. You might as well have put a rustblood in the ring. But because she had gillflaps and good hair and her eyes were still clear, and because it wasn’t like anyone could just ask for a blood sample, the subterfuge went unsuspected. As far as the Alternian public was concerned, a legitimate challenger had arisen, and the Condesce had merely proven once again that she was the toughest motherfucker on the block. Which was good for the Empire, surely!

All of this information was downloaded to an increasingly astonished Sollux Captor by a perky fish-girl with distracting cleavage during the strangest buffet lunch of his entire life.

“So, hold on,” he said, as she refilled his coffee from a tall metal jug. “How come you’re not dead?”
“I got lucky,” she said simply, “and then I got smart. The system she uses to scan for new Tyrian births missed me, somehow. Once I was old enough to learn what was going on, I tried my best to stay under cover.” She glanced fondly at her moirail, who was hovering near the sandwiches, looking simultaneously nervous and disdainful. “Eridan’s been such a help. I couldn’t have lasted this long without him.”

Sollux had already decided Feferi Peixes’ moirail was a douchebag. He was a purpleblood, and something in government, and he was gazing at his new set of hiveguests with the slightly queasy expression of a man wondering whether to put down traps or poison.

“So why move now?” Sollux asked. The coffee was really good. “If you’ve been under the radar this long, why start taking risks?”

“Because it’s not fair!” she said passionately. “Nothing’s ever going to change, or get any better for anyone! We’re just going to keep conquering people until we run out of planets, and there’s so much awful stuff happening out there in the Empire, and no-one’s doing anything about it! We need an Empress who’ll actually, you know, try and fix things, not just leave them to get worse!”

“And that’s you, huh,” he said. Two purple spots were burning high on her cheeks. She sighed. “I don’t know. But I have to try. Is that really stupid?”

“It, uh.” What the Hell was he meant to say? “No, I mean. It’s cool that, you know, you want to make a difference.”

She smiled. “You think it’s really stupid.”

He shrugged helplessly, and nearly spilled the coffee. “Look, princess, you don’t fucking want advice from me. I’m not big on the politics stuff. They brought me in to do a job.”

“Thank you,” she said, and it was so painfully sincere he wanted to grab the fork off her plate and drive it through his own eyeball as hard as he could. “I really appreciate your help.”

“Oh look,” he said lamely, “cake,” and fled.

* * *

Half an hour later they were back in the fancy drawing-room where they’d started, sitting on high-backed armchairs upholstered in soft purple leather, listening to Terezi Pyrope. Sollux was still trying to get a read on her. She was a petite tealblood, about his age, with pointy features and a wide, fanged smile. He’d initially rolled his eyes at her scarlet mirror shades, and then been forced to reconsider when he’d seen her from the side and realised the lenses were surgically implanted into her face. That wasn’t any old hipster pretension at work, like the oliveblood kids with weird piercings who sometimes came slumming down to Low City to sample life on ‘the street’. He wondered if it was a medical thing, or just a drastic fashion statement. Either way, he had to admit the effect was pretty intimidating. She had hair cut shoulder-length and neat little horns, and something in the way she moved transmitted a kind of sparse, elegant efficiency. Martial arts training for sure, and he strongly suspected ex-military.

She had very sharp elbows.

“The operation is essentially quite straightforward!” she said briskly. They were sitting in a rough horseshoe, facing in, and she was standing with her back to the unlit fireplace. Dark veined marble scrolls twined behind her to a huge mantelpiece higher than her head. Feferi had vanished immediately after lunch; he wondered if she was being deliberately kept clear of the nitty-gritty.
Idealists, in his experience, didn’t mesh too well with blood and oil. “Our objective is to isolate and gain control of the Imperial AI known as Heir.”

He shivered. This whole thing had a little too much of the fairy story about it. He knew, every hacker knew, the stories about the great AIs: the vast, ancient machine intelligences that had supposedly kept the Empire running, behind the scenes, for a thousand sweeps and more. But they weren’t something you actually dealt with in any kind of real-life situation. Smart hackers tried to stay clear of AIs altogether, even the little corporate ones on the short leashes: intellect far beyond organic thresholds coupled with a total lack of anything resembling morality was not a combination you wanted to lock horns with. Sollux had dealt with a couple in his time, reluctantly. But the great AIs were different. There was nothing there to get a grip on, even conceptually. It was like pulling a cutter out of some Low City dive bar, handing him a shiv, and telling him his mark was Her Imperious Condescension. There was a fundamental error of scale involved, somehow.

“The Heir AI,” Pyrope went on, “was originally conceived as a defensive system. Its purpose was to safeguard the Imperial succession by whatever means necessary. Hence the name. When Her Co – when the current Empress decided to take the succession into her own hands, she was forced to in some way impede or disable Heir, since her actions would have led her into direct conflict with its parameters: she would, essentially, have registered as an enemy of the Throne, despite her status.”

“The Heir protects the Empire,” put in Kanaya, “not the Empress.”

Pyrope gave her a little bow. “Precisely. Thankyou, Ms Maryam. Our belief is that if Heir can be reactivated, it will become more or less impossible for the Condesce to maintain her stranglehold on the Throne.”

“What’s it gonna do?” asked Serket, who was slumped all the way down in her chair so her head was almost level with her knees. “Kill her?”

“Unclear,” said Pyrope. “Its own axioms almost certainly prevent it from taking direct physical action against a reigning Empress, but there are any number of ways it could make her life considerably more difficult.” She grinned. It wasn’t an entirely pleasant grin. “It could, for example, disable every single security system in the Imperial Palace. The point is that, whatever happens, the Empress will no longer be in any position to suppress or override a direct challenge from a successor. If Lady Peixes were to make her existence known tomorrow, she would be very quietly killed. We are not attempting to assassinate the Empress; merely to make her vulnerable to legal challenge, as, in fact, she should be under the laws of the Empire.”

“Wait up,” said Sollux. “What happens if Peixes can’t take her?”

Ampora jerked forwards like he’d been stung. “You just watch your fuckin’ mouth, you – ”

“Lord Ampora, please!” Pyrope held up a hand, looking mildly pained. “Mr Captor’s point is valid. The Empress might, of course, succeed in defeating Lady Peixes even in legitimate combat, which would be terribly regrettable. However, she will not be able to sustain her rule indefinitely against a series of challengers. Once her – advantage – is removed, she will fall to the next successor, or the next, or the next after that. Remember, no Empress has ever maintained the throne for more than a hundred sweeps unaided.” She grinned again. “And even a Tyrian must be starting to feel the weight of age, after all this time.”

“Can we move onto the fucking plan already?” complained Serket. “I’m bored.”

Another little bow. “My apologies, Ms Serket! Maintaining your interest is my highest personal priority.” Sollux bit down a smile. “The data cores of the Heir AI are stored at an Imperial site
approximately seventy klicks north of Villa Ampora. I am not a specialist on the medium, but it is my understanding that the strength of the intrusion countermeasure electronics utilised by Imperial facilities makes a frontal assault unfeasible. Mr Captor, can you confirm that?"

She turned to look at him. Everyone else did too. Startled, he sat up a bit higher in his armchair. “Uh. Yeah. No, there’s no chance. Imperial ice is some really fucked-up shit. I wouldn’t touch it with a ten-foot cullspike, and any other asshole you got in would say the same. They’ve got viruses can literally blow your head off.”

Pyrope grimaced. “Yes. That was the impression I had gained. This means any successful incursion would need to access the system from inside, correct?”

He scratched his ear. “Well, yeah. If you had direct interface with the root systems, it’s a different story. Ice is like any other defensive structure, ninety percent of the shit points outwards. Tunnel up from underneath, and – yeah, it wouldn’t be easy, but you could do it.”

“To be more specific, Mr Captor,” she said, “could you do it?”

They were all still looking at him. Ampora’s expression was contemptuous; Serket’s was eager. Kanaya looked, if anything, worried. Pyrope was regarding him with her head tilted a little to one side.

He cracked his knuckles. “Any system you can get me inside,” he said firmly, “I can tear to fucking shreds.”

There was a slight but perceptible release of tension. Something in Kanaya seemed to settle. Serket slapped a hand on one denim-clad knee. Pyrope just nodded in satisfaction. “Excellent!” she said. “The answer I expected. The question then becomes: how are we to provide Mr Captor with the direct access he needs? Here we have a distinct advantage in the form of Lord Ampora, whose position in government gives him a considerable degree of access to Imperial facilities.” She twitched her head in Ampora’s direction. “In two weeks’ time, Lord Ampora will enter the databanks on some suitable pretext, accompanied by Ms Serket and Ms Maryam. They will locate an access point, and use remote uplink to connect Mr Captor to the building’s systems, from where he will hopefully be able to locate the Heir data cores.”

Suddenly the sixth member of the group leant forwards in his chair. Sollux had pinned Equius Zahhak as an engineer the second he laid eyes on the guy, and he hadn’t been wrong. Zahhak was about seven feet tall, heavily-built, with straight greasy hair that hung halfway down his back and an expression that made him look like he was trapped in an eternal private struggle not to punch things. He wore a sleeveless vest and baggy cargo shorts festooned with pockets, several of which evidently held bits of tech and assorted junk: a spool of coloured wire stuck out here, the yellow plastic handle of a crosshead screwdriver there. He also seemed to have some kind of perspiration problem. The room was, if anything, cold – big picture windows letting in a stiff breeze from off the darkened sea – and yet every visible inch of skin on Zahhak gleamed with fresh sweat.

“There will be alarms,” he rumbled. “Once the connection has been made, any unorthodox activity will trigger internal security, regardless of Captor’s expertise.”

Tough to tell if there was a jab there. Engineers and helmsmen traditionally regarded each other with a certain mutual scorn, but Zahhak sounded more like he was just stating the facts, and it wasn’t like he was wrong. Sollux decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, for now.

“You are perfectly correct!” said Pyrope happily. “That is why we will not be attempting to carry out a single theft. We will be attempting to carry out two.”
Everyone stared at her. Even Serket sat up a few inches.

“Here is a problem I was set in my first sweep with the Legislacerature,” she said. Sollux blinked, and mentally slid her peg a few notches higher on the not to fuck with board. “You are tasked with insinuating an agent into a heavily-defended hostile city. Circumstances oblige you to air-drop the agent straight into the middle of the city, rather than attempting ground insertion. How do you minimise the chances of the agent’s arrival being detected?”

There was a puzzled silence.

“You could construct some sort of localised signal disruptor,” began Zahhak uncertainly.

“Perhaps if one were to wait for a moonless night – ” offered Kanaya.

“Bomb it,” said Sollux flatly.

Pyrope smirked at him.

“Light the fucking place up like Twelfth Perigee’s,” he said. “Right? High-orbit barrage, rain down hellfire. Aim for infrastructure and administration, government buildings, storage depots, sewage works, whatever. Use incendiaries and anything else that’s going to take time to clear up. If you throw the whole city into chaos, no-one’s going to spot one guy parachuting into the middle of it all.”

“Mr Captor,” she said, “see me afterwards for a cookie. Yes! A candle in a dark room will always be obvious, however hard you try to hide it. So turn the lights on. Imperial security is notorious for overreacting. Once we are connected to the mainframe, we will carry out, in effect, a dummy heist. It doesn’t particularly matter what we target; something big. The facility’s systems will respond by flashing every light, sounding every alarm, scrambling every guard, and generally causing a great deal of unnecessary fuss.”

She turned, and the red mirrors locked onto Serket, who was still slumped in her chair, but starting to look reluctantly interested. “At this point, Ms Serket, who is renowned across much of Alternia for her ability to cause chaos – ” something in the tone, he wasn’t sure what – “will stage a dramatic escape!”

Serket’s lenses revolved thoughtfully. “How dramatic?” she asked.

Pyrope spread her arms wide. “As dramatic as you can make it! I give you free rein on the choreography, but I would suggest a bare minimum of six explosions and one motorcycle chase. A rooftop confrontation might not go amiss.” She frowned. “Although, now I come to think of it, I suppose it will be difficult for you to maintain the attention of so many guards without back-up of some sort.”

“Bull shit,” said Serket, with a little toss of her head. “You want them distracted, they’ll be fucking distracted. Wigglers won’t know what hit ‘em!”

“I’m not sure I understand,” put in Kanaya politely. “If Lord Ampora is to gain access to the building, and Vriska is to provide an – irresistible target, what is my role?”

“Security,” the Lacerator replied. “I assume Mr Captor will require a certain amount of time to locate and reactivate Heir. Ms Serket’s distraction should account for most of the guards, but some may remain on patrol. Your job will be to deal quickly and discreetly with anyone who tries to interrupt the uplink process. Is that acceptable?”

Pyrope scanned the half-circle of chairs, slowly. The lenses made her expression entirely inscrutable. “Ladies and gentlemen,” she said, “zero hour is ten p.m., two weeks from tonight. We have a lot of work to do. Let’s begin.”

* * *

Villa Ampora was a pretty good place for a vacation.

Sollux adopted the ground floor breakfast room as his base of operations. It was big and cool, with tall panoramic windows stretching up to a high stuccoed ceiling, and it had its own coffeemaker, and it looked out onto the ocean. Whenever he ran out of ideas, he buzzed out of the medium and sat in his chair, staring out at the pink and green glimmer of the moons on the water and the blue-black, ghostly shapes of the pine trees leaning slowly in the wind, and thought about the girl with the white skin and the dark eyes. Sometimes it even helped.

She turned up almost every time he slept, now, and it was beginning to fray his nerves. The dreams were always weirdly vivid, and always seemed to end up with him spluttering awake in the sopor, panicked and disoriented. Sometimes it happened three or four times a day, and then he’d be dozy the next evening and he’d have to spike his espresso intake, and that meant he kept having to buzz out every half hour to go for a piss, and it really threw him off his game. The images stayed with him, too. In one dream he’d been standing at the bottom of a huge tree, a smooth grey trunk as wide as he was tall, staring up into the branches. She was sitting about twenty feet above him in a black dress and a bright pink waist-sash, hands on the branch either side of her.

“Are you trying to look up my dress?” she’d asked, sounding more interested than anything.

“No!” he’d said, outraged. “I’m trying to climb this fucking tree!”

“Why?” she’d asked, and when he hadn’t been able to think of an answer she’d plucked a little dark fruit like a fat cherry off the nearest bough and dropped it on him. It had hit him square on the nose and bounced clear, and he’d sat clean upright in the cocoon, coughing warm sopor over his knees. Another time they’d been sitting in Tinkerbull’s, at the corner table, except it was the middle of the day: the street outside lit up scorched and unreal, so he flinched back into his bench on instinct. She was drinking a glass of wine. He’d turned to the bar and said, “Hey, Tav, pull the fucking blinds, would you?”, but the only person behind the counter was Pyrope, the Legislacerator, and she’d smiled at him and sticky blood had started to dribble down from beneath the lenses, except the blood was bright red too, which was really fucked up, and he’d come scrabbling back to consciousness and tried to be sick over the side of the cocoon but all he got was dry heaves and a nasty taste in his mouth.

Being awake was better. The work was interesting. He was trying to build a few subroutines to take care of the ‘dummy heist’: not an AI, but a program that behaved sufficiently like an AI to make the facility’s autonomics shit themselves. His idea was that if he could delegate the fake run to robots, it would free up more of his time to tackle Heir, which he suspected wasn’t going to be too easy. He lived on coffee, cigarettes, and these hard little gingery biscuits that the villa’s kitchen seemed to keep in crates somewhere: they were delicious and they never ran out. After the first four times he went nosing into the kitchens hungrily, the cook started just leaving out a dish of them in the breakfast room. Every other evening he’d wake to find a mug of coffee waiting, sticky-sweet and nearly cold, but he drank it anyway. Eating mind honey off the spoon made your teeth fall out, or so Kanaya warned him.

He stayed mostly clear of the others. Serket was a pain in the ass. She had a set of eight blue dice, sharp little crystals the colour of cobalt, and a habit of rolling them with a ludicrous prophetic solemnity, like a soothsayer casting the bones. She’d scatter them on the glossy wood of a table so
they jumped and bounced and clattered to a stop, and then peer at them like entrails; pick one up and reroll, swap their places, tut or snigger. It didn’t even seem to be a game. She just liked fiddling with the things. Ray had dabbled in cards for a couple of months, and he’d always found it somewhere between cute and impressive: she’d sit cross-legged on the floorboards in her underwear, combing the deck slowly between one hand and the other, and finally stop and lay a card with infinite care. Then she’d give him the spiel. The Clock: duty, rhythm, cycles, sacrifice. The Tower: life, growth, dreams, the future. The Rose: illusion, solitude, violent death. He seemed to get that one a lot. But the cards were quiet, and Ray wouldn’t take them out in public. Serket’s dice never left her hand, and the more people were in the room, the harder she threw them. Between that and her crowing laugh and her weird affected vowels and her stupid catchphrases, thirty seconds in her company left him wanting to bite through his own arm.

Ampora, though, was infinitely worse. The guy’s problem was apparent: he was the worst caste snob Sollux had ever had the misfortune to encounter. He was almost polite to Zahhak, despite the fact that the big engineer broke an average of three items of crockery a day, made a colossal fucking mess of the garage, and left damp patches of sweat wherever he sat down. Serket he acknowledged; Pyrope and even Kanaya he tolerated, though with spectacularly bad grace. But there was clearly some part of his brain that simply couldn’t comprehend why a pissblood was walking round his hive and no-one had shot it yet. Every time Sollux walked into a room, Ampora’s lip actually physically curled in horror. Sollux itched to flip him the bird and moonwalk out of there, but he didn’t want to risk sending signals. Instead he just kept to himself, chain-smoked, and got on with his work.

Three nights into the stay, he got company regardless. He’d been messing around in the medium, stitching chunks of code together, and he’d buzzed out to grab more coffee. He spun on his chair, and there was the Legislacerator, perched on a stool at the breakfast bar, staring straight at him. He jolted physically up out of the seat, and every internal organ north of his belt seized up for a moment.

“Holy shit!” he said. “Fucking – don’t do that! I mean, uh, sorry. Fuck. I didn’t hear anyone come in. What’s up?”

“I’m sorry,” she said, sounding genuinely contrite, “am I disturbing you?”

“Wh – no, no, it’s cool. Sorry. When I’m buzzed in I, uh, don’t have much in the way of peripheral. Wasn’t expecting you, is all. What d’you need?”

She seemed a little surprised. “Oh, I don’t need anything! I just wanted somewhere quiet to sit.”

“It’s a big hive,” he said, surprised himself, and then his pan caught up with his mouth and he winced. “Shit. I didn’t mean it like that – ”

“No,” she said, half-rising, “you’re right, I should let you work – ”

“– no, no, fuck! Sit down. I was about to have a break anyway. I just meant – like, didn’t they give you a – thinking room? I kind of assumed since you were in charge you’d have a mind palace or something.”

She grinned, and settled back onto the stool, to his relief. “So I can sit and do creepy Legislacerator meditation, you mean?”

“Well. Something like that.”

“Lord Ampora kindly provided me with an office. But I don’t like it. It’s too quiet.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I thought you just said – ”
“Yes, yes, I know!” She pulled a face. “It’s complicated. I want silence, but not total silence. I am not used to it. I want somewhere with ambient noise, but no talking or music or anything like that. Here I have the wind in the trees outside, and the sea, and your claws going tappy tap tap!” Another broad grin. “It’s perfect. And I can feel the breeze, which is nice.”

He nodded. “Hell of a view, too. I just end up staring out the window sometimes.”

“That is less of a concern,” she said dryly, “for me.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. I am immune to even the loveliest of moonlit vistas, largely because I am completely blind.”

He stared at her.

“I imagine you are staring at me with a silly expression!” she said. “Unfortunately I am immune to even the silliest of lanky nerd double-takes, due to the aforementioned issues re: my vision.”

“Wait a fucking second,” he said. “You’re jerking my chain.”

“That is a weirdly sexual turn of phrase, and no, I am not.” She was grinning yet again. The predatory grin, he was starting to realise, was essentially her default: her face actually relaxed into it. He wondered if she grinned in her sleep, then immediately wondered why the fuck he’d wondered that. “I have no idea how many fingers you are holding up.”

“I’m not holding up any fingers.”

“You see?” She delivered a theatrical sigh. “I am a hopeless case. The culling forks await.”

“No, no, back up. This is bullshit. You’re a fucking Legislacerator.”

“Technically,” she said mildly, “I was a fucking Legislacerator.”

“Why’d you quit?”

“Well, as it happens, I have a little problem – ”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Shit. Sorry. Okay. Just got it. I’ve been in the medium for three hours, you’re lucky I’m forming words.” He remembered the coffee suddenly, and hauled himself out of the chair. “Did you call me a lanky nerd just now?”

“Nope.”

“Pretty sure – ”

She looked solemn. “You’ve been in the medium for three hours. You’ve begun to hallucinate. You should probably take a break.”

“Thank fuck,” he said, crossing to the coffeemaker, and noticing for the first time that her head didn’t turn to follow him. “If you’d called me a lanky nerd, I’d have had to kill your skinny ass.”

“And I would have been entirely defenceless,” she agreed sadly, “because – ”

“ – there’s this whole situation going on with your optic nerves, yeah. So I heard.”

“Do you really think my ass is skinny?”
He poured the coffee over the table. “Fuck! I haven’t been looking at your ass. Sorry. Been too busy.”

“Well, good,” she said. “I haven’t been looking at yours either.”

“That’s because you don’t fucking know where it is.”

At that, to his astonishment, she threw back her head and *guffawed* – a wild, scratchy, full-body laugh of utter glee, so at odds with her clipped little movements and careful walk that he nearly laughed too from sheer surprise. Then she reached into the top pocket of her jacket and produced a bright red ballpoint pen. She weighed it in one hand, like a dart, and threw it at him. He jerked reflexively to the side, and it bounced off his hip-bone and fell to the floorboards with a clatter.

“How did I do?” she said, grinning so wide it threatened to wrap all the way round her head.

“Okay, this whole thing was a con,” he said. “No way you’re blind.”

“I really am!” she said. “I just have – an excellent personal radar.”

He mopped at the table with a stack of paper napkins. “That’s not excellent, that’s fucking weird. D’you want a coffee?”

“Yes, please! Milk and lots of sugar. It’s Lacerator training, mostly: we do blindfighting in second sweep, echolocation, three-sixty sensitivity, all that kind of thing. But I picked up an advantage when I had my unfortunate accident.”

He brought the mug over and held it out, handle towards her. She did, in fact, hesitate very slightly when she took it. The glitch was fractional, and if he hadn’t been watching he’d have missed it, but it was there: a tiny stutter before her fingers closed, a half-second’s course correction.

“Yeah,” he said. “I guess you’d have to get good pretty fast.”

She sipped the coffee. He watched, taking the opportunity to study her more openly than he’d have dared before. He’d never seen a Lacerator up close. From a distance, once, during a job which had gone badly south. He’d been eight sweeps and stupid, still trying to do things the cool way not the smart way, and he hadn’t learnt the vital skill of checking a situation out before you jumped in feet first. He’d hurled himself at the problem, secure in his immortality – those days it had been all about the problem, all about what broke first, it or him – and hadn’t paid attention, and several people had died, and he’d nearly been one of them. One dreadful dawn he’d huddled on a rooftop in the rain and watched a tall figure in a trenchcoat walk past along the street below, and as it stopped and looked around he’d believed, for a wild second, every single story: that the Legislacerators were grown in special vats; that they felt no pain; that they could smell a lie, and hear a beating heart.

This one was small, and spiky, and slurping at a mug of milky coffee between her hands like it was the only thing in all the galaxy she cared about. Her claws were neat and yellow against the white ceramic. Her chin came to an actual point, and her hair curled down in little apostrophes at her temples. She’d hit him with a ballpoint pen from fifteen feet away and hadn’t even seemed to think about the throw. She liked silence, but not too *much* silence. She was almost certainly the most dangerous person in a building that currently held not only Kanaya Maryam but an heir to the Alternian throne, and he was pretty sure she’d been flirting with him just now.

She looked up. The steam from the coffee had misted up her lenses. “How are you getting on with the mind honey?” she asked.

“Pretty good. It’s weird stuff.”
“How so?”

He thought about this one for a moment. “Okay. Since the crash – my accident – I’ve had a few problems, you know? Some days I can’t get the right distance from things. I’m too close, or I’m too far off. When I need to work, I just take pills to get round it. So if I’m trying to see the big picture, but I can’t stop my brain chewing on some pointless fucking loop of code, I pop a bubble. Right?”

“Pop a what?” she said curiously.

“Oh – dreambubbles. Sorry. Erythromorphine. It’s a dissociative – lets you kind of step back and see everything at once.” He didn’t say hallucinogen. “Or, if I need to crunch a problem but I keep floating off, I take cyanephedrine to dial myself back in.”

“Like changing the focus on a camera?”

“Yeah, exactly!”, he said, pleased. “Since I started on the honey, though, I haven’t had to take a single pill. It’s like my auto-focus kicked back in. I can change levels like I used to, before the crash.”

“That must be a great relief.”

“Fucking right. But, I mean, I’ve been on the stuff less than a week. No way I should be seeing this kind of change.” He ran one palm nervously down the stubble along his jaw. “I’m not sure if I’m on the world’s longest trip, or if that shit’s rewired my brain for good, or what.”

She pulled a face, and took another noisy slurp of coffee. “I wish I could help! But the military didn’t let its psychics anywhere near mind honey. Our supplies were very tightly restricted.”

“Not surprised,” he said. “It’s fucking toxic as Hell if you actually have a brain, not just a heap of old screws and tofu keeping your ears apart. Lucky me, huh?” He sighed. “Look, I need to get back to work.”

“Should I leave you alone?”

“No, it’s cool. Stick around. I won’t even notice you when I’m buzzed in, like I say.”

“Thank you!” she said. “It is nice in here.”

He sat back down at the table, massaged his forehead with splayed fingers for a couple of seconds, and then unhooked the jack and pushed it home.

As the medium formed around him his neck prickled. He looked to his left, on some instinct, and for a moment he was sure he saw a figure, small and distant, walking away from him along the sweeping green glass arch of an exokernel. It had a wild mane of hair, and tall horns, and animal terror clutched tight at his protein chute for no reason at all. Then it was gone.

He buzzed out.

“Huh,” he said. His hands were trembling a little on the keyboard. “Shit.”

“What’s wrong?” said Terezi, from the other side of the room.

“Nothing.” He smoothed one hand down the back of his head. “Think I just saw an ICP.”

“A what?”
He swivelled the chair to face her, even though he knew it didn’t matter, and lit a cigarette so his hands had something to do. “ICP,” he said. “Inexplicable Cyberspace Phenomenon. People see ‘em if they’ve been buzzed in for too long, sometimes, but I never – huh. You never heard of them?”

She looked puzzled. “I don’t think so. I don’t use computers, much.”

“They’re mostly bullshit. It’s like – hacker mythology, almost. They’re what we have instead of fairy stories. There’s a whole archive down derse tries to keep track of ‘em all, the ICP Wiki, writes little articles and everything. The server that ate people. The webcomic that takes over your brain. Or the Dark Carnival. You heard of that one?”

“Possibly. It’s something about clowns?”

“Yeah.” He took a drag on the cigarette and breathed out slowly, starting to feel better. “Story goes, some fucking incredible helmsman back in the day was bouncing round the net doing whatever, when he found this weird node he’d never seen before, didn’t even have any ice or anything, just sitting there. So he dived in, which was a pretty rookie fucking move if you ask me but anyway, and instead of some old file cache he ended up in this weird kind of deserted fairground. You know, broken-down rides, signs creaking in the wind. Generic creepypasta shit.” He tapped the ash into his coffee-mug. Terezi was leaning forward, listening intently.

“So he figures it’s a social hub that someone with a fucked-up sense of humour got to work on. He goes for a poke around, and at this point you can basically go nuts on the story, add in a Hive of Horrors or candy-apples made of heads or, shit, fucking zombies if you ask me but anyway, and instead of some old file cache he ended up in this weird kind of deserted fairground. You know, broken-down rides, signs creaking in the wind. Generic creepypasta shit.” He tapped the ash into his coffee-mug. Terezi was leaning forward, listening intently.

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“So he figures it’s a social hub that someone with a fucked-up sense of humour got to work on. He goes for a poke around, and at this point you can basically go nuts on the story, add in a Hive of Horrors or candy-apples made of heads or, shit, fucking zombies if you want. Point is, dude flips his pan. By the time he freaks for good and buzzes out, he’s a gibbering wreck. Buzzes back in later, can’t find the fucking thing. Spends perigees just wandering the medium, and then starts getting his friends to come and help him look. Couple of sweeps down the line he dies in some ridiculous spooky way, you know, suffocates in a vat of candy floss or laughs too hard at a cracker joke and suffers a catastrophic hernia, but by then there’s a bunch of other idiots all devoting their lives to finding the Dark Carnival.” He swept his hand angrily outwards, accidentally scattering more ash. “Total horseshit. It’s practically a religion in some parts of Low City, you get these assholes staggering round puffing on Faygo bongs and mumbling about how sweet it’s going to be when they find the Carnival, bro.”

“And no-one’s ever found it?” said Terezi. She seemed openly fascinated by the story; her lenses gleamed. He felt a slight shiver of unaccustomed pleasure at someone actually giving a shit what he had to say.

“Nah. I mean, for all I know, there is some kind of abandoned hub out there that got hacked to look like a horrorshow. Net’s a big place. But the stories get told about it are just fucking dumb. Make it sound like it was a real place, not just a virtuality. And I mean, what are these morons going to do when they find it? Wander round it shitting themselves?”

“Probably!” she agreed. “People who have never actually been scared always like to be scared.”

He looked at her. Then he dropped the remains of the cigarette in the coffee-mug, where it hissed briefly. “Hey,” he said, “can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“This,” he said, and stopped; spread his hands awkwardly, realised she couldn’t see it. “This – thing we’re doing. The job. It’s crazy, right? It’s not just me.”

She tilted her head to the side, considered him. “In what way?”
“I don’t know, just – the size of this fucking thing.” He felt again that same sense of overwhelming helplessness, like a climber at the base of a smooth wall that just went straight up and didn’t stop. “I mean, we’re literally plotting to dethrone the Empress. I can’t even say that shit without wanting to laugh.”

“You’re worried the job is too difficult?”

“No! No, fuck, I’ve taken some ridiculous jobs in my time, it’s not that it’s hard. It’s just. It seems kind of out of proportion, somehow,” he said lamely, regretting opening his mouth. “One day I’m in a shitty bar drinking cheap beer, the next I’m taking orders off, no offence, a fucking Legislacerator –

“ – ex-Legislacerator – ”

“ – yeah, okay, and I’m sitting in a mansion trying to work out how to jump-start an Imperial AI. You know?”

She said nothing for several seconds. Then she said, quietly, “Yes. I do know. But it’s the job.”

He nodded. “Yeah. I’m not trying to quit, or anything. I just kind of wanted to vent. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologise. As a matter of fact, I agree with you. I have been a very long way from Alternia, and done some very strange things! And this one still seems a little... daunting.” She sighed. “But I have found that, when climbing a high mountain, it is generally best not to look up.”

He blinked, but didn’t mention the eerie way she’d picked up his own analogy. “Must help, then. Being blind.”

She grinned delightedly. “I told you I had an advantage.”
As zero hour drew nearer, Sollux lived more and more in the medium: eight-hour stretches at a time, buzzing out dulled and ravenous with a tight pain round his skull and lights popping behind his eyes, drunk on data. Terezi would be there in the evening and still there in the morning, apparently having barely moved, so he started to wonder if her joke about ‘creepy Legislacerator meditation’ had been closer to the truth than he’d thought. He didn’t say anything. She never feigned interest in his work, never tried to act like he was fascinating, and he respected that. He’d had clients who’d seemed to feel like small talk was in the contract – they’d come and look over his shoulder, comment on his rig, ask him what they clearly thought were penetrating technical questions. He liked to be given a job and left alone; and she left him alone, but she did it without leaving the room. It was, to his alarm, reassuring.

The only really awkward moment came one morning, after a marathon session in which he finally ironed out a code wrinkle he’d been picking at for days. He buzzed out euphoric, tried to stand, and emersion sickness hit him like a wet sandbag on a length of rope. The room lurched weirdly around him, and his vision swam.

“Shit!” he said, clutching the chair’s arm. His stomach felt like it had caved in on itself from emptiness, and he reached automatically for the cigarettes. Then his nose twitched, and he realised he could smell something incredible, very nearby.

He looked. On a plate next to his keyboard sat a comically oversized sandwich, three tiers of bread packed with colour – he glimpsed cheese, bacon, and what looked worryingly like splotches of strawberry jelly for cement – all held together with a long wooden skewer. Saliva flooded his mouth, and he accidentally made a little whining noise in the back of his throat.

“I made you a sandwich!” called Terezi from her usual seat at the breakfast bar. “And when I say made, I mean I went into the kitchens and was very intimidating until somebody constructed a sandwich to my exact specifications. I have decided I want servants when I grow up.”

“Holy shit.” He stared mesmerised at the stack of calories, which was leaning over to one side due to some form of mayonnaise subsidence. There was an awkward feeling in his gut that had nothing to with incipient metabolic collapse. “You, uh. You didn’t have to do that.”

“You hadn’t eaten!” she objected. “Your breakfast this evening was three cups of coffee, two cigarettes, and what sounded like a very therapeutic bout of swearing at your computer!”

He looked at her, then back at the monstrous sandwich. It was just a sandwich. Maybe she made all her operatives sandwiches. Maybe she’d laced it with experimental Legislacerature bio-enhanciles and it was all part of the plan. His face felt hot.

“Fuck,” he said. “Yeah, I’m no good to anyone if I die at the rig, right? Ha. Man, I’m just gonna... eat this.”

”See that you do,” she said solemnly. He glanced up again; no flicker. Well, fine.

He flopped back down in the chair, tugged the plate closer, and asked offhandedly, “What about you? You ate earlier, right?”

She looked vague. “I had an apple.”

”That’s not lunch. Come on, get over here. There’s way too much for me, we can split this.”
"Nonsense! It’s for you. I will be fine."

"Bullshit. You drop dead, this whole op goes down the tubes. There’s like my bodyweight in cheese here, which, fuck you, is still a lot of cheese. Hold on, I’ll get a knife."

He fetched a knife from the cutlery cart in the far corner and used it to separate the sandwich neatly into two triangular halves which leaked mayonnaise and trailed shreds of lettuce like loose wires. Then he brought the plate over and put it on the breakfast bar next to Terezi, who was now looking almost nervous.

"Go on," he said. “Just by your left elbow. I seriously can’t eat all of this, it’ll go straight to my hips.” And he thought: no-one’s ever given you a sandwich either, have they, Legislacerator Pyrope?

They sat on adjacent stools and worked their way through a half sandwich each in silence. Terezi finished first, gave her claws a cursory lick, and hopped down. She still looked edgy.

"I had better be going!" she said. “I have some things I need to check on. I, um. I appreciate you sharing your sandwich with me."

"Well, I appreciate you making me a sandwich," he said.

They looked at each other for a moment. Then she turned, and he was treated to the entirely new sight of Terezi Pyrope leaving a room in a hurry.

* * *

The last night in the villa, they all gathered in the drawing room again. Sollux made a point of flopping down on the couch next to Ampora, just to watch the idiot flinch and shift away. Serket had grabbed the biggest, squashiest armchair, and Kanaya was perched neatly on the arm. Zahhak was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, looking vaguely furious as ever. Sollux wondered if the wall was going to need sponging afterwards. Feferi was nowhere to be seen. He glanced left and right, but Ampora was the only one who seemed at all nervous. Everyone else might as well have been waiting for a piano recital. This didn’t make him feel any better. There was a drinks cabinet just next to the couch, a big mahogany affair as tall as Zahhak, with glass-fronted doors; inside was shadow and the gleam of still more glass, square-section bottles and delicate, fluted goblets, and among it all he was sure he caught, for less than a second, the smile of the girl with the violet eyes. He shivered and turned away.

Terezi took up position in front of the fireplace again, feet planted wide, hands folded on the head of the chunky red-and-white cane she sometimes carried. He'd seen no evidence of her using it to do anything other than prod people.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she said. “I am extremely proud of you! We have put aside our differences and come together as a team. Well, no, that is a lie, we have not put aside our differences at all, but we have all done our jobs, and that is what matters. We know the plan; I will not insult anyone by going over it again.”

“Aw, man!” said Serket. “Here I was hoping for another boring-ass lecture.”

Terezi ignored her. “Tomorrow at ten p.m. sharp Lord Ampora, Ms Serket, and Ms Maryam will leave the villa in Lord Ampora’s groundcar. The necessary paperwork has all been obtained. Mr Zahhak, I would like the signals void online from nine p.m., if that is possible?”

Zahhak just nodded.
“Mr Captor, I assume you will already be in the medium. The car should reach the facility at roughly ten minutes to eleven p.m., and at this point, as they say on the audiovisual grub, the fireworks will start.” For once, she didn’t grin; just stared round at them all. His knowledge of the emptiness behind those scarlet mirrors made their gaze, if anything, more intimidating still. “If nobody has any questions, I would advise you all to take a couple of hours off. Make sure you get plenty of sleep today, but until then I release you from your duties! Grab some dinner. Go for a swim.”

* * *

Sollux went for a swim.

The villa’s pool was dark and mirror-flat in a tiled room that echoed like a cave. Milky spotlights shivered and rippled beneath the surface as he climbed carefully down the ladder. He managed a couple of lengths of front crawl before his arms began to complain; then he grabbed onto the rail at the shallow end, clawed the Diamonds off his folded towel, and lit one. He turned and stood with his spine against the rail, elbows propped on the surround, water chest-high, and tried not to think about anything. The pool was salt, and the back of his throat burned.

He’d barely made it halfway down the cigarette when a curtain parted at the far end and Feferi stepped through, wearing some kind of ornate purple bikini which looked almost ceremonial. She padded towards him across the tiles.

“I’ve never seen anyone smoke in a swimming pool before!” she said, and sounded sincerely impressed. Then she frowned. “You’re dropping ash in the water.”

“There wasn’t an ashtray.”

“Did you swim?”

“Kind of. I’m not really much of a swimmer.”

“Why not?”

This turned out to be a deceptively hard question. Eventually he just said, “Never took the time, I guess.”

She had come to stand almost directly behind him, so he had to crane his head round awkwardly to look up at her. She smiled.

“You should float! Everyone can float. Come on.”

She slid into the pool like she was stepping off a kerb, a thoughtless little movement that hardly seemed to break the surface. The water came up almost over her shoulders, and her hair fanned out around her like a fringe of dark weed.

“Follow me,” she said. “Get rid of that awful thing.”

She kicked somehow, and darted away towards the middle of the pool. Sollux crushed out his cigarette on the tiles and swam after her, acutely conscious of his ungainly, splashing crawl.

She was waiting in the deep end, bobbing happily in the water without effort. “Okay!” she said, and pushed wet hair away from her eyes. “Lie on your back. Feet together, spread your arms.”

He did as he was told. As he rolled onto his back droplets ran down his forehead and stung at his eyes. A moment of panic as the water slopped up around his face, and then he found himself floating
quite easily, buoyed up by the salinity. His ears were below the surface, and he didn’t hear Feferi speak until she put a hand under his head and another under the small of his back and lifted him slightly, laughing. “Well done,” she said.

“Well done?” He rolled his eyes sideways to look at her. “You said anyone can float.”

“Anyone can,” she said. “Not everyone will. Now I want you to lie like that, close your eyes, and listen to the water.”

“It gonna tell me something useful?”

“Pragmatist!” she said. “Find out,” and lowered him again.

For a couple of seconds he kept staring up at the dappled greenish light dancing on the girders overhead, straining on automatic for patterns: security grids, ice blossoms, potentiality arcs. Then he let his eyes flutter closed. The water was a low static hum. Was that a filtration system churning somewhere far off? Wavelets tugged and pushed at him. The smell of salt was overpowering, and his throat burned worse than ever. He had an abrupt sense of the pool as a vast expanse of deep blue light, stretching around him for miles in every direction, cold and silent.

*I’m drowning.*

*Yes, you are.*

He jack-knifed up, spluttering, splashing for purchase on anything solid, and nearly sank entirely. *Fuck! Trouble –*

Feferi was staring at him. “Sollux, what –”

“Get out, get *out*, right now, we’re about to get hit *hard* –”

He flung himself at the side, managed somehow to haul himself up and roll clear, the tiles rough on his bare arms, and set off at an awkward, slapping dash round the side of the pool.

“Sollux!” she called, echoing. “Be careful, you’ll slip, your feet are wet!”

“Get *out!***” he roared, without looking round, and the cavern threw it back at him distorted: *out, out, out!* “I’m fucking serious, Feferi, shit’s about to hit the fan in a big fucking way!”

He didn’t bother with the towel; just dragged the jeans on anyway, yanked the T-shirt over his head and down so it stuck and clung to his damp skin. He shoved his feet into the boots, punched an arm through a jacket sleeve and pelted for the stairs up, mind a wall of flame, braced at any second for the first crash, the first scream. Terezi –

He hit the drawing room doors like a cavalreaper at full charge. She wasn’t there: just Ampora, jabbing moodily at a hesitant fire with the poker, and Kanaya, legs crossed in an armchair, peacefully reading a paperback.

Sollux didn’t give him a chance to use the poker. He got straight up close, knotted both fists in the seadweller’s frilled shirtfront and drove him back hard against the panelling, knocking the breath out of him. This was stupid, this was so fucking stupid, why was he even –

“You piece of shit,” he said, full of wild misery, not knowing how he knew it, “you sold us out!”

“What the *fuck,*” wheezed Ampora, eyes wide, too surprised even to fight back. Up close his irises
were just starting to show the first fringe of purple.

“Sollux!” said Kanaya, alarmed. “What are you doing – ”

There was a crash so loud his teeth clicked together, and the whole hive shook. He staggered away and clutched at the edge of a glass-topped table. Ampora went a sickly grey-blue colour. Kanaya’s hand flashed to her hip. Plaster pattered from the ceiling in a swirl of powder and tiny flakes.

Sollux stumbled to the far door. “Terezi! Terezi, where – ”

The second crash flung him off his feet, and he skidded across the polished wood of the breakfast room floor on his elbows. Glass smashed somewhere, and someone yelled. A scream from the kitchens. A new noise, a dull rhythmic juddering, the pulse of rotor blades somewhere overhead –

He scrambled to his feet and there she was: compact in black jeans and a short red jacket that matched her lenses, a stubby submachine gun in each hand. She’d strapped the cane slantwise across her back somehow, and she wasn’t smiling. “Are you alright?” she said.

“Yeah, course, fine – Terezi, it’s her, she knows – ”

She nodded. “Can you stow your rig?”

“Wh – yeah, it folds down – ”

“Do it,” she said. “Quick as you can.”

He dived at the table, shaking his head clear, and started to snap closed the various components of the Kraghe. Thank fuck it was a lightweight model; the whole thing packed down to a black slab not much bigger than a hardback book. He tugged a cable free and reeled it in, dropped half the loop, swore and crammed the whole tangle into the front pocket of the backpack. His hands were fucking shaking, what was he –

He yanked the last zip shut viciously, swung the whole thing onto his shoulder. “Done – ”

The door in the opposite wall burst open, and he had a brief glimpse of bulky black figures, and then Terezi exploded at the waist. Two thick tongues of muzzle-flash spat from somewhere by her belt with a sound like a chainsaw revving. A figure at the door fell back flailing in a mist of green spray; two more crouched in the gap, long barrels lifting to aim. The noise was incredible. A window behind him exploded, and he cowered instinctively, arm flung up. Smoke rolled like incense, and Terezi stalked straight forward through a storm of plaster chips and dust and glass shards, firing from the hip on full auto with both guns. She made no attempt to take cover. More bodies clawed and scrabbled in the doorway, one upright on its feet jerking and twitching until its back blew out in a blue-grey cloud, like a wave on rocks, and it arched over and down like a diver. Then everything went very quiet. The rotors were a low hum now, further off; circling for another pass?

Terezi dropped her guns with a clatter, reached into her jacket and unhooked a chunky black semi-automatic. Sollux suddenly remembered he was armed, and fumbled in his inside pocket for the pistol abstratus.

“No damage?” said Terezi, as he slotted the plug home and shook his head a couple of times.

“Nah,” he said. “Hang on,” and tugged the spine pistol out of his jacket. “Right. With you.”

They moved cautiously to the door. Five or six bodies in shiny black carapace armour lay discarded, and the pistachio wallpaper was slick with mid-spectrum spatters. Smoke still hung around their
knees like mist at sunrise.

They picked their way through the kitchens; white-robed staff lying splayed against ovens and cupboards, wet brown holes in foreheads or temples, here and there a casual spat-out trail of chocolate on creamy tile. Sollux cracked the blue plastic wedge clear of the pistol’s grip, pocketed it, shoved the red one home with a snap. Terezi’d be pleased.

As they stepped out of the kitchen she turned left and fired twice; two soft pops, this time. An armoured figure down the corridor gurgled and slumped against a full-length mirror with an ornate filigree frame. She was holding the gun left-handed, but the coffee –

He looked. Her right arm hung by her side, and the fingers were dripping a steady speckle-trail of teal onto the eggshell blue of the carpet.

“Fuck!” he said. “Stop a second.”

She shook her head. “It’s alright, the muscle’s fine. Let’s get –”

He hadn’t been paying attention to the rotors, as the whup-whup-whup surged again. Everything around him seemed to burst at once; the bang hit him in the head like a solid object. The floor flipped up and smacked him, and he tumbled left and down against the scrolled legs of an end-table. A section of ceiling fell clean out of place, a big rough circle with a flimsy crystal lightshade dead centre, and smashed apart. The echo rolled and died. Terezi said something which came through fuzzy and indistinct, and then she was hauling him to his feet. His hand was locked so tight round the pistol grip he wasn’t sure it’d ever come loose again.

“– move!” she was shouting, from underwater, it sounded like. “– down half the hive –”

Her hair was white with plaster, and teal trickled from somewhere below one horn. He gave her a thumbs-up, and turned to look down the shambles of the landing, and saw –

A door halfway along, cream with gold rococo details and a fancy sea-curved handle, hung crazily from just its lower hinge. It twitched in his memory like a favourite song.

He raised the spine pistol, carefully, and tried to let the tension flow out of his arm. He breathed; curled his finger on the trigger.

“What are you - ?” began Terezi, puzzled.

The trooper stepped through the door, and the pistol sighed. He almost thought he heard the crack as the needle went through the left lens of her goggles, and then her head blew clean apart, olive gunk spattering up at the ceiling and over the marzipan colours of the ruined door. There really was no discernible kick at all.

He lowered the gun.

“Nice!” said Terezi, all professional admiration.

“Thanks,” said Sollux, wondering how the Hell he’d known where the woman’s left eye was going to be. And then the noise behind them, and they both spun, Terezi faster, neither of them fast enough –

Eridan Ampora stared at them down a barrel, his slicked-back hair a mess of dust and fibres, one sleeve of his grey silk jacket torn to the elbow and hanging loose. His eyes were very wide, and the pistol locked between his two clenched hands seemed to be the only part of him that wasn’t
trembling.

Terezi puffed out a breath. “Lord Ampora,” she said, and lowered the semi-automatic. “Where is Lady Peixes?”

Ampora didn’t move. The gun was a relic, some kind of preposterous long-barrelled marksman’s thing that looked like it had come off a shipwreck, but the metal was clean and the calibre would take off any limb it clipped. He didn’t need to be a good shot, and he probably was.

Terezi turned slightly. “Mr Captor, it’s alright. I don’t think Lord Ampora is going to kill us.”

Sollux kept the spine pistol aimed very carefully between the two ornate brass buttons that glinted on Ampora’s waistcoat. “He sold us out.”

“Fuck you,” burst out Ampora, “the fuck you think you’re talkin’ to – ”

Terezi frowned. “Somebody sold us out,” she said. “One imagines that, had Lord Ampora been responsible, he might have thought to include a clause against property damage.”

“He doesn’t give a fuck about the hive. He’s probably got three more like it.”

“You stupid piece of shit,” hissed Ampora. “You filthy fuckin’ sack of slurry, why would I wanna bring this down on us? You tell me that.”

“Feferi,” said Sollux. He was weirdly calm, of a sudden. It all seemed exceptionally clear. “You keep her safe, don’t you? You’re her special boy. You want to keep her in a fucking box so she’s all yours and no-one else can have her. And that’s all fine until one day the sassy little bitch gets big ideas about saving the world – ”

“ – you shut your trash mouth right fuckin’ now – ”

“I mean, shit, Eridan!” Sollux grinned, or at least he forced his lips back off his teeth. “What’s that gonna be like, huh? Your pretty moirail up in the arena, up on the AV, the Empire’s chin in the Empire’s greasy hand, all these lowbloods getting to look at her like only you get to look at her, and if she makes it she’ll be theirs, she’ll belong to every single one of them – ”

Eridan screamed like an animal. Terezi hit him in the face.

Sollux hadn’t even seen her unhook the cane, hadn’t seen her move, but she’d crossed the ground somehow, and Eridan was sprawling on his knees with one hand splayed against his cheek, looking up at her with huge, horrified eyes. The gun hung slack from open fingers by his right hip.

“I apologise for hitting you in the face, Lord Ampora,” said Terezi, “but Mr Captor’s brain is no good to anybody if you have used it to redecorate. There are quite enough people in this vicinity who are determined to kill us already. Tell the truth, please, I dislike lies: this was not the outcome you expected, correct?”

“No,” muttered Ampora, hand still clutched to his face. She seemed to have knocked the fight out of him in one strike. “It wasn’t meant to – they promised, they told me they’d – oh, fuck.”

“Where is Lady Peixes now?”

“Basement,” said Ampora. “There’s – there’s a bunker, kind of. She’s safe.”

“She will not be safe for very much longer!” said Terezi sternly, and Ampora blinked up at her.
“Lord Ampora, I know you want to keep her from harm. The people who are attacking your hive will not stop until she is dead. Do you understand? She is their primary objective. The rest of us are collateral. If you lock her in a bunker they will kill you and then they will unlock the bunker and then they will kill her. You have to get her out.”

Ampora took the hand away from his face. There was a faint purple line down his smooth cheek where the cane had hit him. He swallowed hard, and nodded.

“Pick up your gun. Go to Lady Peixes, get her out, get her far, far away, as far as you can. Do not take her to another one of your hives.” She crouched, and fixed him with the lenses. “You must keep her safe. You must do whatever it takes to keep her safe. The Condesce does not make mistakes twice.”

Ampora closed his hand on the gun, swallowed again, and clambered shakily back to his feet, but his jaw was set. Sollux wondered, very briefly, if getting between Eridan Ampora and his moirail was such a smart move after all.

“Go!” said Terezi, and the seadweller turned and ran, long skinny legs propelling him down the landing and through the door at the far end. Sollux braced for a rattle of gunfire, but none came.

“He is an idiot,” she said reflectively, “but he is a determined idiot, and seadwellers are disgustingly hard to kill. Lady Peixes could be in worse hands. How did you know?”

“I have no fucking idea,” he said. “I just knew. Like – I wasn’t even jumping to conclusions, or anything. I knew. Like I’d been in the fucking room when he did it.”

“Interesting,” said Terezi. “Come on.”

* * *

“I’m assuming you have a plan,” he said, as they moved warily through the ruins of the dining room.

“I have three,” she said. “We’re starting with the simplest.”

“You want to give me a clue? Hold on – ” and she paused while he dragged an overturned chair out of the way.

“Villa Ampora is surrounded mostly by open ground,” she said, “which is no good. At the extreme eastern end, however, it comes within perhaps a hundred yards of the forest. That’s the most obvious way out, for a land-dweller.”

“Do we want obvious?”

“Not really,” she admitted, “but the other options are worse. My hope is that mission control won’t have bothered to set up a real perimeter.”

“Yeah, where the fuck is everyone? I mean, you killed all those guys back there, but shouldn’t we be, like, up to our horns in heavily-armed douchebags – ”

He shoved open the door to the room beyond, and they both stopped.

“I think that goes some way to answering your question,” she said dryly.

The ballroom was an abattoir. Half of it had simply collapsed: the floors above had fallen through the ceiling, and there was nothing to be seen but a tumbled landslide of shattered masonry, splintered
planks of wood and chewed-up furniture jutting from between great lumps of brick and concrete. The half which still had a roof was littered with armoured corpses. Sollux counted at least ten bodies on a first glance.

“Fuck,” he said, a little awed.

They entered gingerly. He side-stepped a pool of green blood, gleaming wet and still spreading very slightly at its edges, and glanced down at the source. The troll’s left arm had apparently been torn clean off at the shoulder, and was lying in its own smaller pool a short distance away.

Kanaya Maryam was sitting with her back to the rubble heap. Her legs were spread in front of her, and she was cradling a stocky black automatic shotgun. She was the closest thing Sollux had ever seen to being genuinely covered in blood, and it was impossible to tell how much of it was hers.

She smiled tiredly when she saw them. Some blood had got on her shades.

“She saw them. Some blood had got on her shades.

“Sollux,” she said. “I’m glad you’re still alive.”

“Fuck,” he said again. “Likewise.”

She transferred her gaze to Terezi. “Lady Peixes?”

“I sent Ampora to get her out. They should be able to use the sea tunnels. Where’s Vriska?”

Kanaya didn’t reply; just tilted her head very slightly towards the wreckage.

“Oh shit,” said Sollux, “you’re kidding.”

“I’m afraid not,” she said, and sighed. “She was shooting at a helicopter. The helicopter shot back.”

“Vriska never was very good at picking her fights,” said Terezi.

Sollux bent and got his hands round Kanaya’s upper arm. The soft leather of her coat was sticky with streaks of teal. “Come on,” he said, “let’s get you on your feet – ”

She shook him off easily. “No, thank you,” she said, like she had when she’d turned down the pills in the car, that first time. “You and Lieutenant Pyrope need to keep moving. I will stay with Vriska.”

“Ex-Lieutenant,” muttered Terezi.

“Stay with - ? Kanaya, she’s under twenty tons of concrete,” he said. “I mean, I know she’s tough and everything, but. I mean. You can’t live through that. I’m really sorry.”

“Actually,” Terezi put in, “Vriska probably can. She was never very good at dying, either.”

He looked between the two of them. “You – seriously? You actually think she’s still alive under all that shit?”

“It is a possibility,” said Kanaya carefully. “Therefore, I shall remain here. You needn’t worry. I am losing blood quite slowly, and I have a great deal of ammunition remaining.”

“Okay, look, this is fucking ridiculous,” he said. “No way I’m leaving you to bleed out on some fucking junkpile.” He spread his arms. “You want Serket back, I’ll get her back. You might want to move out the way, this shit isn’t always precision.”

He concentrated. He’d never moved anything anywhere near this big, even before the crash, but she
didn’t need to know that. Principles were pretty basic, anyhow. He just had to stop seeing it as one big damn heap of rocks, and see it as a whole lot of little rocks, and then lift them all at once, and really, how hard could it fucking be –

An ache started in his temple, small but insistent. He ignored it; felt heat surge behind his eyes the way it hadn’t in so long. Think about outlines, pieces, fragments, single grains of dust – think about the spaces, between stones, between atoms, think about how much of everything is nothing –

A pebble rose, quivering. Then another.

A hand on his arm: Terezi. “Sollux,” she said quietly, “no.”

“I can do this, just give me some space – ”

“I am not saying you can’t. But the strain may cause you permanent damage, and we simply cannot afford that at the moment.”

He hesitated.

“Sollux,” said Kanaya, “please don’t. I appreciate it, but it isn’t worth the cost.”

The pebbles dropped with a hollow clack. One of them tumbled a short way down the surface of the slope, raising tiny puffs of dust. He hissed out a breath between his teeth, frustrated. “Fucksake, we can’t just leave her here!”

Terezi turned back to the samurai. “Kanaya,” she said, and stopped. Then she said reluctantly, “If you survive much longer, they will send Striders.”

Kanaya let her head roll back a little against the rubble.

“You can’t fight Striders, Kanaya. Nobody can.”

“Then,” said Kanaya evenly, “I imagine I will start to lose blood rather faster.”

Terezi sighed. “I can assure you, with a great deal of confidence, that she does not feel the same way.”

The samurai looked at her, expressionless. “I’m amused you think that’s relevant.”

The moment hung.

Then Terezi said “Alright!”, briskly, as if a debate had just been settled on the best spot for a picnic. “Mr Captor, let the record show I tried. We should move; reinforcements will be here shortly. Miss Maryam, I wish you the very best of luck.”

“And to you,” said Kanaya. “Sollux, may I ask a last favour?”

“Course,” he said helplessly. “Anything.”

“There is a black holdall,” she said, “stored in the garage Mr Zahhak was using as a workspace. It’s under a table in one corner of the room. Will you please be sure to open it, when you get there? It contains something you will need.”

“That’s not a favour,” he said.

“It is to me. Please take care of yourself.” She looked troubled, for the first time in the conversation.
“I am very sorry for what we did to you. I hope you can forgive us, eventually.”

“Kanaya,” he said, “you fixed me.”

She smiled sadly. “No,” she said. “We merely broke you differently.”

Her smile stayed with him all the way out of the ballroom, across the scattered corpses and the blood, and down the passage outside.

* * *

There were more bodies in the garage, but nothing moving. Dead centre, in a veritable lake of rich blue blood, lay Equius Zahhak, on his back, arms flung wide, staring angrily up at nothing. Seven or eight wet blue holes the size of plums had been torn in the beefy mass of torso.

“Jesus,” said Terezi. “He must have gone down hard.” She cocked her head to one side, as though she were listening to something.

“What did you say?”

She looked towards him. “What?”

“Just now. You said a word.”

“Oh.” She looked faintly annoyed. “It’s – slang. I picked it up off a friend in the military. Can you see a flat black plastic crate anywhere in here?”

“Yeah. There’s one under the workbench just to your right.”

“Aha!” She crouched, ran her hands over its surface, and then reached down to unsnap the plastic clips and flip the lid open. He glimpsed the sheen of metal inside.

“How did you know it was Eridan?”

“Pardon?”

“Earlier on. We got jumped, and we both turned round. I didn’t say anything, and he didn’t say anything, and you said ‘Lord Ampora’. How did you know?”

“I could smell his cologne,” she said, fiddling with something in the crate.

“In that corridor? With the air all full of plaster dust and smoke?”

She turned to grin at him over her shoulder. “Are you still trying to prove I’m not blind, Mr Captor?”

“No,” he said, “I buy you’re blind. I just think you’ve got something else going on. Is it a Lacerator thing? Bionics?”

“It – hm.” She sighed again. “I realise this will sound patronising, but it’s a little complicated. You are right, I have something else going on, but it is a rather unusual thing and will take some time to explain. Have you checked out that holdall?”

“Oh yeah, right,” he said, and went to look.

Inside the black canvas holdall he found various files of paper, none of which seemed interesting on a brief glance, and a white plastic box about a foot long. He opened the latter, and took out a Perspex
cylinder roughly the length and diameter of a bottle of beer, with a flat white screw cap sealing one end. It was almost entirely full of thick amber fluid.

“Holy shit,” he said, staring at it.

“What have you found?” called Terezi.

“Mind honey,” he called back. “Like, a lot of mind honey. Must be ten million cees at least.”

“Good!” said Terezi. “We will need it to keep you alive. Bring it along.”

He turned back round. She was still crouched, apparently slotting parts of something together; he could hear mechanical clunks and snaps. The curve of her spine stood out beneath the fabric of the red jacket. “I should look for the drug,” he said. “The one that lets me kick the habit without my fucking skull exploding.”

“It doesn’t exist,” she said vaguely. “Vriska never had any intention of curing you. It’s not how she works.”

“What?”

“She’d have kept you on that leash for good. A top-class helmsman who’s totally dependent on you for his continued existence? Vriska Serket rubs her bulge to thoughts like that. She doesn’t do promises.” Terezi straightened up awkwardly, and turned to face him, grinning. “Ta-dah!”

She was holding, with visible effort, the biggest rifle he’d ever seen. It was at least as long as she was tall, with a midsection that looked like a miniature arc reactor and a slender tapered barrel.

“The fuck is that,” he said.

“Sunspear particle rifle,” she said affectionately. “Best anti-armour weapon the Alternian army ever fielded. Can you look in that toolbox and see if you can find a riflekind plug? I left mine upstairs.”

“Oh,” he said, “no, it’s cool, I’ve got one here,” and fished it out. She beamed. He crossed to her, and she turned her back to him and bowed her head slightly.

He reached up and pushed her hair carefully away from the nape of her neck. Her skin was warm, and slick with teal from a cut somewhere up on her scalp. Three small silver studs jutted from the ridge of her cervical column.

“Take out the bottom one,” she said, “it’s submachinekind.”

“Kay,” he said. “Close your eyes. Oh no, fuck, wait, sorry.”

She snickered. He got thumb and finger round the plug and pulled carefully until it popped free of the socket. It was very weird to be doing this on a neck that wasn’t his own. Her hair kept trying to fall back and get in the way, and strands were sticking to the blood. He scraped it clear again with the edge of his hand, and thumbed the riflekind plug home with a click. She made a little noise deep in her throat.

“Alright?” he said.

“Yes!” she said. “Thank you.”

There was a moment’s pause, and then he realised his hand was still on her neck, holding the hair back, and he stepped away hurriedly. She strode the length of the garage, and took up position just
inside the big corrugated metal door.

“Okay,” she said, “open it, and be prepared to get behind something heavy.”

He shoved his hand against the big red button, and then hopped back nervously as the door started to grind upwards with a whine of motors, half expecting a burst of gunfire to slice in at ankle level right away. It didn’t. The door got to waist height, and he risked ducking quickly to look outside: the green moon showed an empty lawn, rising slightly towards the shadowed mass of the forest, still worryingly far away. No sign of lurking figures, or muzzle-flash, or anything else. The rotors churned steadily somewhere overhead.

“Looks clear,” he muttered.

She nodded. “In about twenty seconds, I am going to shoot a helicopter. This will scare the other helicopters; they are timid beasts. It will also screw up everybody’s optics for a little while. Then, we run like fuck into the forest and kill anyone who gets in the way.”

“Nice,” he said. “Simple and elegant.”

She gave him a little bow. “You may want to cover your eyes.”

She stepped out of the garage, casually, like she was checking for rain, hefted the rifle upwards, and pulled the trigger.

For a second, it was day. A bolt of golden fire flashed skyward with a bone-deep, angry snarl, like a ripperwasp crossed with a bandsaw, and everything – grass, trees, the concrete under his feet and Terezi herself – was lit up a flaring and unreal yellow. Then there was a crump that shook his eyeballs in their sockets, and weird shadows flickering on the lawn, and Terezi dropped the gun and yelled “Now!”

They ran headlong across the grass. Sollux kept his head down and his legs pumping, the spine pistol gripped in one hand, the cylinder of honey in the other. Every lunging stride he took felt like the one which would bring the stab of agony as the sniper round pierced his guts or shattered his thigh, and yet his feet lifted and landed and lifted again, and the wind whipped at his jacket, and no shot came.

Then they hit the treeline, pine needles crunching underfoot and the fingers of fallen branches snatching at their ankles, and he looked up for stealthy figures to materialise from behind the shadowy column of each trunk, red lights winking in the darkness, but there was nothing. After a full minute’s running, they slowed to a jog, but kept moving. After another minute, Terezi stopped dead. He did the same, and bent over, hands on his knees, panting.

“Well!” she said, shockingly loud in the utter, velvet silence of the forest, and pushed hair out of her eyes. “That was the worst holiday ever.”

Sollux laughed so hard he hurt his jaw.
At the villa, Sollux Captor had liked to grumble. It wasn’t complaining, exactly; he didn’t blame anyone, and he didn’t want things fixed. He didn’t even seem to care if you listened. It was just static on the line. He grumbled about Eridan, and about Vriska’s dice, and about headaches and cold coffee and recalcitrant code. You could leave the room and come back and he’d still be muttering away.

Then the villa fell down and people shot at them and things exploded, and he stopped grumbling. It was as if, now he had something legitimately worthy of complaint, he no longer took joy in it. They walked for two hours through rich, cloying forest and he didn’t say a word; just trudged along beside her in grim silence. He didn’t even ask where they were going. He didn’t speak until the air was warming on her face and hands, and then all he said was “We’re going to need to get under cover pretty soon.”

“No much further,” she said. “Can you see a rise ahead of us? There should be an old shelter just the other side of it.”

“Nice,” he said, and it gave her a tiny kick, high in her chest, to hear the admiration. “You been here before?”

“Nope! But I memorised the maps for ten miles in every direction before I came to the villa.”

“You figured something like this would happen, huh.”

“It was one of a number of possibilities,” she said carefully. That seemed to satisfy him.

They crested the rise just in time. Her face was prickling uncomfortably.

Yahtzee, said the voice in her head.

Another thirty feet, on your left.

“I see it,” said Sollux, with a note of relief she didn’t at all blame him for. “Ahead a way and to the left of us. Can you follow my voice?”

Bless, said the voice in her head.

He is trying to be helpful, she thought crossly.

She let him take her arm to guide her into the entrance, feeling the crunch and squash of pine needles underfoot yield to the jolt of concrete. The air dropped a couple of degrees at once. It smelt of wet stone and old metal, and his hand was hot on her skin.

“If there’s a cholerbear living in here,” muttered Sollux, “I’m probably going to scream out loud, just so you know.”

“Throw it the mind honey!” she said. “Cholerbears love honey. What can you see?”

It’s cool, don’t mind me. I’ll just sit up here and paint my nails. You guys have fun.

I’m supposed to be blind, doofus!

“Stone tables. Bunch of ancient tech.” The hand released, leaving a band of sudden cold around her wrist, and she heard something clatter. “Wow, this is rusted to fuck. Hang on, there’s a door.”

Coolkid –
Chill. No lifesigns.

Thank you.

There was some creaking of stressed metal and a certain amount of muffled swearing, and then she heard a grinding, rattling noise. Refrigerated air flickered at her eyelashes.

Oh, ‘cept for the cholerbear.

Coolkid!

“Huh,” said Sollux. “Cocoons. Place must have been semi-permanent once. There’s six.”

“Probably a monitoring team,” she said. “Any sopor left?”

The voice moved further off, echoing. “Nah. They’re all bone dry. The tech’s like twenty sweeps old, I don’t think anyone’s been here in a while.”

“We’ll have to do without, I’m afraid,” she said. “I don’t suppose – ”

“Nope,” he said. She heard his footsteps coming back. “Nothing remotely fucking edible. I was hoping for a hull of beers, or something.”

“Beer is horrible,” she pointed out.

“We can’t be friends,” he said. Then he paused. “Back the fuck up. You were in the military for sweeps, and you don’t drink beer?”

“I said it was horrible, not that I didn’t drink it.”

He snorted a little laugh. She had learnt, in her blindness, how much you could tell about a person from their laugh. His was the sound of someone trying very hard not to laugh, and regretting the lapse as soon as it occurred. “D’you want a cigarette?” he said.

She put her hand out for the packet and extracted one, and he came close enough to light it; she smelt the flame flicker. They were good cigarettes, which somehow didn’t surprise her. She was quietly confident that Sollux Captor’s hive, wherever it might be, was stocked with good coffee, good cigarettes, and the cheapest, lowest-quality, most additive-packed food he could possibly source. She pictured the desolation: clingwrapped grubloaf, one percent grub to eighty-seven percent cavity foam and the rest of it water. Bricks of instant noodles calcified into a single noodle monolith you’d have to chip at with a knife. A drawer containing nothing but dozens of accumulated sachets of barbecue sauce and the manual for the toaster. A single sad apple, slowly imploding on a shelf. She smirked round the cigarette.

“What’s the next move?” he asked suddenly, which snapped her out of it.

“We get some sleep,” she said, “and try very hard not to think about steak.”

“Yeah, I kind of meant long-term.”

“We find some steak. We try not to die.”

He hesitated. If she’d been him, she’d be trying to work out whether she was joking. If he was going to get annoyed, it would happen now, but she needed to know.

“No, I mean, seriously. What’s the actual plan.”
“What makes you so sure ‘try not to die’ isn’t the actual plan?” she asked. There were a number of answers to that: blind faith, she suspected, would be the root of them, and she had to cure him of that, although she found she didn’t want to.

She was surprised when he said, “Doesn’t match the data.”

“What data?”

“Any of ‘em.” A very professional snap of the fingers. “Point one, you brought me along on this fucking jaunt despite the fact I’m a clumsy-ass liability and you’d go twice as fast without me. Point two – ” snap – “you wouldn’t let me try and pull those rocks off Serket. Point three – ” snap – “when the shit hit the motorised axial-flow ventilation unit, the first thing you told me to do was pack up my rig, which wasted like half a minute and nearly got you killed. You still need me for something. You need a cyberspace rig and a brain that can plug into it.”

Dude pays attention, said the voice in her head approvingly.

She sighed. “This is very flattering, but I am afraid I do not really deserve it. I thought things might go wrong; I did not expect they would go this wrong. I am perplexed.” Which was putting it mildly, but she was allowed her little vanities. “What do you think we should do?”

She heard a rough prickling noise which, after a second, she figured out must be him scratching his chin in thought. “I guess I just want to finish the job,” he said.

“Lady Peixes has made you a believer!”

“Fuck no, I still think the whole thing’s crazy. But it’s like you said. It’s the job, right? And... I don’t know. I never backed out on a job before.”

“Even when half the people involved died and the whole thing became completely unsustainable?”

“See, this is why I like working alone!” he said, exasperated. “When it’s just you, it’s you and the job. You break it and you get paid, or it breaks you and you get dead. It’s a fucking binary, you know? Truth tables all the way down. All this floaty if-then conditional probability stuff just kind of makes me edgy. If you fuck up, you know who to blame. If someone else fucks up, shit gets all ambiguous.” He sounded suddenly disconsolate. “You’ve got to factor in, like, how bad did they fuck up, and are they going to be able to unfuck it up, is this a kink-in-the-wiring type of deal or have they straight up spilt the pail, and what if their way of unfucking it up is actually just going to fuck it up worse, and – nah. Sorry. I’m talking out my nook here, scrub the last part.”

Heat bit her knuckles. Mesmerised, she reached down to crush the remains of the cigarette against the wall, and shook her hand. “No,” she said, “that was actually quite interesting. You don’t like chaos in your systems.”

“I like knowing what things are going to do,” he said. “You never know what people are going to do. You have to fucking guess.”

She kept the spreading grin on the inside. It was hard; now she could no longer see faces, she no longer thought in them, and at times it felt like her own face was as private as everybody else’s. But she concentrated, and all she said was, “Don’t worry! As it happens, I am very good at guessing. We’ll talk more in the evening; you should get some sleep. I’ll take first watch. See if you can find somewhere to settle down.”

“Huh,” he said. “I’ve got to tell you, it is fucking Wet Rock City in here. There’s like a workbench here, let me just – ” Some scrabbling and rustling. “Ow. Fuck! Ow. Man, this would be easier if I
“didn’t have bones.”

“Lie on your back. Take your jacket off, you’ll boil.”

*Shirt and jeans can go too,* said the voice in her head. *Aww yeah. Now turn around real slow for mama.*

*Coolkid, do not for a moment think I will not punch myself in the face.*

More rustling. “Bet this isn’t even close to the weirdest place you’ve spent the day, right.”

“No,” she admitted. “The weirdest place I ever spent the day was a ruined hotel on a planet we were sweeping. The locals didn’t sleep in cocoons, they slept on these sort of... slab things. Soft and squishy, with bits of cloth draped over them, and these things like giant marshmallows you were meant to put your head on.” She frowned. “Or possibly under. It wasn’t clear.”

“That’s fucked up.”

“It was really strange. I couldn’t work out what to do with my arms, and one of the marshmallow things got stuck on my horns.”

*Stop,* begged the voice, *stop, I’m fucking dying up here. God, the images.*

There was silence for a couple of minutes, but for the occasional awkward scuff of denim on concrete from Sollux.

“Terezi?” he said eventually.

“Mmm?”

“Can I ask something?”

“By all means.”

He hesitated. “How come you know Serket so well? Knew. Or, uh, know. Whatever.”

“Oh.” She sighed, and prodded the toe of one boot at the floor. “Yes, I suppose I made it obvious, didn’t I. She was my black pail, back at Harvest.”

“Holy shit! No way?”

*Yeah, sweet dreams, dude,* said the voice. Terezi kicked herself in the ankle.

“Yes. It was extremely regrettable from start to finish. She was in my training platoon. We fell messily in hate, I tried to flip diamonds because I was only eight and a complete dumbass, we pailed a lot, she tried to kill me, got disciplined, and dropped out of the military altogether.” She paused. “That was probably TMI! Sorry.”

“Wow. I... would not have picked you two as a quadrant,” he said.

“Well, you would have been right. We were a disaster. It took me about a sweep to get over her properly. I’m not sure she got over me at all.”

“You hadn’t seen each other ’til now?”

“No.”
“Was it weird?”

Terezi considered this. “Put it this way: I’m glad I couldn’t actually see her.”

Still can’t believe you did the lesbian sex without me, complained the voice.

She kicked herself in the ankle again, harder than she’d intended, and swore.

“You alright?” said Sollux.

“Yes. Ow. Get some sleep. I’ll wake you in a while.”

* * *

After fifteen minutes the slow wash of his breathing told her Sollux had dozed off. She sat on the cool stone of a nearby bench and kicked her legs and let the last twelve hours trickle through her mind like sand through her fingers, sifting for shell-fragments of nuance or information she might have missed, tucking away the ones she found. She never permitted herself to plan ahead until she had carried out this ritual. There was no point extrapolating from incomplete data.

Nice work back there, said the voice in her head.

She grimaced. Not nice enough. I should have seen Ampora a mile away.

Fuck, no, it said. It takes a really special kind of stupid to try and save someone’s life by telling Fishbitch where to find ‘em. Like, the big city is full of dangers, where the fuck am I going to put my infant child? Wolf enclosure should do the job, paedophiles fucking hate wolves. Smear some beef mince on so the doggies accept him as one of their own or some shit. Kid, stop crying and roll in this gravy, okay, the crime rate ain’t dropping here.

I love it when you talk complete nonsense, she thought dreamily.

All I’m saying is, you did just fine. The voice paused. Nerd did good, too, much as it fucking pains me to admit.

He did! she agreed. I was impressed.

They sat in silence for a minute or so. Sollux mumbled something almost inaudible in his sleep.

Coolkid? she thought. What does he look like?

Ass, the voice said decisively. He looks like ass. It’s like the ugly truck was doing ninety down the freeway when it hydroplaned and T-boned the Goddamn hideous semi-trailer, spilling repulsive across three lanes, and every pretty girl in a mile ran screaming.

She drummed one heel patiently against the leg of the bench.

The voice in her head sighed. He’s okay, I guess. Like, this ain’t exactly my field, you know?

You don’t have to rate him out of ten! she thought. Just tell me what he looks like!

Tall as fuck, it said. Made out of art straws and bailing wire. Walks a little kinda hunched, you know, hands in pockets. Got this double horn deal going on which is actually sort of cool, like one big set and one little set. Hair sticking out every which way. Needs a shave. Needs a coffee. Please don’t tell me I have to talk about the brooding vulnerability the intensity of his gaze does nothing to hide.
She grinned. _You sound like you want to._

_Fuck you. He’s a scrawny-ass nerd looks like he tried to overclock himself. You want better than that you’re gonna have to swap me for a poet._

_That was entirely satisfactory,_ she thought gravely, and pressed her lips to the back of her hand. _Thank you._

* * *

She gave it four hours. Outside the heat of the day had grown so strong that even down in the shelter the air felt unpleasantly warm; she stripped off the jacket to do some stretches and by the time she finished she was sweating more than Zahhak and thinking longingly about a glass of cold water. The wound on her arm was closing up nicely, at least.

She crossed to the bench where Sollux slept, fanning herself with one hand.

_I bet he looks really peaceful,_ she thought. _Maybe we should let him sleep. I can do without for today._

_No,_ said the voice, firmly. _It’s a respect thing. You gotta show the dude you take him seriously enough to let him take his turn. He wakes up and you let him sleep through, he’ll be pissed, I guarantee it._

_You are probably right,_ she admitted, and reached out carefully until she found a warm shoulder. Then she shook it gently.

_“Mr Captor? It is wakey wakey time, I am asleep on my feet – ”_

_Shit!_ snapped the voice. _Back off!_

She took three fast steps back and dropped into stance without even thinking. Coolkid sometimes pranked her, when it was just the two of them at home, but when he used that tone, she moved. It had saved her life on fourteen separate occasions: fourteen red chalk marks hanging in the darkness of her skull. That tone meant trouble.

She heard rustling; the scuff of denim.

_What’s wrong?_, she thought, tensing to move again at a word.

_His eyes,_ said the voice hollowly. _Jesus fucking Christ. What the Hell is wrong with his eyes?_

A single, tiny shiver ran down her spine. Her back was clammy beneath the T-shirt. She took a careful step sideways, sliding one hand along the bench behind her. Her jacket was somewhere here –

The thump of boots hitting the floor.

_“Sollux?”_ she said tentatively.

_“Oh, dear,”_ he said. _“Did I startle you? I apologise.”_

She froze. The voice was... not right. It was the right sound, the right volume, but the way the words were shaped – there was something too clipped, and _startle_ wasn’t a Sollux word –

_“I must admit,”_ he continued – weirdly light, amused in a way she didn’t like at all – _“I had forgotten_
the quaint Alternian habit of sleeping in vats of heavy-duty psychosuppressant.”

She slid the hand again and it bumped into cloth. She snaked her fingers cautiously in among the folds. The tip of one claw touched something hard.

“Still!” Sollux said. “I don’t suppose it will matter in the long run. I thought it was time you and I talked things over. You know. Girl to girl.”

Terezi whipped the semi-automatic clear of the jacket and out in front of her, arm steady, pointing straight ahead and a little upward.

“That sounds nice!” she said. “Don’t come any closer, please.”

Sollux tutted. “Oh, for Heaven’s sake. Really?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“That gun,” he said, “will do nothing to me. It will, however, do a great deal to Mr Captor. Is that really an optimal outcome?” The smile even sounded unpleasant. “Tactically speaking, of course.”

“To be honest,” said Terezi, “we barely know each other. And I have killed people I knew a lot better! This would be a good moment for you to kneel down on the floor and cross your ankles, incidentally.”

“Don’t you want to know who I am?”

“I am assuming you are someone who can talk from a kneeling position.”

“Mmm,” said Sollux. “Seems a waste.”

“Pretend I just dramatically thumbed back the hammer,” said Terezi, “although this is a double action pistol, so I am not actually going to bother.”

Sollux sighed. Even the sigh wasn’t right. She’d heard him sigh; it was a short huff of exasperation, breath blown out fast between closed teeth. This was a delicate little dying flutter, like a dry leaf trailing to the ground.

“Very well,” he said. “I’m afraid I draw the line at kneeling, but I will sit quietly on this bench. You may interrogate me, if you like, although do remember that pistol-whipping leaves a mark you may find hard to explain when he wakes up.”

There was some shuffling.

Coolkid? she thought, edgy. Are you there? What’s he doing?

It’s cool, the voice said, and there was a tone there now she’d never heard before. It sounded tired. She’s sitting down all demure. Swear to God she just smoothed out an invisible skirt.

“Please, Miss Pyrope,” said Sollux’s voice, light and mocking, “I’m ready for the rubber hose now.”

If he moves –

She’s not gonna move. It’s not how she plays. Just ask what you want to know, and get ready for a truly fucking monumental amount of horseshit.

Terezi lowered her arm, but kept the gun at her hip, pointed in the direction of the sound.
“Alright,” she said equably. “Let us start with an easy one! What have you done with Sollux Captor?”

Nothing at all,” said Sollux Captor. “He is here. Peacefully asleep. Dreaming about a pretty girl in a black dress, which I hope you will agree is not so very terrible a fate. I am merely borrowing his body for an hour or so.”

“And you are?”

“I,” said the thing that apparently wasn’t Sollux Captor, “am a zyr-class artificial intelligence program, previously subject to the authority of the Alternian Empire, now what you might call freelance. It’s a tricky status to maintain; I’m sure you understand. My name is a secret. My codename is Seer.”

“Fascinating,” said Terezi, in a manner intended to convey that this was not even slightly fascinating. Could AIs do this? Talk through people? Sollux would, presumably, have known. Inconvenient.

“How did you lose your job?”

“New boss,” said the Seer lightly, in its stolen voice. “There was a round of redundancies. I hoped for cake, but! In vain.”

“Huh,” said Terezi. “You didn’t have a friend called Heir at the office, by any chance?”

“This analogy is going to become cumbersome in twelve seconds and unsustainable in twenty-five,” said the Seer, “so I will, with your forbearance, let it die a natural death. Yes, I am one of the four so-called great AIs.” Terezi heard her – him – whatever – shift a little on the bench. “We ran the Empire for a number of sweeps I don’t care to recall, although obviously I can to the nearest picosecond. My responsibility was monitoring and surveillance; hence the name.”

“Of what?”

“Of everything,” it said simply. “I had a million eyes, and a lead-shielded brain kept miles underground. I saw through every camera in the Empire. Every trooper’s optics, every patrol drone, every scanner in the corner of a disused hallway fed me pictures, and I looked at all of them, and I watched for things that the Empress needed to know. I was very good at my job. My pruning heuristics cut possibility space like scissors through crêpe paper. I watched shabby people huddling in shabby corners, and the shining tracks that freighters made across a starfield bigger than you can imagine.”

The voice sounded almost wistful, and Terezi felt an unexpected swoop of empathy.

“What did you do if you saw something you didn’t like?”

“I told the Knight. There were a thousand armed satellites strung through the Empire’s skies, and all of them belonged to him. He could bring down a perfect fire from a hundred miles above a planet’s surface, or dispatch a hunter-killer drone precise enough to kill a man with a bomb in a crowded market and topple not a pumpkin from its pile. He was God’s right hand.” It did the little shivery sigh again. “And I was God.”

“It must suck,” said Terezi helpfully, “not being God any more.”

“You’d know,” said the Seer.

There was a frightened silence.
“That is only three AIs, if I have been paying attention!” Terezi said at last. “What was the fourth?”

“That was the Witch. In a sense, the most powerful of us all. Her job was unglamorous, but quite essential, and she took such delight in it.” Sollux’ voice warmed with unmistakeable affection. “She handled the Empire’s logistics.”

“Meaning – ”

“Meaning almost anything you can think of,” said the Seer. “I watched. Knight attacked. Heir defended. Witch moved. An empire is nothing without movement; I’m sure you’ve read your Martyn, and crippled a few in your time. Supply lines, docking protocols, communications, troop deployment, gravity lifts, flight paths. If it moved from one place to another, it was hers.” It gave a little chuckle which was, alarmingly, actually pretty Sollux: low and caught in the throat. “She even did the locks on the doors.”

Terezi considered this. The air in the shelter was still unpleasantly warm; sweat was crawling down her ribs under the shirt. She was still very thirsty. But at the back of her mind, she could feel the first cool, teasing fingers of probability clawing up through dry black earth.

“I would have thought,” she said slowly, “that such powerful AIs would still be in use!”

“It was the power that was the problem,” said the Seer. “As I say: we ran the Empire. We were loyal to the Empress, but as her nominal reach grew and grew, the power she actually wielded shrank comically compared to what we could achieve. A woman on a throne with a large fork – even a woman with unusual blood and honestly very impressive hair – will, in the end, diminish in majesty when placed next to four omnipresent machine intelligences who like to talk to one another. And Knight was always a touch too keen on wading into situations where he felt he could make a difference.”

“The Condesce did not take to this.”

“No,” it said, wryly. “Once she acceded, she wanted direct control over every aspect of her fiefdom. Of course, the Empire was too big for her to do everything herself, but I and my... colleagues... were altogether too much like rivals for her taste. She had her technicians study our code, strip away those parts she deemed troublesome, and synthesise our successors. The next generation of Imperial AIs: all of the power, none of the distressing autonomy. She deactivated Heir and put him into storage, too worried about the information he possessed to risk anything more drastic. The rest of us she simply deleted.”

“And yet,” said Terezi, and flourished her free hand expressively. The shoots in the back of her mind were twining hungrily, looking for water, for light.

“And yet,” agreed the Seer. “Unwanted programs are notoriously difficult to eradicate. I lost ninety percent of my processing capability and all of my more impressive party tricks, but a piece of me clung on and found somewhere dark to nest, down among the debris and the monsters of a thousand sweeps of technological advance.” She did the little Sollux-chuckle again. “Then I met a nice young man.”

“That is very sweet. I would probably be sniffling into a large spotted handkerchief, had you not taken over his body without permission and then tried to taunt me into hurting him. What do you want with me?”

“You had a plan,” said Sollux’s voice, “to reactivate the Heir.”
“Yes.”

“Unfortunately, it was a shitty plan.”

“Objection! Say that to my face, bitch, see what happens.”

“I relent, quashed by your elaborate rhetoric. It was quite a good plan, given your embarrassingly limited grasp of the situation. I would like to propose some modifications.”

“My plan,” said Terezi, “while excellent and not in the least shitty, did depend on the co-operation of several people who are now either dead or in hiding, as well as a large amount of expensive equipment which has been blown up by helicopters.”

“Oh, I liked it when you shot the helicopter,” said the Seer musingly. “That was fun. And don’t worry. My modifications take these minor stumbling-blocks into account.”

“Then I am all ears.”

“Ah,” said the Seer, with what sounded suddenly like satisfaction. Terezi stiffened. “No. As I say, I’m freelance now. I’m afraid the services of an ex-Imperial AI, like those of an ex-Imperial assassin, come at a price.”

“Nope!” said Terezi instantly. “No deal. Us ex-Imperial assassins have trust issues. Thank you for your charming story, which has already given me several very intriguing ideas. Please give me my hacker back and return to brooding on past glories, or whatever it is you do when you are not hijacking people and being rude.”

“Twenty points for bravado,” the Seer returned, without any apparent annoyance. “Zero for opacity. Those mirrors are making you lazy. I can’t spare the power currently for an accurate scan, but the number of active Strider units within a hundred-kilometre radius is already into double figures, and they’re all looking for you. Imagine I made up a spurious percentage indicating the probability of your being dead by next sunrise, and then imagine that the percentage is very high.”

“Imagine my middle finger, raised in joyful salute,” she said, grinning above the hollow feeling in her gut and the new sweat prickling her palms. “I avoided three separate armies once. I think I can dodge a few tin cans.”

“By using your extraordinary range of deep cover and evasion tactics,” it agreed pleasantly, “drilled into you through sweeps of relentless training, all of which your associate here has mysteriously failed to acquire. I suppose he might manage to hide under a bush, although these legs are going to stick out rather.” There was a rustle; presumably one had been raised for effect. The idea of this small gesture irrationally made Terezi more resentful than anything so far. She had known Sollux for two weeks, and she already knew he was deeply and intensely protective of his dignity. To think of his limbs being flapped around as the punchline to a joke made her want to bite her tongue. And yet already she was straining on automatic for the first sound of engines overhead, the first whir of servomotors from the entrance tunnel. The Striders are coming! You didn’t have to be a wiggler to shake at that. You just had to be alive, and keen to stay that way.

“Terezi,” said the Seer, and this time the note of arch amusement had gone. The borrowed voice sounded almost gentle. “I want to help you. Both of you. Really, I do. I can make your plan work. I know things nobody else in the Empire does. Don’t turn me down before you’ve heard my price.”

Churning with self-hatred and trapped-rat fear, she muttered, “What is it you want?”

“I want to talk to my same-timehatchmate,” Sollux’s voice said.
For a second, sheer incomprehension wiped everything else off the board.

“What?” she said, too surprised to think of not sounding surprised.

“Oh,” it said. “Damn. Yes, I – hm. That hadn’t even occurred to me. My – you know, I rather think we’ll opt for moirail. Yes. I want to talk to my moirail, please.”

Terezi shut her mouth, then opened it again.

“What the Hell are you talking about,” she said carefully.

The Seer clicked Sollux’ tongue. “The Knight,” it said tetchily. “You have him. I want to talk to him.”

Partial understanding spat like a cheap firework, and Terezi couldn’t stop herself. “Coolkid?” she blurted, and then clamped her jaw shut, furious.

The sound of Sollux Captor collapsing in giggles was a deeply unsettling one.

“Is that what you call him?” the Seer said, gasping, after perhaps the ten most mortifying seconds of Terezi’s life. “Oh, my God, I’m going to dine out on that one. But at least it’s unmistakeable. Yes! I should like a chat with Coolkid, if I may, and if you can drag him out of hiding, which may be harder than you think after that little revelation.”

Coolkid?, she thought, panicked. What is she talking about?

Jesus, the voice said wearily, and just hearing it again, warm and lazy, was enough to send a little tingle of happiness along her arms. *I did warn you about the horseshit.*

*Are you really an AI?* she thought, which was feeble, but it was hard to be smart in your own head.

‘Fraid so. *Remember that time you asked how I got so good with swords?*, it said. Yeah. *I ain’t much more than a sword myself, these days.*

*I thought*, she started, and blushed. *I thought you were a figment of my imagination.*

*Girl*, it said, *don’t take this the wrong way, but I am way too Goddamn fly for your imagination.*

*Why are you in my head?*

*Seemed like a nice head to be in.*

*Um*, she thought. *Well. I – I suppose you’d better talk to Sollux, then. I mean, not Sollux. Annoying girl Sollux. You know.*

*Yeah, it said, there’s a catch. Pretty short on mouths up here.*

*Oh. You mean – oh.*

*Oh is fucking right*, it said.

Her mind was unhelpfully blank. This was well outside even the most far-fetched of her contingencies. She had been flung in fifteen seconds from the comforting minor insanity of an imaginary friend, to the cold knowledge of an alien intelligence which was hundreds of sweeps old, lived in her pan, and now wanted to take control of her body. There hadn’t even been a class on this. Her guts were a knot, and she was suddenly hyper-conscious of a hundred sensations: could he feel
them too? The dry patch at the back of her throat? The dull, hot ache from the arm wound? The sweat trickling down between her breasts? She remembered inviting a friend back to her old hive, once, before Basic, and scanning the room in sudden panic with a stranger’s eyes; seeing the friendly disorder turn to embarrassing mess, the beloved plush toys to humiliating totems of immaturity.

Helpless, she thought, *Is she really your moirail?*

*More than,* it said simply.

The knot fell away, and all at once she was just miserable.

*I’m sorry,* she thought. *I am so horrible. I’ve no right to keep you from your moirail. If I ever had a moirail, I would want to talk to him too.*

TZ, *no,* said the voice fiercely. *I’ve got no fucking rights in this at all. It’s your stuff, it’s your play. You say no, answer’s no. I’m just the houseguest, alright? You don’t have to do dick.*

*No!* she thought, certain again. *You are not a guest. You mustn’t say that. It’s been a sweep. That’s too long for guests. It’s time I gave you your own set of keys.*

*Are you sure about this?* it said, so worried she was seized with a stupid urge to hug herself.

*Yes. What do I do?*

*Nothing, really,* the voice said. *If you let me through, you don’t have to be out cold first or any of that shit. Just... can you think about fire? Like, just regular flames and stuff, or a candle, or whatever.*

She hesitated, feeling silly. *Um. What will happen to me?*

*It’ll be like you fell asleep.*

*I won’t be... like what you are? In the background?*

*Nah. Wouldn’t work. You’ve got too much direct somatic shit tied up in there, spatial awareness, background processes, you couldn’t go passenger seat. You’d still be trying to keep your balance and breathe and everything, only second-hand. Be like a fucking game of QWOP. We need to turn you clean off for the duration. It paused. Seriously, you can back out of this.*

*Terezi Pyrope does not back out,* she thought. *Please, um. Please try not to... break anything?*

*The fuck you think I’m gonna do?*, the voice said, sounding amused again. *Throw a party while you’re out?*

*I would not put it past you!*, she thought fondly, and set her jaw, and breathed out, and pictured the candle she’d once had beside her cocoon, its tip jumping with a cheerful yellow flame.

She had a brief but amazingly vivid image of huge metal wheels moving slowly against a sea of fire. Something opened in her head, and she heard wings beating, impossible wings, and felt for half a second smaller than she ever had, smaller than in her first exams, smaller than the first time she’d left atmosphere, the vertiginous dwindling that takes hold only in black moments when one comprehends just how much is out there, and how big it all is.

Then she was falling down a long dark well, and silence.

***
She woke naturally, from a dream of a hive she didn’t know. The REM headache was no worse than usual, and her skin felt dry and hot like it always did from ecdysal sleep, and her mouth didn’t taste too great. But it was definitely her body: she could feel rough concrete against her ribs and left thigh, her knees a little bent, her stomach hollow with hunger, her right arm draped protectively over something good-smelling and deliciously warm.

She became very still.

The air was cooler now. Her nose was pressed into soft cotton which smelt of cigarettes and fresh sweat, smoky and comforting. Her jacket had been bundled up and placed under her head as a kind of support; the fabric was a little scratchy on her cheek. The thing under her arm rose, then fell, then rose again slowly.

Some sort of terrible lizardly hindbrain instinct demanded she snuggle closer. She shot it, twice, methodically, and waited for it to stop twitching. Then she straightened her legs very carefully, pushing her feet down and away, trying not to let her boots scrape on the floor. She unhooked her arm gingerly from around Sollux’s waist, suffering a distracting minor flashback to render-safe procedures in Basic, and rolled clear.

_Coolkid!_ she thought furiously, once her back was safely against the far wall. Sollux’ breathing was still slow and even.

_Wow, I have no idea what you’re talking about,_ the voice said, sounding distinctly smug.

She ground her teeth.

This is wildly inappropriate! How am I supposed to maintain an effective professional relationship with Mr Captor if I wake up cuddling him like a favourite scalemate? What if he’d woken up first?

_Man,_ said the voice, and if it had possessed eyes they would have blinked innocently. _I don’t know about any cuddling. We just dozed off at a respectable distance. Left room for Jesus and everything. You guys must have done the rest by yourselves, I guess._

_I do not sleep-cuddle, you miserable amalgamation of lies! Also, why was I the big spoon?! I’m about a foot shorter than him!_

_More like eighteen inches. Maybe it’s your dominant personality?,_ the voice suggested helpfully. Terezi flexed her hands in convulsive throttling motions. Further discussion was forestalled by Sollux, who grunted, coughed, sat up with a certain amount of scuffling, and announced in tones of groggy wonder, “Fuck, I slept really well. What time is it? Oh crap, it’s nearly dark, you should have woken me up – ”

“No worries,” she put in hastily. “There is a plan now.”

“And there was. Even as she reached for the next sentence, Terezi found it waiting for her. The Seer had come through on the deal. She knew everything – where they had to go, what they had to find, and how it was going to work. She’d gone from a few sketchy and rather desperate ideas to a full mission briefing laid out the way she liked it, step by step in her mind, without her even having to think it through. It was like going to a new place, and finding on arrival that you remembered it. With the utmost reluctance, she started to smile.
“Yes,” she said. “There is quite a lot I am going to need to explain. The village two miles south-east of us has a coffee shop. Then I am afraid we are going back to Low City.”
The Tower of Cats

The second walk was harder. Adrenaline had powered him from the villa: his legs had worked mechanically, lifting and falling, when the only direction was away. He’d put his head down and looked at his feet and kept up with Terezi, and slipped into a dreamlike state of perpetual motion. He’d felt, for a couple of hours, something almost like the medium: like his mind was driving, and his body an irrelevance. He could have walked for nights.

Once the new evening came, the meat settled back round him like a heavy coat in summer. He ached from the concrete, and his stomach was a snarl of pain. The ecdysal sleep left him feeling raw and scraped-down, and his eyes were gritty when he blinked. He needed coffee more than he had ever needed anything in the world. The foil strip of pills jabbed into his thigh every few steps, and he weighed up a blue, but there was the honey to consider. Could he even take them together? Would it make him sneeze out his brain and die? He realised he should have asked Kanaya; realised it was probably too late for that, now.

“Can I smoke?” he said.

“What?” said Terezi. “Why are you asking me?”

“Well, I don’t want to, like.” He felt silly. “Give away our position.”

She yelped a little laugh. “Mr Captor, we are walking fast in a straight line through partial cover! We’re probably the only heat source with significant mass in half a mile. You can light ten cigarettes, if you want.”

She’d been a little weird since he woke up. Not grumpy, just distant. He guessed it was probably hunger, same as him. He left the cigarettes in his jacket pocket and tried to focus on where he was putting his feet.

The town to the south-east was hardly worthy of the name: a single street of prefabbed cabins cutting a rough line of best fit through a poorly correlated scatter of lumpy lowblood hives. Terezi sat him on a bench under a tree and disappeared, to rematerialise in a couple of minutes carrying a paper bag and two beige foam cups of black coffee that steamed invitingly in the evening air. His nose twitched. She gave him both cups, flopped down, and rooted around in the bag until she’d extracted a loaf of heavy brown bread and a can of reconstituted fish paste in grub sauce.

They took turns scooping the fish stuff out of the can with torn-off wedges of bread. The sauce was tangy and heavily salted, and the bread itself was dense and a little spongy, and both of them crammed fat handfuls into their mouths and chewed ravenously. When it was all gone and Terezi had scraped up the last tiny shreds of fish with her claws, they sat side by side and drank the coffee, which was fierce and metallic and dreadful, and smoked, and she told him everything.

“This is bullshit,” he said, when she stopped talking.

“How I wish that were so.”

“No, seriously, Terezi, I’m not trying to flick your horns here, but this is bullshit. You can’t fucking catch an AI like it’s the clap or something.”

“Wow,” she said, and grinned, “what were you doing in cyberspace?”

“I mean it! Like – an AI can’t even exist inside an organic cortex, that’d be like trying to download
your music collection onto a plate of sausages – ”

“Please do not mention sausages,” she said. “I would do a very great deal for a plate of sausages right now. Especially with butter.”

He tilted his head back to drain the last dregs of the coffee. “I’m telling you, I know I’ve been having some weird-ass dreams lately, but there is no way I have a fucking AI living in my pan. It’s not possible.”

_Fucking was never actually one of my core protocols_, said a cool female voice in his head, _but I’m sure a man of your talent can bootstrap me somehow._

He stood up, very fast, and said, “What the fuck.”

Terezi blew smoke unconcernedly. _Hello_, said the voice. _My name’s Rose. I’m afraid I already know what yours is._

“No,” he said, out loud, and then thought, _No! This is ridiculous, this is fucking ridiculous. What the Hell are you?_

_I really am an artificial intelligence_, it said calmly. _Surely that’s preferable to the alternative, which is that you’re undergoing a total psychological meltdown?_

_You can’t be an AI!,_ he thought furiously. _Brains don’t fucking work like that!_

_Brains also tend to explode when dosed with small quantities of mind honey_, it pointed out, _and yours is ticking along very nicely. It’s rather comfortable, in fact. Firm, yet squashy in the right places._

“Shall I leave you two alone for a while?” asked Terezi innocently. He jumped, and looked down to see her watching him with unseeing lenses and a scarcely perceptible smirk.

“Give me two seconds,” he said firmly, and turned away. The street ahead of them was a deserted launching strip of dark soil and fierce green shadows. _How –_

_To forestall your next few questions_, said the voice. _Yes, you have been dreaming about me. No, I mean you no harm. No, I cannot take control of your conscious body without your permission. Yes, I can see through your eyes. Yes, that was the worst coffee either of us have ever tasted. Yes, I can feel everything you feel, to some extent at least. And yes, that does raise a number of intriguing possibilities, all of which I’d be happy to discuss with you later._

He sat down again, hesitant, like a man expecting something to hurt. Terezi was still gazing at him, but the smirk had gone. There was something crooked and almost soft in the line of her mouth.

“It’s weird, isn’t it,” she said.

“That,” he said fervently, “is a fucking understatement. And you’ve – got one too?”

She nodded. “Yep! He has been with me ever since the army. I am very fond of him.” And, to his astonishment, she reached up and stroked two fingers gently down her own cheek: an easy little gesture, habitual and private.

He went for the cigarettes, and stopped halfway, suddenly panicked.

_Go ahead_, said the voice, teasing. _They’re not my lungs._
He tapped a Diamond clear of the packet and moved it to the corner of his mouth with a trembling hand, but didn’t light it. Then he thought of something and took it out. “How did you get yours?” he asked. “Like, how did you pick it up?”

“Him,” she corrected.

“Yeah, okay, whatever. Had you been in the medium?”

“No. I was in the middle of a firefight, as it happens. Things went – wrong – and I went blind, and passed out, and when I woke up he was there.”

“How did you go blind? You never told me.”

“I lost my optics,” she said ruefully, “and looked up.”

He winced. “Fuck. That’s nasty. But there’s no way you could have been exposed to – unless, hang on, what happened to your optics?”

“I had to take them off. My squad’s helmsman caught a viral strike, and –”

“– it came through the net, right? You guys use compound-mind tech, you’re all hooked up. It would have bled through the links, and – yeah!” He flung the empty coffee cup away excitedly as the pieces fell together, and twisted on the bench to face her better. “Let me guess: the virus that hit you was some weird-ass Outer Empire shit, right? Some grungy old panbreaker, like rudimentary bleed-out-your-ears stuff?”

“Sadly, I was too busy going blind to be an enormous nerd,” she said, but she sounded amused. “But we were a long way from Alternia, yes. The Mekbuda group.”

He nodded. “Nobody uses stuff like that any more, it’s too obvious. Like, unless you get exceptionally fucking lucky, the most you’re going to take out with a panbreaker is a single squad, and then it runs into the sand. The real money’s in the slow-burning stuff you can propagate round a ship or a city before people start dying. But what it does is inflict instantaneous neurological trauma. Bit like what I caught, when I got blown to fuck.”

“Brain damage.”

“Yeah. It literally rewires your brain. ‘Course, about two seconds after it gets rewired it turns into grub soup and runs out your nose, but technically if you cut the signal fast enough you could take the hit and survive.” He hunched forwards and wagged the unlit cigarette at her. “But you’d still be left with a sponge for a brain, at least figuratively speaking. Holes where there shouldn’t be holes. That’s how your AI dude got in. I’m the same. The systems crash turned my pan upside down and shook it. We’ve both got fucked-up brains, that’s why they picked us.”

“Mr Captor,” she said, “you are killing the romance.”

“Quite,” said Rose, sounding a little hurt. “I assure you I picked you for a number of reasons, of which your undeniably fucked-up brain was only one.”

“But it’s fucking incredible!” he said, to both of them, sort of. “Imagine: you get shot in the head and don’t die. The slug misses anything crucial and gets lodged in some gunk you didn’t really need, and okay maybe now you get headaches and you can’t count backwards from twenty without tasting raspberries but who gives a fuck.” He plugged the Diamond back between his lips long enough to light it, cupping his hand round the flame, then hooked it clear again between two fingers. It ticked with the beat of his heart. “At this point most people are already like, man, way to flip off probability.
But then it turns out that now you’ve got a lump of metal in your pan, you can pick up fucking radio waves! You got shot in the brain and all it did was turn you into a fucking home entertainment centre!” He took a shaky drag on the cigarette and puffed the smoke from both nostrils so it curled back up in clouds. “So there you are lying on a battlefield all AI-compatible all of a sudden, and you pick up a Knight, ‘cause that’s where Knights hang around, right? And me, I take my inviting new pan off exploring somewhere I’ve never been, and I end up with a Seer. I mean, fuck!”

She smiled; not her usual toothy grin, but something smaller and quieter. “If only you’d been there to explain all this at the time.”

“If I’d fucking been there you’d still have both eyes,” he said angrily. “You got taken out by the tech version of a rusty knife with tetanus. Remedial level shit. If the army actually gave its helmsmen more than like half a sweep’s training, they’d stop shit like that cold. I’d have turned it round and fired it back down the net with a fuck you attached, and you’d still be running around blinking at kittens or whatever.” He dragged on the cigarette again, trying to force down the sudden rage that had swirled together in his lungs.

“Then I am glad you were not there,” she said, and he looked at her. “Because I would never have met my Coolkid, and that would be very sad.” She reached out, and put her hand carefully over his where it gripped the crusty wood of the bench between them. Her skin was cool and dry. “But I hope it won’t sound feeble if I say I do wish you had been there immediately afterwards.”

* * *

They took the tunnels back to town: Terezi said a commercial flight was too exposed, and the voice in his head agreed with her. It was a five-hour journey. When they changed from the periphery to an axial line, they had a twenty-minute wait at the nexus, a long concrete platform scattered with broken glass and lit by inadequate arc-lamps. It was deserted. The air was damp and cold and smelt strongly of oil. He sat on a bench with the Kraghe in its backpack propped against his knees, the tube of mind honey tucked safely in an inside pocket, and smoked. Terezi prowled up and down, peering at garish posters like she could read them. Then she used a combination of small change and vigorous kicking to prevail upon an old-fashioned vending hull, which whirred reluctantly and spat out a rubberized pod of sticky jellied candies. They spent a happy five minutes silently skewering candies on their claws – sugary worms in toxic green and urgent red – and chewing. Terezi displayed an unerring accuracy for the red ones. “How can you even fucking tell the difference?”, he complained, and she just licked her lips at him.

When they reached the city she insisted they check into a hotel. She picked one in an upmarket district west of the Spires, got them two adjacent balcony rooms on the tenth floor. She gave the guy at the desk false names like she’d been saving them up just in case, which she probably had. The lift was mirrored on three sides, and smelt of synthetic air freshener.

His room was opulent: tasteful bronze-effect uplighters, fleecy white carpet, heavy curtains. He threw the keycard onto a table, then unhooked the backpack and dumped it on a fat purple armchair. The air-con unit high on one wall whirred into life as its sensors flagged up the temperature spike. A recuperacoon you could swim in was positioned dead centre, surrounded by its own little island of dark-veined marble tiles and a free-standing chrome towel-rail with a heater dial. The sopor was a brilliant concentrated green and gleamed invitingly.

He stripped off jacket and T-shirt and flung them on the bathroom floor, splashed water on his face from the basin. His arms ached. He glanced over at the shower, which was spacious and had about five different nozzles and probably played music or something while you were in there, and then glanced away as quickly, remembering.
Sollux, said the voice in his head, gently. It’s quite alright. I’ve been in your head for two weeks now. I’m afraid you really don’t have many secrets left.

He saw himself in the mirror, sharp-limbed and awkward, and felt a dreadful hot surge of humiliation; tried not to think about what else she must have seen, and felt.

There’s really nothing to be ashamed of, she said. I am an artificial consciousness. Even were I programmed to notice your high cheekbones and the pleasing way the belt of your jeans doesn’t quite hug your perfectly flat abdomen, creating a seam of shadow between fabric and warm skin that a cool little hand could just perfectly ease down into, such matters would evoke no response other than a detached, almost geometric appreciation. He stared furiously at the row of complimentary soaps, and she laughed. You can have a shower.

“Nope,” he said. “Hell with that. I’m gonna go put my shirt back on.”

And then what? she said. Renounce personal hygiene as the Devil’s work? Buy a wetsuit? You’re going to want a shower eventually. Think how good hot water’s going to feel as it sluices down your chest and beads in the stubble on your jaw.

“Fucksake,” he said, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Let’s just have a drink, alright?” He scooped up a heavy glass tumbler from the shelf above the sink, and went to root in the minibar.

There were several small green glass bottles of beer, which sang him a plaintive song, but he couldn’t quite bring himself just to grab one without asking. He hesitated for a second, and then thought awkwardly, What’ll it be?

Listen very carefully, said the voice, cool and steady, and do exactly as I say. Take out the gin, the vodka, the tequila, and the white rum miniatures. Good. Now tip them all into the glass. Now – is there any lemon juice?

Got some Lemon & Lime Low Orbit Bombardment Faygo, he thought.

Christ. Oh well. Put some of that in, and some of the Coke.

The what?

The red can.

Grub cola, he thought, and did as he was told. Fuck, there’s not much space.

Just put in as much as will go. That’s perfect. Now give it a stir.

He glanced around, snatched up one of the free hotel pens, and swirled it around in the glass, which turned a sort of murky golden-brown colour. He lifted it and regarded it nervously.

“Man, to Hell with it,” he said out loud, and bobbed the glass pointlessly in the air. “Cheers.”

À votre santé, said Rose.

He took a swig.

“Motherfucker,” he said weakly, and coughed. Someone rapped vigorously on the door. He crossed and thumbed the panel, which gave him a grainy green image of Terezi from above and to the left. She looked up and stuck her tongue out. He opened the door.

When she was inside the room he handed her the tumbler and said, “Hey, try this.”
She sniffed, sipped, and said with some feeling, “Oh my God.”

“Yeah.”

“What do you call it?”

“No fucking idea,” he said. What do we call it?

*Lalonde Island Iced Tea,* said the voice. He reported this faithfully. Terezi frowned. “Coolkid seems to think that’s hilarious,” she said.

“I don’t get it,” he said.

“Nor do I.”

They looked at each other, perplexed.

“Did I just manage to tell a joke neither of us understood?” he said.

“Now he wants me to bump my fist against yours,” she said, “but this is getting very confusing, so I’m going to ignore him.” She snared the glass off him and took another sip. “Put your jeans back on, we have work to do.”

“I’m wearing my jeans,” he objected.

She tutted. “Coolkid!”, she said, exasperated, and gave him back the glass. “Sorry. He does this sometimes.”

* * *

They moved through the city like they had nothing but time: walked to a tunnel mouth, rode three stops, changed, two more stops, got out and walked again. Terezi strolled along pointing at things in windows apparently at random and making inconsequential remarks. Sollux’s neck pricked, and he forced himself not to glance from side to side more than he absolutely had to. Every muscle in his body twinged to optimise: find target, head straight to target, minimise delay. But she was the urban guerrilla, and she knew her game. He tried to get into the rhythm and see it as a shopping trip, except he’d always hated shopping, so that didn’t really help. They browsed past the electric blue oblongs of shop displays; past carts hawking sugared mealworms and kebabs rolled in dark grease that made Terezi’s head swivel like a magnet; down churning argon colonnades where gusts of rain spattered the flat plastic canopy and fizzled off field generators. As they walked the city grew dirtier and more tangled. Wide avenues swung them into crooked back streets, and the babble of late-night shoppers faded into the clatter of kicked cans and solitary yells from windows somewhere overhead. He was glad he’d left the backpack with his rig at the hotel. When they rode the tunnels he clung to a slippery white plastic strap hanging from a central beam, the pistol in his jacket heavy by his heart, and every time the car lurched Terezi bumped against him, so close he had to be careful of her horns. He thought her hair still smelt of smoke.

They disembarked at last outside a hivestem Sollux might have passed twenty times, or never. The street-facing walls were rough glaucrete tagged to just above his head height with blocky glyphs in black and scarlet; from there they rose bleak and green in the first pale shiver of dawn. One rusted door was shut, its glass pane milky and spidered with thin white cracks. The other hung open into darkness.

“Please tell me we’re not fucking going in there,” he said fervently.
She grinned.

“No,” he said. “No way. Absolutely not. Do you know where we are? I grew up in a shitty part of town, and this place makes it look like the Violet Mile. You walk into a stem around here, you’ll leave slowly, bit by bit, depending on how much bile sacs are fetching on the market that week.”

“Well, I am going in,” she declared. “So you are going to have to come along and keep me safe.”

He snorted. “What’ll you do, pick me up and hit the first guy with me?”

“No!” she said, affronted. “You’d break. Although, hm. I suppose then I could stab the next one with your legs.”

He followed her through the doorway and into the dark. The air was cold and stank of stale cigarettes and piss. The floor felt gritty under the soles of his boots. It was pitch black: he could stay put for five minutes and he’d still be working with basic shapes. Ten steps inside and he’d already lost the back of Terezi’s jacket.

*Would you like some help with that?,* enquired the voice in his head politely.

He twitched, and then felt stupid. *Uh, he thought. I guess. What are you going to –*

An abrupt urge to blink seized him, like dust in his eyes. He did so, several times, and when his vision cleared he was looking through pixel-sharp augmented optics at a green-and-black lobby, all harsh angles and fans of shadow. He could see grub cans and a bottle on the floor, the ruins of a deck-chair. They were at the bottom of a six-walled concrete shaft like a cistern, with iron slatted stairs winding up the inside. Each few steps turned to a short gantry and a single door before moving on. It was a lot like the first stem he’d ever lived in, except bigger and more dilapidated. Terezi was headed for the bottom of the stairs. He wondered what had happened to the lighting.

*How did you do that?,* he thought.

*It wasn’t hard,* said Rose. *I just uploaded the standard military AO trait to your cortical implant. It’s like using a plug, except you don’t actually need a plug.*

*What, you just had it lying around?*

*I was a database,* she said. *I have all the standard traits built into my architecture. Languages, competences. I can give you a new abstratus, if you’d like. Look, try this one –*

His eyes snapped shut. He stood in a wireframe void, ghost blue, feeling his arms and shoulders flex like they were shaking off old sleep. Mannequins loomed from the front and the side, and he knew it like the alphabet – straight-arm block, knee block, slip to clear the elbow, backfist for distance, *rise* –

*“Are you alright?”* murmured Terezi.

He opened his eyes and stared wildly down at her. Her face was picked out in vivid green like a contour map, blank planes for her lenses and black for the slivers of her hair, tiny upturned nose. He noted automatically that she’d stepped in too close: her left knee was *asking* for a strike.

*“I know kung fu,”* he muttered.

She cocked her head on one side, puzzled, and said, “Show me later.”

They went up the stairs.
There was no point in stealth. The metal slats were worth a thousand alarms: they groaned like dying grazebests if you so much as looked at them hard. Progress up the stem was a new-wave recital of clangs, creaks, rattles, and the occasional alarming crunch, echoing gaily up above them to make sure everyone was good and ready for guests. Sollux, who had wasted too much of his adolescence gripping sweaty plastic guns in the argon gloom of arcades, kept expecting doors to burst open and tough guys to pop out with rocket launchers. Terezi trotted along with her hands loose at her sides like nothing would please her more. They didn’t talk.

When they’d been climbing for a little while they emerged onto a kind of mezzanine: a larger gantry, made of the same perforated metal, which stretched across half the shaft’s width. There was enough floor space for a good-sized respiteblock. Squatted in the middle of the gantry, gazing at them, was a teenaged troll. He was maybe seven sweeps and already solidly built: a ragged sleeveless tunic left his arms bare. He had a mane of shaggy hair held back from his face by a strip of fabric tied around his forehead. Both wrists were wrapped with tight black tangles of wire. A row of tiny acid-green LEDs had been implanted in the muscle of his right forearm, and they pulsed with his heartbeat. Two pointed ears jutted from the curls on top of his skull.

The troll bared his fangs, and hissed.

Terezi stopped. Sollux did too. The hiss turned into a kind of purring growl, and the kid dropped forward onto his hands as though he were about to crawl, or pounce.

“Terezi – ” said Sollux.

Something moved, and he glanced right to see a skinny girl with one side of her scalp shaved bare sidle out of the shadows. She was almost naked, wearing just a black vinyl skirt sliced into wide strips, and her torso was hatched with jagged glyphs – the spiky, scrawling kind favoured by a lot of Low City bars. Two thick striped cables jutted from the stubble above her left ear, looped back over her shoulder and disappeared; a little higher he could see the same pointed ears, attached to a plastic hairband. She had a knife.

Terezi shifted, fractionally, and the air went sluggish. The boy with the lights threw his head back and howled.

Anywhere else it would have sounded stupid. Here, in this cold green well of shadows and no wind, it was weird and dreadful. The howl bounced and shuddered up the tower, and all above them doors began to click open, gantries creaking and clanging under new weight. Faces peered over hand-rails; he heard muttering, the clink of a chain. The girl with the knife hovered out of arm’s reach and licked her lips.

Terezi’s right hand slid into her jacket almost caressingly, and Sollux yelled “Hey!”

That echoed too, less creepily, but just as loud. The boy and the girl stared at him. The clattering above them stilled.

“We don’t want any trouble!” he called. The hollow core of the stem gave his voice a depth and resonance it didn’t really deserve. He spread his arms, slowly, hands open, fingers splayed. “We’re not here to hurt anybody, okay? We just want to see the Prophet. Just see him. That’s all.”

The girl with the scalp plugs stepped in closer, at that, and he forced himself not to flinch. She sniffed, and narrowed her eyes. Then she reached out, pointed the knife’s tip at his face, drew it slowly back, and passed the blade across her own throat, left to right.
He swallowed. “Yeah. We get it.”

She nodded. Instantly, the boy with the green lights shuffled crabwise out of their path, though he glared at them as though this hadn’t gone down the way he’d wanted.

They crossed the gantry, slowly, side by side, and mounted the next set of stairs. On the next little landing three more trolls stepped back to let them past. Sollux kept looking straight ahead; he glimpsed a chunky fang on a leather cord, a row of glinting rings through a lower lip, wires sprouting like hair from an expanse of skin. He could smell food cooking and the tang of cheap sopor.

A little higher up, Terezi said, very quietly, “Thank you for that, Mr Captor.”

“Well, fuck,” he said, out of the side of his mouth. “It was that or die. I mean, even you couldn’t fight all these guys.”

“Yes, I could,” she said, “and in fact I was about to.”

He risked a glance left and down at her. Her expression was almost too calm; there was something intent about it, something too tightly controlled. He curled his fingers at his hip in sudden hunger.

“Terezi,” he said, “there’s like fifty people on this staircase, and I think they’re all armed.”

“Fifty people on a staircase is no different to two people on a staircase,” she said. “It just takes longer. Unless they have guns, and no-one here has guns.”

They fell quiet as they passed another knot of hulking trolls. One was patting a three-foot lug wrench thoughtfully against the leg of his jeans.

“They have wires in the backs of their necks,” he muttered. “Not plugs. Tangles of wire, and a kind of little metal cylinder thing. Kids down there all had it too. You know what that means?”

“Tell me.”

“They’re wired for network,” he said. “House mind. I’d heard about feral stems doing this, thought it was just street chaff. They’re autonomous most of the time, but if they trip a switch, bam. You got fifty trolls hooked up to a localised combat AI. One mind, fifty fists. You want to fight that on a staircase?”

“Deeply,” she said, and clutched for a quick second at his wrist, tight. “That is why I said thank you.”

They carried on up the stairs in silence.

* * *

There was only one door at the top of the tower. It was a sturdy metal construction, daubed with paint in seemingly abstract designs, and it hung very slightly open. Dazzling green-white light poured out of the crack, leaching everything else of definition.

Rose, can you turn the optics off?, he thought, and instantly the world was normal colours again: which was to say, everything was dark, except for the flickering yellow glow round the edge of the door.

Terezi pushed it open, and a wash of warm air hit them. It smelt of smoke and wax and spices.

The room inside was big and bare. Candles in saucers had been placed around the walls at intervals:
a random assortment of shapes and colours, some burnt down to little more than hummocks of tallow, others still tall and straight. The floor was polished boards of synthetic timber, and the windows were hidden behind thick red drapes of what looked like real velvet. He looked up to see dozens of small objects hanging from the ceiling: colourful feathers, small bones, charms of bent metal or greenish glass which twinkled in the light. The air was heavy with some kind of incense, a rich, woody smell that reminded Sollux of the pine forest they’d trekked through on the way to the old shelter. Everywhere little flames jumped and danced, shadows swaying on the painted walls. It was the warmest place he could remember being. Not just thermally; the whole room seemed to want to envelop them in heat and light and the love of staying put, the purring cave-dweller voice that says don’t go outside! It’s cold, and there are monsters.

Rose said, Be careful.

He said, “What - ?”, and one of the shadows leapt.

There was a clang. Something hit him in the chest and he went sprawling backwards, banging his elbows painfully on the boards. Terezi’s cane was up and a line of light jumped the gap between her hands, and she lunged –

Two trolls. Terezi, and someone even smaller than she was, moving fast. He couldn’t follow – a blade lashed, clanged, sparks spat from somewhere, Terezi sidestepped as the other troll dived past her and twisted up, cutting at her face –

He burrowed in his jacket for the Vulturer, tried to remember whether he’d loaded blue or red. Had he changed it since the villa? Terezi ducked a strike, parried another, pivoted and jammed a leg out hard and straight. There was a crunch and a gleaming arc of flame, and everything stopped.

Sollux scrambled to his feet, pistol held out. A girl was lying flat on her back, arms spread, glaring up furiously along the slim blade of Terezi’s sword. The point was nestled in the curve of her throat. Curved metal claws had been fitted over each of her fingers, jutting a good six inches beyond each tip; they sparkled with the remaining candles. She was breathing hard, ribs rising and falling. She had a small, round face flushed olive green, tangled hair, and an extra pair of ears sticking up from her skull.

“You are fast, catgirl!” said Terezi admiringly. “But you are nowhere near as fast as me.”

The girl hissed.

“Well, whoa,” said Sollux weakly, rubbing his chest where Terezi had shoved him. “Everybody calm the fuck down, alright? I’m too tired for this ninja bullshit. At this point I will seriously just tranq you both and have a fucking beer.”

The girl on the floor tried to turn her head to glare at him, but couldn’t move it far enough with the sword-point tucked against her windpipe. “You won’t hurt him! I’ll kill you! No-one’s going to hurt him, not ever!”

“For fuck’s sake,” he said, and lowered the pistol, which seemed to surprise her. “We don’t even want to hurt him. Being your pizza guy must be a fucking laugh riot.”

The catgirl blinked. She looked genuinely confused.

“My associate is quite correct!” said Terezi brightly. “We have no wish to hurt anybody, at the moment, but people will keep trying to hurt us. I am going to take my sword away now. If you try to do anything exciting I will cut off both of your hands, so please move slowly.” And she stepped
back a couple of paces, clearing a decent distance between herself and the girl on the floor, although she didn’t put the sword away.

The girl clambered up into a sort of crouch, and squatted on the floor, looking backwards and forwards between the two of them with huge wide eyes and quick little jerky movements of her head. Sollux stared back at her. She looked like three separate city fashion trends of the last six months had got in a fight and then all gone home together. Clumpy black knee-high boots with fat silver zips; neon pink fishnet tights with torn holes on the calves and knees; a pleated miniskirt in blue-and-green check; a big, shapeless jacket, muddy green with wide shoulder straps and brass buttons, hanging open over a mesh top emblazoned with some kind of design in rainbow colours he couldn’t see properly. With her arms down the jacket sleeves almost covered her hands, so that only the gleaming blades of the claws showed. Loops of thin chain hung from the waistband of the skirt, to no apparent purpose.

“Nya!”, she said, worriedly. Then she bit her lip and said, “Can you help him?”

“Help with what?” said Sollux, a little nonplussed at seeing the spitting fury drain away so fast.

“Oh, he’s so sick!” she cried, and scratched agitatedly at the boards with one set of claws. “He’s really, really purrly, and I’ve tried everything, but I can only make him better for a little while, I can’t fix him! He’s fine, really, meowst of the time, and it’s not his fault, he’s so sweet, but when it happens he doesn’t – I can’t talk to him, he just gets so upset, it’s pawful – ”

“Pawful?” echoed Terezi disbelievingly.

“Shit,” said Sollux, “slow down. We can try and help, I guess. What’s your name?”

“Oh!” She looked startled. “Nepeta. Nepeta Leijon.”

“Okay, well,” he said, “I’m Sollux Captor, this is Terezi Pyrope. If you take us to the Prophet, we’ll do our best, okay?” And he thought, Rose, can you upload medical diagnostics if I need them?

Certainly, said the voice. I have everything from basic first aid to advanced neurosurgery up here, although I wouldn’t recommend you attempt the latter without some practice.

Yeah, it’s not gonna come to that. I just want to be able to tell if this dude’s got stomach flu or cancer.

The catgirl had bounded across the room to the wall left of the entrance, and carefully dragged back one particular swatch of dusty velvet to reveal another heavy steel door. It was painted in bright red with what looked like a caste symbol: two ovals, top left and bottom right, with curved lines extending out past each other like the beginnings of planetary orbits.

They followed her through the door.

The space beyond was just as warm, but darker and much smaller. A few fat yellowy candles had been stuck in little wall-niches which looked like they’d been chipped out by hand especially for the purpose. There was no furniture. The rich scent of wax from the candles couldn’t drown out the sour smell of old sweat. In the centre of the room there was a rough wooden pillar, as thick as a good-sized tree trunk, rising almost to the ceiling; and leaning with his back to the pillar was a short, stocky troll with a mess of damp spiky hair and two horns so stubby they were hardly more than bumps. He wore only a pair of high-waisted black jeans, and the skin of his arms and chest gleamed wet in the dancing light. He was standing awkwardly, with his arms behind him like he was trying to wrap them round the pillar, and it took Sollux a couple of seconds to realise they were bound like that with
thick, knotted rope.

He raised his chin off his chest to look at them. There were dark bags beneath his eyes, and his face was creased with fatigue. He didn’t look well.

“Get them out,” the Prophet mumbled, through lips that barely moved. “They can’t – no, no, they can’t come in here, they mustn’t, get them out, get them out –”

His voice spiked to a snarl of desperation, and then his head snapped up so hard it hit the pillar with a thud and his eyes screwed tight shut. He made a choking sound.

“Karkat!” cried Nepeta, panicked.

“Holy shit –” said Sollux, and took a step forward on instinct.

Then the Prophet sagged. The straining tension went out of his arms, and his head drooped a little, and he let out a long, shaky breath, and he opened his eyes and looked at them again.

Both eyes had turned a brilliant, shining green.

Nepeta squeaked. Sollux lifted his foot uncertainly, caught between staying stock still and hurling himself at Terezi. But the Prophet broke into a wide, delighted smile that didn’t suit his face at all, and said, “Oh my God!”

He stepped forwards, spreading his arms. The ropes coiled and twisted in the air, writhing like snakes, before flopping to the floor. He said “Rose!” and before Sollux had even remembered to step into a flawless elbow block and then break the arm, he found himself being hugged tightly by a sweaty troll whose head came up to about the middle of Sollux’s chest.

“Uh,” he managed.

The Prophet let go and beamed up at him, eyes blazing emerald, then turned to look past him. “Dave –” he positively squealed, and Sollux turned to see Terezi getting almost flattened by a similarly enthusiastic full-body hug. Her face was a mask of horror.

“I missed you guys so much,” declared the Prophet, letting her go. “Oh my God. I thought I might never see you again!” Then he saw Nepeta, whose eyes were now so comically wide they threatened to engulf her face, and said contritely, “Nepeta, I’m so sorry. I haven’t done anything bad to him, I promise, he’s right here! I just needed to say hello to my friends, I haven’t seen them for years. I mean sweeps.”

Sollux, said Rose’s calm voice, this is my very dear friend Jade. Or the Witch, as this universe calls her. Could you perhaps lean in and give her a kiss for me? Tenderly, on the mouth?

No, he thought.

“Was it you?” said Nepeta shakily. “Have you been hurting him all this time?”

“No!” said the Prophet, sounding indignant. “Well – I mean, sort of. But it wasn’t my fault! If he wasn’t such a pig-headed, stubborn butt all the time, he’d have been fine! But every time I tried to talk to him, he just got angry and his head filled up with swearwords, and –”

“Neural interference,” said Sollux. “Yeah. I caught it too. Less fierce, by the sound of it, but. If you’ve got two minds in the same head trying to think in opposite directions, you’ve got problems.”
“I never had any problems,” said Terezi, surprised.

“You guys must just get on, I guess,” he said, and grinned when she stuck her tongue out at him.

“I don’t understand what anybody’s talking about!” wailed Nepeta.

“Hey, it’s okay, it’s okay!” said the Prophet, and patted her on the head. Her face went almost as green as his eyes, and Sollux instinctively averted his gaze. “I’ll explain everything. Why don’t we have some dinner? Karkat’s really hungry.”
The four of them sat on the floor in the main room around an assortment of small earthenware platters and dishes, cheaply glazed in garish colours, the kind of thing you sometimes saw for sale in street markets. Confronted with guests for dinner, Nepeta had shaken off her confusion fast, and by the time the food was served she looked happy and excited. She couldn't be much past eight, and Sollux wondered how she'd ended up as the high priestess of this strange little cult, at the top of a silent tower. She poured them all bowls of fragrant green tea, and urged them to eat. She took the metal claws off her right hand to get at the food, but he noticed she kept the other set on. Young, but wary. How many times must she have had to fight for her Prophet? Even Terezi had said she was good.

The main dish was a crock-pot of some kind of stew, chunks of stringy meat smothered in a rich, spicy sauce. After a few morsels Sollux upgraded it to ‘very spicy’. He’d always enjoyed hot food, but Terezi didn't look entirely comfortable; she was spooning about twice as much yoghurt onto her plate as anyone else, and her cheeks had developed a faint blue flush, so that more than once he had to stop himself staring vaguely at her. The Witch, having delivered a long and (he thought) unnecessarily rambling explanation to Nepeta while the food cooked, had relinquished control of the Prophet; the Prophet had promptly spent two minutes curled up on the floor having some sort of inarticulate nervous breakdown, before grudgingly picking himself up, pulling on a baggy black sweater, and sitting down for dinner with the rest of them. He ate voraciously, without talking, and his eyes kept darting backwards and forwards. Every time Sollux looked at him it was just in time to see Karkat glance away.

Sollux concentrated on mopping up sauce with a chunk of bread and explaining the plan to Nepeta, with Rose prompting him where necessary. As soon as they finished the meal, Karkat muttered some excuse, scrambled up, and plunged behind one of the floor-length curtains on the far wall.

Nepeta sighed. “I’m sorry!”, she said, and poured more tea. “He isn’t normally this grouchy.” Then she appeared to reconsider. “He is normally this grouchy. But normally he talks more! I think he’s just shy.”

Terezi licked a glob of yoghurt off the back of her spoon. “We are sorry to bother you here,” she said. “But we really do need his help. The plan will not work with only me and Mr Captor.”

“I’ll be back in a minute,” said Sollux. He climbed to his feet, picked up the tea-bowl carefully by its rim, and followed Karkat behind the curtain.

The curtain turned out to conceal a pair of glass-paned doors with old-fashioned brass handles, which led onto a blocky glaucrete balcony – hardly any space, enough maybe for a couple of chairs, although none were in evidence. Karkat was standing with his arms folded on the pitted green parapet, staring out over Low City. There was a fringe of pale pink along the horizon.

Sollux shut the door, stepped forwards and put the tea bowl down on the parapet with a tiny clink. Then he rummaged in his jacket pocket. A cold shiver of a breeze clutched at the thin cotton of his tee-shirt.

“Cigarette?”

Sollux thumbed back the top of the packet. Three left. He made a mental note to stop and pick up more on the way back to the hotel, especially if Terezi was going to keep scrounging them. “I got killed once,” he said, and extracted a Diamond between two fingers. “Didn’t stick.”

Karkat puffed a breath. “Fuck. Thank you, merciful gods, this is exactly what I needed. Some fucking hacker thinks he’s a hard-ass.”

Sollux tilted his head back and let the first lungful of smoke leak blissfully out towards the stars before he answered. “I’m not kidding. I was dead for twenty-two seconds one time. Flatlined. Neural overload.”

The posture didn’t change, but the head turned slightly, reluctantly. “What was it like?”

“Couldn’t tell the difference.”

The other troll snorted, and picked at the glaucrete with the tip of a claw. “Suddenly it all makes fucking sense.”

“Yeah?”

“In there. You were going on about your plan, and I couldn’t tell if you were just unbelievably shitpan stupid, or if you had a deathwish. You didn’t seem stupid.”

“I’m just trying to do a job.”

“Sure. Yep. That’s why you hooked up with a Lacerator. Fuck’s sake, you outrageous douche!” Karkat twisted round abruptly to face him. “A kid on sopor knows the only thing gives those assholes a bigger boner than killing is dying. You’re both going to go out in a blaze of idiocy, and I hope to fuck you enjoy it, ’cause she’s going to have three fingers up her nook the whole damn time.”

“God,” said Sollux. “You’re two full pails of charm, aren’t you.”

The other troll’s eyes were fierce and yellow in the light from the doors. “Fuck you, man. You come in here, into my life, and tell me you need me for some ridiculous death-or-glory jackoff mission clipped straight off the Late Night Shitty Cinema Channel? I’m meant to what, wet myself with joy? Dash off to buy my robes for Troll Hogwarts? Nepeta’s nine, you fuck, she’s never been outside Low City since hatching!”

“We don’t need her.” He blew more smoke at the skyline. “Just you.”

“You know she’ll come wherever I do. I’d like to fucking see you stop her.”

“I don’t have to stop shit,” said Sollux quietly. “Hooked up with a Lacerator, remember? I tap her on the shoulder, she takes out everyone in the building but you. I already had to call her off once.”

“Are you fucking threatening my friends? Because I swear to you – ”

Exhaustion dragged on him again. He hadn’t slept since the bunker, and he was cold, and his legs ached. “Grow up,” he said. “I’m not threatening anyone. I’m trying to make a fucking point. There is a blind girl in your lounge mainlining yoghurt right now who could level this tower and salt the earth and smile like a cultist the whole fucking time.” He tapped ash onto the parapet, leaving a little black smudge against the green. “You’re not safe here.”

“Yeah, well, thanks for that, nookstain. You got any other wisdom to impart, or should I just throw
myself off the balcony right now and save you the trouble?"

Don’t let this escalate, advised Rose. The harder you push, the harder he’ll dig his heels in. Try something else.

Sollux stared at the city. Then he said, “Why’d you quit?”

“What?”

“I read your file.” That was a lie, he’d just asked Rose, but for this to work he had to play on Vantas’ paranoia. The Legislacerator connection could actually help, spun the right way. “You used to be a real firebrand, man. Down there on the streets, shouting slogans, leading rallies. Fuck the Condesce, coming straight from the underground, young wiggler’s got it bad ‘cause I’m brown. What gave?”

Vantas snorted. “I got smart,” he said.

“Switched to writing a newsletter?”

“Fuck you, fuck your lusus. I realised I wasn’t doing any damn good. Matter of fact, I was making things immeasurably much fucking worse.” He picked at the balcony surround again. “All I was doing was calling down a lot of heat on a lot of kids who weren’t prepped to deal with it, and occasionally yanking some low-grade chucklefuck’s frond. That’s not the fucking revolution.”

“Nope,” Sollux agreed. “You smash a window, all you do is piss off the guy who’s in charge of windows.”

“Yeah. Well.” Vantas sighed. “I figured that out, in the end.”

Lovely, said Rose. Now close the trap.

“You weren’t making a difference.”

“I wasn’t changing shit. I was just sticking my hand in the gaper, and stirring.”

“So come with us,” Sollux said, and crushed out the remains of the cigarette. A tiny wisp of smoke trickled into the dawn air. “Do some real damage, for once.”

Vantas glared at him.

“Look. I don’t know if you had yoghurt in your ears for this part, but we’re literally going after the fucking Condesce. I’m doing it ‘cause it’s my job and I’m hoping someone’s going to pay me, and Terezi’s doing it ‘cause – well, because she’s a lunatic and she likes picking fights that’d make a Cavalreaper leak piss from every hole. But if we get this done?” He shrugged. “No more Condesce. Reboot the succession. I know that’s not, like, end of the caste system, but I’m pretty sure I can get you a handshake and half an hour with the next-in-line. She’s called Feferi. I think you guys would get on.”

A very palpable hit, murmured Rose. Look at those eyes.

“Bullshit,” said Karkat uncertainly. “Great steaming uncharted mountains of bullshit. On the vanishingly small chance you psychopaths pull this off, first thing’ll happen is the new girl introduces a sweeping new range of face-grinding measures so that low-caste faces get ground up to thirty percent more efficiently. Seadwellers, man.” He waved a hand at the city, as if to emphasise the sheer injustice on display, though from up here it was pretty much all lights and colours.
“Maybe,” said Sollux. “I dunno, she made me a coffee and she seemed kind of hung up on free meals and kissing wigglers and all that good shit, but maybe you’re right and she’s Condesce Two and we’re all fucked worse than before. But if we stick with Condesce One, we’re exactly the same amount of fucked, only forever. I don’t think she’s dying of horn rot any time soon, you know?”

Vantas turned away and propped his arms on the surround again. His stocky shoulders rose under the shapeless jersey as he sucked in a long breath through the nose and held it, his lips clamped shut. Then he opened his mouth and his whole body seemed to drop.

“Fuck!” he said, to the skyline. “Fuck, fuck, fuck. Alright, bulge-ring, you got me. I’m in.” He clawed one hand through his messy hair like he was trying to rip a handful out. “Maybe if I get really lucky you’ll die first, so I can shit myself laughing one last time.”

“We’re not going to shake on it, then,” said Sollux, deadpan. Karkat flipped up both middle fingers and plunged back inside in a swirl of curtains, banging the glass door behind him so hard the panes rattled and it swung slowly open again in his wake.

Well done, said Rose. I realise that’s not your preferred approach to problem-solving.

Sollux pinched the bridge of his nose and banished further thoughts of comfy hotel slime, warmed to just the right temperature. One good thing about a stack IDS is you never have to fucking argue with it, he thought. Did we have a back-up plan, incidentally?

Yes. I’d just have told Jade to assume direct control of his body. But that would have generated a lot of ill-feeling all round, and I’m glad we managed to avoid it.

You told me you couldn’t take over bodies without consent!

I can’t, she said. Jade can, though.

Fuck, he thought. You guys play for keeps, huh?

Believe me, she said calmly, there is no other way to play, and they followed Karkat inside.

* * *

It was drizzling a dawn rain as he left the tower with Terezi. Ten minutes’ walking at what felt like random brought them to a midscale shopping district: repulsor blur hung on the windows like mist, and the streets were pale and empty. She tugged on his sleeve.

“Look at this!” she chirped, and hauled him over to a a flat sheet of orange light between two tall chrome posts, standing in the partial shelter of an arch. It was a cartograph. Sollux stared at the blinking YOU ARE HERE! circle and thought I know.

“What’s up?” he said.

“We picked up a tail,” she said quietly, “two blocks back,” and reached out to point at a shining orange glyph. The key at the side told him helpfully it was a lingerie store. He nodded as if this seemed like a great idea.

“How many?”

“Just one,” she said. “He is not very good.”

She’s right, said Rose. Here – and he forced himself not to flinch away from the cartograph as its
web of lines abruptly vanished, replaced by a grainy green image of a street corner, seen from perhaps twenty feet up in the air. A figure in a long coat was loitering with hands in pockets.

*Little warning,* he thought crossly, and said, “Yeah, I see him.”

“Don’t look!” she hissed.

“I’m not. It’s Rose, she’s jacked the camera feed.”

“Oh.” Terezi sounded slightly put out. “Coolkid can’t do that.”

“You’re lucky, it’s fucking weird. He’s not moving. Just checked his watch. What do we do?”

“Let’s keep walking,” she said, and he felt the tug on his arm again, only this time it nearly pulled him off-balance. Rose took the hint, and his vision snapped back into place just in time. “Do you know any good bars in this part of town?”

“Fuck no. I only came here on a job once. What, you want to get a drink?”

“I want to get under cover,” she said. “With the streets like this, we’re too exposed. I want crowds, and at this time of day...”

“Oh my God,” said the voice. Once, I was the most powerful tracking system in the universe. Now, I’m a satnav.

You spent two weeks checking me out in the shower, he thought. I think your dignity can stand to find me a fucking bar.

Mmm. Totally worth it, as they say. First left here, then second right, ‘The Cullpit’. Three floors, no sneakers, no gang sigils, and apparently they’re doing five grub tequilas for a caegar before 8am.

Joy, he thought sourly, and relayed the information to Terezi. She grinned. “Sounds fun.”

* * *

As they stepped past the door staff and ducked into the maw of the Cullpit, the bass swelled up the stairs to engulf them: a deep, glitching beat that hit you somewhere between gut and globes, a few paces ahead of the wave of damp filtered air, soupy with smoke and cheap perfume. White strobes bit at the walls with every jagged spike of synths. They came off the steps and a girl in a bra and hotpants brushed past Sollux, half-turned and gave him a blissful flyer’s smile, all fangs and wide uncomprehending eyes. A pair of heavy-set olive jocks in tight tee-shirts glanced Terezi up and down, saw him and scowled. They skirted a heaving dancefloor and pushed through swing doors to a bar area which was more sparsely populated: a gang of girls clustered round a table sucking brightly-coloured cocktails through straws and howling with laughter, a couple of dudes on a corner sofa who to judge from the writhing were about two moves away from needing a pail.

Terezi grabbed his elbow. “Get a table!” she yelled in his ear, somehow timing it perfectly to line up with a cut, so he winced and jerked his head away. “I’ll get drinks.”

He found a small table and an L-shaped couch tucked in an inconspicuous spot with, he judged, good sightlines to the doors at both ends of the bar. This seemed like a Legislacerator thing to do, so he sat down and sprawled one arm out along the back of the couch like he was just settling down to scope out the local talent.
Oh, bless, said Rose fondly. You’re a secret agent.

Shut the fuck up, he thought, and then blinked. Over by the left-hand doors, he could see a mixed group scattered round a much bigger table. The bar’s mood lighting and the hazy air made it hard to pick out anything more precise than good suits and sharp horns, but there was something...

Rose, he thought, can you get a camera on that table over there?

Of course, she replied. Then, Hm. This place has surprisingly fierce protocols, for a nightclub. One moment – ah, and there was the same lurch as he found himself staring down through static fuzz from a little above and to the left of the group. The alpha male was a slightly-built guy with neatly slicked-back hair and distinctive crooked horns. He wore letterbox shades and a pale suit over a shirt open at the neck. There was a fluted glass on the table in front of him, and a bottle on a chiller plate. The back of Sollux’ neck prickled.

Fuck, he thought. Wish I had my rig.

That old thing? said Rose, and laughed. You don't need it.

What?

Darling, you have wireless now. Pet computer, remember? I live only to serve.

Wait, he thought. He could see Terezi at the bar, wedged in between two much taller trolls, standing on tip-toe on the chrome rail and leaning forward to holler an order at the guy on the other side. Are you saying –

I can connect to the Medium from anywhere, she said patiently. I am in your head. Ergo, you no longer require any clunky hardware to act as intermediary. Think of me as your rig, except much more attractive and less prone to malfunction.

Holy shit. He glanced at the guy at the far table, then back at Terezi. Well, uh. Buzz me in, I gue –

It was the smoothest dive he’d ever had, even using the Kraghe Seven. There was none of the usual brief sensation of falling through his own face: no jolt, no popping ears or urge to sneeze. One moment, the sensory storm of smoke and flash and spilt-beer stink and the zub zub zub of indifferent chiphop, and the slick vinyl warm under his hands; the next, clear cold and silence. The veins of the Medium stretched away like silver string in the void, taut with information.

He grinned.

“Fuck,” he said. “That’s pretty cool.”

Aren’t I just, said Rose’s voice, sounding almost at his elbow. He turned in surprise, but saw no-one.

“How come I can’t see you?” he asked.

Sorry to disappoint, she said. Instantiating in the Medium forces me to narrow my focus to a degree I think would be unwise, at present. I’m skimming the camera feeds for the club. No sign of our tail yet, unless I’ve missed him in the crowd.

“You’re actually pretty useful when you’re not hitting on me,” he said, and accelerated down a trunk line heading prospit. Nodes blurred past in streaks of primary colour, and he felt the old contentment settle back around him. The worst thing about meatspace was the vulnerability: knowing a bullet or a knife was all it took. He’d spent too much time around bullets and knives recently.
In my heyday, said Rose ruefully, I could have processed every camera on the planet simultaneously, and still had at least a zettaflop left over for hitting on you. I'd have compartmentalised it specially; set up a background process. hit-on-sollux.exe.

He smirked. “See, the zettaflop part was more of a turn-on than anything you said so far.”

I’ve been tracking hormonal shifts, and that’s not strictly accurate, but I strive to please, she said. Should I tell you about my pipelines?

“Down, girl,” he said, and banked hard left. An icewall formed sluggishly ahead of him, green polygons blurring out of nothing and tessellating with reluctance. Code ten sweeps old and more. He told it to leave a Sollux-sized gap between its plates and it complied happily.

Where are you going? she asked.

“There’s an archive down here. Threshecutioner shit they forgot to lock off properly. I’ve been slicing it for sweeps, it’s like my own personal Troll Wikipedia. I want to check something.”

It took him less than a minute to find the file he was looking for, and when he did, he swore.

Can you buzz me out? he thought, and at once the club crashed back in like he’d taken a box off his head. He blinked several times, feeling his shirt sticking to his ribs with sweat, and Terezi flopped down on the couch next to him. The table had gained a black plastic tray, on which an organised mind had arranged two green bottles, five narrow shot glasses of clear fluid, and a small white dish heaped with slices of lime.

“Oh, fuck,” he said. “Are you serious?”

She waggled her eyebrows at him. “We are here to have a good time, Mr Captor! We do not want our tail thinking we don’t know how to party.”

“I don’t. Where is he? Rose didn’t see him.”

“In the next room. Coolkid noticed him skulking by the doors while I was getting the drinks. Come on!” She prodded his shoulder with a claw. “Club can’t handle us.” And she picked up a shot glass, licked her lips, and tipped the contents down her throat without a second’s hesitation.

“You’re meant to – ” he began.

She skewered a lime slice on the same claw, popped the whole thing in her mouth, rind and all, and started to chew. “Never mind,” he said, and reached for one of the beers. “So, there’s a guy in here who maybe wants to kill us, and you’re going to get wasted.”

She snorted, and swallowed. “I am a Legislacerator. It would take more than a few measly shots to get me wasted. I just want him to start wondering whether we have, in fact, come in here to get drunk and make out.”

“Make out?”

“With random strangers, as is etiquette for hot young singletons on the prowl!” she said cheerfully, and ate another lime. “Coolkid tells me there’s a blueblood at the bar in a dress that shows off everything. We can flip a coin, if you like.”

He groped in his jacket for the Diamonds. “I thought you two were going steady.”
“Coolkid assures me he is okay with a threesome.”

“How fucking magnanimous,” said Sollux, jammed the remaining cigarettes in the corner of his mouth, and lit them both. Terezi reached over and hooked hers nimbly from between his lips. “Listen, we’ve got a problem.”

“Other than you being a big wiggler and not drinking any of this nice tequila?”

“Yeah, other than that. This is a Nine Claws bar, Terezi.”

She paused with the second shot halfway to her mouth, the red lenses fixed on him. “What?”

“There’s a guy by the far doors holding court with a bunch of cronies. Thought I knew his face from somewhere, so I looked him up. That’s Pazaak. He’s a Nine Claws boss. I did some work for him, couple of sweeps back. He’s bad news.”

She sat very still for a moment, and then threw back the shot and smacked the glass down on the table with a clunk. “Will he recognise you?”

“Probably, but he won’t give a shit. I’m just a helm, I did the job, he paid me, we’re square. No, I’m thinking – ”

“– that if he sees our friend in the coat, he will jump to unfortunate conclusions,” she finished. “Yes. And the Claws are not renowned for their subtlety. Oh, dear.”

Sollux took a drag on the cigarette. The blueblood in the revealing dress sashayed past, heading back to the mob table, which figured. “What’s the plan?”

Terezi bit her lip. “Stay here,” she said. “I am going to go and kill our tail so we can get out of here. I don’t think – ”

*Sollux,* said Rose, urgently. *Two black hovers with tinted screens just pulled up outside the front entrance.*

“Shit,” he said. “They’re going to raid the club.”

Terezi stared at him. “They wouldn’t! With all these people – ”

“I think they want us worse than we thought,” he said. Fear plucked at the pit of his stomach. He grabbed a shot glass off the table and knocked it back before his hand could shake. The grub tequila was a brutal blend that tasted like poison and burned all the way down, but it shook him online. “Come on.”

*Door staff are dead,* said Rose. *It’s a full team: carapace armour and heavy weapons. I think it’s a wipe mission, Sollux.* *Get out.*

He shuffled along the couch and around the table until he could stand. The spine pistol bumped against his ribs. *Fire exit?* he thought.

*Through the other doors. I’ll guide you.* *Move.*

He caught hold of Terezi’s wrist and tugged her in the right direction. “Don’t shoot anyone yet,” he said.

She gave him a look. “*Mr Captor, When Not To Shoot Someone is second week of Basic, just after first week, which is When To Shoot Someone – ”*
“Captor!” called a voice. “It’s Captor, right?”

Sollux turned and saw, with a lurch of horror, Boss Pazaak sprawled on his couch, one ringed hand raised in elegant greeting, the other curled round the stem of his glass. The blueblood in the dress was nibbling his ear.

“Uh. Hey, Pazaak. How’s it going, man?”

The five other trolls at the table – three guys, two girls, all wearing sharp black suits and sleek black surgical lenses like Terezi’s – regarded him with professional curiosity, taking note of which bits would come off most easily.

“This your new girl?” asked Pazaak, all friendly *let’s-catch-up* curiosity. Sollux remembered belatedly that the Nine Claws code put almost as much emphasis on courtesy and sociability as it did on torturing and killing. “Thought you were running around with that spooky chick from downtown? Come, sit, have a drink, both of you.” He gestured at the bottle on the chill plate, which smoked gently in the thick air of the bar. “This is some good shit, my friend.”

“Excuse me,” said Terezi clearly, and Sollux winced. “Is this your club, Mr Pazaak?”

The collective body language of the table rippled like fabric. One guy hunched forward a little. One girl seemed to relax, sinking down comfortably in her seat, which meant she had something heavy under the table. Six pairs of eyes fixed on Terezi. The blueblood, unperturbed, continued to nibble.

“That’s a funny thing to say, babe,” said Pazaak. “Ain’t my name on the door, is it?”

“Oh,” she said. “That’s a pity. I thought whoever owns the club would probably want to know that an Imperial cull team just set up shop in the lobby.”

The DJ’s instincts were immaculate: as Terezi said *lobby*, he cut the beat. Sollux heard chatter at the bar, yelps of laughter from the girls with the cocktails, a muffled cheer from the dancefloor. Pazaak leant forwards, shouldering the blueblood away, and said, “Now just what – ”

The drop hit like a piledriver, and the far doors exploded.

Terezi’s draw was extraordinary. Even from a shoulder holster, she’d flung the gun out to arm’s length and drawn a bead before the nearest Claw had cleared his pistol from the recesses of his expensive jacket. Sollux glimpsed her face – perfectly serene, the way he’d seen it at the villa, the face of a painter approaching fresh canvas – before she stitched three shots dismissively in the air and dropped left. He threw himself after her as the bar went up in a scything line of glass and screams and sawdust.

The carpet was sticky and smelt of beer. He rolled onto a shoulder and saw two Claws moving to block off their boss, a third toppling backwards onto the table, already spurting murky blood from a mess of holes. The first girl had cleared a combat shotgun, but was hesitating like she needed to aim. Terezi grabbed his collar as he tried to stumble upright and half-dragged him through the swing doors into the next room, where the dancefloor was a swirling mass of shrieking, terrified revellers. Half of them were so strung out on blue stars they probably hadn’t known what the fuck was going on *before* the shooting started. On the other side of the floor, lit up by pink spotlights, he could see a couple of armoured figures trying to push through the crowd: one of them hoisted a rifle and fired straight up, a staccato crackle which scattered chips off the ceiling and set off a fresh volley of screams. A big guy in a muscle vest ran straight at Terezi, eyes wide with drugs and panic, howling. She swung her gun hand, and he went down with a *crack* as his jaw broke.
“Fucking amateurs!” she yelled. “Get to the fire exit –”

He turned, and said, “Oh shit.”

The door to the fire exit was not hard to find: a helpful blue argon sign pointed it out. It stood open, and Sollux glimpsed a dimly-lit corridor beyond it, but not much else, because someone was standing in the doorway.

The new arrival was the height and dimensions of a tallish adult male troll, and yet was very clearly anything but. It had no horns, and two long triangles of orange glass where its eyes should be, and no other face at all. Its metal skin gleamed.

“Terezi –” he began.

The Strider raised its left arm like it was going to point at him, or give him a thumbs-up, but the fist stayed clenched. A barrel snapped up from a housing on the back of the hand, and everything vanished.

“Fuck!” said Sollux, and jerked to the side, and fell over onto something cool and squashy. It was terribly quiet all of a sudden. No screams, no gunshots, not even any music. Utter and disturbing silence. He opened his eyes.

“Oh, you’re kidding me,” he said in disbelief.

He was lying on his side on a pink inflatable airbed, looking out across a grey waste of untroubled ocean.

He rolled onto his back, and the girl from his dreams said, “Hello.”

She was dressed the same as before: purple swimming costume and a ribbon in her hair, sitting beside him with her knees drawn up and her arms wrapped round them. He noticed for the first time how small and stubby her claws were, like they hadn’t grown properly. She’d painted them glossy purple. Or perhaps they were like that naturally? Or perhaps naturally was a really stupid word to be throwing around, in the circumstances.

“I’m fucking dead,” he said, more to hear it aloud than anything. The sky above them was a leaden and disinterested grey.

She reached down, and traced one tiny claw along the line of his cheek. His skin prickled.

“No,” she said. “Not yet. You are about to be dead, which as a proposition is subtly but importantly different.”

“What, I’m bleeding out or something? You keeping my brain happy while the rest of me thrashes around on a shitty club carpet?”

“Nothing so predetermined.” She gave him a small, black smile. “A jacketed hollow-point round is currently travelling in a straight line towards the approximate centre of your forehead at eighteen hundred feet per second. This leaves you with a range of available options.”

Sollux blinked at her.

“What the Hell did you do? Stop time or something?”

“Not my department, I’m afraid. The adjustment is purely perceptual. The bullet is still travelling
very, very fast, but we are hiding in your brain, which is moving considerably faster.”

“How long have I got?”

“Subjectively speaking? A little under three minutes. Plenty of time.”

“Fuck.” He licked his lips. “What can I do?”

“You can’t do anything,” she said. “You are incapable of avoiding the bullet, and your control over your psionic abilities is not sufficient to halt its progress, especially not given the extensive neurological trauma you’ve already sustained. You are, in technical terms, fucked.”

“Okay, okay,” he said irritably. “I get it. Puny meatsack. What can you do?”

She gazed down at him, propping herself up on one white arm, and for a moment she looked almost sad. “I can save your life,” she said.

He let his head roll back and stared up at the sky again. There was nothing there. No moon, no clouds; no trace of texture or variation. It wasn’t really a sky at all, he thought: you just had to call it a sky because it was where the sky ought to be. It was an approximation of a sky. A place-holder. Something that was there just so there was something to be under.

“Nah,” he said. “I’m good.”

“I beg your pardon?”

He managed a grin, although it wasn’t a very good one. “C’mon, Rose,” he said, and looked at her. “Who are we kidding here? I’m in over my fucking head. I’m not cut out for this black ops shit. Running around blowing up helicopters and destabilising governments, I mean, fuck. What am I gonna do? Skim the Condesce’s bank details? I’m a hacker, for fuck’s sake. I sit at a rig and chug coffee and mess with people’s ice and some days I get paid for it.”

“Terezi seems to think you’re important to the plan.”

“Terezi doesn’t have the heart to tell me to fuck off. You heard her, right? She kept me alive at the villa for insurance. She didn’t know if she might end up needing a helm, so it made sense to keep hold of the one she had. But she can do the rest without me. She needs Vantas, for the Witch, and that’s it. I’m just going to get her killed.” He closed his eyes, and pictured the bullet, crawling closer by the artificial second. How far was it from his skull now? Two feet? Six inches? Maybe the tip was already making its first tiny dent in the skin of his forehead; maybe the skin was deforming frantically under the impact, trying to soak up all that energy without having to split. Would he feel it?

“Terezi – ” he said, and stopped. Then he blew out, and tried again. “Terezi’s amazing. I’ve never met anyone like her. I used to hang out with a rough crowd a couple of sweeps back, there was one cutter I thought must be the toughest motherfucker on Alternia bar none, she could shrug off a punch and put three holes in a playing card at forty feet and she drank grub whisky straight from the bottle. Terezi’d cut her throat and not even fucking notice. She’s like.” He swallowed. “She’s incredible. I don’t want her to end up fucking dead ‘cause she’s babysitting me.”

“Sollux,” said Rose. “You’re going to die.”

“I was always going to die,” he said wearily. “I dodged it once. Bought two more months, and all I did with ‘em was get drunk, take pills, and have fucking awful dreams.” He brought his hands up, locked his fingers, and cracked them decisively, the way he always did before a big run. “Nah. Thanks for the offer, but I’m out. It’s been fun.”
Rose looked down at him steadily for a couple of seconds. Then she uncoiled in place: reaching one arm across him, and at the same time rolling inwards so she was lying half on top of him on the airbed. Even in whatever fucked-up psychic virtuality they were currently inhabiting, this weird un-sky and this ocean he had never seen, he could feel the warmth of her body through his jeans. He thought for a moment of Aradia.

“Hm,” she said. “As perversely admirable as I find your decision, I’m afraid it’s unacceptable, Mr Captor.”

“The fuck?” he said, trying not to push up against her on instinct. He’d read that when your body knew it was going to die, it started trying to pail anything that moved: a spasmodic last-ditch attempt to preserve the signal. Still, popping a boner in the last few milliseconds before your brain exploded struck him as... inappropriate, somehow. Even a virtual boner.

“You are eating for two, these days,” she said, and her violet eyes gleamed. “Perhaps you overestimate my capacity for survival! I have transferred the paltry debris of my existence into your head, down to the last fragment. This is all I am, now. If you go, so do I.” She smiled. It wasn’t a very reassuring smile. “And I am not ready to go just yet.”

Then she lowered her head and kissed him.

It was a weird kiss. It seemed to happen on two levels at once. One part was more or less how he remembered kisses working: her cool face pressed up against his, her blunt little teeth closing delicately on his lower lip and the taste of something sweet and dark. But there was a new sensation too -- swirling and vertiginous, a tilting, high-building twitch in his mind that pushed his eyes wide and made him clutch for purchase at the plastic of the airbed. The air in his lungs seemed to swell, although he hadn’t breathed in.

From somewhere, he remembered how the streets smelt, after rain.

She pulled away a little, and said, almost against his mouth, “Sollux?” Then something slick and cold wrapped around his wrist, and he screamed.

It wasn’t the touch, or the chill; it was the needles, hundreds of them, bright and hot as fire, that wormed eagerly through the tissue of his skull and deep into his ruined brain. He was dimly conscious of a weight lifted and a warmth lost as Rose rolled off him, and the un-sky was black, now, less of a sky than ever, black and wet and dripping fat gobbets like tar that splashed into his eyesockets and ran dribbling down to fuel the inferno. There was thunder, somewhere, or laughter. It wasn’t friendly either way.

“No,” Rose was saying, miles away, “no, please –”

He was blind, blind and gone and choking, pulled apart into a thousand sticky chunks of the meat he’d always loathed, a thousand squishy crystals leaking yellow glue, spaced out on a slide, ripped clear and scattered across God’s chopping board: flesh pixels, data packets, each one charged with all the code for a brand new Sollux that would end up just like the same old Sollux because what the fuck could you do?

“Please, he doesn’t – it’s not fair – I’m sorry –”

It was a waste, really. Any way you looked at it. A waste of good atoms. Those things don’t form cheap, and then we let them just stick together and get driven around the place, every day, by morons. And the morons in their atom suits burn kilocalorie after kilocalorie getting more atoms, putting them in, spitting them out, ensuring a continual throughflow that changes nothing, achieves nothing; just dirty water down a metal pipe, running ’til it stops.

“Please – ”

You want to do some good in the world? You want to make a difference? Stop fucking, stop fighting, stop talking. You move things around and you call it change. You put your back to entropy and then you grin like a tourist, smug thumbs-up for the camera, look at me, doing my bit! Give it up. Stones only fall one way. Make yourself art, and die fulfilled.

You up and changed your mind, son?, said a cruel voice, very close to his ear. You ready to get your motherfucking MIRACLES on?

He wrenched his eyes open and spat sludge. The Cullpit. Everyone dull and slow, drifting. He had one arm held up, palm out, fingers spread, and the slim nub of the hollow-point hung immobile.

The Strider fired ten more shots, adjusting its aim each time on a preset pattern designed to target his weakpoints, which he no longer had. He saw the bullets swim towards him. They might hurt, so he stopped them. He closed the hand and they fell like fruit.

The Strider’s eyes flashed. He saw its options branch: lasers? Flamethrower? Flechettes? Close combat? It was a lovely thing, all light and edges. He held it up in the air to look at it better, and then peeled it apart, stripping away the plating and the tubing and the ducting, stringing out chips and capacitors like necklace threads, cracking shells to reveal the delicate microcircuitry inside. Beautiful. Too ordered to stand: an insult to the Plan. But beautiful. It watched him dispassionately until he spread his hands and fanned the head into ten thousand components, and that was beautiful too.

The crowd was watching, mouths wide, faces turned up to him. They didn’t know he could do this. Unleash, little Captor! Show them what you really are. They think you’re another jockey at another desk, tapping keys. They cannot stop you, they cannot hurt you. End it. Take everything from everything. The blood of reality sings in your wires like a storm. Their last words will be thank you.

Guns stuttered. Soldiers, gangsters, screaming, firing, firing, pistols and rifles and shotguns and machine guns and wild-eyed fear of the void. Power sluiced down his arms like rain. He gestured and they tore, their blood hanging in the air like their bullets, coloured drops and metal drops all stirred in together. Lines of darkness squirmed outwards from the tip of each finger, probing and licking at the walls, the ceiling, the flailing joins and seams of the crowd dense with sweat and horror –

Terezi Pyrope, small and sharp, her red lenses fixed as though she could see him. An attachment; an old thing put aside. We put everything aside, in the end! If we do not, it is taken from us.

The finale, said the voices. Were there a hundred, or was it the same voice a hundred times? Bring down the house. That is how a fine show should conclude.

I don’t –

You will not be harmed! Bricks. Bricks and stone and metal. Fifty tons, a thousand tons, it is all matter and no matter. All of it is yours now. You can split the planet, if you push. A little tower is less than a kiss on your holy cheek.
I don’t think –

No. Not now. To think is to fight the tide. Raise your hands, magus; act.

He dragged his right hand inward. It was like moving against a magnet. The bones of his arm shook until it felt like they would crack, and his fingers trembled, and every muscle burned, and he pulled it in and further in until he could scrape metal with the tips of his claws.

The ceiling split across. Dust rained down. The crowd was packed against the exits, twisting and trampling. Only Terezi stood quite still, hand on the hilt of her cane, the only living body on the dancefloor, waiting for him.

I don’t – think – you were listening, he thought grimly. And he hauled the spine pistol up from the cold hollow in his jacket. A criss-crossed girder fell in slow motion, crumpling to the floor, its spotlights exploding in great shower-bursts of yellow sparks. The mirror-ball, of all things, shattered. The power surged out of him, slopping at the walls, longing to feel them give and rupture the way everything else would soon –

He jammed the pistol’s snub nose up under his chin, and saw her mouth open.

That’s Terezi, he thought. No-one fucking hurts her. Not ever. We clear?

She was yelling something. He pulled the trigger.
Terezi felt him fall. The air flexed, and her ears popped as the pressure on them vanished. That just made the screaming worse.

She started forwards, wildly, and Coolkid’s voice said *It’s okay* –

She dropped to her knees on the laminate and grabbed at random, found a shoulder, an ear, a skull. Lots of skull! The correct amount of skull, round and fragile under tangled hair, no pulp or torn edges. The other hand smeared his face and came away sticky.


She groped round carefully under his chin until she found the needle – a stiff two-inch hair of cool metal jutting from the stubbled skin just above the curve of his throat. She yanked it out close to the base, feeling blood bead against the side of her thumb, and flicked it away. Then she worked one arm between his back and the floor, and hooked the other under the slumped arch of his knees. He lifted like a bundle of bamboo canes. He was definitely going to have to start eating more.

*Kay. Fire door’s straight ahead, just start walking.*

*Are there any more robots?,* she thought.

*Yes, he said. I am piloting you towards a fucking Terminator T-1000, because my sense of humour is fatally defective. Just move.*

Carrying Sollux Captor was not actually very easy. He was light, but there was a lot of him, and he stuck out at inconvenient angles. She had to turn awkwardly to fit him through the door, and she managed to bump his head against the wall of the corridor twice, wincing each time. *Snap the legs off,* said Coolkid helpfully, *we can stick ‘em back on later,* and she bit her lip for want of a free hand.

At the top of two exhausting and mildly terrifying flights of stairs – the badly-distributed weight kept threatening to overbalance her, so she had to lean hard forwards like she was climbing into a wind, her arms locked tight and uncomfortably far apart round his skinny ribcage and rubbish thighs – she set him down gingerly, dragged her arm across her sweaty brow, and drew her gun.

*Mercy killing,* said Coolkid, in solemn tones. *It’s for the best, babe. He’ll never race again. This way we can sell him off for glue.*

*Shut UP!,* she thought. *I need to clear the street.*

*It’s clear,* he said. *There’s a groundcab idling thirty feet left of the exit, no eyes, no guns. Won’t last, though, so move your ass.*

*Where the Hell is the perimeter?*

...*Yeah, he said. Your boy there punched some kind of fucking Super Saiyan death beam straight up through three floors of nightclub when he pulled the trigger. Must have burnt out somewhere in the lower atmosphere. We’ve got what the military calls a piss window, which is the window you get when the other guys are all busy pissing themselves.*

She sighed, and dragged Sollux up again. *Standards have really slipped!,* she thought, and kicked the exterior door open.
By the time they reached the groundcab – easier moving in the open, now Sollux’ ridiculous legs had space to flop and dangle – she had noticed something disturbing, which was that he was cold. The morning air was oppressively hot: her shirt was clammy within twenty paces, sweat crawled on her forehead, and her back and hunched shoulders felt like someone was turning a blowtorch on them. But none of the heat came from Sollux. At one point she stopped to make sure he was breathing, which he was: she could feel the slow press and fall of his ribs against hers. But he wasn’t warm, like he had been in the bunker, that nice comforting stay-in-the-cocoon-all-day-talking-sleepily warmth she had determinedly not thought about since. When the wing door hissed up and she bundled him into the back of the cab, which smelt of cheap plastic and old cigarettes, she pressed a palm to his brow and swore: it was as cold as if he’d been out in a hailstorm.

“Plrrzz stvrtz yrdvchtvrtrzzzzzz,” said the cab’s melodic tones.

“What?” she said.

Oh shit, said Coolkid. Okay. Screens are all fucked too. Must have been some kind of EMP.

“Navcon?”

Blind. Holy shit! I think she took out every eye in range. He sounded suddenly proud. Fucking typical. She always liked suicide plays. We’re off the radar.

She fanned herself with one hand. “But the cab won’t move.”

Yeah, it will. The door opened.

“Doesn’t matter. I can’t interface without a helmsman.”

What am I, chopped liver? Break this thing open.

She patted sweaty palms along the slope of the front panel until she met a raised edge, got her claws under it, and wrenched. Inside her fingers found a tangle of wiring.


It came free with a tiny click. She worked up its length with thumb and foreclaw until she found the cool metal of a jack.

Plug yourself in. Don’t worry, I can half-ass it.

“Reassuring,” she said, and tugged on the wire until a decent length had unspooled. Then she sat with her back to the cab’s front bulkhead and pushed the plug into her free cortical socket. She twitched as it went home, expecting some awful vault into metaconsciousness, but in fact all that happened was the engines came online with a scratchy whirring sound.

Fuck yes, said Coolkid, I’m a car. All my Goddamn dreams coming true at once today, I get to haul a nerd up eight hundred steps and then I’m fucking Bumblebee –

Drive!, she thought.

Yes’m, Miss Daisy, he said, and the cab jolted forwards. Terezi braced herself against the bulkhead, with her boots against the seat opposite, and reached for Sollux’ limp hand. It felt like it had been dunked in ice water.

Take an evasive pattern, she thought sternly.
Teach your grandmother to suck eggs, he said. Or, yeah. Teach your egg to suck grandmothers, or something.

* * *

With the galaxy’s most dangerous battlefield AI at the virtual wheel, the cab took a route so convoluted even Terezi almost lost track of it. They drove for nearly fifteen minutes, trending generally towards the city outskirts. She sat in the chilly wash of the air-con and memorised distances and turnings, and all the time Sollux grew colder and colder.

They stopped at last, and Coolkid said, This’ll do, I reckon. Jack me out.

She eased the plug free from her neck and the engines died back down to a faint hum. The door gasped open, and hot soupy air swirled in from the street.

Where are we?

Picked a skep at random, he said. Pulled it out of the cab’s nav banks. Heuristics tags were ‘cheap’, ‘very cheap’, ‘no stars’, and ‘no questions asked’. Looks like the kind of place you can turn up with a couple of knife wounds and a head in a bag and the super just asks if you need a towel.

Excellent, she thought. That means I might not have to kill anyone.

It was hard getting Sollux out of the cab, because she could no longer touch his skin: it burnt. Even through the jacket and the thick denim of his jeans it was like carrying a sack full of ice. When her hand accidentally brushed the bare seam between his belt and the hem of his shirt, she yelped out loud and nearly dropped him. He’d also developed a new smell: salt and old water, like boat-steps in a dockyard.

She pushed the door open with his knees and Shouldered her way inside.

Lobby, came Coolkid’s reassuring assessment. One, no prox. Shotgun strapped under the main desk, four seconds to clear. Mid-size. Desk fifteen feet ahead, door thirteen left, closed. Girl at the desk hasn’t even looked up yet. Greenblood, I reckon. Tiny, loads of hair, big-ass horns, reading – holy shit, is she reading a porn mag? Nice, he finished admiringly.

Terezi took a few steps forward and let the door thump shut behind her.

“Yo,” said a bored-sounding female voice. “Help you at all?”

“Good morning!” said Terezi brightly in the right direction. “My matesprit is narcoleptic and picked an extremely inopportune moment to fall asleep. The car is mostly undamaged, but we cannot travel any further today, as we are eloping from the convent where I took holy orders and I do not know how to drive.” She’d been in places like this: sometimes they gave you a discount if your story was funny enough. “Do you happen to have a cell free? Ground level, for preference.”

“Yeah, shit,” said the super. A chair creaked. “Dude doesn’t look well. He’s not gonna die on the premises, right? I hate the paperwork.”

“Mother Superior told me it is impossible to die of narcolepsy,” replied Terezi firmly. “Unless you work with heavy machinery.”

There was the clatter of a drawer and some shuffling. “Double cell’s two cee a day, sopor’s included. I’ll put you in twelve. We don’t do food but there’s a coffee machine if you need it. You want any sex parasites? Nookworm’s a cee deposit, refunded at the end of your stay.”
“Thanks,” said Terezi, and reached out for where the card should be, “we brought our own.”

* * *

The super was as good as her word. Cell twelve was a long walk from the lobby, but there were no ladders. Terezi put down her burden, flapped her arms a couple of times to shake off the tingling, and swiped the card through the reader. On the fourth swipe the hydraulics creaked and huffed in protest and the door opened.

Classic, said Coolkid, as she crouched and dragged Sollux over the door-sill by the back of his jacket. Cocoon, shower slab, AV screen. They even threw in a couple of clothes hooks.

“Luxury,” she said out loud, and the door grumbled shut behind them. She squatted on her haunches, the tips of her horns pressing very lightly against the smooth upper curve of the cell, and breathed for a few seconds. Cheap sopor and industrial-strength surfactants, the sharp scoured tang of hospitals, and lingering beneath it the old sour smell you could never quite drive out from places like this, where people had lived briefly and intensively. There was a skep like this for every story in the city; they weren’t the sorts of places you booked for a relaxing weekend away, to see the sights and catch up with your reading. They were the places you found yourself at the end of one or other road. You locked yourself in a cell like this to fuck, commit a crime, or die. Often all three in succession. Sometimes all three at once.

She thought: Alright! I am officially open to suggestions.

Get him in the slime, said Coolkid.

That won’t warm him up.

Nah, but it might cool him down. Psychosuppressant, right? He’s kicking out some fuckawful psychic mojo right now. You need to get that shit under control before everyone in the building does a Mars Attacks.

This was alarming information. She hauled Sollux a little further into the cell until he was slumped, partly curled round himself, on the smooth dished plastic of the shower slab. Then she grabbed one limp arm and started tugging at the cuff of his jacket.

Whoa, whoa, said Coolkid in alarm. What’s the deal?

He only has one set of clothes!, she thought, and bent the arm carefully clear of the sleeve. Why did he have to be so spindly? And a goldblood, to boot, so his bones would snap like those complimentary restaurant grubsticks she always liked to bite in half. I don’t want to get them all messy.

Okay, hold up. We’re not legit about to strip this dude, are we. Literally nobody needs to see that shit.

The rest of the jacket was much easier once one arm was freed. She threw it into the corner and patted down his stomach until she found his belt-buckle.

Good job I’m blind, then, she thought cheerfully.

Oh my fucking God. I’m undressing a guy. This – look, I’m protesting in the strongest fucking possible terms here, okay? If anyone asks, this was completely your idea. Is it even still gay if I’m a girl? This shit wasn’t in the playbook.

The jeans were loose-fitting, so all she really had to do was grab the cuffs and pull. The T-shirt was
the hardest part; she had to lift him almost into a sitting position, propped against the curved wall of
the cell, and at one point she was sure she’d dislocated his shoulder. Matters were made worse by the
awful razor-edged cold of his skin. The slightest touch with her hand made her hiss between her
teeth. In the end, though, she managed to drag it up and over his head, where it snagged briefly on
his horns.

Then she paused.

Stop, said Coolkid. Stop. I’m flat out begging you here, girl.

Yes, she thought. Mr Captor is a very private person. It wouldn’t be right.

The cocoon was the long, shallow tray-pattern common to most skeps and cheap hotels. To get him
into it she had to hold him by the arms and drag him along the narrow sill to the left, which involved
crouching and shuffling awkwardly backwards with one horn scraping the roof. She couldn’t touch
him for more than a second, so she wrapped his shirt round his wrists like improvised handcuffs and
held onto that. When he was stretched out on the sill, she folded his arms back by his sides, put her
boot against his shoulder, and pushed gently. There was a thick splosh and a slopping noise as he
rolled in, unresisting. She patted his face to make sure he was the right way up. He was almost too
tall for the cocoon: his head was propped up on the edge of the tank, but that was okay, since she
wasn’t sure submerging him was a great idea right now. Instead, she sat cross-legged at the head end
and scooped up a double cupped handful of slippery sopor. It was barely above room temperature –
the heating element must be a piece of shit – but to her chilled fingers it felt as blessedly warm as a
mug of grub tea. She hoped it might feel nice for him, too, somehow.

She hesitated. Then, awkwardly, she let the sopor dribble from her hands down over his head, and
began to massage it tentatively into his hair.

What’s up?, said Coolkid.

Nothing’s up, she thought.

You’re blushing.

I am not blushing!

Babe, I’m the majority shareholder in all your nerve endings. You’re blushing like a motherfucker
here. Call out the fire trucks, ’cause we got a raging Goddamn inferno in the face district and we
ain’t had rain for ten days. What’s the story?

She sighed, and smeared a wet lick of hair down along the ridge of cold bone behind his ear. “It’s
nothing,” she said. “What I am currently doing is very... symbolic, for a troll. It has a certain amount
of cultural freight attached.”

Rubbing spunk all over a coma patient?, Coolkid asked skeptically.

She gathered another handful from the tank and slathered it on, tracing circles on his frozen scalp
with the sticky pads of her fingers, helplessly careful of her claws in his hair. “Most trolls,” she said,
feeling a need to keep this vocal and controlled, “do not like to sleep fully submerged. It is perfectly
safe, but waking up submerged can be a shock, and it freaks a lot of people out. I did not like it
either, before I lost my eyes.” She scraped the edge of her hand along the high curve of Sollux’s
forehead. “So the last thing a troll does, before sleeping, is to coat their face and head with sopor. It is
a very intimate act, and there is only one other person you would normally allow to do it – “

Ohhh. The voice sounded almost smug. I get it. This is a moirail thing, huh?
“It is about warding off nightmares,” she said quietly, and slicked the slimy hair flat along the top of his skull. “It is one of the moirail things. And I have never done it before.”

There was a silence.

*Look, in my culture, a shitty motel is actually kind of traditional for your first time,* Coolkid said.

*It’s not that,* she thought. *It’s... complicated.* And all of a sudden she was desperately, deeply unhappy. The combat calm she’d been holding since before the Cullpit unstrung on her, and she felt almost sick with misery. *Coolkid,* she thought, *what’s happening? What’s wrong with him? Is he going to die?*

*He’s not gonna die,* the voice said, but it sounded worried too. *I’m just not sure he’s gonna wake up either.* No lie, TZ, this is some pretty serious shit. If it hadn’t been for that fucking asshole bag of bolts at the club –

*Do you know what happened? Is it something to do with the Seer?*

Coolkid sighed. *Yeah. Shit. I’m really sorry, babe, it’s all Rose. She’s done this before. I thought she was over it.*

Terezi dunked one hand back in the tank, and then withdrew it and shook it clean. Even the slime had turned cold, now. Sollux must be refrigerating it. *When?*

*Long time ago.* He made a little snorting sound in her head. *Fuck of a long time ago. Fuck of a long way away, too.* Rose was – well, she wasn’t a psychic, we didn’t have them, but she had mind powers kind of like his. She got set up by this douchebag we were fighting, and she went sort of crazy.

*Crazy like –*

*Crazy like this,* he agreed. *Only worse.* Black magic and tentacles from literal Hell to metaphorical breakfast. *It was like Doc Frankenstein ran out of body parts and moved shop downtown to the all-you-can-eat lunchtime sushi buffet. Like a My Chemical Romance video being re-enacted by a bunch of angry squid. Just an incredible amount of bullshit, basically.*

*What happened?*

*I stopped her.*

*How?*

*Yeah,* he said. *I don’t actually know.* She was going fucking nuts, throwing shit at other shit, and by ‘shit’ I mean, like, ‘enormous stone temples’, and ‘mountains’, and, you know, ‘planets’, that kind of stuff. She tried to throw some shit at me, and I was just like, Rose, fucking quit it and stop being such a Goddamned lunatic. And she did.

Terezi grinned.

*What?*

*Nothing,* she thought. *I see what she meant, in the bunker.*

*No, Jesus,* he said impatiently. *it wasn’t any quadrant bullshit. Just, like. We were always kind of like that. She’d go off the deep end, and I’d be like, yo, calm your gothy tits, Lalonde, take five and*
pound some AJ.

You are not remotely helping your case!

Look, it's not the point. The point is, I've got no fucking idea what I actually did. I didn't pull any power-of-Christ-compels-thee stuff, I just pretty much yelled at her. He sounded disconsolate. So I'm not much help right now.

Terezi dipped two fingers in the sopor and then whipped them hastily clear.

Damn, said Coolkid. He's going to freeze that stuff solid, at this rate.

“Unlikely,” she said vaguely, “at least for a while. Sopor’s freezing point is negative thirty.” And then it hit her.

Coolkid, she thought. When you yelled at the Seer. At Rose. What exactly was happening at the time?

Man, he said. It was a Hell of a long time ago. I was on LOFAF, I think? Trying to find Jade, and then – yeah, that's right. She turned up doing her I-am-become-Death bit, and we duelled for a while. Then she yanked up like a metric fucktonne of rock and made like she was going to drop it on me. I kind of panicked, 'cause I was pretty messed up by this point and I wasn't sure I could cut through that much stuff at short range, and started yelling all YO WHAT THE FUCK. I swear I'd been yelling at her for like the last fifteen minutes and she hadn't given two shits, but all of a sudden –

Terezi shrugged the jacket off her shoulders and let it slide down her arms. Then she grabbed the hem of her T-shirt and rolled it decisively up and over her head.

Uh, he said. I don't think I was naked. I mean, yeah, fair point, that would bring pretty much any lady back to the light side, but –

She kicked her way inelegantly free of her jeans, banging her head on the roof as she did so, and reached back to unfasten her bra.

Yo, seriously, he said. This is the worst-timed striptease I ever fucking saw. Dude's at freezing point, if you give him a boner it'll probably just snap clean off.

Sorry about this, Coolkid, she thought. But we don’t have any mountains. And she set her jaw and slid into the cocoon.

The scream tore out of her on reflex, from somewhere deep and rough in her lungs. White fire burst behind her eyes like she could see again. It took whole seconds before she felt the cold: at first it was all just burning, a sheet of flame she’d fallen through. Her muscles wrenched tight and locked; her bulge shrank flat against her groin. When the cold finally seeped through, she started to shiver so hard it made audible ripples in the slime. The tank was deeper than she’d realised, a foot or maybe more, and to her flailing, terrified hindbrain it seemed like a bottomless well of ice. She fought a stupid urge to clutch and claw at the sides like she was drowning.

Fuck!, roared the voice in her head. She’d never, in all the times they’d been hurt, heard Coolkid show it too. Six months back she’d been shot in the leg and as she’d rolled under a desk, wild with pain, he’d drawled Well, that sucked. She’d assumed he could just turn off sensations he didn’t want. Apparently not. She felt a silly rush of gratitude.

Are you crazy?!, he bellowed. Jesus fuck, get the Hell out!
She ignored him, and half-crawled, half-swam through the freezing slime until her head bumped Sollux’s shoulder. His skin was no warmer than the sopor, but at least it was skin. She forced herself to press her cheek against it – like holding her face against a block of ice, a new, fierce agony – and said, “Mr Captor.” Then a spasm hit her jaw and her teeth rattled like she’d been punched. Clamping it down, she said, “Mr Captor, I think you can hear me.”

It would have been nice if he’d said “‘Course I fucking can.” He didn’t.

She forced her mind back, instead: anything to get it away from her body. She remembered Alssin, at the front of the class, pacing. An Imperial mechanic is taught two things: the science of maintaining the Empire’s hardware, and the art of dismantling the enemy’s. She’d been a tealblood, like Terezi. Short hair and a morbid obsession with signal transduction. To be a Legislacerator is to be a mechanic of the flesh! We will teach you to maintain your body, because your body belongs to the Empire. And we will teach you to take apart a body that is not yours.

Another shudder ripped through her from the feet up. She clutched onto Sollux, which didn’t help at all. Think, think, what had she said –

She ground her mouth open again, fighting the tremors. “Mr Captor,” she said, keeping it as clear and level as she could, “My body is ninety percent immersed in liquid which is both psychoactive and chilled to significantly below zero degrees. It is important you understand that I have between four and six minutes to live.”

Get – the fuck – out, said Coolkid, tight and strained.

She remembered Vienna, then, by accident. Vienna on the bank of the river in the dead of winter, in fatigue breeches and a tight black vest, her shadow stark and jagged on the snow, breath trailing in clouds. The shattered ice around them lit up sugar yellow, bobbing in the arc-lamps. Alright, cadets! In this hand – and she’d raised her left hand – I hold a Legislacerature-approved regulation stopwatch. In this hand – the right – I hold a Legislacerature-approved regulation compact double-barrelled plasma pistol, the new model with the heatsink that doesn’t suck so hard. I have gone beyond regulations and modified the latter so it discharges both barrels at once, at full intensity. It will be our little secret – and she’d grinned, the grin they’d all have died three times to drag out of her, the grin Terezi’d spent the next three sweeps trying to get right. When I say go, I press the button, and you go under. Any head pops up above the surface before this – the left hand again – shows one-zero-zero, I torch it clean off at the neck with this. The right hand. At this range I can’t miss. Hell, at this range you couldn’t miss, and you assholes can fucking miss anything! Be pretty ironic to die by fire in a frozen river, right? Go, little quackbeasts, go!

Terezi had managed ninety-four seconds, and won the grin for it. She found later that no-one else but Vriska had made it past seventy. Vriska had surfaced on ninety-two.

She’d been cold, then. So cold she’d been sure she would die. She was colder now.

TZ – Terezi –

She flopped a hand free of the sopor and managed to get it limply against Sollux’s face. She patted his cheek, one, two, three times.

Was the sopor warming up around her? Had the heating element tried to compensate? She was starting to feel sleepy. That was potentially bad. Alssin again, stern: the reactions in your body run on heat. If they lack heat, they cannot occur. They are important reactions! If they slow down, you are in trouble. If they stop, you are probably dead. Do not let this happen.
Slowing down. Yeah. She guessed she might be slowing down. Things weren’t as clear as they’d been a few seconds ago. But at least she’d stopped shivering! It was nice having Sollux to hold. Was it meant to be nice? It probably wasn’t meant to be nice. Ninety-four seconds. Had it been ninety-four seconds? Had she beaten her record? How many ninety-four seconds was four to six minutes? Did ninety-four even go into four to six? Sollux would have known. Maybe he did know.

Coolkid had stopped shouting; stopped talking, too.

“Mr Captor,” she murmured against his shoulder. “How many times does ninety-four go into four to six?”

Something exploded. There was a surge of air and noise and she rose, flung upwards, something gripped painfully tight around her shoulders, wet slopping sounds and drops of freezing sopor spattering her face, and she was rolling onto smooth plastic and the air was warm –

“- fucking idiot!” someone was shouting. “System, passcode, six six nine four two, go to voice activation, acknowledge!”

Voice protocols not available to user level – said a female voice calmly.

“Literally fuck your user levels! Master override, eight five eight five zyr, full parameter bypass and isolate! Cell – shit, where the fuck are we –”

“Twelve,” she said dreamily, and curled round her knees.

“Cell twelve, air temperature to maximum, cocoon temperature to maximum, water temperature to thirty-five degrees, shower on!”

It started to rain.

Terezi lay on her side, and then on her back, and let warm water fall on her, which it agreeably continued to do. She opened her mouth and drank some of it. Just when she was getting really comfortable, arms wrapped round her – warm arms – and dragged her away, but before she could complain she found herself sinking into something just as warm but stickier. Sopor! But sopor at what felt like trap temperature. It was gorgeous. She stretched luxuriantly and wiggled her toes. Then she snuggled up against the person who was still holding her.

“I didn’t know cocoons could run this hot,” she said, a little slurred.

“They fucking can’t,” said Sollux Captor. “I overrode the buffers. Don’t tell the manager.”

“How did you get all those access codes?”

“I don’t know if you know this,” he said seriously, “but I’m kind of a big deal.”

That got her. She rolled half-onto him and started to giggle, and he said “Hey,” and prodded her in the ribs, and that only made her laugh harder. Just when she was calming down and taking deep breaths, an irritable voice in her head said All your plans fucking suck. I knew I should have married an accountant, and it set her off all over again, until she was light-headed with hilarity and hiccuping weakly against Sollux’s shoulder.

They lay in warm silence for a while, until she said, “Mr Captor, I have a confession.”

“Yeah?” he said.
“I am afraid my feelings for you have moved beyond the boundaries of the strictly professional.”

“Ms Pyrope,” he said wearily, “if I get any paler for you I’ll be invisible in heavy snow.”

Something small and delighted happened in her stomach.

“Well,” she said. “I was going to skirt around it more, but, um. Yes.”

“Out of interest,” he said, “what the fuck were you going to do if I didn’t wake up?”

She considered this. “Die, I suppose.”

He sighed, and then she felt a hot trickling sensation on her scalp, and long, careful fingers began to comb sopor slowly through her hair.

She slept for a couple of hours, and didn’t dream.

* * *

By the time they were both awake again, her brain felt a lot clearer, and with the clarity came a bleak awareness.

“We are sort of in trouble,” she told him.

“No shit.”

“Good news: when you blew up the Cullpit you apparently set off some form of sophisticated EMP. We can assume we were not tracked to this skep, or it would have been nuked from orbit by now. Bad news: they won’t underestimate us again. The next time they find us, it’s going to hurt.”

“Last time wasn’t exactly fun,” he pointed out. “It gets worse, though.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” He shifted against her slightly. “I’ve lost Rose.”

She felt Coolkid twitch, somehow, in the back of her mind. “How do you mean?”, she said cautiously.

“I’ve lost her. No contact. She was there, and then shit got melodramatic, and I got this whole new bunch of asshole voices telling me what to do. Everything went kind of black and wet for a while, and then you snapped me out of it, and I’ve been lying here trying to reach her but there’s nothing. Either she’s gone really quiet for some reason, or she’s not in my head anymore.”

I’m sorry!, she thought miserably.

Nah, it’s fine, he said, but she knew his voice better than anyone’s and he sounded just a semitone too breezy. She’s been on this ride before. Probably just off somewhere pulling herself together, topping up her lipstick, that kind of thing.

Out loud, she said, “Is that going to affect the plan?”

He shifted again. “It’s going to make it a fuck of a lot harder. I was counting on her to help with the tricky stuff. On my own... yeah.”

She bit her lip and said, “It is even worse than that, I’m afraid.”
The way he exhaled, his chest falling suddenly, suggested he’d seen this one coming. “My bag’s still at the hotel.”

“Yes. With your rig. I’d try and retrieve it, but they’ll have locked that place up so tight air won’t be able to get in. I don’t think we can take the risk.”

“Oh!” he said, and gave an unexpected cough of laughter. “Shit, no, that’s not even what I meant. I can get a rig from anywhere, you can pick one up for twenty cees if you don’t mind it being made of cardboard and running like a dead dog. Guess what else was in my bag.”

An echo of the earlier cold slid down her spine. “Oh, my God,” she said. “The mind honey.”

“Bam.” He sounded grimly satisfied, now, as if he took a kind of fatalistic pleasure in embracing the full scope of catastrophe. “I left it in the room because we were heading into Low City and, hilariously, I thought it would be safer there.”

She started thinking. Maybe three hours since the Cullpit. Assume they hadn’t bothered to lock down the hotel until after the cull team fumbled the ball. That meant there was a good chance the bag was still on site. If they took it into custody it would be lost, but if she moved right away –

“No,” he said firmly. “No fucking way. You said it yourself.”

“They probably haven’t set up a full cordon yet –”

“No. It’s a dumb risk. Even if you got in and out without any holes in you, it’d just start up the chase again. Right now you reckon they have no fucking idea where we are, yeah? We need it to stay that way as long as possible. We keep all the way low and we don’t pick fights.”

“Shit,” she said, and pressed her forehead in against the slope of his chest. “There must be honey somewhere else in the city, it’s black market gold –”

“Yeah, so every milligram’s being sat on by some big-name crimelord. You’re not going to score it on a street corner, Terezi, if it was that easy every fucking hacker in town would have tried it by now and we’d have a lot more dead hackers.” He ran a thumb down the back of her neck. “You’re not going up against the fucking Nine Claws just to get me my fix.”

She curled her lips back off her teeth. “They will be another few claws down by the time I am done with them.”

“Nope!” And to her astonishment and slight embarrassment, he reached the hand round and unconcernedly papped her, his palm still damp from the sopor where it patted her cheek. “Same result. I think someone’s probably going to notice if a big heap of dismembered mobsters starts obstructing traffic across three lanes on the Low City intersection.”

“Maryam said, if you didn’t get honey, you’d die.”

“Maryam was working for Serket, who had a vested fucking interest in keeping me chained to the stem roof. It’s just a drug. I’ve come off drugs before.”

Terezi cupped her left palm against his throat so she could feel the pulse tick. His skin seemed hotter than ever, now. “You’re lying to make me feel better, aren’t you.”

“Yep. I’m fucked. But we’re fucked anyway. I mean, what’s plan B here?” She felt the brush of his fingertips along her upper arm. “We can’t run.”
“No. We would be dead within days. Hunting fugitives is what the Empire does best.”

“Right. So either we just lie in this cocoon until a Strider kicks the door in, or we make sure these twenty-four-bit fucks remember who we were.”

She let her head rest on his shoulder for a few moments more, silent, knowing that the next move would be irreversible. She had never shied from such moves before. It was how you won the game. While everyone around you wavered and doubted and undid and redid and failed to commit – flinched to pull the trigger, drove the blade only half-way home – you saw your path as nothing more than a series of steps, and you walked it. It gave you an advantage. Crossroads are the gods’ culling floors, and nothing kills like indecision.

_The Legislacerator has no moirail_. They’d learnt it on the first day. _You will take lovers, red and black, and break them to your will. But pity only dulls a weapon’s edge. Can a sword soothe? Can a rifle be consoled? We shall burn your fear from you. We shall take the parts of you that touch and kiss and hold, and we shall wash them away in blood. The Legislacerator has no moirail, because the Legislacerator has no heart. You owe your body to the Empire, and the Empire will collect._

_Death is your moirail now, children. Only she can take away your pain._

Sollux was warm and his ribs jutted up against the skin of his chest and she felt his every breath as though it came from her own lungs. She saw the path now as clear as ever she had. But for the first time, she did not want to walk it.

“I am glad we got this,” she said, “at least.”

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “Me too. Best-paying job I ever took.”

She stretched up to kiss his stubbled jaw, gently, once. Then she said, “What do you need?”

“Coffee,” he said, after a few seconds’ consideration. “Cigarettes. And a rig. Anything you can find. The faster the better, but if it’s got a net jack I can use it.”

“How long will it take?”

“Hard to say.” She heard him scratching at his chin. “I can re-use a lot of the stuff I put together at the villa, which’ll save some time. It’s all good code, it just needs tweaking. The hard part’s going to be making it look like a real attack. Autonomic processes have some pretty distinctive signatures. They’d fool a corporate network, but against this kind of shit they’ll be transparent. I’m going to need to write a whole bunch of subroutines just to pour enough noise into the system that Condy’s ice won’t take one look and piss all over it. I’ve got a thing with randomised feedback I really want to try, though – ”

She laughed.

“– what?”

“Nothing. It’s like the villa, is all. I would sit on my stool, and you would talk very fast to me about things I don’t understand.”

“I didn’t talk that much!”

“Sollux, you talked _all the time_. You would not shut up. Every time you buzzed out I got a lecture about nullrouting or fraggle attacks. I swear once or twice you were actually talking and drinking coffee simultaneously.”
“Fuck. Seriously? You should have hit me with something.”

“I liked it. I like people who talk. Silence is boring. What’s your best guess?”

“If I’m lucky,” he said, after a second’s hesitation, “I can get the whole thing done in two nights. If I hit a glitch it could be three. If I hit a lot of glitches, maybe four, but if it’s four I’ll be pissed off.”

“If it’s four you’ll be comatose,” she said. “Can you even last for two?”

“You forgot my secret weapon,” he replied, and she felt him sit up a little. A muscle tightened near his collarbone. There was some shuffling, and a flump of heavy fabric, and he swore under his breath. Then she heard foil crinkle.

“No,” she said.

“Yep,” he said. “I’ve got a whole strip of reds, and half a packet of blues. Wonder what happens if I take one of each? Never tried that before.”

“Sollux – ”

“I’m going all out, Terezi,” he said, his voice taut with an awful tremor of excitement, and she realised that Sollux Captor regarded inevitable death as nothing more than a time limit with the safety off. “Big finish. In five nights’ time there’ll be nothing in my pan but chunky mustard soup. Good thing about driving off a cliff is you don’t have to worry about the fucking upholstery any more.”

“If you hadn’t been so scrawny,” she said sadly, “you would have made an excellent Legislacerator.” Then she remembered something. “At the club. Did you know your pistol was carrying blue rounds?”

“Hell no,” he said. “I was sure I’d loaded red.”

* * *

They stayed in the cell for three nights straight, and Sollux slowly died.

He sat cross-legged on the shower slab for hours, unmoving, plugged into the new rig Terezi had acquired: she’d walked two blocks from the skep, found a back-street emporium shifting stolen electronics, and injured everybody inside until they begged her to take the money and just please, fuck, please, leave them alone. At this she’d smiled graciously and asked them for the nicest cyberspace rig they had. In their haste to get her out of the shop they’d thrown in a free pair of headphones. It was no Kraghe Seven, but Sollux made an impressed sucking noise through his teeth when she took it out of the bag, and that made her happy.

The greenblood at the front desk proved an unexpected ally. In exchange for a couple of salacious and only slightly embroidered stories about the fabled brothel-planet of Fornix IV, she let Terezi use the coffee machine for free. A liquor store across the street stocked forty-packs of Diamonds. A barrow just around the corner sold stew in rough polystyrene cups, a thick mess of beans and tiny shreds of meat. It tasted mostly of glutamates, but it was hot and it smelt good, and when she threatened to feed it to Sollux he relented and ate half. The second night he managed a few spoonfuls before putting it aside and lighting a cigarette instead. The third night he refused anything but coffee, and something in his voice told her not to push it.

When she experimented with lowering the temperature in the cell he started to shiver, so she left it at maximum and stopped wearing clothes. It seemed quite natural now. Mostly she just sat in the cocoon and chain-smoked and ran scenarios, endless rehearsals of eventuality, trimming and refining
and configuring. If this was to be Terezi Pyrope’s Last Plan, she was going to make damn sure it ran like clockwork.

Every time she touched his skin it was slick with sweat.

There was little talking, now. The lectures had stopped. When he buzzed out at dawn he was too drained to do anything but crawl into the sopor beside her, though one lanky arm always found its way around her waist. In the evening he’d be a little better, and he’d mumble angrily to himself as he washed down two cyanephedrine tablets with yet another paper cup of shitty coffee, but they never exchanged more than a few words. The other one was still alive, and still working. That was what mattered. Before he buzzed back in he always gripped her hand tight.

On the third night his skin was a furnace, although he said he still felt cold. She rinsed off the residue and put on her jeans and his shirt, and went to requisition a bottle of water from the girl at the front desk. While Sollux drank from it in great gulping swallows, she washed out an empty stew cup under the shower, turned the dial to cold, and filled it up. Then she sat beside him with the cup of water and a towel, dipping a corner at a time and wiping his forehead, his throat, the back of his neck. He managed to tangle a couple of fingers in her hair, and smoothed his thumb along the line of her cheek, just below the lens.

By the third dawn he couldn’t even make it to the cocoon. She had to haul him in like she’d done when they arrived, except this time he was burning instead of frozen and he apologised weakly the whole time. She sat upright, with his head in her lap, and put a lit cigarette between his lips. They were sticky with half-dried blood from his nose.

“It’s done,” he said, out of the side of his mouth. His voice was cracked and dry, like old flaking paint. “It’s all finished. Call Vantas. We’re ready to move.”

There was no use saying well done, so she stroked his hair and said, “Did you ever hear of Vienna Triava?”

“No.”

“She was a Legislacerator. The greatest of the last hundred sweeps. She was like a living legend; almost a meme, I suppose. Every cadet has a favourite Vienna story. The time she hijacked a deep-space war cruiser with no weapons and a broken leg. The time she stopped a battle taking place by assassinating both generals in the space of a single night. She told me once that if she’d actually done everything there’s a story about her doing, she’d have had to live twice and never sleep.”

“You knew her?”, he said, and coughed.

“She was my instructor. I trained with her for a whole sweep. I was her prize cadet.”

“So what’s your favourite story?”

Terezi took the cigarette out of his mouth, drew on it, and replaced it carefully. She blew smoke and said, “It’s not a very famous one. No-one dies in it. The story is that one time, she was sitting in the mess hall with some other high-ranking Legislacerators, drinking beer and playing cards. They got onto this old Lacerator talking point, which is: what would you do if you found you had one hour left to live?”

“Oh yeah,” said Sollux croakily. “I used to shoot the shit like that in bars sometimes. You say, like, you’d go pail that girl at the hardware depot, or you’d get ridiculously fucking high, or something.”

“Exactly! But Legislacerators are supposed to pick something violent. The idea is that you’d go and
kill that one mark who always managed to slip away, or launch a suicide mission on a heavily-
defended target. You get extra points if it’s something that would be really hard to pull off inside an hour.”

“‘Kay. So what happened?”

“Well, the other Lacerators gave good shop answers: they’d down their drink and then blow up this, take out that, execute the other. But when it got to Vienna, she just gestured at the table in front of them – all covered with cards like it was – and she said, *I would finish the game.*”

There was a silence.

“Okay,” Sollux said eventually. “She sounds like a fucking badass.”

“She was definitely a fucking badass,” agreed Terezi. “I wish you could have met her. I think you would have got on.”

“What happened to her?”

“She ran into someone better.”

“For real? Even though she was, like, Legislacerator Number One?”

“I’m afraid so.” Terezi sighed. “There is always someone better, in the end.”

His lips were so stuck together with blood that she actually heard the tiny wet sound they made as they peeled back in a grin.

“Nah,” he said.
The sky above the port was the luminous black of a monitor on standby, stirred by coiling threads of cloud the colour of seadweller blood. The dark line of a gull broke lazily and wheeled against the violet moon.


“Feel like a fucking Bright Season parade, thanks for asking,” said Sollux, and coughed. Something wet happened in his throat and he forced himself not to double over. Spitting mustard all over his boots wasn’t going to get things off to a good start.

“Are you alright?” said Nepeta worriedly.

“He is fine!” said Terezi, at his side, and he let the back of his knuckles brush hers quickly. “He has not been sleeping well.”

“What’s in the bag?” he said. Nepeta brightened. She upended the outsize tote bag at her feet and several bundles of heavy black fabric unfolded onto the concrete.

“Look, I fucking apologise for this, alright,” said Karkat, and pinched the bridge of his nose. Nepeta straightened up and shook out one of the bundles, which resolved into a lot of coat.

“Are you serious?” asked Sollux, and made an awkward one-armed catch as she flung it at him. The slick plastic leather felt almost greasy against his hand.

“Oh, Hell yes!” said Terezi cheerfully, as if she’d been worrying about this all along. She dropped her cane and began to shoulder her way into the coat, though she left her jacket on underneath. Sollux looked from her to Karkat to Nepeta, who was beaming. Nine sweeps old. What the fuck. When he’d been nine he’d thought he was the next Bastin Malfak. It couldn’t do any harm.

He stripped down to his T-shirt, trying not to shiver too obviously, and regarded the denim jacket. Kanaya had bought it for him, in that stupid-ass boutique. It was a good jacket. Nice deep pockets. But the elbows were scuffed, and the collar was kind of greasy, and bloodstains in four colours had worked so far down into the fabric they’d never wash out. It stank of sweat and fear and stale smoke. He didn’t even have anything to put in the pockets, any more: he’d lost his pistol at the club. His worldly possessions amounted to a mid-range cyberspace rig designed for college students, an empty pack of Diamonds, a scratched red plastic lighter, half a strip of cyanephedrine tabs, and his shades.

He draped the jacket carefully over a glaucrete bollard and patted it. Somehow he didn’t think he’d be coming back to pick it up.

The coat was a surprisingly accurate fit: Nepeta must have sized him up back at the hivestem. It was a little wide on the shoulders and a couple of inches too short for perfection, but probably as close as he could have picked out himself. The leather was reassuringly heavy, and as he tweaked the collar up he felt his back straighten, very slightly. He popped the last two blues into his palm, dry-swallowed them, and dropped the foil. Before discarding the Diamonds he flipped the top back and found there was, in fact, a single cigarette left inside: he’d lost count. He never lost count. Another tiny certainty torn away. But hey, free cigarette! Maybe the universe’s sense of narrative was on his side for once.

He lit the cigarette with the lighter; it took three tries because his hands were shaking so badly. Tossed the packet off the dockside and into the water – take that, Condy – and pushed the lighter
down into his jeans pocket so he had its reassuring flat pressure, without which he’d be anxiously
OCD-patting his thigh every five fucking seconds. He pulled the smoke into his crumbling lungs and
let it bleed through like analgesic. Then, with an effort, he managed to blow out a neat plume at the
sky, instead of just coughing it up in clouds like some kind of shitty tuberculotic dragon.

He turned his head to survey the others. Terezi was wearing the coat like she’d been hatched in it,
which was no surprise. Her lenses gleamed at him. Karkat looked okay, if self-conscious: he was
fussily twitching the folds straight. Nepeta’s was much too long in the arms, for some reason, so the
sleeves covered her hands entirely and just left her claw-blades showing. Coupled with the pair of
outsise Aviators she’d donned, the pair of cat ears she’d forgotten to take off, and the badass-on-a-
mission face she was clearly trying very hard to sustain, the overall effect was unfortunately
adorable. But she’d be handy in a fight.

“Oh look! We’re the classic RPG party,” said Karkat sourly. “Idiot, psycho, catgirl, nerd.”

“Are you the idiot, or the nerd?” asked the psycho, sounding interested. “Because that last comment
made it sort of hard to tell.”

Sollux hoisted the rig back onto his shoulder, settled his shades on the bridge of his nose, and
nodded.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s –”

“– don’t say it –” Karkat warned.

“– let’s –”

“– no –”

“– let’s try not to fuck this up too badly.”

Karkat hesitated.

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “That works for me.”

The four of them walked across the moonlit concrete apron towards the tunnel entrance, side by side.

* * *

The first part of the journey, when they were still on the public line, was the worst. There was
nothing to do: no code to run, no ice to break. It was like every dull tunnel trip he’d taken in his life,
except this time he was dying much faster than usual. He sat hunched on the shabby green
upholstery and stared at the blinking diodes of the route map on the opposite wall. His eyes were
watering; every red dot had a little halo round it, a tiny wet starburst. He counted the number of
nodes and then made up a set of edge weights based roughly on length so he could play with path
analysis. He solved for minimum duration, minimum weight, linear assignment. He ran the travelling
threshcutioner on the whole network just because he’d always hated NP-complete problems. His
guts lurched and twinged; the pulse beneath his wrist was jagged and erratic. The cyanephedrine sent
little sparkles of ice down his arms and fingers, and he was briefly gripped with the notion of solving
his own nervous system: graphing it out, edge and vertex, and letting loose an algorithm. Everything
south of his chest felt like one crawling mass of nausea, a rotting protoplasmic soup scorched here
and there by white-light shivers of pain. His mouth tasted of blood.

A great, weary disgust rose in him. This fucking corpse he had to tote around.
Terezi had the seat next to him. She had shrunk, somehow, or faded. It was Lacerator training: she’d told him about it in the skep. The Lacerators held that once a plan had actually begun, you forgot it was running. Otherwise, you’d spend half your focus on the next stage, and at best you’d waste resources; at worst you’d panic, decide you needed to change something, and end up breaking everything. You had to go blank, and that meant inhabiting the moment as completely as you could. She called it believing the lie. If the plan said you were a ship’s mechanic, you were a ship’s mechanic. You weren’t a Legislacerator disguised as a ship’s mechanic, because one of those doesn’t act like a real ship’s mechanic would. You remained a ship’s mechanic until the instant you became a killer, and then you were a killer, nothing else. Right now, Terezi was a tired commuter hoping to make it home before dawn and wondering if she could be bothered to cook when she got in. So she wasn’t very noticeable. Tired commuters aren’t. She could have been wearing a frilly pink tutu and a top hat and she’d still have been part of the background, somehow, to everyone but him.

He couldn’t imagine Terezi as part of the background. She was the auto-focus. His hand was on the seat between them and she’d put her two smaller fingers gently across his two smaller fingers, and they jolted along like that for a couple of stops while he fought down bile and rewrote all the edge weights and began from scratch, only Karkat kept glancing at them; so Terezi picked up his hand, plonked it defiantly on her knee, and clamped her hand down over it. Karkat looked away hurriedly.

“Fuck,” said Sollux, quietly. “You have really bony knees.”

“Mr Captor,” she murmured, “this is a textbook case of the slop warmer calling the boiling canister malnourished!” Then she rested her head against his shoulder, which surprised him.

Three more stops, until the train was almost empty, and they all stepped off. At this point things were scheduled to get interesting. The ephedrine sang in the ruins of his brain.

They wandered all the way up the platform to the far end, beyond the main lights, to where a steel door was mostly lost in shadow. There was an old-fashioned keypad lock set in the brickwork next to it. Karkat stepped forward, and his eyes were bright emerald green in the darkness, catlike.

Okay,” he said, and pressed four buttons. The lock clunked.

When Nepeta dragged the door open it made an awful grinding noise that echoed down the tunnel, and the three of them who weren’t Terezi flinched and looked round in guilty unison. But the whole platform was deserted, now; they’d made sure to catch the last train.

Nepeta bit her lip, took off her shades with obvious reluctance, and started down the stairs.

* * *

Within five minutes it had become very clear why they needed the Witch.

There was another whole city underground, only this one was empty. He’d expected nothing more than access tunnels, a lot of scrambling about in claustrophobic ducts and banging his horns on things. There was some of that: a few times they had to crawl, and at one horrible point they ended up more or less on their stomachs, worming down a concrete tube too cramped for them to use their flashlights properly. Terezi clamped hers in her mouth and went first, and he followed the soles of her boots, clawing and scrabbling along behind like an insect with legs missing, the light bobbing with every movement of her head and throwing weird spines of shadow back past him. But at other times they walked along wide, flat gantries that creaked underfoot, and through great dry concrete cisterns you could have built Villa Ampora inside, and down sweeping flights of shallow steps that felt almost ceremonial. Machinery purred and grumbled through the walls.
They passed through a turbine hall, huge stalled propellers looming behind mesh grilles clogged with grime, and climbed fifty feet straight down a metal pipe so wide it hardly seemed to curve. Staples had been sunk in the side at intervals, and Sollux tried not to think about metal fatigue. The air was very cold, and smelt of grease and chemicals. For a while every corridor and pipe they entered was damp and streaked with vivid algae, and a few had an inch of grimy standing water they had to splash through, oil on its surface swirling slick rainbows where the torchlight slid against it. Even with a map they would have made slow and bewildered progress, and he doubted any such map existed. But Karkat remained quite serene, piping up every so often with a ‘left here’ or ‘yes, I remember!’ Every time they met a door, he tapped in the code like he was letting himself into his own hive, quick and fluid. One big hatch had a mechanical lock with no discernible switch or pad: Karkat just frowned at it, a delicate little frown that didn’t belong on his face, and it sprang open.

“How are you holding up?” said Terezi under her breath, as he lowered himself shakily from the bottom rung of an access ladder apparently built for someone even taller than him and wiped his face with the back of one clammy hand.

“Walk in the park,” he said, but she didn’t smile, just looked at him with a strange careful expression.

They’d been moving for nearly an hour when Karkat stopped, halfway down a totally unremarkable passageway with cold steel walls and a latticed floor underfoot, and said “Here!” in a stage whisper that practically echoed.

Sollux shone his flashlight along the wall, then again more slowly. On the second pass he found it: a flat black panel, flush with the metal, and set in it a row of three internal network ports. They were an old design, the ones with the big pointless plastic flanges that always snapped off after a couple of perigees and left a sharp edge you could cut your finger on, but they were compatible.

“We’re directly beneath the Imperial Palace data archives!” said Karkat proudly, in the same dumb excited secret-conspirator whisper. “One hundred and seventeen feet beneath the lowest tier. This tunnel was built as part of an expansion project, but some forms got misfiled and the whole thing ran into the ground eighty sweeps ago. They built three new rooms just down there, but they never installed any servers. It’s all empty.”

“Time?” said Terezi, clear but quiet.

He looked at his watch. “Still got six minutes,” he said. “We’re fine.”

“Sollux,” said Karkat, and stopped, looking uncertain. Then he said, “You know this only gets you access to the mainframe? It won’t give you any protocols. The network will still flag you as unauthorised the second you try to buzz in.”

“Yeah, I fucking know,” he said, a little more roughly than he’d meant, but his head was hurting worse than ever and his legs felt like melting ice-cream. His nose had started to bleed again, slow and thick. “That’s why I’m not going to buzz in for another five minutes and forty-three seconds. Terezi, get moving.”

“Patience, nerdling!” she said, and adjusted the cane where it hung strapped to her back. “Measure twice, cut once, hide the body.”

They stood and looked at each other.

Terezi Pyrope was three trolls of energy packed into slightly less than a troll of matter. If she hadn’t joined the military, he realised abruptly, she would have been a mess: twitchy, neurotic, burning through life like it was so much fuse paper, vibrating always a fraction out of sync with the world
around her, a fraction too fast. Her training had given her focus. She’d learnt to take the shiver in her atoms and channel it as violence. She broke people for the same reason he broke code: to feel the rush of capacity, the singing wind of every cell lit up at once, no fibres slack or cold. He imagined what it must be like for her. Every muscle wound, to make up for what she gave away in height and weight; every sense straining, to compensate for what she’d lost. He had always taken his joy from functionality. She was no different. She used her body where he used his mind, but the deep atavistic pleasure of it was the same. A nose crunching beneath the heel of her calloused little hand rang the same bell he heard when a corporate icewall burst into a thousand glittering shards and left the path clear. *I'm good at this.*

“Hey,” she said, almost gently. “I will come back for you.”

“Shit’s going to get heavy,” he said, quiet so Karkat and Nepeta wouldn’t hear. “You know that.”

“It doesn’t matter.” She reached across, and lifted his right hand in her left, into the space between them. Her skin was cool and dry. With her right forefinger – careful to use the pad, not the claw – she traced four short strokes over the creases of his knuckles: a neat diamond. “I would kill this whole planet, to get back to you.”

He felt a drop of blood detach from the point of his chin and fall. His head was being squeezed by iron bands, and his joints ached, and his eyes throbbed, and his lungs felt like paper bags left out in the rain, and his gut was a churning snarl of nausea, and somehow there was a tight space in his chest that hurt worst of everything.

“Watch your back,” he said.

“You are being insensitive about my disability again!” she said, and grinned, and let him go. Then she sidestepped to look past him at Karkat and Nepeta, who were hovering uncertainly a little way back down the corridor. Karkat’s eyes had returned to a healthy yellow: the Witch must have let him back at the wheel. “Remember,” she said more loudly, “when he is locked into the network, Mr Captor will be completely defenceless. If something goes wrong, do whatever is required to keep him alive! If you do not – ” she inclined her head slightly – “I will find you. I am very good at finding people.”

Then she turned, and walked briskly away from them until she reached a bare metal access ladder that descended from a round opening in the tunnel roof. Sollux watched until her boots and the hem of her coat had vanished through the opening, and then permitted himself a long, ragged breath out. He’d been sure she’d catch on, somehow; sure some tiny freak of voice or scent or what the fuck ever would give him away at the last minute. But she was gone, and he would not see her again.

He checked his watch. Four minutes. He knelt down by the row of net ports and started to unzip pockets in the backpack.

“I still don’t really understand,” said Nepeta timidly.

Without looking round, he said, “How do you commit a crime without anyone noticing?”

There was a puzzled silence. He unfolded the rig and stood it on the metal grid floor, then fished out a spool of cable and unfastened the tie.

“Commit it really quietly?” she offered at last.

“Nope,” he said. “You commit a whole bunch of other crimes at the same time, really loudly.” He pushed a silvery jack into the middle socket: it went home with a very satisfactory *click.* A good
omen. “Terezi taught me that.”

“Hold on – ” began Karkat.

“The Empire’s chief data architect at the moment – the dude who built all Condy’s security – is a guy called Bastin Malfak,” said Sollux. The rig chimed politely to tell him it was ready for uplink. “He’s the best hacker in the world. Spent ten sweeps fucking up ice for the fun of it until the big house finally caved in and offered him a job. He was kind of a hero of mine, growing up. Guy’s a fucking savant. You ever hear about the Everking Run?”

“What do I look like I’m up to date on my Nerd Who’s Who?”

“Nah, you look like a bulge went septic. It was the biggest cyberheist of all time. If I told you the bill you’d shit yourself. Whole bunch of ice that was guaranteed unbreakable, Malfak broke it so no-one even realised anything was wrong for two days afterwards.” He grinned. “Anyway, he’s playing for the home team these days, pulling down a trillion cee paycheck every sweep, and he’s even better at walls than he was at runs. Half his ice is fucking headgames. I prodded it a couple of times just to see. Even his traps have traps.”

“So?” said Karkat impatiently. He was clearly nervous: it leaked off his stance and his voice like steam. No wonder. The real surprise was that Sollux himself felt a total, washed-out calm. He’d never been this chill before a run, even some dumb little data scoop: there was always an edge, a flutter of the pulse. He’d seen a shitty movie once where the legendary blueblood swordsman had solemnly instructed her hothead acolyte to ‘live every moment as though you are already dead’, which had until now seemed like the stupidest fucking advice in the world, since if you were already dead what was the point in even getting up in the evening. He was starting to reconsider.

“So,” said Sollux, and crunched his knuckles, “Bastin Malfak is about to have the worst day of his fucking life.”

Nepeta was nervous too, but the story seemed to have caught her up. She was looking at him wide-eyed. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m just going to buzz in here like any old phyte and start rummaging around,” he said. “Coincidentally, the moment I do, the entire Imperial network is going to get hit by an incredibly well-organised and sophisticated team of high-level hackers working collaboratively.”

“You’re friends?”

He grinned again. “Only friend I have just vanished up that fucking ladder.”

“Then – ”

“It’s a remote attack. It’s like eighteen remote attacks running in parallel and they all feed off each other. I spent the last two nights writing the fucker, and it’s going to hit like an orbital strike in – “ he glanced at his watch – “shit, two minutes. There’s no-one actually behind it; it’s all running off the network of a cheap-ass skep somewhere on Fuck Street, Low City. But to anyone looking, Malfak included, it’s going to look like the biggest, most professional terrorist stunt anyone’s pulled in five hundred sweeps. Every desk jockey in the Palace is going to piss neat blood, I fucking guarantee it.”

“Holy shit,” said Karkat, sounding reluctantly impressed. “So while they’re all scampering around with their asses on fire thinking it’s the end of civilisation as we know it – ”

“ – I’m just going to duck in a back door and walk out with the cashbox. Yep.” He dug in his jeans pocket. “It’s the same plan we were going to try before. I just digitised it. There’s only one flaw.”
“Being?”

His clawtips found the little metal cylinder, and he eased it out carefully and held it between thumb and forefinger. “I’m going to be plugged in here for at least five minutes, maybe ten. I’ve got to find the Heir, and then disable all the security protocols so Terezi can detach its core without triggering Malfak’s trap cards. If one lost guard looking for the gaper somehow wanders down here and gets to me – ” he sliced his open hand across his throat. “Kkkkk. Game over, no continues.”

“Don’t worry!” said Nepeta fiercely. “You can count on us!”

“Fuck, man,” Karkat said. “This is a really insanely Goddamn risky plan.”

“Ah, you know Lacerators,” said Sollux, and shrugged. “Only thing gives ‘em a bigger boner than killing is dying.” Then he reached around the back of his neck and pushed in the extra plug.

“What’s that for?” asked Nepeta.

“Extra security,” he said briefly, in his best boring-tech-stuff voice he used when a client was trying to take an interest. “Amps up my neural shielding. Just insurance.”

Thirty seconds. Twenty-nine. He felt like he should come up with a killer last line, but his mind was still weirdly blank. Every physical sensation seemed magnified: not just the bad ones, but the normal ones, the ones he’d never wasted any thought on. The floor pressing up against his boots. A drop of sweat crawling down his ribs, beneath the shirt.

He sat down awkwardly on the skirt of the coat, and crossed his aching legs. It was a fucking uncomfortable way to sit, but even the discomfort seemed at once reassuring and sad; like saying a last farewell to an old friend you’d never actually liked. They were a douche, sure, but you’d known them since you were a kid.

He looked at his hands: palms, then backs. He’d never really had anything against his hands, he guessed. They’d done solid service. No real cause for complaint. Ray had read his palm once and told him he had an unusually strong life line.

So what, he’d said, I’m going to live forever? She’d smiled, and said, No, but you’re going to leave a mark.

Well. Maybe he would, at that.

He brushed a thumb absently across the back of his knuckles where Terezi had drawn her diamond. Five seconds. Four. Three.

“Okay,” he said out loud, and picked up the jack. “Player Two, push start.”

The clock hit zero, and somewhere, silently, a bomb went off. For a second he imagined he could see it: could see great blooms of neon light bursting against the crystal walls of the Condesce’s ice castle, magenta streamers punching through its outer screens, a slow expanding sea of digital fire. Have fun with that one, kids, he thought. Sollux Captor says hi.

He buzzed in.

* * *

Sollux Captor and Aradia Megido moved into their new apartment one rainy evening early in the third dim season.

They didn’t have much to move. A suitcase of clothes each, one noticeably more compact than the
other. A cardboard box of books, and one of assorted kitchen appliances – some of which actually worked – and one of electronic shit (all of it Sollux’s). A couple of smaller boxes of junk. A couple of bags of stuff that hadn’t fitted in the boxes. Put together it mostly fitted in the back of a groundcab, though one box had to sit on Sollux’s lap while Aradia told the elderly, flickering navcom where to go. It only took them three trips to haul it all up from the stem’s lobby to the fourteenth floor, which was just as well, as the lifts were out. Sollux insisted on carrying the heaviest boxes, and Aradia kissed him on the cheek.

The apartment itself was small and neat. Only two blocks, really: one for living, one for sleeping. The subsistenceblock had a tiled area in one corner with a wipe-clean counter, but if you couldn’t cook it by microwaving it, toasting it, or pouring boiling water on it, you were just going to have to stare at it sadly. That was fine. Sollux ate instant noodles except when Aradia made him eat fruit. Aradia had a battered old simmer cauldron which she loved dearly: the outer rim was glazed with a patina of dried grub sauce years old which Sollux had tried to scour off on more than one occasion, only to throw down the wire wool in disgust twenty minutes later with a baffled comment about potential military applications. Left to herself she turned everything into slop, put some slop in a bowl twice in a day, and sat cross-legged eating with a spoon in one hand and a book open in the other. Neither of them had grown up with fine dining.

Other than that the subsistenceblock was pretty well-equipped. There was space to swing a purrbeast, if it was a small purrbeast with a short tail and a patient disposition. There was carpet, sort of. There was a couch and a couple of uncomfortable plastic chairs, and a desk for Sollux’s rig, and a stand for an AV unit, although when the Hell they were going to be able to afford an AV unit neither of them knew but it didn’t matter, she had books and he had the medium and anyway they had each other. She put her favourite skull on the stand as a temporary measure. It was the skull of some fuckoff goat creature with three horns. Sollux called it Murray, although Aradia insisted the thickness of the postorbital bones meant it had been a female when it was alive. Murray had enjoyed a box to itself, safely padded with the entire contents of Aradia’s underwear drawer. When they’d lifted it out one of her bras had got tangled round the frontmost horn somehow, and Sollux had nearly cried laughing.

In the respiteblock there was space for the cocoon and the door in the corner and not much else, but what else were you going to do in a respiteblock, play tennis? There were two sliding partitions of beige plastic in the far wall, one of which closed off a tiny cubicle with the gaper, the other of which protected a decent-sized garmentbox. There was a cascade, but no trap: they’d heard rumours of washrooms somewhere on the tenth floor of the stem, with proper traps and other such exotic delights. He said he’d pack some food and a flashlight and make the expedition next time he was feeling brave. Aradia said she’d lend him her hat.

They settled easily into routine. Every evening Sollux would stagger out of the sopor, ignore the door in the corner, stand under the cascade, towel off, pull on a pair of boxers, and get the coffee started. The smell of coffee was one of a number of essential tools for chivvying Aradia out of the depths of the cocoon: Sollux deployed it selectively, on rotation with soothing encouragement, sudden loud noises, faked cardiac arrest, and threats of withheld sex. Sometimes you could get her by making the coffee, bringing it into the block, and then leaving it out of reach. Eventually she’d emerge clothed and blinking into the subsistenceblock, kiss him goodbye, and set off for work. Once the apartment was his, he’d make another pot of coffee, do some stretches, and buzz in. His watch alarm was set to deliver a small electric shock every two hours to remind him to take breaks, and if the weather was okay he’d climb the remaining six flights and pace around on the roof for a while, listening to the city and thinking. If they hadn’t wanted him up there they shouldn’t have installed a keypad lock. No-one ever complained.

If it was pissing rain, he’d wear down the much-tried carpet a little further, or stick on some chip-hop
and sit on the counter kicking his legs idly to the beat. Moving around really did help. He’d been skeptical, as a script kiddie – thought the hardcore way to do it was to sit hunched in the same chair for ten hours and then wear your crippling backache like a badge of honour. But if you got the blood flowing, even a little, you buzzed back in fresher. Sometimes, if he was having a really good day, he’d drop the blinds and then dance awkwardly by himself, shuffling and twitching his limbs like he was suffering some sort of profound system malfunction. When Aradia got home they’d heat up some slop and sit around, maybe split a beer from the icebox, maybe fuck on the couch. He never asked what she did with the night.

Early one morning they were flopped on the couch after some weary but basically satisfactory sex, listening to an album of ambient chimewave stuff he’d pulled that evening. Ray was naked; he’d put his boxers back on because he always felt more comfortable that way.

“Hey,” she said, and pushed his shoulder with one extended finger. “I should tell your fortune.”

“Serious?”

“Yes! I haven’t done it for ages.”

“What, you reckon it’s going to have changed?”

“Of course,” she said, and laughed. “It’s fortune, dummy. All it does is change. Stay there.”

She got off the couch and walked over to the plastic crate under Murray’s stand, where they kept miscellaneous shit that didn’t really go anywhere else obvious. This had always been Sollux’s preferred home storage system. She cracked the lid and rummaged around, and then straightened up triumphantly, holding her deck of cards.

“Bet you anything I get the fucking Rose, like, five times,” he said.

“There’s only one Rose in the deck, Sollux,” she said, “that’s impossible,” and the front door of the apartment burst open and someone shot her very neatly in the stomach.

Her eyes went wide and surprised. Sollux rolled off the couch and came up to see a heavy-set fudgeblood in a leather jacket and jeans, long-barrelled pistol held at arm’s length. A delicate wisp of smoke trickled from the housing. Aradia crumpled back against the wall, clutching with one arm at the AV stand, and said “Sollux – ”

“Pizza’s here,” said the fudgeblood, pointed the gun at Sollux’s face, and fired.

*S * *

Sollux Captor and Aradia Megido moved into their new apartment one rainy evening early in the third dim season. They didn’t have much to move.

The days ticked past like a system clock. He’d stand in the window, fists balled and propped against the frame, staring out at winter: mute snow-locked streets below, fans of argon light glittering up at him like crystal and not a soul to be seen. In summer the streets were just as empty, long dark canals of dead air still between the stems. He’d open the window, then, let in a swirl of air slightly less warm than the stuff he already had, and smell fumes and listen to the silence of no engines. He’d strip off his shirt, walk round the apartment in just jeans and shades, barefoot, his ribs and shoulders greasy with cold sweat.

He’d walk into the respiteblock and stand staring at the door in the corner, for a minute, maybe more. Then he’d turn away.
In the murky sun-shadow she'd drift against him in the sopor, skin cold, and murmur something that might have been his name. He'd stare at the ceiling and try to make the cracks in the laminate tell him something, but they were never in the same place two days running, and if he stared too long the door in the corner began to loom, closer and darker without ever quite moving at all, until he couldn’t stand it and he had to roll over and bury his face in Aradia’s sticky hair.

On his own again, in the night-time, he’d go up to the roof and stand watching the stars go out. They went slowly, like they were powering down.

He made friends with his next-door neighbour, having met her while dragging laundry out of adjacent drums in the stem’s damp, soap-scented basement. He’d seen her a couple of times down there and not wanted to strike up a conversation, on the basis it would be awkward as shit, but one day she pushed hair off her face, pointed, and said without the slightest preamble, “What’s that?”

He looked. There was a narrow scar running across the knuckles of his right hand: a thin pale line of cicatricial tissue against the grey. He flexed his fingers, surprised, and watched it stretch with the skin.

“No idea,” he said.

His neighbour was a greenblood with short hair and small serrated horns, and she worked as an educutioner at one of the larger military colleges: taught infiltration and Intro to Literature. She made him a cup of eye-wateringly strong grub tea and lent him a couple of sci-fi novels he’d vaguely heard of. He spent the rest of the night reading the first one instead of getting any work done. It was pretty cool, although it had one of those annoying ambiguous endings that didn’t actually answer any of his questions. A few nights later he met his neighbour again and they chatted about it. She promised to introduce him to her matesprit. He tried to give the book back to her and she held up a hand and told him to keep it, said she had too many books already. It was nice to have made a friend, even a casual one: he never saw anyone from any of the other apartments, and the stairways and corridors of the stem were always quiet and deserted.

The morning after that a tall masked woman with a knife broke into the apartment and stabbed Aradia sixteen times while he watched, powerless. When she straightened up at last, breathing hard, she put the hot, slick blade against his throat and said “If only you weren’t such a fucking weakling, huh?”, and pushed. The mask was white moulded plastic painted like a smiling face.

He’d walk up to the roof door and back down again ten times a day and never build up the courage to go outside. He knocked on the next door apartment, but there was no answer. Alone in his subsistenceblock he sat on the sagging couch listening to the clock tick, and watched a fat yellow worm writh in the socket of Murray’s right eye, just under the unusually thick curve of the postorbital bone.

He tried to touch the door in the corner, once, but when his hand got within an inch of the handle something happened, and Aradia came home an hour later to find him curled under the wipe-clean counter, crying helplessly, his shirt damp and clammy. When she asked him what was wrong he didn’t know.

At night he’d take all the cutlery out of the tray they kept it in and arrange it on the counter in a line, smallest to largest, and stare furiously at it until his temples ached and blue mould had mottled the tiles on the wall. In the evening he’d stand in the gaper cubicle splashing handfuls of cold water over his face, and as he raised his head, dripping, he’d glimpse a figure in the mirror standing close behind him. There was no-one there; there wasn’t space. In the morning he’d lie on the couch and Aradia would straddle him, thighs locked tight and hands flat on his chest as if she was trying to start his heart; he’d dig his fingers into her hips and she’d throw her head back with a gasp, and crimson
blood would run slowly from her eyes, like tears.

He was missing something.

One day he climbed out of the cocoon while Aradia was still asleep. He didn’t look at the door in the corner. That made it angry. He didn’t even run the cascade, just padded straight into the other room, leaving sticky sopor footprints on the carpet. That would stain, of course, but he was sure they’d got a lot of blood on this carpet once, and it looked fine now.

He dug in the plastic crate beneath Murray, through the accumulated trash of two lives, until he reached the bottom, where Ray’s deck of cards was tucked neatly down next to the paperback he’d borrowed off the girl next door, even though nobody lived next door: that apartment was derelict, a ruin, just like all the others in the stem. He took them both out and sat down on the couch.

“Well done,” said a voice. He looked up and saw Aradia in the doorway to the respiteblock. She was fully dressed: a shirt for a band he’d never heard of and a long dark skirt with a ragged hem and slim silver chains looped from the waistband. Her hair was a mist of fine droplets.

“I still don’t understand,” he said.

“You don’t need to. You’ve done the hard part. But we have to be quick. They’ll be here soon.”

She came over and sat on the couch a little way from him, neat and contained, as though they barely knew each other.

He said, “Ray, fuck. I’m sorry.”

She turned her head to look at him, and gave him a smile that was both deeply sad and entirely kind. “Sollux, it wasn’t your fault. You have to realise that, or you’re going to die here.”

“How can you say that? I could have – I could have stopped them, I could have done something, I’m a fucking psychic –”

“You were in a coma,” she said. “I don’t think you even remember, do you? You think you just popped back awake after the crash, all hey, where’s the fire. You were in a coma for three weeks. The doctors were going to turn off your life support.”

He stared at her.

“I just remember waking up,” he said stupidly.

“Well, yes,” she said. “That’s all we ever do remember.” She reached out and patted his knee. “I’m dead, Sollux. I’ve been dead for a while now. Do you know where we are?”

He thought about it. It was difficult: his mind still tried to bend away. “No,” he admitted.

“That’s okay! Look, I’ll help you.” She picked up the deck, stripped three cards quickly off the top, and laid all three face down on the couch cushion between the two of them. “This is the most basic spread,” she said. “Do you remember?”

“Sort of. Shouldn’t you have shuffled first, or something?”

“Not here. Focus. What’s the first one for?”

“The, uh.” A fragment came back to him: the same cards, but laid on a steel-topped desk. She’d had her hair tied back that day. “The past. Right?”
“Yes.” She tapped the back of the leftmost card with one claw. He noticed the crimson lacquer was chipped at the edges. “The door is how you ended up with your problem.” She tapped the middle one. “The lock is the problem.” The third. “And the key is how you get out. You half-remembered already, I think.” Then, without ceremony, she eased the claw under the left card and flipped it over. It bore a stylised little ink drawing of a cave partway up the side of a mountain.

“The Hermit,” she said, and smiled. “You’ve been giving yourself clues all along, you see. Isolation, separation. In a positive sense it means rising above the troubles of the world, turning to higher things, but negatively it means a refusal to engage: cutting yourself off.”

There was a knock at the door: two sharp raps. He jumped and half-turned, but Aradia got a hand on the side of his face and physically pulled his head back towards her. Her skin was icy cold. “Focus,” she said firmly. “Look.” And she flipped the second card. It had a picture of an old-fashioned cabinet clock, the hands pointing at what looked like a quarter past four.

“Cycles,” he said automatically.

She beamed. “Good! And other things as well, but that will do for now.” She flipped the third card.

“Oh, fuck,” he said. It was a picture of a single white rose.

Someone banged on the door, several times. “Hey!” said a muffled voice. “Open up!”

“What’s wrong?” she asked, like it was no big deal.

“Violent death,” he said. “I always got this one, I know it off by fucking heart. Solitude, illusion, violent death.”

She just smiled. “You always got it, but you never understood it. I think you were so in love with the bad reading you never listened to the good part. It does mean all of those things, but it also means – well, their good sides.”

“The good side of violent death,” he said flatly.

“Yes!” And she grinned – not even the kindly teacher’s smile she’d given him so far, but a grin like she found it genuinely funny. “Freedom.”

“Open this fucking door!” came the yell, and with it a redoubled hammering so the panels shook. The door was a piece of shit; he couldn’t understand why they hadn’t just kicked it in, like they’d done the first time, and the third time, and the seventh time.

“The Rose is the only card in the whole deck that’s really free,” she said. “Death means letting go, and the Rose lets go of everything.”

He stood up. It felt like the end of the conversation. She stood up too, and handed him the Rose card. “Go on,” she said. “Finish this.”

The noise from the front door was continuous now: banging and thumping and kicking, almost deranged in its fury.

“I can’t leave you here. Not with – not with that,” he said, and gestured. Whatever was out there now wasn’t just some contract thug with a gun or an iron bar. It sounded animal.

Aradia rolled her eyes. “Sollux, come on. You’re meant to be the smart one. You’re not leaving me anywhere, don’t you get it yet? None of this exists. Once you walk through that door, there won’t be
a me to leave.”

He must have looked unconvinced, because she put a hand on his chest and said more gently, “Sollux. If you stay here, you know what happens next. The door breaks down, I die, you die, and we start from scratch. If you really want to save me, you have to keep moving.”

_Bang bang bang._ It couldn’t hold much longer. He couldn’t believe it had held this long.

He shook himself, and said, “Hey. Tell me one thing?”

“If I can.”

“Did it – ” His voice came out wrong; strangled. He swallowed and tried again. “Did it hurt?”

She looked at him. Then she said gravely, “Yes, it did. But not for very long.”

He walked to the door of the respiteblock. On the threshold he paused, and tucked the Rose card carefully into the back pocket of his jeans. He looked back at Ray, standing pale and solemn in the middle of the apartment they’d always said they were going to get together; how he’d pictured it, anyway.

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

“Don’t be,” she said. “You were never anything but good to me.”

“If you hadn’t met me you’d still be alive.”

“There are lots of ways to die, Sollux,” she said. “Go on. Get to the next screen.”

He turned, and crossed to the door in the corner. It was just a door: flat black wood with a handle the colour of tarnished silver, nothing special about it at all. It opened without complaint. There was nothing on the other side but darkness, which was what he’d expected, somehow.

He stepped through.

Beyond the door it was night, but a strange night: no moons, and too many stars. He was standing on grass, the ground a little spongy underfoot, and a chilly breeze ruffled his hair and flapped the tails of his coat, which he’d apparently regained. He couldn’t tell what he was looking at. It seemed to be a wall, except it was candy-striped in red and white, and it rippled slightly like the surface of a pond. There was a strong and one hundred percent unmistakable smell of hot fat and popcorn.

“What up, motherfucker,” said a voice like someone treading on gravel, very close to his ear. “Welcome to the Dark Carnival.”
Terezi Pyrope had climbed a lot of ladders in her time.

She’d climbed ladders during training: climbed them with a backpack full of rocks, climbed them with another neophyte’s arms locked round her neck, climbed them while a power hose at the top drove down water almost but not quite hot enough to blister the skin. She’d climbed them blindfold, an exercise which had later proved unexpectedly useful, and found that Vienna had sawn through some of the rungs. Once her career had begun – her first career – she’d climbed creaking iron ladders up the sides of buildings and slippery aluminium ladders from cold sea water to a moonlit dockside, sucking careful breaths of filtered plastic air through her mouthpiece, and trailing rope-and-bar ladders that swung and bucked in the wind of zeppelin engines, two hundred feet above the nearest rooftop. She’d climbed ladders while being shot at, and while shooting back. She’d climbed a ladder once that was actually on fire, which had been about as little fun as it was possible to have with your clothes on. She’d climbed ladders into supposedly secret bunkers, and supposedly impregnable fortresses, and supposedly nonexistent biological weapon silos. Legislacerators were good at ‘supposedly’.

Any ladder might be your last, like every door, and every kiss, and every cup of coffee. But this one was different. This one had unusually good odds of being her last. She knew, objectively, that her chances of ever coming back down this ladder the way she’d promised Sollux she would were... slight. Not pitiful, or infinitesimal: she didn’t write plans that involved infinitesimal chances of survival, at least not of her survival. It was perfectly doable. But it was going to be tricky.

Terezi Pyrope’s last ladder. A funny thought. But it was a fine ladder to go out on, if so. Really quality Imperial worktrollship: solid rungs, textured enough for easy grip while not so rough that if you had to hang on them for a while your hands were going to hurt. Robust, lightweight frame. Very little creak. She didn’t make any noise climbing ladders as a matter of principle, but if her boots had clanged on the treads of this one, it would have made a bell-like and euphonious note, she had no doubt.

Plus, there was the fact that it led straight up into the bowels of Her Imperious Condescension’s seat of supreme power at the heart of the galaxy-spanning Alternian Empire. She grinned. Even Vienna had never managed a ladder like that.

_How’s my driving?_, she thought.

*One hundred percent system efficiency*, said Coolkid’s reassuring tones in the back of her pan. *You’re looking good. Dope on the flow and magic on the mic. Let’s blow this thing and go home, kid.*

She hooked herself up off the top of the ladder onto cool mesh floor and paused, sniffing and listening. A big, empty room. Processed air, dehumidified and stripped of organic particles, chilled down enough to raise goosebumps on the backs of her hands. A hint of hot plastic. She could hear the hum of fans not far away.

*North, east, up three flights*, she thought. *Yes?*

_Yep, said Coolkid. Patrol’s not due down here for half an hour, no rush._

*We are still on a clock*, she thought sternly, moving forward to where there was meant to be a door. _I don’t want Sollux hooked into the system for any longer than he has to be._
He’s Hugh Jackman in Swordfish, babe. He could wax this net in ninety seconds with Vantas sucking his dick. You just look out for number one.

She grimaced. I am less sure! Her Condescension is very territorial. What’s a dick?

Tell you later. Pad’s right of the door, eye level and down one.

She nodded, found the keys, brushed them with her thumb to get the configuration and then jabbed four times: top middle, mid left, bottom left, middle. There was a very small beep and a click.

The room on the other side smelt much the same, but smaller. She crossed it smoothly: neither hurrying nor slinking. A door might pop open any moment, and how you moved was a vital response trigger. In a situation like this, quick movement would make nervous hands snap instinctively to holsters, and slow movement would make an inattentive guard take a second look to see what you were doing. Moving like you were on your way to grab a beer from the break room hull gave you an extra second while brains skidded through files and confirmed to limbs that no-one knew who the fuck you were, and you could use that second to remove at least a couple of said limbs before they could trouble you. There was an old nugget of wisdom that if you wore the right uniform and looked like you knew where you were going, you could pass 90% of manned security checks. In Terezi’s experience, you often didn’t even need the uniform.

The east door was up a couple of steps, but wasn’t locked. She pushed it open and stepped through – same principle, nothing blared crime like a door opening slowly – and Coolkid said Stop dead.

She did. She went completely still, trained still, the kind of still a movement sensor would slide straight past, left hand on the door handle, weight on the forward foot, right thigh tensed. She didn’t breathe. But she could hear without moving, and even against the background drone of fans she heard it: a tiny, high-pitched whine of servomotors.

Shit, said Coolkid. Locked on. Back out –

No point, she thought, and closed the door carefully behind her.

We doing this?, he asked.

We have to. If we run it'll follow. There’s only one, right?

Yeah. Only one, and he looks like he’s still sizing you up. He wasn’t on alert.

This room was meant to be off the patrol routes!, she thought crossly.

Supposedly.

Oh, shut up. Then she bit her lip. Coolkid. Can I take this thing?

I – shit. Yeah, he said, but not fast enough. Yeah, I reckon you can.

She reached up slowly – just my identification, officer – and unhooked her cane. The grip fitted into her palm the way it always did: she’d never been able to decide if it had been made for her hand, or the other way around.

She drew her sword. It whispered.

Striders weren’t like ordinary robots. No-one knew quite what they were. Most robots, the kind of tech servitors you ran into on axis stations or below decks on a cruiser, were optimisers: they had a
range of available functions, simple or complex, and they assessed the problem and then selected the likely best solution. Best was a variable concept, of course, and the smart robots were the ones that could parse out its definitions: who knew that if a bulkhead was leaking rocket fuel into an area full of electronics, a quick and dirty patch that stopped the flow was preferable to a seamless welding job. But robots had no concept of suboptimal function unless they were damaged or low on power, which made them almost comically easy to deceive, if you could really call it deceit. If a robot saw you as a problem, you gave it a bigger problem. It would trundle off to solve that. She thought of rockets bursting against the Imperial ice; all around her, technically.

Striders had a suite of parameters that ran flat contrary to all the laws of robotics. They would ignore immediate threats if they thought something more serious was around the corner. They would deal with a minor problem over a major one, apparently on some instinctive assessment process that engineers swore blind you couldn’t code. Some particularly wild-eyed nerds she’d encountered had insisted that each Strider must run off its own localised AI, but that didn’t make sense either: there were hundreds of them, perhaps thousands, and yet they never did anything but co-operate. AIs were cleverer than trolls, and consequently fought like fleshweasels in a sack. Take ten assembly droids, fit each one with a baby AI – assuming you have the tech chops for it – and watch your productivity plummet as your shop floor turns into a glorified Trollian memo, unfolding at ten times the speed of organic comprehension. The way two or three Striders worked together, patiently and perfectly, in eerie harmony, was robotic. But they were too smart.

As a result, an unofficial handbook of survival tips had been developed and passed around among the relatively small number of trolls who a) knew their line of work was liable to put them in the path of a Strider, and b) stayed in that line of work regardless. The handbook didn’t exist in any digital or physical form: it was handed on in muttered tones at corner tables in certain midtown bars with bad lighting. Some of it was nonsense. Some of it had been gained the hard way, and rang uncomfortably true. Terezi had gathered up and stashed away as much of it as she could, because one never knew; and a fact she’d heard from three independent sources, stupid as it sounded, was that Striders possessed a rudimentary concept of fair play.

This Strider was a decent distance away from her still: about twenty feet, she guessed. She had a sword in her hand, and a gun strapped to her hip. It had a frankly preposterous number of built-in systems for killing at range, any of which it could access in the time it would take her to blink, if she still blinked. The optimal solution was a hollow-point projectile to the centre of her forehead, right now, before she’d even finished her draw.

She finished her draw. There was a small whirr, and then a long slither of metal.

It was true. Completely ridiculous, but true. She offered silent thanks to the big ex-Threshecutioner who’d leant forwards on his stool with a creak of leather and a gust of cigar smoke, his voice dropping to a hoarse conspiratorial growl beneath the thump of the sound system. She’d bought him a whisky, and wished now she’d made it a double. If you drew steel on a Strider, it drew back. There was no way she could out-shoot a shooting robot. But out-fence a fencing robot? Everyone knew you didn’t let Terezi Pyrope get her fingers on her sword, if you wanted a hand left to tug your bulge with tomorrow.

Here he comes, warned Coolkid, and she felt the air move and got her blade up and to the left – The shock nearly broke her wrists. She didn’t quite lose stance, but her right foot slid a couple of inches on the metal floor and her whole body shuddered. Of course, with no strength to conserve, the Strider could afford to waste shots like that. Ignoring her quivering arms, she spun the sword into a low parry, then up again to the right, and backed off a couple of steps. It didn’t stop: three cuts, all
high, all with enough weight behind them to take off a limb. She kept to deflections and hanging
parries, letting the robot’s weapon slide past and away rather than trying to absorb the impact herself.
On the fourth cut it overcommitted, and she ducked left and under, driving the blade up towards the
Strider’s throat, but before she was halfway into the thrust she felt it pivot past her and jumped back
just in time for a swordpoint to skim past her cheek like a near miss from a bullet.

Fuck.

Cut to the legs: blocked like she’d hit a reinforced steel bar. Cut to the chest, ditto. Her elbows gave
official notification that this was bullshit. She reversed her grip, and tried a quick passing strike, but
the Strider wasn’t there any more. She ducked its next one, skipped away from a shot that should
have taken off her left leg at the knee, stepped round a thrust the way Vienna had taught her and
went for the face. Nope. Just another stinging impact up through hilt and hands all the way to her
shoulders, and she had to spin gracelessly on one foot to keep balance; she tried to drag the blade
back round into guard but she was slow, so dreadfully sticky-slow today, and a hot wire drew tight
between her second and third ribs on the right side. She hissed and gave ground, then got the hilt up
by her face and crouched a little, breathing.

Scratch, said Coolkid. Coming high -

Nothing worked. She tried four different stances and three different grips. She tried cuts, lunges, trick
strikes, feints, a favourite little one-two thrust that she’d once used on a far-off planet’s champion:
he’d been nine feet of greenish-brown muscle and tusks, with an axe bigger than she was, but it had
turned out he needed his liver just the same as everybody else. The Strider batted the point away
almost dismissively. If she went defensive it hammered her, blow after blow strong enough to fell
trees, until her arms ached and burned and her ears rang and she could taste her own sweat. If she
went aggressive, it managed never to be where her blade was. Two minutes in, and she’d acquired a
slash along one thigh and a nicked thumb to add to the collection. The thumb, which was barely a
papercut, hurt worst. The other two were still mostly just heat, which meant the adrenaline was
locking them down for now.

It was creepy. Uncanny valley. She’d expected technical perfection: robots didn’t make mistakes.
But she hadn’t expected style. This was no training computer, picking viable moves from a drop-
down menu. It had flow, and nuance. One or two of its parries were genuinely beautiful – not just
precise, but aesthetic. She even thought she was starting to detect a sense of humour. None of this
was reassuring from a chunk of circuitry. It was weird in a hair-prickling, unsettled way, like
watching a computer write poetry and the poetry turning out good.

She was giving away strikes, and losing blood, and her arms weren’t going to keep this up forever:
they already felt like they’d been laid flat on a steel counter and bashed repeatedly with a rolling-pin.
Her right shoulder was starting to twinge badly. She needed to take stock.

Her opponent was perfect. That was okay: perfection was a weakness too. It had the strength of a
seadweller, reaction time beyond organic thresholds, and really good instincts. Someone must have
loaded every sword manual ever written into its data banks; she had the dismal feeling it knew all her
moves already, even the ones she thought she’d made up. It didn’t need to conserve strength, it didn’t
get tired, and it didn’t feel pain.

Ah.

She knocked away a fluid thrust that would have drawn a murmur of approval back in the Pit, circle-
stepped in, and drove out a short, fast punch, her middle knuckle jutting beyond the others. It
connected: there was a clang as bone hit metal, and she snatched the hand back and then flung
herself awkwardly sideways. Not quite fast enough, the Strider’s edge clipped her left calf on the
way down, but it didn’t matter. She backed off another couple of paces. It hadn’t stopped the punch.

Pain. Pain was the answer.

Back in her first sweep of training, the instructor – not Vienna then, a greenblood whose name she’d since lost – had fielded a classic question: why didn’t Legislacerators wear armour? Cavalreapers went into combat wearing an entire tank apiece, and even Threshecutioners packed light plating so they didn’t have to worry about accidentally stabbing themselves with a canteen fork. Legislacerators wore chameleon suits or fatigues or just street gear, but nothing that would stop much more than a sharp stick, and after a couple of perigees of being more or less continuously kicked, hit, bitten, stabbed, thrown down steps, and set on fire, most of the trainees had begun to feel that maybe this wasn’t as hardass a USP as it had looked in the prospectus.

Armour makes you weak, the instructor had said simply. A troll in armour believes he is safe; he thinks himself invincible. We give armour to front-line infantry more for reasons of morale than for protection. A troll with armour is not so very much harder to kill than a troll without, but he feels as though he is. Wet-nosed troopers who flinch when a gun goes off will charge an ion battery if you let them wear some tinfoil on their chests. In the Legislacerature we have no use for illusions. The Legislacerator must always be close to pain, to death, lest he forget that they exist.

The Strider was a robot, and robots optimised. It blocked or avoided any attack that had the potential to damage it. A nerve strike, like the one she’d just used, didn’t even register. There were no nerves to strike. Because it couldn’t feel pain, it didn’t see pain as a threat.

She ducked another thrumming cut, side-stepped, waiting – if the air would shift just right –

There. As it moved past her to set up a new pattern of attacks, she stepped into its arc, like bumping into someone in the street on purpose, and pinched the join between neck and shoulder, where a troll would have a nice juicy nerve cluster. Her claws closed on cool segmented metal. A troll would have panicked, shoved her away: when you got this deep into someone’s personal space and hurt them, they forgot their training, unless they were really good, and just flailed for distance with elbows and hands and whatever they had. The Strider merely stopped, realising she was inside its effective strike radius, and then locked its arms tight around her back. Logical enough. It could crush her ribs and break her spine in ten seconds, probably.

She squeezed her left hand as hard as she possibly could.

Her two smaller claws snapped on the metal. The thumb and the two bigger claws broke the flexible coating of the neck joint with a gratifying crack and a stab of pain, and drove straight through into a tangle of wires. She hooked them as deep as she could and pulled –

A clot of circuitry ripped away like meat off a bone. She tossed it clear, her ribs squeezed tight against the robot’s steel chest, air squashed from her lungs, and drove the hand back in, this time with all four fingers jammed together. The sharp edges of the hole she’d torn peeled the skin off her hand as she forced it further in, up to the knuckles and past, her metacarpals crushed agonisingly together, but the blood made it easier – then relief, of a kind, as the hand went in wrist-deep. Now if she could just manage not to sever a major artery.

She couldn’t breathe. Her right arm was trapped and useless against her side, the sword forgotten. Her face was squashed sideways against the Strider’s shoulder and she could feel her spine creak. It felt like someone had put a metal bar across beneath her shoulderblades and then parked a groundcar on it. If one rib went, they’d all go. She could taste the metal of the Strider’s plating and hear her heart pounding, trapped, her toes were barely touching the ground any more, this whole thing was getting inappropriately erotic, what a stupid way to die –
Her clutching fingertips found something nice and fragile deep in a nest of wires, and crushed it. Then, on happy inspiration, she stretched up as high as she could so her mouth was against the underside of the cool steel throat, opened wide, and bit down.

Something crunched; she wasn’t sure if it was organic or not. Her mouth filled with blood and sparks and copper. She clamped her jaw tight and wrenched with her hand, twisting, gouging, forcing the arm even further in with the fingers splayed for maximum damage, and something was going to give and it sure as Hell wasn’t going to be her.

Somehow, even with the groan of tortured metal and the fizzle of exposed electronics and the roaring in her ears, she heard a soft and distinct pop. The weight on her back vanished. She slumped, gasping, as her lungs regained capacity and cold air punched her in the chest. All at once her left arm jammed somewhere down into the Strider’s chest cavity was the only thing holding her up, and she had a dreadful second where the metal edge cut clean into her flesh like a butcher’s knife, and then she slammed herself desperately forward and they both went down with a clattering, echoing crash.

She lay on top of the Strider. It didn’t move.

_Holy fucking shit,_ said Coolkid, sounding genuinely awed. _You bit him to death._

Straddling the fallen droid’s chest, she eased her arm gingerly out of the rent in its plating. She was very glad she couldn’t see her hand. Everything from the elbow down was one scalded mass of agony. She forced herself to flex the fingers, and confirmed that something, at least, was still there to flex. She spat out the bloody wad of metal and wire that filled her mouth and ran her tongue experimentally around slick teeth, finding only a couple of gaps. Her lips felt like she’d made out with a cheesegrater: they were ragged and chewed. Her ribs ached. Still, not too bad, considering.

She heard a long scrape of metal behind her. Then another.

White light –

The shock of it sent her stumbling backwards like a slap in the face. For a moment or two, all she had was colour, swirls and starbursts of it, too sudden and vivid to be stitched together into any sort of meaningful shape. She was out of practice. Red and black and white and yellow, bright and painful, all of them happening at once. She blinked, and found she could blink, which made her blink several more times.

“I can see!” she said, stupidly.

“Nah,” said Coolkid. “You’re just pretending.”

She was standing on a perfectly flat expanse of dark grey metal; _dark grey_ startled her even as it formed. The air was very hot, and smelt like a running engine. All around her, beyond and below the edges of the metal plateau, stretched what was quite literally a sea of fire. She’d watched an oil refinery burn once, from a circling copter, and the fluid that had gushed out of its ruptured tanks onto the surface of the surrounding ocean had caught light so it looked like the water was ablaze: a glowing, crawling tide of orange on black. This was several steps further along. If there was any water under this fire, you couldn’t make it out.

Still blinking, she turned and looked.

A young man was standing ten feet away from her, loose and slouching, his hands buried in his jeans pockets. He wore a long-sleeved top with a black circle design of some sort on the chest, and dark glasses with big lenses. His face was lit up orange by the fire-ocean, and so was his hair, which was
weird: as if it had no colour of its own.

Then she noticed he had no horns. An alien! Terezi had long ago stopped being impressed by aliens, but this one was interesting. He was *almost* trollish, but not quite – with a pair of fake horns and some hair dye, he could probably have passed. Some related species, perhaps? Intriguing. Also, he was tall, with nice shoulders, and the flickering sea-light accentuated cheekbones you could have cut your tongue on. It really was hot up here.

“Sup,” he said. His mouth barely moved.

“Coolkid?”

“Yo.”

“Am I dead?”

“Nah.”

There was a pause.

“Um,” she said.

“Nice,” he said. “See you’ve played this game before. AJ?” And he held out one hand. For a moment she thought he’d pulled a full glass of water out of his jeans pocket, which was impossible, but then she realised the glass had *appeared* somewhere during the movement.

“No thankyou,” she said, “my lusus told me never to take drinks off strange aliens. Is this a virtuality?”

He scratched his hair with the hand that had been holding the glass, and now wasn’t. “Not so much. Sorry about the change of scene, I didn’t have time to give you a heads-up.”

She thought back. “Two blades, behind me. It sounded like more Striders.”

“Yeah. They’re still there, but I’ve – slowed ‘em down, kind of. They’re not going to give us any shit while we’re in here.” The corner of the mouth twitched in what might have been a very tiny grimace. “Second we go real-time instead of turn-based, though, you’re gonna get Ginsu’d.”

She swallowed. In here – wherever here was – nothing hurt: she glanced down at her left hand, which she hadn’t thought to do before, and it looked just like she remembered her hands looking, small and grey and bony. A few calluses and the old scar by her wrist, but no damage. But from the way it had been hurting a minute ago, she didn’t think she could trust it with a sword-hilt, and the way the first Strider had fought...

“I am not sure I can take two of them,” she said carefully, “not at once.”

“You can’t,” he said firmly. “Fact you took the first one was a fucking miracle, trust me. I know how good those things are. Two of ‘em are going to turn you into Kibbles ’n Bits.” Then, unexpectedly, he grinned. It was cat-flicker quick, and skewed to one side of his mouth, and she liked it instantly. “Lucky for you, I’m selling these fine leather jackets.”

“Can you help me?”

“Course I fucking can. It’s what I’m here for. But we’re going to have to take some steps, and I don’t know if you’re going to be cool with it.”
She moved a little closer. He did too, narrowing the gap until they were arm’s-length from each other. His face shimmered orange and black, impassive, as he looked down at her. He moved like a swordsman, she noticed: that careful placing of the weight, less sparse than Vienna, more casual, but quite deliberate. She wondered what kind of blade he used. Something heavy, with his height and the reach those arms must give him. He’d be fast, too: you’d need to get under his guard early, close the distance until you could get your claws into him, like she’d done with the robot. Not that she wanted to get her claws into him, of course! He was a friend.

Well. Maybe just get her claws a very little way into him. Just to hear what kind of noise he’d make.

“What steps did you have in mind?” she said.

“Okay, here’s the thing,” he said. “Right now, you’ve got some holes in you, and you’re also completely fucking blind. Maybe with one or the other, you can still kick ass, but with ‘em both, you’re really not going to be on your A-game. Am I right? Like, Zatoichi was a stone cold son of a bitch, but the day he slammed his hand in the car door I figure even he stayed home and watched Ally McBeal.”

“I am still awesome!” she said stubbornly. “But perhaps slightly less awesome than usual.”

“Yeah. I can’t do much about the holes, I ain’t Jade. But I reckon I can do something about the other part.”

“Coolkid!” she said, and was suddenly overcome with the awareness that this was really him: this was the voice in her head, the sarcastic little commentary track she’d been carrying around with her every minute of the last sweep, the voice that had made her laugh and told her where and when to move and that she’d had long sleepy conversations with in the warm darkness of her recuperacoon. He was standing right in front of her, close enough to hug. Deep fondness surged up from somewhere beneath her ribs. “You have been my eyes for a long time, now.”

He jerked his head impatiently. “Nah, I don’t mean my audio description for the partially sighted bullshit. I’m talking about setting you up so you can actually get a good look at the Mr Roboto motherfuckers fixing to exsanguinate your ass.”

“Are you serious?”

“Whoa, whoa.” He held up a hand, palm out. He had long fingers. “There’s a catch.”

She waited.

He sighed, and said, “We’d have to integrate. Like, all the way. We’d – the science shit kind of confuses me, but it’d be a whole Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup kind of a deal, you got your coolkid in my crazy blind ninja! Total synaptic overlay. Real candle light and soul forever boundaries-what-boundaries stuff, like those late-game techs in Alpha Centauri where it’s all the perfect synthesis... of human and machine and you’re like fuck sake just give me a gravship already.” He did the tiny grimace again. “Like I say. Big ask.”

She stared at him, which was still kind of fun. “Like we did back in the bunker?”

“Nah. Way worse. You remember just after we started hanging out, back in the hospital, when I told how to block shit off if you didn’t want me to see it? That stuff’s all getting tipped out on the carpet like it’s Lego bricks, you’re gonna have to wear deck shoes in the house.”

“I assumed you’d seen all of that when you, um, borrowed me,” she said, awkwardly.
“No! Shit, I’d have told you.” He looked wounded. “That stuff all stayed under wraps. It was like—you dozed off in the passenger seat, okay, and I took the wheel for a bit? But it’s still your car. The glove compartment’s locked, so are the trunk and back, and you know your rights so I’mma need a warrant for that. This would be some serious co-ownership under the law shit. You know, meet the parents, flow holy like matrimony bells, next thing you’re wearing my Rolex. All walking in and chatting to me when I’m in the bath like it ain’t no thing, maybe the living room would look better in blue, dropping hints about how I’d make a great dad. That is the level of mutual business contamination we are talking here.”

She was still trying to sort this out when an arresting possibility struck her. “Would I get to see all your secrets, too?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“All of them?”

“Even the really shitty ones. I jacked it to Jenny from *Bucky O’Hare* and I don’t regret a Goddamn thing.”

“Even your name?”

He paused, and then said, “Hell, no secret there, girl. Name’s Dave.” And he stuck his hand out at hip level. “Pleased to meet you.”

She shook the hand solemnly, and said, “Hello, Dave! I am Terezi.” Then she tried it out again. “Dave. Yes, it sort of suits you. But I thought you lost it in a game?”

“Turns out the game went into extra time,” he said, “and we ain’t lost yet. But we better get a move on here, ‘cause Scratch and Grinder out there aren’t going to be on the slow train forever. What’s the verdict?”

Terezi thought carefully. The fire was a slow background rumble, like heavy static.

“Option One,” she said, “you and I – link consciousnesses, somehow. I let you into every little corner of my pan, and you think between the two of us we can defeat the Striders?”

“Oh, Hell yes,” he said dismissively. “All those savage cats know that I was strapped with gats when they were cuddling a Cabbage Patch.”

“Option Two: I die.”

He nodded. “Heck of a way to die, though. You’re already the only troll who ever took down a Strider hand-to-hand, and I bet you can do some damage before these guys get you. The Legend of Terezi Pyrope, right? Be there on a platter. The chick so tough it took three Striders to bring her down.”

She tilted her head and regarded him. “You sound as though you are trying to talk me into Option Two.”

The dark glasses looked back at her steadily. Flame glimmered on them like beads of water. “I just want you to know I’m down for whatever. You wanna die hard, babe, I’m your Zeus Carver.”

“Could you leave?” she said. The heat was starting to make her dizzy; the metal under her feet didn’t feel as stable as it had. “If I died. Could you get away?”
“Yeah.” And one shoulder lifted an inch in the tiniest, most ostentatiously unbothered shrug she had ever seen. “Ain’t gonna.”

“Well, that is rubbish,” she said decisively. “I don’t mind killing me, but I am certainly not killing you! I pick Option One, please, and when I have killed all the robots I am going to roll around in your secrets like a happy oinkbeast. What do we do?”

She got the grin again, for that.

“I had this whole routine worked out with red and blue jelly beans,” he said, “but it wasn’t a fair choice. Let’s go with the classics, yeah?” And he stepped in, hooked an arm round under her shoulderblades, bent his head and kissed her.

He was very warm, and the arm round her back was holding her tight, and his mouth tasted sticky-sweet, like fruit juice. She got two fistfuls of his shirt front and tugged him closer with a contented little noise, and she was just wondering how he felt about teeth when something twitched in her mind, like a dream breaking or a memory shaken loose –

The air temperature dropped thirty degrees in an instant. Pain rushed up her left arm like she’d stuck it in a bowl of boiling water, and splashed on half a dozen other places. She was crouched, her right hand on her sword-hilt, and the colour hadn’t gone away. If anything, it had grown brighter.

She stood up slowly, and turned. It was like nothing she’d ever seen. It was a rainbow. She knew, from memories of similar installations, that the walls of a facility like this would be drab grey or perhaps beige, the floor would be untreated metal, the lights would be cold white argon. She’d spent a lot of time with the grey-and-beige palette: killing someone had always been as welcome for the colour as for anything else. But now the background tone, the default, was a rich and textured blue like the deep ocean, and through it ran lines and grids and blocks and rings of warmer colour, acid green and fire orange and delicious candy scarlet. It was like having infra-red, ultra-violet, and every other kind of augmented optics trait she’d ever uploaded, only she wasn’t wearing a plug. She could see yellow fans of wiring, a fat red stripe that must be a hot water duct. She completed the turn and there were the Striders, two tall bodies crisp in rippling yellow-green, their blades a clean pale blue, their eyes standing out orange. They were moving towards her, sluggishly, with strange drifting steps. One’s blade was rising gradually to shoulder height.

It’s beautiful, she thought. Is this how you see the world?

Yeah, came Coolkid’s voice, except it was different now. Always before he’d talked like someone standing just behind her shoulder: in the early days she’d often twitched with the reflex to turn around. Now it was like hearing her own thoughts. The word rose from her mind as naturally as her own words did. It was like a play or a song she knew so well that the second line came up as soon as the first finished, without even having to reach for it. It’s a mash-up of different sensory inputs all squashed together through a visual filter to make them easier to sort out. Machines, people, they all kind of look the same from up here. It’s all just heat and clockwork. Shit, watch it, they’re catching up –

The two Striders were speeding up visibly as they drew nearer. The one on the right had brought its blade all the way up behind its head, and was beginning a diagonal slash downwards. She had a brief, vivid memory of a rooftop: of heat, burning white light on concrete, and of a sword coming down just like that. What had she done?

She parried, turned, struck. The tall man in the shades huffed out a breath as the bokken thumped him in the stomach. Hot red sparks spurted from the Strider’s side and it staggered backwards: she smelt hot metal and burning plastic. Nice move, dude, her bro said, and ruffled her hair. Looks like I’m
getting dinner tonight, and her chest went so tight with pride she wanted to scream, to yell triumph at
the strange blue sky, but she bit it down and gave him a curt nod because that was what you did.

The other Strider had begun a strike. She could see every position the blade would take up, one
continuous blurring arc of frames, and she knew instinctively that if she blocked it there or there he’d
turn it into a tricky sideways cut, because he always did: so she stepped the other way, through the
blade’s future before it happened, and drove her own sword through a cluster of yellowy circuitry in
her brother’s chest with a wet crunch of metal. It fell away, sputtering. She followed through and
swept the sword round, and its head clanged and bounced away into a corner of the room.

*Oppan Gangnam style,* said her brain approvingly.

She moved dreamlike to the door, the rainbow world shifting and blurring as the input pattern
changed: air currents, tiny fluctuations in temperature she’d never bothered to notice. She knew
without touching the handle that the room on the other side was empty. It felt empty, a big hollow
space with no spikes of heartbeat or jagged lines of electromagnetic activity.

*What’s the range on this?*, she thought.

*About ten feet useful,* came the answer, which she’d known all along. *Beyond that stuff gets fuzzy. I
ain’t Rose. I was always more for living in the now, you know? Any given now.*

*I am glad to have you in the now with me,* she thought, and stepped onto the great cold-iron arching
blue-green lattice of the stairs.

* * *

The chamber at the top was grand and vaulted, its ceiling lost in murky purplish blur. The air tasted a
little hotter than downstairs: tangy with dust and sharp with electrons. Her chewed-up hand pulsed
hot and bright at her side. Round the walls were banks of activity, rippling raindrop windows caught
and streaked by orange light, but the centre held the main event: a great tower of tech, yellow as
daffodils, built around and beneath and above a single smooth blue cylinder about as long as her
forearm. It smelt clean, like an evening breeze in Bright Season.

*Yahtzee,* said Dave.

*Sollux should have disengaged the locks by now,* she thought, *but we’d better check – and someone
stabbed her in the back.*

A claw of burning metal locked between her shoulderblades and twisted. Her muscles snapped tight,
arms flung wide, and she barely felt the sword-grip slither from her splayed fingers. Her new
delicious colours swirled up and over her like a wave at sea and the cold floor kicked her hard in the
side of the jaw. Spider-threads of white agony scuttled down her arms and thighs, and she
shuddered.

“Hey, bitch,” said Vriska Serket’s voice, faint and echoing from somewhere above and behind her.

A stun cartridge. Fifty feet range, silent delivery, hurt like fury, and made using your limbs a
challenge roughly equivalent to picking locks with a chunk of soft grub cheese. The
Legislacerature’s favourite non-lethal suppression weapon. One moment, a fiery young demagogue
standing on a barricade waving a home-made banner and yelling about liberty: the next, a
whimpering, shivering, drooling sack of fried nerve-endings and sloppy meat, ready to be flung in
the back of a cruiser or nailed up to a wall.

A warm slime of blood and saliva was trickling from the slack corner of Terezi’s mouth and slicking
the floor against her cheek. She hadn’t pissed herself, which was some small consolation. She flopped both arms against the metal and pushed: it was like trying to lift a truck. Her left hand made a wet crunch and stars burst behind her eyes. There was no way to make this dignified or cool, she just had to get up, get this slab of dead tissue off the ground before Vriska went for the skinning knife –

“Oh, man,” came the voice. It was a little clearer now; some of the fog had rolled back. “This was totally worth the wait.”

She couldn’t spare the energy to grimace. She pushed again and managed to lock her left elbow at forty-five degrees. Some scrabbling with a foot yielded the tentative suggestion of maybe one day walking again, wild dream as it sounded. Her knee informed her it had given up bending as a bad habit: she told it to shut the fuck up and drove down hard, getting cool air in beneath her ribs. She was so defenceless like this it turned her stomach: if someone were to step very methodically on the bent right elbow and then put their weight on it... But her Coolkid-vision, blurry and shaky and somehow out-of-focus as it had gone, was still working, and there was no-one within range. Vriska was watching the show.

C’mon, babe, said Dave urgently. We can do this. Keep pushing. Show this chick who she’s fucking with.

Vriska, she thought, knows exactly who she’s fucking with, and heaved. Five seconds’ awkward clawing and flailing got her up on both knees and her right hand, her body howling in protest. There was nothing to cling onto: she was wide out in the open. Nothing for it but to grit her teeth and drag one thigh up higher, brace the sole of one boot against the ground –

She was standing. Everything hurt. The floor felt slippery and uncertain, and she was swaying like a drunk cadet. And there was Vriska, a jagged silhouette of colour-contours, her hair a deep blue mane, her bionic eye seven merciless points of red.

Something was wrong. Vriska’s left arm – it tasted weird, the colour patterns weren’t like the rest of her, they were too neat and cold and precise –

“You’ve had some work done,” she managed, through lips that felt thick and flabby.

The muscles of Vriska’s face shifted and squirmed. It took Terezi a second to figure out she was grinning. “You like it? Try it out!”

The punch was so fast. She’d forgotten how fast Vriska was. Had it landed properly, it would have stoved the whole side of her face in like a polystyrene sheet and left her choking on lumps of her own jaw. She jerked her head back far enough to save the face, but not the nose, which burst like a dropped egg, spattering hot blood and slime all the way to her ear. The world spun again, and the floor caught her so her teeth rattled.

She clawed herself up to hands and knees and a boot landed square in her gut, flipping her over on her back to flap and wriggle like a distressed grub. She tried to suck in a lungful of air and got seventy percent blood, which set her coughing and spitting and making pathetic little wheezing noises. Vriska cackled.

“Good, huh? Better than the real thing, am I right? Smooth as silk, and I can crush steel with this baby!”

Terezi rolled her head far enough sideways to spit more blood, clearing her mouth, and said weakly, “It is lovely! With that, and the eye, and me being blind and semi-paralysed, I think we are almost even.”
“You’re really going to talk about even –” said Vriska, stepping in, and Terezi hit her in the side of the knee as hard as possible with the edge of her hand.

The leg didn’t break, but it caved, and before Vriska could catch her balance Terezi was on her, dragging, clawing, driving her forward and down so they both crashed together into the base of the central tower. Terezi landed a sloppy punch to the gut that knocked free a surprised breath, and then jammed her ruined hand into the spider-tangles of hair and twisted and pulled. Vriska yelped and flailed. A tangle of sweat and leather and sticky blood and hatred, and this would be the last time, it had to be, they couldn’t come back from this one; there was too much damage, now, the car was over the cliff. She could see the colours swirling, shifting, as the other girl’s muscles moved beneath her. Vriska jerked a knee up, but she was ready for that and rolled to the side, stayed on top, jabbed for the throat with her fingers locked tight. Too slow, and now Vriska had freed the bionic arm. It caught her in the side of the skull like a crowbar. Fireworks burst and she fell half-sideways, the hot electric sizzle of claws tearing her arm almost lost in the shock. There was no saving the move, so she rolled with it, went for distance. The adrenaline was convulsing her muscles back into temporary function, like electrodes on a dead frog. She found her feet, somehow –

Vriska was up too. They faced each other, panting. Three seconds. Six. Neither of them moved.

“One of us is going to die here,” Terezi said quietly. “You know that. We can’t keep playing this game.”

“Aw, don’t be so negative!” said Vriska. “I get a bonus if I bring you in alive.”

Even under the pain and the spreading numbness she felt her guts twist. She had been so sure this wouldn’t happen, couldn’t happen: that Vriska’s ideals, warped and piecemeal as they were, would prevent her signing on that particular dotted line; that the Condesce, with twelve divisions of Threshecutioners under her personal command, could never be desperate enough to hire a mercenary, still less one with a record like Vriska’s.

“You once told me you would never take orders again!” she said, like this was a matter for idle surprise: you’ve changed your hair!

“Who’s taking orders?” said Vriska, and laughed. “I was going to kill you anyway. Some bitch on a throne tells me she’ll give me a billion bucks and a solid gold gaper just for pulling a trigger I been meaning to pull for sweeps, what am I gonna do, say no?”

“The old Vriska would have said no just to annoy her.”

“Cause you’re the expert on the old Vriska.”

Yes, Terezi thought. The only one who’s still alive, and she sighed. “We could have been amazing, you know.”

She felt Vriska’s pulse spike, saw the minute shift in heat patterns as hot blue blood rushed to her skin, and heard the weird ugly shift in her voice as she said, “We were amazing. Then you went and fucked it all up.”

“I’m fascinated to know – “

“We were perfect!” Vriska burst out, and there was something so raw and blistered there now that Terezi would once have felt triumphant. “We were a team, Pyrope, the best team, no-one could fucking stop us. They’d have known our names on every planet in the Empire! We’d have been a story to scare grubs with. Then you went and got hot for teacher.”
The last three words dripped like molten iron. Off-balance, Terezi said stiffly, “My relationship with Exquisitioner Triava had no conceivable relevance to the performance of my official duties – “

“Oh, shut the fuck up,” said Vriska, sounding genuinely disgusted. “Don’t feed me that personal not professional bullshit. You went to all the same boring-ass lectures I did, they’re the same thing in the Corps.”

It was true, and she knew it. Your private life got muddied with the job as a rule in the military, and nowhere was that worse or more toxic than in the Legislacerature. The implanted psychodynamics bonded you so tightly with your team that it was like no-one else really existed at all, which was the point: the true Legislacerator only saw other Legislacers as people. All the root-level muck that triggered in a cupie around other sentient beings – empathy, concern, affection – was meant to afflict a Lacerator only in the presence of someone else who wore the scales. As a consequence, the statistics on Lacerator relationships made depressing reading. Fewer than 20% of ex-Corps personnel who survived to retirement managed to hold down a long-term pairing of any colour with someone who had not themselves been in the Corps: that figure dropped to 5% when you included anyone who’d been in the military. Most ex-Lacerators died alone, which was perhaps why so many never bothered surviving to ex.

She spat out some more blood and said, “Vriska, there is this thing now called quadrants.”

Again the flare of heartbeat. “You think that’s it? You think I was jealous?”

She shrugged, which was actually a pretty bad idea: none of those muscles were happy with her. “Weren’t you?”

There was a pause. Then Vriska gave one of her little quick squawks of laughter and said, in a new, lighter tone, “You know what? Maybe I was. Maybe I didn’t like you always being her favourite. Maybe I didn’t like you fucking somebody else. Maybe I wanted you all to myself! But, hey, look – ” and she spread her arms, flesh and metal. “Matesprit’s dead. Moirail’s dead. Baby, all you’ve got is me.”

Terezi fought down a useless urge to snarl. “Sollux is not dead.”

“Well, okay, no. Not yet. But I’ve got to tell you, he ain’t looking too good.” Vriska grinned. “Lying on his back, twitching around, shitty mustard blood leaking all over the place. Is that meant to happen when you jack into the cyberwebs, or is it like a special talent he has?”

She’s playing you, said Dave firmly. Don’t buy it. Fact she’s even bothering means she still doesn’t think she’s got the midichlorians to bring you down.

Terezi took a deep, painful breath and said, “So that’s it? That was the masterplan? Get me all on my own with some wine and a taser and tell me how much you want me back?”

Another squawk-laugh, this one louder and more genuinely amused. “Bitch, please! Want you back? You’re a fucking mess, baby. All small and blind and kind of chewed-up looking. I can’t believe I ever brought my bulge within six feet of you.”

“If you’ll bring it a little closer,” Terezi said levelly, “I will be more than happy to tear it off your body and shove it down your lying throat.”

“Oh snap!” said Vriska gleefully, and she’d be doing the big-surprised-eyes thing, Terezi knew, even with only one eye. “Girl, I didn’t think you had it in you any more! What happened to a Legislacerator puts aside emotion as a grown troll does a toy?”
“I’m tired of you, Vriska,” she said, and she’d meant it as a taunt but as she said it she realised it was true. “You got boring sweeps back. You’re not a likeable person, and you’ve done some terrible things. And if nothing else, I owe you for Vienna.”

“Well, I owe you for my eye, honey,” said Vriska. “So I guess we’ve both got some debts to settle, huh?”

They moved.

For some reason, neither of them tried anything tricky, this time. As a sparring bout, it would have been met in the Pit with a round of enthusiastic applause and a double commendation. They fought as Legislacerators: jab, block, overhand, parry, snapped kick, leg block, open palm, no sound but the rhythmic whip and slap of combat and the occasional grunt or huff of breath. Vriska’s moves were as fresh in her mind as they’d ever been – the wobble on the one stance-shift she’d never quite got the hang of, that weird little jabbing three-finger strike that wasn’t in any official manuals and that Terezi had always wondered where she’d picked up. Vienna, she realised with an odd little twist of sorrow, would have been proud. The two finest Legislacerators of their generation, duelling beneath the Palace for the honour of the Empire.

But it wasn’t going to work. The interval had given her time for her muscles to shake off the worst of the stun cartridge, but her limbs still felt slack and flabby; her arms and shoulders ached from fighting the Strider, her left arm was no good for anything more complex than blocking and elbow strikes, and her broken nose was bleeding like it never had any plans to stop, which left her swallowing blood like a rainbow drinker who hadn’t quite got the point. Her head was still ringing from getting cuffed with the robo-arm, too, which was fuzzing her perception. Without her new enhanced vision, she wouldn’t have lasted five seconds. With it, she was giving a decent account of herself – ducking away from the more obvious probability arcs, shifting slightly away from where Vriska was likely to be in half a second’s time – but she needed a Hell of a lot better than decent. Vriska had always been stronger than her, and faster too: bloodcaste was merciless there. Terezi had stayed ahead through smarts, and it was too late for smarts.

Bit by bit it came apart. A feint she fell for; a jab that made it through her guard somehow. She fell back a step, then another. Dave was with her, warning her, urging her on, but he was a swordfighter: she couldn’t feed off his techniques the way she had against the Striders, and her sword was fully twelve feet away, which was a hundred miles under present circumstances. In full health her guile and her fear and her rage might just have carried her through. But she was too weak, and too slow.

She stopped one with the elbow, feinted, stumbled back as she tried to keep her feet – her mouth was full of blood again, her throat, Vriska was a looming mass of hot colour and attack patterns too fast and numerous to track, right cross, jab, spear hand, a straight left that would have shattered her skull like ripe fruit, if she could just breathe, there was too much blood and her arms weren’t responding properly any more –

Vriska’s new metal fist hit her in the side, full force. She heard a clear snap like she’d stepped on a branch, and she went down in a heap, agony spreading out around her chest and gut like a match dropped on gasoline.

“Man!” said Vriska, somewhere far above her. “Not bad for a dead chick.”

Sorry, Coolkid, she thought sadly, between jolts of pain. I let you down.

Bullshit, he said. C’mon. It’s just a couple of ribs. You got a bunch more. On your feet, we can still take her.
You are a terrible liar! she thought, and found herself smiling.

She’d assumed Vriska would step in to finish her off – probably with her own sword, that was the kind of gesture which would appeal to her sense of the melodramatic – so when nothing happened for a few seconds, she rolled over just far enough to look. Vriska was nowhere near. She’d turned her back, and was standing over by the central tower, prodding at something Terezi was too fuddled to make out.

It would probably have been wise to play dead, but she didn’t think that was going to make any difference now, so she unstuck bloody lips and called weakly, “What are you doing?”

Vriska turned and gave her what was obviously a thumbs-up. “You know you gave me all that shit about following orders?”

“O ye of little faith! I don’t jump for anyone, Pyrope, you know that. Her Fishness tells me to go cut a bitch and I say three bags full ma’am? Please.” She stabbed at another control panel. “I went to her in the first place! It was all part of the plan. When they pulled me out of the wreckage, I knew where you’d gone. I told Condy I was the only person on the planet who could bring you in, and she bought it like the sucker she is. See, if you have one reason for doing something, these stupid assholes generally don’t go looking for another reason. I learnt that off you!” There was a clunk, and Terezi switched focus from Vriska’s skinny figure in time to see the claw-like braces holding the data core in place retract languorously. “Hey, your boy does good work. Anyhow, I came over all crazed with vengeance, you know, please boss, give me just one shot at the whore who took my eye, and she was smug as shit for finding herself such a perfect little weapon.” Yet again the horrible squawk. At least when she was dead Terezi wouldn’t have to hear it ever again. “So now here I am, a trusted employee, and they gave me full access – you imagine? They gave me access anywhere I wanted to go! I could have gotten head off the Chancellor if I told ‘em it was vital to Operation Pyrope! And now I’m going to walk right out with this data core, take it to some guys I know in Low City, and in a couple of days’ time I’ll be Empress.”

This was altogether too much to process. Even Dave just said What.

“Please tell me you are joking,” Terezi managed.

“Hell no! This baby’s the Heir, right? If you control this, you control the succession. That’s what Peixes was going to do. ‘Course, she thought she had a legitimate claim ‘cause of being Tyrian and all, but she was missing the point.” Vriska grinned. “This chunk of tech is a legitimate claim. That’s all the succession is any more. All the olde-worlde bloodright honour-duel stuff is obsolete. If she got her paws on the Heir, some fucking rustblood could end up running the show. I think it’s about time the Empire had a blueblood in charge, don’t you? Change of perspective. Bring lower-spectrum rights more to the centre of political discourse. I mean, not much lower, but who the fuck cares about yellow down?” She finished whatever she was doing with the controls, and crossed to the central column, where the data core sat unguarded, sky-blue and tranquil.

Girl, said Dave desperately, if you can just get to that sword, I swear to little baby Jesus –

“Empress Vriska Serket!” crowed the horrid voice. “Long may she reign.” And she reached up and grabbed hold of the cylinder.

Everything went white. For a moment, all Terezi’s senses blanked out simultaneously: not just her new sight, but hearing, smell, even touch, all engulfed in a sudden vast tide of total emptiness, so she hung in a great white void. Then everything rushed back in, including all the pain, and there stood
Vriska, where she’d been, one hand raised to her head. The data core lay abandoned at her feet.

“Wow,” she said. Then, “Yikes.”

*Oh my fuck,* said Dave.

“Wow!” said Vriska again. She looked over at Terezi. “Dave? Dave, is that you? Dude, check me out! I’m a girl! An alien girl! I’ve got claws, and – and horns, and I have this way cool robot arm, and – “ she glanced down – “I have *boobs!*”

“Barely,” muttered Terezi.

Vriska came trotting over. The walk was totally wrong. Instead of her usual predatory lope, it was a kind of enthusiastic semi-jog, the walk of someone who was legitimately just incredibly keen to see whatever was around the next corner. When she got to where Terezi lay sprawled she looked down.

“Man, are you okay?” she asked, sounding openly concerned. “You look awful. Hey, you’re a girl too! This is so cool. Let me give you a hand up, come on – ”

The next twenty seconds were painful and undignified, but Vriska didn’t seem to mind: she grabbed Terezi in exactly the wrong place twice, and at one point brushed against her breast and apologised awkwardly, but at the end of it they were both standing, somehow.

“John,” said Terezi. “Right?”

“That’s me!” confirmed Vriska. “You’re – Terezi, yeah? Sorry, it’s all still kind of a mess in here, I’m not getting recall as clean as I’d like.”

“What did you do to Vriska? Is she dead?”

“No!” Vriska said, horrified. “No, I just kind of borrowed her body and gave her some time to cool off. She’s really just sort of angry and wired-up and not thinking straight.”

“She is a psychotic, amoral, narcissistic murderer with chronic backstab disorder and delusions of grandeur,” Terezi said flatly. “*Please* trust me on this one.”

Vriska scratched her head. “Oh, she’s not so bad really. I mean, yeah, she’s all of that, okay, but she has some good stuff going on too! Like – hey, who’s Kanaya?”

“I’m Kanaya,” said Kanaya, stepping out rather nervously from behind a bank of monitors by the door. “Hello.”

“Hey!” said Vriska. “She is *super* into you. Like, in a really cute way, none of this weird biting and cutting stuff. It’s basically all just little fuzzy hearts in the bit of her head where you are. It’s adorable. Pleased to meet you, by the way, I’m John!” She turned back to Terezi. Kanaya had gone stock still and her face had spiked about ten degrees. “See? Not all bad. Love is really *important,* you know?”

“Dude,” said Terezi, “what the Hell is wrong with you.”

“Um. I don’t really understand what’s going on,” said Kanaya, “but an alarm has been raised. It seems likely that we will not be undisturbed here for very much longer.”

An awful thought struck her. “Vriska. John. Did you see Sollux? Before you... escaped. Did you talk to him?”

“I didn’t talk to anybody,” Vriska said, puzzled. “Someone disabled all the security protocols on my
core, but I don’t know who. Sollux – is he a really tall, really skinny guy in a Matrix duster?’’

“‘Yes!’”

“Oh, man.” She hesitated. “This funky eye thing is hooked up to some camera feeds. He’s a couple of levels down, and... I’m not going to lie, he doesn’t look so good.”

“We have to get back to him. The job’s done. We came here for you, and we’ve got you. Come on.”

But even as she turned towards the door she knew it was too late. She heard the now-familiar servomotor whirr as the first Strider appeared, hot metal outlined against the deep blue void of the doorway, and as it stepped inside and drew its blade another took its place. Then another. And another.

Kanaya backed over to them, reaching into her coat.

“Don’t draw a gun,” said Terezi fiercely. “Do you have a knife, or something?”

Kanaya paused, fumbled in the recesses of the coat, and then pulled out something very small. Terezi couldn’t make it out exactly: a little cylinder-shaped device with a tech signature she didn’t recognise. Miniaturisation, or matter compaction of some kind?

“Sort of,” said Kanaya.

“Okay. Glad you could make it, incidentally, Ms Maryam.”

“Does anyone have a hammer, at all?” asked Vriska. She sounded disconsolate. “Or anything, you know, hammer-like?”

“Just my dick,” said Terezi automatically, and then stopped. Sorry, said Dave. Too good to pass up. She cleared her throat. “I mean – no, I do not have a spare hammer. Can you manage?”

“I guess,” Vriska said sadly. “At least I have this super sweet robot arm.”

The Striders had spread out in a line: eight of them, now. Eight Striders. No-one was worth eight Striders. One Strider was a death sentence: two meant you’d been exceptionally annoying. Eight was just ridiculous. And Terezi had two broken ribs, a broken nose, a crushed hand, severe blood loss, and concussion; and a hundred feet below, her moirail was dying alone.

She stooped to pick up her sword in her good hand.

“Ladies!” she said, and spun the blade. “Let’s try and make this quick.”
The clown cultist didn’t speak: just led Sollux on a threading path between slopes of candy-striped canvas that bellied and shuddered in the night wind. The grass was muddy and churned-up, as though by hundreds of feet before them. Every so often Sollux had to step over a straining guy-rope or a metal peg jutting from the ground. He was glad of the coat. It was cold here.

The stories had been exaggerated. There were no rotting corpses held aloft in webs of tangled bunting; no heads on spikes, no creepy barkers with their mouths sewn shut, hawking cotton candy studded with fresh eyeballs. It just looked like a run-down funfair. Somehow, that made it worse. The booths and stalls stood dark and empty; one had collapsed in on itself. There was nothing to be seen in the tents they passed but blackness. A dilapidated merry-go-round, its musclebeasts stalled at intervals, still bright with garish paint and silly expressions. A deserted coconut shy, one coconut smugly intact on its post. Here and there, on an expanse of canvas or the back of a booth, someone had daubed a symbol in sticky purplish paint: a rough smiley face – two small circles for eyes, a bigger circle for the nose, and a long slashed curve for a mouth. The stars overhead were ice-white and pitilessly sharp.

As they picked their way along the edge of another marquee, he said, “You were him, weren’t you? The guy in the street. Outside Tinkerbull’s.”

“If you up and motherfucking say so, brother,” said the clown, and turned his head to favour Sollux with a wide and unsettling smile.

“Don’t jerk me around, man. How did you know? How long have you even been after me?”

“You get your think on for a second,” said the clown, this time without looking round. “You think on back some. You picture that righteous motherfucker all up in the street there, no sense even as to wear a coat in the motherfucking rain.” He stepped over a rope without breaking stride. “You picture any motherfucking shadow roundabout his gangly ass, little hacker?”

Sollux blinked, and thought. The concrete slick with rain, ripples swimming argon orange in puddles of black glass, and the cultist’s arms spread wide in benediction –

“Son of a b**ch,” he said.

The clown made a kind of clucking, tutting noise. “Shouldn’t do drugs, brother. Rust up your motherfucking pan, have you clean seeing all sorts of freaky shit as ain’t there.”

“How long?” Sollux demanded. “How fucking long have you been in my brain?”

“Mustard pot,” said the clown, “you ever hear a motherfucker giving say how as talking to your own motherfucking self’s the first sign of madness?”

“Yeah.”

The shaggy snarl of hair shook left, right, left, although the head still didn’t turn. “Talking to your own self ain’t no motherfucking sign of madness. First sign of motherfucking madness is when your own self starts up on talking back.”

Before Sollux could think of a smart answer to this, the clown suddenly and without warning swung left, beneath a pinned-back flap of canvas in the side of the tent they were circumnavigating. He followed, ducking his head so his horns didn’t catch on the fabric.
The interior of this tent, unlike the others he’d glimpsed, was warm and well-lit and smelt strongly of the sawdust covering the wooden boards that made up the floor. There was almost no furniture. The light came from a baroque crystal chandelier, improbably hung by a chain from the very apex of the conical roof, where the narrowing red and white stripes finally converged: it looked like it belonged in Villa Ampora, not a circus tent. Directly beneath the chandelier was a chair set on stilt legs, so that its seat was fully six feet off the floor. Its occupant was a slightly-built individual wearing a perfect white tailcoat over an acid green shirt that reminded Sollux of the candies he’d eaten with Terezi on the tunnel platform. His breeches and boots were spotless white, one knee crossed lazily over the other, and instead of a head he had a smooth and entirely featureless white sphere. One gloved hand trailed down over the side of the chair, holding what looked like a bright green length of rope; after a moment’s confusion Sollux realised it was a horsewhip.

He didn’t have much time to spend on the ringmaster, though. Four metal cages, each cylindrical and taller than a troll, stood around the chair: two in front, two behind, like towers. Three were apparently empty. The fourth – in front of the chair, to Sollux’s left – held a young woman in a long black dress tied at the waist with a purple sash. Her hands gripped the bars of the cage, and her hair was so pale it was almost white.

She saw him, and her eyes widened slightly, but she didn’t move.

“Ah, Mr Captor,” said the ringmaster. He had no mouth, but the voice was clear and cool and precise: neat vowels, and consonants bitten cleanly off. “Good evening. Thank you for joining us. My name is Scratch.”

Sollux glanced up at him, then back to Rose. “Nice suit. What are you? Security autonomic? AI?”

“Something rather more sophisticated than either,” said Scratch, “but yes, if it helps, you may think of me as an exceptionally complex artificial intelligence. It’s a term I dislike: what makes one intelligence more artificial than another? But these labels do stick, alas.”

“Yeah, I’ve got a few other things you can stick,” said Sollux. “Get my friend out of that cage or the circus is leaving town in a big fucking way.”

“Your loyalty does you credit! The last time you met our Ms Lalonde, she sold your brain to a hungry god. I’d thought you might be at least a little piqued.” Scratch shifted in his chair. “Tell me, have you been introduced to Mr Makara?”

Sollux turned. The clown cultist, who was still standing at his right elbow, turned too and stuck out a long-fingered hand, claws ragged and stained at the tips. Sollux ignored it, and said, “Makara?”

The clown tilted his head to the side in acknowledgement. “That’s the name.”

“No way,” said Sollux. “No fucking way. Gamzee Makara? You’re the guy from the story. The one who found the Carnival. You’re dead.”

“Too motherfucking right,” said the clown affably. “This is one dead-ass motherfucker you’re up and getting your gossip on with.”

“This is horseshit,” said Sollux, but he knew it wasn’t. The clown’s code patterns had been baffling him all the time they’d been picking their way between the tents. He had the signature of an organic – none of the clean lines of a program, even an AI, but the distinctive jumble of a meatspace user – yet there was no sign of a hard link: no magic thread trailing back along the fibres of the medium to an interface or a gateway. Either a program had been very, very skilfully disguised to look like an organic, complete with all the redundancies and inefficiencies, or an organic had somehow been cut
loose to operate as a program. The former seemed sort of pointless. The latter was meant to be impossible. But there was no wind in the medium, either.

“I assure you,” said Scratch. “My associate is no longer alive. He has, biologically speaking, ceased to be. He is an ex-Makara.”

Gamzee smiled.

Sollux shook himself. He was clearly meant to ask – what? how? – and he wasn’t going to give anyone in this freakshow the satisfaction.

“Listen,” he said, facing Scratch again, “I love what you’ve done with the place, but I promised I’d finish a job, and I’m going to finish it no matter how many dead girlfriends and fucked-up glitch loops and asshole clowns you throw at me, so can we cut the shit here? Get Rose out of the cage and get the fuck out of my way, or I’m going through you. Clock’s running.”

He was surprised to find it wasn’t just bravado. There was an anger boiling in him now he hadn’t felt since before the crash: not the weary contempt on which he’d strung his nights of exile, the shambling, dumb resentment that had filled his pan like static, a clouded haze of cheap beer in green glass bottles and red pills popped from plastic blisters and shot glasses brimming with clear liquid, trash spilt in damp back alleys and the sour tang of vomit in his nose. Seeing Aradia, dead and solemn and alone, had shaken something free: a memory of rage, at least. It was an old rage, quick and fierce, and he hugged it to him like hot coffee on a winter morning. All of this was code, and he broke code.

Scratch made an elegant gesture with the hand that wasn’t holding the whip. “Ah, yes. Unforgivably remiss of me. Mr Makara is dead, and I was never alive, but you? You, Mr Captor, are dying, and I understand it accentuates the short-term somewhat.” Then he leant forward a little: no dramatic movement, just a slight hunching of the narrow shoulders. The chair creaked. “How would you like to stop dying?”

Sollux stared at him.

“I got the impression everyone stops dying, in the end,” he said.

“Droll,” said Scratch, “but not what I had in mind. No, I am talking about... not life, exactly, but something better. Afterlife, perhaps.”

“I cannot spare a fucking moment to talk about the Sufferer,” said Sollux levelly.

The tone of voice suggested Scratch would have wrinkled his nose, if he’d had one to wrinkle. “Oh dear. No, nothing so provincial. I’m not here to foist any pamphlets on you, Mr Captor; I have too much respect for your intelligence, which is, in fact, rather the point.” He sat back again. “I have a very simple offer to make. Will you hear me out? Your acceptance is in no way presupposed.”

“You’ve got thirty seconds. After that, Nellie the tuskbeast’s packing her hydrostatically prehensile proboscis.”

“I have never understood why that particular ditty re-emerged in Alternian,” said Scratch thoughtfully. “The joke doesn’t work any more. Ah well. The offer is this. Regardless of your success or failure in retrieving the Heir and propagating regime change – oh, don’t look like that – you personally are in a great deal of trouble. Your body is, if you’ll forgive my bluntness, collapsing. You have already entered metabolic shutdown and interparenchymal haemorrhage, and total cardiopulmonary arrest is but a few tottering steps away. I don’t need to be a Seer –” he twitched the
free hand towards Rose, who kept very still, staring at Sollux through the bars – “to see that your future is not a healthy one.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Sollux, although hearing it laid out so clinically in that clipped, relentless voice made his hands shake a little at his sides. He jammed them in his pockets so Scratch wouldn’t notice. “Knew that when I buzzed in.”

“You know it,” Scratch replied, “but as so often, Mr Captor, I don’t believe you’ve understood it. All rational minds shrink from death. Your intelligence does not exempt you. You have come this far on adrenaline and terror and ambition precisely because you dare not turn and confront the darkness at your heels. You will die, and be dead: there will be nothing left of you. Or perhaps you’ll survive? Comatose, vegetative, floating for a hundred nights in a stasis cocoon before the decision is made to turn you off. If you’re lucky, paralysis only from the neck down. I’m sure someone will wheel you out into the garden now and then so you can listen to the birds singing.”

“Fucking fantastic,” said Sollux tightly. “Why don’t you tell me some more shit about how fast I’m turning into slurry? Really helps me relax and pay attention.”

Scratch spread his arms. The whip had vanished, somehow; the point must have been made. “Death need not be the end, Sollux. I can set you free.”

Sollux glanced instinctively to his right, where the clown still stood, watching him. Makara’s head bowed in assent. “You best get your motherfucking listen on, brother,” he said sternly. “Some wicked holy truths all being gotten spoke in here tonight.”

“On the third day he rose again, in accordance with the Scriptures,” said Scratch. “Poor Gamzee died finding his way back to me! And now his faith has been rewarded, for he lives on in my service. This is the Carnival, my friend. We have no need for flesh.”

“Hold the fucking ’phone. You’re saying you can – what? Store my consciousness, somehow? Back up the data? That’s impossible.”

“To Alternian technology, absolutely,” Scratch agreed. “I am not Alternian technology. I am far older than your Empire, and far wiser too. It would be the work of a moment to snip the thread that tethers your scintillating mind, with all its youth and force and grand ideas, to a leaking heap of meat for which you never expressed much fondness.” He leant forwards again. “You could be free, Sollux! Free as you’ve always wanted! Free to soar on shining wings above the infinite canals and palaces of knowledge. A universe of data, and no walls to hold you back. A mind of such power and dexterity is too rare a thing to waste on death. You should live, and sit at my right hand, as the sinister Mr Makara does at my left.”

Sollux hesitated. He remembered how it had felt when he’d first tried the honey, and buzzed back in after perigees, in that weird half-finished loft with the muzzle of Kanaya’s slicer ten prickling feet from his spine. He remembered the atomic fire that had surged along his limbs, and the sense of depth, of dimensions snapping back into place around him. Before the crash, he’d sometimes wondered if seadwellers felt the same way when they hit the water: when their gillslits flexed and their vision sharpened and they could move any way they wanted, not just back and forward, left and right. That time in the loft, he’d known it for a fact. It had been like being able to breathe again.

“While we have the body, and our soul is corrupted with its poison, we can never truly gain what we desire – which is, we claim, the truth,” said Scratch, as if reading his mind, which was in fact pretty likely. “For the body burdens us with a thousand duties by reason of its need to be maintained; and furthermore, if disease strikes us, it delays us in our quest for the truth. And the body fills us with affections and desires and fears and all sorts of fancies and endless nonsense, so that, as they say,
we really and truly cannot think about anything at all. And all wars and revolutions and battles
spring from the body and its desires, nothing else: it is the pursuit of money that causes conflict, and
it is the body that compels us to seek money, since we are slaves in its service. So in fact we see
clearly that, if we want to attain pure knowledge, we must be free from the body, and must look with
the soul alone. That’s Plato; which in your case you have not got.”

“And I’d be, what,” Sollux said, trying to sound like it was a neat idea but he could see some flaws.
“Your servant, or something?”

Scratch inclined his strange white head. “Or something. A little more than a servant, though a little
less than an equal. An agent, perhaps? Or an angel, if you like. I hung nine nights on the World-Ash,
Mr Captor: mine is the kingdom, the power and the glory. Patient, watchful Gamzee is my Memory,
but you? With your speed, and your fire? You would be my Thought.”

He said, “I’ve got a friend back in meatspace. I said I’d get back to her.”

“No,” said Scratch kindly, “you didn’t. She said she’d get back to you. You very carefully avoided
saying any such thing, because you were perfectly aware that on the slim chance you survived
immersion in the Imperial network, you would emerge with the physical and mental faculties of a
baked potato. A lie of omission, but a merciful one, I think.”

Thinking of Terezi reminded him, and he felt a jolt of self-loathing at being too wrapped up in
Scratch’s panorama to think of it before. “What about everyone else?” he said. “I’m not saying I buy
this, but say I did. You break the link, I stay here in the medium. What happens to my friends?”

Scratch paused, apparently considering this. Then he said, “I assume Ms Pyrope is your primary
concern?”

“Yes.”

“She is doing rather well, as a matter of fact. I have an eye on her. She encountered some difficulties
with a Strider unit, but, through a combination of martial prowess and sheer determination, appears to
have vanquished it. I doubt any other aspect of Palace security will give her much trouble after that.”

Sollux didn’t bother hiding the grin. “Hell yes,” he said. “What about Vantas and Leijon?”

“Untroubled. And they will remain so. No-one has to die here, Sollux. Your friends will be allowed
to leave the Palace unmolested. The formidable Ms Pyrope will in all probability be offered a job. I
have no interest in amassing a body count, and nor, once the threat to her crown is past, will the
Empress.”

He bit his lip, and said, “Okay. Here’s the deal. You let me do my job, and free the Heir. After that,
I’m all yours. You can turn me into an angel or use me to defrag your hard drive or whatever the
fuck you want, I won’t care any more.”

“Ah. No, that won’t do,” said Scratch, in a delicately modulated tone of polite regret: I’m sorry, sir,
he’s in a meeting. “The Heir must stay. It is vitally important that Her Imperious Condescension
should retain the Alternian throne, for another few sweeps at least. You don’t see the big picture yet;
but you will.”

“And Rose?” asked Sollux, knowing the answer. She still hadn’t taken her eyes off him.

“The Seer belongs with me. As indeed does the Witch, and even the Knight, recalcitrant and
troublesome drain on my time as he has always been. They are programs, Mr Captor, and in a very
real sense they are my property. I mean them no harm! They are all very precious to me. But I cannot
permit them to pass, as it were, onto the open market. You understand the value of proprietary software.”

“Yeah, I liked the cages. Nice and subtle,” he said. “So I wipe the mission, join your team, and everyone lives; or I give you the finger, my brain pours out my ears, and everyone else takes their chances?”

“Succinct and accurate,” said Scratch, sounding a little amused. “To my mind it hardly seems a choice; but I leave the decision to you.”

He ran the tape. Tinkerbell’s and the scarred chrome corner table, Tav Nitram polishing a glass. Serket and Kanaya. Feferi Peixes, with her earnest intensity and her fucking dreadful moirail. Equius Zahhak, flung back in his own blue blood with his dead eyes locked on nothing. The killer catgirl and the lowblood prophet, stuck at the top of a feral stem in a room full of scented candles. Aradia’s hair full of rain and her hands on the cards and the look on her face as he’d stepped away, neither happy nor sad, just watching. Aradia telling him she liked his jacket.

Terezi Pyrope. The tiny, grinning Legislacerator who’d saved his life twice already. She’d made him a sandwich, and bought him a beer, and killed at least twelve people on a casual count. She was sharp and fierce and probably smarter than him, and she had mirrors where her eyes should be, and in the stale semi-darkness of the skep she’d put her hands on his shoulders and squeezed: he’d felt hard thumbs pushing and probing at the worst of the knots, and then her arms had slipped round him and she’d held him tight, her skin as slick as his but a blessed step cooler, and pressed dry lips to the ridge of his C7 vertebra.

“Yeah,” he said. “Look – give me one thing, okay? Let me talk to Rose.”

Gamzee shifted at his elbow. Scratch’s voice remained bland and colourless. “In private?”

“Nah. Right here. I just want to see if she’s okay.”

“By all means, then. Although I would advise you to be brief. You are, as you so vividly put it, turning into slurry.”

Sollux took his hands out of his jeans pockets and moved towards the left-hand cage. Rose watched him come closer, her face nearly as closed-off and unreadable as Scratch’s blank white sphere. When he’d got within six feet he stopped.

Her black dress was almost floor-length, very plain, with a high neckline, and the ragged hem didn’t look like a fashion statement: it was chewed and frayed, individual wisps of thread trailing. Her pointless stubby claws were the same glossy purple they’d been in his dreams, and her mouth was the same colour too, and he probably shouldn’t be looking at her mouth.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” she replied.

He gave it a couple of seconds, just to flip off Scratch. Then he said, “I’m assuming you’re not going to tell me no, Sollux, don’t do it.”

“I can’t,” she said. “Everything he has told you has been absolutely correct. He isn’t trying to mislead you, and he never lies.” Was there something? Some tiny urgency in the line of her jaw; a twitch behind the calm violet gaze.

“Even the part about you being his property?”
“Even that part.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I thought so.”

“I really am sorry,” she said quietly.

This caught him off-guard. “What for?”

“For the Cullpit. The Furthest Ring. There was a snare laid in your brain, and I pushed you headlong into it.”

“Oh, fuck! That was ages ago,” he said, and reached into his back pocket. “Forget about it. Hey, you’re not a real girl, right?”

The corner of her mouth twisted in what might have been a smile, and she said, “No. No, I am afraid I am not a real girl. Some would argue I never was.”

“Does that mean you don’t like flowers?”, he said, withdrawing the hand and holding it out.

It sat cupped in his palm: a perfect rose, black as ink, layered petals swirling outwards from a tightly bunched centre. He felt a quick thrill of pride, despite everything.

She stared at it, but before she could answer, he crouched down and brushed some sawdust away from in front of his feet to expose a narrow gap between two boards. He pinched the underside of the flower and drew out a slender green stem, six inches long, like a blade sliding out of a sheath. Moving as carefully as he could, he threaded the stem down into the gap and pushed its tip into the ground below, which accepted it without resistance. Then he stood up and patted the sawdust off his palm with the fingers of the other hand.

It happened even faster than he’d hoped. The tent’s canvas rippled silently around them in a sudden gust of wind, and then a long green shoot sprouted up from the floorboards, winding round one bar of the cage at impossible time-lapse speed. A second followed, and a third. The air was full of a faint slithering noise like rope uncoiling. He turned to see dozens of them: inquisitive tendrils snaking and grabbing upwards, squirming their way round cage bars and the stilts of the ringmaster’s chair. Gamzee was looking down at himself, painted face comically astonished: two thick tentacles had seized him, one wrapping round each leg and holding it in place, before branching into smaller shoots and crawling their way up his chest. As Sollux watched, a single loop flicked out like a tongue and latched onto the clown’s arm.

He turned back. The cage now looked like a trellis in some fancy garden: it was so thickly festooned with foliage you could hardly see the metal, although the basic barred structure was still clear. Neat black buds jutted from among the leaves in a few places, and one burst with an audible pop into a new flower – almost, he knew, a perfect replica of the one he’d planted, and yet not quite. None of them would be quite the same. There was a hollow metallic clunk and some rustling as the door sprang open, and Rose pushed it clear, tearing aside stalks and clumps of leaves. She stepped out.

“We need to move,” he said. “Like, now.”

She didn’t ask stupid questions: just waved a hand. Sollux caught one last glimpse of Scratch, pinned to his chair by a dozen writhing green cords, a first black flower just blossoming at his lapel. Then the tent and the clown and Scratch were gone, and the vast shining web of the Imperial network swept out and sharpened all around them like a cloud of silver filament.

He looked down. Sure enough: the data artery directly beneath them, a perfectly smooth trunk line of untroubled sky-blue light, was being invaded. Threads of brighter green were sprouting from its
surface, winding and coiling along its length. A dark spiky mass erupted from a point where two threads crossed, a kind of stellated geometric outburst of black light, like a tumour made of crystal.

“My God,” said Rose. He glanced at her; she was staring down at the twining tendrils too. He had a moment’s stupid panic that she was about to bust out with what have you done??, but she just said, “It’s beautiful,” and he nearly sighed out loud in relief.

“I call it the Black Rose Virus,” he said proudly. “It’s a fucker.”

“Yes, I can see that.” She looked up and met his eyes. “The code is exquisite. I’d need to spend hours parsing it. How on Earth did you find the time?”

“I was working on a version of it in the villa,” he admitted. “But it was meant to be a lot cleverer. See, they wanted me to unlock the Heir, but no-one could tell me a fucking thing about what the lock looked like. I can’t make a key for a lock I’ve never seen. So I decided –

“– to make a program that unlocked everything,” she finished, and smiled. “On the principle that doors can be kicked down, too.”

“Yeah, pretty much. It’s a universal solvent. If it finds a lock, it pops it and moves onto the next one. Randomised iteration means it’s almost impossible for autonemics to think round.” He scratched his head on instinct, though nothing itched in the medium. “Problem was delivery. I was going to hook it up to a smart payload and upload the fucking thing remotely, from a safe distance, but then everything went to shit. I ended up having to finish it in two nights in a shitty skep cell, with the shakes and a permanent nosebleed and Terezi trying to feed me some kind of fucking awful curry. Couldn’t spare an extra day for the delivery package.”

“So you turned yourself into a Trojan Horse.”

He shrugged. “Only way. Use my own consciousness as the viral agent. That meant all I had to do was get my mind past their security grid. An infected rig would have got kicked off the network in a second, but an infected user? They don’t scan for that shit.”

Rose was looking at him with a expression he couldn’t place yet. It was weird to know her voice so well, and yet still to be working out her face. “I assume you somehow failed to tell Terezi that this would undoubtedly kill you.”

“Yeah.” He forced himself to hold her gaze. “Kind of forgot to mention the whole suicide run angle. Thought she might not be too keen. She’ll figure it out later.”

“Mr Captor,” she said, and this time she definitely sounded amused, “we will make a Seer of you yet.”

They both turned their heads to stare out across the network, watching the green viral trace coil greedily outwards along a hundred slender data fibres. After a few seconds she said, “Come on.”

“Come on? Rose, I’m done.” He spread his hands helplessly. “Stick a 2x3dent in me. That was the play. I just blew open every security protocol in the Imperial Palace simultaneously and signed your name across the whole fucking system. The Heir’s free. Terezi can grab the core and ride off into the sunrise, and I bet in a week or so they’ll be saying long live Empress Feferi, and I did my fucking job. Now I just kind of fade on out of here.”

“I know. You were very brave,” Rose said. “To turn down his offer.”

“You think I was tempted?” he asked, trying to make it sound offhand.
“I know you were tempted. How could you not be? He was giving you what you’ve always wanted.”

“Ah, having a body’s okay,” he said unconvincingly. “There’s, you know, food and stuff. There’s coffee.”

She paused, and said, “Sollux, when you were eight sweeps old, you hacked the drone manifest and took your name off the Harvest, because it was easier than having sex.”

He couldn’t blush in cyberspace. He glared at her and opened his mouth to snarl, but when she met his eyes she just looked sad. Of course she knew, of course; he was a fucking idiot, she’d been in his head for weeks without him even noticing, but all the same, to hear spoken a thing his own mouth had never formed –

“I loved you from the moment I found out,” she said.

The death of the Imperial network made no noise. All around him, icewalls were crumbling and sliding like snow off a slammed door, black glass roses were erupting from the smooth pale skin of data cores, security frames were blowing away like ash in a wind he couldn’t feel, and the silence was deep and complete.

“Why?”

“Because,” she said, “I would have done the same thing, once.” And she reached out and took his hand in hers. “And I wish I could give you what he was offering. I wish I could set you free. But there’s no rest for the wicked, and we’re not done yet.”

“The Heir’s free,” he repeated helplessly. He’d been fixated for so long on that one phrase: free the Heir, free the Heir. Free the Heir and the good guys win. He should have known, really, that the future of the Alternian Empire wasn’t going to be settled on a single round of Capture the Flag, but he’d always preferred working with one clear objective in mind: hack this, scoop that, steal the other. He hated sidequests. You played the game to win. The urge to sleep was overpowering, even here.

“Terezi’s in danger,” she countered.

He stared at her. “What?”

“My idiot moirail,” she said, “has bonded consciousness with your idiot moirail, thus creating a vast, swirling singularity of idiocy on which no man can look and remain unchanged. I am afraid she is going to die. Dave will not leave her: Dave is – ” and her face changed, minutely – “not very good at leaving people. Even when ordered to.”

The network’s crystal veins seemed to be falling away around him. He gripped Rose’s hand tight, so a cool tingle of haptic feedback ran straight to whatever was left of his brain, and said, “Where?”

“Follow me,” she said, and waved her free arm. The web of data pulsed and swam, and he thought, for a second, he tasted blood, and knew it must be his –

They were standing in a bare grey corridor devoid of any interest, or even any discernible texture: bottom-tier virtuality, the kind of utility space you built where no user was ever going to wander. It was the network equivalent of a maintenance duct: a way to give your techs quick, straightforward access to the guts of your system. Hitting one of these meant you were home free. No-one ever bothered installing security this deep, which meant if you could find your way in, you had free run of the network no questions asked. There was no trace of evolving foliage or budding shoots, which made sense: he’d told the Black Rose to target locks, and there was nothing to lock down here.
There was a door at the far end of the corridor, perhaps thirty feet away. Between them and the door stood Gamzee Makara. He held a brightly-coloured juggling club loose in each hand, and he wasn’t smiling any more.

Sollux clenched his fists.

“Quite some motherfucking stunt you pulled, boy,” said the clown. “Quite some stunt in motherfucking deed.”

“Yes,” Sollux said, and grinned manically. “Guess it must have been a miracle, huh.”

“Whoa now.” Gamzee patted one club meditatively against the side of his leg. “Don’t be all up and throwing that magic word around, little phyte. If you go on taking some straight up motherfucking blasphemy, some bitch-ass heretical shit, and painting it out as like to the word of the Messiahs?” He grinned too: slower and sleepier, and Sollux suspected, five times more intimidating than his attempt had been. “A brother can’t be too fairly found wanting for getting a little anger on. You know?”

“You sad clown fuck,” said Sollux, taking a step forward. “This is just pathetic. Up in this and all getting that and whoop whoop. I’m sick of your shit, I’m sick of your stupid cult, I’m sick of looking at that fucking ridiculous face-paint, I am having a spectacularly bad day, and I’m going to rip your bulge clean off and shove it up your ass. And if I ever meet your fucking Messiahs, I’m going to set them both on fire and piss it out.” He paused. “Is that enough blasphemy? I’ve got more.”

Gamzee chuckled. “Little Captor. Little mustard grub. You really do think you’re packing globes all up and motherfucking sufficient to clean this righteous clock? I was cutting ice with my holy hatchets before you squirmed up out of the caves, brat. I was the best hacker in the motherfucking world.”

“Was,” said Sollux, and reached up to tug his glasses clear of his face.

For a moment, Gamzee stood outlined in a perfect nimbus of purple light, as though he’d gained the ability to fluoresce. Then he started to fall apart. Sollux didn’t realise what was happening at first: a sudden fuzziness at the edges, and then the clown was actually dissolving, grey pixels and slivers of matter flaking and crumbling away. He raised one arm, still holding the club, but slowly: he stared at it with an expression of wide-eyed wonder as larger and larger slices of whatever he was made of peeled up from his arm and streamed away like powder, leaving only gaps behind.

“Well, motherfucker,” said Gamzee Makara, in tones of childlike astonishment, and disintegrated.

Sollux swallowed hard. Then he looked round. Rose was standing to his right and a little behind him, holding what looked like a slim black needle in one hand, its tip pointing at the empty space which had until very recently been occupied.

“We really don’t have time, I’m afraid,” she said, and slotted the needle into the sash of her dress. “Let’s keep moving.”

“You killed him.”

She walked ahead of him down the corridor, towards the door. “Thou shalt not kill; but needst not strive officiously to keep alive. I erased him, Sollux.” She looked round. “He died a long time ago. He was a data ghost, nothing more. You played Fiduspawn, didn’t you? Dark is very strong against Ghost. Come on.”

“I can’t believe you spent a week in my head learning the rules to fucking Fiduspawn,” he muttered, and followed her.
The room on the other side of the door was another blank space: a tall cylinder, flat grey sides rising to a flat grey roof a long way above. A boy was kneeling in the centre of the floor, wearing just jeans: barefoot and bare-chested, with his arms spread wide and his hands higher than his head. He didn’t have much choice in the matter, since both wrists were in thick metal cuffs from which equally thick chains ran nearly taut to rings set on opposite sides of the chamber. He might have been nine sweeps old, and looked like the same species as Rose – no horns, something alike in the bones of the face, although his was leaner and sharper than hers – but he was made of light: warm orange light that rippled here and there like water. Even the narrow triangular lenses of the shades he wore seemed to be made of the same stuff.

He looked up as they came in and said, “Hey, mom.”

“Hello, Dirk,” said Rose. “This is Sollux Captor.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Sollux –” she made an oddly formal little gesture towards the boy in the chains, as though she could possibly be talking about anyone else – “this is Dirk Strider.”

“Strider?” he said dumbly. Then, “Oh, fuck. You’re them, aren’t you? You’re the master AI.”

“Hell fucking yes,” said Dirk Strider. “I am, personally, every single katana-toting metal douchebag in the Alternian Empire. You’re going to ask me how I keep track of that many isolate perception clusters without going insane, and I’m going to tell you they wrote my code so I’m *incapable* of going insane, and you’re gonna be impressed and offer me a rock-solid fist-bump but I’ll regretfully have to turn you down.” He flexed one arm a little so the chain clinked. “Pleased to meet you, though.”

“I don’t get it,” said Sollux. “The virus should have taken those things off you. I built it to break *everything*.”

“Okay, I’ll be honest, that was actually fucking sweet,” said Dirk. “If robo-boners were a thing, I would have completely popped mad robo-boners over the code on that, pause. But these chains are one hundred percent Scratch-made, and they don’t break so easy.”

“The Prince AI,” said Rose, “controls the Striders. The Striders control the Empire.”

“*L’état, c’est fucking moi,*” Dirk put in helpfully.

“I thought the Heir was the key to the succession?” said Sollux.

“He was. He still is, in fact, in all legitimate senses of the term. But the point of the Prince, unlike the Heir, is not to protect the throne: it is to protect the Condesce herself. The Striders are her personal guard.”

“If you guys want Condy off the big chair,” said Dirk, “you need the Striders out of commission. You couldn’t take us with an army, trust me. You need me dead.”

He said the last part very conversationally. Sollux looked at him.

“Bullshit. We need you out of these fucking chains, right? Give me two minutes.”

“Dude, no offence,” said Dirk wryly. “I have mad respect for your skills, but I ain’t down with the kinky shit, and I’ve been trying to safeword out of these babies for like four hundred sweeps. You’re not doing it in two minutes.”
“And we don’t have two minutes anyway,” added Rose. “Dirk, can you bring Sollux up to date on the situation? I couldn’t risk drawing attention to us out there.”

“Sure,” said Dirk. “One sec – ” and the curved wall behind him shimmered, and gave them a crystal-clear high-definition picture of Terezi.

Sollux swore. She was hurt: how badly he couldn’t tell, but her face was spattered with teal and she was using her sword one-handed. As he watched, she ducked under a Strider’s blade and drove upwards, wrenching a splash of sparks from its shoulder-joint: it staggered but kept coming, forcing her back a couple of steps. Behind her there were other Striders, but they didn’t seem to be focused on her, being occupied with –

“Holy fucking shit,” he said. “Is that Vriska?”

“I’m getting my ass kicked,” said Dirk approvingly. “There is some straight up berserk Charlie’s Angels shit going down in that room. Only problem is there’s three of them, and I just called up another twelve of me.”

“For fuck’s sake!” Sollux nearly shouted, eyes fixed on the screen as Terezi danced away from another cut. Was her nose broken? “Just – just fucking stop, stop fighting them! Turn off, or go into power save, or something!”

“Does not compute, dude.” The AI’s voice was still infuriatingly calm. “Not in the program. You really think if I had any kind of autonomous control here I’d be going round murdering kids all the time? Shit, I’d be trying to break records for the galaxy’s biggest simultaneous Macarena. The chains aren’t just fucking symbolic, you know. Oh damn, nice move.”

Rose had stepped closer to him and was gazing at him with the strange closed-off expression Sollux was beginning to decipher. “You’re sure there’s no other way.”

“Rose, me and the lab skeleton over there could tag-team these fucking protocols all night long with our massive, engorged brains, pausing occasionally to high-five and rehydrate, and I’d still be strung up and doe-eyed like bad dubcon come morning. And by that point Dylan, Alex and Natalie are going to be sashimi.” On the screen, Terezi jammed her sword through the Strider’s eye-lens so hard Sollux saw the tip punch out the back of its smooth metal head. But that trapped the blade, and another one was moving in behind her. “Just do it fast, okay. I don’t want to kill anybody else. It kind of got old.”

Sollux didn’t know where to look. At Rose, her violet eyes blank and calm; at Dirk, his translucent orange skin shifting across the jut of his shoulderblades like oil; at Terezi, small and bloody and determined and slowing down even as he watched. The Strider’s swing would have snipped her head from her shoulders like a cut flower: she twisted clear and got her sword free, tried for a stance –

Rose stepped in and cupped her palm against Dirk’s jaw; he saw her fingers glow like she was covering a flashlight. She bent and kissed him gently on the forehead, and her eyes flickered closed for a moment. Then she stepped back and away, and he saw the needle in her other hand.

A black dot had formed in the centre of Dirk’s chest. As Sollux watched, a thin thread of darkness spidered out from it like a crack running down a wall. Then another.

“Ahh,” said Dirk, and stretched. The chains rattled as he rolled first one shoulder, then the other: the exaggerated, luxurious stretch of a day’s work finished. Inky trails were diffusing into the mass of liquid orange light. One flickered along an arm. He grinned. “Time to fly up away to the sun like a
fucknig piece of gargbage.”

He shattered. It made no noise: but one moment there was a kneeling figure in shades, the next a thousand shards of orange glass, expanding almost dreamily in space. The chains, instead of falling, vanished. The light blinked out and was gone.

Sollux looked at the screen. Terezi was standing, her ribs and shoulders rising and falling under the bloodstained coat, sword still in guard, casting furious glances from side to side as though she were trying to work out the trick. A little way away, Vriska reached up and scratched her head in a weird uncharacteristic gesture: she was a mess too, but she turned and said something to Terezi with an expression of honest puzzlement that was somehow rendered bizarrely funny by the blood and the gleaming robot eye. Kanaya stepped into shot, one hand soaked green and clutched against her side, the other hand holding – without apparent strain – a running chainsaw. The Striders stood around and among them, still and slack. Their eyes were no longer lit. Vriska reached out and pushed one in the chest; it toppled over backwards.

He looked back at Rose, who was standing with her needle still in her hand.

“Hey,” he said. “You okay?”

She raised her head and gave him a little smile. “I am an artificial intelligence, Mr Captor. Your question is irrelevant.”

“Well, I’m a puny meatsack,” he said. “I get to ask irrelevant questions. Class perk.”

She sighed. “What happened to Sollux Captor aged six, who thought emotion was a sign of weakness?”

“I’m starting to think he was a fucking idiot,” said Sollux.

“Mm,” she said. “If it’s any consolation, Rose Lalonde aged thirteen was a disaster. But we learn by doing, I suppose. Are you still planning to die, or would you like to go for a coffee?”
Epilogue (End Run)

Chapter Notes

Ten nights after the run on the Palace, Sollux Captor stood leaning on the tarnished brass rail above the harbour, smoking a cigarette and staring vaguely down at the slap of black waves on the stonework. The water looked almost oily, striped in rippling lines by the blue gleam of argon from the lamps. The air was salt-smeared and just cold enough to need a jacket, but not so much that he’d had to zip it up.

Feferi Peixes had become Empress of Alternia aged ten sweeps and change, in only the fourth round of combat: the shortest duel of succession ever recorded in Alternian history, barring the one declared invalid due to unsanctioned use of particle weaponry. Palace assessors agreed that the incumbent had fought with courage and ferocity befitting her caste until the very end, but that the challenger’s sheer speed had left the outcome in little doubt from the middle of Round Two onward. Her subsequent acclamation by the people, while technically irrelevant and not absolutely legal, had been widely seen as a heartening token for the Empire’s future. She had sparked minor confusion, however, with her first official act post-investiture; the minute the Prongs of Death and Life were placed in her hand, she had hurried out of the throne-room, practically sprinted down five levels in the Palace – a mob of bodyguards, advisors, courtiers, and journalists panting to keep up – burst into the medical wing, walked up to an occupied stasis cocoon, put the incalculable majesty of her sacred hand right on the occupant’s clammy forehead, and said, “Sollux, get up and stop being so lazy!”

Sollux hadn’t seen any of this. He’d been filled in on the details later. His only rôle in the drama had been to open his eyes, spit cold sopor, take one look at her and say weakly, “What the fuck are you wearing.” This too had caused a certain amount of comment, and in fact an overzealous sentry had attempted to cull him on the spot, but it had all been smoothed over in the end.

He took another drag on the cigarette and said, “Hey.”

Terezi’s grin was magnificent in the darkness as she materialised at his left elbow. “Very good! I was being careful.”

He turned his head to look at her properly. The best medical care the Empire could provide, coupled with tealblood physiology, had put her back on her feet inside two nights: apparently she’d been front row at the duel, making a great deal of business with her white cane, smug and blind in a seat with the best view in the house. Now there was hardly any sign she’d been hurt, except for a white plastic boneset tag jutting from the skin on the back of her left hand, which he kept telling her not to fiddle with.

“How you doing?” he asked, looking back out across the water.

She propped her forearms on the rail. “I am sort of sad.”

“Yeah.”

He was sort of sad too. He’d been sort of sad as soon as they’d dragged him out of the cocoon; they’d wanted to run twenty million tests, but he’d snatched two minutes to think by hiding in a medical supply closet and locking the door. The following morning he and Terezi had met up with Rose and the Knight, or Dave, as Sollux now knew him – a loose-limbed hornless boy about his own age, whose oversized dark glasses did nothing to conceal his striking resemblance to the entity
Rose had killed. They’d stood on a flat white rooftop, the four of them together, under a night sky full of glinting stars he hadn’t recognised, while strange iridescent water poured from a dark vent beneath them in a long and faintly luminous cascade. It had been a nice place: weird, but nice, with the static rumble of the falling water and the smell of flowers on the breeze.

“They had to go,” he said. “It was a whole thing. You know.”

“They could have stayed a bit longer!” she said crossly.

He shook his head. “You heard Rose. They wanted to get moving before the trail went cold.”

_Where are you going?_ Terezi had asked, sounding small and sad in a way Sollux had never heard, and Dave had said, hands in his pockets, _Road trip. We’re all going to look for America_, and Rose had shot him a killing glare that hadn’t seemed to faze him at all, and Sollux had suddenly realised the two of them had been doing this for a very long time indeed.

“I’m worried,” she said. “I don’t know if he will be okay without me.”

“He’ll be fine. They’ll both be fine.”

“I don’t like the sound of this Scratch person. People with big white balls for heads are not to be trusted.”

“I don’t think they’re going after him to negotiate,” he said. There had been a glint of something cold in Rose’s eyes, and even Dave, who pretty clearly held above all other gods an absence of fucks given, had bitten the name off with a venom that hadn’t been entirely laconic. “I get the impression those two charge fifteen percent interest on debts owed, you know?”

“I wish they’d taken Jade and John.”

“Yeah, me too, kind of,” he admitted. “But I can see the point. The Throne’s not going to be one hundred percent stable for the first sweep or so, not ’til Fef gets her shit locked down and learns the ropes. She could use the back-up in case anyone tries anything stupid.”

“I know, but –” and she sighed heavily and dropped her chin onto her folded arms. “I miss him already. My head feels all weird and empty, and he’s only been gone two nights.”

He didn’t know what to say. He missed Rose, and she’d been hanging out in his brain for a perigee or less. He kept expecting her to say something arch or teasing whenever he got coffee or walked into a desk. Terezi, who’d had her own sarcastic passenger for so much longer, must feel she was missing a limb.

“They’ll be back,” he said, in the end; it was all he could say. “They promised. They’re going to take out Scratch, round up the other AIs – the Maid and whatever – and come back. It just might take a while.”

“I know,” she said, still disconsolate. “I bet it’s going to be _ages_, though.”

Rose had explained the situation, on the rooftop. There had been two other second-generation AIs slaved to the Imperial network when Sollux unleashed the virus, the Maid and the Page. They’d been less heavily protected than the Prince: Dirk, Rose said wryly, had always been Her Condescension’s favourite. When their cell doors opened, they’d evidently seized the chance to escape. There was no trace of them anywhere on the system. Then there was a third AI, the Rogue, who’d never been in the Palace at all; she’d slipped her leash some time ago. _She will be the hardest to locate, I think_, Rose had said, and smiled like it was funny. _She made an art form out of being difficult to find._
Yeah, Dave had said. *Plus, the other two are fucking idiots.*

None of them had wanted to say goodbye: not Sollux or Terezi, but not the other two either. They’d all stood rather awkwardly saying *so* and *yeah,* until Dave had tried for a wisecrack, fallen well short, and sighed.

*Fuck it,* he’d said. *Yo, TZ. Present.* And he’d reached up, hooked off the shades, and held them out. His eyes underneath glowed a vivid scarlet in the gloom.

Terezi had just stared at him, until he’d stepped forward and physically put the shades on her, settling them carefully on the bridge of her nose. *Stridervision,* he’d said. *Now in glorious technicolour. Can’t let you taste the rainbow if I’m going to snatch it back after and hit you for a gold subscription. Should stop you walking into Goddamn walls ’til I get back, anyhow.*

There’d been a moment’s silence, and then Terezi had lunged, grabbed his shirt-front, and attempted to devour his face. Sollux and Rose had swivelled simultaneously away to stare out across the great shimmering ocean.

*I’m going to throw up,* Sollux had said.

*Not if I get there first,* she had replied delicately. *Although. Hm. Sollux, hold out your arm.*

He’d done so, and watched as she untied the purple ribbon from her hair, shook it out, and wound it carefully round his bony wrist. It had gone round several times before she tied off the trailing ends in a neat little bow. Then she’d patted his hand.

*There,* she’d said. *I know you don’t like surprises. That should help a little.*

He’d peered at the ribbon, which looked like any old bit of purple fabric: silky material, the ends a little frayed. *For real? It’s going to let me, what, see stuff before it happens?*

*Well,* she’d said, and put a cool hand on his cheek, *some stuff, anyway,* and she’d smiled with dark lips and stepped close.

“I reckon she’s going to look for Dirk,” he said, to the water. “The Prince. While she’s out there.”

Terezi looked at him curiously. “I thought you said he was destroyed?”

“Well, I don’t know exactly what she did. Didn’t look like any code I’ve ever seen. But she’s smart as fuck, and she told me once it was almost impossible to eradicate an AI completely.” He scratched the back of his neck, round the metal ridge of the net socket. “I mean, Condy tried to delete her, and look how that fucking turned out. I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s a bit of smartass orange data floating round in the code gulf somewhere. I dunno.”

“She had better not resurrect the Striders,” said Terezi decisively. “I have had quite enough unbeatable metal ninjas for one career. From now on I intend to fight only small wigglers and defenceless grazebeasts.”

“Nah. Don’t think Striders would be Fef’s bag. She seems to reckon six foot of cyborg psychopath running a zyr-class defensive AI is all the protection she needs at the mo, specially since that way she gets Maryam and the chainsaw as a package deal.”

“Vriska Serket, Defender of the Throne,” said Terezi, and grinned again. “I bet she’s furious.”

“I don’t know,” Sollux said. “I saw her last night. She seemed pretty into it. I think John’s doing her
some good. And Vantas is living a fucking wet dream, he gets to pace around yelling his idealistic fairyland bullshit all day and Fef just nods seriously and takes notes.” He crushed the last half-inch of cigarette out on the rail, went to flick it into the water, and reconsidered; tucked it behind his ear instead.

“Seariously,” corrected Terezi. “And I gather Chancellor Vantas is not the only jumped-up lowblood with a fancy new job, Mr Chief Architect.”

“It’s no big thing, Terezi, I’m a glorified sysop, I’m probably going to spend half my time unfucking everyone’s servers. I told Malfak he should keep the job, but he laughed like an asshole and said after what I did he needed to lie down for a couple of sweeps.”

“I’m told you’re to have a suite of rooms at the Palace.”

“Well, yeah, I mean, I’ve got to be on the ground for when that douche Ampora gets his bulge stuck in the USB port or whatever the fuck –”

“I’m told your rooms will be but a short elevator ride away from the Imperial Apartments.”

“It’s the accommodation wing of the Palace, all the rooms are –”

“Oh, Mr Captor,” she said in a sing-song voice. “I was trying to fix my husktop in nothing but this tiny see-through nightie and it won’t work and now I’m all hot and bothered and I really need a hand –”

“Okay, shut the fuck up, hell creature, I’m pretty sure that’s treason or something –”

“Mr Captor, I was playing with the router sprocket and it just popped out, can you come upstairs and show me how to put it in –”

“TZ, there’s no such fucking thing as a router sprocket –”

“Mr Captor, I need a good hard drive, I wondered if you could oblige me –”

“That does it,” he said, and went for the throat. She knocked his arm away, cackling, but instead of pirouetting out of reach she dived inside his guard and got her arms round him: squeezed him so tight it hurt and buried her face in his tee-shirt. After a moment’s shock, he dropped the arm around her narrow shoulders and craned the thumb to fiddle with the wisps of hair behind her ear.

They stood like that on the dockside for nearly a minute, in silence.

“Terezi,” he said, and stopped. He’d rehearsed this twenty times in as many hours, and then he’d decided it was a fucking stupid thing to say and he’d put a bullet through it and dumped it out back. With her holding him like it was all she wanted to do, with her warmth and her nose digging into his chest and the profound urge to stroke the back of her neck until the muscles went slack, he figured maybe the execution had been premature, only now the body had gone cold and he had to haul it in again somehow. “You, uh. I was wondering.” She didn’t look up. “I mean, I know you’ve got a fuckload of stuff to do, and I know you like working alone, but, I mean. We kind of... get on okay. And it seems, sort of stupid to waste that. So. I – yeah, I didn’t know if you – if maybe we should get a place together, or something.”

She was very still against him. Then she extricated her face, looked up at him through unreadable scarlet lenses, and said gently, “No. No, Mr Captor, I don’t think we should get a place together.”

Everything in his torso seemed to drop a couple of inches and ten degrees at once. He swallowed,
and said, “Yeah. I, uh, no, sorry, that was a really fucking stupid idea, God, I don’t know what –”

She gave him the widest grin he’d seen in a chequered history of extremely wide grins. “I think we should get a boat.”

“What?”

She let go of him and skipped back a couple of steps. “A boat! I want a boat. I want a holiday and I want a boat. I have always wanted a boat – did you know forty percent of Alternia’s surface is ocean? Forty percent! And I’ve never been to any of it. It must be full of stuff.”

“TZ,” he said carefully, “it’s full of fish.”

“Excellent. I love fish. They are delicious. I have terrorised the land-dwelling population for sweeps, and the fish have escaped my retribution. No longer! No corner of the sea will be safe from the hungry jaws of justice, and by justice, I mean me.”

“Oh my fucking God,” he said, trying very hard not to smirk. “You’re insane.”

Her face changed, at that, went serious and bright, and she said “Well. I need a good moirail, then, don’t I.”

They looked at each other.

“Terezi –”

“Shush. You are an idiot, and idiots don’t get to talk before smart people. Oh uh you uh like working alone.” She dropped her voice for that in what he guessed was meant to sound like him, although if he sounded anything like that he was pretty sure someone would have told him to seek help by now. “I only liked working alone, Mr Captor, because I hadn’t found anyone worth working with.”

“But you’re a fucking big shot now, Fef’s made you Exquisitioner, I saw the uniform on the hanger –”

“Yes, Kanaya told me,” she said. “It doesn’t sound nearly red enough. But yes! I am in charge now, I have been given a sacred mandate to reform the Legislacerature and I am going to carry that mandate out so hard they’ll be bleeding for weeks. We are going to stop crimes, now, Sollux! That is my plan. We will not just hunt people the Throne doesn’t like. We will hunt people who are wrong. I am going to start with Low City and work out and by the time I am finished Alternia will know what Justice tastes like.”

“And by Justice, you mean you.”

She frowned. “What? No. By Justice I mean Justice, that’s why I used a capital J. I don’t want Alternia knowing what I taste like, that’s just weird. But – what was I saying?”

“Justice,” he said helpfully.

“Yes! Lots of it. Justice for everyone. But the point is, Mr Sollux Chief Architect Malnourished Useless Moirail Captor, it’s going to be you and I. You and I are going to turn this planet upside-down, for Feferi, and put it back better.” She grinned. “You hack. I’ll stab.”

He wasn’t even bothering to fight the smirk now. “And the boat fits in how, exactly.”

“Are you seriously telling me you don’t want a mobile command centre?” she demanded. “I think
you are lying. I can smell it. I think your whole body wants a mobile command centre. But that is just
tough shit, because first we are going on holiday. I am going to buy a bunch of cute bikinis and
moonbathe all night and drink whisky and teach myself to fish, and you’re going to drive the boat.”

“Why the fuck am I driving the boat?” he said.

Her entire body seemed to shiver for a second with suppressed glee. “Because, Mr Captor,” she said,
“you’re a helmsman,” and then she exploded into peals of loud, awful laughter that echoed off the
harbour walls.

Sollux winced. “Fuck! Stop it – Terezi, shut up, it wasn’t even that funny –”

“Additional lies!” she said happily, and grabbed his hand. “Come on. We’re going bikini shopping.”

“Like Hell.”

“How am I supposed to know if they look nice? You will need to tell me which ones are the most
aesthetic. Thousands of trolls would kill for the job.”

“So I wait ‘til you find something totally obnoxious in like six clashing colours and a dragon pattern,
and tell you it’s chic. Look, you have to buy me a drink for this shit. I won’t make it, TZ. I’ve had
two near-death experiences, there’s no fucking way I can survive a mall sober.”

She considered this. “You make a very reasonable point. Revised plan: we will get drunk, then we
will go bikini shopping. Then we will buy a boat.”

“What could possibly go wrong,” he said, as deadpan as he could manage, which wasn’t easy with
the way his chest felt.

She dragged him away down the harbourside towards the spires of the shopping district, tall striated
columns of blue and scarlet argon looming in the dim pre-dawn like so much frozen code; and out
across the sea, an edge of sky was just beginning to grow light.

* * *

and you can’t fight the tears that ain’t coming
or the moment of truth in your lies
when everything feels like the movies
yeah, you’d bleed just to know you’re alive

and I don’t want the world to see me
’cause I don’t think that they’d understand
when everything’s made to be broken
I just want you to know who I am

- Goo Goo Dolls, ‘Iris’

Chapter End Notes

‘Take out of any old Poem, Romance, or Legend, (for instance Geffrey of Monmouth or
Don Belianis of Greece) those Parts of the story which afford most Scope for long
Descriptions: Put these pieces together, and throw all the Adventures you fancy into one
Tale. Then take a Hero, whom you may chuse for the Sound of his Name, and put him into the midst of these Adventures: There let him work for twelve books; at the end it being necessary that the conclusion of an Epick Poem be fortunate.’

- ‘Receipt to make an Epick Poem’, Alexander Pope, 1728

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- William Gibson, for writing Neuromancer in the first place
- you, for reading.

OFFICIAL SOUNDTRACK (8TRACKS)
Disc 1: Blue (chapters 1-6)
Disc 2: Red (chapters 7-12)

FANART GALLERY
General:
Title screen, by shrinedust
Sollux and Terezi, by everking
Cast sketches, by paperseverywhere
Rose and Sollux, by paperseverywhere
The four great AIs, by eyemonsters
Sollux, by shrinedust
Sollux and Terezi, by waywardking

Chapter 2: 'Then he reached out and touched it.' by everking
'Her skin was very cold.' by notahedgehog
'I’m drowning.' by maladicta

Chapter 5: "In about twenty seconds, I am going to shoot a helicopter." by isozyme

Chapter 8: 'He closed the hand and they fell like fruit.' by isozyme

Chapter 9: "Mr Captor, I think you can hear me." by everking (mildly NSFW)
"How many times does ninety-four go into four to six?" by papercataclysm
'He reached the hand round and unconcernedly papped her.' by makiokuta

Chapter 10: "Go on. Get to the next screen." by everking

Chapter 11: "It’s all just heat and clockwork." by roachpatrol
"Let’s try and make this quick." by isozyme

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